

An Interview with Michel Butor

Author(s): Marianne Hirsch and Michel Butor

Source: *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 3, After the Nouveau Roman: Opinions and Polemics (Summer, 1978), pp. 262-279

Published by: University of Wisconsin Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208270>

Accessed: 18-07-2019 15:20 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*University of Wisconsin Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Contemporary Literature*

## AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHEL BUTOR

*Conducted and translated by Marianne Hirsch*

“For me writing is a spinal column,”<sup>1</sup> said Michel Butor in 1959 at the height of his success as a new novelist. (*L’Emploi du temps* was published in 1956, *La Modification* in 1957, and *Degrés* in 1960.) This statement still applies today after Butor has abandoned the novel to write essays, *études*, dialogues, illustrations, a capriccio, a radio play, a stereophonic study, an anecdote for the cinema, and an opera. Throughout these various formal metamorphoses, however, his writings remain personal quests for knowledge and discovery, literally guidebooks for survival in a multifarious and fragmented modern reality.

Unlike the writers of *Minuit* and *Tel Quel* who continue to classify their texts as “novels,” adding “new,” “new new,” or even “new new new” in order to call attention to the contradiction between their deconstructive activity and the traditional novel, Butor uses generic classifications that are as descriptive as they are accurate. Seeking structures which correspond to current geographic, social, and political phenomena, he is convinced that new forms will enable us to see, perhaps to create, new worlds.

Butor’s formal experiments with open and mobile forms of narrative, mixed media, alphabetical order, discontinuous layout, and multiple typography resemble those of his contemporaries. For example, a recent Butor text looks much like a Roche and even demands similar kinds of reader participation. Yet while the writers of the new and the new new novel are generally known for their creation of hermetic and self-reflexive verbal worlds which explore, through formal play, the possibilities of literary discourse, Butor’s work distinguishes itself by its representational impulse, by the im-

---

<sup>1</sup>“Intervention à Royaumont,” *Répertoire* (Paris: Minuit, 1960), p. 272 (my translation).

portance of the referent, and by the consciousness of speaking to and about an extratextual reality. In Butor's view of literature as an instrument of knowledge about the world, formal (re)search and innovation are necessarily motivated by the needs of representation.

The impulse toward representation and inclusiveness has led to continual expansion in the work of Butor and accounts for the encyclopedic techniques he has developed, as well as for his interest in multiple authorship and in the interrelation of places discovered through travel. Well known as a critic and teacher of literature, Butor reads and uses the work of other writers as a ground on which to continue building. It is the conjunction of text and world that interests him, the manner in which others have chosen to represent reality, and the possibility of adding to or of correcting their vision. From more common forms of intertextuality such as allusion, quotation, and the description of art works, Butor has moved to actual collaboration, thus profiting from the expanded and perhaps more accurate vision of several individuals.

In his effort to include in each text as full and varied a vision as he can, Butor makes of his texts worlds to be explored like cities and cathedrals.<sup>2</sup> Each text exists in space as well as in time; the book is an object, the page a tableau. Strict rules ranging from the realms of biology to those of mathematics govern the organization of each text. As if eager to free the work from the control of its creator, Butor experiments with effects of chance. Each text is a place to discover, a labyrinth in which to find one's way, a storehouse of information. The act of reading thus duplicates the act of discovery, the quest that each work enacts. Butor's realism is based on analogy: to learn to read his books, that is, to participate in their creation, is to succeed in orienting oneself in a complex and heterogeneous environment not unlike the world in which we live. Butor's texts thus become true guidebooks.

Butor's fascination with places is due to his sense that they need to be discovered and written about. "The world, both in its totality and in its details, is a cipher,"<sup>3</sup> he once said, and for him literary creation is an act of deciphering and illumination. To discover the world in its totality is to trace relationships between individual units,

---

<sup>2</sup>See "Recherches sur la technique du roman," *Répertoire II* (Paris: Minuit, 1964), p. 98.

<sup>3</sup>"Le point suprême et l'âge d'or à travers quelques oeuvres de Jules Verne," *Répertoire*, p. 134 (my translation).

an essentially structuralist project. Throughout his works, Butor experiments with relationships between individuals, between individuals and groups, among groups, as well as with relationships between texts and between texts and worlds. Hence his continued and special interest in America, the seat of cultural multiplicity.

Butor's work is now in what might be identified as a third stage. His early works, the novels *Passage de Milan* (1954), *L'Emploi du temps*, *La Modification*, and *Degrés*, are centered on individuals and their defeat by an overwhelming environment. Then, with *Mobile* (1962), *Réseau aérien* (1962), *Description de San Marco* (1963), and *6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde* (1965), the focus shifts to the interaction of groups made up of nameless, repetitious, stereotyped individuals who, together, are better able to master the environment. A celebration of the multiplicity that equates humans, artifacts, natural objects, and places has replaced the anthropocentric values so desperately upheld by the characters encountered in the novels. In the most recent works of Butor's third stage, *Où* (1971), *Illustrations IV* (1976), *Matière de rêves* (1975), *Second sous-sol* (1976), and *Troisième dessous* (1977), the individual has mysteriously returned, but not until after the firmness of selfhood has been shattered, dispersed, and absorbed by the setting. There is in Butor's work an expansive movement out to the world. His settings range from Paris to the Mediterranean, from America to the entire Northern Hemisphere. Although the individual self is no more than a crossroads where various geographic, political, and social forces meet, the depths of the self continue to be explored through dream, fantasy, and imagination.

Butor's texts themselves follow the movement from individual to group in their format. The individual novels and "spatial poems" have increasingly given way to serial works, such as *Répertoire I-IV*, Butor's series of essays, and *Illustrations I-IV*, which are collections of short texts originally published as verbal illustrations of visual art works. In addition, the early *Le Génie du lieu* has been transformed into a series by the publication of *Où*, *Le Génie du lieu II*, to be followed by a third volume. Most recently, *Matière de rêves* has initiated a new series which will be composed of five volumes.

As some of Butor's shorter texts are republished or anthologized in different collections, they are renewed by their interaction with other texts. Similarly, the works of other authors are metamorphosed when they appear in Butor's texts. As his ordering of the issue of *L'Arc* devoted to his work demonstrates,<sup>4</sup> he is particularly fasci-

---

<sup>4</sup>*L'Arc*, No. 39 (1969).

nated by the organization of each of his books. To place Butor in this collection of essays devoted to the new new novel should create a renewal full of just such surprises and insights.

The following interview was conducted in French in May 1976 at Butor's villa, "Aux Antipodes," in Nice. Michel Butor speaks slowly and deliberately. His comments, interspersed with "eh bien," "alors," "si vous voulez," are often punctuated by a final "voilà." Butor has a loud and contagious laugh. Friendly, helpful, and relaxed, he visibly enjoys talking about himself and his work.

*Q.* Your work is thought of as unusually innovative and you once said that formal research and invention are the *sine qua non* of a greater realism.<sup>5</sup> Do you feel that your continued interest in innovation constitutes a criticism of traditional forms?

*A.* Yes, in the sense that such innovation shows that it is possible to do something other than what was done before. At a given moment there are forms which are imperialistic, which pretend to be the only ones possible; novels are written like this, say, or drama like that. There is no use looking for anything else because we have found it. When we do something different, it shows that something different is possible and, consequently, these forms which presented themselves as the only ones are no longer the only possible ones. This difference allows us to see why, at a particular moment, these forms were chosen instead of those. If there is only one way of writing, there is no problem. We often have the idea (it was the idea of our ancestors) that, of course, there are many ways of writing but there is only one that is right, that formerly there were nothing but primitives, savages. And then, little by little, the true way of painting, the real manner of writing were found and that was it—except, of course, that there was always the possibility of falling back into barbarism. Thus, from the moment one shows that there are other possibilities, one forces questions to be asked. One begins to ask oneself why the people of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, were obliged to write their tragedies in alexandrines. They didn't ask this question. For them it was obvious: this was what they had to do. For us today it is an oddity; it seems a bit crazy.

*Q.* Is it your goal to find forms to correspond to our world today?

---

<sup>5</sup>See "Le roman comme recherche," *Répertoire I*, p. 9.

A. Of course, among other things, that's it, because the old forms force us to see things a certain way and prevent us from understanding a very great number of things. So, it is not a matter of substituting a new classicism for a preceding one. No, it is a matter of arriving at a much more mobile and open conception of literature.

Q. And yet, in your work you utilize many other authors; your work is truly intertextual. Would you stress the continuity between your work and what comes before it, or is there a break here? How does innovation fit in this context?

A. I am, above all, sensitive to the continuity, but it is a continuity in which certain adventures take place. I see literature as a fabric, but it is a fabric that twists and turns and makes knots. I may be at the place of a knot.

Q. If we speak of what has come to be called intertextuality, it seems that you are trying to arrive at a new conception of authorship, one that involves a composite of several authors. Are you trying to eliminate the single author?

A. I cannot totally eliminate the notion of authorship; that is impossible, that is a wrong way of expressing oneself, to speak of eliminating the author. But the notion of author changes considerably from the moment one becomes conscious of the fact that a text is never the result of a single author, that there is always a collective author. This collective author is, first, language—society and language—and all a writer can do is to work within a language even if he transforms it considerably. This is absolutely basic. Thus, a writer expresses not only personal thoughts or feelings, but also what is in the language; he shows the possibilities of the language and makes it evolve. And then, let us say that there is an individual who writes, who prepares a manuscript for a publisher: that is the author. But he always works on a collective ground which is the ground of language. Between that ground and this last manipulator who prepares the manuscript for a publisher, there can be all sorts of intermediaries. There can be collaborations, naturally, where other writers or other artists intervene; and then this relation of the language and the author can focus itself through the intermediary of a certain number of authors who are individualized. This is what happens when there are quotations in all the different shapes they can take—either the literal quotation, or, of course, parody, transformation, allusion.

Q. And yet it seems to me that this notion of the collectivity of authorship fascinates and preoccupies you even more than other contemporary writers and I would like to know why.

A. I am particularly conscious of this phenomenon because I am myself a teacher of literature.

Q. And what about the notion of literary genre? On the one hand, you clearly go beyond all the genres we still consider canonical, and on the other hand, you consistently define your works in generic terms. Do you see some of the generic notions you use, the “illustration” for instance, as a new genre or as a personal form, unique to you?

A. There are two levels here. I believe very strongly in the notion of genre because, at a given moment, literature particularizes itself into a certain number of functions; each genre corresponds to such a function, to a social ceremony. That is the reason for rules in the first place. But the genres generally taught in literary studies correspond, on the whole, to the literature of the mid-nineteenth century. They embody a conception of genre that was based mostly on French literature of the mid-nineteenth century and that is adapted, as well as possible, to the literature of other countries and of other periods. So, this classification is well suited only to a certain period. It has immense shortcomings as far as our period is concerned, because it actually prevents us from seeing a great many aspects of contemporary literature.

The genres that are used today are not those taught at the university. The radiophonic text,<sup>6</sup> for example, is something entirely new which is linked to a new technology that gave rise to an extremely important social ceremony—listening to the radio. I will not even mention television. From the point of view of general ethnography, Westerners are people who, every day, at given periods of time, are seated in front of it, and nothing, or almost nothing, will disturb this kind of prayer. So, the texts that are made for these technologies are of a very different nature than those made for the theater, for example, and yet they are still defined and studied according to an old generic classification. Thus, it is extremely important today to delineate the genres that are currently active and to abstract their rules. We must study the genres used today in opposition to the older

---

<sup>6</sup>See Butor's radio play *Réseau aérien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

classification to see the weight of ancient structures and the blinding they can cause.

And then there is something else as well, a second level. It is not enough to determine which genres function today. It becomes a matter of seeing if it would not be possible to invent something else—that is, invent forms which would end up generating social ceremonies other than those which function today. These would lead, eventually, to a much more profound social transformation than, say, elections within a given political system. The “illustrations” are things I propose; others can adopt them or transform them.

*Q.* What interests me very much in your work is the abandonment of narrative. . .

*A.* The abandonment of narrative, what do you mean by that?

*Q.* You wrote novels, but since *Degrés* you have not written anything that might be called a novel.

*A.* Yes, but that does not prevent me from writing narrative—a kind of narrative that is, however, organized differently.

*Q.* Is your departure from the novel form an implied criticism, a break?

*A.* Oh no, the great novelists of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries fascinate me. I read them, study them, and teach courses about them. They brought about considerable transformations in their time. We must continue in the same vein, transforming that which precedes us. I don't believe in innovation for its own sake. I don't just try to do something because it looks new. It is by doing things other than my predecessors did that I do the same thing they did. It is precisely by trying to do what they were doing that I am forced to do otherwise, because of the difficulties I encounter, you see.

For example, I plan to spend two months in Australia this summer. I have already gone to Australia twice, and it is a country that fascinates me. I can explain why, a little, but not well. In talking about Australia, I must succeed in showing why this country fascinates me, but for the moment I still don't know how. When I first went to the United States, I did not at all think that I would write a book like *Mobile*. I thought that I would speak of America as I had spoken of the Mediterranean cities in *Le Génie du lieu*. In fact, when



I was first in the United States at Bryn Mawr College, they asked me to write a piece for the Bryn Mawr *Alumnae Bulletin*. I wrote something I have never anthologized since. It is called “Première vue de Philadelphie,”<sup>7</sup> and is very much in the style of the first *Génie du lieu*. The longer I stayed, the more I realized that it just did not hold, that I had to find something different. This realization produced *Mobile* and subsequent books. Well, for Australia I still have to find the means of saying what I have not been able to say, because the literature about Australia is quite limited. There is one interesting Australian writer, Patrick White, who writes very beautiful Australian books; and then there is D. H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* and a very nice travelogue by Mark Twain, but that’s all, and these works don’t express anything; they repeat.

*Q.* And yet in your book about Niagara you don’t attempt any new description of the falls; you simply use that of Chateaubriand.

*A.* Yes, I use Chateaubriand’s description precisely because it is something very, very classical, but the transformations that I impose on this text result in a description that is totally new. That description is what I want because, in my text, the water flows; in Chateaubriand’s it doesn’t.

*Q.* You make it flow *in* Chateaubriand’s text. That is the remarkable thing about *6 810 000 litres d’eau par seconde*.

*A.* Yes, and in the existing descriptions of Australia the desert is not red. . . . So I want to write a third *Génie du lieu*. I have been thinking about it for years; it is vital to me that there be texts about the Southern Hemisphere. There will be a text about Australia and one about Brazil.

*Q.* And Africa?

*A.* I have never been in black Africa, although I know Northern Africa quite well. And yet I would like to include in this volume a text that will not be a travel text, and which will be called “Jungle.” It will be a kind of forest with descriptions of animals moving around in it. And that will replace Africa.

*Q.* Will it be like Conrad’s jungles?

---

<sup>7</sup>Reprinted in *Les Lettres Nouvelles* (Dec. 1960), pp. 153–55.

A. No, it will be rather like the jungles of the painters, like le Douanier Rousseau's jungles.

Q. An imaginary jungle then?

A. Yes.

Q. You write about places. Have you ever written about places you have not visited or about imaginary places?

A. No—they are in the dreams, of course, but otherwise, no. I have always written about the places I have visited.

Q. The United States seems to be a special place for you. Why?

A. For two reasons. First, because it is the most powerful country in the world by far and for many years to come. It is a country that has today an incredible power of cultural diffusion. It is a country which is in a privileged position; that is a fact, but Europe has had difficulty accepting it. In France, the picture of the French street has been completely transformed by an imitation of America, completely. Secondly, it is the country where I have lived longest outside of France. If I add up all my visits, I have lived there nearly four years. There is no other country through which I have traveled as extensively.

Q. I think America is a country that is difficult to know for a European. Has your vision of America changed very much since you wrote *Mobile*?

A. Not very much. What has changed is America itself. It has developed in the photographic sense, like a negative that develops. There are many things that were not very apparent fifteen years ago, and which have become more and more visible. *Mobile* surprised many people when it was published; now it no longer does. There are many things in the book that Americans have become aware of in these last few years, which means that the evolution of the United States has actually confirmed the book. Nevertheless, there would be many new things to say, of course.

Q. The value you place on knowledge in your works has always intrigued me. In *Mobile* and the other books written in the early 1960s (*Réseau aérien*, *Description de San Marco*, *6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde*), the knowledge of our surroundings becomes the

basis for a collective vision, and what you just said about *Mobile* demonstrates the important role that literature plays in this communal awareness. And yet recently you speak more about the writer's solitude. In *Illustrations IV*, you use the expression "more solitary than a writer."

A. The two are not mutually exclusive. We said before that the writer is not the only author of his work. He is a kind of point of coagulation, a knot in the social and linguistic fabric. But it is the fact that he is a single point, as they say in mathematics, that makes a difference, and that difference is painful. Even while writing for others, the writer feels isolated. He speaks for others; not only does he address himself to others, but he also succeeds in saying what others would like to say. But this function makes him solitary. It is because one suffers more than others that one begins to write, in order to find a means of expressing that suffering. It is because one is at the center that one is alone. And it is because one is at the center that one is marginal. You see, there are many metaphors one can reverse, but it is this very solitude that allows society to change through the writer.

Q. In your novels you repeatedly dramatize the sacrifice of the individual seeker. In the books after *Mobile*, however, that sacrifice is avoided as knowledge becomes collective and more open.

A. Yes, yes. One of the purposes of these forms is to make things less tragic, to find happiness in all this; and thus, let us say, the writer is no longer the only victim.

Q. Knowledge for you is always knowledge of the outside world, and it is always knowledge that serves others. Never does it become exclusively self-knowledge; never is the outside world absorbed to enrich the self. Is that what distinguishes you from other international writers like Henry James, for example?

A. Yes, these are two sides of the same coin. If you imagine the self as a sort of container, then it is obvious that you cannot put everything in it. That would be gluttony.

Q. Do you see the notion of the self changing as a result of the kind of knowledge gained in your books?

A. It is not only the self that changes, but it is also the conception we have of the self, the conception of what it means to say "I," that is

changing. Perhaps psychoanalytic notions could help us here, if we use them with caution.

A new conception of the self is not separate from a new conception of society. There is a point which is very important to me—the decentralization of today's world. Formerly, the Western civilizations imagined that the world was organized around a center, and since Rome, that center has always been a city. In France this idea is particularly strong; we cannot get rid of the opposition between Paris and the provinces. The French just cannot understand that Paris is no longer the center of the world. Paris has, of course, been the center of France for a very long time, since the seventeenth century, and it has been maintained so with a violence that has never existed anywhere else. And this Paris, center of France, dreamt itself center of the world; and it almost came to be that, first with Napoleon, then in the first half of the twentieth century with Paris, center of the arts, Paris, capital of painting, etc. Well, that is finished. It does not work any longer. One of the things that interests me so much about the United States is its nomadic side. People move much more easily. Not only are communications easier, but there is a kind of life in the car; people bring their houses with them. That fascinates me. There are dreams of imperial cities in the United States as well. New York, the Empire City, and then Washington, the dream of a Roman city. How prodigious! They even needed a Frenchman for that. In addition to a capitol, they needed an obelisk which was the most Egyptian of obelisks since ancient Egypt. It is not only the obelisk of the city Washington, but also of the man Washington, of a deified man. It is extraordinary, fascinating. There are fascinating phenomena of centralization to study in the United States, but there is also all the rest, all this great movement, this great nomadic life—very instructive for the French to study.

*Q.* And you yourself have chosen not to live in the center.

*A.* I live in Nice because I want to be at the periphery. I need it. I need to be at the frontier, to be perpetually elsewhere. Centralization in France is just terrible.

*Q.* There has been a lot of criticism of American mobility in recent years. People have no roots.

*A.* Well, people have roots, but with a difference. There is a system of roots which is much more supple. We can imagine an

outline for a spatial organization that is much more interesting than the radiating organization I have just described, and it is the only one which allows us to imagine peace on earth. As long as there are centers to attack, there can be no peace. And that is where we still are: we say Washington and Moscow, for example, and yet we can well conceive that in the United States, in Russia, and in China new organizations will be developed wherein there would be a balance of points in a much more supple network. Communications would be much facilitated by the fact that one wouldn't always have to go through a central point.

*Q.* You spoke of this in connection with the self, and that is very important, isn't it?

*A.* Yes, it is all related, of course; it is our relation with the other. We still have an imperialist conception of the self, whereas we could well see ourselves as elements in a pattern in which others are just as important as we are.

*Q.* Don't we lose something in doing that? Isn't it painful to give up that individuality, that interior depth?

*A.* We lose only illusions. There are still things we don't say to others, that we don't tell ourselves, and that creates depth. But depth is not only interior, it is exterior as well. The others also have depth.

*Q.* I would like to come back to the importance of formal research in relation to that of representation in your work. Jean Roudaut, for instance, has said that your books must be read as a series of transformations imposed on an initial formal plan.<sup>8</sup> Many other critics as well emphasize the formal plan in your work (e.g., André Helbo's recent book *Michel Butor: Vers une littérature du signe*).<sup>9</sup> I feel, on the contrary, that unlike many other new or new new novelists, you are very much concerned with representation, and that formal research works in the service of representing reality.

*A.* The two are inseparable. You can emphasize one or the other, but you fail to understand anything if you forget one or the

---

<sup>8</sup>Jean Roudaut, "Parenthèse sur la place occupée par l'étude intitulée *6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde* parmi les autres ouvrages de Michel Butor," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, 28, No. 165 (Dec. 1966), 500.

<sup>9</sup>Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1975.

other. Formal research for its own sake is no longer interesting. If you emphasize the formal side of the new novel exclusively, you get things that are interesting and absurd at the same time, like those of Ricardou, for instance. The way in which he speaks of things is at once very ingenious and entirely wrong.

*Q.* There is an emptiness there . . .

*A.* It is not entirely empty because even though it is superficial, the surface itself is rich—it is deep, one could say. One can go on finding things at the surface indefinitely, only touching a small part of the subject. And, similarly, if you wanted to study only the content without paying attention to the manner in which it is presented, you would find only platitudes.

*Q.* Would you agree that the difference between you and the other new and new new novelists is precisely this impulse to represent an external reality?

*A.* Of course, I am very different from the others. There are points of coincidence, of convergence, but it seems to me that I am very much alone, to come back to something we spoke about a little while ago.

*Q.* In a recent interview you said: “My entire work is representation, even if the density of transformations, the generalization of processes prevents us in certain cases from seeing what could thus be represented.”<sup>10</sup> What are these transformations?

*A.* You can cut something into many small pieces, paste them together differently, put on another coat of paint, and the result is very different from the original. That is immaterial, since, as I have said in several other places, it is representation not only of that which exists, but also of that which does not exist. And the two are equally important. Dreams, desires, etc., are part of reality because reality is a trap door: it is not full, it does not even exist in the usual sense of the word. It is something which exists and does not exist at the same time, and the holes are as important as the solid parts. I look for the holes, for that which hides and that which we desire without knowing it. Thus all my books are dreams, but they are not dreams of me, they

---

<sup>10</sup>Helbo, p. 11 (my translation).

are dreams of reality. Others dream my dreams. I am only their scribe, their typewriter.

*Q.* Would you say that your works are very personal?

*A.* They are personal in the sense that they are different from those that were written previously, but that is not an individual quality that ends with me. I am not interested in myself. I am interested in myself only as an instrument, just as to do certain things I have to know how to use my typewriter. In the same way I have to know how to use myself, my family, my four daughters—none of this is unimportant. So I write with my daughters. I write with my head, with my hands, with my typewriter, but also with my daughters. I write with this dog.<sup>11</sup> All this is related. This means that there can be more and more autobiographical notions when I write, because that locates me as a writer. Not everyone has four daughters. For readers it can be interesting to see that the person who produces the book has four daughters. When you have four daughters there are certain things you see that you do not see when you have three daughters, and vice versa.

*Q.* You say that water flows in your book and indeed it does; the wind blows, and so on. Would it be possible to use the notion of imitation instead of, or in addition to, representation to describe this phenomenon?

*A.* Oh, yes. There is imitation of reality, imitation of other writers. I would like to compete with certain things—with other authors, for example. Often, when I read something, I would like to write as well as that. And then, I want to compete with painting, music, also with the sea, with clouds, with locomotives.

*Q.* I would like to come back to the development of your work. The novels (the works called “Romanesque I”)<sup>12</sup> are structured in a rather traditional manner, with a single point of view: a subject who is revealed as insufficient and who is sacrificed so as to be integrated into a larger, collective vision. That sacrifice is painful for the subject, who gives up his central place to become no more than a medium. In the books associated with *Mobile*, which have been

---

<sup>11</sup>Jonas, Butor’s dog, was present and barking throughout our conversation.

<sup>12</sup>*Passage de Milan, L’Emploi du temps, La Modification, Degrés.*

grouped under the category of “Romanesque II,”<sup>13</sup> something new is announced, a celebration of a new existence within a collective—collective dreams, a collective identity. A new epistemology and a new writing are part of this, and the self as we know it is surpassed. In more recent books, in contrast, the self returns, narrative returns, and the deciphering of space becomes more and more frustrating and difficult. How do you account for this return to the self?

A. In these recent books there is, in fact, a return to the self, but with a great novelty. That self has a name; it is called Michel Butor. This is really different, because when you write a novel, you write so as not to say your name. You say, “I am giving you this but I am not the one who is saying it. You cannot challenge me on this because it is Ivan Karamazov, it is Louis Lambert who says this, not I.” In my last books there is a situation in which an individual, Michel Butor, says “I am the one who is saying this.” Amid all of the collective givens (phonebooks, dictionaries), the manipulator of these elements can be identified because of such and such a particular sign; just as inside a painting, the painter puts his portrait in a given place. You can sign with your own portrait. That is at a great distance from the first novel, where the transposed autobiographical character was very obvious, I think. Today I can say, pronounce, write the name Michel Butor as I could not at that time.

Q. And why?

A. I don’t know why. I was full of complexes and taboos and I still am, but my books have worked out some of them. So, there are things I can say today that I could not say ten or twenty years ago. And I can speak about myself differently. Here there is certainly an important evolution.

As for the place and the deciphering of the place—places are difficult to decipher at any rate, aren’t they? There are places which have, one might say, a clear historicity. They are historical places—there are documents, the work of other writers. That does not prevent them from being very complex. Let us take Delphi, for instance. We have Greek literature. But there are other places which tell you something, remind you of something, Mount Sandia, for example.

---

<sup>13</sup>*Mobile, Réseau aérien, Description de San Marco, 6 810 000 litres d’eau par seconde, Oŭ, Intervalle* (1973), as well as the first three *Illustrations* (1964, 1969, 1973).



Here there is no literature, or rather very little, because Sandia does figure in Indian legends and in guidebooks. That becomes much more difficult. The choice is not the same. In the first *Génie du lieu* we go around the Mediterranean. That is as cultural as you can get. In the second *Génie du lieu (Où)* we leave Europe. We still refer to Paris and all things in France, but we leave Europe. That poses very different problems, and with Australia it is even worse.

*Q.* Then you attribute the difference between the two *Génies* to the difference between the places you chose to visit in each?

*A.* Yes, and it would be tremendous if I could make the third book as different from the second as the second is from the first, but that would surprise me. That is what I would like, you see.

*Q.* Is there a great difference between “Romanesque II” and “Romanesque III”?

*A.* What do you mean by “Romanesque III”?

*Q.* Your most recent books certainly seem to announce a new stage: the self returns, narrative returns. The previous works seemed to have superseded all that. Is this a break, or do you see it as a logical development: the self returns, but it is situated within the collectivity announced in the sixties?

*A.* Yes, certainly it is totally logical. The second stage goes from *Mobile* to *Où*, and now with the latest *Illustrations*<sup>14</sup> and with *Matière de rêves* there is possibly a third stage, one which I see as more obscure. There is a great deal of obscurity in most of my books, but I strive to present myself with as clear a conscience as possible. It is obviously impossible to have a clear conscience in the case of obscurity, but I used to display clarity anyway, even if it was really, really difficult. Whereas with *Matière de rêves* I say that I no longer know what I am doing. I am still in control, but I take different risks.

*Q.* Here you speak of imaginary places, don't you? There is no longer an attempt to understand that which exists but, as you said, to penetrate that which does not.

*A.* Yes, of course, and it is all announced. There are many dreams in the novels, and *Mobile*, *6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde*,

---

<sup>14</sup>*Illustrations IV* (1976).

and other works of “Romanesque II” are full of dreams as well.

*Q.* But are not these collective, less individualized dreams clearer?

*A.* Yes, yes, but I don’t think that my recent books are difficult books, *Illustrations IV, Matière de rêves*. I have already finished the proofs of the second *Matière de rêves* called *Second sous-sol* and I have completed the manuscript for the third *Matière de rêves*, called *Troisième dessous*.<sup>15</sup> These books are more obscure, but I hope that they will be less difficult to read. I have never believed that my books are difficult to read.

*Q.* People find them quite difficult, you know.

*A.* Yes, yes, well I admit that, but I don’t believe that they are difficult. It’s not true.

*Q.* They are difficult, I think, because we are unwilling to abandon the central self, the individual, the particular. Isn’t there a risk in emphasizing, as you do, all that is general, collective? In *Mobile* you speak of what Americans have in common, not of what might distinguish an individual American. Isn’t there a risk, particularly in view of the book’s formal games, that your book will become a kind of Freedomland, a kind of Clifton’s Cafeteria, that it will imitate what is reprehensible about America? How do you avoid this risk?

*A.* I would say that these structures do produce the particular; that is how the particular comes to be. The particular American lives in Hanover, Indiana, buys his curtains at Sears, and dreams at night after turning off his television set. Besides this crowd there are small individualities that appear and this individualization is reinforced by the historical individuals (certain Indians, Jefferson, Carnegie, etc.). But, for instance, the way in which Jefferson appears destroys him as an individual. We see very well that, in fact, it is not he who speaks, but it is the rest of America which speaks through him. But he could not avoid saying certain things which appear monstrous to us today. Jefferson’s individuality, his talent, Monticello, are reversed in some way. The same thing happens to him as to all the others.

*Q.* What choice does your reader have? Does not this book, as

---

<sup>15</sup>Both volumes have since appeared, *Second sous-sol* in 1976 and *Troisième dessous* in 1977.

well as all the others, demand of the reader a very personal kind of response, an individual self-definition in relation to the book?

A. Yes, sometimes there are things that needle, things that are deliberately provocative and that cause the reader who circulates within the book as he would in Freedomland to become aware of what Freedomland is. That is the reason why this book leaves no one indifferent: the reactions to it are very violent.

Q. Could you tell me about your recent *Bicentenaire-Kit*?<sup>16</sup>

A. I will show it to you. I think it will amuse you. It is written for French readers who can afford such an object (F. 8800), for rich Frenchmen, therefore, who are fascinated by the United States and who play at being Americans. So the book sets itself up against this imitation of America, and it strives to make certain things scream. It must be read as a French book to get at its full irony. It is an irony whose object is the French imitators and, by way of them, America itself.

---

<sup>16</sup>Michel Butor and Jacques Monory, *USA76* (Paris: Ed. Philippe Lebaud, Club du livre, 1975). This "livre-objet" appeared in a limited edition of 300 copies. The blue plexiglass box contains a collection of objects, twenty serigraphs by Monory, and Butor's commentary. The text itself will be reprinted in the third *Génie du lieu: Boomerang*.