Reflection and Revelation in Michel Butor's *La Modification*

LARS G. WARME, *University of British Columbia*

In his prize-winning novel *La Modification*[1] Michel Butor presents a very simple story embedded in a highly complex structure. This becomes evident if we isolate the "plot" and rearrange the events in chronological order, extracting the skeletal facts around which the novel is built. In the process we gain an easier appreciation of the manner in which the author solves the technical problems of the novel, and we discover that the experimental narrative devices, which at first may seem baffling and gratuitous, in actual fact describe a psychoanalytical process through which the protagonist arrives at a new awareness.

The protagonist, Léon Delmont, marries Henriette some time in the thirties. His early fascination with Rome and Roman history makes them take their honeymoon trip to the Eternal City, the first visit for both of them. Léon's historical and artistic interests and Henriette's religious devotion make the trip a memorable one, and they promise to return. They spend their married life in Paris, and in the course of the years they have four children. Presumably it is Léon's interest in Rome that directs him to his employment as French sales representative for an Italian manufacturing firm of typewriters. The position ensures him a comfortable bourgeois existence, a prestigious apartment in Paris and monthly visits to Rome at company expense. As his relations with Henriette grow less affectionate and turn into polite indifference or silent resentment at her (and his own) signs of approaching middle age, and as his growing children become more and more like strangers to him, these trips to Rome become all-important, providing an escape from the tedium of married life. It is not until Léon is 41 that he yields to his wife's wishes to be taken along on one of his trips to Rome. The trip is a complete disappointment: the bleak and wintry city that makes Henriette come down with a cold stands in contrast to the spring-like magic of their honeymoon visit before the war. Two years later, when Léon is 43, during one of his monthly train journeys to Rome, he meets a young French-Italian widow, Cécile Darcella, at his table in the restaurant car. She is cultivated, intelligent, and beautiful, and she works at the French Embassy in Rome. At the end of the journey he gallantly offers her a ride in his taxi to her apartment; on a subsequent trip they have lunch together. She soon becomes his mistress. Léon sees in her a source of rejuvenation and of adventure, his enthusiasm for Rome finds a focal point in her, and together they explore the city with fastidious selectivity, savoring its moods and studying its historical periods and art treasures. At home in Paris Léon finds his married life increasingly unbearable, and he senses Henriette's suspicions and silent resentments, he himself resenting her for what he sees as her malicious martyrdom for the sake of their children and their marriage. His own enthusiasm for Rome is ironically contrasted with Cécile's longing to return to Paris. A year after their meeting, he takes her along for a vacation visit to Paris. This trip, too, is a complete disappointment. He fails to recapture the magic of their Roman adventures together. Presenting Cécile as a helpful Roman acquaintance, he arranges to have her invited home to dinner, and to

his consternation and annoyance Henriette and Cécile seem to hit it off very well, and somehow he feels betrayed by both of them. During the following year the pressure of his double life becomes more and more acute. His attempts to keep the affair with Cécile a secret both at work and at home become burdensome and drive him toward a final decision. Cécile's gentle mockery of his cowardly hesitations and his own desire to separate from Henriette and live with Cécile in Paris make him promise his mistress to find employment for her in Paris. During the week of his 45th birthday (at Henriette's insistence he has had to play the comedy of a family celebration), he finally brings himself to taking active measures and manages to secure a position for Cécile in a travel bureau close to his office. Exulting at his own resolution, he decides to make a surprise trip to Rome to give Cécile the news. Instead of taking the usual wagon-lit train of his business trips he economizes by taking a morning third-class train from Paris. During this uncomfortable journey of one day and one night—itself a "modification" of or departure from his usual routine—Léon is forced to revise his situation; his memories and the vague feelings of apprehension, malaise, and disquietude that have been festering below his conscious level are brought to the surface in a crisis. When he arrives in Rome, he has had to "modify" his views with the realization that his love for Cécile was inseparable from his fascination for Rome and that a life with her in Paris would only be a repetition of his marriage to Henriette. Far from traveling toward a new life of rejuvenation and adventure, he has indeed been "on the wrong track," heading for a fatal mistake.

This, then, is the rather meager story of Butor's novel, and we are reminded of the author's comment on his own art when he states that "il est facile de montrer qu'en se servant de structures suffisamment fortes, comparables à celles du vers, comparables à des structures géométriques ou musicales, en faisant jouer systématiquement les éléments les uns par rapport aux autres jusqu'à ce qu'ils aboutissent à cette révélation que le poète attend de sa prosodie, on peut intégrer en totalité, à l'intérieur d'une description partant de la banalité la plus plate, les pouvoirs de la poésie."[2] The strict discipline Butor imposes on himself in *La Modification* consists in a classic observance of the unities of time and place in addition to a rigorously consistent point of view. The story begins with Léon's entry into his third-class compartment on a Friday morning in November shortly before the train's departure from the Gare de Lyon at 8:10 a.m. and ends with his leaving the same compartment the following morning at 5:45 in Rome. Within the limits of this rigid structure of Joycean formalism Butor organizes time and events with a high degree of verisimilitude.

Perhaps the most striking feature of *La Modification* is the fact that it is written in the second person, and with the exception of the dream sequences, where a third-person narrative is used, this formal or polite "vous" is used from the very first sentence ("Vous avez mis le pied gauche sur la rainure de cuivre") to the last brief sentences of the book ("Vous regardez la foule sur le quai. Vous quittez le compartiment.")

Since a second person is inconceivable without the existence of a first-person speaker, the identity of this speaker may haunt the reader and constitute a disturbing element in the narrative. To imagine the presence of an invisible person or of Michel Butor himself addressing the protagonist at every moment, telling him about his observations, memories, plans, feelings, and physical and visceral sensations, would hardly do justice to Butor's technical

skill. It becomes apparent that—similar to the "you" (followed by "I") at the beginning of Eliot's *Prufrock*—the "vous" in Butor's novel and the "je" predicated upon it is one and the same person.

The question may be raised why the author did not resort to the well-tried device of a first-person narrative instead of this constant addressing of the protagonist by himself. The answer is to be found in the story itself. During his uncomfortable train journey Léon Delmont is coming to terms with himself. In the forced inactivity of the compartment he is entrapped, caught in his own insulating selfhood, thrown back on his own resources. Against his will he becomes his own judge, his own psychologist or psychiatrist. Rather than wishing to open up the Pandora's box of his subconscious, he objectifies and externalizes himself in an act of evasion and self-defence, which, ironically, has the opposite effect in that it brings the protagonist "face to face with himself." To achieve a safe distance the hero uses the polite form "vous" rather than the familiar "tu"; at the same time Butor shows with subtle irony that the hero indeed does not "know himself."

The use of the second-person "interior dialogue" demonstrates the protagonist's attempt to create articulated order out of the chaotic contents of his mind. We could perhaps also see in the device a critical comment by Butor on the factitiousness of an interior monologue or a stream-of-consciousness narrative. Since human consciousness is not really a "stream" but rather highly complex systems of short-hand symbols and of sensory and emotive fragments in constant motion, it can only become verbalized through a special effort—and an effort at that, which stops or alters the spontaneous processes of the consciousness while it is being made. Therefore a direct observation and recording of these processes is virtually impossible, just as certain scientific experiments cannot be undertaken because the object under study changes in the very test situation.

The duality expressed in the "vous"-form illustrates one of the main themes of the novel—the theme of seeing oneself, of coming face to face with oneself. The process is one of *reflection* in both senses of the word. It is hardly a coincidence that Butor's novel abounds in allusions to mirrors of every kind: there are mirrors in the train compartment; from the window there are brief glimpses of reflections in rivers and lakes; the windows themselves become mirrors against the darkness outside; the burning point of Léon's cigarette is doubled and reflected in the myopic glasses of a fellow traveler; in Cécile's apartment the fire flickers in glasses and in faience, and the morning sun is reflected in the objects on the tea table and in her nails, transforming the framed Parisian pictures on her wall into mirrors, etc. These reflections turn into an intricate optical play in a passage like the following:

> Dans le miroir au-dessus de l'épaule de Pierre bougent les tours noires. A travers le miroir que forme la fenêtre à travers le reflet de ce compartiment, passent les lumières dans la campagne, des phares d'autos, la chambre éclairée d'une maison de garde-barrière avec une petite fille, entrevue juste un instant, défaisant sa robe d'écolière devant une armoire à glace. Et il y a encore un autre reflet, le plus tremblant de tous, dans les lunettes cerclées de fer du vieil Italien en face de vous qui dort déjà, de la photographie au-dessus de vous derrière votre tête, qui vous le savez, représente l'arc de triomphe entouré de taxis démodés. (p. 189)

This passage shows how the point of observation is firmly fixed: throughout the novel we see through the eyes of the protagonist, or rather, he tells himself ("vous") what he is seeing from his corner seat by the corridor facing the engine. And he is an obsessive observer: no detail is too small, no movement of the fellow passengers too inconsequential to be left unrecorded. The contents of his wallet and of his shaving kit are described in painstaking detail; the glimpses of passing buildings, landscapes, and traffic are viewed through the window and maintain a sensation of motion; the accumulated scraps of rubbish on the floor of "cette salle d'attente mobile" are studied with scientific exactness:

> Sur le tapis de fer chauffant, oscille une miette de biscuit au centre de l'un des losanges entre les souliers de la dame en noir et ceux du jeune militaire qui déboutonne son manteau, écarte bien les genoux, pose ses coudes par-dessus, regarde dans le corridor. (p. 93)
>
> Sur le tapis de fer chauffant, la chaussure du militaire écrase la miette de biscuit. (p. 95)
>
> Sur le tapis de fer chauffant le soulier gauche jaune clair à semelle de crèpe du jeune époux recouvre presque entièrement la tache de même couleur que dessine le morceau de biscuit écrasé. (p. 99)

A few pages later it is a "boule de papier journal" that gets the same progressive study, and then there is an apple seed, jumping from one diamond of the carpet to another, a seed which a few pages later, during the stop at Aix-les-Bains, has been joined by another seed, both immobile next to the observer's left foot. And then again: "Sur le tapis de fer chauffant, dans le quadrilatère délimité par vos deux pieds et ceux de l'Italien en face de vous, les deux pépins de pommes sont écrasés sur une rainure, un peu de leur pulpe blanche sortant par les déchirures de leur mince écorce" (p. 111).

The descriptions are tedious, disconcerting, and without apparent relevance. We find here the same obsession with visual details as in the works of Robbe-Grillet, and we may be inclined to agree with François Mauriac's criticism:

> . . . this obsession about seeing nothing but the wall—not the wall of Plato's cave, but any old wall—shows clearly in the novels of the new school. . . . Their determination never to go beyond the object, and to represent it exactly as it is, demands a strictly limited vocabulary and the driest of dry styles . . .
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> There must be no indulgence in "fine writing" on the pretext of "suggesting," but only a firmly controlled display of what *is*. That is the lesson of these "moderns"—to suggest nothing, but to focus the eye on what occupies the field of vision at a given moment, and in a given place, with the result that the thoughts and passions of the hero of *La Modification* which do not arise from what he is actually seeing or touching, are treated in as arbitrary a fashion, and with as heavy a hand as in a novel by Bourget.[3]

In the same breath Mauriac suggests "it is time these young men's

arrogance was taken down a peg!" Mauriac's views, coming from a member of "the old school," are understandable. His criticism was prompted precisely by his reading of Butor's *La Modification,* but it seems to be more justified with regard to Robbe-Grillet than to Butor. For Butor does indeed "go beyond the object." The "imitative fallacy" notwithstanding, it is tempting to see in these descriptions the means by which the author skillfully, albeit sadistically, makes the reader suffer the inactivity and the torments of a sit-up train journey. The gradual disintegration of the crumbs and seeds on the floor becomes a concrete embodiment of the passage of time—of that relentless and hardly noticeable process through which the beard is growing, the supply of cigarettes is diminishing, and the hero's linen is losing its freshness. But there is a further justification of these minute observations, given by the protagonist himself: "Il faut fixer votre attention sur les objets que voient vos yeux, cette poignée, cette étagère, et le filet avec ces bagages, cette photographie . . . sur les personnes qui sont dans ce compartiment, ces deux ouvriers italiens . . . sur ce garçon, le plus jeune des deux, qui essuie la buée sur la vitre avec sa manche, afin de mettre un terme à ce remuement intérieur, à ce dangereux brassage et remachage de souvenirs" (p. 130). In other words, the observations become yet another means by which the hero attempts to avoid having to "face himself" and to prevent himself from falling prey to his memories.

It is especially in the application of visual observation that the differences between Butor and Robbe-Grillet become apparent. Mauriac's low opinion regarding "the strictly limited vocabulary and the driest of dry styles" and the lack of "fine writing" displayed by "the moderns" applies less to Butor than to Robbe-Grillet. In his frequent use of simile and metaphor and of emotive adjectives, Butor is a much more subjective observer than Robbe-Grillet.[4] When Léon Delmont observes his fellow travelers—and a good portion of the novel is filled with these observations—he demonstrates the natural mental process of creating an order or a system out of what would otherwise be nothing but meaningless surface registrations. Departing from an objective observation of clothes, baggage, general appearance, and gestures, he makes conjectures and speculates about the profession of the passengers, their destination, their likes and dislikes, builds up whole biographies around their persons, even gives them names. But, ironically, the biographies he creates keep turning into autobiographies: the man on his right is a little younger than himself, about forty, taller, but his hair is greyer; the priest may be on his way to announce his decision to leave the Church; the Italian worker is probably bringing a present to his mistress rather than to his wife; the elderly woman in black is what Henriette will look like in a few years; the two boys are about the same age as his own sons; the salesman from the provinces has a wife and believes he is deceiving her so cleverly, but in reality she is well aware of what attracts him to Paris; the newly married couple, whose love will undoubtedly go stale in a few years, remind him of Henriette and himself on their honeymoon, etc. The hero's observations are thus ironically deflected back to himself; the other people, too, turn into mirrors in which he can only see himself and his own situation.

The time structure of *La Modification* is one of intricate complexity. In summarizing the plot of the novel in chronological order we had to unravel threads that are firmly interwoven in the texture of the novel and take up hints given at the beginning but not followed through until some hundred pages later. It becomes clear to what extent Butor has indeed created "structures . . . comparables à des structures géométriques ou

musicales." In the structural symmetry of parallels and antitheses in this fictional world between the opposite poles of Paris and Rome the author makes each city act as a mirror to the other. The interlacing of a number of train journeys between the cities forms a pattern of perfect literary counterpoint.

Objective time is strikingly established by the rigid timetable of the Paris-Syracuse Express with painstaking notes of arrival and departure times at intermediate stations. The progression of this objective time is reflected in the changing scenery and the metereological variations outside as well as in the increasing physical fatigue and discomfort of the traveler and the subtle signs of material disintegration inside the compartment. But over this firmly fixed, rectilinear time structure plays Léon's personal time with constant variations on the past-present-future scale, moving from the journey to Rome two years ago when he met Cécile to their trip together to Paris a year ago; from the Roman trip with Henriette four years ago to his last stay in Rome less than a week ago, etc., etc. in ever new combinations. It is only through the skillful use of tenses and clear "signal words" associated with each particular trip that the journeys remain distinct from each other, and between each excursion into the past or the future there is always an intermediate stop in the present third-class compartment. The transition from one time level to another is often prompted by associations that are more or less obvious to the reader. Thus, for example, "les taxis démodés" in the picture of *l'arc de triomphe* in the compartment will take Léon back to the thirties and his honeymoon trip with Henriette.

Just as Léon Delmont's journey on the parallel tracks of the railroad moves him on a rectilinear course in objective time toward Rome and a final commitment, his personal time forces him implacably in a different direction. Despite his minute observations of his immediate surrounding, and despite his attempts at lucid rationality as manifested in the "vous"-distance he maintains vis-à-vis himself, he gradually succumbs to the pull of this gravitational counterforce. With each remembered trip and with each projection into the future a slightly different, "modified" light is thrown on his present situation; there is an interaction between the events on the different time levels. Speaking about the necessity of changing one's life, Butor has summed up this process in a different context: "Une conversion n'est pas suffisante; il ne s'agit seulement de prendre la décision d'orienter son avenir dans une direction différente de celle qu'il semblait devoir suivre, mais il faut aussi faire de son passé autre chose que ce qu'il demeurerait inévitablement si on laissait en paix, une source d'obscurité et d'erreurs, la série confuse et opaque des expériences d'un de ces individus noyés dans une irresponsable foule, autre chose, c'est à dire une source de connaissance; il faut en extraire tout l'enseignement."[5]

This process is perfectly illustrated in the novel, where Léon Delmont is forced progressively to "modify" his views and to revise his past to arrive at a final revelation. In this he is aided by his own subconscious. Under the pressure of his memories and through the undermining of his defences by physical fatigue he precariously tries to hold on to his last rational props in that agonizing state between waking and sleep. When he finally yields, he is irresistibly sucked down into the nightmarish vortex of his subconscious, and below that to regions that seem to be part of a collective subconscious. In these dream sequences the protagonist is described in the third person to illustrate the fact that he has lost the rational hold on himself as expressed by the second-person "vous." Objective and personal times are here completely suspended or destroyed.

Léon's journey to Cécile and Rome is in effect a return to Henriette and Paris. At the beginning of his trip he is filled with resentment toward his wife: ". . . pensant vous retenir, vous enserrer dans ce filet de petites rites . . . (ah, comme elle vieillissait!)" (p. 31); family life is described in strong metaphors: ". . . cette demi-vie se refermait autour de vous comme une pince, comme les mains d'un étrangleur, toute cette existence larvaire, crépusculaire, à laquelle vous alliez échapper enfin" (p. 34); and Henriette is seen as "ce cadavre inquisiteur" (p. 34), "ce boulet auquel vous êtes enchaîné et qui vous entraînerait aux fonds asphyxiés de cet océan d'ennui . . . ce corps tôt fané" (p. 35).

It is only gradually that these undifferentiated feelings soften, that Henriette's "visage de reproches" (p. 68) begins to mirror his own guilt. His feelings of resentment give way to compassion: "Vous songiez aux traits tirés qu'avait Henriette dans votre lit le matin d'avant avec ses cheveux en désordre" (p. 93). And during their second trip to Rome together four years ago, also in a third-class compartment, there was Henriette "qui peu à peu s'était serrée contre vous pour éviter le froid, avait laissé tomber sa tête contre votre épaule" (p. 149). Many memory excursions later he comes back to this same trip and remembers how she tried to excuse him for intentionally having chosen this wintry season to take her to Rome "pour lui ôter l'envie de venir vous gêner une nouvelle fois" (p. 180). It is not until the end of the novel that the memory of the honeymoon trip is allowed to emerge to the surface in its fragile tenderness. At the moment before leaving the train after this journey, which has been a journey backwards in time as well as a journey downwards into the self and a pilgrimage of penance, Léon addresses himself directly to his wife: "Je te le promets, Henriette, dès que nous le pourrons, nous reviendrons ensemble à Rome, dès que les ondes de cette perturbation se seront calmées, dès que tu m'auras pardonné; nous ne seront pas si vieux" (p. 236).

Léon's relationship to Cécile does not undergo a correspondingly complete metamorphosis. His revelation consists in a recognition of his love for her as a self-delusion; it was inextricably connected with the myth of Rome as the Eternal City and with his fear of aging. He knows that he will have to sacrifice her, making her the victim of his decision. The last memory of Cécile recorded by Léon dates back to a visit to Rome a year ago, when she had seen him off at the station: "'Adieu', lui avez-vous crié comme elle courait la tête levée, admirable, les cheveux en couronne de flammes noires, s'essoufflant dans un sourire" (p. 233). And in his compartment, just before reaching his destination: "Dans votre tête résonne cet 'adieu Cécile', les larmes vous montant aux yeux de déception, vous disant: comment pourrai-je jamais lui faire comprendre et me pardonner le mensonge que fut cet amour, sinon peut-être par ce livre dans lequel elle devrait apparaitre dans toute sa beauté, parée de cette gloire romaine qu'elle sait si bien réfléchir" (p. 233).

That last image of Cécile running, "les cheveux en couronne de flammes noires," has an almost pagan beauty, befitting the description of her throughout the novel as an embodiment of freedom and the pre-Christian spirit of Rome. Her paranoic hatred of the Catholic Church, her refusal to visit "ce Vatican que j'abhorre, dans cette cité cancer qui s'accroche au coté de la splendeur et de la liberté romaines, cette poche du pus stupidement dorée" (p. 139) contrast sharply with Henriette's religious dependence. There is a deep and disturbing element in the figure of Cécile, whom Léon has thought of as "messagère des régions heureuses et claires" (p. 35) and "cette possi-

bilité de vivre avec elle une jeunesse nouvelle" (p. 184). True to her first name, she represents music. But Saint Cecilia was also a Christian martyr, a noble Roman virgin, according to some legends a Roman empress, whose relics rest under the high altar of the Basilica of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere. It is not without interest to note that the dictionary definition of the Italian word *arcella* is: "(Archael.) space below an altar leading to a tomb."[6] In Cécile Darcella Léon has been infatuated with the dead past of Rome; his decision to return to Henriette (whom he had seen as "ce cadavre inquisiteur") is an affirmation of life and responsibility in the present. Cécile is the victim of his decision through which she becomes the martyr for Henriette and for the same church as her ancient namesake. Léon's tears are proof that it has been a difficult decision, but one to make him worthy of *his* name, "lion from the mountain."

NOTES

[1]Michel Butor, *La Modification* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957).

[2]Michel Butor, *Répertoire I* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1962), p. 272.

[3]François Mauriac, *Mémoires Intérieurs*, tr. Gerard Hopkins (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1960), pp. 212-213.

[4]Many passages of *La Modification* testify to this fact, for example the description of the Delmonts' bedroom, where "l'aube commençait a sculpter les draps en désordre de votre lit, les draps qui émergeaient de l'obscurité semblables à des fantômes vaincus, écrasés au ras de sol mou et chaud dont vous cherchiez à vous arracher" (p. 16), or the reference to the hero's disquietude as "cette sirène d'angoisse poignante qui s'était mise à hululer dans votre coeur et que vous essayiez d'écarter" (p. 92).

[5]Michel Butor, *Essais sur les modernes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 362.

[6]In her book on *La Modification* Françoise Van Rossum-Guyon draws our attention to the significance of Cécile's room in the Roman apartment of Mme da Ponte and the fact that it is located "de l'autre côté [d'une] petite entrée très noire" (*La Modification*, p. 49). Tempted by the association of the name *da Ponte* with Mozart's librettist as suggested in the novel itself (p. 48), F. Van Rossum-Guyon gives what seems to be a somewhat more farfetched interpretation of the name *Darcella:* "Comment ne penser alors à *Don Giovanni* et à *Ulysse* de Joyce lorsqu'on sait que *Darcella* est l'infinitif de *La Ce Dare . . .*" (Françoise Van Rossum-Guyon, *Critique du roman, Essai sur* La Modification *de Michel Butor*, Paris: Gallimard, 1970, p. 276).