

The Symbolic Function of Birds, Names, Numbers, and Playing Cards in Michel Butor's *Passage de Milan*

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Michel Butor's first novel *Passage de Milan* has remained relatively unrecognized by Butor scholars. At the time of its publication in 1954 Michel Carrouges was its most sympathetic and lucid critic.¹ More recently Jennifer Waelti-Walters has examined parts of the internal symbolism of the novel² and Patrice Quéréel has attempted to interpret *Passage de Milan* in the context of theories of Althusser.³ These studies offer a careful analysis, but on the whole, *Passage de Milan* is a more complex work than many critics have acknowledged. Indeed, its very title contributes a major key for deciphering the richness and ambiguities of the novel. In general, titles of works have a special significance for Butor and are never merely gratuitous word play. As he states in one of his studies of James Joyce: "En réalité . . . ce titre est une clef que Joyce nous donne pour pénétrer dans les secrets de sa fabrication."⁴ This statement can be readily transposed to encompass Butor's own works. The title *Passage de Milan*, like the names of several characters in the novel, has more than one meaning. At the simplest and literal level, it is the name of a fictional street in Paris where we find the block of flats in which the events of the novel are to take place. In symbolic terms however, the *Passage de Milan* has another meaning and becomes the "passing over" or ritual passage of the Egyptian bird of death identified by Butor himself as Horus.⁵ Furthermore, the *milan* of the title is portrayed at the heart of an art work being painted in the novel and is throughout connected with the inner symbolism both of the painting and the novel. The title has yet a broader significance in that it prefigures a series of wordplays including anagrams, associations of words around which the fictional content is organized. The *milan* further introduces the motif of Egyptian civilization regarded in the novel as a source of Hermetism and shown to be in conflict with a modern European culture which is evaluated in relation to the Egyptian past. The Egypt of *Passage de Milan* represents an enigmatic and mysterious world and heralds the possibility of rebirth.

In regarding Horus as a kite rather than a hawk, Butor departs from tradition to which in other respects he seems to conform. Horus is connected with craftsmanship and magic, and tradition employs him in one of his forms as the god of blacksmiths. The followers of Horus began as metal workers and then became "manieurs de pique,"⁶ significant here because the bird is interrelated

¹Michel Carrouges, "Passage de Milan," *Monde Nouveau Paris*, 82 (October 1954), pp. 74-77.

²Jennifer R. Waelti-Walters, "Passage de Milan: le point de départ," in Butor, *Colloque de Cerisy*, ed. Georges Raillard (Paris: U.G.E., 1974), pp. 55-64.

³Patrice Quéréel, "Passage de Milan: description d'une topique," in Butor, *Colloque de Cerisy*, pp. 70-80.

⁴Michel Butor, "Petite croisière préliminaire à une reconnaissance de l'archipel Joyce," *Répertoire* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1960), p. 139.

⁵Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Michel Butor*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 51.

⁶G. Maspero, "Les Forgerons d'Horus," *L'Anthropologie*, 2 (1891), pp. 401-07.

with card symbolism prevalent in the inner painting and predominantly with the "as de pique." In the novel, the passage of the bird becomes confused with the ace of spades and forewarns of death. But the fictional content has many paradoxical turns, and within death is new life. Butor himself has emphasized this point in an interview with Georges Charbonnier: ". . . le passage d'une ombre en croix comme cet animal de proie, cet animal qui est le soleil de la mort. La lumière de mort vient prendre cette jeune fille, la lumière de la mort vient éclairer le centre de cet immeuble et vient dessiner toutes les silhouettes des personnages."⁷

References to birds of prey primarily serve as an omen and forewarn of the fate of the young girl Angèle Vertigues whose birthday is being celebrated in the novel. But birds also cast their ominous shadow over other inhabitants of the building. To give but a few examples of this recurring motif:⁸ Angèle is evoked as "vierge et grand oiseau" (p. 70); Samuel Léonard, an Egyptologist, is surrounded by "idéogrammes d'oiseaux" (p. 196); his Egyptian servant Ahmed sees the "derniers milans" (p. 239); Jean Ralon, who is both Catholic priest and scholar of Egyptian culture, visualizes great birds (p. 218) in a dream where certain parts of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* are enacted, while his brother Alexis sleeps in sheets which in the nocturnal darkness give the impression of being "[de] longues ailes" (p. 244). Virginie Ralon, their mother, recognizes that the birds are an omen and linked with a *passage* (p. 56). But she does not know their significance unlike her son Jean, who, as a result of his devotion to the study of Egyptian works, can begin to interpret the knowledge communicated by the birds, although he refuses to impart his knowledge.

The wings of Horus frozen on de Vere's painting prefigure the shape made by the dead girl's prostrate body, lying as it does in the form of an X. This shape may be understood as a desacralized cross as well as a mark denoting erasion. In the interview, already indicated, Butor told Georges Charbonnier that the form of the X might be understood as a "rature." He went on to elaborate upon this in terms of an erasion of guilt, thus suggesting that through Angèle some form of purification ceremony is taking place. In the novel, the Christian cross and the X-shaped cross are thematically, and at one point visually connected, one being placed on top of the other with the X shape of the Egyptian bird dominant as shown in Alexis's dream where "le calvaire est caché par le grand corbeau d'ombre" (p. 215).

Now according to the twentieth-century adept Fulcanelli, whose formative influence over Butor is seen in the retrospective vision of *Portrait de l'Artiste en jeune singe*,⁹ X can be an hieroglyph of glass: "X . . . hiéroglyphe grec du verre . . . matière pure entre toutes . . . et celle qui approche le plus de la perfection."¹⁰ In Butor's novel the artist Martin de Vere, read as *verre*, proves to be an agent in the passing over of the bird which symbolizes Angèle's death. This dark foreboding omen begins to cast a definite shadow over the fictional world as the earlier chapters under the guidance of Venus are left behind to prepare for the influence of Saturn: "Et l'on devrait changer la page du

⁷Charbonnier, p. 81.

⁸For other references to birds see *Passage de Milan* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), pp. 42, 56, 68, 108, 112, 147, 167, 170, 193, 196, 215, 221, 232, 239, 243, 244, 276. All references are to this edition.

⁹Michel Butor, *Portrait de l'artiste en jeune singe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

¹⁰Fulcanelli (pseudonym), *Les Demeures Philosophales et le symbolisme hermétique dans ses rapports avec l'art sacré et l'esotérisme du Grand-Oeuvre* (Paris: Omnium Littéraire, 1960), I, 143.

calendrier, Saturne supplantant Venus (p. 164). Here is an indication that Angèle will be eclipsed by Saturn, and that Planetary influences will affect events. This is exemplified in the fact that de Vere's painting is divided into twelve parts which he terms "maisons" understood now both as a reference to the block of flats in which the drama is enacted, and to the houses of the zodiac. Moreover, the alchemist Michael Maier, another acknowledged influence on Butor's formative years, expresses the view that the united pair must be locked in a "maison de verre."¹¹

To return to the bird symbolism, Horus can be said in this novel to represent transmutation. Like the alchemical *corbeau*, it is the "emblème mystérieux de mystérieuses opérations."¹² The priest Jean Ralon includes in his readings concerning Egypt, chapter LXVIII of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* where it is stated that the deceased takes the form of a bird in preparation for the flight to the boat of the Egyptian sun-god Ra. In the novel, it is Angèle who takes the form of a bird in the mind of Louis Lécuyer, the cousin of the two priests. He first conceives her emergence as a bird in these strange thoughts which pass through his mind during the birthday party: "Angèle seule est véritable au milieu de ces squelettes . . . Que l'on me laisse me baigner dans son chaud mercure, dans ses ombres pourpres, ses petits lacs. Votre corps est couvert de plumes, Angèle, juste au-dessous de votre peau, minces autour des yeux, amples sur votre ventre . . ." (p. 193). This prefigures Angèle's death in accordance with Egyptian tradition, but it also reveals a connection of alchemical symbols at work in the novel, the idea of alchemical transformation being suggested by references to "mercure." Furthermore the alchemists regarded Mercurius (*mercure*) as the "Virgin" and Angèle is the "vierge." If we further borrow from alchemical tradition, we can say that Mercurius is also a queen. In the novel, Angèle is the "queen" depicted on the playing cards. Thus alchemical thought can be seen to provide the connecting link between symbols.

Butor's *Passage de Milan* proclaims the magical and prefiguratory function of words and especially of proper names. Since the publication of *Passage de Milan*, Butor has discussed the symbolic nature of proper names in several of his essays, including those on Baudelaire,¹³ Breton,¹⁴ Apollinaire¹⁵ and Proust.¹⁶ In *Histoire extraordinaire, essai sur un rêve de Baudelaire*, a work which endows a particular significance to birds and to the "langage des oiseaux," Butor argues that this major symbol of Baudelaire's poetry arose as a response to his name, albeit a distortion of it.¹⁷ We can compare this with Butor's remarks on his own name:

¹¹Michael Maier, *L'Atalante fugitive* (Paris: Librairie de la Medici, 1969), p. 108, writes ". . . enfermés. En une maison de verre."

¹²Fulcanelli, p. 46.

¹³Michel Butor, *Histoire extraordinaire, essai sur un rêve de Baudelaire*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1961).

¹⁴Michel Butor, "Heptaèdre héliotrope," *Répertoire III*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1968), pp. 325-50.

¹⁵Butor, "Monument de rien pour Apollinaire," *Répertoire III*, pp. 269-305.

¹⁶Michel Butor, "Les Sept femmes de Gilbert le mauvais," *Répertoire IV* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974), p. 313.

¹⁷Butor, *Histoire extraordinaire*, p. 233.

"Enfin l'on sait bien que certains des poèmes les plus fameux fourmillent de références aux oiseaux . . .

Une telle constance, il nous faut la relier au nom même de Baudelaire. Je sais ce qu'un enfant peut souffrir des plaisanteries faites sur son nom. En ce qui concerne notre poète, rappelons-nous quelle fureur provoquaient chez lui les fautes d'impression transformant Baudelaire en Beaudelaire . . .

J'ai parlé tout à l'heure du pingouin comme du dandy des oiseaux. Traduisez cette expression dans le langage de la fin du XVIIIe siècle ou du début du XIXe, vous obtiendrez le 'beau de l'air.'"

“. . . s'il est possible de chercher aux syllabes Michel Butor de lointaines acceptations jargonnesques, ou de les fouiller par anagrammes et calembours, c'est la signification courante, l'injure qu'est pour beaucoup mon patronyme qui m'a environné dès mon enfance, c'est l'oiseau qu'il désigne dont j'ai fait très tôt une sorte d'animal totémique pour redresser cette hostilité de la langue . . .”¹⁸

This is an example of Butor's tendency to use anagrams and puns in attaching significance to proper names. The term “langage des oiseaux” used by Butor in *Histoire extraordinaire* has a special meaning in hermetic literature, as testified by Fulcanelli who refers to “la cabale hermétique que les vieux maîtres appelaient la langue des oiseaux.”¹⁹ Indeed it will be argued that *Passage de Milan* can be said to draw its meaning from the “language” of the bird.

Names enable a secret relationship to be suggested between such different people as Léonard and the Ralon brothers. Leonard's name when rearranged provides most of the letters of Ale(x)andr(i)e. Alexis too is associated with that city because of the first letters of his name. The connection is reinforced because Alexis's correspondence is addressed to Alexandria, the reputed home of alchemy according to many historians of alchemy including E. Holmyard.²⁰ Jean, on the other hand, researches into Egyptian mythology. Thus both of the Ralon brothers are significantly connected with Egyptian tradition. The Christian Alexis finds his true role in the structure of fictional meaning when his name is fused with the Egyptologist Léonard's, Alexi(s) and Lé(o)nard being rearranged to form Alexandrie, thereby revealing that unknown to themselves, they need each other in order to complete a relationship which finds its significance in an acceptance of the influence of Egyptian culture. As the reader arranges the different names and parts of names, he finds clues to the deeper meanings of the text.

When we read Angèle's name as ANGE/AILE two aspects of her “self,” namely the outer Christian “angel” and the wing denoting in the novel the power of the Egyptian bird, are placed in juxtaposition. Angèle's virginal quality is suggested by her surname since the *vierge* is contained within Vertigues. It becomes clear that, although she does not know it, she represents the conflict of two opposing religions symbolized by the bird and the virgin. Vincent, an adolescent of the Mogne family who lives on the second floor of the apartment building, expresses this when (without being aware of the meaning) he comments: “. . . il est certain qu'il y a chez Angèle un aspect vierge et grand oiseau, à peine révélé . . .” (p. 170). But she does no more than act out the role allotted to her by her name and then further emphasized in the painting. The *dame centrale* of de Vere's canvas clearly prefigures Angèle's eventual fate. Moreover, we might even go so far as to suggest that she is the *dame-oiselle* such as Butor discovered in a study of André Breton written several years later. There, Butor argued for a symbolic connection between birds and women which he summed up in the *calembour* “femme-oiseau, dame-oiselle.”²¹

The narrative of *Passage* develops by means of the image of the bird in conjunction with different wordplays relating to names. Angèle Vertigues must be read as *ange/aile*, *vierge* and *reine* if we are to understand how the events of the night are anticipated in her name, and to see how the changing word

¹⁸Butor, “La Prosodie de Villon,” *Répertoire IV*, p. 111.

¹⁹Fulcanelli, p. 68.

²⁰E. Holmyard, *Alchemy*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 22.

²¹Butor, “Heptaèdre héliotrope,” *Répertoire III*, p. 337.

patterns structure the novel. Angèle anticipates the *aigle* as *ange/aile* undergoes yet another transformation. At a given moment, the bird on the painting is described as like an eagle: "Cet as que j'ai voulu semblable à un aigle en plein vol" (p. 121). Now both the *ange* and the *aigle* can be interpreted in the context of alchemy, and they have been analyzed by the documentor of alchemy, Albert Poisson.²² In addition, it may be noted that traditionally the eagle is the bird of Saturn. We know that the latter part of *Passage de Milan* is placed under the influence of Saturn. Louis is Saturn, and then the eagle, and both he and Angèle may be said to be joined together or even "married" if her name is read again as *ange-aile*. This union is prefigured in another way since Angèle is the *reine* dismissing her valets at the party: "La reine renvoyait un à un ses valets" (p. 242), and the queen of hearts is married to the king on the painting. The Vertigues parents hold the party with the intention of finding an acceptable suitor for their daughter, a theme anticipated by the arrangement of playing cards. Indeed the thoughts of Louis and Angèle cross in their dreams of future marriage. In his drunken vision, Louis imagines her dressed in yellow with grey ostrich feathers. Since the two colors are specifically used in the painting, they create now a further connection of which Angèle could not be aware, between herself and the painted world. The thought of ostrich feathers provides a reinforcement of the Egyptian symbolism running throughout the novel; Osiris, the god of the underworld, being traditionally depicted as wearing them. As the images swirl in Louis's mind, Egyptian and Christian symbols once more interlock when the Virgin is transformed into the goddess Bastet with her cat's heads: ". . . la statue de la Vierge a une tête de chatte" (p. 264). Bastet is looked upon as the Egyptian equivalent of Venus, thus we are provided with a further oblique reference to Angèle here. Alchemical and Egyptian symbols fuse in Louis's thoughts, the alchemical influence being at its height when he imagines Angèle as a "crowned Virgin": "C'est un beau, c'est un grand mariage, disent les gens à la sortie du cinéma illuminé. Tout est brillant à l'intérieur; la salle est comble. Une procession d'enfants jonche l'allée de roses blanches. Angèle à ses côtés, vêtue d'une éblouissante robe jaune presque blanche, brodée de fils d'argent et de plumes d'autruche grises, avec des roses à ses tempes, et d'autres parsemées sur sa poitrine et ses épaules, voilée, incroyablement coiffée d'une couronne qui se termine en paratonnerre noué de fils de soie de diverses couleurs . . ." (p. 193).

To consider further linguistic associations, the novel is structured upon the flight (vol) of the bird, a deliberately ambiguous term since it also indicates the theft (vol) planned by Henri Delétang, one of the guests of the party. Several of the participants in the drama have something to do with a *vol* of one kind or another. Ahmed is described as being "comme un voleur" (p. 100); Félix is caught as if "en flagrant délit du vol" (p. 40). Alexis, on the other hand, asks: "Pourquoi donc le voleur s'est-il introduit dans ma nuit?" (p. 185); while at the party, Gérard, jealous of his brother Vincent, holds a monologue with himself in which he imagines giving to Angèle the ambiguous warning: ". . . il [Vincent] vous volera" (p. 175). These many anagrams and word associations reinforce the significance of hermetic thought.

In addition to names, numbers have a major connecting function in the novel, and like the *Cabbala*, Butor's *Passage* reveals the future by numbers. Triangular forms presaging death combine with the image of the bird when wings become triangles and triangles become wings. Birds can be said to have the numerological significance for Butor of five, originating in the five letters of his own surname (*butor* being of course a type of bird). Now the number of the

²²Albert Poisson, *Théories et symboles des alchimistes*, (Paris: Bibliothèque Chacornac, 1891), p. 81.

apartment building is 15, a multiple of 3 and 5, understood as the bird (5) and the triangle (3). It should be noted that Butor remains within esoteric tradition when he endows words with numerical significance in this way. The number of the building has important connections with Egypt since the passages from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* which provide the foundations of Jean Ralon's dream prescribe a journey through 15 doors of the underworld. The number is further linked with a series of "magical" coincidences as a gust of wind from open windows simultaneously blows out 15 candles on Angèle's cake, and blows the sketches for de Vere's painting some 15 centimetres. Thus the bird-triangle emerges as a symbol of major importance although it is not until the close of the novel that it becomes visible, and then only for Louis: "Il [Louis] regarde par terre; les dessins du tapis, l'iran, les oiseaux en triangle qui deviennent visibles" (p. 276).

In addition to birds, playing cards, endowed with a particular symbolic value, are part of de Vere's canvas. It must not be forgotten that Egypt is often regarded as the birthplace of playing cards. The cards of the painting, like the bird, have a role to play in telling the future. The queen is joined by the king with the ace close by. In *Passage de Milan*, the ace firstly symbolizes death, but like the bird, it has a dual function. This would fit with a remark made much later by Butor in an essay on Rabelais. There he states that "les sages égyptiens liaient l'Apollon à l'as."²³ In the same essay Butor argues that numbers and cards are endowed with symbolic value in Rabelais's work.

The bird is represented at the center of the painting, that part which is eventually destroyed. Thoughts of birds reemerge as Jean Ralon dreams of a passage from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* which is spoken by Horus. The paradox of light and darkness is maintained here since Jean Ralon accompanies the sun-god Ra part of the way on his journey through the underworld, but because the priest does not have faith in the right words and refuses to acknowledge the power of words and names like the true believer of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, he is barred from following the complete path prescribed in that book, a path by which two men become birds and accompany Ra to the end of his journey. To return to the playing cards, Angèle is mistaken when she thinks she knows the secret of cards (p. 243), as is Léonard when he believes that he could arrange the cards his own way: ". . . je vois bien que je me conduisais, croyant mener le jeu de cartes . . ." (p. 272). The symbolic function of the playing cards depends upon the interplay of the two colors, red and black. In a fascinating analysis of Stendhal entitled "Fantaisie chromatique à propos de Stendhal," Butor suggests that Stendhal's works are structured according to a vast system of analogical grids in which the pivotal colors, red and black, can provide a starting point for a *fantaisie* linking playing cards and colors.²⁴ *Passage de Milan* seems to be composed according to similar concerns: a grid of analogy, part of which is a symbolic interplay of two colors. In *Passage de Milan*, many characters are connected with the black color of the bird. A further connection with the color black and the bird is provided by Alexis when it is seen that in his name are concealed the *ailles* and the X shape made by the bird, as *ailles* and X are rearranged to form Alexis. Red, on the other hand, symbolizes shame and blood in the novel reminding the reader that Angèle's whiteness is stained by the ritualistic *passage*. A red card projected on the painting is that of the queen of hearts, a role prepared for Angèle by the presence of *reine* in her name.

²³Butor, "Les Hiéroglyphes et les dés," *Répertoire IV*, p. 158.

²⁴Michel Butor, "Fantaisie Chromatique à propos de Stendhal," *Les Cahiers du Chemin*, 21 (15 April 1974), pp. 86-114.

If de Vere's canvas prepares for the future, the artist never gives any clear indication that he understands what he is expressing, and the prophetic significance of it is unknown to him. Neither does any one of the inhabitants ever have enough information to piece together the clues of this esoteric puzzle: "Nul de la maison ne peut entendre l'air dans son entier" (p. 87). Several of the people in the building at some time make conscious or unconscious reference to the painting. Thus Benedicte who has seen the painting can say of Angèle: "Un peu jeune pour la dame de coeur, mais la dame de son tableau n'a rien à voir avec la nourrice des jeux de cartes ordinaires" (p. 170), and again: "Et sa robe lui va . . . a la lumière électrique elle paraît blanche comme le carré du type au-dessus" (p. 169). Léonard is referred to as "le vieux roi" (p. 139), while Vincent speaks of "l'aimable jeune homme qui me sert de symétrique" (p. 171), thus alluding, without knowing it, to the painting on which cards are symmetrically arranged. Ahmed repeats the expression "Dans ces maisons" in a moment of acute nostalgia for his homeland, and also alludes to the "croix d'ombre," both of which refer the reader back to the painting. Thus a strange and complex array of coincidences reveal the presence of magical interconnecting forces at work.

The complicated series of resonances can be seen in terms of magnetic fields drawing images together by a process of "attraction." Indeed the room of the party is the place "où se lèvent les champs magnétiques" (p. 103) and Angèle is caught up in the magnetic field and its poles ("dans ce champ soumis d'ordinaire à d'autres poles," (p. 126). Like a magical text, *Passage de Milan* suggests that the fate of individuals depends upon mysterious forces which are expressed in prefigurations and coincidences. The term "voler" used to describe the movement of the curtains (p. 179), links the bird with magic. As the guests gather around Angèle in the cake scene, the fete takes on the dimensions of an occult ceremony, with the victim bewitched and awaiting sacrifice (p. 259). Suggestions of a primitive ritual are evoked in such passages as "On sent sous sa [Angèle] blancheur un autre corps plus sombre et obstiné qui aime les danses sauvages" (p. 170). The party is seen by Louis in his drunken thoughts as cannibalistic, and he envisages Angèle's parted flesh from which emerges the bird recognizable by its wings: ". . . alors je voudrais voir la déchirure bien nette, les ailes qui s'écartent" (p. 191). Gérard Mogne also imagines the taste of flesh: "Le goût du sang dans les dents, le morceau qui roule sur la langue, et les fibres que l'on sent toutes fraîches, déchirées" (p. 174). Thus the fete is increasingly connected with primitive beliefs and practices which find their significance in esoteric traditions.

The passage of the bird prefigured in so many ways will lead to the possibility of a new life in Egypt. De Vere's painting provides an indication of an arcane knowledge as well as of the power of Egypt, although the artist himself is little aware of what he has created, or to what extent it lays out the future and reveals a fatal sequence of events. In short, all at 15, *passage de Milan*, are affected by the painting with its visual, linguistic, and numerological secrets.