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MICHEL BUTOR: THE MYTHO-FANTASTIC FUNCTION OF NAMING

Patricia A. Struebig

Michel Butor, a contemporary writer of the French New Novel, now the New New Novel, makes extensive use of naming, repetition of epithet-like phrases, distortions of quotations, sight-sound similarities of words and phrases, to create stories within stories and from other stories, and to evoke an oneiric level which allows times and locations to blend while still remaining separated. Carrying to the extreme the practice of immersion of text within text and meaning within meaning in *Boomerang*, the novel of 1978, the author combines eight different story lines, printed in four different colors, skillfully interweaving with his own narrative the elliptic citation of twenty-three sources ranging from the accounts of adventurers and explorers such as Cook and Bougainville to fantasy voyage writers like Jules Verne, and even aborigine story-tellers.

In this study, the method and purpose of this type of creation is analyzed to show relationship between “new” literary production and “new” society, and the role that naming, as a creative technique, plays in that relationship. Butor himself in *Répertoire II* has indicated that because the world only appears to us for the most part through what we are told about it, in conversations, classrooms, news media, a vital role of the literary text is to restructure information in such a way as to reveal hitherto unsuspected relationships, thereby enriching us with new perspectives and transforming our submission to the media into positive use of them (89-90). Butor’s statement introduces indirectly his method of “restructuring” or “re-using” information from a myriad of sources to create his own literature, and sets this study in motion.

To discuss mytho-fantastic function in Michel Butor’s work, we must begin with a retrospective glance at this creativity, and we must define mythic function both globally and as it performs in this author’s texts. By extending this definition of mythic function in a literary text to encompass the introduction of fantastic levels in writing we can observe the growth not only of Michel Butor as a writer, but of new writings and their reason for being.

Butor’s writing career began in 1954 and continued with the publication of five novels through 1960. For the times these novels were considered non-traditional, difficult to read, out of the ordinary realm, and thus were categorized under the genre type just named, the *Nouveau Roman*. The novel as form disappeared from his repertory with *Degrés* in 1960. As Dean McWilliams explains in “Butor’s American Texts...,” the ritual murder of the novelist-protagonist, and the death of the novel as associated with historicism and its failure to adequately synthesize modern civilization, opened the way to the freer narrative form which Butor has developed from that time forward (261).

In previous research I have discussed Butor’s role as a myth maker, and his novel *La Modification* as the telling of a contemporary myth, that of the search for self in a self-less modern society. The author’s creative production continues to echo this aspect of story telling, and in his critical writing and interviews he stresses that bonding of man to “place” or “space” in the universe that is the stuff of myth and the basis of myth-making.

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, and as the term is used here, a myth is a story told by man to represent in overt terms some aspect of existence which cannot otherwise be “told” (“Asdiwal”). That is, there is a *vérité négative*, “an unwelcome contradiction which is a necessary truth,” in man’s life (Leach 72), which cannot be stated or admitted openly, whether due to societal taboo or to personal unawareness (Lévi-Strauss, “Winnebago”). The role of mythic analysis is, then, to discover through the network of consciously presented details, the subconscious confession which is the meaning of the myth. Lévi-Strauss

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calls this the logic of the myth, and explains that the relationship between this “mytho-logic” and the conscious elements of daily life is not always direct.

Reviewing the stylistic variation and thematic content of Butor’s works uncovers the relationship of his writing to the mythologizing process. The author travels in his works, and quotes extensively other travelers and explorers, to create a “litany” of travel which transports the reader beyond the page, beyond the self. Thus, as Michael Spencer describes it, for Butor:

To travel...in a certain way is to write (firstly because to travel is to read), and to write is to travel. (147)

Dreams and reality are mixed in the many simultaneously occurring voyages that the author describes, creates, and quotes. In his earlier, more traditionally-styled works, obvious literary devices such as Eliot’s objective correlatives and Gide’s *mise en abîme* function to re-present to infinity this voyage into the self. Butor multiplies views, *regards*, glances, gazes, stares into mirrors and window panes which reflect, at pictures of the “places” of the world, through eyeglasses and windows and doorways, to intersecting highways and train tracks, to networks of ship and air travel routes. Then and now, on different levels in buildings, in different colors and type-styles and genres on levels of the page, and in different “compartments” of the mind he tells personal stories of dreams or fantasies of travels within other stories and dreams.

As we are today overwhelmed by complicated structures, in both the figurative and real senses, we recognize the existence of the “fantastic” in our daily lives. Fantastic constructs surround us on all levels; ever-taller sky-scrappers, more complex “complexes,” serpentine superhighway monsters, screeching, roaring, pounding, booming mechanical noise interference, social and political patterns complicated to the sublime, not to say the contrary. And we realize that Butor’s new and personally demanding writing style epitomizes the confused pattern with which contemporary man is faced. This is the literature grown from our times: fantasy, fantastic, science fiction, horror, new novel, new poetry, new new novel, post-modernist fiction, whatever the label. This is the literary style which best inscribes our era.

Butor uses reference – in the form of direct quoting, re-quoting, sometimes deliberately mis-quoting, and self-quoting – to earlier and contemporary writers, artists, historians, travelers, discoverer-explorers, readers, alchemists-researchers, and just plain natives of every part of the globe to illustrate the openness of the world, of the “book,” and its infinite source content. By thus naming everything in his world, and referring it to all past names of places and activities and discoveries, Butor begins the attempt to “tame” this new world. In addition, recent Butor scholars interpret the appropriation and incorporation into his works of stylistic elements from painting, music, poetry, from dream-telling and historical accounts as an attempt to crystallize the perspective from which man must now view his world; that is, that there is no longer one art form which can accommodate the intricacy of the relationships of this modern world.¹

As a stylist Butor consciously uses language and the relationships of languages, the naming of persons and places past and present, the repetition of phrases and of key words, as switching mechanisms to open passage into the dream or mythological other-world. Puns, *jeux de mots*, similarity in sounds and in patterns of words trigger thought associations which allow change of levels of concentration and of understanding, while biblical-style phrasing and poeticized litanies are like incantations repeated by characters, lending effective power to the narrative. Obvious and not so obvious syntactic structures lead, and, in fact, force the reader to be creative in his perception of a work. He is led to join his own culture to that being described and thus to complement the content with his knowledge, his past. As E. David well states in “Science Fiction in the Novels of Michel Butor”:

Butor is concerned to show how every aspect of our life and culture plays its part in determining our personal and our collective unconscious. (52)

There is real influence of the surrealists' *écriture automatique* in Michel Butor's method. However, the application is typically butorian; seemingly free and wandering, yet in truth strictly ordered for the purpose of causing the reader to lose control of a text which is totally controlled, and which will eventually control him. As F. C. St. Aubyn sums up in "Butor and the Stuff of Dreams," the texts entrance the reader:

Like an obsession, the lists and quotations serve as an armature for the structure of these dreams, whose content would otherwise lose all coherence. The effect on the reader is to lull his senses as he watches all these dancelike entrances and exits until he becomes a part of the dream, mystified, enchanted, moved, paralyzed, recognizing the unfamiliar and familiar with the unrecognized. (257)

Further, Butor treats the raw material of the world in narrative that is spatially not chronologically ordered. His texts are symmetrical, and even their lacunae are purposefully orchestrated to apply pressure and achieve the effect desired. In their analysis of "The Structure of Michel Butor's 'Courier des Antipodes'," Dean McWilliams and James Allgren give detailed attention to this exactitude of design (which Donald Rice likens to an Indian weaving), concluding that:

Butor has always taken a surrealist's delight in juxtaposing disparate elements, but nowhere has he devised such a rigorous system to force every element into immediate contiguity with every other element. (239)

And in the Afterword to his "Courier des Antipodes" translation, Michael Spencer defines the work as a "geographical, literary and onomastic mosaic" (155). From this point of recognition of authorial method and control we move to seek its *raison d'être*.

It is this total immersion of text within text, to infinity, which announces Butor's step into, or invitation into the fantastic. His *textamorphose*, "textamorphosis," the writing, re-writing, quoting, re-quoting and self-quoting, repeating, self-repeating technique which he has perfected is at once the entry into and the creation of the other world. What began in earlier works as strings of lyrical and sonorous phrases, such as his reverie of the woman Rose, developed through three full pages in *L'Emploi du Temps*, is here cited briefly:

Rose, ma Perséphone, ma Phèdre, ma Rose qui s'est ouverte dans ce marais de paralysie et de gaz lourds, depuis le temps des grands brouillards, hélas non point ma Rose, mais seulement Rose, l'interdite Rose, la dérobée, la réservée, la vive, la simple, la tendre, la cruelle Rose. (208)

Rose, my Persephone, my Phedre, my Rose who
has bloomed in this swamp of paralysis and of
poisonous gas, since the age of the dense fogs,
alas not at all my Rose, but only Rose, the
forbidden Rose, the secretive, the reserved,
the lively, the simple, the tender, the cruel Rose.²

Of course, beside the sonorous harmony of the passage, one recognizes in this adaptation of "Rose" the literary heritage of Ronsard's "Ode" to his sweetheart.³ The use of such subliminal pre-text suggestions is a conscious and constant part of Butor's creative technique, lending not only literary credibility to his texts, but enhancing their lyrical beauty.

The technique of *tissage*, described by Leon Roudiez as the weaving of such harmonious and rhythmic content, continues, but becomes briefer, more staccato in cadence and spacing, and more vigorous in later works (252). For example, in *Matière de rêves*, we visualize Paris from the "Rêve de la montagne noire" ("The Dream of the Black Mountain"). Both the harmony of sound and the power of meaning are recognized through speaking the words:

Allô Paris fumeuse râleuse, la crâneuse doucereuse,
la lépreuse la poisseuse.

Hello smokey ill-tempered Paris, the sticky-sweet
braggart, the leprous the pitch-coated.

This short sequence is taken up again in variation five pages later as:

Allô, Paris chérie, crassie rancie, marrie tarie,
Paris pourrie.

Hello, Paris darling, squalid rancid, grieved
exhausted, rotted Paris.

Such an extension of the method to variations on a theme repeated again filters and crystallizes in **Boomerang**, to take its most compact embodiment, the refrain. However, it is the use of a refrain with varying forms, the changes, as noted, deliberately placed and aimed at guiding the reader's consciousness to other portions of the text, those prior to and those anticipated by the wording of the strain. I note just a few, such as the myriad mentions of the aborigine spirits, *les mimis*, "l'innofensif mimi nain, le mimi rouge, le mimi géant, le mimi Mikmik, ...Bumumba," etcetera; the references to Butor's family and to their participation in activities which draw them and the reader into the act of his creativity: "A quoi penses-tu Agnès?, A quoi rêves-tu Irène?, Que lis-tu Mathilde?, Marie-Jo chérie, baisers, soupirs,..." (What are you thinking of Agnes?, What are you dreaming of Irene?, What are you reading Mathilda?, Marie-Jo darling, kisses, sighs,...); and others which move the reader about in time and space, such as: "...disent les gens d'Oenpelli de l'autre côté de l'autre bout du monde sans bout." (...say the people of Oenpelli on the other side of the other end of the world without end). This is the longest form of that refrain, but it often appears simply as "disent les gens d'Oenpelli" (say the people of Oenpelli), or "de l'autre bout du monde," (at the other end of the world), thus echoing the pre-text of the title **Boomerang**, and the subtext suggestion of opposite sides of the world in the division "Courrier des Antipodes." ("Letters From the Opposite Ends of the Earth") We are well aware that such oneiric and onomastic techniques are not new to novel writing (Spencer 261), but here they function to distill new meaning from the wealth of universal knowledge; to build new myth from old or non-myth.

Butor transposes text and place to a mythological level, making both universal in their content and comprehension. By linking the collective and historical past with the collective cultural present, he achieves the new mythological present in which every reader can participate. It has no boundaries in scope, and the itineraries are limitless, since they are the reader's choice as he follows in his own way the signs, directions, keys, and routing codes provided by the author. Butor changes not only the construction of text, but the role of place in these new composites. As Spencer indicates:

...the notion of place...may be seen not only as a radiating or receiving point, but also--possibly as a variation of the receiving point--as a "vantage point" from which to observe other places. (172)

Thus, all places, *les lieux*, of Butor — cities, countries, continents, Indian lodges, log cabins, train compartments, a speeding Cadillac crossing the U. S., an airplane anywhere above the globe, forests, deserts, mountains, a waterfall, a cocktail party, a school room — which would normally denote stasis, actually engender further movement. And we, as students of Butor, continue to discover that what is new is old. In fact his fundamental content has not changed. The discovery long ago in La Modification of the opposition between mobility and immobility mediated by the act of introspection, inner mobility (Struebig), is revealed still universal in his works.

In Butor's paranovelistic universe, the reader is at once outside and inside the text, outside and inside himself. By means of his "textamorphosis," the magic of his "fantastic" word combinations, Butor transports the reader to this other world which is still his own. This author has always invited the reader to participate in the creative activity of writing, as he explains to his interviewer Michelle Rogers:

Je ne suis pas plus difficile qu'un autre. Le problème c'est que je suis, à certains égards, "nouveau," alors il faut que le lecteur trouve la bonne position,...par rapport au texte. Il faut qu'il perde un certain nombre de préjugés, il faut qu'il apprenne à lire des textes comme ça. Il y a beaucoup de culture qui entre à l'intérieur, mais ce sont des invitations à la culture, ils n'exigent pas du tout cette culture avant. (510)

I am not more difficult than other writers. The problem is that in certain respects I am "new," so the reader has to find the proper perspective from which to perceive the text. He has to overcome certain prejudices, he has to learn to read these texts. There is a lot of culture in them, but they are invitations to culture, they do not demand possession of the culture in advance.

His method has now expanded to encompass the sharing of his own erudition as part of the immense unconscious wealth of culture and myth abiding in each reader, and the impressive, if idealistic, attempt to bring it all to the level of the collective consciousness of man.

To bring our discussion full-circle is to close with reference to the function of naming. Through the juxtapositions of old and new times, cultures, and social conflicts, Butor confesses the guilt of modern man who forever seeks the promised land of his future, yet never accepts it when he reaches it. There is, as ever historically, only past and future, never a place for the present. Butor's travels are real and figurative, to

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teach man the method, as in ancient myths, of finding his way. He explains to Michelle Rogers the meaning of his travels, and so of his writing:

Les voyages que je fais aujourd'hui, les voyages que je fais depuis des années sont l'équivalent premièrement des voyages dits de découverte des siècles passés....En même temps ce sont des voyages de pèlerinage, c'est-à-dire que je vais chercher dans un endroit des lumières sur l'endroit d'où je suis parti. (512)

The trips that I have been taking for years are the equivalent of the voyages of discovery of past centuries....At the same time they are pilgrimages, I mean that I go to seek in one place enlightenment on the place from which I began.

He re-views history and his-story to reconstruct what is lost, just as classical mythographers and their heroes did in the ancient descent myths.

By naming and thus circumscribing his world, contemporary man becomes more aware of himself, of his own content, and of his sharing of universal culture. So he resolves his conflict with both nature, which is in harmony with all men and at peace with its present, and culture, with which man felt at odds because he saw himself excluded from it.

The negative truth, that which cannot be admitted openly, is man's cultural and racial prejudice. Butor's texts emphasize the undercurrents of racial tension around the globe, and the feelings of insecurity between members of different cultures and different social classes. His myths tell these stories in order to exorcise the feelings of insecurity, of lack of faith in self, for as he says: "Only the comparison with the myths of others can enable us to understand our own and to live with them intelligently" (Le Sidaner 34).

By stepping into the other world of this new fiction, we learn to become someone else, and through this other to become more fully ourselves.

In conclusion, we find that man once again becomes the center of creativity in an inhuman, machine-oriented society, and that this form of new literature, through the emphasis of naming and repetition, encourages man to know and to develop his mentality in a rehumanizing effort. So it is recognized also that the timeless device of onomastics in literary creation still functions to involve readers in the activity of writing; drawing upon the experience of the audience and renewing the imagination as it has since the times of oral transmission of literature.

NOTES

¹For further discussion of Butor's creative technique, the distinctive form of his works, and the world vision they imply see, among others: F. C. St. Aubyn, "Butor and the Stuff of Dreams," *World Literature Today* 56, no. 2 (Spring 1982), 251-258; Dean McWilliams, "Butor's American Texts: The Writer as Red Indian," *World Literature Today* 56, no. 2 (Spring 1982), 258-264; Leon Roudiez, "Un Texte perturbé: Matière de rêves de Michel Butor," *Romanic Review* 75, no. 2 (March 1984), 242-255; and Michael Spencer, *Michel Butor: Letters From The Antipodes*, trans. from Boomerang with an Introduction and Afterword by Michael Spencer (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1986).

²This and all other English renderings of citations from Butor are my own.

³Pierre de Ronsard's "Ode" (*Odes*, I, 17) which begins by evoking the beauty of the rose, then likens it to his beloved, and thus eulogizes her, is strikingly related to Butor's "Rose" both stylistically and lyrically. Butor imitates idea, intent, and form, which he uses effectively to evoke by contrast the negative aspects of his Rose who is born in the *marais* of the *gaz lourds* of contemporary times rather than of the morning sunlight, and yet to show her equally durable and therefore attractive qualities of enchantress who is at once Persephone and Phedre, desirable and forbidden, and above all eternal.

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