

in tune with the modernism of multiple time schemes and their comic possibilities. Finally, W.P. Kinsella is a moralist whose vision of man is tonic and stable; as Neil Randall recently demonstrated, Kinsella uses humor to unite "theme, style, and character" into a beneficent whole.<sup>5</sup>

## Problems of Representation in Butor's *Oï*

SEDA A. CHAVDARIAN, *Diablo Valley College*

In spite of its tremendous diversity, Michel Butor's work has an underlying current that connects all of it together. While deeply anchored in ethno-cultural and mythological references, his books are attempts to understand and define artistic expression. In his earlier novels, Butor comments on the literary process indirectly through a fictional author, but becomes directly involved later on. Among the many aspects of artistic expression pursued in his work is literary representation. Butor's interest in it dates back to his early works and is closely connected to his concept of *genius loci*, first communicated to us in *Le Génie du lieu* (1957). Butor once distinguished modern civilization from the ancients as people of the book rather than of places. Monuments were the ancients' way of giving expression to their reality, their way of "reading" it.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, by studying the place, Butor examines the notion of representation. In this study, we shall briefly look at Butor's approach in *Oï* (1971).<sup>2</sup>

Subtitled *Le Génie du lieu 2*, *Oï* is a sophisticated account of Butor's voyages to America and the Far East. While on the surface his work is a special kind of travel log, it treats essential questions posed by Butor in all of his oeuvre, in particular, the literary expression of creative energy. There is the resurgence of the theme of writing, where the author himself and not a fictional character is hard at work trying to recount certain events. We shall specifically examine three different attempts of representation in the book: a description of Mt. Sandia, an explosion in Santa Barbara, and most importantly, the Shalako ceremony of the Zuni Indians.

The problems of representing something by writing are studied through the author's effort of giving a picture in words of Mt. Sandia, which he is contemplating from his window. The rectangular form of the window is the rectangle of the pages that we have opened. The picture of the mountain through the window is what the author tries to transfer to the rectangle of the book. He wishes to cover the blankness of the page by words, just as the mountain fills the space of the window. There are problems involved in trying to imitate a model. The difficulty of his task

---

<sup>5</sup> Neil Randall, "Shoeless Joe: Fantasy and the Humor of Fellow-Feeling," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 33 (Spring 1987), 173-83.

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Marie Le Sidaner, *Michel Butor voyageur à la roue* (Paris: Encre, 1979), p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Butor, *Oï* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). All references will be made in the text.

arises from the instability of his image. The mountain changes every minute, rendering the written description valid only for a given moment, becoming totally unrealistic and alienated the next. By his writing, he is trying to create a still picture of an object that changes constantly and does not allow an exact imitation. Since it cannot be true to the image, the author is having difficulty in trying to find a way to characterize his writing. He is constantly questioning himself, "est-ce un discours?"; "est-ce une description?" The writing becomes at best a series of impressions and glimpses of the mountain. The relationship between Mt. Sandia and the author becomes that of struggle and resistance. Throughout the attempted description, are recurrent comments such as "raturer une ligne recommence" (p. 17), or the use of different words to show the arbitrariness of their choice. The mountain resists any effort of containment by giving impressions of different images—sometimes that of a woman or of a pyramid. The capitalized words interspersed throughout his descriptions denote the mountain's side of the conversation, so to speak: "résistance," "permanence," "défi." By its permanent mutism, the mountain defies his effort. Imitation becomes impossible not only because of the object itself but because of the author, who may see the object differently from others. The very last description of Mount Sandia—175 pages later—is in no way different in character than all of the others. There has been no meaningful progress.

The study of representation is continued on a much smaller scale by the attempted description of the early morning hours in Santa Barbara when Butor and his wife are awakened by an explosion. In approximately thirty pages devoted to this section, we are given eleven different versions of the same scene that becomes more elaborate with each additional version.<sup>3</sup> However, by the time we reach the last two, the details have filtered out of the description again. Rather than being a rendering of a particular scene, the entire section is an exercise of words around Mrs. Butor's question "qu'est-ce que c'est?" Here again, the descriptions are nothing but impressions of what really happened.

The third and the most important example is the section that describes the Zuni Shalako ceremony (the great fertility ritual performed at the winter solstice) which at first glance seems to be an exact rendering of Ruth Bunzel's account of it.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the description of the ceremony is an imitation. But during this process, Butor shows the true nature of imitation. Although he admits the source of his text, he is not exactly copying it but establishing his own song of the Shalakos, thus making imitation a means of creation at the same time. This process is clearly shown in his rendering of the Shalako song. A careful comparison of the song that Butor has recorded in *Oñ* and the ones in the Bunzel texts shows a clear divergence. In her text, Ruth Bunzel first gives an English version of the song and then an English-Zuni one with the two languages juxtaposed on the same page. When imitating the song, Butor takes different parts of each section and puts them together as one completed and continuous song.<sup>5</sup> At this point, although he makes variations in his imitation, he remains faithful to the line by line rendering of the song, omitting only one or two lines here and there. But from a certain point in the book (p. 304), he takes one particular section of the song and breaks it up and repeats it fourteen times before coming back to the regular verse. The repeated section is essentially the following verses:

je suis sorti j'ai regardé  
de tous côtés j'ai imité

<sup>3</sup> For some examples, see pp. 77, 82, 84, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Bunzel, "Introduction to Zuni Ceremonialism," *U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology*, 1929-30 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1932).

<sup>5</sup> See Bunzel, pp. 711, 711-12, 714, 763-64, 769-70, 771-72.

souffle mouillé du vent de l'ouest  
puis j'ai atteint le lieu nommé  
depuis toujours source au cresson (p. 303)

At each repetition, he changes something either in the order or the choice of the words. This repetition and divergence is Butor's means of making up his own song. By the emphasis of the song and by repetition, he gives importance to the section that concerns the point of beginning, source, and imitation. At each repetition of the above verse, the word *source* is singled out and repeated vertically on the left margin.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Butor's notion of imitation is revealed indirectly through the Shalako ritual. The ceremony is essentially an invocation of the gods through imitation; but here, the word acquires a very different meaning. The coming of the gods is accomplished through the mask which the dancers wear to impersonate them and bring them to life. What is extremely interesting about the mask is, as Ruth Bunzel points out, the total lack of realism. In the Zuni ceremony, imitation does not mean an exact reproduction of something but the copying of its idea, with the imitator being free to "fill in" the parts. It is an idea that is imitated in many different forms. The tool used to bring about the imitation—the mask—rather than resembling the source, is totally dissimilar.

By manipulating and experimenting with Ruth Bunzel's texts, Butor illustrates, in a very subtle way, how imitation and representation become means of creation. He uses the Shalako song to express something entirely different where imitation becomes the total lack of likeness. In this way, *Où* becomes not only an account of Butor's voyages, but a medium through which he experiments with different possibilities of expression. Seen in this light, a mountain, an explosion, a ritual, by themselves become pretexts to unveil for a deeper understanding of the creative process. The ambiguity of the title of this work rests on the notion that *Où* (with the accent) can be another "Génie du lieu" where, while writing of his voyages, he studies the effect of a particular place on him; but it can also be *Où* (with the accent crossed off) indicating that it can be something else. That something else, we believe, is a discourse on representation, an exercise in writing.

---

<sup>6</sup> See Butor, *Où*, pp. 310-11.