

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Michel Butor and the Tradition of Alchemy

Contemporary French writers are currently (and, as usual) engaged in a polemic over the appropriate characteristics of literature. On one side of the fence stand those writers who see literature as a form of communication: form is clearly subservient to the message to be conveyed. Opposing them are those writers who have surfaced since the zenith of the *nouveau roman*, and whose ancestry may generally be traced back to the hermeticism of Mallarmé. This latter group, including Jean Ricardou, Philippe Sollers, and Maurice Roche, have in theory and in fact elevated language itself to such awesome stature that it becomes virtually impossible, and in any case pointless, to define the "subject matter" of their works. Somewhere in between these two factions stand a number of relatively well-established authors, including Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet (since the Spring Revolution of 1968), and Michel Butor.

Butor, as a writer and artist, finds himself in a somewhat awkward position. On the one hand, he subscribes to the theory that his ideal reader must be encouraged and/or coerced to participate actively in the work of art: the reader's effort must be commensurate with that of the author, and Butor finds himself open to accusations of literary elitism and hermeticism. On the other hand, Butor does not accept the human condition as it stands, socio-politically or intellectually. Echoing Rimbaud, Butor insists that life be "changed": "Any literature which does not help us toward this end is eventually, and inevitably, condemned."¹ Ironically, a single theme, that of *alchemy*, suffices to emblemize the contradictory dictates of hermeticism and didacticism.

Butor's interest in alchemy clearly antedates his success as a writer. In an essay which appeared in 1953, one year before the publication of his first novel, Butor discusses "Alchemy and Its Language," pointing out a number of aspects of the hermetic traditions which in later years he incorporates into his fictional pieces. His first task, naturally, is to lay to rest the popular opinion that alchemy is concerned with the transmutation of base metals into gold. Butor, like most modern scholars, sees alchemy rather as a tradition of knowledge into which one must first be initiated in order to become, ultimately, an adept. The transformation of matter is a metaphor for a more arduous and elusive spiritual transformation; the true, and subversive, nature of this ultimate science is hidden from the uninitiated through the use of a system of codes to be deciphered; the keys to aid this decoding are to be found in the *Book*, passed down from the adept to the initiates.

Butor's interpretation of the basic nature of alchemy is admirably suited to becoming the basis of an entire aesthetic theory. If Butor's purpose is no less ambitious than the incredible goal of "changing life," he must begin by changing himself. Butor described his own initiation in a "capriccio" published in 1967, entitled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Monkey*.² In this very Joycean and vaguely autobiographical work, Butor recounts how several years after World War II, he spent seven weeks in a Bavarian castle, and how he dreamed that he was transformed by a vampire into a monkey, able to reverse the transmutation only after diverse trials and tribulations. Following the Bavarian summer, Butor departs for Egypt, his "second birthright."

On the narrative level, several physical transformations are involved. On an aesthetic level, the number of transmutations in *Portrait* is greater.

The student Butor himself is first transformed into an artist, or at least into a potential artist, through the imitation (i.e., the aping, as a young monkey) of his predecessors and through a "voyage of initiation." This trip leads him to a "derangement of the senses" and finally to an ability to decipher what Baudelaire would have called the "confused words" which he finds surrounding him.

The artist enjoys an "orgy of deciphering," solving the mysteries he encounters by writing about them. For Butor, art must in fact be considered as an integral and necessary part of the life of the artist. "I do not write novels in order to sell them but in order to obtain a unity in my life; writing is a spinal column for me."³ By writing about the mysteries encountered, the artist transforms reality by transferring it to the plane of fiction.

If he is successful, the artist will ultimately transform reality itself, in its own realm. Butor understands Rimbaud's insistence upon the alteration of life through art in a very literal sense. While not actually a political polemicist, Butor is far from being a pure aesthete, as there is a social lesson to be found in everything he writes.

Finally, after the artist has decoded his reality, he *recodes* it, or rearranges it, in artistic form. One effect of this procedure is to make the Butorian book rather difficult to read. The reader must make the appropriate effort, after all, if he wishes his own way of seeing life to be transformed.

The monkey of Butor's title is not to be interpreted as simply an ironic tribute to Stephen Dedalus. Rather, it serves to link Butor's *Portrait* to the iconography of alchemy, as is demonstrated by Fulcanelli's *Les Demeures philosophales*. "The alchemist, in his patient work, must be the scrupulous imitator of nature, *the ape of creation*, in the words of several of the masters. Guided by the analogy, he accomplishes on a small scale . . . that which God does on a large scale in the cosmic universe. Here, the immense; there, the minuscule."⁴ Butor has made several personal precisions on Fulcanelli's comments: (1) like the alchemist, the medieval artist was considered to be an imitator of Nature, in that he was copying the result of Creation; (2) the alchemist, in fact, was considered to be an artist, not a scientist; (3) the alchemist produced the very process, rather than simply the result, of Creation. Furthermore, Butor reminds us in *Portrait*, "In Egypt, the god of writing, Thoth, was often depicted as a monkey" (p. 51).

The appearance of Thoth not only provides an additional link between art and the image of the monkey, but also introduces the theme of Egypt. Egypt is thematically appropriate to *Portrait*, because of the possible Egyptian origins of the art of alchemy; in fact, Thoth, or Hermes Trismegistus, is supposed to have written the first alchemical text known to Western man, the *Tabula Smaragdina*, or *Emerald Tablet*. More importantly, it is to Egypt that the future writer of *Portrait* will go to be reborn as an artist.

The myth of rebirth goes hand in hand with the myth of the transmutation of metals, and, more generally, with the entire European hermetic tradition. Moreover, this thematic element of *Portrait* determines the very structure of the *capriccio*. *Portrait* is based on the number seven, and specifically on the seven days of the week. Beginning with *lundi*, the moon's day, we follow the narrator, chapter by chapter, through *marti* (Mars), *mercredi* (Mercury), *jeudi* (Jupiter), *vendredi* (Venus), *samedi* (Saturn), and finally *dimanche*, the Lord's day, dedicated to the sun. Playing on the fact that the French week ends on Sunday while the German week ends on Saturday, Butor is able to create a chronological cycle in which endings are identified with beginnings. Thus *Portrait* does not "end"; instead it may serve as an introduction to Butor's other works.

Given the general alchemical atmosphere of *Portrait*, it is not surprising that Butor finds time to deal with specific hermetic philosophers: Jacob Boehme, Basilius Valentinus, and Nicolas Flamel. Jacob Boehme appears in *Portrait* through the vehicle of his commentaries on the book of *Genesis*: the days of the creation are dealt with one by one as the narrator's week of weeks progresses. Basilius Valentinus serves as a foil to Boehme, establishing a gridwork of colors, gods, and virtues for each day of the week. Thus, Wednesday is represented by the Chancellor Mercury, by iridescent Arithmetic and by Temperance "of marvelous hue" (*Portrait*, p. 106). A counterpoint is established between the two, as Basilius Valentinus "speaks to" Boehme, and Boehme "answers" Basilius Valentinus.

A more direct role is played by Nicolas Flamel, whom Butor quotes extensively early in *Portrait*. The inscriptions and figures on Flamel's tomb trace the process of alchemy in seven steps. To each of the figures is attached a set of colors associated with the phases of preparation of the Philosopher's stone, flavescent, citrine red, and so forth. These colors appear over one hundred times in *Portrait*, in references to eye coloration and clothing. Where eye color is concerned the colors are chosen from the first part of Flamel's list both early and late in *Portrait*; the colors from the end of Flamel's list predominate in the center of the *capriccio*. Thus the colors go from flavescent to crimson lake and back again, completing the cycle appropriate to any alchemical work. Clothing colors, on the other hand, are patterned in a fairly straight progression. Thus Butor's seemingly arbitrary choice of colors in *Portrait* reinforce the book's structure, that of a circle superimposed on a straight line.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Monkey is, among other things, a key which Butor gives his readers to help decipher the works written before (and after) *Portrait*'s publication. Alchemy, in whatever sense we may attribute to it, is primarily concerned with transformation. Each of Butor's novels deals in some way with a very human form of transformation, the *rites de passage*. These rituals may involve the attainment of manhood and loss of innocence, as in *Passage de Milan*, the transmission of knowledge, as in *Degrees*, the recognition of bad faith, as in *A Change of Heart*, or the development of an artistic vocation, in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Monkey*. In each case, plot follows the same pattern, as dictated by scholars such as Mircea Eliade and others who have made comparative studies of initiation ceremonies. The protagonist, male, undergoes a transformation, usually against his will. He is separated from the comforts of female companionship and is forced to undergo a ritual death and some form of discomfort or hardship. Following his ordeal, he is reborn, or is at least given the promise of possible rebirth. The end result, generally, is a *book*. In *Passing Time*, Jacques Revel is left with a diary which will help him to understand the suffering he has undergone in the course of the year.

In *A Change of Heart*, Leon Delmont will produce a "future and necessary book"⁵ in order to come to grips with his own unwilling transformation. At the end of *Degrees*, the narrator dies, leaving to his nephew only the book whose composition has brought about his death. At the end of *Portrait*, Butor the student heads for Egypt to become Butor the writer of books, Butor the artist. Butor's art is an effort to transform the world and simultaneously to transform the self—tasks certainly more arduous than merely changing lead into gold. Thus, although part of the very modern *nouveau roman*, he participates in the tradition of the literature of alchemy. Butor the artist transforms the reader; the reader, having been initiated, must then transform the world.

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¹Michel Butor, "Une Autobiographie dialectique," *Repertoire* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1960), p. 262. All translations are my own.

²Butor, *Portrait de l'artiste en jeune singe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

³Butor, "Intervention à Royaumont," *Repertoire*, p. 272.

⁴Fulcanelli, *Les Demeures philosophales* (Paris: Schemit, 1930), pp. 82-83.

⁵Butor, *La Modification* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957), p. 236.

Time and Aesthetic Distance in Carlo Bernari's *Le radiose giornate*

From his first novel *Tre operai* (1934) to his latest, *Un foro nel parabrezza* (1971), one of Carlo Bernari's most consistent techniques is his unmasking of contradictions in both individuals and society. *Le radiose giornate* (1969), which is a complete redoing of *Prologo alle tenebre* (1947), best exemplifies this characteristic of Bernari's narrative. *Le radiose giornate* also represents the author's desire to rewrite a novel which in its original form was misunderstood. Perhaps *Prologo's* structure and the political atmosphere in which it was written are partially responsible for its misinterpretation. As a result, the novel was considered to be simply a detective story, or a fictional reconstruction of some political espionage which took place in Naples during the closing days of the Second World War. The author's desire to unveil personal contradictions among fascists and anti-fascists was completely overlooked in 1947. However, in 1969, after certain stylistic changes had been made (Bernari restructures the entire novel), the reader easily discovers the intended message which was undoubtedly present but seemingly hidden in the original version.

A brief analysis of *Prologo alle tenebre* and *Le radiose giornate* will reveal that in *Le radiose giornate* time and aesthetic distance are the primary instruments in portraying the protagonists' contradictions which are directly responsible for their social predicament. Moreover, we shall illustrate that in *Prologo* the historic background, with all its political allusions, and the actual structure of the novel, are primarily responsible for the ambiguities that Bernari needed to clarify twenty years later.

In *Prologo alle tenebre* the connecting link between what may appear to be five separate episodes is the recurring leitmotif of the "secret" which prevails throughout the entire novel and which is explicit in the titles of the chapters. The story unfolds as Eugenio, the narrator-protagonist, recounts events which took place in Naples during the closing days of the Liberation. Within this particular milieu it is not surprising that the characters disguise controversial thoughts or actions with lies. And we can reasonably assume that the political atmosphere is responsible for the secretive ambience. Bernari juxtaposes the political background and the psychological analysis of the main characters in such a manner that at first it is difficult to perceive that the political realism is merely an expedient to point out certain contradictions in the protagonists.