

Fictions in Fiction: Henriette and Cécile in Michel Butor's *A Change of Heart*

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While over time a novel stays the same, we, its readers, change. Ten years ago as a student, when I first wrote about Michel Butor's *La Modification*, 1957 (*A Change of Heart*) my paper differed greatly from the one that follows. In those days I enjoyed the optimism of having most of my career and personal life before me. I believed (as only someone who had written many essay exams on the subject could) that good men repeatedly face an existentially crazy world, and I was adept at keeping separate my feminist and non-feminist criticism. Léon Delmont, I wrote in that paper, dwells in a chaotic world off the train. During a journey between Paris and Rome, he bravely faces issues of values and life-style. He decides not to bring his Roman mistress, Cécile, to live with him in Paris and not to separate from his longtime wife, Henriette. Although I noted that Léon's decision seems to him "morally and psychologically healthy," I added--sorrowfully accepting Léon's view of his problem--that it condemns him "to what may be a dissatisfying existence in Paris with Henriette."¹

Now, like Léon Delmont, I am in my forties. I am no longer required to imagine the problems of middle age. I am middle aged and I realize I've changed my view of Léon's middle-aged crisis. There are at least two reasons why. One is that time has freed me from student status. I no longer study under male professors whose views, even without urging, I felt compelled to reflect. Another is that I've made peace with having a sex-linked perspective on what I read. To deepen that peace, however, I've looked again at works by male writers, to "re-vision"-- as Judith Fetterley puts it in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*--their meanings.²

Such a revisioning of *A Change of Heart* begins with a comment made by Butor himself during a lecture at Macalester college in St. Paul. Commenting on narrative perspective in *A Change of Heart*, Butor mentioned the objections of French feminists to his use of second-person narration. Feminist critics had felt, he said, coerced to accept Léon's perspective on the world and they doubly resented the obviousness and force of a coercion usually expressed in more subtle terms. Recognizing that I had implicitly accepted Delmont's assessments of Henriette and Cécile, I wanted to study the characters again.

¹ Mary Beth Pringle, "Butor's Room Without a View: The Train Compartment in *La Modification*," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 5.3 (1985) 112-18.

² Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978)

Since I could not encounter them except through Léon Delmont, what could I learn about these two women? Hardly anything, I realized, as my first rereading reminded me that my gaze is perforce Léon's. Though wife and lover are the source of Léon's angst, Léon knows shockingly little about Henriette to whom he has long been married. He knows even less about Cécile in whom he professes to be passionately interested. Butor's art lies in revealing Léon's ignorance of his primary intimate contacts and his ability to blithely make judgments about these women's desires and motivations. Such judgments are pure "Léon"—limited by his obsession with himself—and reflect his fear of aging, his assumption that women are either saints or whores, his horror of being alone, and his inability to be intimate with either woman. And he does more than make judgments about Henriette and Cécile. He literally creates these two dismal characters. In the process, he reveals himself to be not only self-absorbed but lacking inner resources. Such a reading is a far cry from the typical: Martin Seymour-Smith sees Léon coming to "tragic self-awareness."³ Jerrold Lanes describes Léon as "Everyman" whose "destination takes on the character of a collective destiny."⁴ Martin Price claims "in Blake's words, the eye sees more than the heart knows, but the heart [Léon's] - as use of the second person seems to imply - is one which commands great sympathy."⁵ One wonders whether Butor today regards his hero as a tragic figure or as a perennial adolescent, selfishly rationalizing his conduct and giving his obsessions human form, or as both. Proof that Léon thinks he has matured on his trip is the book he smugly pledges to write. It will, he claims, "bring to life in the form of literature, this crucial episode in your experience, the movement that went on in your mind while your body was being transferred from one station to another."⁶ Such a reading argues for a "change of heart" where none seems to me to have occurred.

That Léon fears aging, even yearns to be a child again, is a dominant motif in *A Change of Heart*. Having hurried to board the train to Rome, Léon is terrified of the muscle strain he feels from having toted his suitcase through the station. To himself he mourns, "No, it's not merely the comparative earliness of the hour that makes you feel so unusually feeble, it's age, already trying to convince you of its domination over your body, although you have only just passed your forty-fifth birthday" (313). Frightened of aging, Léon even resents the birthday party Henriette and his children have thrown in his honor, "the whole scene set to convince you that henceforth you were an elderly man, sobered and tamed" (338). Léon's desire to become a child again is especially apparent when he's around Cécile. On his first visit to her apartment Cécile butters his toast and "once again . . . [he] felt as timid as a youngster" (413). In

³Martin Seymour-Smith, *Who's Who in Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976).

⁴Jerrold Lanes, *Saturday Review* 25 April 1959: 18.

⁵ Martin Price, *Yale Review* 48 January 1959: 598.

⁶ Michel Butor, *Passing Time and a Change of Heart* trans. Jean Stewart (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969).

fact, Léon sees in Cécile a way to avoid growing old. He "would find that peaceful respite in her eyes, in her walk, in her arms, that leisure, that renewed youth, those fresh horizons" (489).

Léon so wants to be a child that he projects onto Cécile the role of "good mother" and eventually that of "bad mother." As good mother Cécile is always delighted to see him, patiently tends to his needs, and understands why he can't immediately separate from Henriette. Once Léon needs to distance himself from her though, he fixates on the disappearance of the qualities he once loved. When, for example, Léon is late for an appointment with Cécile, he notes that she is "very annoyed because she had got everything ready for . . . [him], tea and toast and so on, since [he] . . . had told her the night before that [he] . . . might like that" (421). Thereafter, Cécile's mothering doesn't have a restorative effect: Léon "felt her stroke [his] . . . head, which is already growing a little bald" (430).

When Léon wants to assign responsibility for his aging though, he blames Henriette. Contrasted with "good mother" Cécile's "life-giving power" (472), Henriette is described as "lifeless," as being "that prying corpse from whom you would have parted long ago but for the children" (340-41). In sleep Henriette looks to Léon as if she's a body being prepared to lie in state: ". . . poor Henriette asleep on the other side of the bed, her graying hair spread out on the pillow, her mouth a little open, separated from you by an impassable river of linen" (343). Henriette's aging, in Léon's mind, infects him. He sees her as "all that prohibited [him] . . . from starting life afresh, from sloughing off the old man which [he is] . . . fast becoming" (392).

Cécile, on the other hand, embodies in Léon's mind youthful beauty. Unlike Henriette, Cécile has "jet-black snaking tresses" (387). On the train Léon conjures an early morning vision of Cécile, opening her windows to the morning sun, "tossing back her still-uncombed hair" (356). The image Léon has of Cécile's apartment abounds with freshness, comfort, color: a divan where two can comfortably lounge and "flowers that are always so fresh and so varied" (356). Unlike the grayish Henriette depicted by Léon, Cécile wears colorful clothes, "a wide-pleated, violet-and-crimson patterned dress," a "dark emerald-green corduroy suit." Léon perceives that Cécile's excitement about life reflects in her face making it quiver "like the wind tossing a cluster of gladioli" (357). When Léon is in Rome with Cécile, he, too, feels youthful, as if he's "still young enough in spirit to be able to make good use of [money] . . . in a wonderful life of adventure" (352-53). Léon and Cécile stroll through Rome like young lovers, "[his] . . . arm around her waist or over her shoulders" (353).

Léon's fear of aging is hardly unique. His method of dealing with it is not unusual either. Far from being a model of heroism and "tragic self-awareness," Léon--beginning to end--deludes himself into romanticizing his self-imposed isolation. His failure to become truly (not sexually) intimate with Henriette or Cécile results from his lack of interest in the reality of either woman. Léon's preoccupation is in what females represent in his life, their embodiment of his fantasies. Nor are his fantasies interesting. Rather Léon accepts the easy adolescent male stereotype of woman as angel or whore.

Take Henriette, for instance. On one level Léon cavils at her for being old and boring and suspicious; on another he perceives her to be angelic, a saint. Léon's saintly Henriette could not serve her man more dutifully nor suffer the pain he inflicts more patiently. She is the perfect spouse. She arises at dawn to fix him *café au lait* before he sets out to visit his mistress. She keeps his wardrobe well stocked and serves hot meals promptly. The children appear sane and healthy, no thanks, Léon admits, to himself. She never complains when he leaves; when he returns she greets him at the door and waits for a kiss. She is, in Léon's mind, as faithful as Penelope: Thinking about his next return home, Léon imagines Henriette "waiting for [him] . . . and sewing" (448). The possibility is even posed—"[Y]ou'll realize then that you're in the bedroom, that she's lying in bed sewing, that it's late, that you're tired after your journey, that it's raining outside" (449)—that Léon still accepts sex from Henriette although he professes to despise her. To cement his depiction of Henriette as saint, Léon allows that his wife is comfortable with a religious upbringing that "she makes no attempt to shake off" (463). Though he first refers to her faith in negative terms, calling it "bourgeois," Léon, the sinner, eventually imagines begging forgiveness from his saintly wife: "I promise you, Henriette, as soon as we can, we'll come back to Rome [to see the Vatican you love] together, as soon as the waves of this perturbation have died down, as soon as you've forgiven me." Appropriately he adds, "[W]e won't be so very old" (560).

Although Léon worships Cécile's youthful beauty, in a subtext he reveals his view of her as whore. Besides being willing to participate in Léon's adultery, the "bad Cécile" created by Léon tempts him into sinning. When Léon first meets Cécile on a train, she is wearing "a bright red dress cut low over her sun-tanned bosom . . . her lips were painted almost violet" (365). Significantly, Cécile carries a black handbag (366) and travels third class (371). Léon's behavior related to Cécile, down to the smallest detail, confirms his hidden assumptions about her character and sexuality. On his present trip to Rome he selects "the silky stuff of the purple pajamas which [he] . . . carefully picked out last night for Cécile's benefit from among the variegated elegance of [his] bedroom wardrobe" (329). Not surprisingly, Léon's "whorish" Cécile has little use for the Catholic church with its uncompromising view of adultery. Léon professes to agree with her: "[S]he hates popes and priests as much as you do, and in a far more virulent and emphatic way than you (and that's one reason why you love her so much) . . ." (463). Later, however, he refrains from religious discussions with Cécile, "knowing that she would refuse to understand, through fear of contagion" (454). Although he would doubtlessly deny having done so, Léon treats Cécile in ways that suggest he sees her as little more than a prostitute. Trying to decide where Cécile might live once he brings her to Paris, Léon considers putting her in a "servant's room" close to his home. Once Léon refers to taking Cécile on a "pseudohoneymoon" (414). And always Léon feels the purifying guilt of a man who consorts with whores. On the way home to Paris after a tryst in Rome with Cécile, Léon reports feeling discomfort at facing a photograph from the Sistine chapel, hanging in his train compartment. It is of a "damned soul trying to hide his eyes" (394).

But Henriette and Cécile are absent from the novel in another way. Léon perceives each woman as embodying the values he assigns to the city in which she lives. Henriette is Paris, and Paris for Léon means family and work. The acceptance of responsibility which each implies is a hallmark of maturity, and

Léon accepts neither. Traveling from Rome to Paris, Léon thinks of his family and reports feeling as if he "lost ground with every mile" (439). Too, he is ambivalent about his job selling typewriters. Although he says he despises it, he concedes to himself, "practically the whole of your time is taken up by your profession, even when you leave Paris for some place other than Rome" (352). When in Rome to work Léon is tied to Paris and Henriette. Both are represented by the hotel Albergo Quirinale, a French-style inn where he is served by "smiling obsequious servants" (450). It is "as Cécile noticed . . . a sort of citadel of Henriette's within Rome" (434).

Meanwhile, Cécile, connected with "Rome, brilliant Rome" (341) not including the Vatican, embodies childlike freedom from responsibility. Léon admits that when "[he] dream[s] of Cécile [he is] . . . also dreaming of Rome" (360). In Léon's mind Rome—and therefore Cécile—is a "secret," a "surprise" (343). Rome is where Léon "felt genuine" (435). Compared to Paris with its connection to work and family responsibility, Rome makes Léon feel free "as in the days before [he] . . . assumed [his] . . . responsibilities, before [he] . . . really became successful" (342). In fact Rome is the only place Léon allows himself to take a break from work, which he describes as "a game . . . that might destroy you utterly like a vice, but which hasn't done so, since today you're free, since you're going to find your freedom, which is called Cécile [in Rome]" (352). Gradually, as Léon's disenchantment with Cécile grows, he acknowledges that "it is now certain that you really love Cécile in so far as she represents Rome to you" (518). He even vows to memorialize that connection in the book he plans to write. In it Cécile "would appear in her full beauty, adorned with the glory of Rome which is so perfectly reflected in her" (558). The irony here is that a book, another object, will only confirm the absence of a real Cécile. She is a void into which the desperately disconnected Léon pours meaning.

Léon's first problem, the root of his maturity, is that he has no identity apart from his connection to these two women, and he knows little about either one. A second problem is that he can't bear to be alone. Paris and Rome are the sites of his isolation and he struggles desperately to fill each with female company and, therefore, his life with meaning. Léon's first meeting with Cécile on a train is intensified by his desire to escape loneliness—" [Y]ou wanted so badly to talk to her about yourself" (367)—but even then he goes about escaping selfishly. Once on a solitary, disorienting walk to his Paris apartment Léon recalls an earlier lonely time "when you were neither rich . . . nor married, as though suddenly the very foundations of your life, your solidity, your personal appearance even had deserted you" (452). The memory causes Léon to panic, and he doesn't recover self-confidence until he is safely inside his apartment building. In fact Léon's decision to leave Cécile in Rome is based on his fear of being alone in both cities. If Cécile moves to Paris and he separates from Henriette, there would be days of loneliness during the transition. The reason he has not told Henriette about Cécile's moving to Paris is not that his wife will weep or condemn him, but that "there will be that lonely life in a Paris hotel, the thing you dread above all others" (425). In Rome, once Cécile is ensconced in Paris, Léon would also risk loneliness. He once imagines visiting Rome after Cécile's move to Paris. He sees himself "pining for the woman who drew you there and kept you there" (382). So desperately afraid of loneliness's pain, Léon decides not to tell Cécile what his plans had been nor why the train trip has changed his mind. Why? Because of "that long lonely journey [back to Paris]

ahead of [him]" (524). It is fear of loneliness, not respect for values or religion or the women involved, that causes Léon to decide to leave Cécile in Rome. Fear, terror in the face of change, causes the "little boy" in Léon to accept the status quo.

According to Judith Fetterley in *The Resisting Reader*, female readers often identify against ourselves in works by male writers with male protagonists. In *A Change of Heart* this identification occurs even more definitively because of Butor's use of second-person point of view. Butor insists that readers ally themselves with Léon to the extent that we nearly become him. The perspective is so powerful that I, for one, willingly overlooked the novel's two major female characters with whom I probably share more in common than I do with Léon. With Henriette it is the struggle to rear children, the frustration of living with someone obsessed by work. With Cécile it's the effort to make sense of moral issues in love and work. What distinguishes Henriette and Cécile from Léon is their willingness, even by Léon's account, to strive for intimacy. They are there for him, yet he pushes them away. Of course one can only surmise about Cécile and Henriette. Readers never see them. All we see is what Léon would have us see, and all he sees is himself. Henriette and Cécile are words on a page, fictions within fiction, concoctions of a man driven to assign his lopsided order to the world. Léon tells himself stories about people sharing his train compartment and he tells himself the same about his closest companions. What is sad is that his stories distance him from them rather than bring him closer. He has opportunities for intimacy but, in selfishness, he evades them. As such Léon's life seems hardly tragic, only pitiful. His is the tale of the fitful movements of a self-deluded typewriter seller whose book—if he ever writes one—will contain the meanderings of a fool. It will be filled, as is *A Change of Heart*, with voids instead of people. Who are Henriette and Cécile? Ah, there's a story! Contemporary fiction, of course, argues it can't be told because narrators can't see beyond themselves. Assuming this is true, the writer's obligation is to create a narrator carefully. How much more engaging are the mature though morally complex narrations of say, Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the fictional "Joan Didion" in Joan Didion's *Democracy* (1984), or Butor's lonely hero in *Passing Time* (1957). Despite the narrative limitations of these heroes, readers are enriched by each moment spent in their company.