



Enthymema XXIII 2019

Trading Butterflies: The Representation
of Asian Sex Workers in Vollmann
and Houellebecq

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Abstract – The article compares the representation of Asian sex workers in William T. Vollmann’s *Butterfly Stories* (1993) and Michel Houellebecq’s *Platform* (*Plateforme*, 2001). Both the novels are set in South-East Asia, and both involve an apologetic and romanticised description of the sex trade. By comparing the two novels, I argue that both authors’ treatments of the sex industry develop a critique of Western Orientalism, and at the same time sympathy for and complicity with the colonial power dynamics that regulate the relationships between Asian countries and the West.

Keywords – William T. Vollmann; Michel Houellebecq; Orientalism; Satire; Sex Trade.

Malvestio, Marco. “Trading Butterflies: The Representation of Asian Sex Workers in Vollmann and Houellebecq.” *Enthymema*, no. XXIII, 2019, pp. 57-72.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.13130/2037-2426/11921>

<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/enthymema>



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ISSN 2037-2426

Trading Butterflies: The Representation of Asian Sex Workers in Vollmann and Houellebecq

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1. Introduction

In this article,¹ I analyse two novels – *Butterfly Stories* (1993) by William T. Vollmann and *Plateforme* (Plateforme, 2001) by Michel Houellebecq – in order to underline the strong similarities between the two in their representation of prostitution that oscillates between celebration or complicity on the one hand, and condemnation on the other. Specifically, I argue that the tone of the novels, together with their advocacy of particular ways with which to address the problem of prostitution, satirises an Orientalist² approach towards foreign countries. At the same time, the novels exhibit two more problematic stances: Houellebecq provides a serious denunciation of the damage that the sexual revolution has engendered in the West, whilst Vollmann defends the supposed romantic dimension of the sex trade. In other words, each novel simultaneously contains an accusation towards Western countries, and sympathy for and complicity with the power dynamics that the very same Western countries have created. These novels share the same setting, Thailand (and partly Cambodia, in Vollmann’s case), at a moment in which international tourism was growing rapidly. In both Vollmann and Houellebecq, speechless and disempowered Thai and Cambodian prostitutes represent a passive means of salvation for white, richer men in deep personal (or social) crisis. Although this happens in different ways (as a result of economic calculation in Houellebecq, as the end of a gnostic path through degradation in Vollmann), the implicit ideology that underpins these texts is similar, and so is the outcome. In Houellebecq, prostitutes can offer the sexual intimacy that capitalism and liberalism have made impossible in the West; in Vollmann, they can offer love. My purpose is not, of course, to contradict the authors, or to attack them for their ideas: on the contrary, my analysis is intended to excavate the contradictions of these texts. Moreover, while a great amount of (often negative) criticism about Houellebecq already exists, the same cannot be said about *Butterfly Stories*, and Vollmann’s work in general. In this sense, a comparison between

¹ I am grateful to Christopher K. Coffman for reading an early draft of this article, and for the suggestions he provided.

² By Orientalism, I refer of course to Said’s famous critical concept, first developed in his 1978 book of the same title, in which the author exposes the imperialistic and colonial ideology that structures Western representations of the Arab world. In Said’s theory, the allegedly underdeveloped, weak and disorganized “Orient” is a cultural and rhetorical invention of the West justifying imperial conquest and colonial domination. Of course, the concept of Orientalism, far from being monolithic, has been variously developed and re-defined through the decades. In this article, I will employ the term to refer to the approach of the protagonists of these novels toward South-East Asian women, whose depiction is stereotyped and patronizing. Founded on a colonial imagery, the portrait of Thailand and Cambodia is detached from reality and cancels differences and specificities in favour of a generically exotic depiction that reveals more about them than about the peoples and cultures they encounter. As we will see, however, while this approach is, to a certain extent, satirized in the novels, the authors themselves are not completely untouched by this very same tendency.

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Vollmann's book and a controversial author such as Houellebecq may help to cast a light on the value, but also on the problematic nature, of Vollmann's writings about sex and prostitution.

At the turn of the millennium, the number of sex workers in Thailand alone amounted to approximately half a million (Lyttleton 152-54), and while some certainly chose their job freely, the vast majority of them were either forced or tricked into it (Ryan and Hall 120ff.), or held in slavery-like conditions (Jeffrey). During this time, a significant diffusion of AIDS ("24 percent among brothel prostitutes nationwide"; XIV) and extensive child trafficking were also connected to the expansion of the sex market.³ Although both Vollmann and Houellebecq reveal the presence of hidden violence in this trade at least partially in their books, and so demonstrate their awareness of the industry's attendant issues, their protagonists do not share this awareness: they refuse to problematise their relationships with the prostitutes they meet or prostitution in general. Moreover, the very existence of a sex market in Thailand was favoured, if not started, by the presence of the American army in the region during the war in Vietnam (1955-75). As Ryan and Hall write, "the American military presence was also formalised in Thailand when in 1967 the Thai government signed an agreement with the US government to provide Rest and Recreation facilities in Thailand for American troops in Vietnam," creating "a series of economic structures and dependencies which would be filled by the international tourist once the military forces departed" (Ryan and Hall 141).

Nevertheless, although the novels allude to the colonial dimensions of the sex trade, they never explicitly thematize it; similarly, the depiction of sex workers is profoundly stereotyped, and seems to respond only to the narcissistic needs of the male characters. Such a representation of sex workers, and of prostitution in general, I argue, has a double meaning. On the one hand, this absence of critique, the tendency to show the sex trade as an apparently idyllic business from which all participants benefit and in which nothing ever goes wrong, highlights the evident falsity of such a portrait, and is thus a form of parody. On the other hand, it prevents the protagonists and readers from developing a more nuanced, empathic understanding of the difficulties and dangers faced by the sex workers they encounter in the novel – it prevents, in other words, a transformative encounter with Otherness. Though this problematic representation of sex work is, to a certain extent, intended as satirical, it also shows the ambivalence of Vollmann and Houellebecq towards prostitution, to the extent that the drastic opinions of their protagonists appear to belong, at least partially, to the authors as well.

2. "That Most Honest Form of Love": Prostitution in William T. Vollmann's *Butterfly Stories*

The plot of *Butterfly Stories* pivots on the romantic relationships that an unnamed protagonist, a journalist, develops with South-East Asian prostitutes – in particular, a Cambodian called Vanna. After two introductory chapters recounting his childhood and coming of age, the main part of the novel is dedicated to the time that the journalist spends in Bangkok and Cambodia with a photographer (also unnamed), the unprotected sex that they both have with local sex workers, and how the journalist falls in love with some of these local people. Throughout these stories, the protagonist is referred to progressively as the butterfly boy, the boy who wanted to be a journalist, the journalist, the husband, and Vanna's husband. After his return to America, he fails to reconcile with his wife and his previous life, and seeks distraction from his now

³ Ryan and Hall: "In 1990, the Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights announced that it estimated that there were two million prostitutes in Thailand, 800,000 of whom were children" (112). Though the origin and validity of these figures is unclear, such statistics provide an indication of the (if perceived) scale of the problem.

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unbearable marriage in unsatisfactory meetings with American prostitutes, in fantasies of infidelity, and in futile attempts to bring Vanna to the US. Eventually, he discovers he has contracted AIDS and flies back to Cambodia in an attempt to reunite with Vanna. In the last pages of the novel, we see him walking towards the Thai-Cambodian border, the Khmer Rouge guards waiting for him.

Although the first two parts of the book describe the childhood and early life of the journalist, the main focus of the novel is his adult life and his relationship with prostitutes. In this sense, the novel really begins with its third chapter: “Once upon a time a journalist and a photographer set out to whore their way across Asia. They got a New York magazine to pay for it” (Vollmann, *Butterfly* 43). The “butterflies” of the title refer to prostitutes, as stated in the introduction of the novel, which professes the book to be about “that most honest form of love called prostitution” (3). This paradoxical definition is recalled throughout the novel in the expression “butterfly someone,” repeated both by sex workers and by the journalist. This expression alludes to a kind of unfaithfulness between client and prostitute. Certain actions are labelled as misbehaviour: for example if the prostitute leaves the client immediately after intercourse, or if the client refuses to engage in a quasi-rental relationship with the sex worker. However, the word “butterfly” can also evoke the practice of collecting butterflies – in this case, beautiful women. The novel’s insistence on a connection between prostitution and love here is already suspicious, insofar as it romanticises and sentimentalises the sex trade. This notwithstanding, the novel’s development of the term “butterfly” also signals the disparity of interests between the prostitutes and their client: while the journalist wants his relationship with the sex workers to last because he is convinced that he is in love, the sex workers want it to last in order to gain as much money as possible. Far from eliciting sympathy in readers towards the “pure-hearted” journalist, the different meanings of sex and relationships for the protagonist and the sex workers emphasise their relatively disparate material circumstances, and the superiority that this situation grants the journalist.

Although nothing in the text explicitly refers to it, it is worth noticing that the term “butterfly” could also be connected to Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904), as Daniel Lukes has noted (Lukes 255-57). In this opera, the protagonist, a Geisha named Chocho-san, marries an American sailor who returns to the US after conceiving a child with her. Chocho-san is nonetheless in love with him, and patiently awaits his return for three years. However, he goes back to Japan with his new American wife only to collect his baby: having understood that her hopes were in vain, Chocho-san kills herself. In a sense, the resonance with *Madama Butterfly* can be interpreted as a parodic allusion to the pure love that the journalist feels for the prostitutes: like Chocho-san, the journalist succumbs because he is too naive to appreciate the material dynamics that govern the sex industry and that regulate the relationships to which it gives rise. More significantly, *Madama Butterfly* inspired David Henry Hwang’s 1988 play *M. Butterfly*, loosely based on the scandal involving French diplomat Bernard Boursicot and the male Chinese opera singer and spy Shi Pei Pu. The latter deceived the diplomat into believing that he was a female and seduced him in order to gain top-secret information for the Chinese government. Hwang’s play exploits this story in order to reflect on the dangers of Orientalism, in the form of the diplomat’s idealisation of his partner based on stereotypically colonial imagery which inevitably forecloses a meaningful encounter with the Other. At the same time, Hwang insists on self-deception as a fundamental part of love.⁴ Neither of these themes is dissimilar

⁴ Both Hwang’s play and Cronenberg’s movie (1993) end with the protagonist (Gallimard) committing suicide while performing the role of his former lover, a man pretending to be a woman (Song Liling). The deceived protagonist does not, however, take the role of the man who has betrayed him, but of the woman he believed him to be: Liling is an opera singer, and Gallimard falls in love with her when he sees her singing *Madama Butterfly*; thus, in the climatic ending of the movie, actor Jeremy Irons, playing

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from the journalist's perception of South-East Asian women in *Butterfly Stories*. As in Hwang's play, in fact, in Vollmann's novel "the 'victim' of the story is not Vanna, the love interest, but the journalist himself who falls to pieces at Vanna's hands" (Lukes 256). The protagonist, in other words, becomes a victim of his own Orientalist view, and succumbs to a world he is not able to interpret and control. At the same time, as we will see, this self-deception-cum-self-destruction proves to be voluntary, and almost joyful.

If, so far, I have explored the uneven material circumstances that characterise the protagonist's relationship with the sex workers of the novel through the trope of the butterfly, here I want to pay close attention to how the novel construes these material disparities and, indeed, their cultural and historical inflections. The descriptions of women in *Butterfly Stories* reproduce stereotypes: women are always presented as enthusiastic and passive, and the linguistic distance between them and the journalist (and the narrator) prevents the opportunity to properly characterise them. To the eyes of the journalist, the women he meets are essentially indistinguishable from one another. The journalist falls in love with one prostitute after another: Oy in Bangkok, then Vanna and Marina (and Vanna again) in Cambodia. In the eyes of the protagonist, however, these female characters have no distinguishing traits except for their endless availability for the sexual and romantic fantasies of the journalist. Even their names are often very similar to each other: Oy, Joy, Toy – it is unclear if these are their real names or are just nicknames for English-speaking clients), leading the journalist to comment on the presence of "so many Oys" (Vollmann, *Butterfly* 54).

Furthermore, the journalist and the prostitutes are unable to communicate because the sex workers do not speak English and the journalist does not try to learn any of the women's native languages except for the few words he needs to buy sex. Even the translators, such as the English teacher (their guide in Cambodia), do not speak English in the story. This character's inability to speak and understand the language he apparently teaches is mocked throughout the novel; nevertheless, the journalist relies on the teacher's efforts to express his feelings or to know the intentions of his beloved ones. Despite his continuous declarations of love, the sex workers that the journalist meets are nothing more than phantasmatic presences – empty containers for his insatiable desires. Similarly, the journalist does not learn anything about Thailand except for the sex trade, as the only references to culture concern prostitution and local food.

The protagonist also seems to be unaware of the violent origins of the sex trade. The violence that underlies and generates the sex trade takes many forms. In this specific case, the first form is, of course, the violence of economic inequality, both local and international, that sees some women sell sexual services to comparatively wealthy clients. The second form is the violence of war, as in the Thai sex market which originated in part as a consequence of the Vietnam War (when Thailand functioned as a resort for the American troops). Finally, the suffering that the Khmer Rouge caused in Cambodia during their rule (1975-79) and their occupation of border regions with Thailand in the following decades is borne out in the book, which actually opens with a depiction of the massacres of the regime. Although unrelated to the topic of the first chapter, which narrates the childhood of the journalist (10), this image functions as an anticipation of this topic, present throughout the book. Later in the novel, in

Gallimard, dresses up like a Japanese Geisha, and not like a Chinese woman, thus underlining that his love was directed toward an invention and a projection of personal desires, and not toward a real person. In his final hour, Gallimard pays homage not to a person, but to the very Orientalist idea that caused his own fall. It is highly eloquent of Vollmann's interest and sensibility in this issue, I believe, that he himself became interested in cross-dressing in later life. The testimony of his transvestism is recounted in *The Book of Dolores* (Dolores being Vollmann's female persona; 2013), wherein his account is accompanied by self-portraying photographs and drawings. Françoise Palleau-Papin has written extensively on this book in the present issue of this journal.

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the third chapter, a Cambodian prostitute working in Bangkok evokes the violence of the Khmer: “We go Kambuja, said the journalist. You come Kambuja? / No. / Why? / She grimaced in terror. – Bang, bang! she whispered” (44-45). Oy, the first prostitute that the journalist falls in love with, does the same (65). At the end of the book, it is suggested that the journalist will soon meet death at the hands of the Khmer Rouge themselves.

The journalist is therefore not unaware of the violence that surrounds him: however, he never draws a connection between that violence and the reasons why women become involved in prostitution. He seems reluctant to reflection on the significance of Thailand and Cambodia’s histories for the sex industry there. In one of the most graphic passages of the book, the narrator describes the ghastly violence inflicted upon the proprietor of a café whose wife and children were raped and killed by the Khmer. Immediately after the depiction of their suffering, the journalist is caught in a maze of thoughts:

Given that any suffering I might have experienced is as nothing compared to his, does that mean I’m nothing compared to him? Is he greater than I in some very important way? – Yes. – So is there anything I can do for him or give him to demonstrate my recognition of the terrible greatness he’s earned?

But the only thing that he could think of to help the man or make him happy was death, and the man had refused that.

Then he thought about giving the man money, and then he thought: Yes, but Vanna is as important as he is. And because she loves me and I love her, she is more important. (128)

As we can see in this passage, the journalist acknowledges the existence of political violence in the countries he visits, but he refuses to consider its importance and consequences in favour of selfish considerations and, indeed, a narcissistic fantasy of requited love. During his stay in Cambodia, he is hosted by military chiefs, and manages to interview Pol Pot’s brother: however, the proximity of political violence does not foster political literacy but childish, romantic fantasies. Immediately after this passage, the journalist imagines what life under the Khmer regime could have been like for Vanna: “As for tragedies (which were a riel a dozen in Cambodia), what about the circular white scars on her brown back, put there forever by the Khmer Rouge when as a child she couldn’t carry earth to the rice fields fast enough? If he could have gotten into his hands the people who’d done that to her, he would have killed them” (128). This image of an abused childhood, however, is merely the product of the journalist’s imagination, as nowhere in the novel does he receive this information from Vanna – who does not even speak English. Even the journalist’s claim of revenge seems preposterous and vain, considering that he is in Cambodia to interview the very people who committed (or who likely could have committed) the same crime. The end of the novel, which implies the death of the journalist by the Khmers, seems to comment ironically on his blindness: at the same time, however, this most horrible death appears as the most logical conclusion of his path of degradation.

The only moment in which the political violence that haunts Cambodia starts to cause the journalist anguish is when he is back in America and sees increasingly worrisome updates about Cambodia in the news. While in Cambodia he could have acted to protect Vanna in some way from her destiny, all he can do now is take refuge in the idea of bringing her home with him to the US. The impossibility of this task is signalled in a dialogue with an immigration lawyer (205) and also by all of the conversations the journalist has with his contact in Cambodia, Sien, whom he pays to keep an eye on Vanna, but who can only give him sporadic and irrelevant information in broken English.

Perhaps we ought not to find it surprising that the protagonist is so unwilling to reflect upon and critique the intersections between political violence and sex work, given that he benefits greatly from the violence inflicted upon others, as it grants him access to a wide market

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of sex. The journalist's sentimentality applies in this case too, as he is initially reluctant to exploit this market; however, this reticence is, again, a form of posturing, since not only does he benefit from the violence but he commits it too. One page after having had sex with Oy, who was still a virgin, he says "I can't help but feel it's wrong," to which the photographer replies: "Well, we're giving 'em money, aren't we? ... How else they gonna eat? That's their job. That's what they do. What's more, we're payin' 'em real well, a lot better than most guys would" (51). This highly unethical excuse, which simply accepts inequality as it is, without any moral hesitation around benefitting from it, is enough to placate the journalist's doubts. In the end, as the narrator explicitly states, the sentimental journalist is no different from the cynical photographer: "Interesting that the photographer, who wanted to break as many hearts as possible, and the journalist, who wanted to make as many as happy as possible, accomplished the same results...! Does that prove that the journalist was lying to himself?" (102). Indeed, the journalist causes great damage with his behaviour: he constantly refuses to use condoms during sexual intercourses with prostitutes, thus carelessly spreading the HIV infection to others, no matter how young: "You see, doc, I fucked this GREAT sixteen-year-old whore without a rubber; I practically had to rape her" (107). The protagonist not only commits indirect acts of symbolic and actual harm, through his perceptions of sex workers and through his transmission of HIV to others, but deliberately enacts violence upon a young sex worker and even takes pleasure in its non-consensual aspects. This is not the reciprocal love about which he speaks at length, but "practically . . . rape."

Paradoxically enough, it is indeed the very impossibility of a meaningful encounter and of a fulfilling union with them that leads the journalist to fall in love with prostitutes in general and with South-East Asian prostitutes in particular. It is, in other words, the lack of context and conflict provided by Orientalised women that allows the journalist to fall for them, in contrast with the complicated and distressing relationships he has had with Western women. Since his childhood, the journalist seems to have been attracted to girls more vociferously than usual for a boy his age (10). At the same time, his love has been directed towards stronger females than him, such as the girl who defends him from a bully (20). In the second chapter, he falls in love with a woman who identifies as a lesbian, and therefore cannot love him in return, but who nonetheless ends up dating a male friend of his; similarly, his wife is presented as critical and aggressive.

The relationship of the journalist with prostitutes is a parodic version of the traditional Western idea of courtship love, in which the hero faces all sort of troubles or humiliations for the woman he desires. For instance, the journalist lets Vanna humiliate him when he lets her choose an evidently overpriced bracelet in front of a laughing crowd (91-92). More generally, the journalist's abandonment of his previous life, his wasting of all of his money, the sordid details about his sexually-transmitted infections, and his final contraction of HIV/AIDS must also be interpreted in this sense within the context of the novel. Moreover, it is worth remembering that *Butterfly Stories* is the second instalment of Vollmann's so-called "prostitution trilogy" – a series centred on prostitutes. The other two books, a one-hundred page novella and a one-thousand page novel, *Whores for Gloria* (1991) and *The Royal Family* (2000) respectively, focus like *Butterfly Stories* on the wanderings and erratic behaviour of a male character looking for love in a sublimated female figure. In *Whores for Gloria*, this figure is the eponymous Gloria, a childhood friend of the protagonist, who is a Vietnam veteran. It is doubtful, however, whether Gloria exists at all. In *The Royal Family*, the female figure is the Queen of Whores of the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, whom the protagonist – a private detective – is asked to find. The Queen of Whores does indeed exist, and appears to possess magical powers, as her bodily fluids seem to have drug-like effects. As in *Butterfly Stories*, the protagonists are marginal, disturbed men; in *Whores for Gloria*, the Vietnam veteran is an alcoholic with mental health issues; and in *The Royal Family*, the detective is haunted by the memory of the suicidal wife of

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his brother, with whom he was having an affair and who – it seems – probably killed herself while carrying his child. Like the journalist in *Butterfly Stories*, who marches calmly towards his death, these characters end up deranged and lost. In *Whores for Gloria*, the protagonist participate in a spiral of madness and eventually gets killed (possibly by Gloria herself),⁵ while in *The Royal Family* the detective becomes a vagrant, wandering aimlessly through California.

For these relationships to be possible, the woman involved must be distant: she must qualify herself, in other words, as absent (of conflict, of responsibilities, of resistance). When the journalist returns home, not only can he no longer bear his marriage anymore (“He kept waking up in the middle of the night not knowing who the person beside him was”; 173), but he also does not find relief in the company of American prostitutes (199-200). Apparently, this quest for love has to pass through its impossibility. As Lukes writes, the journalist “finds himself in a double-bind in which the female object of his desires is both the source of his social opprobrium and censure and the solution he seeks to them” (247). Moreover, the path towards pure love, like every gnostic path, is also a path through degradation: “to gain more wisdom than others, one must do abnormal things” (Vollmann, *Butterfly* 188). This is true in the general sense that the journalist moves through degraded landscapes and war theatres, enjoying a liminal activity such as prostitution: but most of all, as we have seen, the journalist indulges in violence towards underage girls, and he contracts and spreads AIDS, potentially even to his own wife (240). The outcome of this path cannot be anything but death; and indeed death is what the journalist receives. “He was tired; he wanted to lie down in Vanna’s arms and sleep forever” (107), we are told in the first half of the novel. The book ends with the journalist marching towards the border patrolled by Khmer guards shouting at him, and with the sentence “Soon he’d be sleeping beside her forever” (277).

It is the impossibility of love, and the stylisation of the path towards love that this impossibility implies, which forbids the journalist from seeing South-East Asian prostitutes as real people. This impossibility depends on the cultural distance between them – as partially constructed by Orientalism, and as dramatised in the obstacle of language – and the material or economic distance between them – which causes their fragility and, therefore, their constant disappearing. Vollmann is not insensitive towards the representation of strong and round female characters, who crowd most of his novels. A large part of *Europe Central* (2005), for instance, is devoted to complex female characters such as Nadezhda Konstantivna Krupskaya or Käthe Kollwitz; and even in the last instalment of the prostitution trilogy, *The Royal Family*, the prostitutes are often the centre of focus. In *Butterfly Stories*, despite the extensive allusions to the horrifying conditions surrounding the sex trade, the focus is only on the journalist, and therefore the prostitute characters appear only as instruments of the distorted desires of a narcissistic male. However, both the tragic ending of the novel and several hints by the narrator against the journalist suggest that this point of view is, to a certain extent, to blame: at the same time, nevertheless, no alternative vantage point is provided, nor does any explicit criticism of the narrative take place. Even the narrator’s viewpoint, which sometimes presents the protagonist in a negative light, is insufficient, coherently with what Coffman calls Vollmann’s “moral nonintervention” (Coffman 15), his constant refusal to pass judgment, and the journalist’s views overwhelm the novel.

Such a structural ambiguity can be traced in Vollmann’s personal opinions on prostitution. Vollmann has written in several occasions in favor of prostitution as a respectable job, and his obsession with the figure of the prostitute is quite evident throughout his work. His most extended take on the issue is the famous essay, “The Shame of It All: Some Thoughts on Prostitution in America” (1999). In this anecdotic phenomenology of prostitution, Vollmann

⁵ On the quixotesque nature of Jimmy’s quest in *Whores for Gloria*, see Kauffman 215-22.

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defends his own personal experiences with prostitutes, arguing that a relationship of exploitation does not exist between the client and the sex worker, and that a prostitute can enjoy her work and benefit from it. He also opposes the regulation of prostitution, claiming, along with the Marquis De Sade, that “it’s this multitude of laws which is responsible for this multitude of crimes” (186). While similar positions are not necessarily morally inexcusable or even just disagreeable, as they tend to recognise the agency of sex workers, for readers of *Butterfly Stories*, there is a risk of conflating the protagonist with William T. Vollmann himself. In a sense, Vollmann seems to court this confusion. Like the protagonist of his novel, he went to Thailand as a journalist, with the company of a photographer (the novel’s photographer is “based on Ken Miller,” longtime friend of Vollmann, according to Michael Hemmingson; 44), and he managed to interview Pol Pot’s brother, as the journalist does. Moreover, one of the illustrations of the book (Vollmann, *Butterfly* 140), portraying the journalist, resembles the author himself in body posture, facial characteristics, and in his iconic glasses. However, although not deploring prostitution as a social phenomenon, the narrator of *Butterfly Stories* despises both the double standards and the fake sentimentality of the journalist, and his abuses.

The difficulty in discerning reality and fiction in Vollmann’s prose led Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Thompson to lambast him for a magazine article (*Spin*, 1993) about his experience in Thailand. When they criticise passages like the following – “If it costs ten dollars to sleep with a woman once, then why should it cost more than 300\$ to marry her and sleep with her for life?” (qtd. in Bishop and Thompson 57) – I would argue that they fail to see the intrinsic, absurd irony of such an assertion (what Lukes has defined “a typical Vollmannian epigrammatic economy”; 251). Rhetorical questions such as these are in fact a common feature in Vollmann prose, and are a way both for the narrator to move into the focalisation of a character (in this case, the brothel owner) and to highlight the absurdity of their motivations. However, it is true that Vollmann’s novels refuse to question the economic and social dimensions of prostitution, and so avoid considering the violence of the sex trade. As Bishop and Thompson write, Vollmann’s idea of consent is extremely wide, as he considers *voluntary* workers all those who are not, literally, slaves: as the authors summarise, according to Vollmann, “to be exploited one has to be under the age of consent or literally chained to a bed in a room with no windows”⁶ (Bishop and Thompson). Vollmann may then be criticised for failing to take into account that consent may depend on economic independence. In conclusion, while Vollmann most definitely condemns the abuses, the blindness, the self-centeredness, and the lack of empathy of his protagonist, he also shares with him a romanticised view of prostitution as an alternative to a problematic and challenging relationship with a romantic and/or sexual partner.

3. An Immodest Proposal: The Sex Trade and Sex Tourism in Michel Houellebecq’s *Platform*

The protagonist and narrator of *Platform*, Michel, is a middle-aged, disillusioned man. He has no family or passions, and his job consists in organising cultural events despite his lack of interest in culture or the arts. After the father he hated is murdered, which Michel welcomes with detachment, he decides to participate in a tour of Thailand. Although the tour is not explicitly of a sexual nature, he engages in several sexual encounters with Thai sex workers during his free time. During this holiday, he meets Valérie, who works in the tourism industry,

⁶ In his interview with Kate Braverman, Vollmann claims that “we’re all prostitutes” (Hemmingson 157). Such a crude generalisation is, at the same time, a way to remark that the job of a sex worker is as respectable as any other, and a voluntary inattention of the objective dangers that the sex trade implies.

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and after their return to France they start a passionate affair and eventually move in together. Michel and Valérie start planning the launch of a new category of touristic resorts, the Aphrodite Clubs, which explicitly offer their clients the possibility of engaging in sexual encounters with professional local sex workers. Valérie and her boss choose Thailand as the most suitable country to host the first of these clubs, and they make another trip to the country, joined by Michel. At the end of their stay, they are attacked in a terrorist bombing organised by Islamist terrorists, and Valérie dies. After her death, Michel decides to remain in Thailand, where he prepares to die – the novel being, thus, his suicide letter.

Platform is Michel Houellebecq's third and most controversial novel.⁷ An “omega male” (Lukes 240) – or a proto-incel, as literary critic Adam Kirsch has recently argued in *The New York Times* – like the journalist in *Butterfly Stories*, the protagonist and narrator, Michel is a man in a minority position in his country, and is characterised by feelings of unease: he has no particular talents nor appeal, and he is neither rich nor handsome. He thus looks for compensation in the company of Thai sex workers. In France, Michel's male role is threatened by the aggressiveness of new and young ethnic minorities. This menace is evoked at the very beginning of the book, since Michel's father is murdered by the brother of the young Arab woman he had a relationship with. “I had a vision of migratory flows crisscrossing Europe like blood vessels; Muslims appeared as clots that were only slowly reabsorbed” (Houellebecq, *Platform* 22), comments Michel. Moreover, a colleague of Valérie is gang-raped by a group of West Indian teenagers.

Michel feels also that his masculinity is under attack by the liberal and liberated sexual behaviour of French women. According to the narrator, Michel (and to Houellebecq in general), the sexual revolution has “extended the area of the struggle,” to quote the French title of the author's first novel. The sexual revolution of the Sixties, by separating sexual pleasure from reproductive needs, has disrupted the traditional structure of family, and deprived marriage of a strong social meaning. This process has opened for men a space of perpetual struggle, extending the process of courtship limitlessly in time, and creating a stressful competition among them which takes as models famous and talented stars. For this reason, men like Michel, who do not desire to enter into this struggle (and who have no chance of winning it anyway), find an escape in the sex trade, which allows them to bypass this process: “A lot of men are afraid of modern women, because all they want is a nice little wife to look after the house and take care of the kids. That sort of thing hasn't disappeared really, it's just that in the West it's become impossible to express such a desire” (144). French women, moreover, have become to the narrator's eyes excessively cold and tactical in their sexual relationships, too obsessed by the constant need to be liked and chosen to enjoy actual love-making. As Morray states, in Houellebecq “the sexual liberation and utopian aspirations of the late-sixties counter-culture movements are seen to be largely responsible for today's depressing impassivity before questions both moral and sexual” (Morray, “Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual Economy” 8).

Michel finds in Thailand, and especially in Thai prostitutes, the purity that Western people, in his opinion, have lost. As Houellebecq writes in one of the most famous (or rather infamous) passages of the book:

Offering your [Valérie's] body as an object of pleasure, giving pleasure unselfishly: that's what Westerners don't know how to do any more. They've completely lost the sense of giving. Try as they might, they no longer feel sex as something *natural*. . . . We have become cold, rational, acutely conscious of our individual existence and our rights; more than anything, we want to

⁷ On the reception of *Platform*, and in particular on the debate concerning Houellebecq's opinion on Islam, see Sweeney 28-33.

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avoid alienation and dependence; on top of that, we're obsessed with health and hygiene: these are hardly ideal conditions in which to make love. (*Plateform* 244)⁸

This 'paradise regained' is, of course, a caricature (van Wesemael 105), and is filled with racial stereotypes. The male as well as the female characters exchange considerations concerning which ethnicity is more suitable for sexual intercourse. Robert – Michel's loud travel companion in Thailand, and a figure similar to the photographer in *Butterfly Stories* – claims, as if he was talking about animals, that Thai girls, and not Brazilian or Cuban, are the best lovers in the world (Houellebecq, *Plateform* 74), and that "you won't find a white woman with a soft, submissive, supple, muscular pussy any more" (112). Similarly, Valérie comments that white women prefer Africans while white men prefer Asians (233) as black people are more simple, virile, and only want to have fun (234) – in a reproduction of pernicious and racist, if familiar, stereotypes that date back to the colonial period.

These stereotypes prevent the narrator from providing an accurate description of the sex workers – or a description not connected to his own sexual needs. On the one hand, French women, with the exception of Valérie, are presented as frigid and unable to enjoy sex. During the holiday in Thailand, Josiane distinguishes herself by her puritan comments about the sex trade and (in Michel's eyes) her acidic and snobbish behaviour. Even the younger, relatively more easy-going Babette and Léa do not enjoy sexual company during their stay. Instead, sex seems to be performed only in abstract and complex forms such as BDSM (Bondage & Discipline, and Dominance & Submission), in which, according to Valérie, no real contact, intimacy or sensuality ever takes place (191). It is significant, in this sense, that one of the characters who indulges in BDSM is a woman who is shown to be destroying her marriage and causing distress and unease to her husband. Valérie represents an exception among Western women, resembling in her views and behaviours a Thai sex worker more than a frigid French feminist – as the novel would have it (Sweeney 113): and, in fact, the novel ends with her violent death. She provides Michel with unlimited, uncomplicated sexual pleasure, intimacy, love, a purpose in life, and even economic maintenance. Her relationship with Michel, who apparently lacks any form of likeability, is so ideal that it has been suggested that the whole plot of the novel can be interpreted as a dream – Michel's erotic dream with Valérie as protagonist (Murray, "Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual Economy" 10-11). On the other hand, Thai prostitutes do not oppose any of Michel's requirements, and, most importantly, they seem to really enjoy the sex that they are paid for. For instance, although she does not like her job, the sex worker Sin still manages to have (or at least fake) two orgasms without any effort from Michel (Houellebecq, *Plateform* 118). They are grateful to Michel for his money, and do not seem to perceive their relationship as exploitation. As Sweeney argues, this representation of the sexual encounters with Thai sex workers shows them as natural, less complicated partners than Western women, rather than simply prostitutes doing their job: "Smiling and acquiescent, the Thai women's bodies possess neither subtext nor context and exist only to offer life-affirming sex to disenchanting Western men with an expertise and tenderness that combines a maternal tenderness with the advanced sexual techniques of the whore" (Sweeney 146).

While the relationship of the journalist with prostitutes in Vollmann's novel appears to be modelled on a desecration of the model of a mystique of love, Houellebecq has his model in another unrealistic and culturally central form: pornography. All the sexual scenes in the book seem indeed to share the pattern of pornographic films. In these scenes, nothing goes wrong, agreement is mute and immediate, sex does not require context or mutual understanding, and it is functional to male pleasure. In fact, these scenes are so ideal that there seems to be no

⁸ Of course, Michel's assertion is somehow axiomatic, as it lacks support both in sociological data and in most people's personal experience. See Betty 110-12.

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actual difference between what happens in reality and in a fantasy. In a dream, Michel fantasises about intercourse with an Arab girl on a tube train: she is pole-dancing in a bikini, then she uncovers her nipples and invites Michel over, before starting to pleasure him manually. They then have sex in the half-full train. According to Buchweitz, “the scene incapsulates male desire as it appears in a fantasy fully realised: the female body is offered effortlessly to the narrator, without any encounter in the social sense (there is no mutual introduction of the participants), with only one goal – immediate physical pleasure” (Buchweitz 142). Since the carriage is half-full, Michel comments that “such things could never happen under any normal circumstances. It was the dream of a starving man” (Houellebecq, *Plateform* 84). However, such things *do* happen throughout the whole book, and this encounter can be seen as a model of every sexual encounter of the novel, be it with Thai prostitutes, Cuban maids, or Valérie. When Michel meets Valérie in Paris for the first time, she seductively opens the door half-naked, and immediately engages in intercourse with him, as if in the opening scenes of a pornographic movie. Similarly, in Cuba, their maid joins a threesome with them immediately and without question.

This “classic Conradian opposition between the repressive conditions of Western civilisation and the possibilities of release in the ‘blank spaces’ of the world through capitalist exploitation” (Lehardy Sweet 170) influences the perception of every aspect of Thai culture in Houellebecq’s work. This can be seen, for instance, in the description of the Karen and Akha tribes. The Karens are good, says the guide, because they have devoted their economy to tourism; Akhas are “bad,” on the other hand, because “in spite of the government’s best efforts, [they] seemed incapable of giving up growing opium poppies, their traditional activity” (Houellebecq, *Plateform* 65). In other words, that which is Orientalised is accepted only once that it has abandoned its identity, and embraced the uniformity of globalization. As Graham Matthews argues, “Michel and the others are only permitted to see the Karen tribe because they adhere to the Western fantasy of the harmless, inclusive Other who responds positively to ideological apparatus . . . because they have renounced their cultural identity” (Matthews 139-40). Similarly, the stereotyped vision of Thai sex workers as perpetually available for Western pleasure has changed the very form of Thailand as a country and a society. As Edward Said has noted, such a view of an irrational and childlike Oriental, opposed to a rational and mature European, is based on a deliberate ignorance of the fact that the so-called Oriental did not live in a disorganised, chaotic world, but rather in a world with an organisation (national, cultural, social, epistemological) different from that of the West (Said 40). Houellebecq partially denounces this approach in his satire of the touristic world, as it underlines the hypocrisy at the basis of tourism, even in its most ethical and self-conscious forms. To a certain extent, the idea of a series of resorts based on the sex trade may be read as more honest than the tour Michel takes, as they would prostitute only the bodies of the indigenous peoples, and not their culture. At the same time, Houellebecq continuously attacks the Islamic world for its diffidence towards sex and its refusal to engage the sex trade: in other words, the author condemns as barbaric a civilisation simply because it refuses to share Western values.

The journalist, and even more so Michel, are *flâneurs*, since, as Ryan and Hall argue, “being a tourist is to occupy a liminal role within a temporal marginality” (Ryan and Hall 1). Both the tourist and the prostitute are liminal people: “threshold people existing betwixt and between, . . . in an ambiguous position between ‘positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial’” (3).⁹ It is thus not by chance that it is the meeting of the tourist and the prostitute that leads to such a candid yet acute exposure of the existential quagmire of the West. Michel’s marginality allows him, in a sense, to understand the centrality of the sex trade

⁹ As the authors note, Zygmunt Bauman was the first to apply the concept of *flânerie* to tourism, in his essay “From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity” (1996).

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in Thailand, by contrast with his fellow tourists. The role of *flâneur* implies a more refined capacity for observation and a strong sense of detachment – both qualities that are in observable in Michel as narrator of the story. *Platform*, in fact, is rich in economic considerations about the mutual convenience of the sex trade, presenting a variation on the centuries-old, Orientalist leitmotiv of the regeneration of Europe by Asia (Said 40).

Michel's vision of prostitution is purely economic. Among the many ways in which money can be attained (intellect, talent, strength, courage, beauty, luck, inheritance for example), sex is no more or less honourable. Given that beauty is so valued in narcissistic West (at least as far as Michel is concerned), "if sex was really to come into the category of tradable commodities, the best solution was probably to involve money" (Houellebecq, *Platform* 298). The whole idea of building resorts devoted to connecting tourists' sexual desires and locals' financial needs is founded on it. The plot, in other words, pivots on an abstract, simplistic, and purely economic-oriented idea of the sex trade:

Therefore . . . you have several hundred million Westerners who have everything they could want but no longer manage to obtain sexual satisfaction. . . . On the other hand, you have several billion people who have nothing, who are starving, who die young, who live in conditions unfit for human habitation and who have nothing left to sell except their bodies and their unspoiled sexuality. It's simple, it's really simple to understand: it's an ideal trading opportunity. (242)

Such a vision, however, deliberately ignores the reality beyond prostitution as a social phenomenon. The prostitutes Michel meets have chosen their job because they have urgent economic needs: Sin, for instance, was abandoned by her husband and has to raise two children alone (118). Deception, exploitation and addiction are never mentioned in the idyllic scenery that Houellebecq portrays, where prostitution always happens because of free will or economic calculus (Murray, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity* 15). Even AIDS is nothing but a pale fear, immediately overcome by the sex worker's reassurance that she is "OK" (Houellebecq, *Platform* 117). Although Houellebecq, for instance, is not unaware of the political history of Thailand, and of the role of the Vietnam War in the development of the sex industry in the country (Lehardy Sweet 166), colonial violence is never mentioned as a cause of the economic disparity between the West and South-East Asia. Moreover, the sex trade is presented as a mutual form of progressive effort – even an attempt to build a utopia (Houellebecq, *Platform* 298).

Platform contains several dialogues in which tourists more puritan than Michel oppose his vision, as does the *Guide du Routard* that Michel reads during his travel. "We're far from prudish, but Pattaya we don't like," say the authors of the guide; "humanitarian protestant cunts" (51), comments Michel. However, it could be said that even those who oppose Michel's ideas are somewhat patronising. Indeed, this clash of perspectives notably excludes the Thais sex workers' take on the issue; as McCann writes: "their silence shows their disempowerment" (McCann 141). However respectful of the domestic culture, tourism is always to an extent a colonial activity, as it forces a complex society into the gaze of tourists for their pleasure. As Aedín Ní Loingsigh argues, the notion of "counter travel" promoted by the *Guide du Routard* and derived from "tourism's awareness of its own homogenising tendencies, and its attempts to market new destinations," has inevitably resulted into "a whole new series of stereotypes and predictable patterns" (77).¹⁰ In this sense, *Platform* is, in a way, a reflection on the impossibility of knowing the Other, and on the inevitability of the "commodification of Otherness" (Hooks 21). However, Houellebecq accepts the idea that tourism is always disrespectful to

¹⁰ On tourism, and especially sex tourism, as a postcolonial activity influencing the whole economic and cultural system of a country, see also Carrigan 151-90. For what concerns the dangers of exoticism and the hypocrisy of the "anti-tourist tourist" who, despite being critical of the tourist's role, yet tends to perform similar acts of symbolic violence or cultural erasure, see Huggan.

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endorse Michel's theory that, then, sex tourism is not much worse. The reader is never, at any point of the book, introduced to the views of Thai characters, nor can they find a description of them which is more than stereotypical: in this way, Houellebecq makes ethical and humanitarian concerns appear as patronising as the racist views of his protagonist.

It has been argued that Houellebecq's novel has to be read as a social satire, and this is certainly true. In particular, *Platform* has been compared to Jonathan Swift's 1729 pamphlet, *A Modest Proposal*. In this book, the Anglo-Irish writer ironically suggested that poor Irish parents should sell their children as food to rich people. By doing so, Swift argued, they could at the same time gain money and get rid of an unproductive member of the family. This logical argument is, of course, utterly immoral: "in a similar way [to Swift], Houellebecq examines the global inequalities that have developed in tandem with the rise of neoliberal capitalism and posits a simple albeit unpalatable solution by standard Western norms" (Matthews 129). The end of the novel, with the terrorist bomb destroying Michel and Valérie's dream, could be interpreted as an illustration of the paradoxical thesis of the book. However, the bomb does not contradict the thesis: it simply forbids its realisation. Nowhere in the book are the principles on which Michel bases his ideas contradicted. Even if their paradoxical, exaggerated nature is underlined, no alternative viewpoint is counterpointed. *Platform* contends that Islam is not an option for the West, not only by harbouring a continuous (and shameless) mocking of the religion, but by portraying it as exclusive. The novel affirms that no dialogue is possible between the West and Islam. The evocation of Auguste Comte's theories, which Michel reads often, as well as the neutral tone in which the theories on prostitution are exposed, is indicative of the novel's tendency to portray the economic dynamics of late capitalism as inevitable, self-generating, and, most importantly, without alternatives.¹¹

4. Comparative Conclusion: Satire and Complicity

The value of this particular comparative analysis of two very different novels lays in the excavation it allows of both authors' latent prejudices about sex work. The parable of the protagonists of *Butterfly Stories* and *Platform* is similar: two "omega males," despised in their own country, travel abroad to find a social role that the economic inequalities between the West and South-East Asia make possible for them to fulfil. Because of the money generated by the colonial past (and present) of their country, they are allowed to find compensation in a poorer nation. Their dreams and aspirations are those of the coloniser: the journalist wants to bring Vanna back to the US to give her what he thinks is a better life, and Michel wants to transform the local economy according to Western ideals and desires. Both the journalist and Michel, however, are in the end destroyed because they have underestimated the complexity of the world they wanted to possess: the journalist, instead of "whoring his way across Asia," loses control of himself, contracts HIV/AIDS, and faces voluntary death, while Michel's partner is killed in a terrorist attack – an eventuality he had not foreseen in his idyllic portrait of Thailand as a sex paradise.

¹¹ To a certain extent, this view of prostitution seems compatible with Houellebecq's own, as can be observed in interviews wherein he unapologetically defends the sex trade in developing countries. As he states to the *Paris Review*, "everybody wins. It doesn't interest me personally, but I think it's a good thing. A lot of British and Americans pay for it. They're happy. The girls are happy. They make a lot of money"; and he claims to know that the girls are happy because he "talk[s] to them," although "it's very difficult because they don't really speak English" (Houellebecq "The Art of Fiction"). The ignorance and abhorrence of these comments notwithstanding, Houellebecq's personal inclination to bait his interviewers is notorious, and should not be underestimated.

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In both novels, the tone of the narrative is often humorous. *Butterfly Stories* offers several comical moments in the perpetual indecision and petulance of the journalist, whose dramatic lack of self-consciousness is evidently a tool of tragic irony. *Platform*, meanwhile, with its exasperated cynicism and its excessive and paradoxical thesis, is explicitly constructed as a social satire. In a way, thus, it could be argued that these texts are intended to function as critiques of the sex trade they depict, and that the centrality of disempowered white males is an attempt to deconstruct a traditional model of masculinity. While this is true to an extent, as neither the journalist nor Michel can be said to embody strong patriarchal figures, it is worth noticing that the ironic tone is applied only to the characters' (and more generally Western) ambition to save themselves through an Orientalist fantasy. In other words, the authors may satirise the purposes of their characters, but they do not criticise the ideology that produces them, despite sporadically condemning the excesses of the sex trade. They avoid showing a different perspective (and when they do, it is either overcome or ridiculed, as in the case respectively of Vollmann's narrator and of the *Guide du Routard*), and they do not even offer clues that a different perspective is possible. In both novels, South-East Asian women are always prostitutes, portrayed in conformity with male desire. Their role in the sex trade, moreover, is never problematised, and on the contrary is romanticised as a voluntary choice. Thus they both tend to ignore the historic and contemporary violence that underpins the sex market, be it colonial, economical, or physical. Of Thailand and its inhabitants, in other words, nothing is shown but what pleases the eye of the Western male.

Butterfly Stories and *Platform* are two extremely ambiguous texts. Vollmann creates a character who seems to fall in love with sex workers, but whose blindness to the circumstances surrounding them is striking. Such a blindness can be intended as the necessary premise of the journalist's frantic research of self-degradation: nevertheless, this gnostic path through suffering always happens in the context of a patronising commodification of Otherness. On the other hand, by writing a novel that lives out Disraeli's motto, used by Said as epigraph to his *Orientalism*, "the East is a career" (5), Houellebecq exposes the ideological hypocrisy of the international tourism. At the same time, however, this economic system is not openly criticised: on the contrary, it is suggested that an implementation and an extremisation of its dynamics will result in an almost utopian utilitarian situation. However, both the novels end tragically, not only with death, but with complete defeat. Though the authors intend to comment on the vanity and the folly of this effort of appropriation and commodification of the Orientalised Other then, they do not show any openness to a different perspective. This oscillation between complicity and denunciation seems to be, in the end, self-referential.

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