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Author(s): Marianne Hirsch
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MICHEL BUTOR: THE DECENTRALIZED VISION

Marianne Hirsch

Butor's works represent a displacement of the familiar by the new: spatially, a departure from Paris to other places; temporally, a movement from the present to other historical periods; psychologically, an interplay between Self and Other; formally, a progression from the novel to more open and mobile texts. Yet this displacement implies a dialectical movement in which Self and Other are, in Butor's words, "decentralized" and reconstituted. "We still have an imperialist conception of ourselves," says Butor, and we must shed that vision in order to "see ourselves as elements in a pattern in which others are just as important as we are." In a recent interview, Butor proposes a transmutation of the self as the necessary basis for an accurate perception of our world: "A new conception of the self is not separate from a new conception of society. . . . Formerly, the Western civilizations imagined that the world was organized around a center, and since Rome, that center has always been a city. . . . We can imagine an outline for a spatial organization . . . wherein there would be a balance of points in a much more supple network . . . the only one which allows us to imagine peace on earth. As long as there are centers to attack, there

can be no peace."[1] This decentralization—essentially a deconstruction of the coherent self of Western humanism—motivates Butor's work.

Butor's experiments with various literary genres and narrative modes suggest perhaps the range of self-enactments embodied in his works: his novels include the third-person narration of *Passage de Milan* (1954), the first-person journal of *L'Emploi du temps* (1956), the second-person narration of *La Modification* (1957). His other works range from the most subjective—travelogues, autobiographies, dream narratives—to the most objective—verbal illustrations of visual art works, and collage texts that eliminate a coherent narrator as well as a unified character. In this great variety of experimental forms, three different stages can be recognized, three approaches to what I have referred to as the decentralized vision. I should like to call these three stages confrontation, displacement, and deconstruction.

Butor's four novels (the fourth is *Degrés,* published in 1960) represent the confrontation of character and setting, a confrontation in which the protagonist is diminished and displaced by an immense cultural framework. The second group of works, Butor's "spatial poems," from *Réseau aérien* (1962) to *6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde* (1965), acts out this displacement by focusing no longer on an individual self, whether in the form of character or narrator, but on a world which has totally integrated the individual as one of many elements; character gives way to characteristic, individual to stereotype. A third group of recent texts, including *Où* (1971), *Intervalle* (1973), and the three volumes of *Matière de rêves* (1975-1977), brings with it an apparent return to beginnings, to characters, but to character in the form of a single self, which is that of the author, Michel Butor.[2] As the self encounters and narrates its world, it undergoes visionary transformations, losing its physical and psychological boundaries in a mystical, dreamlike fusion with the world; the result is a form of dispersal of the self's solidity, a deconstruction.

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[1]Marianne Hirsch, "An Interview with Michel Butor," *Contemporary Literature,* 19 (Summer 1978), 272–73.

[2]All four of Butor's novels were published in Paris by Editions de Minuit; the other texts cited were published by Gallimard. This essay was completed before the publication of *Boomerang* in 1979.

Butor's displacement and deconstruction of the unified central self of Western literature is linked to the antihumanism of Heidegger and Sartre, as well as to the self's anonymity in Musil and Kafka, the self's fluidity and diffusion in Bergson and Proust, the self's decomposition in Conrad and Ford, the self's impersonality in Eliot and Joyce, the self's marginality and disintegration in Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet, the self's silence in Beckett. Butor's universe, however, does not have a void at its center; center and periphery merge as hierarchy is replaced by heterogeneity and multiplicity. The loss of the self yields not an emptiness, as it does in some of these writers, but a different kind of plenitude in Butor's world and in his work. To perceive that plenitude and to cope with that heterogeneity requires a psychic and literary revolution not unlike Laing's schizophrenia,[3] Deleuze's pre-Oedipal identity,[4] Derrida's dissemination,[5] Barthes's "jouissance,"[6] or Bersani's unlimited desire[7] (the "deconstructed self" is, in fact, Bersani's term). This revolution demands a break with the psychic totality and intolerance of otherness on which fictional character is based, in favor of a mobile and plural self.

In Butor's works, this psychic revolution essentially plays itself out in literary terms and is aimed at the reader. Bersani argues that literature and language give "structure and continuity to what may be fragmented and discontinuous in the history of our desires."[8] Butor's expansive and inclusive experimental texts represent an attempt to explore fragmentation and discontinuity. Confronting the reader with new worlds to discover, his texts demand significant changes in our habits of reading and consequently our conception of ourselves. Underlying Butor's work is a structural analogy between text and world: the reader stands in relation to the text as each individual stands in relation to the world. Herein lies Butor's realism, and, unlike that of his contemporaries, his work is consciously representational: his is not as much a mimetic as an analogical realism. To learn to make sense of the complex structures of Butor's

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[3] See R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965).

[4] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Viking, 1977).

[5] See Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1973).

[6] See Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973).

[7] See Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976).

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

texts is to learn to cope with the plurality and fragmentation of our world. In following, for example, Jacques Revel's itinerary through Bleston's museum as he deciphers the Theseus tapestries, identifying within the eighteen "portes de laines" the place of Theseus in the streets of Athens, his own place in the rooms of the museum, and the relation of those rooms to the streets of Bleston visible through the windows, we become conscious of the place of the book in our own room, the relation of that room to the streets of our own city, and so on. The boundaries between text and world disappear in the struggle for orientation that is analogous for the reader of *L'Emploi du temps* and the inhabitant of Athens or Bleston.[9] Prophetic and pointedly didactic (Butor has written on Fourier and shares the didacticism of utopian works), his texts lead the reader to experience a new form of being, collective and discontinuous. Through Butor's work, we are led to accept ourselves as displaced, dismembered, dispersed in a larger collectivity. Yet our own habits of coherence and the desire for totality fostered by the literary structures to which we have become accustomed offer continued resistance to that acceptance.

    The limits of fiction as a representational medium for our world emerge in each of Butor's four novels. The novel can be no more than the account of the failure of the individual's single vision, confronted with an overpowering setting. *L'Emploi du temps,* starting out as a diary-memoir, the story of a period in one man's life, becomes the record of Bleston, the English city in which he spends a painful year. Even as he piles sentence upon sentence, Jacques Revel disappears as the focus of his own memoir. The scratching of his pen on the white pages of his journal reveals "mon propre visage et le tien derrière lui, Bleston, le tien qui transparaîtra de plus en plus fortement, au point que l'on ne distinguera plus, pour ainsi dire, de moi-même, que le brillement des iris autour des pupilles et celui des dents autour de la langue" (*L'Emploi du temps,* p. 276).[10] Suffering the defeat of each effort to humanize the city and elevate his own experience, Revel painfully and reluctantly comes to concede that his

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    [9]See *L'Emploi du temps,* p. 156.

    [10]". . . my own face . . . and yours behind it, Bleston, your face ravaged with inner conflict; and yours will shine through more and more clearly, until nothing can be seen of me but the glitter of eyes and teeth." *Passing Time,* trans. Jean Stewart (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), p. 287.

ramblings through Bleston and through the labyrinthine pages of his memoir lead not to the discovery of some deeper human meaning, but to the revelation of the city's indestructible and chaotic life. Revel's search is for himself, for his position among the buildings and bridges, the books, maps, tapestries and paintings, the past and the present: "Alors j'ai décidé d'écrire pour m'y retrouver, me guérir, pour éclaircir ce qui m'était arrivé dans cette ville haïe, pour résister à son envoûtement, pour me réveiller de cette somnolence qu'elle m'instillait" (p. 199).[11] Yet Revel's journal fails to illuminate and crystallize his experience. In fact, it is the very act of writing that leads to his extinction. In accepting Bleston's pact, Revel agrees to relinquish his identity, to become a lens for the city's discovery and a vehicle for its expression. As such, he comes to see himself no longer as a unique individual whose personal experience is in any way significant, but as a "carrefour," a point among many where various cultural forces meet. He can do no more than to bring those forces to the surface, not giving them significance, as James' Lambert Strether, that "mirror of miraculous silver," illuminates Paris, but simply revealing them through his journal, which itself becomes a "miroir-piège pour te prendre, Bleston."[12] The journal turns into a chaotic labyrinth that traps the writer rather than being shaped by him.

Since there are initially seven months between the events he describes and the time of writing, it becomes clear that subsequent events could force a reevaluation of earlier ones. Revel's writing thus requires constant revision, and he is unable to keep up. As he writes, rereads his journal and continues living, the connections proliferate and the journal becomes as chaotic as the city. Revel's prose is haunting, incantatory, tortuous; unsure of which line to follow, ignorant of what may yet emerge in the future, he attempts to keep track of every moment in case it should prove significant later on. Still hoping that some meaningful pattern will emerge, Revel continues until his last moments in Bleston to add to his pile of sentences, to reread and reshuffle the information, to try out words and phrases, testing their power over the chaos which surrounds him,

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[11]"Then I decided to write in order to get things straight, to cure myself, to explain to myself what had happened to me in this hateful town, to offer some resistance to its evil spell, to shake myself awake from the torpor it instilled in me" (*Passing Time*, p. 201).

[12]". . . mirror-trap by which to capture you, Bleston" (my translation).

over the chaos he has created. Revel's journal remains unfinished; as he despairingly realizes, it is no more than a "description exploratrice, base pour un futur déchiffrement, un futur éclairement" (p. 264).[13]

Plot (the story of a life) has given way to pattern (the record of a city), yet the conflict in Revel, his resistance to that displacement, turns that pattern into a maze: "le labyrinthe de mes jours à Bleston, incomparablement plus déroutant que le palais de Crète, puisqu'il s'augmente à mesure que je l'explore" (p. 187).[14] It is Revel's own presence that causes the disorder. In the journal's openness, however, lies Revel's redemption; in its disorder lies the density of a life that refuses to become extinct, the fullness of a city that imposes its reality. Revel discovers the potential usefulness of his journal to Bleston's inhabitants, its victims, "toutes ces femmes sans hanches, tous ces hommes sans épaules et sans sourire,"[15] who often look at him with expectant eyes. As Revel enacts Bleston's disorder in his endless ramblings through the city's streets, restaurants, and fairs, in his penetration of its multiple historical layers, in his tracing of its connections to other cities, so the reader re-enacts Revel's itinerary by following the labyrinthine order of his journal. In experiencing the discontinuity of information and participating in the struggle of putting the fragments together, the reader is forced into the acceptance of an uncomfortable truth—the individual's incapacity to impose structure or meaning, his insignificance in the midst of a configuration of cultures no longer defined by him.

The sacrifice of Revel's individuality is a condition for his ability to envision the immense setting. His status as a displaced outsider enables Revel to see Bleston's own insignificance. Just as Revel relinquishes his uniqueness, so the city of Bleston must give up its centrality. It is no more than one city among many; not the villainous monster in Revel's plot, but a point in a vast cultural and historical network. In his service to the city, Revel acquires a new identity, that of an anonymous artist who, like the French artisans who created the tapestries and the stained glass windows, offers his work

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[13]". . . exploratory description, the basis for a future interpretation, a future illumination" (*Passing Time,* p. 275).

[14]". . . the labyrinth of my days in Bleston, incomparably more bewildering than that of the Cretan palace, since it grows and alters even while I explore it" (*Passing Time,* p. 195).

[15]". . . all these women with no hips, all these men with no shoulders and no smile" (my translation).

to the larger community.[16] The work can be useful only through his anonymity, his ultimate disappearance. At the end of the novel, Revel is a phantom.

The novel is traditionally a biography or, as Lukács has said more specifically, the biography of a problematic individual.[17] In *L'Emploi du temps* that individual gradually disappears in favor of the setting. The "livre futur" that will illuminate a communal rather than a personal experience is the only compensation Butor offers the protagonists who have suffered so bitterly at the loss of their centrality. As he specifies in an interview, "Il faut qu'il y ait ce sacrifice humain à l'intérieur du roman. Dans la mesure où il accepte . . . d'être cette victime dans cette mesure il réussit. Dans la mesure qu'il reconnaît que cette musique future lui est interdite mais que justement sa mort va la rendre possible pour d'autres, dans cette mesure-là il est entièrement pardonné."[18] Because it is habitual in reading fiction to project oneself into the plot through the characters, following their itinerary and identifying with their responses, the reader of Butor's novels experiences the individual's sacrifice and displacement personally. The identity of character and reader is brought out most clearly in *La Modification,* in which the protagonist, Léon Delmont, is addressed throughout the novel as "vous." Moreover, all of Butor's protagonists are themselves readers of texts, whether those texts be museum tapestries, stained glass windows, detective novels, history lessons, or train schedules. It is in their role as readers of an unchartable world that they lose their human centrality.

The insufficiency of a single individual's vision is precisely what leads Butor to abandon the novel form. Butor conceives of his books as guidebooks which, like the "Guide bleu des égarés" of *La Modifi-*

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[16]For an interesting exploration of the human "eclipse" in *L'Emploi du temps* and modern fiction generally see Arnold Weinstein, *Vision and Response in Modern Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974). My own reading of *L'Emploi* owes a great deal to Weinstein's, with whom I have had occasion to discuss the novel at length.

[17]See *Theory of the Novel,* trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), pp. 77, 78.

[18]"This human sacrifice is necessary within the novel. As long as he is willing to be this victim, he can succeed. As long as he admits that this distant music is denied him but that his death will make it possible for others, he is entirely forgiven." St. Aubyn, "Entretien avec Michel Butor," *French Review,* 36 (Oct. 1962), 20–21; my translation.

cation, must help us to live knowingly. He suggests that our survival requires a different sort of knowledge than the self-exploration offered by the traditional novel form; we need to understand not only the human, but also the material, historical, and political side of the reality in which we live. We need to take into account all forces that define and determine the human individual, as well as all that exist independently of people. As Butor says so lyrically, "nous avons le plus urgent besoin . . . d'inventer de nouveaux chants et de nouveaux contes grâce auxquels, peu à peu, toute notre tribu puisse se retrouver, se reconnaître et se comprendre."[19] Instead of continuing to recount the defeat of nameless and powerless individual figures, as do Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Beckett, Butor attempts to transcend the singularity of the novel.

Butor's trip to the United States in 1960 occasioned texts that are clear departures from what he perceives as the novel's myopic structures of individual character and plot. *Mobile* (1962), *Description de San Marco* (1963), *Réseau aérien,* and *6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde* experiment instead with mobile, multiple, and collective forms. Here groups and their interaction replace individuals and their intrigues as the units of reference. The defeat of an individual intent on maintaining a position of centrality is replaced by the celebration of decentralization and plurality. Instead of the confrontation of character with setting, we have the displacement of the character by the setting.

These particular experimental texts of Butor's have been called "uninteresting" and even "unreadable" by enthusiastic readers of his novels. In an essay that appeared shortly after the publication of *Mobile,* Roland Barthes identifies the source of the difficulties: "Ce que *Mobile* a blessé, c'est l'idée même du Livre. . . . Le Livre est un objet qui *enchaîne, développe, file* et *coule.* . . . Les métaphores bénéfiques du Livre sont l'éetoffe que l'on tisse, l'eau qui coule, la farine que l'on moud, le chemin que l'on suit, le rideau qui dévoile, etc. . . . écrire, c'est couler des mots à l'intérieur de cette grande

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[19]"We have the most urgent need to invent new songs and new stories, by means of which, little by little, our entire tribe might be able to find each other, recognize each other, understand each other." *Répertoire* (Paris: Minuit, 1960), p. 249; my translation.

catégorie du continu, qui est le récit."[20] *Mobile* is neither the factual nor the fictional account of an individual's journey through the U. S. It is, as its subtitle indicates, an "étude pour une représentation des Etats-Unis."[21] While "étude" suggests its unfinished and provisional character, "représentation" means both mimesis and performance and both meanings apply here.

Mobile can best be described by means of the structural models, all indigenous to America, that are set up within the text itself. The book is dedicated to Jackson Pollock, and as his action paintings use the materials of paint and color as a storehouse of forces to be released by the movement of the artist's body across the canvas, so *Mobile* uses the materials of the book, three types of print, five different margins, and numerous blank spaces to make each page into a visual tableau. The use of different typescripts and margins, and especially the text's alphabetical organization (the book goes through the fifty states in alphabetical order) derive from what Butor considers the most widely read American book, the sales catalogue. Names in capital letters attract the reader's attention; surrounding each is a description of the "item" (the name of a city) in roman print and, in italics, reflections and impressions. *Mobile* even imitates the catalogue's advertising language; on the back cover the book is advertised as "une orgie de surprises et de frissons." The text itself identifies the uniquely American patchwork quilt as another of its structural models; it shares with the quilt a composition of discrete units, assembled according to precise and regular repetitive patterns. The book's title suggests the most important model, Calder's mobiles. Like a mobile, Butor's text is composed of separate units, each of which moves in relation to all the others. The controlled yet unpredictable relations of these units produce in the text a tension between chance and design that characterizes the mobile— each encounter with it is different, subject to the reader/viewer's position in relation to the work. Besides Calder, the title also evokes Mobile, Alabama, the town with which the book begins and, of course Mobil gasoline. In addition to "movable," the word *mobile*

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[20]"What *Mobile* injured was the very idea of the Book. . . . The (traditional) Book is an object which develops, makes links, spins, and flows. . . . The metaphors which describe the Book are the fabric that is woven, the water that flows, the flour that is ground, the road that is followed, the curtain that reveals, etc. . . . to write is to flow words into this great continuous category that is narrative." *Essais Critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), pp. 175–77; my translation.

[21]"Study for a Representation of the United States."

in French means "motive," and *Mobile* demands to be read as an account of the motives that led up to the American present, and as a motive for action in its own right, as a challenge and a provocation.

The difficulties of this text, I would suggest, do not lie in its nonlinear composition: we have become used to reading paradigmatic texts; the interruption of narrative flow by lists and catalogues has been a convention since Homer, subsequently employed by Rabelais and Joyce, among others. We have also learned how to deal with disrupted chronology from Flaubert and Proust; we no longer expect a story to unfold and flow smoothly, as Barthes suggests. The airplane vision of fifty states in forty-eight hours, as well as the progression of the journey, based not on geographical but on alphabetical contiguity, seem quite appropriate for this subject. Choosing between a variety of different reading routes through the text certainly poses difficulties for the reader, but the real frustrations of *Mobile* lie in its failure to be concerned with the fate of individuals, in its elimination of a central subject. *Mobile* is a journey without a traveler, a search with no seeker, a labyrinth with no Theseus.

The reader becomes the only individual consciousness within the work, the only one who can attempt to combine the fragments into a meaningful pattern.[22] By participating in the book's expansive and inclusive structures, the reader learns to function within a new world. Reading is no longer a process of identification with character; nor is it a process of projecting oneself into the place of a missing traveler or an implied seeker. The text consistently defies such humanization.[23] Instead, reading is a process of orientation in a world of fragments—animate and inanimate, past and present, important and trivial. As we follow the book's intricate patterns, we accept our position as one of many, empathizing with collective acts and truths, even with collective dreams; we chart our own course alongside *Mobile's* Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, the

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[22]In his essay "The Death of the Author," in *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148, Roland Barthes suggests that "a text's unity lies not in its origin, but in its destination."

[23]R. M. Albérès, in *Butor* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1964), insists on reading *Mobile* as an account of Butor's experiences and impressions; Georges Charbonnier, in *Entretiens avec Michel Butor* (Paris: Seuil, 1967) insists on projecting himself into the place left blank by the book's missing subject. Both, in my opinion, miss the essential novelty and challenge of *Mobile* and demonstrate our dependence on humanistic categories.

Winnebago Indian Albert Hensley and Susannah Martin, burned as a witch in 1692 in Salem. As we orient ourselves amidst a multiplicity of individual and collective dreams, fears and desires, we are forced to acknowledge our part in the collective crimes that are at the base of American culture, and by extension, of all Western culture: the genocide of the American Indian and the enslavement of the Black African. Butor says: "*Mobile* est un livre au pluriel . . . c'est à l'intérieur du pluriel que le singulier va se condenser."[24] In displacing the individual from the center of his work and thus avoiding the sacrifice of the individual self that characterizes his novels, Butor announces a new collective identity, a collective form of knowledge, a collective aesthetic.

In spite of the failures and frustrations it recounts and enacts, in spite of the guilt of which it is a constant reminder, *Mobile* is a celebration of the collective. The revelation that is so painful to Revel in *L'Emploi du temps*—the fact that Bleston's rivers, buildings, bridges, and trees are neutral forces, as important and more enduring than its inhabitants—becomes almost joyous in *Mobile,* where historical figures, ice-cream flavors, cars, birds, oceans, items in the Sears catalogue, quotations from Benjamin Franklin, the Trappist jelly brochures, even human limbs appear side by side. Roland Barthes' aspiration could be used to describe *Mobile:* "le texte de plaisir, c'est Babel heureuse."[25]

The transmutation of the individual self represents a moment of freedom and rebirth inherent in the potential of the new continent, the new world. As Butor says:

Si nous avons la possibilité de devenir Américains sans cesser d'être Éuropéens, si nous avons la possibilité de traverser ce phénomène de dissolution, mais en conservant beaucoup mieux toutes nos structures anciennes, alors nous nous trouvons avec la possibilité de nous inventer nous-mêmes à un niveau bien supérieur.

Il y a dans toute l'Amérique, dans toute la notion de "nouveau monde," il y a une espèce de risque extraordinaire; il y a une sorte de crise

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[24]"*Mobile* is a plural work . . . it is within the plural that the singular will condense itself." Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Michel Butor,* pp. 189, 190; my translation.

[25]"The text of pleasure is a sanctioned Babel." *Le Plaisir du texte,* p. 10; trans. by Richard Miller in *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 4.

de l'humanité qui se produit non seulement pour les gens qui y sont, mais naturellement, pour tous les gens qui sont ailleurs.

Si nous sommes capables de nous approprier ce moment de crise, alors, nous sommes véritablement capables d'inventer une individualité supérieure, nous sommes capables de vivre une autre vie.[26]

As readers of novels, we feel a resistance to this challenge, a resistance which is perhaps not unlike the original settlers' fear of the enormous strange continent, or their desire to impose on the new continent the values of the old. Incapable of inventing new codes that might correspond to a new world, the European immigrants continue to function within the old frames of reference:

En attendant ce triomphal retour, ne fallait-il point reconstituer autour de soi une nouvelle Europe, effacer le plus possible de son esprit ce continent qui nous accueillait mais nous effrayait.
                                        Nouvelle
                                                France,
                        Nouvelle
                                Angleterre,
            Nouvelle
                    Ecosse,
Nouveau
        Brunswick.[27]

Jefferson and Lincoln, carved into Mount Rushmore, symbolize the European settlers' attitude toward the grandiose American landscape: the need to humanize and domesticate it, thereby rendering it harmless. Similarly, old styles of architecture, old musical forms

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[26]"If we have the possibility of becoming Americans without ceasing to be Europeans, if we have the possibility of undergoing this phenomenon of dissolution even while preserving our old structures, then we find ourselves with the possibility of re-inventing ourselves on a superior level.

There is in all of America, in the whole notion of the "new world," an extraordinary kind of risk; there is a kind of crisis of humanity that emerges not only for the people who are there, but also naturally for all those who are elsewhere.

If we are capable of appropriating this moment of crisis, then we are really capable of inventing a superior kind of individuality, we are capable of leading a different life." Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Michel Butor,* p. 199; my translation.

[27]"*Meanwhile, until this triumphal return took place, why not reconstitute a new Europe, effacing as much as possible this continent that received but alarmed us? New France, New England, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick. Mobile,* p. 99; trans. by Richard Howard in *Mobile* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 95.

were imported, rather than new ones invented. Such failure of vision characterizes a civilization that is, at its basis, self-centered and imperialistic. Afraid to relinquish its centrality, it insists on perpetuating itself. Having established itself by the exclusion and intolerance of all otherness, all strangeness, it has become what Butor calls a *Nouvelle Europe.*

In its efforts to overcome such blindness and to move toward plurality and decentralization, the text of *Mobile* calls into question our notions of authorship; it makes explicit what theorists like Barthes find true of all literary works: that instead of being the original creation of a single author, they are mere re-creations, points in a vast cultural and linguistic network. For Barthes, every text is a "tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture."[28] In *Mobile,* the intertextual relationships are explicitly identified by quotation marks and the naming of sources. The inclusion of other voices, ranging from Andrew Carnegie to the Montgomery Ward catalogue, responds to Butor's attempt to transcend the singularity of authorship, the limited vision of the individual "author." It represents the movement toward a new omniscience comprising not merely one enriched perspective, but a composite vision of many perspectives. Butor's efforts at expansion and inclusiveness, unlike those of Barthes' "scriptor," are made in the service of a representational art. Butor's text is not a tissue of signifiers but an instrument of knowledge about an extratextual reality. To understand the vast and complex American universe demands an individual transmutation that collaboration can help to bring about: "La collaboration avec un autre," says Butor, "vivant ou mort, est une façon de developper une personnalité nouvelle. C'est une entreprise tout à fait comparable à la production d'un personnage romanesque."[29] As readers, we enter into a similar kind of collaborative relationship with the various voices of the text. The absence, in *Mobile,* of one central subject, enables us to see the individual self as an arena in which various cultural forces interact, and thus better to survive in a decentered universe.

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[28]"The Death of the Author," p. 146.

[29]"The collaboration with another, whether living or dead, is a way of developing a new personality. It is an enterprise which is totally comparable to the creation of a fictional character." Danielle Bajonnée, "8 Questions à Michel Butor," *Marche Romane,* 21 (1971), 37–39; my translation.

Yet the book's collective aesthetic has its severe costs. As readers of novels, we miss psychological depth and human interiority. We instinctively rebel against what might seem like generalization and superficiality, reduction and objectification. The book's repetitive and regular patterns, arranged in alphabetical order, are signs of loss for those who expect to follow the development of fictional characters. Those individuals that do appear in *Mobile,* Thomas Jefferson, for example, are evoked not for their uniqueness, but for their participation in collective structures. Through quotations from his journals, Jefferson is revealed as a racist, the product of a profoundly racist age. As Butor says: "It is not he who speaks, but it is the rest of America which speaks through him."[30] To appreciate the novelty of *Mobile* is to transcend the standards of individualism.

The text's strong pull toward individuality, toward a center represented by Washington with its obelisk and its brilliant white temples, or by the "Empire City" of New York, demonstrates how painfully difficult that transcendence is for us all. We continue to search for individuality and depth. *Mobile* functions within the dialectic to which I alluded earlier. Butor himself, despite his attempt to transcend the singularity of authorship, remains a strong presence in the text, felt not through his voice but through the process of selection and collection for which he is clearly responsible. The vision of America that emerges in *Mobile* is a biased and personal one, polemical, didactic, and provocative in its criticism. On the other hand, the text of *Mobile* clearly escapes the individual control of its author. Its component parts, whether they be sales brochures or Benjamin Franklin adages, are often so familiar as to have the property of "found" objects; they have become a part of the culture in an impersonal sense. Their juxtaposition, moreover, creates unexpected meanings, reminiscent of the surprise effects of surrealism.

And yet the text of *Mobile* is structured with clarity and precision, tracing an easily identifiable progression—from darkness to the inception of dawn, from death to rebirth, from old European names and structures to new indigenous ones. At the center of the text (that is, at its midpoint) is Washington, the spiritual center of the "European Americans" who inhabit the country; at its end are towns like Eden and Elkhorn, Wyoming. The text's last word,

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[30]Hirsch, "Interview with Michel Butor," p. 278.

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Buffalo, subsumes the guilt of the past and the implicit hope of a re-newed future. My own reading of *Mobile* oscillates between the recuperation of such inherent structure and progression and a recognition of the text's heterogeneity and multiplicity, its fragmentation and openness. I try to read *Mobile* as someone who grew up reading telephone books or sales catalogues, but I cannot get around the fact that I grew up reading stories.

The disjointed text of *Mobile,* however, itself a new world to explore, does provide an opportunity for a serious reorientation, a redefinition of our notions of surface and depth, individuality and collectivity. The surfaces of *Mobile* are not superficial, they are not Robbe-Grillet's "surfaces without mystery, without depth." In *Mobile,* all those parts of our history that as a culture we have suppressed, the journals of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, the records of the Salem trials, of the Chicago World's Fair or the Indian peyotl cult, the secret dreams of erotic liberation and nightmarish terror, emerge in a dazzling spectacle, alongside car makes and ice-cream flavors on the book's surface, not as superficiality, but as presence. By acknowledging the presence of the past, by making the connections, by battling with ancient impulses and habits, we as readers give the book a different depth.

So far, I have traced what seems like a logical development from singularity to multiplicity, from individuality to collectivity, from alienated character to the suggestion of a community, from the insistence on the self's centrality to the acceptance of its marginality. All the more surprising, even disquieting, then, to find the reappearance of the individual subject in such works as *Portrait de l'artiste en jeune singe* (1967)—an autobiography, *Où*—a travelogue, and the first three of the projected five volumes of *Matière de rêves.* This change might suggest a return to self-preoccupation and individualism, a failure of the collective aesthetic announced in *Mobile.* The "I" in the later works is not that of a fictional character, however, but that of the author, Michel Butor. *Où* and *Matière* help us assess the changes in the relation of self and world brought about by the introduction of the autobiographical "I" into the fragmentary and mobile text, changes that result in the self's deconstruction and absorption into the world.

In *Où*,[31] Butor himself takes the role of his fictional protag-
onists, that of an individual confronted with a vast, unchartable
world. Establishing, like Revel (of *L'Emploi*) and Vernier (of
Degrés), the connection between a variety of temporal and spatial
planes, Butor is willing to pay a price for that kind of activity, that
kind of self-knowledge. As a result of the re-emergence of the
subject, however, such knowledge becomes considerably more prob-
lematic than it was in *Mobile.*

In *Où,* Butor travels further than ever before across the entire
Northern hemisphere to places that are but sparsely documented by
European visitors. Sitting in front of his window at Cauterets and
looking at the Pyrenees as he writes about Mount Sandia in New
Mexico, about Korea and Cambodia, about Utah and a trip across
the Rockies, Butor is unable to discover connections between the
various places. As his frustrations expand from the individual visits
to the attempt to write about those visits and to relate them to one
another, Butor is unable to finish his task and his text.

Individual encounters with places in *Où* are fraught with
frustrations shared by the traveler/writer (Michel Butor) and the
reader who follows his itinerary. Butor's entry into these places is
limited by his European viewpoint: for a European it is impossible to
transcend the status of mere tourist at the temple of Angkor Vat or
at a Zuñi ceremony. What Butor and his readers learn about Korea
and Cambodia, New Mexico and Utah, is hardly what is most sig-
nificant about these places. Little insight is gained by the traveler
whose guidebooks are inadequate and whose eyes are incapable of
assessing alien landscapes and rituals. The book's culminating
section leads up to the winter solstice ceremony of the Zuñi Indians,
a ritual that celebrates the harmonious union between the human
being and the universe. As the seasons are renewed and another year
begins, the Zuñi reassert the centrality of the pueblo in their cos-
mogony. Though the details of the ritual are anticipated, they are
not witnessed as, inexplicably, the visitors leave before the main
dancers appear. Neither the traveler nor the reader is able to ex-
perience the unity and harmony of the Zuñi ceremony. This traveler
finds himself in a position similar to that of Jacques Revel, trying to
infer depth and significance from places whose meaning can only be

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[31]As its accent is crossed out, *Où* means both "or" and "where."

conferred on them by their readers. The mood of frustration is underscored by the weather anecdotes around which the book is organized: "La boue à Seoul," "Le pluie à Angkor."[32] Snow, rain, mud, and cold interfere with the visitor's vision at respective sights. Yet snow, rain, mud, and cold are the only characteristics that can be identified with certainty.

Où remains the account of the frustrating experiences of one man's visit to a number of important sites, supplemented by quotations from guidebooks that explain the monuments' significance and by accounts of previous European visitors—the *Book of Mormon,* for example. The multiple views of Mount Sandia are again those of one man at various times during the day and year; they are equally personal and impressionistic. Instead of the celebration of *Mobile,* *Où* accents frustration, the inability to see and to describe: "toute montagne est indescriptible"; "je viens de déchirer toute une page"; "je viens de raturer toute une ligne."[33]

The reader is presented with the resulting fragments and is called upon to actualize relationships that are only potential. *Où* is composed of several long syntagmatic units, cut apart and interspersed. In turning the book's pages, the reader thus quickly jumps from one unit to another, even while having to follow linearly the development within each one of them. The reader's involvement and participation in the text duplicates the difficulties of the narrator's complicated journey.

Thwarted again and again in his efforts to assimilate the beautiful and exotic landscapes encountered in his journeys, the narrator is propelled back to Paris, the original place to be discovered and understood, the place that is perhaps the cause of all the frustration. The two pillar texts of *Où,* appearing at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the book, are called "J'ai fui Paris" and "Je hais Paris."[34] Less concerned with the specific discovery of place, *Où* concentrates on the phenomenon of personal expansion and metamorphosis that is the result of the voyage. Throughout the entire book, the traveler, "blind and deaf," struggles to disengage himself from the cultural blinders imposed by Paris in order to comprehend an increasingly heterogeneous and alien world. In its complicated

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[32]"Mud in Seoul," "Rain in Angor"; all translations from *Où* are my own.

[33]"Every mountain is indescribable"; "I've just ripped up an entire page"; "I've just erased a whole line."

[34]"I Fled Paris"; "I Hate Paris."

progression, going from Paris to the Pyrenees, to Mount Sandia, to Cambodia and Korea, back to Paris, to Utah and California, and back again to Paris, the self loses its boundaries and is dissolved.

An infantile attachment ties the narrator to Paris; he sees it as the only place where he or anyone can live. His descriptions and evocations are loving and lyrical; his dependence is total. In order to rid himself of the blinding notion of the city's exclusivity, which obscures for him both Paris and any other place he might encounter, he must learn to hate the city to which he is tied by strongly emotional and physical bonds:

— j'ai constaté maintenant qu'il y a des cieux de nuages et des gris et des cils ailleurs. (p. 118)

— je suis maintenant tout à fait capable de m'installer loin de toi. (p. 121)[35]

The narrator's conflict with Paris is finally revealed as ideological: "Je hais Paris parce qu'elle m'empêche de voir Paris, d'être à Paris, de m'y étendre" (p. 143); "Je hais Paris parce qu'elle m'interdit Paris" (p. 144).[36] The imperial and unique Paris is not the real city, but the result of a rigid habitual vision that must be unlearned. The real Paris can only be discovered after one admits that it is not unique, but (like Bleston) a city among many. Only after discovering that he is able to live elsewhere can Butor see Paris for what it is; only then can he appreciate its unfamiliar vitality and beauty; only then can he uncover its hidden dimensions, listed in random order in the lyrical sections of "Je hais Paris."

The flight to Asia and America, the love affair with beautiful exotic spaces, an act of adultery and liberation is no more than the dream of an anticipated return, of a moment when all will be different. Just as in *Réseau aérien* the dream of unexplored islands in the Indian Ocean develops into a dream of "l'inexploré Paris," so here the return promises to restore to Paris its primitive freshness: "tout me sera enfin rendu de Paris" (p. 133),[37] the narrator hopes. Not only does the discovery of the new world make it possible to

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[35]"I've established now that there are clouded skies and greys and eyelashes elsewhere"; "I'm now perfectly capable of settling down far away from you."

[36]"I hate Paris because it prevents me from seeing Paris, from being in Paris, from spreading out there"; "I hate Paris because it forbids me Paris."

[37]"All of Paris will finally be returned to me."

understand the old, but such distinctions vanish as Paris is revealed to be an amalgamation of old and new, familiar and foreign. At the close of *Où* it becomes clear that the cycle of flight and return will have to be repeated again and again.

During the flight, however, very significant changes have occurred. In the beginning, the city is described as a vital organism of which the narrator constitutes only a minuscule part: "je fais partie de ces innombrables globules du sang banlieusard que pompe sans répit le coeur urbain" (p. 103).[38] The city is the heart while he remains at the periphery. At the end, however, he grows to become himself an organism which can subsume the city: "j'aurai bientôt les veines chargées de ton poison, Paris" (p. 391).[39] The confrontation of individual and city has given way here to a dissolution of the individual inside the city, a deconstruction that yields a new way of living in Paris and in the world. This narrator no longer clings to the humanistic values which insist on his uniqueness; he does not, like Revel, desperately resist his dispersal but is content to spread himself all over the city when it will let him do so. All he does is for Paris, as indicated by "c'est pour toi, pour toi," a refrain reminiscent of a love song. "Tous les voyages que je fais dessinent ta palpitation" (p. 391),[40] he says. It is to discover relations between Paris and other places that the journey is made and the book written. As a result, both the self and the image of the city are profoundly altered: not only is self defined in relation to other, but the boundaries between self and other are dissolved. The mythic cycle of death and rebirth, so familiar in Butor's work, takes on a more literal and momentous significance here, as the end of *Où* begins to suggest a fluid and flexible form of selfhood. Significantly, that transformation takes place in Paris and not across the ocean.

The "I" of *Où* traces not an introspective but an expansive movement; after the acceptance of the collective in *Mobile,* it was essential for Butor to return to Paris, to the self, in order to gauge the process of change involved in such an acceptance. The autobiographical "I," moreover, represents a further liberation from the conventions of fiction and from the division of the central subject in the fictional text between author and character. Even if that dis-

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[38]"I am one of those innumerable cells of suburban blood pumped incessantly by the urban heart."

[39]"Soon my veins will be charged with your poison, Paris."

[40]"All the trips I take outline your palpitation."

tinction is not always clear and neat, it provides a grip on the individual subject which here has become more conflated and therefore more diffuse. And yet, when Butor assembled the separately published texts about Korea and Cambodia, Santa Barbara and Utah, and the fragments about Mount Sandia, he added to them a beginning, a center, and an end: the texts about Paris. He thereby made it possible to recuperate his text, to trace the progression I have just outlined. A progression toward deconstruction is still a progression, a movement toward decentralization implies the strong presence of a center. We still find within *Où* the same dialectic that characterized *L'Emploi,* the same resistance to the self's dissolution.

Matière de rêves and the two subsequent volumes that have appeared so far, *Second Sous-sol* (1976) and *Troisième dessous* (1977), take a microscopic look at the form of selfhood suggested in the Paris section of *Où*. Through the narration of dreams, these volumes explore the inner spaces and contours of that self and, as the titles indicate, its layers of depth. Throughout Butor's work, dreams have played an important role as vehicles of personal cognition and insight. Yet dreams are also links between self and community; on the level of dream every individual experience becomes a collective one, as the boundaries of individual selfhood vanish. As the surrealists have suggested, dream narration is at once the most individual and the most collective of literary forms.

The dreams recounted in these three volumes are all dreams of continual metamorphosis and transmutation. The self is no longer a fixed entity. In "Le rêve de l'huître,"[41] for example, Michel Butor, a French writer who travels to lecture in unnamed exotic spaces meets with various misfortunes that rob him first of his clothes and identification papers, then of his body and his human identity. Different imposters replace him as he is reduced to menial and degraded positions. While taking on one shape after another—that of a poor hermit, a black man, various land and sea animals—he never forgets his primary identity and continually struggles to re-attain it. Besides constant metamorphosis, he participates in a process of expansion and generation by enjoying sexual relations with various well-known fictional characters and engendering their daughters. He is thereby able to project himself into the work of other writers, and the dream

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[41] "The Oyster Dream"; all translations from *Matière de rêves* are my own.

text merges with the books that are on the shelf of the dreamer's room. During the dream, his body is emptied and refilled. He shrinks to the size of an oyster at one moment, and grows to the limits of the universe the next. Various animals build their nests inside him. The desire for the world is ultimately rewarded by possession. As in *Où,* the relationship between self and world is one of erotic love and desire:

Je grandis; mon double corps entoure ces jambes; bientôt cela me fait deux jambes à moi aussi, et les anneaux de mon corps autour de sa poitrine se divisent en deux bras où poussent deux mains qui la palpent. Ses vêtements éclatent. Nous grandissons. La chapelle éclate; nous en écartons les débris commes les écailles d'une huître. "Je t'aime, je t'aime." Nous tenons toute une vallée; tous les animaux nous regardent, le soleil monte. . . . "Adieu, adieu multiple regard qui t'es appelé Michel Butor; va par le monde, il est temps!" Je deviens fleuve et me précipite vers la mer. (*Matière de rêves,* pp. 37–38)[42]

As river flows into ocean, the singular self merges into a larger community.

The self evoked in these early dreams is at once fluid and solid, fluid enough to mold itself to almost any shape, yet always solid enough to remember its bare primary identity (name, nationality, profession). Like Proust's bottle in the Vivonne, it could be said to be made out of solid water or liquid crystal. In the second and third volumes of *Matière,* however, even these boundaries disappear. As the "I" of the dream encounters another figure whose name is Michel Butor, all distinctions between the pronouns used, *je, tu, il, nous,* vanish. In fact, the dreamer merges with the very dream text at several points: he reads the story of his dream as it is written on his own body, in one instance; in another, his body turns into the pages of the book and his blood flows into the letters on the page.

The dream text flows continuously from one focus to another; there are no distinct units here, no interruptions or disjunctions.

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[42]"I'm growing; my double body surrounds these legs; soon that gives me two legs also, and the rings of my body around her chest divide into two arms which grow two hands which feel her. Her clothes burst. We grow. The chapel bursts; we discard its debris like the shells of an oyster. 'I love you, I love you.' We hold an entire valley; all the animals look at us, the sun rises. . . . 'Farewell, farewell multiple glance whose name was Michel Butor; go into the world, it is time!' I become a river and rush toward the ocean."

These structures that are repeated at regular intervals merely serve to punctuate the flow: the dream could begin or end anywhere. As the various dreams refer to each other, to Butor's earlier work and to that of other writers, the text's capacity for expansion becomes as endless as that of the self. Facing these limitless transformations, the reader must make greater adjustments—just as the dreamer must learn to get along without limbs at one moment and with myriad insect legs the next. It is no longer a question of piecing fragments together, of charting, deciphering, choosing, organizing. In one sense, the reader might be said to have a more passive role here than in *Mobile* because here he follows the text linearly. But the line has disappeared; it is no longer an apt metaphor for a text that totally violates our notions of beginning, end, and progression. In *Le Plaisir du texte,* Barthes describes the reader/subject's role in such a generative text: "Perdu dans ce tissu, cette texture, le sujet s'y défait telle une araignée qui se dissoudrait elle-même dans les secretions constructives de sa toile" (p. 101).[43] The dreams, of course, are not remembered but created, or recreated, in the very texture, in the very process of their narration.

Comparing the role of the subject in the dream texts and in Butor's autobiography—*Portrait d'un artiste en jeune singe,* about half of which is composed of dream narratives—demonstrates the extremity toward which *Matière* moves. *Portrait* is a journey of growth and discovery, an outward journey to Germany and an inward journey to the narrator's personal and cultural past, to his and his culture's unconscious and irrational dreams and desires. The aim and the result of the journey is also a transmutation of the self, a *Bildung* from which the narrator would emerge as an artist. Yet the metamorphosis into the *jeune singe* is only a metaphorical one, the references to other texts are only allusions, and the alchemical process which is at the basis of the transformation implies that the fragments of selfhood will eventually be assembled into a whole, the personality of the artist. *Matière,* in contrast, rests on a process of dissolution and explosion of the whole into fragments.

Whereas in *Portrait* the dream chapters are interspersed between accounts of the narrator's daytime pursuits, *Matière* has lost contact with daytime reality. The day merely offers material for the

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[43] "The subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web" (*The Pleasure of the Text,* p. 64).

transformative process of the dream; it is no longer represented within the text. The almost limitless freedom of these dreams brings with it fears of destruction as well as promises of possession. The self evoked here undergoes expansion to the point of being threatened with extinction.

The metamorphoses of *Matière* bring us back to earlier texts. They enact, on a personal level, the multiplicity celebrated in *Mobile*; they suggest the emotional expansion that accompanies Butor's desire for the world in *Où*; they adumbrate what it might mean to absorb and subsume Paris within one's own body. Can the human body, can the human psyche survive such expansion, we might ask? And, by extension, can the literary text survive such explosion?

Reading Butor's work involves a radical reorientation of ourselves and of our place in the world: the reading process reveals a new vision of that world even while recognizing our dependence on old habits. In a world whose meanings are multiple and heterogeneous, complex and contradictory—in a world that, therefore, demands to be charted—the act of reading remains the only legitimate individual activity, Butor implies. Butor's texts provide us with corollaries and analogues to the experiences we encounter daily. Butor is amazed that people find his texts difficult; certainly they could not be more confusing and heterogeneous than a Paris metro station, he has said! The reader who makes his way through a Butor work, as one might walk through a cathedral or a city, a museum or an amusement park, coping with fragmentation and disjunction, contradiction and illogic, is, as Barthes suggests in *Le Plaisir du texte,* a hero in the adventures of our culture.

Dartmouth College