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Life On Venus: Europe's Last Man

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Venus

There are not many moments in history when it is possible to worry that the world has become too happy for its own good. One such moment came in Europe during the late nineteenth century, when the Napoleonic Wars had receded into the distance and the First World War was still hidden over the horizon. For a brief period, it became possible to believe that the West was headed for a condition of permanent peace; that technology, democracy, and globalization were driving a virtuous circle that no atavistic violence could disrupt.

This vision never came very close to becoming a reality; the late nineteenth century was, after all, the era of communism and anarchism, imperialism and scientific racism. It is remarkable, then, to consider how many of the greatest writers of the period were exercised by the possibility that reason, progress, and material well-being—in short, the bourgeois order—might destroy the human spirit. The definitive statement of this view was offered by Nietzsche in the prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where he summons the specter of the Last Man—or, as R. J. Hollingdale renders it in his translation, the Ultimate Man:

The earth has become small, and upon it hops the Ultimate Man, who makes everything small. His race is as inexterminable as the flea; the Ultimate Man lives longest.

"We have discovered happiness," say the Ultimate Men and blink. . . .

They still work, for work is entertainment. But they take care the entertainment does not exhaust them.

Nobody grows rich or poor any more: both are too much of a burden. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both are too much of a burden.

The twentieth century, of course, did not turn out to be the age of the Last Man after all. The two world wars and the global violence of the Cold War demonstrated to anyone's satisfaction that irrationality and cruelty, which Nietzsche feared were dwindling resources, still flourished in abundance just underneath the thin crust of modern civilization. But then came 1989 and the end of history—or at least *The End of History and the Last Man*, as Francis Fukuyama put it in his influential book. It is almost always referred to simply by the first part of its title; to his critics, Fukuyama is the man

who declared “the end of history,” triumphally and, needless to say, prematurely.

But the second part of the book’s title is actually more telling, and more representative of Fukuyama’s argument. No sooner had humanity emerged from a century of hot and cold wars than Fukuyama was resurrecting Nietzsche’s admonition that a world of peace and prosperity would be a world of Last Men. “The life of the last men is one of physical security and material plenty, precisely what Western politicians are fond of promising their electorates,” he pointed out. “Should we fear that we will be both happy and satisfied with our situation, no longer human beings but animals of the species *homo sapiens*?”

While Fukuyama appreciates the seriousness of the Nietzschean warning, he hears it from the perspective of a partisan, not a foe, of liberalism. The danger he foresees is not simply that bourgeois democracy will cause human beings to degenerate, but that degenerate human beings will be unable to preserve democracy. Without the sense of pride and the love of struggle that Fukuyama, following Plato, calls *thymos*, men—and there is always an implication that *thymos* is a specifically masculine virtue—cannot establish freedom or protect it:

It is only thymotic man, the man of anger who is jealous of his own dignity and the dignity of his fellow citizens, the man who feels that his worth is constituted by something more than the complex set of desires that make up his physical existence—it is this man alone who is willing to walk in front of a tank or confront a line of soldiers. And it is frequently the case that without such small acts of bravery in response to small acts of injustice, the larger train of events leading to fundamental changes in political and economic structures would never occur.

When Fukuyama published his book in 1992, he was specifically concerned about the loss of *thymos* among Americans. Today, his predictions about the debility of the post-historical world still pass for common currency among neoconservatives; what has changed, dramatically, is the consensus view about where that post-historical world can be found. The American response to the 9/11 attacks—the war on terror, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—have banished any fear that America might grow passive and debilitated. The opposite complaint is much more likely to be heard, especially from European critics of America. And partly for that reason, it is to Europe that Americans now look for examples of the Last Man. The opposition of Europeans to the Iraq War, from a neoconservative perspective, all but epitomizes the inability “to walk in front of a tank or confront a line of soldiers” that Fukuyama warned about.

This was the essence of Robert Kagan's argument in *Of Paradise and Power*, published in 2003 on the eve of the Iraq War. Europe, Kagan wrote, "is turning away from power" and "entering a post-historical paradise of peace and relative prosperity," while the United States "remains mired in history." He dwelled, in terminology purposefully reminiscent of Nietzsche and Fukuyama, on the psychological frailty, the thymotic decay, of contemporary European society. "The real question," he writes, "is one of intangibles—of fears, passions, and beliefs." Kagan's much-quoted formula, "Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus," is a more or less overt accusation of European effeminacy. Or, as James Sheehan puts it, in more value-neutral terms, in *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?*: "The eclipse of the willingness and ability to use violence that was once so central to statehood has created a new kind of European state, firmly rooted in new forms of public and private identity and power. As a result, the European Union may become a superstate—a super civilian state—but not a superpower."

Is it true that Western Europeans, after half a century of peace and prosperity, suffer from the kind of moral malaise that Nietzsche warned about, and that Fukuyama and Kagan diagnosed? One way to answer this question is to listen, not to American pundits, but to Europeans themselves—in particular, to their novelists. In the nineteenth century, a reader of Dostoevsky and Flaubert could have gained insights into the state of Europe that a reader of newspapers would have missed. In the twenty-first, it is at least possible that the most significant European novelists can give us similar insights. Precisely because novels are not, and should not be, political documents, they offer a less guarded, more intuitive report on the inner life of a society. And when novelists from different European countries, writing in different languages and very different styles, all seem to corroborate one another's intuitions, it is at least fair to wonder whether a real cultural shift is under way.

The three novels I wish to consider are not, of course, anything like a representative sample of the fiction being written in Europe over the last two decades. But W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, Michel Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles*, and Ian McEwan's *Saturday* are as distinguished and emblematic a selection as might be made. All of these writers were born in the 1940s and 1950s, and emerged as major novelists in the 1990s. In other words, they are members of the post-World War II generation, and did or are doing their most important work in the post-Cold War period. They belong to, and write about, a cosmopolitan, peaceful, unified

Western Europe: McEwan (b. 1948) is English; Sebald (1944–2001), a German, spent most of his adult life in England; and Houellebecq (b. 1958), who is French, has lived in Ireland and Spain.

While all of these writers are celebrated and critically acclaimed, they in no sense form a school or movement. Houellebecq is an often-crude satirist, whose misanthropic, pornographic novels have won him a scandalous reputation. (The most recent of many *affaires* Houellebecq came last year, when his own mother attacked him in viciously personal terms for misrepresenting her in his fiction.) He could not be more different from Sebald, who had a considerable reputation as a literary scholar before he began to publish a series of unclassifiable books—hybrids of fiction, memoir, and history—in the 1990s. Sebald’s melancholy works were immediately acclaimed in Germany and then in the United States, and before he died, in a car accident, at the age of 57, he was often mentioned as a candidate for the Nobel Prize. McEwan has been at the center of the English literary world since the 1970s, but he has emerged in the last decade as probably the best novelist of his generation, on the strength of books like *Amsterdam* and *Atonement*. The *New Statesman* has described him as “the closest thing we have to a ‘national novelist.’”

Three more different writers could hardly be invented. Which makes it all the more suggestive, I think, that their portraits of the spiritual state of contemporary Europe are so powerfully complementary. They show us a Europe that is cosmopolitan, affluent, and tolerant, enjoying all the material blessings that human beings have always struggled for, and that the Europeans of seventy years ago would have thought unattainable. Yet these three books are also haunted by intimations of belatedness and decline, by the fear that Europe has too much history behind it to thrive. They suggest currents of rage and despair coursing beneath the calm surface of society, occasionally erupting into violence. And they worry about what will happen when a Europe, gorged on historical good fortune, must defend itself against an envious and resentful world.

The Elementary Particles (1998) is the book that comes closest to confirming Nietzsche’s vision of the Last Man. Indeed, the novel opens with a portentous preface, written as though in the distant future, informing us that the character we are about to meet—Michel Djerzinski, “a first-rate biologist and a serious candidate for the Nobel Prize,” who is also an emotionally autistic, sexually stunted wreck of a human being—literally brought about the end of the human race in the late twentieth century. For his discoveries in genetics allowed humanity to replace itself

with a new species that is not dependent on sexual reproduction, and is therefore free from suffering and death. Houellebecq gives us a glimpse of that future felicity in a poem: "We live today under a new world order . . . / What men considered a dream, perfect but remote, / We take for granted as the simplest of things."

The novel, then, is Houellebecq's portrait of a society—contemporary European society, French division—so incurably miserable that it deserves, and needs, to be made extinct. Yet the ironic message of *The Elementary Particles* is that it is precisely the plenty and safety of French society that make it intolerable to inhabit. All the qualities that European social democracy prides itself on—its sexual liberation, political tolerance, and economic equality, free health care and the long paid vacations—become instruments of torture to Michel and his half brother, Bruno, the novel's unlovable heroes.

They are victims of the zeitgeist—of "Western Europe, in the latter half of the twentieth century," which Houellebecq describes in the novel's very first lines as "an age that was miserable and troubled," when "the relationships between . . . contemporaries were at best indifferent and more often cruel." The most destructive agent of this indifference is Bruno and Michel's mother, Janine, who Houellebecq describes as an early adapter of the hedonistic, materialistic lifestyle that would become routine after the 1960s and the sexual revolution. (This is the character that prompted Houellebecq's mother—who shares Janine's last name—to publicly disown him.) Concerned only with her own pleasure, Janine has no interest in mothering her children, literally abandoning the infant Michel in a pile of his own excrement. No wonder he grows up to be incapable of love or sexual connection; or that Bruno, similarly maltreated, becomes a loathsome pervert, obsessed with pornography and public masturbation, prevented only by his own cowardice from becoming a child molester.

Bruno and Michel are the prime exhibits in Houellebecq's programmatic indictment of modern European sexual mores. Starting in the 1960s, he writes, "a 'youth culture' based principally on sex and violence" began to drive out the ancient Judeo-Christian culture that valued monogamy, mutual devotion, and self-restraint. The innovative element in Houellebecq's argument is to link this new hedonism with the triumph of the European welfare state. Freed from all concern about politics and economics, men and women had nothing to occupy themselves with but the pursuit of sensual gratification. But this pursuit quickly developed into a Hobbesian war of all against all, in which the young and attractive are the objects of worship while the ugly and shy, like Bruno, are utterly despised. "Of all worldly goods," Bruno rages, "youth is clearly the most precious, and today we don't believe in anything but worldly goods."

"It is interesting to note," Houellebecq writes in one of many passages of armchair sociology, "that the 'sexual revolution' was sometimes portrayed as a communal utopia, whereas in fact it was simply another stage in the historical rise of individualism. As the lovely world 'household' suggests, the couple and the family would be the last bastion of primitive communism in liberal society. The sexual revolution was to destroy these intermediary communities, the last to separate the individual from the market. The destruction continues to this day." No wonder that "in the last years of Western civilization," the "general mood [was] depression bordering on masochism."

Houellebecq's powerful nostalgia for the "household," for genuine love and romance instead of sexual adventure, naturally leads him to an extremely sentimental view of women. Michel and Bruno each encounter a saintly, self-sacrificing woman who longs to heal their psychological trauma. But both of them are unable to return the love they are offered, so profoundly have they been ruined by their mother and the age she represents. By the novel's end, Bruno has gone into an insane asylum and Michel has withdrawn to a hermit-like existence in Galway, Ireland, where he works out the scientific discoveries that will lead to the abolition of mankind. It is not a coincidence that Galway is the westernmost city in Europe, the point where the West culminates and disappears. Nor is Houellebecq's reader surprised to learn that, in the future, humans greet their own extinction with "meekness, resignation, perhaps even secret relief." The leisure-world that is contemporary Europe, Houellebecq argues, is a trial that human beings cannot bear.

To turn from *The Elementary Particles* to *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) is to exchange the passionate complaints of an outraged teenager for the quiet, hypnotic monologue of an old man. For while Sebald was only 51 years old when the book appeared, his writerly persona seems as old as the Ancient Mariner. The narrator we meet in the book's first pages—he shares a name and a history with the author, though the identification is never totally secure—has just suffered a complete nervous breakdown: "I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility," he confides matter-of-factly. Unlike Houellebecq's avatars, however, Sebald has not suffered from any calamity in his personal life, about which we never hear a word. His is a strictly philosophical crisis, brought on by "the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past," which Sebald sees everywhere he goes.

The book can be described, in fact, as a catalog of the various kinds of destruction, natural and man-made, which confront the writer as he takes a walking tour down the east coast of England. *The Rings of Saturn* is not really a novel; there is no plot and no character development. It is, rather, a branching series of stories and memories, one giving rise to the next by no logic except that of free association. In the second chapter, for instance, Sebald starts out remembering a train ride from Norwich to Lowestoft. Along the way he observes that the countryside was once covered with windmills, which have now all disappeared; visits a country house that was an architectural marvel of Victorian England, and is now a crumbling, unvisited museum; walks down a boardwalk that was once a popular holiday destination and is now seedy and abandoned; and remembers a story he once heard about two American pilots who crashed nearby, close to the end of Second World War.

In other words, Sebald is drawn to stories of abandonment and loss, to sites where Western civilization seems to have died out, to obsolete technologies and unrecapturable pasts. As the book goes on, he assembles so many of these tales as to become a Scheherazade of destruction. And because Sebald the wanderer almost never encounters another person, he manages to produce the eerie sense that England itself has been abandoned, that he may be the last man left to catalog its ruins. The mood of the book is beautifully captured in one of Sebald's many quotations from Sir Thomas Browne, the Renaissance polymath whose meandering, encyclopedic works are models for his own: "The shadow of night is drawn like a black veil across the earth, and since almost all creatures, from one meridian to the next, lie down after the sun has set, so . . . one might, in following the setting sun, see on our globe nothing but prone bodies, row upon row, as if leveled by the scythe of Saturn—an endless graveyard for a humanity struck by falling sickness."

This vision of a world turned into a graveyard is Sebald's metaphor for the Europe he knows. Born in Germany in the last months of World War II, he is naturally obsessed with the war and its casualties; in other books, like *The Emigrants* and *On the Natural History of Destruction*, he deals explicitly with the Holocaust and the Allied bombing of Germany. But what makes *The Rings of Saturn* uniquely powerful in his oeuvre is the way that even the war comes to seem like just another manifestation of the entropy that is constantly at work in human affairs. The book evokes a Europe where simply too much history has taken place, too many lives have been lived and lost, so that it is no longer possible to make sense of them all or even remember them properly. Sebald quotes Michael Hamburger, another German émigré, on the difficulty of remembering his childhood: "Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable." The same

feeling is voiced by a random Englishman, a "Mr. Squirrel from Middletown," who "had no memory at all and was quite unable to recall what had happened in his childhood, last year, last month or even last week. How he could therefore grieve for the dead," Sebald pointedly adds, "was a puzzle to which no one knew the answer."

The answer proposed in *The Rings of Saturn* is that grieving for the dead has become so overwhelming a task, for the European inheritor of twenty centuries, that it leaves room for nothing else. In typically elliptical fashion, when Sebald describes an eccentric Irish family living in the ruins of their stately home, he is offering a metaphor for Europe on the cusp of the twenty-first century:

The floor-boards began to give, the beams of the ceilings sagged, and the paneling and staircases, long since rotten within, crumbled to sulphurous yellow dust, at times overnight. Every so often, usually after a long period of rain or extended droughts or indeed after any change in the weather, a sudden, disastrous collapse would occur in the midst of the encroaching decay that went almost unnoticed, and had assumed the character of normality. Just as people supposed they could hold a particular line, some dramatic and unanticipated deterioration would compel them to evacuate further areas, till they really had no way out and found themselves forced to the last post, prisoners in their own homes.

The Elementary Particles and *The Rings of Saturn* both depict a civilization collapsing from within, unable to stand what it has become. It makes perfect sense that both were published in the 1990s, during the West's brief holiday from history, with no external enemy on the horizon. *Saturday*, on the other hand, published in 2005, at the height of the "war on terror," when the West once more felt itself under threat, this time from Islamic fundamentalism. Ian McEwan plunges his novel into this particular historical moment by dramatizing the conflict between a privileged, guilt-ridden, indecisive civilization and an angry, jealous barbarism. He asks in the form of a parable the same question Kagan asked in *Of Paradise and Power*: can Europe defend its values from its enemies, when those values include a principled aversion to violence?

The whole action of the novel takes place on one particular Saturday: February 15, 2003, the day of the worldwide protests against the impending Iraq War. Henry Perowne, the middle-aged neurosurgeon and

paterfamilias who is McEwan's protagonist, finds his day of errands—a squash game, a visit to his Alzheimer's-stricken mother, grocery shopping for a dinner party—disrupted by the protest: "It's a surprise, the number of children there are, and babies in pushchairs. Despite his skepticism, Perowne in white-soled trainers, gripping his racket tighter, feels the seduction and excitement peculiar to such events; a crowd possessing the streets, tens of thousands of strangers converging with a single purpose conveying an intimation of revolutionary joy."

Yet as this passage makes clear, Perowne is divided against himself on the morality of the Iraq War. He knows too much about the evil of the Saddam Hussein regime to join the protestors in their self-righteous certitude: "by definition, none of the people now milling around Warren Street tube station happens to have been tortured by the regime, or knows and loves people who have, or even knows much about the place at all." At the same time, when he discusses the war with his squash partner and fellow surgeon, an American named Jay Strauss—whose name codes his Jewishness and his allegiance to neoconservatism—Perowne feels repelled by Strauss's bellicosity. "He's a man of untroubled certainties, impatient of talk of diplomacy, weapons of mass destruction, inspection teams, proofs of links with al-Qaeda and so on . . . Whenever he talks to Jay, Henry finds himself tending towards the anti-war camp."

Perowne is a stranger to "untroubled certainties" of any kind. His ability to see both sides of the war debate, his refusal to make snap ideological judgments, is one mark of his maturity; it is part and parcel of being civilized. For McEwan makes clear that Perowne represents the best of modern European civilization. He is healthy, handsome, reasonable, generous, a good father and devoted husband and concerned citizen. His work as a brain surgeon is described in minute technical detail, to underscore the miraculous prowess that science and skill have endowed him with: in the book's first pages, we see him save one life after another with his state-of-the-art surgical tools. And what Perowne does and is on the individual scale, McEwan suggests, London is on the grand scale: "Henry thinks the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece—millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work."

The problem, of course, is what to do about the people who don't want it to work. In the context of Saturday, this is clearly a geopolitical question; but McEwan is too canny a novelist to bring Perowne directly into conflict with a terrorist, which would be almost impossible to stage or write about convincingly. (When John Updike tried to enter the mind of an Islamic

fundamentalist, in *Terrorist*, he could do little more than recite clichés.) Instead, McEwan devises a more quotidian kind of conflict, in which the resilience of Perowne's civilization finds itself equally tested.

The trouble begins when Perowne gets into a fender bender with Baxter, a young thug who quickly grows violent. Based on his behavior and certain subtle symptoms, Perowne is able to deduce that the impetuous Baxter is suffering from an incipient neurological disease: "This is how the brilliant machinery of being is undone by the tiniest of faulty cogs, the insidious whisper of ruin, a single bad idea lodged in every cell. . . ." When Perowne shows Baxter that he knows about his condition—it is inherited, and Baxter knows full well what's in store for him—the thug loses his nerve, much like the Arthurian knights overawed by the Connecticut Yankee who can predict an eclipse.

But later that day, as Perowne's family gathers for dinner, Baxter barges into his expensive home and holds the whole group hostage. With the exquisite narrative cruelty of which he is a master, McEwan makes us watch as Baxter forces Perowne's grown daughter, Daisy, to strip naked, by holding a knife at her mother's neck. That Daisy is a poet, who has come home bearing the galleys of her first book, only makes the symbolic dimension of the standoff more unmistakable: here is passive, feminine culture victimized by blind masculine violence.

For Perowne, despite all his surgical skills, is unable to overcome the intruder, thanks to a fatal deficit of thymos: "Never in his life has he hit someone in the face, even as a child. He's only ever taken a knife to anesthetised skin in a controlled and sterile environment. He simply doesn't know how to be reckless." Perowne can understand the evil he is facing, but his understanding of evil's causes does not help him to defeat it. Indeed, McEwan suggests, the opposite may be true: he may understand Baxter so well that he is too ambivalent to fight him, just as he has been ambivalent about the justice of the Iraq War. He has been plagued all day by second thoughts about his initial conflict with the criminal: "His attitude was wrong from the start, insufficiently defensive; his manner may have seemed pompous, or disdainful. Provocative perhaps." If he could only have appeased Baxter's crazy, touchy pride, he might have been left alone in the cocoon of his culture and wealth: just the same calculation that, Kagan suggests, Europe as a whole made after September 11.

It is the way McEwan resolves this deadly standoff that makes *Saturday* such an ambiguous and troubling book. At the last moment, just before Baxter is about to rape Daisy, he notices her book of poems and commands her to read one out loud. Instead, she recites "Dover Beach"—Matthew

Arnold's great meditation on the uncertainty and loss of confidence of modern European man: "And we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night." And Baxter is so overwhelmed by the beauty of the verse, by the high culture he has never known, that he lets Daisy go and drops his guard, allowing Perowne to tackle him.

It is a totally fantastic resolution to a horribly credible dilemma; it has something of the willed unreality of Shakespeare's late romances, like *The Winter's Tale*, where the dead magically come back to life. Civilization does not have to fight barbarism, McEwan's parable suggests. It only has to display its charms, and barbarism will disarm itself. Things only get more self-flattering in the coda to this episode, when Perowne volunteers to perform the brain surgery needed to save Baxter's life after he hits his head on the stairs during their struggle. Any stain of aggression is therefore wiped away; Perowne, and the civilization he incarnates, emerges both unharmed and innocent. It is such a complete example of wish fulfillment as to make the reader suspect that McEwan is being deliberately, teasingly perverse.

But just as Shakespeare tells us that a sad tale's best for winter, it is precisely the wishfulness of *Saturday* that makes it an apt parable for Europe's own *Saturday*—the last day of the week, the day of rest. This metaphor holds equally well for Houellebecq's novel, with its nightmare of perpetual pleasure-seeking, and for Sebald's, with its reverie of retrospection: both seem to take place in a civilization that has retired from its historical tasks, having done and suffered so much that further effort seems impossible. Yet actual history, of course, does not allow for days of rest, and the historical world of which Europe is a part will not release it into the gentle euthanasia of Houellebecq's imagination, or the quiet senescence of Sebald's. McEwan's vision of a civilization dragged back into conflict and struggle, by foes more brutal and irrational than itself, seems much more likely to resemble the actual future. That is why McEwan's inability to imagine a realistic victory in that struggle makes *Saturday* perhaps even more troubling, considered as a spiritual diagnosis, than *The Rings of Saturn* and *The Elementary Particles*. The civilization that Houellebecq depicts is not worth saving, and the one Sebald dwells in is beyond saving; but the one McEwan describes, more realistically and affirmatively than either, deserves to be saved.

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