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## NAVIGATING *NON-LIEUX* IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION: HOUELLEBECQ, DARRIEUSSECQ, ECHENOZ, AND AUGÉ

Close to the start of Michel Houellebecq's novel *Plateforme*, its narrator, who shares his creator's first name and possibly some of his views, tells us something important about himself and, he claims, all of contemporary Europe:

Mes rêves sont médiocres. Comme tous les habitants d'Europe occidentale, je souhaite voyager. Enfin il y a les difficultés, la barrière de la langue, la mauvaise organisation des transports en commun, les risques de vol ou d'arnaque: pour dire les choses plus crûment, ce que je souhaite au fond, c'est pratiquer le *tourisme*. On a les rêves qu'on peut; et mon rêve à moi c'est d'enchaîner à l'infini les 'Circuits passion', les 'Séjours couleur' et les 'Plaisirs à la carte'—pour reprendre les thèmes des trois catalogues *Nouvelles Frontières*.<sup>1</sup>

For Michel, Europeans today want to travel, but in an escapist mode—that of the tourist—that will protect them from the humdrum problems they seek to escape at home or abroad. The reality to be fled is one immediately identifiable to readers from its references to current politicians, media figures, or brand names such as *Nouvelles Frontières*, *Monoprix*, or the instant foods on which its lonely single male heroes subsist. They are, in Houellebecq's view, the sexually pauperized victims of a liberalization of the sexual market parallel to that of the economic market, a process in which, as Pierre Varrod puts it, 'aucun mécanisme de régulation équivalant aux Assedic ne vient garantir l'accès à une sexualité minimum tout au long de la vie d'adulte'.<sup>2</sup>

The utopias pursued by those actively seeking sexual employment, and in the meantime slaves to a routine of 'métro-boulot-peepshow',<sup>3</sup> promise above all the satisfaction of sexual desire, but fail to provide it for a variety of reasons. For Houellebecq these are principally attributable to flaws in the human blueprint, most notably ageing (especially devastating to women who become physically undesirable, whereas men simply stop desiring). Houellebecq's is a particularly bleak world-view, his heroes characterized by alienation and misanthropy (a misanthropy of which their misogyny is a particularly pronounced aspect). However, his theme of escape from the everyday, and specifically escape from the modern city, into another world, either far-flung and exotic (as in *Plateforme*) or closer to home but unspoilt (the naturist resort of his earlier *Les Particules élémentaires*),<sup>4</sup> is shared by a number of French writers over the last decade. Jean

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Plateforme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001) [henceforth *P*], p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> In '*Plateforme* pour l'échange des misères mondiales', *Esprit*, 279 (November 2001), 96–117 (p. 98). Houellebecq's first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), spells out this thesis of the extension of the struggle for satisfaction from the economic to the sexual market place.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Rondeau, 'Le système Houellebecq: vieux singe moraliste?', *L'Express*, 30 September 2001 (<http://livres.lexpress.fr/dossiers.asp/idC=2532/idTC=30/idR=4/idG=3>) [accessed 9 April 2005] (para. 2 of 5).

<sup>4</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998) [henceforth

Echenoz and Marie Darrieussecq are two novelists who have explored a similar 'escapist' vein—both even produced almost simultaneously a sequential pair of novels about characters vanishing from the lives of their partners.<sup>5</sup> In all three, moreover, the protagonists' relationship to the world is presented in large part in terms of the physical geographies of both the built and natural environments they negotiate, with a critical emphasis on the alienating effect of contemporary western urban and suburban landscapes. These are the dehumanized architectures that anthropologist Marc Augé calls non-places in his landmark study of the same name.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Augé himself has recently complemented his theoretical observations with an exploration in fiction of how individuals experience these settings: his first published novel, *La Mère d'Arthur*,<sup>7</sup> illustrates the ideas first presented in *Non-lieux* via yet another 'vanishing spouse' plot. This article will assess the extent of convergence and the significance of divergences in the way Echenoz, Darrieussecq, Houellebecq, and Augé conceive of contemporary individuals' relationships to their environments.<sup>8</sup>

Jean Echenoz shares with Michel Houellebecq a predilection for male protagonists with an aura of neglect and a talent for loneliness and failed relationships, existing on the margins of a society which communicates with them largely through junk mail, from brochures for singles' clubs and travel agencies in Echenoz's *Lac* (p. 38) to the 3 Suisses catalogue and the Monoprix magazine in Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires* (p. 150).<sup>9</sup> In terms of form and tone, however, they are poles apart. Whereas Houellebecq's outsider heroes either narrate their own encounters with a social world they despise (*Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Plateforme*) or contribute lengthy monologues to a third-

*PÉ*]. Based on a naturist campsite near Royan, the resort in the novel is devoted to facilitating sexual encounters, its clients lonely and desperate *ex-soixante-huitards*. The campsite owner sued Houellebecq for his representation of the resort. In *Plateforme* the sexual utopia sought vainly in *Les Particules élémentaires* is briefly attained before being destroyed by Islamic fundamentalist terrorists. Once again Houellebecq found himself in court, this time for defamation of Islam, a charge of which he was acquitted.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Echenoz, *Un an* (Paris: Minuit, 1997) [henceforth *UA*] and *Je m'en vais* (Paris: Minuit, 1999) [henceforth *JMV*]. Marie Darrieussecq, *Naissance des fantômes* (Paris: POL, 1998) [henceforth *NF*] and *Le Mal de mer* (Paris: POL, 1999) [henceforth *MM*]. In Darrieussecq's recent *White* (Paris: POL, 2003) [henceforth *W*], the theme of escape, though less dramatically literal (not an unannounced disappearance but a remote posting), is sustained. Other works by Echenoz which will be referred to include *Cherokee* (1983), *L'Équipée malaise* (1986), *Lac* (1989), *Nous trois* (1992) [henceforth *NT*], *Les Grandes Blondes* (1995), and *Au piano* (2003) [henceforth *AP*], all published in Paris by Minuit.

<sup>6</sup> *Non-lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992) [henceforth *NL*].

<sup>7</sup> Marc Augé, *La Mère d'Arthur* (Paris: Fayard, 2005) [henceforth *MA*]. This is not Augé's first attempt at writing fiction: 'J'ai déjà écrit des romans qui sont restés dans mes tiroirs' (*Le Monde*, 7 January 2005, p. 27); indeed, his theoretical writings are sprinkled with elements of narrative.

<sup>8</sup> With their thematic overlap in the subject of disappearance and escape, these writers are particularly compatible examples of a wider critical focus in contemporary French fiction on the way modern built and technological environments impact on individual existences. Christian Oster, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, and Annie Ernaux are among others who share this concern to some degree.

<sup>9</sup> Similarly in Augé's *La Mère d'Arthur*: 'Depuis mon retour, le téléphone n'a sonné qu'une fois. Une erreur. La concierge a monté le courrier: trois prospectus publicitaires, la facture d'électricité' (p. 177).

person narrative which provides its own analysis of malfunctioning western society (*Les Particules élémentaires*), Echenoz presents, always from a third-person distance, lightly drawn characters and a superabundance of implausible adventures, sketched by a detached and amused narrator who frequently intrudes over the heads of his characters to remind us that we are being told a story. His narratives are intrinsically playful, an adjective scarcely applicable to those of Houellebecq, whose moments of cruel comedy amplify rather than transcend the constant undertone of misery.

None the less, Echenoz's heroes manifest the same detachment from everyday city life that we see in Houellebecq, and a *disponibilité* that leads them away from it at a moment's notice, whether to the far-flung exotic—Malaysia (*L'Équipée malaise*), India (*Les Grandes Blondes*), the North Pole (*Je m'en vais*), even outer space (*Nous trois*)—or into the domestic unknown, the unpicturesque provincial hinterland (*Les Grandes Blondes* again, *Un an*) . . . or indeed, as in his latest novel, *Au piano*, to the ultimate unknown destination, the afterlife.<sup>10</sup> The heroine and hero of *Un an* and *Je m'en vais* respectively, two closely linked novels, both escape difficult domestic situations in Paris. Victoire's predicament is summed up in the succinct opening sentence of *Un an*: 'Victoire, s'éveillant un matin de février sans rien se rappeler de la soirée puis découvrant Félix mort près d'elle dans leur lit, fit sa valise avant de passer à la banque et de prendre un taxi vers la gare Montparnasse' (*UA*, p. 7). When, in the opening sentence of *Je m'en vais* two years later, its hero walks out of his previous life one New Year—'Je m'en vais, dit Ferrer, je te quitte. Je te laisse tout mais je pars' (*JMV*, p. 7)—we may not immediately recognize this fifty-year-old art-gallery owner with cardiac problems and an abusive wife as the initially presumed dead Félix of *Un an* whose girlfriend Victoire had fled in panic and who reappeared mysteriously thriving at the end of that novel.

Like Houellebecq's characters, although with more success, Ferrer is preoccupied with sexual matters, and, like Houellebecq, Echenoz finds an analogy to the single man's quest for a partner in the natural sciences—chemistry, this time, rather than the quantum physics of *Les Particules élémentaires*, whose title articulates not just a scientific concept but Houellebecq's vision of an intrinsic human isolation transcendable only by the genetic reprogramming of a sexless and desireless humanity. For Echenoz, chemistry provides a model of affinities among isolated humans, and its history of unintended discoveries is testimony to the possibility of the chance encounter—in sexual terms the transient, diverting affair. The narrator describes in the following terms Ferrer's quest for a replacement for Victoire, inexplicably absent on his awakening—though he does not realize it—from a brief coma caused by a 'bloc auriculo-ventriculaire' (*JMV*, p. 58):

Mieux vaut attendre le hasard d'une rencontre, surtout sans avoir l'air d'attendre non

<sup>10</sup> Augé's bachelor hero Jean also has time on his hands (an older author's creation, he has taken early retirement) and travels across France and the world to find his missing schoolfriend. Closer to Houellebecq's alienated narrators than to Echenoz's adaptable heroes, this narrator-hero has encounters with contemporary urban and inter-urban landscapes which bring a sense of his own 'disappearance', accentuated by age: 'J'étais passé du côté de ceux qu'on ne voit plus, et je ne me sentais à peu près bien qu'en marchant dans les rues aux heures tardives où l'on ne croise plus âme qui vive' (*MA*, p. 200).

plus. Car c'est ainsi, dit-on, que naissent les grandes inventions: par le contact inopiné de deux produits posés par hasard, l'un à côté de l'autre, sur une paillasse de laboratoire. [. . .] C'est la chimie, c'est ainsi. On va chercher très loin toute sorte de molécules qu'on tente de combiner entre elles: rien. Du bout du monde on se fait expédier des échantillons: toujours rien. Et puis un jour, un faux mouvement, on bouscule deux objets qui traînaient depuis des mois sur la paillasse, éclaboussure inopinée, éprouvette renversée dans un cristalliseur, et aussitôt se produit la réaction qu'on espérait depuis plusieurs années. Ou par exemple on oublie des cultures dans un tiroir et hop: la pénicilline.

Eh bien justement, selon un processus analogue, après de longues recherches vaines au cours desquelles Ferrer a exploré des cercles concentriques de plus en plus éloignés de la rue d'Amsterdam, il finit par trouver ce qu'il cherchait en la personne de sa voisine de palier. (p. 62)

His journey to the North Pole shortly thereafter is motivated by money (the salvage of Inuit artworks) rather than sex, though he finds that too in the shape of the ice-breaker's resident nurse. If the initial escape of the title is out of one relationship, it is far from being directed towards an abandonment of desire of the kind Houellebecq envisages for humanity in *Les Particules élémentaires*, and of the kind even the sexual tourist hero of *Plateforme* finally embraces after a brief idyllic relationship—that old-fashioned formula of sex combined with love—ends in terrorist slaughter. Rather, the year covered in *Je m'en vais* (a full year, unlike *Un an*, which perversely falls a few months short) sees a procession of women pass through Ferrer's life, and even if the last and most serious relationship also ends in failure, the novel none the less closes on a promise of fresh adventure emerging from a familiar setting, with Ferrer, jilted on New Year's Eve, wandering back to his old home, where his ex-wife, he discovers, no longer lives but where he makes a new female acquaintance. (Thus, as with the *voisine de palier*, adventure does not require travel to the Arctic but is there to be discovered, literally on one's doorstep.)

In contrast to what motivates Ferrer's adventures and travels—sex and enrichment—the journey of one of Echenoz's rare female protagonists, Victoire in *Un an*, is away from both: Félix appears dead, and her panicked flight leads her on a downward journey into homelessness before eventually rebounding.<sup>11</sup> A brief affair in St Jean de Luz ends in the disappearance of Victoire's lover with all her remaining money, and thereafter her only sexual encounters are either easily rejected overtures from other tramps or wryly negligible moments with a homeless couple who befriend her, all sleeping together in their clothes, 'et sans pratiquement jamais rien de sexuel entre eux' (*UA*, p. 75). Her journey into the French south-west is one into abjection, punctuated by thefts which, if more modest than that of Ferrer's Inuit art collection in *Je m'en vais*, are devastating to her: first of her savings, then of her bicycle, and ultimately of her principles as (in a nod to de Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*) she is reduced to stealing a bicycle herself. Ferrer's upward social and financial journey in *Je m'en vais* from an apartment outside the périphérique to a penthouse in the eighth ar-

<sup>11</sup> The only other Echenozian heroine, the former pin-up Gloire of *Les Grandes Blondes*, is also on the run from sexual relationships, leaving a trail of men pushed to their deaths in Echenoz's homage to *Vertigo*. *Un an* too, like all Echenoz's work, has a number of cinematic intertexts, most prominently Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), but also Vittorio de Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* [*Bicycle thieves*] (1948).

rondissement jars with Victoire's slide from rented house through cheap hotels to sleeping outdoors (although she too will make a more modest recovery from her misfortunes, moving back up the scale of accommodation from a derelict hotel shed to an abandoned farmhouse, to sharing the *deux-pièces* of an acquaintance back in Paris). Her dark itinerary in *Un an* relativizes that of Félix Ferrer, which sent her unwittingly on her path to ruin, and Ferrer's unawareness of any of this, along with the lack of narratorial allusion to it in *Je m'en vais*, only reinforces the sense of her marginalization at the end of that novel, despite what we know from *Un an* to be her return to some form of stability:

Un soir même au Central, comme Ferrer est passé prendre un verre avec Hélène, Ferrer tombe sur Victoire qu'il n'a plus vue depuis le début de l'année. Elle n'a pas tellement changé d'allure même si ses cheveux sont plus longs et ses yeux plus distants, comme si leur objectif avait reculé pour embrasser un champ plus vaste, un long panorama. Par ailleurs elle a l'air un peu fatiguée. (*JMV*, p. 244)

Like *Un an* and *Je m'en vais*, Marie Darrieussecq's *Naissance des fantômes* and *Le Mal de mer* also deal with people who leave their loved ones without warning. In *Naissance des fantômes* the narrator's husband walks out of their apartment to buy a baguette and never returns, and the novel details the way the process of waiting and wondering unravels not only the wife's sense of her husband and their relationship but also her own sense of self, all against the backdrop of an all-dissolving sea:

Le quadrillage d'écume mouvante qui retenait les épaules de la houle se défaisait [. . .] toutes les connexions de mon cerveau peu à peu défaites, brumeuses et floues [. . .] et ma pensée se vaporisait à son tour en cherchant à s'épandre à la mesure de ce qui lui manquait, épousant le corps creux, vide et volatil de mon mari. (*NF*, pp. 66–67)

*Le Mal de mer* tells the story of a mother who, with her young daughter, leaves her husband and their city home for the sea, seemingly Biarritz (though it is not named), close to St Jean de Luz, where Echenoz has sent his fleeing heroine, both writers drawn by an Atlantic that, as we shall see, also has particular importance for Houellebecq. Once again, the sea's vast and uniform embrace affects all the characters—the missing mother and child, the detective looking for them, the child's grandmother who comes to the resort once they have been traced to it, the estate agent who rents them a holiday apartment . . . Its principal function is to be a foil to their isolation in an atomized society (to borrow Houellebecq's image), and to connote a lost original unity. Although unlike the Echenoz pair there is no explicit narrative overlap between these two novels, they are very closely linked in terms of theme, setting, and imagery. The shared themes are primarily the elusiveness of others and the dissolution of the self in the absence of the loved one; the common setting is the sea's edge and its contrast with the city; the recurring imagery is both of the supernatural (in the form of ghosts) and of nature (nature immediately present in the shape of birds and sea mammals; mediated in the form of televised nature programmes; abstract in recurring evocations of the physics of nature—the natural sciences here once again a key reference in narrative explorations of human relations).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Darrieussecq's more recent work continues to draw on the natural sciences in setting human

On the level of setting, marked resemblances are evident between Houellebecq, Echenoz, and Darrieussecq. All three emphasize their protagonists' estrangement from the contemporary world by having them repeatedly encounter urban and inter-urban environments designed to be passed through rather than appropriated or domesticated, environments on which those negotiating them leave little trace and which thus impose transience on their users. In Houellebecq such environments embody the west's free-market economic structure and are opposed to unspoiled natural paradises. For Darrieussecq too, urban life maintains us in a state of unhappy technological estrangement from the natural world and from one another. For Echenoz, as we shall see, the situation is different, as imposed transience gives rise to an improvisational approach to life, promoting and rewarding an openness to the unexpected.

The kinds of environment in question are what ethnologist Marc Augé calls 'non-places' (the French title playing on the idea of a lack of trace or evidence of implication contained in the legal term *non-lieu*), in opposition to the anthropological notion of 'place' as not just a space but one invested with meaning by its inhabitants, who derive an identity and a community from it (*NL*, pp. 68–72). Non-places, for Augé, are therefore devoid of meaning, identity, or community; they are reflections of a world 'où l'on naît en clinique et où l'on meurt à l'hôpital' (p. 100), a world of provisional residences rather than permanent homes, of silent commercial exchanges with cashpoints, 'un monde ainsi promis à l'individualité solitaire, au passage, au provisoire et à l'éphémère' (pp. 100–01). Non-places are a product of the contemporary period Augé calls 'la surmodernité', an age characterized by, among other things, the increasing accessibility of all parts of the planet and consequent massive urbanization and migration. Such non-places include:

les voies aériennes, ferroviaires, autoroutières et les habitacles mobiles dits 'moyens de transport' (avions, trains, cars), les aéroports, les gares et les stations aérospatiales, les grandes chaînes hôtelières, les parcs de loisir, et les grandes surfaces de la distribution, l'écheveau complexe, enfin, des réseaux câblés ou sans fil qui mobilisent l'espace extra-terrestre aux fins d'une communication si étrange qu'elle ne met souvent en contact l'individu qu'avec une autre image de lui-même. (*NL*, pp. 101–02)

This is precisely the décor inhabited by the solitary, mobile characters of Houellebecq, Darrieussecq, and Echenoz, as well as by Augé's own fictional hero. On the train from Paris-Montparnasse, Victoire from *Un an* observes a characterless hybrid landscape that seems to have taken on the features of the transport environment that intersects it: 'Bien que de marques et d'essences limitées, les arbres étaient non moins semblables entre eux que les automobiles sur une route nationale un moment parallèle aux rails' (*UA*, p. 11). Later the declining sunshine of late summer is also experienced through the metaphor of car travel: 'S'il fait encore parfois très chaud on sent que ça ne carbure plus, qu'on a coupé le moteur, que cette chaleur n'est qu'une queue de comète en roue libre, une auto en panne dans une pente' (p. 94). In the two Darrieussecq novels characters experience the natural world in the mediated technological

vulnerabilities against the backdrop of an all-powerful, impassive Nature, whether exploring the impact on his family of a child's accidental drowning in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* (Paris: POL, 2001) or that of memories of infanticide on an Antarctic expedition in *White*.

form of nature programmes on television, watched even in Biarritz, with the ocean outside her window, by the grandmother of *Le Mal de mer*, taken ill in her thalassotherapy centre (another alienation of the natural). The capital city in that novel is an inhuman maze encountered from the departing car, one which forces humans to mimic its crazy geometry:

Du pare-brise de la voiture ont jailli de nouvelles rues, au fond desquelles éclate encore le faisceau d'autres rues, creusant d'autres directions; le pare-brise est étoilé de toutes ces rues qui virent, se dédoublent et se disséminent, encadrées un instant par les rétroviseurs et zigzagantes de piétons puis coulissant, murs lavés, bords effacés, scindées et rouvertes, décalant sans cesse la profondeur de l'espace jusqu'à se rassembler en une longue tranchée grise, droite, fendue de glissières et battue d'un rythme blanc. (*MM*, pp. 17–18)

Living-spaces bear no imprint of identity, much less connection to a community. The house Victoire rents by the sea in Echenoz's *Un an* contains little trace of its previous, now deceased owner, most of her personal effects having been donated to the Secours catholique. Nor will Victoire leave any trace of herself behind, apart from leaving the place cleaner than she found it. In *Le Mal de mer* the rented seaside apartment that mother and child end up in is as impersonal as Victoire's refuge, coming complete with supplies for the short-stay tenant which suggest minimal investment in this accommodation: 'Avec les clefs il y a un kit cadeau, des sachets de café soluble, de la lessive en modèle réduit, et des échantillons de crème solaire' (*MM*, p. 48).

Houellebecq's characters live permanently in 'short-stay' mode, even at home. Michel Djerzinski in Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires* lives the last ten years of his life in a holiday home in the west of Ireland. The narrator tells us: 'Dans cette maison, dans la vie en général, il savait désormais qu'il se sentirait comme à l'hôtel' (*PE*, p. 364). The Michel of *Plateforme*, examining his deceased father's kitchen, finds 'des sachets-repas individuels *Weight Watcher's*', while he himself lives on 'purée Mousline' (*P*, pp. 12, 25). In *Les Particules élémentaires*, the soulless commercial architecture of a Cap d'Agde naturist resort—three shopping centres, a mini-golf, holiday apartments meeting the 'normes de confort standard des stations de vacances' (*PE*, p. 268)—dashes the hopes nurtured by Djerzinski's brother Bruno of finding personal (i.e. sexual) fulfilment there, despite the promiscuity of its clientele.

Much of *Plateforme* is a critique of the western tourist industry, the flag-bearer of an aggressively one-sided economic globalization.<sup>13</sup> Western-owned skyscrapers loom over impoverished shanty towns in Bangkok as international commerce suffocates local trade, and western tourists like the narrator remain at ring-road and chain-hotel distance from the native culture:

Nous longions alternativement des buildings d'acier et de verre, avec de temps en temps une construction de béton massive évoquant l'architecture soviétique. Des sièges sociaux de banques, des grands hôtels, des compagnies d'électronique — le plus souvent japonaises. Après l'embranchement de Chatuchak, l'autoroute surplomba des voies radiales qui encerclaient le cœur de la ville. Entre les bâtiments illuminés des hôtels on commençait à distinguer des groupes de maisons, petites, à toits de tôle, au milieu de ter-

<sup>13</sup> One of the most disturbing aspects of Houellebecq's novel is its suggestion that the sex trade could enable the exploited Third World to equalize the relationship, trading physical hunger against the sexual hunger of frustrated westerners.



rains vagues. Éclairées par des néons, des échoppes ambulantes proposaient de la soupe et du riz; on voyait fumer les marmites de fer-blanc. L'autocar décéléra légèrement pour prendre la sortie de New Petchaburi Road. Un moment nous aperçûmes un échangeur aux contours fantasmagoriques, dont les spirales de macadam semblaient suspendues au milieu des cieux [. . .]. (*P*, pp. 41–42)

One of Houellebecq's prime targets in *Plateforme* is the leisure group Accor ('Aurore' in the novel), which owns most of the French hotel chains: Mercure, Sofitel, Novotel, Ibis, Etap Hotel, Formule 1, etc. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, Bruno's mental collapse is clear when, fresh from his psychiatric clinic, he begins to babble Mercure-speak, underlining its own 'insane' alienation from reality:

'Est-ce que tu savais que l'hôtel Mercure "Baie des Anges" a un système de tarifs dégressifs suivant la saison? En période bleue, la chambre est à 330 francs! Le prix d'un deux étoiles! Avec un confort institutionnel de type trois étoiles, une vue sur la promenade des Anglais et un *room service* 24 heures sur 24!' Bruno hurlait presque, maintenant. (*PE*, pp. 316–17)

Victoire in Echenoz's *Un an* lies low briefly in a Formule 1 hotel—her need to avoid human contact (she fears she is being sought for Félix's murder) is met perfectly by the dehumanized anonymity which this staff-free motorway chain imposes:

Comme toujours en bordure des voies de type autoroutier, se tenaient là deux ou trois de ces hôtels impersonnels et bon marché dont les fenêtres donnent sur des échangeurs, des postes de péage, des roclades. Dépourvus de ressources humaines, toutes les opérations s'y traitent par l'intermédiaire de machines et de cartes informatisées. Leurs draps gratuits comme leurs serviettes de toilette en étoffe synthétique jetable. Victoire fixa son choix sur le plus anonyme, un bâtiment sourd-muet appartenant à la chaîne Formule 1. (*UA*, p. 53)

The functioning of Formule 1 makes abundantly clear the isolating potential of technology, even in a domain like the hotel industry, with its emphasis on 'accueil'. For all three novelists, as for Augé and other contemporary social thinkers, notably Paul Virilio,<sup>14</sup> systems of electronic communication which in principle open the individual up to the outside world in fact emphasize aloneness, just as the technologized hotel does. Television is a prime culprit. In Augé's *La Mère d'Arthur*, the television of Jean's Formule 1 hotel room is as vacant as the 'capsule fonctionnelle' (p. 156) that contains it: 'J'allume la télé, zappe et l'éteins' (*ibid.*). In Darriussecq, television displaces direct engagement with nature; in Houellebecq, evenings are spent alone with the box: 'Je n'étais pas malheureux, j'avais cent vingt-huit chaînes' (*P*, p. 25). In Echenoz's *Je m'en vais*, satellite dishes block out sunlight and replace it with television images (p. 219). An international reporter is never met by her neighbour, just seen on television: 'Comme elle passe sa vie à dormir quand elle rentre, volets fermés sur décalage horaire, Baumgartner ne la voit pas souvent, sauf sur son

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. his discussions of the effects of (originally military) communications technologies on the territorial organization of populations, producing a deterioration in community action, in *L'Espace critique* (Paris: Bourgois, 1994), especially Part v, 'L'espace critique'. In *L'Inertie polaire* (Paris: Bourgois, 1990) he also criticizes the dehumanizing technology used by the Formule 1 hotel chain.

écran quelquefois' (*JMV*, p. 136).<sup>15</sup> Telephones too enact isolation and discord rather than communication, as seen in Augé's wrong number<sup>16</sup> or in the many calls made by the narrator of *Naissance des fantômes* to her mother, her husband's office, her happily married friend, or her mother-in-law. The futuristic hologram-telephone of Darrieussecq's latest novel, *White*, gives paradoxical form to the frustrating insubstantiality of the contact it offers. In a more comic vein, a baby intercom brings an abrupt end to one of Ferrer's conquests in *Je m'en vais* (pp. 120–21). For Houellebecq's heroes, access to prostitutes via the *minitel rose* or the Internet offers a travesty of the loving relationships they aspire to, a temporary relief that underlines their desperation. On a similar 'lesser evil' principle, the Internet in *Plateforme* allows one to shop safely in the suburbs by eliminating the only social contact the suburbs apparently offer: gang attacks.

Technology thus isolates us, but it simultaneously deprives us of privacy or autonomy. A cashpoint allows Victoire in *Un an* to avoid dealing with a cashier, but threatens to reveal her whereabouts to the authorities (p. 45), just as the credit-card system of the Formule 1 hotel reveals illicit affairs to betrayed spouses (p. 54). Likewise, the 'carte grise' car registration database reveals the location of mother and daughter to the detective of *Le Mal de mer* (p. 54). In *La Mère d'Arthur* it is only by forgetting his mobile phone that a character can keep his whereabouts secret, although at the expense of other private information. In *Les Particules élémentaires* technology is the great saviour of intelligent life from the human condition, for at the end of the novel cloning does away with the individual altogether. In this state, notions of privacy or autonomy will be inapplicable. Technology may thus save us—by redesigning us—from a world which, by destroying both community and solitude, it has contributed to making unbearable in the first place.

It will be clear already that if all the writers under discussion pay close attention to the way an increasingly man-made, technological environment reinforces social atomization and traps the individual in complex networks of mobility, there are none the less major differences in tone between them. One last set of examples will make these very apparent: descriptions of airports, spaces of transit and escape par excellence. For Houellebecq, Roissy emphasizes the contemporary human condition as one simultaneously of isolation and of uniformity—individuals as 'elementary particles':

Et maintenant j'étais là, seul comme un connard, à quelques mètres du guichet Nouvelles Frontières. C'était un samedi matin pendant la période des fêtes, Roissy était bondé, comme d'habitude. Dès qu'ils ont quelques jours de liberté les habitants d'Europe occidentale se précipitent à l'autre bout du monde, ils traversent la moitié du monde en avion, ils se comportent littéralement comme des évadés de prison. Je ne les en blâme pas; je me prépare à agir de la même manière. (*P*, p. 34)

For Darrieussecq, the airport (unnamed though closely resembling Roissy) where the mother of *Le Mal de mer* makes her definitive exit at the end of the

<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *La Télévision* (Paris: Minuit, 1997) the narrator, torn from his research project on Titian Veccellio by the temptation to watch television (an inferior 'TV'), finally turns on the set to find his upstairs neighbour on the screen.

<sup>16</sup> See n. 9 above.

novel is, seen at night, a bleak site of emptiness, where the only activity is departure, and where even the rubbish on the floor speaks of farewells and absence:

Tout est en train de fermer. L'aéroport se vide, il n'y a plus que deux vols au décollage, le sien, et Buenos Aires. [. . .] Des balayeurs contournent les dormeurs, des papiers d'emballage volettent. [. . .] Une atmosphère éparse de lieu qu'on quitte, amplifiée, et rendue plus lointaine qu'un au-delà des mers, par l'indifférence des haut-parleurs vacants. (*MM*, pp. 125–26)

For Echenoz, in sharp contrast, Roissy is an altogether more stimulating place. Acknowledging that an airport is nothing more than 'un lieu de passage, un sas' (*JMV*, p. 10), he none the less has his hero discover in the basement, next to the Multistore and the Business Centre, an incongruous space of calm, the ecumenical Spiritual Centre, kitted out with the generic office paraphernalia of metal chairs, brochures, and pot plants. In this space ostensibly remote from the everyday, the eternal is smoothly absorbed into the transient. By the register in the Catholic chapel are two handwritten signs: 'l'un mentionnait la présence du saint sacrement, l'autre priait de ne pas emporter le Bic' (p. 112). Aside from its unlikely accommodation of the spiritual, the airport is on another level a simple workplace, and the Centre is part of the routine of its ever-moving and ever-communicating employees, with their beepers and walkie-talkies. Far from being estranged by his setting, Ferrer too straddles the spiritual and the secular with ease: first attracted to a pretty Lebanese nun; then obliged to disappoint a passenger terrified of flying, '[qui] souhaitait recevoir le sacrement d'un prêtre qu'à contre-cœur Ferrer dut convenir n'être pas' (p. 112).

It is precisely this permanent openness to new adventures in all settings that preserves Echenoz's characters from distress at their estrangement from the non-places they spend their lives passing through. While, for Augé, loneliness generally marks our encounters with *non-lieux* on account of the impersonal discourses with which they address us—'prendre la file à droite', 'défense de fumer', 'retirer votre carte', etc. (*NL*, p. 121)—he does also recognize their liberating potential:

Sans doute, même, l'anonymat relatif qui tient à cette identité provisoire peut-il être ressenti comme une libération par ceux qui, pour un temps, n'ont plus à tenir leur rang, à se tenir à leur place, à surveiller leur apparence. *Duty-free*: à peine son identité personnelle (celle du passeport ou de la carte d'identité) déclinée, le passager du vol prochain se rue dans l'espace 'libre de taxes', lui-même libéré du poids de ses bagages et des charges de la quotidienneté, moins pour acheter à meilleur prix, peut-être, que pour éprouver la réalité de sa disponibilité du moment, sa qualité irrécusable de passer en instance de départ. (*NL*, p. 127)<sup>17</sup>

This liberty is a major force in Echenoz, motivating the freewheeling sense of endless possibilities his narratives irresistibly project. Theirs is a world of negotiation, where characters' lives reflect and thrive on the mobility and ephemerality that characterize the contemporary world. (An earlier novel, *Cherokee*, is a sustained celebration of improvisation, in jazz as in life.<sup>18</sup>) Even at the bot-

<sup>17</sup> He reiterates this idea in *La Mère d'Arthur*: 'trente minutes pour rêver dans un espace libre de toute charge' (p. 68). Similarly, in the arrivals area, 'la certitude de ne pas être attendu a quelque chose de triste et de grisant à la fois' (p. 83).

<sup>18</sup> See Emer O'Beirne, 'From Traffic to Jamming: Cars, Music, and Improvisation in Jean

tom of the social ladder, Victoire, now homeless, manages to get around by negotiating her itinerary with those who give her lifts: 'S'il se pourrait qu'on fit quelque détour pour l'avancer, il arriverait aussi qu'elle dût s'adapter à une destination, ceci équilibrant cela' (*UA*, p. 63). Indeed, even nature negotiates a compromise with technology, as evidenced in *Je m'en vais* by the rabbits of Roissy whose breath smells of kerosene (p. 11), the starlings which integrate into their repertoire the competing electronic noises of computer games or mobile phones (p. 125), or the storks for which the pylons outside San Sebastián provide nesting platforms (p. 210).

Darrieussecq's world, by contrast, is one of regret and loss, a vision most emphatically embodied in the dead children of the recent novels *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and *White*. But already in *Le Mal de mer*, the mother's freedom involves abandoning her child. Here, as throughout Darrieussecq's work, nature acts as an impassive foil to humans' estrangement from one another: the deliberate confusion of the 'elles' of mother, daughter, grandmother, and sea in a single pronoun that evokes the vast embrace of the ocean, along with the rather Durassian *mer/mère* homophony, point up the lost generational continuity within this female line. Thus the increasingly ill grandmother leaves her hotel in an ambulance without having made contact with either daughter or granddaughter. For the narrator of *Naissance des fantômes*, the movement and bustle of others is far from vivifying, for it simply masks the void of her husband's disappearance (*NF*, p. 136), as the empty wrapping paper emphasized the absence of departed travellers in *Le Mal de mer*, or as the daily routine and trail of footprints at the polar research station in *White* amplifies the vast antarctic emptiness, itself setting in relief the ghosts of all the dead borne by the living.

Given the enthusiasm for a genetically engineered 'post-humanity' expressed in *Les Particules élémentaires*, and *Plateforme*'s seeming promotion of the extension of the free market to the business of sex, via sexual tourism and prostitution, it might be surprising to discover in Houellebecq's work a similar sense of loss to Darrieussecq's, and a strong strain of nostalgia for a past, better world. In *Les Particules élémentaires* Michel Djerzinski visits the once rural Crécy-en-Brie where he grew up, to find the village transformed into a suburban satellite of Paris by the extension of the RER line to Marne-la-Vallée to serve Euro Disney. He has come to Crécy to supervise the relocation of his adored grandmother's remains in the cemetery, in order to accommodate the enlargement of the bus station. Modernization—specifically of transport networks—pushes a loved past rudely aside, confronting the individual (for we are not post-human yet) with annihilation and decay. In the local bar, unrecognizable with its video games and MTV, he meets his childhood sweetheart, Annabelle, but their revived relationship will also end in her death. Death is inevitable (and in Houellebecq's work particularly agonizing for female characters), and nature shows a Lamartinian impassivity in the face of suffering, ageing, and mortality—the allusion is close to explicit when Djerzinski observes, from the house where his mother is dying, 'le miroitement bleuté d'un lac' (*PE*, p. 323).

Echenoz's *Cherokee*, in *Crime Scenes: Detective Narratives in European Culture since 1945*, ed. by Anne Mullen and Emer O'Beirne (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 183–94.

But nature can escape the alternative of destruction by civilization or irrelevance to it. There exists for Houellebecq a remote place where contemporary society has left less of a mark than elsewhere, yet which can also produce the brave new genetically modified world where loss, death, and loneliness will no longer exist. Unlikely though it may seem, this springboard to paradise is the Irish county of Galway—another Atlantic refuge for the distressed, though in a wilder register than Echenoz's or Darrieussecq's Basque resorts. Djerzinski ends up there, to escape from both professional inertia and personal suffering (he has done no research since leaving the CNRS, and Annabelle has died horribly). In an image of an unspoiled natural idyll saved through the sex- and death-transcending powers of genetic engineering, a herd of GM cows graze peacefully behind a Connemara stone wall before vanishing into the mist:

Djerzinski s'approcha du muret en pierres qui délimitait le pré. Les vaches broutaient calmement, frottaient leurs têtes contre les flancs de leurs compagnes; deux ou trois étaient allongées. Le code génétique qui gouvernait la réplication de leurs cellules c'est lui qui l'avait créé, qui l'avait amélioré tout du moins. Pour elles, il aurait dû être comme un Dieu; pourtant, elles semblaient indifférentes à sa présence. Un banc de brume descendit du sommet de la colline, les cachant progressivement à sa vue. (*PE*, pp. 360–61)

Though modern vices such as discos and antidepressants are creeping into local life, Walcott, the English director of the research centre, hopes that the spirituality exuded by the landscape may keep the worst excesses of modernity at bay:

Je suis resté athée, mais je peux comprendre qu'on soit catholique ici. Ce pays a quelque chose de très particulier. Tout vibre constamment, l'herbe des prairies comme la surface des eaux, tout semble indiquer une présence. La lumière est mobile et douce, elle est comme une matière changeante. Vous verrez. Le ciel, lui aussi, est vivant. (*PE*, pp. 362–63)

Michel may be living in a rented holiday home decorated with cartwheels and oil lamps for the benefit of tourists; but being on the Sky Road in Clifden, walking at the turn of the millennium through a series of townlands the narrator recites like an incantation (Gortrumnagh, Knockavally, Claddaghduff, Aghrus) brings the geneticist the insights that will end the travails of an exhausted humanity.

It is hard to take without a large pinch of salt Houellebecq's suggestion of the near-mystical ability of the west of Ireland landscape to generate—through Michel—a new form of life which might retain the relative purity of this region 'au point le plus occidental de l'Europe, à la pointe extrême du monde occidental' (*PE*, p. 365). In the same hyperbolic vein, Michel is depicted as a Messiah figure—'ses travaux, il le savait, étaient terminés' (p. 377)—who at the end of his life is 'assumed' into the cosmos (he is thought drowned, but his body is never recovered), restored to nature's internal harmony, as the somewhat Baudelairean resonance of his last writings suggests: 'le ciel, la lumière et l'eau se confondent' (p. 379). There is of course much irony in this novel, which is presented as a cloned society's retrospective salutation to 'cette espèce infortunée et courageuse qui nous a créés' (p. 394) and consecration of the scientist who conceived the transition from one to the other. Yet the fact that the narrative requires a place of spiritual purification in contrast to the soullessness

of urban sprawl and the tawdriness of the resorts in which Michel's brother Bruno seeks and fails to find fulfilment through sex, a place appropriate for the harvesting of what is best in humanity, suggests a core of seriousness in the presentation of the Connemara landscape as a source of spiritual ecstasy (and it is literal *ek-stasis*, as Michel makes the mental leap which takes human life out of itself into post-humanity).<sup>19</sup>

This unexpected Atlantic apotheosis in *Les Particules élémentaires*, in its evocation of a harmony between 'late man' and nature, a harmony which ushers in a happy post-human coexistence free of selfishness, cruelty, and anger (*PÉ*, p. 393), sets itself apart from the stance of estrangement from nature articulated in Marie Darrieussecq, but only by way of an imaginative leap through the looking-glass that separates (for the moment at least) the human from the clone. Seen from the human side, there is not much to choose in terms of pessimism between a nature from which humans are estranged, as they are from one another, and one to which we might be reconnected (as we might to one another), but only at the cost of radical genetic reconfiguration. For both Houellebecq and Darrieussecq, the infinite expanses of sea and sky, although they surround us all the time, are awesomely remote from human life. In fact they are nature's 'non-places',<sup>20</sup> indifferent to human proximity and keeping no trace of our passage, as in the case of Djerzinski's presumably drowned but missing body. To feel at one with them is impossible in Darrieussecq's universe; in Houellebecq's it can be done, but it requires ceasing to be human. For these two, then, contemporary human alienation far exceeds Augé's diagnosis of 'traceless' super-modern spaces of transit or *non-lieux*; theirs is a tragic vision where our estrangement from the natural world through architecture and technology has ironically made nature not a refuge but the ultimate articulation of our lack of connection, a *non-lieu* par excellence.

Echenoz sees things differently. For him, the most remote expanses invariably turn out to have all the banal familiarity of home—of the anthropological *lieu*—whether it be the sea in *Un an* which washes up rubbish on the vast and empty off-season beach, the remote North Pole in *Je m'en vais* which offers Ferrer the same diet of litter, pornography, short-lived relationships, and continuing heart problems as he had in Paris, or outer space in *Nous trois*, where second-hand spaceships with the food stains, graffiti, and forgotten photographs left behind by previous astronauts drift past space-station debris and even a lost space-glove (*NT*, pp. 171, 197; Echenoz's banalization of such alien environments as space and the polar icecap could not be more different from the inhumane role both play in Darrieussecq's *White*). Unlike the atomized post-Romantic loners of Houellebecq and Darrieussecq, for whom both the modern world and natural refuges turn out to share an isolating distance from humanity, for Echenoz's heroes who successfully negotiate the non-places of urban moder-

<sup>19</sup> This impression of seriousness is reinforced by the short text 'Ciel, terre, soleil' in *Lanzarote et autres textes* (Paris: Librio, 2002), pp. 91–94, in which Houellebecq reflects on the importance, for him, of living by the sea in Ireland: 'Pour la première fois aujourd'hui je vis dans un endroit d'où je peux, par la fenêtre, contempler la mer; et je me demande comment j'ai pu vivre jusqu'à présent' (p. 93).

<sup>20</sup> Darrieussecq actually uses the term to describe the endless empty expanse of the Antarctic: 'Ce paysage habité par eux seuls, ce non-lieu, ce non-sens formidable, air soleil sol' (*W*, p. 183).

nity, exploiting their anonymity like Victoire in the Formule 1 hotel, or their floating populations like Ferrer at Roissy, the non-places of the natural world too, from space to the Arctic wastes, turn out to be oddly familiar and can be navigated with profit. The world is experienced in terms not of generalized estrangement but of generalized familiarity.

This generalized familiarity of everywhere extends, in Echenoz's most recent novel, *Au piano*, even to the afterlife. Heaven is revealed to be not an ineffable state of bliss but a *non-lieu* in its most contemporary guise: a featureless super-hotel-cum-hospital, a 'centre d'orientation spécialisé' where the newly deceased hero Max, a classical pianist, waits while a commission studies his dossier, before being 'orienté vers l'une ou l'autre des deux destinations prévues' (*AP*, p. 95)—for the goats, Paris suffocating under black clouds of pollution; for the sheep, a sunlit natural park with a profusion of plant and animal life, but with a certain holiday-camp blandness. But the opposition of nature to the city is only ostensibly that of heaven to hell—the would-be heavenly alternative to modern urban life turns out to be a sentence to an eternity in Club Med. As the officious manager points out to Max, the residents of this Garden of Eden 'disposent d'équipements pour les activités sportives, il y a des terrains de golf, des tennis, des clubs nautiques sur les plans d'eau, tout ça. Je dois dire que les prestations sont bien. Ils organisent aussi des petits concerts de temps en temps, des petits spectacles, personne n'est obligé d'y assister, bien sûr' (p. 140).

Far from alienation, much less ecstasy, the repeated experience of Echenoz's protagonists is that even the most 'other' places—the North Pole, outer space, heaven—are just like home. In heaven as on earth, connections are everything, and opportunities are to be played like a musical improvisation:<sup>21</sup> Max the pianist learns that Doris Day and Dean Martin have managed to secure a coveted position in the *centre d'orientation*: 'Elle a des protections, voyez-vous, elle a su se placer. Le système a des défaillances, quelquefois, il y a des complaisances, c'est comme partout' (p. 100). 'C'est comme partout': Echenoz suggests that the paradox of the *non-lieu* is that in its anonymous uniformity it has become a second home. If his fiction describes the world in terms that chime considerably with Augé's vision of omnipresent impersonal spaces and networks, the experiences he elaborates in that world blur the opposition between *lieu* and *non-lieu* in a way diametrically opposed to the ubiquitous alienation of Houellebecq or Darrieussecq. In Echenoz's vision, the supermodern settings of the endless global suburb have become our familiar, navigable environment where our own inconstant selves are reflected, where transient communities form and dissolve, where 'meaning' and ephemerality are inseparable, and where our improvised negotiations provide the narratives, and the music, to our lives.

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<sup>21</sup> See O'Beirne, 'From Traffic to Jamming'.