



Aerial element in the works of Jean Echenoz and Patrick Deville*

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MINIMALISM, an artistic movement that emerged in the 1960s, refers to the generation of writers who came after Samuel Beckett and the Nouveau Roman. Facing maximalism, the principles of this movement can be summarized in simplicity, objectivity, conciseness and repetition. Jean Echenoz and Patrick Deville are considered as two emblematic figures of literary minimalism that opt for a new form of narration and a style based on simplicity and abbreviation. Known for having a simple and fragmentary style, they have also in common a fictional universe characterized by dynamism, movement and geographic displacement. Their characters are also immersed in a fuzzy space-time framework to which is linked a key element of dynamic imagination: the aerial element.

The abundance of references made to the air in the works of these two eminent novelists suggests a deeper meaning of this substance. The secret of such a meaning can be revealed by the "criticism of the depths" proposed by Gaston Bachelard; an approach to thematic criticism that allows discovering the imagination of the poetic spirit at the moment of creation; a state of waking reverie where the mind embodies its images in a material element. It is, in fact, the discovery of this element and its components that can explain the relationship that exists between human being of the contemporary era and the world around it. In order to be able to detect this

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relationship, based on the typology of aerial images described by Bachelard, this work is interested in discovering the latent relation of the lightest, most fugitive and dynamic element with the vision of the world and the minimalist style of Jean Echenoz and Patrick Deville.

So, the first part of this work deals with positive images of sky, ascension, height and flight, embodied by birds and all other celestial forms. The dreamers of height and ascension find most of the time, some kinds of intimate appeasement and calm. According to Bachelard, the dynamic imagination is a psychic amplifier that transports the dreaming mind, through these aerial images, to somewhere else or to metaphysics, and generally has an upward tendency. In this case, we see that all the objects and even all the elements of the romantic universe of Jean Echenoz and Patrick Deville have a strong temptation to leave Earth for Sky. For instance, the characters' interest in birds, sky, planes, helicopters, etc., demonstrates an intimate quest for calm and freedom. Contemplating the flight of birds in the sky, the dreamer wishes unlimited freedom. In other words, in the imagination of being devoted to the substance of air, flight is a "transcendence of greatness", and what better greatness than freedom for human. However, the upward attraction is not only expressed in the image of birds, spaceships, rockets, planes and helicopters, but it can be seen through the intangible movement of smoke, vapor or perfume as well. All these shapeless and opaque substances have a considerable power to suggest action and upward mobility in the work of Echenoz and Deville.

Besides, many situations and scenes take place in the elevators or on the terraces. All these places give rise to the idea of height and verticality, but also that of floating and suspension. It is in the elevator that the Echenozian character finds every time his beloved woman, and on the terraces that he seems to be in peace, feeling closer to the sky. Therefore, it should be noted that there is an undeniable relation between the aerial element, height, suspension, happiness, desire, woman and love. However, if the Echenozian character likes elevators and terraces, the character of Deville opts most of the time for roofs, skyscrapers, domes, trees and spires. For all of his meetings, the narrator also takes the trouble to climb to the highest floor of buildings, twenty-ninth and twenty-fifth floors, to contemplate the sky, because everything is different for him away from the earth.

Generally, characters of these two postmodern writers are rarely attached to the earth. In fact, they are in search of liberty and human greatness threatened by the abyss, or in other words, by the emptiness of modern life. According to Bachelard's word, aerial images welcome all metaphors of human greatness. So, the romantic universe of these two authors is based

on the elements that liberate the characters from the enclosure, from the earth.

However, the suspension characterizes not only the narrative framework of the novels of Echenoz and Deville, but also their text and their style. The refusal of all heaviness and all complexity gives a light and limpid style, characterized by abbreviated terms, ellipses, lack of coordination and subordination. This is how the famous principle of "less is more" among minimalists finds its links with the air element and its effects. In fact, the simplicity, lightness and shortness of style go hand in hand with the idea of elevation, flight and suspension. (In this dialectic of completeness and brevity, simplicity and complexity, it is thanks to a refined and simple style that the minimalist author suggest the deepest and most complex ideas.)

As already mentioned, aerial imagination most often excites images of development, freedom and calm; however, there are very rare situations in which this dynamic imagination elicits violent images. This is why the second part of this work gives way to analyze the symbolism of threatening and violent air, clouds and the anger of the wind. Clouds can provoke the fugitive, the ephemeral, the threat, the brutal movement and the transformation constantly. Following Bachelard, who analyzes the clouds according to the classifications of Goethe, we can see that *cumulus* announces "power of action" and "threat" and *nimbus* makes powerful storms that ruin everything. In fact, thickness and obscurity of clouds have a direct link with the disasters and catastrophes of the history in Echenoz and Deville's work. Nevertheless, the substance, which better represents the anger of the aerial element, is the wind. The furious wind is the symbol of pure anger. By its strong dynamism, the wind can cause horrible movements, which disturb objects, life, and thoughts of men.

Common point between the furious images of cloud and wind is in their fragility and their transient nature. They can appear or disappear in the blink of an eye without leaving a trace. This instability and mobility of the aerial elements can also translate the eventful life of the characters, far from a fixed or stable point. Actually, the imagination of Echenoz and Deville seem to be linked to notions such as displacement, movement, travel, wandering and flight. The characters in their works constantly roam the world, sometimes on land, sometimes in the sea, and most of the time in the skies. The images created by this element, which do not have the complexity of recurrent poetic images, adapt well to the simple style of minimalist and to the lack of the figures in their style. In fact, a primitive material reverie, with all its simplicity, arouses the human imagination with an exceptional power from its fundamental and natural character.

Therefore, the fragmented, airy and dynamic style of Deville and Echenoz is in complete harmony with the air and the desire for flight.

Keywords— Dynamic imagination, Movement, Aerial element, Jean Echenoz, Patrick Deville.

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