

MARY LYDON

Perpetuum Mobile. A Study of the Novels and Aesthetics of Michel Butor Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1980. Pp. xv + 295.

This is a significant addition to the growing number of book-length studies on Michel Butor. Professor Lydon analyzes the extraordinary scope of Butor's work and explains why he abandoned novel writing for "mobile" forms. The search for new forms is central to Butor's purpose and is nowhere confined to gratuitous ornament, for technique and metaphysics cannot be separated one from the other. Each work invites the reader to question the nature of representation and, ultimately, to reflect on the meaning of literature to which Butor's devotion is no less than total.

Professor Lydon's book consists of nine chapters, a foreword by Butor, and a bibliography which, while useful, is not current. In chapter 1, "The Novel and Novelty," she discusses the new novel, the newness of which lies not in a distinction between the new and the traditional novel, but between the new novel and the popular view that all novels should imitate nineteenth-century models. Techniques of fiction have always been in evolution and to retain conventions of one hundred years ago is both lazy and dishonest. Like other new novelists, Butor is preoccupied with formal experiment, the result being that some short-sighted critics have attempted to isolate form from content in his works, a distinction which Butor emphatically rejects.

In chapter 2, Lydon argues that the reader need not be overwhelmed by Butor's changing formal techniques since he makes strenuous efforts to guide his reader. After dealing with objections which have been raised to Butor's critical method, she goes on to show how his essays shed light on his critical purpose. Criticism is not only a necessary complement of art, it is both *critique* and *invention*. Furthermore it is a collaborative enterprise, the effective critic being one who can prolong the writer's invention as Butor does in *Histoire extraordinaire*, a text which, she contends, has a strong claim to being the *chef d'oeuvre* of Butor's critical endeavor.

Other works by Butor are divided into three phases and treated chronologically.

There is a consistent effort to establish in each phase the concept of a self-conscious artist choosing his forms with scrupulous care. The first phase comprises the four novels with one chapter devoted to each. *Passage de milan* discussed in chapter 3 is the matrix of Butor's work, and although it is not structured as rigorously as *Degrés*, it reveals his preoccupation with formal technique. Its originality lies in Butor's use of "realistic art" to show how false our conception of reality is. The fourth chapter, "The Music of Time," argues that the diary is a perfect form through which Jacques Revel can begin to organize his experience and seek out its inner meaning. "The Train of Thought," chapter 5, provides an excellent analysis of the role played by art, and particularly Michelangelo's Sistine chapel, in Delmont's decision to reject his original plan in order to write the book which will be the instrument of his salvation. Although *La Modification* is a highly complex novel, it is "easier to read" than other works of Butor. This factor along with its themes of escape and journeys has caused it to be misread as a romantic novel. Yet it is in fact a critique of the novel both on moral and technical grounds, and "a critique of contemporary society as well" (p. 119). *Degrés* examined in chapter 6, emphasizes Butor's view that a book is the means by which one may arrive at understanding. Moreover, *Degrés* is the real pivotal work in which Vernier in his attempt to show the overall connection between things, looks forward to the break with tradition exemplified by *Mobile*.

The second phase consists of those works which Jean Roudaut placed under the heading of *Romanesque II*. Although Professor Lydon finds the term misleading, she accepts the grouping proposed by Roudaut. Thus chapter 6, "New Departures," provides an analysis of *Mobile*, *6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde*, *Reseau aérien*, and *Description de San Marco*. This chapter, following as it does upon the detailed study of the novels, is disappointing. In spite of her contention that *Romanesque II* may be dealt with as a group because of the shared similarities, the result is a rather hurried survey. That is not to say however that the chapter lacks an original thesis. Indeed, Professor Lydon takes previous critics to task, arguing that despite first impressions to the contrary, the four novels may be more challenging to the reader than the texts which comprise *Romanesque II*. This is because the novels contain no overt instructions as to how we are to read them.

Chapter 8 is devoted to *Portrait de l'artiste en jeune singe*, an unusual book set apart from the others and falling outside of the boundary of the three phases. With remarkable insight, she contends that the balance between the discipline and the indulgence of art is perfectly maintained in this ironic and cunning text which contains "all the earnestness of a religion and all the playfulness of a game" (p. 228). The final chapter, "Words and Images" discusses the three volumes of *Illustrations* and *Travaux d'approche*. Although Butor's purpose remains unchanged, he is an increasingly isolated craftsman viewed with suspicion by writers and critics alike. Advances in technique are based upon his conviction that interaction between language, the visual arts and music is essential to a fuller understanding of the world. Because Butor no longer provides detailed clues as to possible ways of reading him, many readers have accepted defeat, declaring the new works too difficult and obscure. But Butor devotes his life to writing, and if his readers reciprocate with a commensurate degree of loyalty and perseverance, they will be richly rewarded.

Apart from reservations about the early cut off date for the study (1973), and slight doubts about a format which allows no place for such an interesting text as *Le Genie du lieu*, I find the central argument of Professor Lydon's book both lucid and convincing. Throughout, a masterly balance is achieved between the continuity of Butor's themes and the originality of each individual work. In short, this is a solid analysis of Butor's experiments in form, and one which warns us that "failure to grasp the sense of Butor's effort is failure to seize our cultural context" (p. 256).

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PATRICK RAFROIDI

Irish Literature in English: The Romantic Period

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The first of these two volumes is an essay in which Professor Rafroidi of the University of Lille (France) attempts to prove that Ireland had a literary Romantic Period from 1789 to 1850. It contains an introduction and three major divisions: the Prelude to Irish Romanticism; Nationalist Romanticism; the Impact of Irish Romanticism on Europe. The second volume is a bibliography with four divisions: a general bibliography of historical and critical studies, reference works, and anthologies; Irish authors and their works, criticism, and Rafroidi's biographical notes; Irish authors and their principal French translations; major Irish periodicals from 1789-1850.

The identification, description, and evaluation of a literary movement is a scholarly task saturated with difficulties and one need only consider the Renaissance and two of its major commentators, Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds, to discover the wide range of theories which a literary or cultural movement can generate. Though the methodology needed to comprehend any literary period is fearfully complex, I suggest that three requirements are fundamental. First, there must be an explanation of the intellectual bases to the period. This explanation must go beyond any particular manifestation of the movement (e.g., for the Romantic period an interest in the past or for the English Augustan period an emphasis on the couplet). The explanation must clarify the means by which men and women attempted to explain the world in which they lived. Professor Rafroidi does not do this. His explanation includes the usual characteristics of the English Romantic period: the search for the past, the triumph of the particular over the general, a concern for the "satanic and the horrific," an emphasis on patriotism, the presence of a unique dialect ("Irish-English"), the exploration of unique traits within the country researched, in this instance Ireland as an "uncontestably true" area for Romantic scenery and legendary tales. The characteristics are interesting and essential to the study but they do not adequately distin-