

Michel Butor's *La Modification*: The Revolution from Within

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Although Michel Butor has never been a political writer per se, he is very much a literary revolutionary for he believes deeply in the ability of a work of art to change man's place in society or society itself: "Toute oeuvre est engagée . . . plus elle est profondément inventive et plus elle oblige à un changement."¹ His collaboration with other artists is, in part, a clear example of his willingness to change the traditional boundaries that separate the different fields of artistic expression.

Butor's best known novel, *La Modification* (1957),² has obtained its comfortable position in the literary history as his contribution to the "new novel." Its success is due in part to its traditional format. It satisfies the general public with a character and a storyline that concludes; however, to the careful reader, it offers a more significant story that can remain completely unnoticed if not extracted from between the lines.

La Modification is a superb example of the contestation of a genre within that genre itself. It is the ultimate illustration of the true meaning of revolution—an uprising from within that drastically alters the status quo. The aim of our study is not to approach this work in light of the "new novel," but rather to give an insight into Butor's very clever way of revolutionizing the novel within the traditional format. Our attempt is twofold: to show in what way *La Modification* becomes "une oeuvre engagée," and to examine how Butor's literary revolution is accomplished from within without the application of outside theoretical considerations that are so often applied to this book to give it different interpretations.

It is well known that *La Modification* is the story of an initiation, but most studies have considered it to be Leon's understanding of the nature of his love for Cecile and, in turn, the realization of his relationship to Rome (see, e.g., Marian Grant, Michel Leiris, Justin O'Brien). We believe that it goes much deeper, in that Leon's initiation suggests a fundamental change in our attitudes concerning literary creation. This deeper modification becomes apparent through the study of what we call the "hors-d'oeuvre"—literally, things that are not always immediately relevant and essential to the storyline—and their relationship to the dream.

While on the train, Leon recalls his most recent return voyage from Rome, at which time he decides to visit the Louvre. After crossing the Pyramid St., passing the statues of the sons of Cain and the Arc de Triomphe de Carrousel, he notices the obelisk of the Place de la Concorde. These images mentioned just in passing, represent four motifs in the book that become significant. The pyramids and the obelisk symbolize a very interesting idea of death. The first represent a way of thought that did not consider death as an end but a beginning, a passage from one world to another. The second symbolizes not only life but creation, for it is erected

¹Michel Butor, *Répertoire III* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1968), p. 20.

²Michel Butor, *La Modification* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957). All references will be made in the text.

onto a hillock that is a copy of the "benben" upon which the first Egyptian creator-god Ptah had appeared. To all this is added the idea of victory by the arch. The statues of the sons of Cain connect death to a founding. In this way, victory and a new beginning are grouped along with death-creation symbolism. It may be argued that these images are grouped together by mere coincidence, but knowing Butor, the ideas suggested by them become much too important to be left at that.

Once inside, Leon goes through the Egyptian room and finds himself by the paintings of Panini, depicting the ancient and the catholic Rome. This juxtaposition of the old and the new becomes important in the novel, where the ruins of ancient Rome refuse to die. They are a continual reminder of the unending character of death. Their almost threatening force is like a constant warning of the perseverance of the dead to remain alive. By trying to represent the ruins, the artist breathes life into them and keeps them alive through repetition. Thus, the ruins become a regenerative force that give rise to the creative power of the artist and vice-versa.

The books read by Leon also share a common theme with the others: the volume of the works of Piranesi—an eighteenth century engraver whose efforts were directed towards keeping the spirits of the ruins alive; the letters of Julien the Apostate, a significant choice for he was the last emperor who tried to replace Christianity by paganism and thus revive something that was dead; the *Aeneid* which obviously illustrated not only the theme of initiation but of creation. In these works, we already have an indication of the role of the artist and the work of art.

Ostensibly, the books and monuments elucidate Leon's struggle between his religious insecurities and the reason for his attachment to Cecile and Rome; however, a different theme emerges and becomes intensified in the dream. Generally, Leon's dream has been equated to the descent of Aeneas to explain his hidden attraction to Rome as the center of the world. Some readers have established the possibility of it being also the Egyptian death journey (e.g. Mary Lydon, Dean McWilliams, Jennifer Waelti-Walters). The scope of this study does not allow a detailed examination of the dream, but a careful comparison does indeed show that its different stages correspond directly to the chapters of the *Book of the Dead*: the Hall of Judgement is strikingly similar to chapter 125; the times when the train enters the tunnels coincide directly with the fourth and fifth hours of the underworld where the vessel enters the body of the serpent; the boat in Leon's dream is described in terms of the train, "C'est une barque de métal, une épaisse masse de rouille, mais dont les bords sont clairs comme des rails, aiguïsés comme le tranchant d'une faux" (p.183). Even the physical setting of the dream resembles that of Egypt. The importance of this parallelism goes beyond the fact that the Egyptian death-journey is the arch-typical initiation that reinforces Leon's voyage of discovery. If connected to the other elements in the book, it clearly demonstrates a specific function in the novel that surpasses the mere initiation idea.

The boat that Leon embarks on in the dream is that of Ra which was the means to rebirth for the ancient Egyptian. It saved him from total annihilation. Leon's initiation is in essence into the true meaning of death, its concept according to Egyptian religion that considered it a fertile, reproductive passage. The Roman ruins that Leon prefers to visit symbolize this. What he realizes at the end is not that pagan Rome is more important than Christian Rome, but that it exists despite the latter's wish to cover it up.

All the elements examined thus far connect creation with death and depict it as a regenerative force. At this point, however, it is not clear what relationship they have to Leon as author, but the last remaining element clearly connects all of them to writing.

The purpose of Leon's dream becomes clear through the study of the other recurring theme in the novel—that of the book. It is overwhelmingly connected with Leon from the very beginning. Most chapters open and close with the mention of the book that he has bought in Paris. It seems, at first, to be both any book and a specific one. It is about something that interests him, but its title and contents do not seem important. They become molded slowly as we progress in the novel. Michel Leiris suggests that *La Modification* itself is the story of the genesis of the book.³ Jean Roudaut sees the book as remaining in the future.⁴ Both critics' interpretations can be incorporated into one. The book—*La Modification*—writes itself in that its contents emerge from the juxtaposition of all of Leon's thoughts; but in a more general sense, it remains to be written because, as we shall see, it is not a question of a specific book that Leon will write, but of any book.

We arrive at this understanding towards the end where the possibility of the dream being also the contents of a book is suggested. After the incident with the boatman, the dream is interrupted by Leon's remembrance of his and Cecile's voyage to Rome. There, in a single sentence, by the images used, Butor fuses the reality of the train with the dream and the book, then passes on to the dream again. Everything becomes part of the book. He repeats a sentence precisely as it appeared in the dream a few pages before: "Elle a refermé son livre que vous n'avez pas lu . . . où il pouvait être question d'un homme qui désirait aller à Rome et qui continuait sa navigation sous une fine pluie de goudron qui devenait de plus en plus blanc comme de la neige, de plus en plus sec comme des bribes de pages déchirées, non point vraiment couché dans sa barque de métal, mais sa tempe s'appuyant à la paroi verticale fraîche et polie comme une vitre, et qui sentit alors une odeur de fumée . . ." (pp.185-86). This last sentence is structurally an echo of the one just a few pages back where the character enters Sybil's cave: "Il tâte autour de lui pour trouver une surface plane où s'étendre, mais doit se contenter d'une encoignure où il s'installe, non point couché, mais la tempe s'appuyant sur une paroi verticale, sans doute une veine de marbre, fraîche et polie comme une vitre . . . il se met à sentir une odeur de fumée."⁵ A few pages later, the character in the dream realizes that he is looking for a book, "je suis à la recherche de ce livre que j'ai perdu parce que je ne savais même pas qu'il était en ma possession, parce que je n'avais pas même pris soin d'en déchiffrer le titre alors que c'était le seul bagage véritable que j'eusse importé dans mon aventure" (p.191). This response is very interesting because the book has never before been mentioned in the dream, but herewith, it not only finds itself in it but becomes its main feature. Why has it suddenly become his only luggage? It is at this point that our interpretation of the dream becomes more evident. In the Egyptian death-journey, the *Book of the Dead* is the most important object buried with the deceased for it contains the formulas that will enable him to reach the kingdom of Osiris. It is interesting to note that the book is always in Leon's left hand or on the left side. This apparently irrelevant detail can be explained through the dream, in that, for the ancient Egyptian, the left was closer to the heart and represented the conscience. The movement to clarify the dream intensifies at this point. Leon is imagining a book, the contents of which will be the same as that of the dream. The initiatory character of his voyage becomes clear and culminates here: "vous restituant vous-même à cette tranquille terreur, à cette émotion primitive où s'affirme avec tant de puissance et de hauteur, au-dessus des ruines de tant de mensonges, la passion de l'existence et de la vérité" (p.199). It is after this realization that the *il* changes back to *vous*.

³Michel Leiris, "Le Réalisme mythologique de Michel Butor," *Critique* (Feb. 1958), pp. 99-118.

⁴Jean Roudaut, *Michel Butor ou le livre futur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

⁵Butor, *La Modification*, pp. 176-77. For more examples, see pp. 99, 217, 219, and 221.

The merging of Leon's dream and the contents of the book is also shown stylistically through a close analysis of the syntax. Although, Leon's dream seems to be constantly interrupted by the comings and goings in the compartment, there exists a definite pattern that connects all of them together. There is one recurring paragraph spaced out throughout the entire dream. Basically, it has the same structure and subject-matter, but with certain adjectives and words altered. It is always about a man lost in a forest who is trying to find his way.⁶ The immediate function of this paragraph is to always summarize the apparently haphazard structure of the dream; but it also plays a much more significant role that becomes noticeable from part III, where, for the first time, the possibility of the dream being the contents of the book was suggested. The paragraph brings together two important aspects that had thus far remained apart. Before that, only the physical aspects of the book were mentioned. Sitting in the compartment, Leon looks at the back of the book "dont la couverture devient comme transparente, dont les pages blanches au-dessous, c'est comme si elles se feuilletaient d'elles-mêmes devant vos yeux, avec des lignes de lettres dont vous ne savez pas quels mots elles forment?" (p.165). The fact that the same story finds itself in the dream and in all the different types of books mentioned in *La Modification*, leads us to believe that the contents are not that of a particular book but of any book. Whether it is Leon's books or Cecile's, all of them share the basic story of voyage and initiation. Their contents are essentially parallel to the story in the *Book of the Dead*.

La Modification becomes the story of the making of an author. All the different "hors-d'oeuvre" examined, take us away from the surface plot and show us his hidden initiation. The importance of the ideas of death, creation, founding, and victory implied through the monuments, and the relationship between the author and the ruins through the works of art in the beginning of the book, become more meaningful when seen in light of the dream. They represent the essential qualities of a true author, one who is initiated into understanding the everlasting, creative energy concealed in death. Along with Leon, we the readers are introduced into the secrets of "authorship" and the gestation of a book, and in turn into a new understanding of their characteristics. The basic theme of every book is shown to be an initiatory voyage into the regenerative quality of death. The *Book of the Dead* was the means of rebirth for the ancient Egyptian, for it allowed him to become Osiris and thus be constantly reborn through sacrifice. In this way, death becomes a creative power. It is well worth remembering that Butor himself began writing his first novel only after his rebirth in Egypt.⁷

To simply establish the dream as paralleling the Egyptian nocturnal journey, without considering its relation to the rest of the elements examined, would not be sufficient in understanding its significance. We arrive at our conclusion not only through the analysis of the different "hors-d'oeuvre", but also through the sinuosities of the recurring sentences intertwined in the dream. This understanding of death, established in *La Modification*, along with the characteristically repetitious yet changing quality of Butor's sentence structure, become systematically used in his later works. Each of them treats the theme of regenerative death in one way or another and connects it to writing.

For Butor, a change in one's life is possible only through a change in one's knowledge and perception of the world. By unsettling our literary assumptions in *La Modification*, he already launches a revolution. It is a quiet revolution but a true one nonetheless that gains momentum and becomes more intense in his later works.

⁶Butor, *La Modification*, pp. 166, 169, 174, 193.

⁷For a more detailed study of Egypt's influence on Butor, see S. A. Chavdarian, "Michel Butor: the Text as Osiris," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly*, No. 1 (1985.), pp. 83-89.

Butor's books are like hieroglyphs that can be considered for their beauty—the surface plot—or deciphered to provide a much deeper meaning. They are a Rosetta stone waiting to be discovered. In this way, *La Modification* becomes the true example of the modern novel equally created by the author and reader. The revolution that began from within is completed from without through the very active and essential participation of the reader.