



The contemporary French (crime) novel: Pennac and Echenoz

While browsing through a back-issue of *The Economist* recently, I came across an article which suggests the imminent death of the science-fiction genre in Hollywood. It suggests that this is an almost inevitable consequence of the appearance of self-mockery or parody in the genre, and draws parallels with the death of the Western which, it states, came about for the same reasons. There are, it is true, clear signs that science-fiction is finding it hard to take itself completely seriously at the moment - the article mentions the films "Men in Black" and "Mars Attacks", and in the realm of books, we might perhaps use the immense success of Pratchett's novels as evidence that readers now seek a self-recognition of the genre's shortcuts and clichés, which they themselves spotted long ago.

If the conclusions of the article are correct and self-sufficient, we might expect them to apply to all "popular" genres, including the French "roman policier" as a prime candidate. Here is a category of writing long regarded as fundamentally "unserious". As Jean Pons says

It's railway station literature, they say, popular books, tuppenny works. They tell stories to be read to kill time, fairy stories to put you to sleep in the evening, in spite of the bad dreams they spark off.

Pennac's novel *Au Bonheur des Ogres* sported a cigarette advertisement on its back cover when it first appeared in Gallimard's "Série Noire" - not what we would expect from "serious" or "respectable" literature.

If we choose to rank the roman policier alongside science-fiction and the Western as "pulp", reading for kicks, what Pennac himself has elsewhere called 'industrial literature', then we may wish to view him and Echenoz as the genre's "enemy within". Both can be seen to exploit the genre's conventions, if not subvert them, to their own authorial ends. By the logic of *The Economist* (and who could challenge the logic of *The Economist*?) they are biting at least one of the hands that feeds them, killing off the genre which, if not defines, at least informs their writing.

Before we get carried away with this line of reasoning, however, several caveats are in order. The first is that the death of the genre has been predicted before by no less than Narcejac, in his *Une Machine à Lire*, published long enough ago for the idea to have been proved wrong. True, the cause of death he predicted was exhaustion rather than insouciance, but either way the genre has proved itself to be hardier than was thought, and obstinately refused to go away.

Secondly, whatever we may think, *The Economist* does not see the link: "Two of the best films of 1997 have been in a genre long out of favour. The police thrillers "Donnie Brasco" and... "LA Confidential" ... suggest a way forward."

But most importantly, the article fails to investigate why this self-parody should have arisen in the first place. If anything kills off the science-fiction genre, and it will not have an easy job of it, it will be the shortening of the distance between invention and knowledge. Knowledge that, if there is life on Mars, it has more in common with what grows on kitchen floors, than with us. Similarly, the death of the Western came in the wake of a new, less fanciful breed of History, which left people asking how full-time cowherds and pioneers found the time for gunfights at noon, and how genocide was heroic.

The same cannot be said of the roman policier, and in this respect, the subversion practised by writers such as Pennac and Echenoz can be seen as revitalising rather than undermining. Much has been made of the polar's links with the fait divers. Although we know that these novels are fiction, the "truth" of the fait divers assures us that, bizarre and quirky though the narrated events may be, they could happen. And in asking how and why the events narrated by a fait divers happened, we are already on the path which the roman policier opens to us.

And *how* and *why* have Pennac and Echenoz tampered with the genre, while keeping at least one foot firmly within it? A very noticeable incidence is the way that their publishers have distanced them from it. As one writer provocatively asks, "has Daniel Pennac become a 'real' novelist in moving from the black covers of the Série Noire to the white of Gallimard's 'serious' edition?" Meanwhile, apart from a couple of publications in reviews and anthologies, Echenoz has nailed his colours firmly to the mast of Les Editions de Minuit. In spite of their publication of Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages*, a subversive detective novel if ever there was one, it is not a Minuit back cover that we consult for advice on what cigarettes to smoke or aftershave to wear.

This distancing could have something to do with the dearth of critical writing on these two authors. While there is a current wave of critical interest in the "roman noir" which proclaims itself as such (of which this conference is our most immediate example) writing on Pennac has largely been limited to book reviews. More attention has been paid to Echenoz, including a small book by Jean-Claude Lebrun, published in 1992, but much of it seeks to place him securely out of harm's way, in the canon of the "nouveau nouveau roman" or whatever one chooses to call it, or at the very least among Minuit's new rising stars: in any case, well out of reach of any comparison with those nasty children next door at Gallimard, with their unsavoury "noir" backgrounds. Even those who acknowledge his populist influences are keen to insist on the distance, on the one-way transaction, taking from the genre without ever entering it. In spite of, or perhaps because of the new seriousness attributed to the polar, we clearly sense a certain snobbishness on the part of Echenoz's fans.

However, I would suggest that in a genre which functions by exposing its own skeleton, a genre where the good writers have always succeeded by playing with the clichés of the bad writers, one cannot keep one's feet completely dry. Parody all you like, you remain linked with the genre. A most striking example of this is Michel Rio's extremely recent *La Statue de la Liberté*, where every possible cliché is ironised, and which nevertheless remains what its subtitle says it is: a "roman noir". Whatever their apologists claim, Echenoz and Pennac both realise this, and cheerfully exploit it to the full: and sometimes in very similar ways, as I aim to show.

An important case in point, and very appropriate in a genre which uses the apportioning of blame as a key motivating force, is a fundamental mistrust of a seemingly banal environment. This takes two main forms: the deliberately frustrating digression, which often employs unexpected anthropomorphism to hit home, and the frankly bizarre. The first owes much to Ezra Pound's dictum, "make it new"; the second to the B-movie; both take the "straight" polar's eye for detail and magnify what that eye sees to preposterous proportions, subverting without stepping out of the genre. There is an almost paranoid obsession with the everyday, as if only by explaining, detailing, talking around, can we be sure that the key to the dénouement is not to be found here.

Lebrun goes as far as to posit: "with Jean Echenoz the Flaubertian love scene inside a carriage in Rouen would no doubt have drifted off towards a general consideration of the new facilities offered for human copulation by the invention of the wheel and the appearance of the carhorse!" And it is true that Echenoz is never in a hurry to get to the heart of a (perhaps illusory) mystery when there are details to explore. But Pennac shares this trait, even if his way of doing so relies more on keeping us in the dark. So we find, at the very beginning of *Au Bonheur des Ogres*, first novel of the Malaussène series, when we are still very much finding our feet with Pennac:

(Monsieur Malaussène is) glued to the spot by the black mouth of a rifled barrel. Because it's me that it's aimed at, the bastard, there's no possible doubt. The turret turned on its axis, stopped when

pointed in my direction, then the barrel raised its end until it stopped, aimed between my eyes. The turret and barrel belonged to an AMX30 tank

and it is only at this point, confused as we are to find a tank in a department store after only one page, that it becomes clear that the tank in question is a remote-control toy. Call me stupid, but I fell for it the first time. Both writers allow an otherwise banal detail to expand, to frustrate narrative time in order to create a general mood of suspicion and unease.

And when it seems desirable to go beyond even this stage, there is always the bizarre. The above-quoted remark by Lebrun refers to a digression by Echenoz on the killing of flies with rolled-up newspapers, in his novel *Lac*. But if the newspaper in question is banal, the fly is not: it is a spying fly, carrying a miniature microphone to facilitate eavesdropping. (Echenoz claims to have got this idea from a genuine USA secret service project. If this is true, it goes to show that truth is at least as strange as fiction.) Pennac, meanwhile, chooses to use a robot King Kong toy, complete with headless girl in arms, as the remote-control fuse in the suicide bombing which ties up his first novel. Only the frequent bathos of the fait divers could clear the way for this sort of plot device. They are ironic, yes: but they do not in themselves prove parodic intent. As director of the Série Noire, Patrick Raynal published *Oedipus Rex* (with the help of Pennac, as it turns out.) Here we have a "great" work of literature, one of the templates for our understanding of tragedy, whose tragic inevitability rests on one of the greatest and best-known suspensions of disbelief in Western literature. If we can accept that a supposedly dead, crippled man can unknowingly kill his own father in the throes of tragic road-rage, why not believe in spying flies and King Kong detonators? Especially as Raynal sees Oedipus as the origin of the roman noir's interest, hence his choice to publish.

A second concern for these authors is terrain. While nearly any polar spruces itself up with a chase, with new faces and new places, these two authors, again in different ways, centralise the importance of place, so that where is often as important as what happens there. Lebrun is skating on thin ice when he claims (twice) that "each chapter of *Le Méridien de Greenwich* takes place in a different setting" because some of these 'settings' are perilously close to each other, separated by only a few feet: but his basic point, that movement is a key element in how the novel functions, holds true. It is as if there were a refusal to centre the work: in the absence of an investigative police force against which the reader may measure his understanding, he must be wrong-footed by the novel's obstinate insistence on changing location. Further, the journeys between these places are reduced to a series of loci, snapshots of an itinerary by a ludic author. Echenoz pushes to the extreme an inherent characteristic of narrative, the digitalisation of the analogue.

Nor is this feature restricted to *Le Méridien de Greenwich*. *Nous Trois*, a novel of just over 200 pages, moves from Paris to Marseille, back to Paris, to Armagnac, and then back to Paris via Outer Space; quite an ambitious itinerary if the writer aimed to describe the journeys in detail, which as a result Echenoz wisely refuses to do. Journeys are described in terms of the events which punctuate them: the trip to Marseille is thus largely reduced to the rescue of a woman from her exploding car, while that to Armagnac has a vomiting lapdog as its main preoccupation.

Once again, Pennac shares this obsession, but deals with it in a very different way. Pennac fixes us resolutely in Paris: but it is a skeleton Paris, and mythologised to the hilt. He also digitalises the analogue, but does so around certain oft-described sets, as if with a view to making them references of literary backdrop. Just as an aside, we can spot a similar urge to mythologise in *La Vie Duraille*, on which Pennac collaborated with Pouy and Raynal, under the collective penname of J-B. Nacray. Raynal as a writer is almost obsessively Niçois, and yet when the police officer from Paris reduces Nice to "Nice! The palm trees, the sea, the salad!" nothing is said, nothing happens to change this image. While we cannot be sure who is behind this, the "Malaussène" novels might give us grounds for suspicion

And of course it is Belleville which is the main candidate for mythologisation. Belleville, Pennac's shorthand for a misunderstood paradise, Belleville which benefits from having a name which sounds as if it were straight out of an Enid Blyton novel. In using the extreme end of contemporary social

problems for the plots of his novels, Pennac seemingly feels constrained to disregard them in giving the setting, as if seeking a Greater contrast. Perfect racial harmony for the Malaussène family, with couscous on the house at their neighbourhood Arab restaurant every time their number is added to. Ben Malaussène supports himself and four siblings (this will increase to six siblings over the course of the series, plus a child of his own) on one salary, and yet money is never really a worry; this is the Paris mourned by "Où sont-ils donc?", a fast-disappearing anachronism where you can still leave your door unlocked, and whose map a character in the fourth novel, *Monsieur Malaussène*, has tattooed on his back to preserve its memory.

What saves this unlikely milieu from being disregarded as rose-tinted cliché is the fact that it is used to counterweight the "real" scandal of the plot and, as in Echenoz's novels, its fragmentariness. Pennac's Belleville is a flitting between the old ironmonger's which serves the family as a residence, and the restaurant mentioned earlier; add Ben's various places of work, a single hospital, and (of course) the police station, and you have practically the whole of Pennac's Paris, linked up by the Métro whose main function seems to be to save the trouble of describing the rest.

While on the subject, it is the nature of Ben Malaussène's work which prompted that "of course" before the mention of the police station. In the course of the first novel, *Au Bonheur des Ogres*, Ben is officially employed by a department store as "Contrôle Technique". In fact, as he will try to explain to police during their enquiries on a spate of bombings at the store, this is a cover for his real job: Bouc Emissaire. A professional blame-taker, a scapegoat, whose role is to attract blame and, through it, sympathy, encouraging clients to withdraw their complaints. But it soon becomes clear that for Ben Malaussène, this is more than a job: it is a vocation. He is savagely assaulted and beaten by a mob of his colleagues as the suspected bomber at the store. Coudrier, head police officer on the case, explains to him:

You do a curious job, Mr Malaussène, which necessarily involves getting a thrashing, sooner or later ... You see, the Scapegoat isn't only the one who, should the need arise, pays for the others. He is above all, and first and foremost, a basic principle in explaining things ... He is the mysterious but *patent* cause of any inexplicable event.

And so, for various reasons, Ben decides to get fired. He gets his lover to publish an article on his clandestine functions at the Store in the magazine *Actuel*, sure that this breach of confidence will be enough to lose him his job. He does indeed lose his job: only to find himself courted for a similar job at a publishing house, which opens the way for the second and subsequent novels and which, money needs pressing, he finds himself compelled to accept. It is here that, along with the reader, he understands that Scapegoat is for him an inescapable vocation.

Hence the "of course". Ben is destined to be a natural suspect, to be in possession of incriminating evidence quite by chance, to find himself at the scene of the crime, and thus to be pulled in for questioning. There follows a double investigation, which the reader is invited to regard from a distance: Ben the amateur sleuth tries to prove the innocence of Ben the suspect, which latter is being watched with intent interest by the police. With the aid of his large and bizarre family Ben the sleuth always triumphs, turning up the real culprit, as if by chance, in the process. And so on to the next novel.

In spite of the numerous shady dealings and criminal activities going on in Echenoz's novels, the police as figures of control and authority are never really in evidence. When they turn up in *L'Equipe Malaise*, they are fooled by one of the "oldest tricks in the book", as we might say - the guilty parties pretend to be the injured parties, and make good their escape in the ensuing confused calm. (It is also one of the oldest tricks in reality - in his memoirs, the well-known gangland criminal "Mad" Frankie Fraser claims to have used it in the 1960's in Southport to escape from a police officer.) In novels such as *Lac*, which do examine the activities of State and its many arms, it is as key and active parties in the intrigue - the State do not defend and elucidate the law, but rather place themselves outside it. Unlike many romans policiers, but very much like milieu classics such as *Du Rifif chez les hommes*, the long arm of the law

controls nothing, and the outlaw has centre stage; except that with Echenoz, the State can be an outlaw too.

Nor does Echenoz employ a Bouc Emissaire character. We might, however, say that the novels themselves are boucs émissaires. A key critical question which is always relevant in a first reading of an Echenoz novel is, "What the hell's going on?" These novels set out *deliberately* to shake our certainties on how a novel should be read, all the while begging to be accepted *as* novels. Strings of characters are introduced before being linked up in any way; two characters become a single character; a narrator alternates between describing himself as "I" and as a third person with no warning; and, as in Pennac's novels, the playful "false start" is much in evidence. Thus, in *L'Equipe Malaise*, we see a principal character caught in an explosion, and thrown through a window, before finding out that he is merely doing his job as T.V. stuntman. Perhaps it is in *Un An* that the novel's refusal to play fair is most in evidence. A young woman, waking up to find her lover lying dead next to her, prefers to go on the run rather than wait around for questioning. While she is on the run, an old friend repeatedly turns up to keep her up to date on developments. When he lets her know that everything has been cleared up, she returns to Paris, only to find her lover alive and well: it is in fact the old friend who was found dead, around the time of her flight. No explanations are given. Even the title lies - having fled Paris in February, she is back in Autumn, probably October.

All this to say that, as does Ben Malaussène, these self-proclaimed novels use some recognisable novelistic tactics to dupe us into believing in their sincerity, and thence into excusing the liberties they take with the form. We withdraw our complaint. It is also interesting to note that, as I suggested earlier, these novels are also cited by critics as part of the mysterious but patent "cause" of the changes they see in novelistic practice. For the critical milieu they are a positive bouc émissaire, thus avoiding the need to examine seriously whether the "straight", blue-collar roman policier, for example, might have raised the sorts of doubt on which the white-collar "nouveau nouveau roman" feeds, and which it exhibits in its structure. Just a suggestion.

The article by Jean Ports from which I quoted earlier, "Le Roman Noir, Littérature Réelle", talks about the roman noir as taking a political or social stance. The roman noir is an immediate and committed literature. Immediate because these novels speak to us directly of the banalities and convulsions of our world: they show us, through their violent fictions, a "known" world which is that of our daily life but also that whose disparate aspects the media exhaust themselves to show us, or to propose analyses of the circumstances. Committed because the news which they take and transform into a novelistic form gives rise, implicitly or deliberately, to the taking of political stances: the roman noir takes up a position with regard to human and social reality.

This is certainly an illuminating statement when applied to the works of Pennac and Echenoz. The plots they employ either lean on, or else frankly conscript, both the newspapers' lust for scandal, and the socially relevant concerns which provoke this scandal. So Pennac lays into the Far Right, drug abuse, and the prison service; Echenoz meanwhile takes the shady secret services, the corruption of big business in the quest for something new, and the remnants of colonialism. And the overriding conclusion is that, for whatever reason, crimes and misdemeanours are not punished by the people there to punish them. Indeed, at least in Pennac's first novel, and in nearly all of Echenoz's, there is no real crime to punish; the bombing raids of *Au Bonheur des Ogres* turn out to be suicides, so that perversion of the course of justice is the main offence; Echenoz's *Un An*, as we have already seen, prefers the surreal to a court case. Even when, in the latter's work, crimes do occur, there is no suggestion that this should provoke any response on the part of the reader. It is merely part of the story.

Indeed, even in the more conformist work of Pennac, crimes are not really significant except in that they bring Ben under suspicion, or that the final explanation is so shockingly revealing with regard to society. Bombs in hypermarkets? No big deal, except that Ben's involved. Satanist Nazi suicides? Now you're talking. But with Jean-Marie Le Pen putting glossy brochures through everyone's letterbox, perhaps we're closer to the bone than we thought

But this is a paper on detective fiction, after all, not on contemporary politics. So perhaps a few words on how these two authors exploit the conventions of this genre are in order. Some of them, such as the false start, the anthromorphosis of objects for surprise, have already been covered. And on the level of characters, a search for the alcoholic sleuth is doomed. True, Echenoz has his Bourbon-drinking plantation-manager in *Le Méridien de Greenwich*, and in Pennac's collaborative work *La Vie Duraille*, Taffanelli is the ideal conformist non-conformist cop: but in the bulk of their work, at its heart, cheap imitations of Phillip Marlowe are mercifully absent.

But there are others. The good guy who turns bad is a frequent appearance; and indeed in the French context of this genre, we can note how many characters obstinately refuse to choose their side of the good-bad fence. When police are present in their stereotyped form, they are not there to protect, but to bring the "milieu" into line with conventional society: otherwise the "milieu" can look after itself, settle its own scores.

We also see the products of the remarkable cross-fertilisation between the film and the novel. This is often treated as a feature of the "throwaway" novel, unworthy even of the name. What a surprise, then, to see two novelists highly regarded by their respective publishing houses (without being plugged as "popular" in the derogatory sense of that word) take so much from the cinematic art. For both, dialogue is an essential means of characterisation. Echenoz incorporates it into the body of the text as far as possible, to show how literary it is; Pennac proves the same through portraying silence through typographical tricks. The original method comes from film and the stage; the treatment aims to make it literary.

But there is more. Take the sudden cutting from scene to scene. While in itself this is a novelist's trick, the absence of apologetic and soothing words (no "whilst", "meanwhile" or "dear reader" here) shows that cinema's love of wrongfooting has invaded these texts. This builds suspense (love of one form of roman policier) and increases the impression of violence (love of another form). The vectors of time, which the "respectable" novel has for so long tried to ape, or else refused and struggled (I defy you to read Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages* over an extended period, and find the place you left off without the aid of a bookmark), are here if not ignored, then at least severely bent. This is not because they are perfect novels, but rather because they have ignored novelistic rules in favour of cinematic rules, moving comfortably between places and times with a century's tradition to back them.

This was never intended to be a long paper, although it took me long enough to write it, and I am aware that I have not covered anywhere near the whole opera of Pennac and Echenoz. Nor, more importantly, do I claim to have shown that they are so similar as to be identical, even to the naked eye. But what I have shown, I hope, and what should not be overlooked, is that their novels exhibit many structural and technical similarities. The importance of this is twofold.

Firstly, as I have said, there is a tendency in current critical activity to group writers into schools. Of course, this is not new, but for this very reason we must ask ourselves if it is still a valid notion. As has been pointed out by the so-called "new new novelists", themselves, they have no manifesto; *Pour un nouveau nouveau roman* has yet to be written, by Echenoz or anyone else. They have no self-professed common goals, and critics admit to discerning the influence of the more "respectable" roman policier writers on their work. Is it really still a useful notion to group writers into schools, especially *exclusive* schools based largely on their choice of publisher? Or is it more the sign of a protectionist élitism aimed at reinforcing the literary class struggle?

What we can still believe in just about, is the existence of genre, marked out as it is by a set of conventions of writing: and this is my second point. What we need to examine is whether these conventions are fixed, or whether they can be taken apart, modified, or added to. In other words, do the novels under consideration fall into the genre and, by doing so, extend it, or do they rather move away from it? These novels are clearly written with the elusive goals of "literature" in mind; they are thrillers which do not have thrilling as their sole function. They are also marked by a certain structural indecision; they lack the comforting firm conclusion, the sad or happy ending that marks the Anglo-

Saxon whodunnit as it marks so many other novels. The final explanation, when present, still leaves many questions unanswered, indeed unasked. The pursuit of understanding is modified into the pursuit of a conclusion, which is not always on offer.

But Pennac's and Echenoz's "tampering" has not, I feel, excluded them from the genre, nor brought the genre to a crisis. Rather, their writing marks a regeneration, by exposing what was already inherent in the genre: the lack of faith in powers-that-be, including novelistic powers-that be, the refusal to judge when matters can be settled "chez les hommes", and when the real crimes are being committed by people so high up as to be untouchable; and the refusal to create a comforting finale where everything falls into place, knowing that nothing will change. Rather than tampering with the genre, they are perhaps in the process of providing it with its protective exoskeleton.

Sean Cosgrove
The University of Edinburgh
