Echenoz’s Plan

Plan of Occupancy is in some ways an exception in Jean Echenoz’s oeuvre due to its length (12 pages in translation minus the forward) as well as the degree to which it challenges literary conventions, including his own. Echenoz’s early novels are renditions of the classic detective story that are invariably spun into stylistic anomalies in the context of the genre. More recently he has published a series of dramatized biographies that focus predominantly on (partly) fictionalized accounts of everyday details of his subject’s lives. The book under consideration here is connected to no particular genre; it stands on its own both in terms of length and the highly imaginative narrative it sets up. It may be considered minimal not only by virtue of this length but also to the extent that it both denies and invites a reader’s participation in the cocreation of meaning. What that meaning might be, manifold as it is, doubtless signifies the trappings and the possibilities of committed occupation.

I turn to the scholarship of Warren Motte to help “amplify” certain of the French novels because of their relative complexity and because he brings an exceptional and elegant level of insight to these particular strands of minimalism. As he explains, Echenoz’s book is “narrated in an uncompromisingly laconic tone where less always means more” and ultimately “dramatizes and puts into question the very idea of the book” (“Reading” 2). Here we might take “the book” to mean not only Plan of Occupancy but the Book as a general category that is interrogated by an overtly “writerly” process of écriture. Indeed, for Motte, Echenoz “proposes to occupy the ground of the novel, precisely at the zero degree of that construct. Plan of Occupancy is elaborated in an aesthetic of radical eschewal” and thus operates as “a performance
[... ] [that] dramatizes [...] the minimalist experiment itself” (3). As such, its gravitas is more aligned with a performative act than it is with plot. Consequently, I would take issue with Dominique Julienne’s notion that the book’s “importance [is] more on the tale and less on the telling” (52). Of course, there is an irony at work here, doubtless instrumental to Echenoz’s radicalism, insofar as the book relies upon an aesthetic of reduction while engaging with events and ideas that are clearly enormous in scope (an “epic of the trivial,” as Motte claims of The Bathroom). As Mark Polizzotti, the book’s English translator, puts it, “In its brief evocation of a mother’s death, a father’s obsession, or even the deterioration of a humble plot of grass, this novella canvases as much human drama as a Russian epic” (Plan x).

The book’s surface plot is uncomplicated but reflective of the monumental themes of death, loss, and obsession. A woman has died in a fire. Naturally, her husband and son lament her death, though the former becomes increasingly fixated on a large-scale illustration of his wife, a perfume advertisement on the side of a building. Another structure is being erected that slowly obscures the vision of their beloved. Consequently, they move into an apartment of the newer building, directly across from the advertisement, and proceed to tear down the wall that stands between them and the image. The final paragraph heralds both closure (the ignition of conceivably productive action) and the continued ascendancy of a foreboding mania:

From such a countdown, you can arrive at zero all too quickly. So you might as well get to it, might as well start scraping immediately: no need to change clothes, you already dressed that morning in your large white overalls speckled with old paint. You scrape, and layers of plaster hang in the sun, dotting foreheads and forgotten cups of coffee. You scrape, you scrape some more, and very soon you have trouble breathing, you sweat, it begins to get terribly hot. (Plan 14)

With this, Polizzotti suggests, “the text having reached its point of stasis, there is, quite simply, no more to be said” (viii). And so the novella concludes, perhaps earlier than any novella in the history of letters.

There is, of course, a tradition of occupying a ground zero of aesthetic production. One might think of John Cage’s infamous 4’33”, the performance of which continues to offend and delight by virtue of its questioning the boundaries of music. Kasimir Malevich’s White on White painting poses a similar quandary, or pleasure, depending on the viewer’s prerogative; as do the films of Andrey Tarkovsky, for example,