

# Michel Butor and the Social Structure

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In some instances Butor sees the writer in the role of a detective ferreting out an overt or a covert crime such as fratricide. On other occasions he bestows on him the part of a psychologist unearthing original sins and repressed complexes. At all times, however, in his Hermetic fiction, Butor projects in his writer-protagonist the role of an anthropologist engaged in the process of probing beyond the limits of the individual consciousness into the set up of the family, the clan, the age group, the generations and their gaps, the entire nation with its history and ramifications reaching into the buried primordial past common to all humanity.

Butor shares a concern with sociological writers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss or Mircea Eliade when he features in each of his fictional works, from the early *Passage de Milan* through *Mobile*, *Rites of Passage* which lead from personal life to the collective by steps and degrees relating beyond the ego limits to the group, the city and the race, to the ground shared by all mankind, be it Australian Aborigines or Parisian Lycée students.

As varied as his novels may be, whether they feature only one hero or anti-hero such as Delmont or Revel, the Revealer, or a group such as the adolescents in *Degrés*, or the families in *Passage de Milan*, they display one common theme: a crisis of identity followed by a partially successful or aborted epiphany. In whichever milieu the plot is set and however the ultimate outcome may be resolved, the main question which arises in each and every one of his works of fiction is how to trace identities. An individual Self is related to ever-broadening circles of relationships in an effort to abolish the feeling of isolation and alienation which surrounds modern man beset by a tendency to ignore or forget his roots.

Butor makes it perfectly clear that his protagonists represent a totality of human experience and are by no means unique. In *La Modification* the narrator Léon Delmont uses the second person to involve the reader in his ordeal. He is an average traveling salesman at life's crossroads and comes to realize who he is, by some inner Eleusynian experience. Not only is he everyman, but in every child, man or woman he encounters, he sees his own children, wife or acquaintances at some various stage of life. Stripped of the myths he had projected upon them, all women are interchangeable, as he realizes their resemblances and similar gestures on parallel occasions.

Even in this mythological novel, Butor insinuates a scathing although fleeting criticism of a commercial Establishment with its concomitant stultifying labor. Scabelli, the Italian firm which employs Delmont is criticized in veiled terms, which yet remind the reader of the Marxist climate which prevails in Georges Pérec's sociological novel *Les Choses*. The basic absurdity of an enterprise dedicated to foisting typewriters on a market already glutted with similar products is unambiguous: ". . . il s'agit simplement pour vous d'obtenir que les gens achètent une Scabelli au lieu d'une Olivetti ou d'une Hermès, et cels sans raison véritable, naturellement, jeu assez amusant parfois, jeu harassant qui ne vous laisse presque pas de répit, jeu qui rapporte, jeu qui pourrait vous anéantir entièrement, tel un vice" (*Modification*, p. 54).

Delmont stoops to threaten a salesman who is unable to fill his sales quota, although both men fully realize that in that provincial sector the merchandise just cannot be sold readily. Delmont himself becomes a slave to the company, patterns his behavior according to the style expected of its executives, at least on the surface, gets promoted and earns more money, for his family, he rationalizes. Yet in the process, this very family grows alienated from him as his wife and children come to despise him. Actually he is a robot, manipulated by his bosses in the name of some obscure mercantile interests which are not his own. Finally he seeks escape from bondage and some measure of revenge for his hypocritical docility in an adulterous relationship with a younger foreign woman with whom he would recapture freedom and youth. However his domestication and premature aging will cause this dream to collapse in an anticlimax yet fraught with some overtones of an epiphany as he gains the intuition that his bourgeois wife, his insolent children, himself, and even his mistress are typical people to be viewed in the context of the collective rather than original. His abortive adventure has been prompted by the discontent plaguing the majority of his Western contemporaries: "Démon non de vous seulement mais de tous ceux de votre race" (*Modification*, p. 191).

A younger hero, Revel is also traveling and he establishes himself in Bleston which is an ironical pseudonym for Manchester. Here he seeks to exercise the demons of the Industrial Revolution which have made of this city a present day inferno especially for the poor, the exploited and the foreign labor who have no refuge from its smog, fog, soot and pollution. Revel works at his stupid rote-like job amidst the inhospitable and distrustful natives, yet his position is privileged if one compares it to that of his savior and mentor, the African Horace Buck, who provides him with clean and inexpensive lodgings to which he himself can never aspire. The wages for the latter's toil is a mere pittance, and his own quarters the squalor of a slum. In this town coal gnaws at everything, noise reigns supreme, prejudice is overt and directed in various degrees against all foreigners, as they are viewed according to the stereotypes of their national origins.

Yet this town professes its Christianity although its religious rites are imbued with an aura of hypocrisy and sentimentality which Butor finds repellent. Christmas is heralded by spending which the poor can ill afford and by the purchase of mawkish cards. The celebration of Yuletide as well as Easter is tainted by rejection of the homeless who are denied a place to eat and drink. Bad taste and a joyless climate permeate the city even at these supposedly merry occasions under the aegis of the ugly temple erected to business, a huge department store, which, when it will be finished, is to dwarf the Cathedrals of the past. Class distinctions are enforced even post mortem as one cemetery is reserved for poor Jews and the other for rich ones! Of course the same holds true for dwellings which become more spacious and luxurious as their location is removed from the center of town over which looms the prison which safeguards its institutions. Even the most intimate relationships are regulated by financial interests. Two of Horace Buck's white Blestonian women friends leave him to marry white men who can afford them better material security. It is no wonder that Buck, in Promethean fashion starts a few minor conflagrations such as the symbolical burning of a small model of soulless Bleston or present day Babel!

Butor mentions a whole string of metropolises which grew big, rich, corrupt, and dehumanizing until they ultimately fell prey to incendiary elements. In Bleston we find resonances not only of Babel but of Sodom, Knossos, Athens, Rome and prefigurations of American cities which he also

considers as doomed to crumble in great conflagrations lit by their Cainites, heirs not only to Cain but to Ham and Seth, ancestors of the enslaved races waiting for their chance to revolt.

The earlier work *Passage de Milan* displays a disparate assembly of protagonists who dwell in the same Paris building. The unifying event is the birthday party celebrated by twenty year old Angèle. Birthdays are featured as important rites of passage in many of Butor's works especially when the celebrant has reached the crossroads of life such as puberty, nubility, or the onset of middle age. Various groups are participating in the social event and we view several rather typical families. One especially, the Mogne clan or self-styled "smala" comprises three generations and represents the small bourgeois French family Establishment. Butor traces the components of the ego of the individual in its relation to relatives, elders, peers, and strangers. He shows the various generations, their gaps, clashes, taboos and habits with the insistence of an anthropologist on a visit to a tribe of Stone Age Aborigines. There is a great deal of unconscious repetition and pattern reenactment despite the alienation and animosities, as the son willy-nilly follows in his father's footsteps. Even the same trite greetings are mechanically voiced. There is also a well-established pecking order at various occasions such as dinners and parties. Sibling rivalries and disrespect displayed by the young in the treatment of their elders is transmitted from generation to generation with an ever accelerating rate.

In the roles dictated by the family code no trespasses can be tolerated. Transgressions are punished by sarcasm, mockery or overt criticism, as the mother plays the part of the Shaman who controls and initiates the clumsy guests or outsiders. Yet in this traditional pattern a new element is added as the oldsters come to realize that their role is waning since "Occidental politeness" is dying out, and they become the butt of the sadism of their descendents. Butor's fathers are notoriously weak authority figures who cling to a sham of control over their scornful children. The youngsters are repelled by parental weakness, indulgence, and eagerness to accept childish lies. Butor depicts not only particular fathers such as Mogne or Delmont but THE FATHER in Nietzschean terms, the God who is dead or dying and banished from our conscience. Paying fake respect to him appears hypocritical to Butor who depicts adults as paying lip service to a simulacrum of a decorum while their children see through the comedy with greater frankness.

Another fallacious authority figure is rich Samuel Léonard, the exploiter of a handsome Egyptian chattel Ahmed whom he dresses like an Oriental prince, treats like a dog and abuses homosexually. One Mogne son also gets involved with Ahmed and founders in an equivocal situation. To Butor such affairs are symptomatic of a sick society more concerned with covering up deviation than in an unmasking of its lies which even the youngest of children discern.

In this setting the family is seen as a confining and guilt ridden cell where every member is judged, ridiculed, and disciplined whenever an infraction to the code is suspected. Butor's most consistent social criticism, however, is displayed in two later works: *Degrés* and *Mobile*. In the former he probes and denounces the fabric of the entire French Secondary educational system in 1952. Actually he was disgusted with the schooling as late as in 1966, when during an interview he confided to this writer his distaste for the unnecessary cramming of irrelevant information his daughters were subjected

to, even in elementary classes. *Degrés* elaborates on these convictions. In this book a lycée class is introduced and probed with regard to its composition and relationships between teachers and pupils who are a rather motley crew comprising French Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Italians, a Caribbean Black, etc. The teacher Pierre Vernier has decided to present a lesson on the Discovery of America to his class.

The very climate of the classroom is based on the principle of authoritarianism as the teachers wield the weapons of blackmail: low grades, denial of promotion, and fear of the baccalaureate examinations. The very relationship reflects that pictured in the textbook used: the master lordling it over the fawning slaves. Whenever the teachers do not bully the pupils, they aim sarcasm at them and discourage free enquiry or comments. Never is a question of conscience raised by the professor, yet the lesson deals with the Rape of America and religious persecutions in Europe. Never are the feelings of Black, Huguenot, or Jewish pupils taken into account although they might consider the text with its pictures of Indian and black slaves toiling in the mines and plantations of the New World from another viewpoint than their classmates!

Although the students have read the Rabelais treatise on education wherein he describes bad teaching, their own teacher follows blindly the nefarious pedagogical traditions which are denounced: splitting of hair over Old French and bogging down young minds in confusion and infinitesimal detail. Furthermore several of the children come from broken homes, yet the system takes no account of the causes for failure in classwork. Thus a motherless pupil is chided for tardiness, and a cardiac patient is blamed for his laziness in the gym.

Education is reduced to forcing children to meticulously render the orthodox sham voiced in antiquated texts which are part of an unchanging curriculum based on Renaissance standards of education. The absurdity of the inherent contradictions must be cloaked in silence while the educators teach the same archaic programs and materials year in and year out and they themselves grow more dispirited and irascible. The very structure of history and geography undergoes a deformation. The Mercator map used in classroom significantly magnifies the temperate zones at the expense of the Equatorial regions of the globe. Likewise only the Classical European background is stressed whereas entire areas of history and prehistory are relegated to limbo. Dead languages are favored over modern living idioms, as Homer's Greek and Shakespeare's English take up all the time and effort. Whenever a child so disoriented by this overburdening maze of instruction as to be unable to pass his examinations, his punishment will be a repetition of the year which will only add to his boredom and discouragement without remedying his basic deficiencies.

In the class the topics which really interest most teenagers are carefully avoided. Although the adolescents are perplexed by numerous sexual allusions inherent in Graeco-Latin literature, their would-be mentors treat them like babies and shirk answering any specific questions. According to Butor, however, even young children are unlikely to be fooled by the secrecy which cloaks their parents' or elders' adulteries or homosexual tendencies and grow up in a climate of unhealthy sexual curiosity fraught with equivocal overtones.

Fortunately the children do resort to healthy moments of escape from the school and home regimen whenever they can snatch some spare time from their burdensome routine. Scouting and reading science fiction shared with their peers provides a sense of belonging to a clan or gang, and identifying with some totem animal whose properties they project upon themselves.

They also create their own myths, build huts like primitive men and undergo ordeals of passage. This type of group oriented extracurricular activity is the only one which does not stifle their natural animal nature, as it creates cooperation amidst peers and a sense of belonging. Adults seeking to intrude on this setup misunderstand the very nature of the children whom they are supposed to guide. Thus the overcivilized teacher Pierre Vernier who lacks even rudimentary psychological insight disintegrates physically as well as morally. He dies as a victim immolated by his basic lack of understanding of the world he lives in, of the culture he attempts to decipher for his pupils, and of the historical origins of the alienation of contemporary man.

For Butor any crime, guilt, or buried historical sin can never be laid to rest. It reasserts itself with extra virulence centuries or even millenia later. In the last page of *Degrés* the Apocalyptic words are uttered: “. . . dans l'édification de cette tour d'où l'on devait voir l'Amérique s'est formé quelque chose qui devait la faire exploser . . .” then there are allusions to an explosion and a conflagration: “. . . vestige d'une conscience et d'une musique future.”

In *Mobile* Butor projects impressions of an America which he sees as racing by in constant mobility, restless rootlessness to the same artificial havens on each coast. He conceives of it as a nation of lonely people rushing past ghettos, reservations, and signs “For Whites Only.” As far as he is concerned, America suffers from a split personality under a veneer of happiness. He depicts it as a land drowning in material profusion, yet covering up an enormous crime: the introduction of slavery on new shores after the suppression of the Indian and ruthless eradication of the pre-Columbian past. Butor, in the course of a conversation, told the author of this paper that he feels that the repressed past is taking its revenge on present day America. He views the current drug scene as a compensation which affects all youth in this country. The contemporary orgiastic trends, jazz, crime waves, even the rash of divorces are seen by him as forces which erode the very structure of family life. Yet he is not pessimistic about the future. He hopes for greater frankness, more awareness and social conscience: “Toute vie est jugée par sa réponse posée pour la première fois au commencement du monde: ‘Suis-je le gardien de mon frère!’” (*Mobile*, 235).

Consciousness can be acquired on a personal level as well as on a collective one. Most people live by myths which must be demystified if we are to understand ourselves and others and stop projecting our fears, hates, and prejudices upon them. Butor's goal is to let the reader acquire more awareness by realizing that his common humanity reaches beyond family, clan, nation, religion, or race. He always sympathizes with the Promethean or accursed man who revolts against the subjection of son to father, pupil to teacher, colored to white, present to past. Slavery is archaic, so are conventions, social sham and pious cover up of lies. The disease must be exposed lest it fester in us and explode. Man must face the past and view it dispassionately, as historical fact cannot lie buried without reasserting itself. We cannot even afford to ignore prehistory for in it we will find roots common to all men. The totems and taboos which regulate the lives of Australian Aborigines are operative in the life of Pierre Vernier and loom over the inhabitants of Bleston. By realizing the tenuous bond between ourselves and the vanishing natural world which is our habitat, we may acquire a better understanding of ourselves and of our milieu, and stand less alienated in the Diaspora of modern cities. We can grow richer and wiser by reversing the trend of distrust and hostility which we project toward our brother whom too often we treat as the “Other.”