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# Echenoz's Modern-Day Mystics

*Dominique Jullien*

Back in 1988, in an article on Echenoz published in a special issue of *Yale French Studies* devoted to contemporary French novelists, I wrote: "Although the Médicis prize awarded to him for his second novel, *Cherokee*, has begun to familiarize the public with his work, Jean Echenoz is still a new name in contemporary French fiction. No critical studies are available on him yet, but a number of short articles can be found in different periodicals."<sup>1</sup>

In 2005, Jean Echenoz is no longer a new name in contemporary French fiction. With a dozen novels published (all by Editions de Minuit), numerous literary prizes (including the Prix Médicis for *Cherokee* in 1988, the Grand prix du roman de la Société des gens de lettres for *Lac* in 1989, the prix Novembre for *Les Grandes Blondes* in 1995, and the prestigious prix Goncourt for *Je m'en vais* in 1999), and a well-developed and growing critical bibliography, Jean Echenoz is now a familiar figure in the literary landscape. Articles appear regularly in the press, and an entire program of France-Culture devoted to his work aired recently (December 2003). On the scholarly side, the first international colloquium on Echenoz's fiction was organized by the Université de St-Etienne in 2004. His latest novel, *Ravel*, a fictionalized narrative of Ravel's last ten years of life, came out in January 2006, and the impatient fan could read excerpts and reviews on the official Echenoz website even before its publication. Jean Echenoz is beginning to establish himself on the English-speaking literary scene as well, where five of his novels have already been translated by Mark Polizzotti.

Equally familiar to readers is what has come to define Echenoz's trademark manner: his novels are playful, ironic reworkings of popular genres, particularly detective novels, spy novels, and corresponding thriller movies. *Lac*, his award-winning 1989 novel, a sophisticated and clever spoof of spy fiction, is an exemplary case of a narrative that plays on generic clichés and readers' expectations. Two stories, however, are somewhat atypical in his *oeuvre* and seem to me to handle the usual Echenoz themes of disappearance, death and grief in a more melancholy and serious tone. The short story, *L'Occupation des sols* (1988) and the 2003

novel *Au piano* would appear to have a rather peculiar status, to be rather less self-conscious and more straightforward, the importance being more on the tale and less on the telling.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I will argue that these two works exhibit, albeit with Echenoz's characteristic bittersweet playfulness, the profound metaphysical anxiety that inhabits modern artists.

To be sure, these works are also rewritings of other texts. Allusions and references, whether to books or to films, are the stuff they are made of, no less than other novels by Echenoz. They are, in this sense, no less "postmodern." Just as *Cherokee*, *Le Méridien de Greenwich* or *Lac* were ironic rewritings of detective and spy fiction, *Au piano* appears to be a take on popular comedies of the hereafter, such as the 1990 thriller *Ghost*, or the 1991 Albert Brooks comedy *Defending Your Life*, both of which can be seen as variations on the classic Warren Beatty film *Heaven Can Wait* (1978). In *Ghost*, the character is murdered during a mugging, like Max Delmarc in *Piano*. In *Defending Your Life*, Purgatory is a comfortable yet unattractive hotel—as it is in the novel—where the newly deceased are judged, not on their sins, but rather on their ability to prove in court that they have made the most of their lives, something our mildly depressive pianist hero notoriously failed to do, both during his lifetime and afterwards. In the film, the unloveable yuppie character, played by Albert Brooks himself, is allowed to redeem his selfish and useless life, cut short in a car accident, and return to a more meaningful existence on earth thanks to the transforming love of Julia (Meryl Streep), who herself has led a magnificent life and died a heroic death. In Echenoz's version of a comedy of the hereafter, however, bitterness prevails over the comic veneer. Gentle but ineffective, the unheroic Max fails in his quest for a lost love allegorically named Rose, not once but twice, as he helplessly watches her slip away and leave him "plus mort que jamais" at the end of the novel. Conflicting with Hollywoodian optimism in this story is the dominant gene of Flaubertian pessimism, which permeates so much of Echenoz's fiction. Echenoz has spoken about the importance of Flaubert for his own books on numerous occasions. In an interview published as an appendix to the 2002 edition of *Je m'en vais*, Echenoz confided that Flaubert was "pour moi une grande référence, c'est même la plus grande référence possible, un auteur que je relis très souvent."<sup>3</sup> The watery blood of Frédéric Moreau runs in Max Delmarc's veins.

In the case of *L'Occupation des sols*, Flaubert's presence is felt on the stylistic level. In an interview for *Le Magazine littéraire*, Echenoz reflected on the labored perfection of Flaubert's sentences, in particular the famous last sentence of *Hérodias* referring to the head of John the Baptist ("comme

elle était très lourde, ils la portaient alternativement"): "C'est donc une phrase extrêmement brève, prosaïque et presque anodine, mais qui allie à la fois toutes les qualités de l'écriture flaubertienne (...) sèche, mais généreuse aussi, visuelle, presque cinématographique (...) une phrase tragique et ironique, pleine de sous-entendus (...) une phrase qui est presque une provocation tant elle a l'air intempestif, déplacé, inachevé (...) et en même temps, à y regarder de près, c'est une phrase formidablement construite."<sup>4</sup> It would seem that the first sentence of *L'Occupation des sols* rewrites the last sentence of *Hérodiade*, even reproducing the rhythmic pattern of the first segment (comme elle était très lourde // comme tout avait brûlé): "Comme tout avait brûlé—la mère, les meubles et les photographies de la mère—, pour Fabre et le fils Paul c'était tout de suite beaucoup d'ouvrage: toute cette cendre et ce deuil, déménager, courir se refaire dans les grandes surfaces."<sup>5</sup>

Like Flaubert's concluding sentence, this one is prosaic, mundane, almost banal,<sup>6</sup> yet strangely off balance as a result of the slightly ungrammatical use of verb tenses: one would normally expect *ce fut* rather than *c'était*, and the procession of infinitives gives a halting, broken aspect to the sentence. More uncanny still is the systematic juxtaposition of physical and emotional references (ashes and mourning, mother and furniture) and the numbing accumulation of impersonal phrases (*tout, c'était, toute cette cendre, déménager, courir se refaire*). There is no parody, no derision here: it is rather the reverent tone of the last Flaubert, the writer of the *Three Tales* with their ambiguously mystical mood.

The first sentence of the story introduces the characters, minimally characterized by their mutual love relations: the mother, the son, and "Fabre," whose first name the reader will never know, since he is called only by his last name and his marital status (*le veuf*, the widower), in turns. Thematically, both *L'Occupation des sols* and *Piano* revolve around a common quest for a lost woman, a familiar, indeed obsessive theme in Echenoz. In an interview with Olivier Bessard-Banquy, Echenoz acknowledged this thematic recurrence in his books: "La question centrale de mes livres, au fond, c'est la disparition. Les premiers livres tournaient autour de la disparition d'un objet ou d'une personne, d'une femme en particulier. C'était la question de l'homme abandonné, en somme."<sup>7</sup> Both Fabre and his son Paul have been abandoned by Sylvie when she died in a fire. As for Max Delmarc, he spends his days mourning the loss of the young girl he loved platonically as a student without ever daring to approach her, Rose Mercoeur, whose memory prevented him from ever loving any other woman. In both stories the loved woman is lost not once but several times: Sylvie Fabre's mural portrait on the side of the

Wagner building is first damaged by the wind and the passage of time, then walled over by new construction. Rose Mercoeur pops up in the Paris subway twice (or so, at least, Max believes) only to vanish again. Finally she resurfaces in a department store, tantalizingly close to Max, only to be taken away by his double and rival, Béliard.

This quest for a lost woman is shot through with several mythical parameters, albeit in a tentative, inconclusive way. It suggests the myth of Eurydice, particularly given that Max is himself a musician like Orpheus. The ghostly pursuit of Rose's shadow in the corridors of the *métro* (65-76) anticipates the infernal afterworld that Max is soon to reach, since he is destined to a violent death by mugging, two weeks later. Like a modern-day Orpheus, Max descends into Hades to find Rose at long last (the nose job altering her appearance, her relocation in the "Park," the novel's bleak version of Paradise, and her acquaintance with Béliard, all inform the reader that she too, like Max, is dead) only to lose her on the very last page, as Béliard leads her away from the department store, back to the Park, informing a crushed Max coldly: "C'est comme ça, voyez-vous, la section urbaine. Ça consiste en ça. C'est ce que vous autres appelez l'enfer, en quelque sorte" (222).

Mythical reminiscences are also woven into the fabric of *L'Occupation des sols*. The dead woman, Sylvie Fabre, is another Eurydice, with father and son teaming up to retrieve her from the peculiar Hell where she is buried. The widower rents a studio in the new building that has been built adjacent to the mural portrait of his wife. According to Fabre's calculations, based on the building plans, the studio is located right next to Sylvie's eyes: "On ne le dissuade pas franchement d'emménager tout de suite, au quatrième étage côté Wagner, dans un studio situé sous les yeux de Sylvie qui étaient deux lampes sourdes derrière le mur de droite. Selon ses calculs il dormait contre le sourire, suspendu à ses lèvres comme dans un hamac; à son fils il démontra cela sur plans" (18-19). Forsaking any other activity, at the end of the story the two men endeavor to break down the wall of their studio apartment in order to uncover Sylvie's image on the adjacent building's wall. The intense heat mentioned in the last sentence ("On gratte, on gratte et puis très vite on respire mal, on sue, il commence à faire terriblement chaud" [22]), in addition to being another example of a rewriting of Flaubert's famously prosaic conclusion to *Hérodias*, could also be read as a hint to the Hell into which the men venture in their heroic quest for Eurydice.

The poignant motif of the doomed quest for a lost woman holds a fascinating appeal for the reader's imagination precisely because it

conjures up an array of mythical, legendary and religious images without privileging any one image in particular. Both Sylvie Fabre and Rose Mercoeur are contemporary incarnations of the idealized female figures that write a story of loss into the Western literary tradition—the elusive Rose endlessly sought for by the Lover in Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*, Goethe's Eternal Feminine leading Faust ever upward, Beatrice guiding Dante through Hell into Paradise, Venus tantalizingly appearing and disappearing before her son Aeneas, yearning for an embrace she denies him, the innumerable sightings of saints and virgins in the Catholic lore. For Paul and Fabre, transfixed in fascinated grief, the image of Sylvie Fabre is a giant Madonna, smiling from above in her long blue dress: "Elle les regardait de haut, tendait vers eux le flacon de parfum Piver, Forvil, elle souriait dans quinze mètres de robe bleue" (8).<sup>8</sup> Years later, a grownup Paul articulates the nature of the image's fascinating power, just as the devastating construction is about to begin: "C'était une belle robe au décolleté profond, c'était une mère vraiment" (11). But as the new building rises against the Wagner, Paul is made to watch helplessly as his mother is, as it were, buried alive: "Les étages burent Sylvie comme une marée (...) l'immeuble allait atteindre le ventre de sa mère. Une autre fois c'était vers la poitrine (...) Mais à partir des épaules, le chantier pour un fils devenant insoutenable, Paul cessa de le visiter lorsque la robe entière eut été murée" (14-15).

An archetypal motif runs through the story, the (seemingly universal) association of a building with a human sacrifice. A human being must be buried alive or walled into the building to ensure its completion. In German and Scandinavian legends it is often a child; Mediterranean folktales tell the story with a young woman.<sup>9</sup> In Marguerite Yourcenar's retelling of a Balkanic variant, "Le Lait de la mort" (*Nouvelles orientales*), the victim is a young mother, who is walled alive into the tower save for two openings for her breasts and her eyes. As the brick wall rises, the young woman bids farewell in turn to her feet, her knees, her hands, her hips and womb. She looks like "une Marie debout derrière son autel"<sup>10</sup> (54); but when the wall reaches her breasts she begs her cruel brothers-in-law to leave openings, so that she can still care for her child: "Ne murez pas ma poitrine, mes frères, mais que mes deux seins restent accessibles sous ma chemise brodée, et que tous les jours on m'apporte mon enfant..." (55); she also begs to be able to see the child: "laissez une fente devant mes yeux, afin que je puisse voir si mon lait profite à mon enfant" (55-56). Her young son is brought to her, and she is able to watch him and feed him. After a few days she dies, but the

miraculous milk continues to flow from her breasts for another two years, until the child is weaned and turns away from her of his own accord: "Ses yeux languissants s'éteignirent comme le reflet des étoiles dans une citerne sans eau, et l'on ne vit plus à travers la fente que deux prunelles vitreuses qui ne regardaient plus le ciel. Ces prunelles à leur tour se liquéfièrent et laissèrent place à deux orbites creuses au fond desquelles on apercevait la Mort, mais la jeune poitrine demeurerait intacte et, pendant deux ans, à l'aurore, à midi et au crépuscule, le jaillissement miraculeux continua, jusqu'à ce que l'enfant sevré se détournât de lui-même du sein" (56-57).

Whether or not Echenoz actually read this story by Yourcenar, the thematic parallels are striking. The overall meaning of the story, however, is reversed in Echenoz's version: unlike the legend that tells of a mother ensuring the survival and well-being of the child from beyond death, here, conversely, there is no weaning, no closure, and no moving on. Paul, the son, does grow up, but he keeps visiting the building (even as he stops seeing his father), as though unable to sever the maternal ties: "Plus tard, suffisamment séparé de Fabre pour qu'on ne se parlât même plus, Paul visita sa mère sur un rythme plus souple, deux ou trois fois par mois, compte non tenu des aléas qui font qu'on passe par là" (10). The enigmatic ending of the story points rather to a return to the dead mother, a reunion in which, perhaps, quite possibly, the men will also die. In this mysterious story, the most mysterious moment of all involves a woman named "Jacqueline" whose milk is spurned: "une femme qui venait sur le trottoir s'arrêta derrière [Paul], leva les yeux au ciel et cria Fabre. Paul, dont c'est quand même le nom, se tourna vers elle qui criait Fabre Fabre encore, j'ai du lait. La voix énervante tomba du ciel, d'une haute fenêtre au milieu du ciel: tu simules, Jacqueline. La femme s'éloignait, on ne sait pas qui c'était. Monte, Paul" (16-17). Called up by this voice from above,<sup>11</sup> Paul ascends into "Heaven" for a final reunion with the dead mother, burying himself alive in the rubble in the attempt to unearth the buried image of Sylvie Fabre. Significantly, Fabre moves in next to Sylvie's eyes—the eyes that embody Death in Yourcenar's story, and which in *L'Occupation des sols* are irresistibly attractive lamps that draw and burn—and to her mouth ("il dormait contre le sourire," [19]), the very locus of taboo in Yourcenar's story: "placez vos briques devant ma bouche," says the young woman, "car les baisers des morts font peur aux vivants" (55). Far from being a life-giver, Echenoz's *morte amoureuse* becomes a vampire, sucking the life out of her men, drawing them back to her, pulling Paul back from adulthood and Fabre away from other loves.

And yet the enigmatic ending provides no certain clue—will Fabre and Paul succeed in their archeological quest? Or will they cause a fire by digging into the building wall, thus bringing the story full circle from the mother's death in a fire at the beginning? Echenoz's famously "undecidable" narratives leave the reader stranded. Although we know what happens at the end of *Au Piano*, we are confused by the dreamlike multiplication of motifs and episodes that echo one another, depriving us of any stable point of reference in reality. Everything happens twice, everything is multiplied, a device already used prominently in an earlier novel.<sup>12</sup> The recurrent motif of the woman lost to a rival alternates with that of the woman forced upon the hero (first Doris Day in Purgatory, then Félicienne in the Urban Section or Hell). Rose's departure with Béliard echoes other similar episodes—Félicienne ends up with Bernie (207); the gorgeous neighbor with the dog has a husband (82); a young Rose is never seen without an ominous *barbu* (27); even Max's sister Alice is claimed by his agent Parisy after Max's death (188). To confuse matters further, the rival also functions as a double and helper. A helpful, servile and sloppy Bernie, humbly waiting on an elegant, famous and capricious Max in the first part, returns in the second part as a well-dressed and successful show-business executive, cutting a dashing figure next to a downtrodden Max in reduced circumstances, condemned to wearing poor quality hand-me-downs and serving in a seedy bar. While he obligingly rids Max of the tiresome Félicienne and procures him a job as a bar pianist, Bernie, for all we know, may thus be responsible for Max's final and terrible punishment, since the rule of Hell is no one is allowed to continue what they were doing in their lifetime (152). Christian Béliard himself, Max's guide in the hereafter, is both a guardian angel<sup>13</sup> and a devil.<sup>14</sup> He is also a double, both of the old Max (he inherits Max's alcoholic addiction, while a dead Max can no longer bear the taste of alcohol, and, of course, he steals Max's beloved Rose) and of Max's agent Parisy, who also behaves both as a helper and an antagonist, bullying and keeping a sharp eye on Max during his musical career just as Béliard watches and bullies him in his degraded afterlife. Every relation in Max's life is reflected separately in his afterlife, although the whole picture is not; his afterlife rewrites his life endlessly, but seen through a distorted mirror. The places of Max's "life" and "afterlife" are reversible—the Park and the Parc Monceau, the *Centre* and the *Salle Gaveau*, the *métro* and the *Section urbaine*, and so on.<sup>15</sup> In these echoes and mirror effects any stable reference to reality is lost: Max's ultimate encounter with Rose in the department store could be a figment of his imagination, no more nor less than his sightings of her in the subway when he is still alive; the entire afterlife



episode could be “just a dream” caused perhaps by delirium—a dream, however, from which there will be no awakening.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed Echenoz’s characters never question the strange things that happen to them. This aesthetic of uncertainty,<sup>17</sup> which leaves the reader lost in the loose ends, extends to the protagonists, who as a rule do not attempt to understand or interpret. In this, Echenoz’s undecidable narratives depart from the fantastic genre in the nineteenth-century tradition, which constantly calls upon interpretative impulse and skill, whether the character’s or the reader’s. With Echenoz, we are closer to Kafka’s parables and their uncertain metaphysics.

An inconclusive yet genuine metaphysical anxiety permeates these “beautiful melancholy novels”<sup>18</sup> that stand out from the usual self-conscious Echenoz production. Max’s condemnation to the *section urbaine* (a modern version of Hell) appears morally unmotivated, certainly out of proportion with any sins he committed, as even the diabolical Béliard agrees (“il y a toujours une petite part d’arbitraire dans les délibérés,” [148-149]). Why, objects Max, is his sentence so harsh after a lifetime devoted to art (148)? The fact is that Max wastes first his life, then his death, searching for his “Rose,” the true purpose of his life. When he sees Rose leave in the company of Béliard, he stays behind “plus mort que jamais” (223). The reader is prompted to ask, was Max then dead even during his lifetime? In fact, his is a life sacrificed to art, wasted rather than lived, pitifully devoid of woman’s love. I would propose that the hero’s death-in-life, then life-in-death predicament can be read as Echenoz’s sly variation on the *kunstlerroman*. The series of unfortunate events that make up Max’s life and afterlife provide an original perspective on the conflict between art and life that forms the dramatic backbone of those stories. Contrary to the Romantic tradition, which idealized art and valorized the sacrifice of life—typically represented by a woman’s love—to art, there is hardly anything glamorous about art in *Au Piano*. Max’s dedication to his art is mercilessly de-idealized: his daily routine is lonely and tedious (32), his concerts are a humdrum affair at best (64), a nightmare at worst: “Il était là, le terrible Steinway, avec son large clavier blanc prêt à te dévorer, ce monstrueux dentier qui va te broyer de tout son ivoire et tout son émail, il t’attend pour te déchiqueter” (15). In Hell his musical talent is held in contempt: “Vous n’allez plus pouvoir faire l’artiste comme avant, voyez-vous, dit Béliard, il va falloir exercer un vrai métier comme tout le monde” (152).<sup>19</sup> Worse still, Max himself does not believe in the value of the sacrifice he made, since “Rose” —life— eludes him again and again.<sup>20</sup>

In *L'Occupation des sols*, we see both the passing of time (the son grows up, the cityscape changes) and the reversal of time at stake in Fabre's archaeological attempt to restore Sylvie's mural. In this undecidable parable of memory and grief, the reader does not know whether they are successful in their work as "défossoyeurs,"<sup>21</sup> but the story leaves no doubt about the all-engulfing nature of their task. They are forsaking life in order to resurrect the dead woman. Moving into ever smaller and barer quarters (from the large family apartment that burned down into a *deux-pièces* with his son, and finally into the tiny studio with a foam mattress and a naked lightbulb), Fabre is entombing himself alive in the new building. He is a new sort of mystic in ascetic pursuit of his dead wife. From his impoverished appearance, from the unfurnished apartment, we may suppose that he has lost his job (17), or perhaps that his "mission supérieure" (19) requires the sacrifice of any superfluous creature comforts. In preparation for their task, the men don "larges tenues blanches" (21) that suggest both painters' outfits and monks' robes; the food they choose is likewise ascetic ("beaucoup de nourriture légère" [19]).<sup>22</sup> More poignantly still, the Sunday afternoon on which they begin their labor is a spectacular summer day, which seems the call of life itself: "Un soleil comme celui-ci, développa le père de Paul, donne véritablement envie de foutre le camp" (20-21). Instead, they will bury themselves in the ruins of the past, choking on dust and turning away from life, in a kind of ironic variation on the famously claustrophobic cork-lined room of memory in Proust's *Recherche du temps perdu*.

A common issue is played out in both stories; in *L'Occupation des sols* as in *Au piano*, life is forsaken for a supposedly higher good. The redemptive value of art, the central creed to Romanticism and high modernism, is at the heart of these stories, and yet is also very much in doubt here. "Fabre" the maker, the craftsman [*faber*] is an artist of sorts—an "égyptologue" (21), an archaeologist of memory. But curiously, it seems he lacks the ability to evoke and recreate his subject. Remarkably, he never attempts to reproduce the only image of Sylvie left to him (the mural) in drawings or photographs. His early attempts to evoke Sylvie verbally for his young son end in frustrating failure: "Le soir après le dîner, Fabre parlait à Paul de sa mère, sa mère à lui Paul, parfois dès le dîner. Comme on ne possédait plus de représentation de Sylvie Fabre, il s'épuisait à vouloir la décrire toujours plus exactement: au milieu de la cuisine naquirent des hologrammes que dégonflait la moindre imprécision. Ça ne se rend pas, soupirait Fabre en posant une main sur sa tête, sur ses yeux, et le découragement l'endormait" (7-8). What Fabre lacks is the ability to

transpose and translate, a key difference between the sterile fascination in which he engages, and a meaningful creative act. Instead of recreating Sylvie by means of images or words, Fabre loses himself in an idolatrous cult—in the Proustian sense of the word—one that does not distinguish between art and life: “Regarde un peu ta mère, s’énervait Fabre que ce spectacle mettait en larmes, en rut, selon” (10). Fabre’s failure, of course, is Echenoz’s triumph. The text successfully renders failure, a paradox that lies at the heart of the *kunstlerroman* tradition.

A hesitant pianist unconvinced of the redemptive virtue of his art, a despairing widower who fails to transform pain into beauty—these are the mystics for our time. Echenoz’s characters live in the same metaphysical exile famously defined by Albert Camus. If, as Herbert Read put it, “metaphysical anxiety is now a global condition of mankind,”<sup>23</sup> for Fabre and Max, metaphysical anxiety is all the more real, perhaps, because there is no answer to their queries, no redemption in their quests.<sup>24</sup> The artist’s frustration (“ça ne se rend pas”) merges with the widower’s grief. The attempt to recreate is indistinguishable from the desire to resurrect, just as the image—the idol—is always called, like the dead woman herself, “Sylvie Fabre,” with no distinction ever being made between the model and the picture. For these misguided mystics, arrested in unhappy fascination, the object of their quest is a Rose not to be picked in this life or the next.

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## Notes

1. *Yale French Studies*, 1988, no.75, special issue: "After the Age of Suspicion", p.337.
2. To a lesser degree, the 1997 novel *Un an*, which tells the story of a young woman's slow descent into homelessness and dereliction, would also belong in this category.
3. Jean Echenoz, *Je m'en vais suivi de Dans l'atelier de l'écrivain*, p.248.
4. De Biasi, Pierre-Marc. "Jean Echenoz: 'Flaubert m'inspire une affection absolue'." *Magazine Littéraire* 401 (2001), p.54).
5. *L'Occupation des sols*, p.7. Echenoz's opening sentences have been noted for their dramatic concision. Olivier Bessard-Banquy praises the "incipit prodigieux de concision" of the 1986 novel *L'Équipée malaise* (*Le Roman ludique*, p.34).
6. On Echenoz's "insistence upon the commonplace, the dull, the ordinary", see Warren Motte, "Playing it by the Book." *SubStance* 26, no. 1 [82] (1997), p.24. Martine Reid also sees banality as key in Echenoz's fiction ("Echenoz en malfaiteur léger", *Critique* 547 [1992], p.988-994).
7. Jean Echenoz, 'Entretien avec Olivier Bessard-Banquy, "Il se passe quelque chose avec le jazz"', *Europe*, no.820-821, "Jazz et littérature", p.197; quoted by Christine Jérusalem, *Jean Echenoz: Géographies du vide*, p.151.
8. On the Madonna motif, see in particular Sjeff Houppermans, "Pleins et trous dans l'oeuvre de Jean Echenoz" (*Jeunes auteurs de Minuit*, p.86).
9. "Numerous instances are known of animal and human sacrifices made in the course of the construction of houses, shrines, and other buildings, and in the laying out of villages and towns. Their purpose has been to consecrate the ground by establishing the beneficent presence of the sacred order and by repelling or rendering harmless the demonical powers of the place" ("Sacrifice." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2005. <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?tocId=66317>>).
10. Marguerite Yourcenar, "Le Lait de la mort" (*Nouvelles orientales*, p.54).
11. Paul's conversion to an odd form of spiritual calling is noted by Annette Kerckhoff "L'Occupation des sols, une réflexion sur l'espace de l'écriture" (*Tangence* no. 51 [May 1996]), p.47.
12. "Tout ira par deux, toujours plus ou moins par deux" (*L'Équipée malaise*, p.49).
13. The same name is used for Gloire's guardian angel in the previous novel, *Les Grandes Blondes*.
14. Critics have pointed out that the name has Biblical connotations. Beliar (or Belial) is the name used in some Biblical texts for the Devil. "Found frequently as a personal name in the Vulgate and various English translations of the Bible, is commonly used as a synonym of Satan, or the personification of evil. This sense is derived from II Cor., vi, 15, where Belial (or Beliar) as prince of darkness is contrasted with Christ, the light" (*The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume II*; Online Edition Copyright © 2003 by K. Knight). In *The War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness* (1QM), one of the Dead Sea scrolls, Belial is the leader of the Sons of Darkness. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Belial is the name of a "lewd" and "vicious" spirit. On Echenoz's participation in the collective Bible translation project, *La Bible Bayard*, see Christine Jérusalem, "Variations Au Piano De Jean Echenoz: Ni Tout à Fait Le Même Ni Tout à Fait Un Autre." *Critique* 59.671 (2003): 223-31. According to her, Echenoz's involvement in the Biblical project inspired him with the "demiurgic" desire to create "un roman ex nihilo" (p.224).
15. On these "figures de la réversibilité" and their "effet de surimpression", see Christine Jérusalem's online article, "Sections urbaines: l'aller et le retour, la nostalgie dans *Au Piano* de Jean Echenoz".
16. Victoire, the heroine of *Un an*, who wakes up next to her dead lover, runs away, and proceeds to disintegrate socially, could also be having a bad dream, but we will never know, nor will she, what really happened to Félix and Louis-Philippe.

17. Christine Jérusalem analyzes this "poétique de l'incertain" in her article "Variations au Piano de Jean Echenoz", *ibid.*, p.299. Warren Motte discusses the "principle of incertitude" in the context of *Un an* ("Jean Echenoz's Yearbook." *A French Forum*, p.301).
18. Christine Jérusalem, "Variations au piano de Jean Echenoz," *ibid.*, p.301.
19. Another allusion to Flaubert here, this time to the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*: "ARTISTES. Ce qu'ils font ne peut s'appeler travailler." (Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet suivi du Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966, p.336).
20. C. Jérusalem points out an allusion to Robert Desnos's Surrealist poem "Rose Sélavy": "Rose, c'est la vie, forcément, qui s'en va." ("Variations au piano de Jean Echenoz," *ibid.*, p.230).
21. The word is coined by Pierre Brunel, in his discussion of the idolatrous cult requiring the worshippers to become "emmurés" ("Sur un roman minuscule de Jean Echenoz: *L'Occupation des sols*." *Studi di Letteratura Francese: Rivista Europea* 27 [2002], p.162-165).
22. Christine Jérusalem discusses the physical and spiritual renouncement at the heart of the story in her book, *Jean Echenoz: Géographies du vide*, *ibid.*, p.190.
23. Sir Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, Praeger Paperbacks, 1959, p.222.
24. On Echenoz's "atheist metaphysics", see Simon Kemp, "Crime Fiction Pastiche in the Novels of Jean Echenoz." *Romance Studies* 20.2 (2002), p.187. Kemp quotes Olivier Bessard-Banquy's characterization of Echenoz's world as one marked by "la disparition de Dieu sur la pointe des pieds" ("Le parti-pris d'Echenoz", *Critique* no.595, December 1996, p.1073).