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Between Pantheons:
Roman Landscape and Topography in Butor's *La Modification*

A Paper given to the Virgil Society on 18 May 2002

La Modification is a book that is centred around journeys, journeys which for the most part find their centre in Rome. As so often travel functions as a metaphor for a process of self-discovery, a voyage into the subconscious.[1] The protagonist, a middle-aged business man named Léon Delmont, is on a train to Rome; he is going to tell his mistress Cécile that he has found a job for her in Paris, that he is going to leave his wife and children for her and that they will set up home together. As the journey progresses he falls in and out of sleep, in and out of dreams and memories. Eventually the memories of six other journeys blend into his

> train journey, and, together with the dreams unleashed by his subconscious, they reveal to him so urgently the extent and the implications of his wilful short-sightedness that by the end of his journey and the end of the book he has determined to leave Cécile and to try and salvage his relationship with his wife, Henriette. His 'change of heart'[2] is based heavily upon Aeneas' descent into the Underworld in *Aeneid* 6, and the parallels between Delmont and Aeneas in the Underworld have been the subject of a great deal of lucid commentary.[3] However, critics have tended to stress the initiatory aspect of the parallels alone, and yet the links between the two figures stretch far beyond the fact that they are both seeking to create a solid image of Rome and that both went down into the Underworld in order to learn how to direct their futures. This paper will indicate the importance of Aeneas' pilgrimage around the future Rome (*Aeneid* 8) to *La Modification* and to Delmont's experience of Rome, and will look at the significance of the Roman monuments that Delmont visits or passes.

Memory shapes the direction of *La Modification*. Delmont is driven by his memories of previous train journeys to Rome, but he also moulds his future through the stories that he has read about Rome, and stories which he tells to himself about his fellow-passengers - and their relationship with Rome. Eventually these stories fuse into a force strong enough to destroy the fiction upon which he has built

his future and become fabrications which destroy his myth of Rome. At the same time he is being driven in a physical sense towards the uncovering of all these fictions as he is transported by the train; throughout the work there is a sense that things would have turned out differently if he had embarked on a different train.

Just as Delmont is suspended between two cities, Paris and Rome, thus echoing Aeneas, who spends most of the *Aeneid* suspended between Troy and Rome, he is also suspended in an unreal time, which is composed of both past and future, something which is characteristic of the *Aeneid* as a whole. By the end of the journey he is able to look at Cécile and to recognize not only that 'if she comes to Paris I will lose her'[4] but also to see that she is an obstacle to his true vision of Rome, 'the place of authenticity' (146), just as once Dido stood in the way of Aeneas' Rome.

As the book progresses it becomes increasingly apparent that for Delmont Henriette represents Paris, while Cécile represents Rome. The cities with which these women are identified are contained in their names: Henriette recalls Henri IV's conversion to Catholicism and his attendant observation that, 'Paris vaut une messe', while Cécile represents the Roman martyr, Caecilia, who remained a virgin, and whose mind during her wedding ceremony was filled with heavenly music rather than thoughts of a husband. These resonances contained in her name may point to a life that she is perfectly capable of conducting without Léon, resonances which should have indicated to him that she was far more elusive than he had imagined. Hippolyte Delehaye describes Cécile's namesake as 'The most tangled question in all Roman hagiography'[5] and indeed the name does repay further probing. The origins of the legend of St Cecilia are unknown. Suddenly and for the first time at the end of the fifth century a saint appeared who seems to have been unknown to previous generations, and yet who receives all the homage due to one of the most revered of Roman virgin-martyrs. Her story is an obvious fiction and there is practically no evidence that she was venerated much earlier than this date - no evidence that she ever existed, apart from the deeply ingrained popular cult which celebrates her at her tomb in Trastevere with great enthusiasm. Butor associates Delmont's Cécile strongly with the legend of St Cecilia by pointing out that 'the first Roman secret which she uncovered for you was Pietro Cavallini's *Last Judgement* at Saint Cecilia at Trastevere.'[6] The image of the Last Judgement is highly charged as later in the book, on his descent into hell, Delmont undergoes a Last Judgement experience where he is condemned and enlightened by the prophets, sibyls and cardinals of Rome. But it is still more significant that when Delmont speaks of 'rejoining his liberty which is called Cécile' - her very name should tell him that he is labouring under an illusion, that this liberty is rooted in a confected legend.

Furthermore, as the legend of Caecilia developed, she became associated very strongly with the Bona Dea, to whom Romans appealed for help in combating eye disease.[7] The name Cécile is telling in this context as it is closely related to 'cécité' meaning 'blindness'. It is true that Cécile does blind Delmont to certain aspects of Rome and to all that Rome signifies, but it is equally true that it is through her that he begins to acquire an understanding, albeit a partial one, of all that Rome can mean. It is as if by shedding a bright light on certain angles she dims certain other angles even further. Since she is the catalyst for Delmont's 'change of heart' it is also significant that in the later Middle Ages she 'became a symbol and exemplar of deep spiritual change'.[8] Butor makes sure that we realize that she can see far more clearly than Delmont. She is able to appreciate Henriette on Henriette's own terms and comes to esteem her as someone who is considerably more intelligent and liberal than Delmont had suggested. In fact Cécile goes so far as to point out that Henriette is much more open-minded than Léon himself, and one of the crucial moments in the novel is when Delmont remembers how the two women instinctively formed an alliance against him. He does his best to suppress this memory just as, at the time, he did his

best to curb this developing friendship by limiting how much the women saw each other.

In Delmont's mind Cécile becomes synonymous with Rome and all that Rome means to him. He points out that 'before meeting Cécile well might you have visited the principal monuments, and appreciated the climate there, but you did not have this love for Rome'(60). His lamentable failure to read the city in the pre-Cécile period is indicated by his silence when his wife asks him on a visit to the temples of Venus and of Rome 'Why Venus and Rome? What is the relationship between those two things?' (270). He should, of course, have pointed out that Venus was Aeneas' mother who guided and protected his mission to found Rome, but that she is also the goddess of love, which in Latin is Amor, the reverse of Roma. And the temples themselves provide a visible explanation of the pun, as they stand back to back. But if Rome is the city of love it is love that is needed to uncover her significance. And as Delmont has fallen in love with an illusion, and an illusion that keeps announcing itself as such, his vision of Rome is necessarily flawed and fragile.

Butor makes it clear that it is not solely a fulfilled stability in his relationships that Delmont seeks but also a fixed centre to his world, and not just his personal world but the centre of Western civilization, which has failed to hold. At the end of the book he announces:

> And so one of the great waves of history is drawing to a close in your consciences, the one where the world had a centre, which was not simply the earth in the middle of Ptolemy's spheres, but Rome in the centre of the earth, a centre which had been moved, which attempted to become established after the collapse of Rome at Byzantium and then much later in imperial Paris, where the black star of the railways over France was like the shadow of the star of the Roman roads. (279)

The multivalency of Rome is indicated through the myriad Romes that belong to the various characters in the book. Delmont displays his awareness of the city's potential for multiple significations by imagining the Romes of his fellow passengers:

> If it is unlikely that he is going to Rome this time, he has perhaps already been there or perhaps dreams of going there to see his pope, to mingle with the cassocked crowd swarming through all the streets like clouds of chattering flies, fat or bony, children or clapped-out ancients; he must have known or else will come to know a Rome that is very different from that which Cécile has shown you over these last years. (89)

Cécile refuses absolutely to set foot inside the Christian site of the Vatican, abhorring 'this cancer city clinging to the sides of Roman splendour and freedom' (168). At the same time Delmont depicts an Henriette who, while she is in Rome, as consolation for her husband's indifference, turns fervently towards the Catholicism which Rome represents.

Butor doesn't confine himself to setting up pointers and clues in her name alone. It is worth mentioning that Delmont's name is stereotypically Italian, Del Monte, the name of an important aristocratic family in Papal Rome (precisely the Rome which Cécile asks him to reject) and the name of Cardinal Del Monte who was Caravaggio's early patron. It is also evocative of the hills of Rome.[9] The name Léon harks back to Leo I, the legendary saviour of Rome against Attila the Hun and his armies, as well as to Leo IV, builder of the Leonine city which is one of the names under which the Vatican is known (civitas Leoniana, Città Leoniana). When Cécile tells him that he is 'rotten to the core with Christianity, with the stupidest kind of devotion, despite all your protestations; the humblest Roman cook has a broader outlook than you do'(168), she perhaps speaks more truly than she realises. And it is easy to categorise her as someone who refuses absolutely to set foot in any of the Christian sites in Rome, but this is not the case. What she does refuse to do is to set foot within the Vatican, that is the Leonine city, and she points out that this is his home, that this is where he belongs by observing: 'I am too afraid of that insidious poison which has robbed me of so much and which is now robbing

me of you to be mad enough to enter these accursed walls, especially with you, where everything would foster your cowardice' (168). By her refusal to enter the Vatican Cécile sets herself up as the antithesis of Dante's Beatrice, who went through Peter's gate in the *Purgatorio*,[10] and thereby she sows seeds of failure within their relationship. She does however agree to go and look at Michelangelo's 'Moses' and points out that there is a church near her house, Sant Andrea della Valle,[11] where copies of his main statues are held. Again, it is telling that they go and look at the Moses, as the Moses statue is held in the church of S. Pietro in Vincoli (St Peter in Chains); this sets up the prison imagery by which Butor defines Delmont's relationship with Cécile, even though Delmont perceives her as embodying his freedom.[12] Moreover the Moses is a famous failure as it was originally intended for the S. Pietro in Vaticano. It also evokes the failure of Moses himself, who, like the Aeneas of the *Aeneid*, also wandered without reaching his final goal. Delmont has prints in his apartment, one of which was given to him by Cécile after they had discovered Piranesi's book on the Roman ruins together. She gives him *I Carceri* and so he hangs this image of prisons in his apartment. When we remember that she is constantly berating him for the lack of freedom in the outlooks he holds we might recognise that the gift may well have been more barbed than Delmont realizes.

There is a curious introduction into the account of one of their pilgrimages: 'in the little bar on the piazza Farnesi, before going off to lunch on the Largo Argentina [because on a weekday like that you couldn't go off too far] you were saying that it was strange that you had never set out, an Isis and a Horus piecing together once again their Osiris, to search for the fragments of Michelangelo, and so to gather together the signs of his activity in this city.' (167) As the Largo Argentina is very near the site of the temple of Isis the references to Osiris, Isis and Horus are less surprising than they might initially seem. And the fact of the temple of Isis was recalled by two obelisks, discovered in the area of the Temple, both erected nearby. Butor describes one of their tours around Rome: 'One time your peregrinations, your pilgrimages, your quests had taken you from obelisk to obelisk...'(167) One of these obelisks was erected in front of the seventeenth-century Pantheon and one in front of the eighteenth-century church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva on top of an elephant. The reference to the obelisks, strengthened later by a direct reference to Santa Maria sopra Minerva, may well include another joke on Butor's part with regard to the fortitude of the scholar, the student of Rome, as there is an epigraph at the base of Bernini's elephant which observes: 'It is the sign of a strong mind to maintain a solid knowledge.' Furthermore, Butor reminds the reader that Santa Maria sopra Minerva is the only example of a gothic church in Rome, but since it was built above the ruins of a temple dedicated to Minerva Chalcidica, goddess of wisdom, it again overlays the Christian with the pagan. This pagan element is strengthened if we remember that the church stands in the shadow of Rome's most perfect classical structure, the Pantheon. These fleeting references to the Egyptian gods uncover yet another Rome, and again it is a Rome where Christian and pagan meet, since the figure of Isis (mother of all) and Horus (divine child) prefigure the Pietà, and Delmont and Cécile are also eager to see the two Pietàs in Michelangelo's Rome.

While Butor connects Léon strongly with the Catholic side of Rome, and has highlighted the connections between Cécile and St Cecilia, he ensures that the links between Cécile and Rome's pagan history are no less striking. She first invites Léon to her flat when they visit the tomb of Caecilia Metella on the Appian Way, and she lives at a house run by the family Da Ponte, which is the name of Mozart's librettist.

Delmont is aware of his biased approach to Rome which is coloured by his relationship with Cécile, and occasionally he regrets the limitations, but they are more than compensated by the Rome which Cécile represents, 'this splendid Roman air which will be like a rediscovery of spring after the Parisian autumn' (perhaps also a reference to Cécile's youthfulness compared to Henriette). This is a Rome

depicted by Virgil's *Georgics*, which Butor incorporates into the novel by quoting '*hic ver assiduum*' (here is eternal spring) (55). But when Virgil refers to spring in the *Georgics* he links it to the childhood of the world (2.339-42). The insertion of this particular allusion into *La Modification* heightens the feeling of limitless possibility and optimism that Delmont finds in Rome, and intensifies the literary tradition of finding a renewal of life, a transformation of life within Rome. *La Modification* is almost a parody of this tradition, perhaps best exemplified by Goethe in *Italian Journey*. Whereas Delmont watches helplessly as what he had held to be a fixed and meaningful centre kaleidoscopes into contradictory and challenging shards and pieces, Goethe's experience is of the various fragments of Rome coalescing into a stable and coherent whole:

> 'Now I have arrived I have calmed down and feel as if I had found a peace that will last for my whole life. Because, if I may say so, as soon as one sees with one's own eyes the whole which one had hitherto only known in fragments and chaotically, a new life begins.
>
> All the dreams of my youth have come to life; the first engraving I remember - my father hung views of Rome in the hall - I now see in reality, and everything I have known for so long through paintings, drawings, etchings, woodcuts, plaster casts and cork models is now assembled before me. Wherever I walk, I come upon familiar objects in an unfamiliar world; everything is just as I imagined it, yet everything is new.[13]

Goethe speaks of his awe when his visions are transformed into reality, as he is forced to look upon the familiar with new eyes. It is precisely this defamiliarisation, this capacity to see things anew, that Virgil demands of his readers in the eighth book of the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas is shown around the site of future Rome by Evander, king of the Latins. For contemporary readers of Virgil there would have been a sense of awe as they heard of Aeneas treading over sites destined to be revered in later Roman history. Although the episode presents to Virgil's readers a Rome founded upon historical reality, to Aeneas the episode is nothing more than a presentiment of the future, the shadowy outline of his hopes. It is worth noting that within the *Aeneid* this is only one in a sequence of false Romes: for Virgil, as well as for Butor, Rome is haunted by a whole series of ghost cities, the cities that she has been, or could have been. Book 1 shows us the foundation of Carthage prefiguring the foundation of Rome, Book 3 describes the new Troy built in Buthrotum and Book 8 depicts the site of the future Rome. As Virgil maps onto Evander's rustic settlement the shapes of the stately buildings of his own day, he contrasts the pastoral simplicity of Pallanteum with the contemporary grandeur of Rome. Virgil takes his readers on a journey from Evander's tiny settlement on the Palatine up to the golden Capitol of the Augustan age, which was perceived as the centre of both the Roman empire and the universe itself. And so Virgil's passage (*Aeneid* 8. 337-369) is pervaded by an ambiguity which filters through into Butor's text. This ambiguity is neatly indicated by the *nunc/olim* figure (*even then* the Capitol was instinct with divinity) (*then* a wooded spot, *now* the golden Capitol, 347-8), but *olim* can refer both to past or to the future: either 'golden now, once densely wooded' or 'golden now, one day to be densely wooded.' Gibbon ends up looking back on the history of Rome and giving fullest expression to this point:

> The place and the object (the Capitoline Hill) gave ample scope for moralising on the vicissitudes of fortune, which spares neither man nor the proudest of his works, which buries empires and cities in a common grave; and it was agreed that in proportion to her former greatness the fall of Rome was the more awful and deplorable. "Her primaeval state, such as she might appear in a remote age, when Evander entertained the stranger of Troy, has been delineated by the fancy of Virgil. This Tarpeian rock was then a savage and solitary thicket: in the time of the poet, it was crowned with the golden roofs of a temple: the temple is overthrown, the gold has been pillaged, the wheel of fortune has accomplished her revolution, and the sacred ground is again disfigured with thorns and brambles. The hill of the Capitol, on which we sit, was formerly the head of the Roman empire, the citadel of the earth, the terror of kings; illustrated by the footsteps of so many triumphs, enriched with the spoils and tributes of so

> many nations. This spectacle of the world, how it is fallen! how changed! how defaced!"[14]

Charles Martindale points out that it is not only a matter of whether we prefer woods or gold; the trajectory of history is itself unclear, and the lines allow us to see beyond the grandeur of Augustus' Rome to a return to the wild, as though the Gibbonian narrative were already there in shadowy form in Virgil. *Nunc* introduces another ambivalence, since it could mean 'now in Virgil's day' or 'now in Aeneas' day', and 'golden' could be literal or metaphorical, 'belonging to a golden time' or 'made of gold/gilded.' And Martindale shows how this more complex narrativisation gives us cycles of growth and decay; ancient cities powerful long ago are ruined already in the time of Aeneas, perhaps thereby portending the eventual fall of Rome itself.[15]

Moreover, the *Aeneid* also acknowledges the dangers, the limitations of historical narratives. If we read carefully we can see that Virgil indicates that early Italy has more than one history, more than one truth. James Zetzel has pointed out how Evander's ethnography combines two standard accounts of the history of civilisation: the hard, primitive anthropological account which sits uneasily alongside the softer, more primitive mythological account which he also provides.[16] But it is also possible to read the passage as if all the elements in Virgil's narrative are held together in a simultaneous timeless moment. Rome the eternal city is always both the *caput rerum*, the metropolis which Augustus found brick and left marble, and sweet rural scene, both the *res publica* restored by political and military power and place of a renewed age of gold, *aurea saecula*. Virgil shows us how such a Rome, the new Troy, can be both standing proud and in ruins. Martindale recalls Bruno Snell's famous argument that Virgil discovered a spiritual landscape which he called Arcadia; read archaeologically, Aeneas' visit to Pallanteum uncovers a spiritual city which men have always called Rome.[17]

It is possible therefore to see Delmont's journey around Rome under the aegis of Cécile as already being inscribed in shadow form onto this episode in Book 8. The ambiguity pervading the Virgilian episode heightens the incomplete feel to Delmont's projected tour of Cécile's Rome by evoking memories of Aeneas' tour:

> and at the close of dusk you will witness the darkening of night inside the Coliseum, then you will pass near to the arch of Constantine, you will go down the via San Gregorio and the via dei Cerchi passing by the ancient Circus Maximus; in the night you will see the temple of Vesta on your left and on the other side the arch of Janus Quadriforis; then you will rejoin the Tiber which you will walk along as far as the via Giulia to arrive back at the Farnesi Palace where you will doubtless have only a few minutes to wait before Cécile comes out of it. (86-7)

In another tour which he evokes Butor also fuses glory and ruin in the same passage and asks us to travel through time :

> during which you were attempting to reconstitute from immense, scattered ruins the monuments as they might have been in their early days, the image of the city as she must have been in full glory; and so, when you were walking in the Forum, it was not only amongst the few, paltry stones, the broken capitals, and the impressive brick walls or dados, but in the midst of an enormous dream that you shared, which became more and more solid, precise and justified at each passageway [. . .] to continue this systematic exploration of Roman themes you would also have had to go one day from the churches of Saint Paul to churches of Saint Paul, from San Giovanni to San Giovanni, from Saint-Agnès to Saint-Agnès, from Lorenzo to Lorenzo, to try and deepen or delimit, to seize and to use the images linked to these names, the gateways onto some very strange discoveries (of that you can be sure) on the Christian world itself which is known so fallaciously, gateways onto this world which is still in the process of collapsing, of becoming corrupt, of crashing down on you, and from the ruins, the ashes of which you were seeking to flee into its capital itself.' (167)

In fact one of the more chilling moments in the novel is when Butor takes us back to Virgil's Rome

by fading out all the more modern buildings. 'It's decided that in the afternoon you will walk around all this quarter of the city where there is nothing to be seen, as it were, except for these ruins, as the modern-day city and the baroque city somehow retreat to live them in their mighty solitude.' (86). Butor is also taking us back to Mussolini's Rome, as is indicated if we look at Mussolini's speech when he is received in the Capitol by Cremonesi, whom he has promoted from Commissioner to Governor of Rome, with greater powers:

> Governatore!
>
> You have before you a period of at least five years to complete what has been begun, and to begin the greater enterprise of the second stage of development.
>
> My ideas are clear, my orders are precise. I am absolutely certain that they will become concrete reality. Within five years, Rome must appear marvellous to all the peoples of the world: vast, well-ordered, powerful, as it was at the time of the first empire of Augustus.
>
> You shall continue to free the trunk of the great oak from everything which at present strangles it. Make open space around the tomb of Augustus, at the Theatre of Marcellus, at the Capitol, at the Pantheon. Everything which sprouted near those monuments in the centuries of decadence must disappear. Within five years, in a vast perspective from Piazza Colonna you must be able to see the bulk of the Pantheon. You must also liberate the majestic temples of Christian Rome from the parasitical and profane constructions which have crept up around them. The monuments of the thousands of years of our history must demonstrate their vastness in the solitude that is necessary.

It is worth remembering that the standard school edition of Virgil in twentieth-century France, the Plessis-Lejay, presented the *Aeneid* as a work which eulogized Rome's divine mission to dominate and civilize the world, claiming that this was Virgil's 'great inner idea which is his own and which became for him the centre towards which everything gravitates.'[18] But the promotion of an empirocentric world in the twentieth century is dangerously redolent of fascistic desires and it must not be forgotten that Mussolini used Virgil's text to promote his regime. Towards the end of Butor's novel it becomes apparent that in his vision of Rome Delmont has wilfully suppressed memories of Fascist Italy:

> At that time Italy was drunk on the dream of empire and overrun by police, uniformed figures were to be seen in all the stations . . . you said to Henriette, who admitted to you her unease, you said to her 'They don't exist', and she tried vainly to believe this. (231)

Eventually he recognizes the importance of taking responsibility not only within his personal life, but within the wider historical context and declares: 'a cavern which has been within me for a long time [. . .] is the communication with an enormous historical cleft.' (276). His only hope of redemption is the articulation of a full recognition of his past. Throughout the train journey and the journey of his self towards discovery, acceptance and reconciliation, Delmont has been clutching an unread book as a talisman. He now plans to write his own story in book form and to present it to Cécile, and acknowledges that the account he gives can only be partial and subjective, will be something which he has fabricated rather than an objective truth which he represents, since even before he has decided to describe his experience, when he looks at the covers of the unread book he imagines the story within:

> where there would need to be, for example, the question of a man who is lost in a forest which closes up behind him without his managing even to decide to which side he should now go, to find once again which is the path which brought him there, because his steps leave no trace at all on the heap of dead leaves into which he is now sinking. (201)

It is, of course his own story, but a story which is based upon others: he is in his own version of the Dantean wood, awaiting help from Virgil. Butor speaks of the 'dead leaves' and in a book which is so heavily imbued with Sibylline imagery it is impossible to dissociate leaves from the cryptic papers of the Sibyl which have come to represent literature in general. Delmont is lost in a wood of words, of

fictive representations, unable to find his way to any central, concrete ideas. Once again Butor is parodying the literary tradition of establishing one's identity within Rome: Cicero was one of the earliest contributors to this tradition, and observes in the *Academica*:

> Tum ego, 'sunt', inquam, 'ista, Varro; nam nos in nostra urbe pergrinantis errantisque tamquam hospites tui libri quasi domum reduxerunt, ut possemus aliquando qui et ubi essemus agnoscere (1.9)
>
> (Then I said 'You are right, Varro. For we were like foreigners drifting and wandering through our city but your books brought us home, so that we were able to recognise who and where we were)

The book that is designed to act ultimately as his guide remains unexamined on his journey until eventually he realises that he must write it himself, must find his own answers to the urgent questioning of the 'grand veneur', the mythical hunter who haunts his dreams: 'Are you listening to me?' (114), 'What are you waiting for?' (135), 'Where are you?' (151), 'Are you mad?' (183) 'Who are you?' (220)

The wood evokes once again the memories of Aeneas' tour around the future Rome, and reminds us that the centre of Rome, the Capitol, was once just such a wood. While Aeneas arrives at the beginning of the history of Rome and sees in Book 8 a vision of Augustan Rome, Léon comes at the end, and sees a confusing mass of pantheons amongst which he wanders. Aeneas wanders much on his way to found Rome; Léon wanders much within Rome. While Aeneas encounters a number of false images of Rome before he is able to found the city, Delmont's narcissism and short-sightedness lead him to believe that what he has found is real, until he is forced to acknowledge the fact that his prejudices and solipsism have led him to a gross distortion of Rome's identity. His determination to create a Rome in Paris is based upon his inability to appreciate either city properly, and parodies Aeneas' experience.[20] Furthermore, while Aeneas is driven to Rome by 'pietas', responsibilities to his race, his father, his gods, Léon has a bizarrely cold and distant relationship with his children, something like a vague affection combined with a great willingness to live without them. Butor has cast as a twentieth century Aeneas a man who is comically devoid of any of the qualities which lend his prototype any kind of greatness. Right up to the end of the book Butor seems to be looking upon his protagonist with a wry smile: the Aeneas of our times, he who would seek redemption through literature is a seller of typewriters to other people, and his firm is based in a city where one of the major buildings is the Vittoriano, known slangily as 'the typewriter' or 'the wedding cake'. Given Delmont's problems with relationships the emblem of the wedding cake must also be a joke. It is also somewhat ironic that the politically myopic Léon, incapable of understanding the threat of Fascism even as it stands right in front of him, has chosen to live next to the Pantheon at the heart of the Latin quarter, the seat of revolutionary feeling in Paris.

Virgil has come to open Delmont's eyes to the very ambiguity of literature, for his dream undermines the power and glory of a regime which the *Aeneid* had been used to perpetrate. Within *La Modification* the intertexts from *Aeneid* book 8, which stress the ambivalence of history, serve as a corrective to those elements of book 6 which promote a more positive vision of the Roman empire. Delmont has been forced to scrutinize his vision of Rome, to analyse its implications on his personal life, and the references to the immensity of Rome's significance, to the process of turning his conceptions around before his eyes recall Aeneas at the end of book 8 gazing at a magical shield which has the future history of Rome chased upon it. Delmont has the privilege of recognizing that his vision of Rome can only portray a fragment of the whole and that the book which he has sought amidst 'so much danger and wandering' (erreurs) will, in the end, be no more than the reflection of the liberty which he now realises he lacks.

> ... it is the foundation and the real volume of this myth that Rome is for you, they are the ins and outs, the neighbouring elements of that face under which that immense object was presented to you, trying

> to turn it around under your gaze within the historical space in order to advance your knowledge of the links that it has with the conduct and decisions of yourself and those around you. (239)
>
> So to prepare, to allow, for example by means of a book, that future liberty which is out of our reach, to allow it, however minimally, to set itself up, to establish itself
>
> it's the only possibility I have to delight in its reflection at least which is so admirable, so poignant
>
> without there being any question of finding an answer to that enigma which the name of Rome points to within our consciousness or unconsciousness, of taking account even crudely of this centre of marvels and obscurities ... (276)

By the end of the book Delmont is beginning to recognize the immense multivalency of Rome as a cultural icon; the wealth of ideologies embedded in her art makes of her an unrivalled image of the cultural confusions and problems of the late twentieth century, a postmodern image before its time. This realization distinguishes him from the Aeneas at the end of the eighth book, who rejoices with short-sighted joy at all that he beheld:

> He marvels at such visions on the shield of Vulcan, his mother's gift, and knowing not the deeds he rejoices in their image as he raises onto his shoulders the fame and destiny of his descendants. (729-31)

At the beginning of the shield episode Virgil has warned that he could only bear witness to a minuscule part of events - not only is the shield's texture but also its text beyond all telling 'clipei non enarrabile textum' (625). The shield episode seems to represent a felicitous portrayal of history, a moment of respite when Aeneas and the reader can behold the future fulfilment of his mission. Zetzel points out that Virgil has enclosed the chronicle of Roman history within a closed and perfect circle, which mirrors the universe in its order and balance, and in the static pattern of time it portrays it is similar to the sixth book where Aeneas meets his past in the form of his father and beholds the future of the Roman race.[21] It is a circle which seems to be bound in perfect harmony, but for Virgil's contemporaries the circle of the shield would have been suggestive of the circle of empire: 'the *orbis* of the shield becomes an emblem of the *orbis* terrarum'. Aeneas is able to rejoice in his shield because he is unable to see this far, to hear, as Auden could, behind the Virgilian lines 'the weeping of a Muse betrayed.'[22] In the shield he carries the history of his descendants such as Delmont, but Butor reiterates Virgil's warning through the figure and story of Delmont.

La Modification is a novel which itself offers a new journey on each reading, a journey where a new clue or joke of Butor's corrects our earlier perceptions and readings: it is all too easy to classify, to categorise the figures of Delmont and Cécile, to identify their Romes, and yet Butor has laid a multiplicity of clues to modify these categories, to show that so many of the areas or buildings of Rome by which they become identified are themselves so full of various, shifting histories that any kind of stable identities are impossible. Of course Delmont's story will itself become inscribed on our pilgrimages to Rome once we have read the book, and as we reach an understanding of how Delmont's vision of Rome is flawed, partial, wilful, Butor is doing his best to show us how easy it is to fall into the same trap, almost how impossible it is not to. The rich network of allusions and histories running through *La Modification* ensures that we can only take in so much on any one reading, that the journey through the novel can only be partial and various. Perhaps Butor's best joke is the one he saves until after the end: that even while we believe that we understand Delmont and his history, it is only when we revisit the book that we recognize that we had only seen a fragment of him and of his Rome, that our reading of the book was just as consistently slanted as his reading of Rome. And it is in this way that Butor makes Delmonts of us all.

National University of Ireland **EAMONN O'CARRAGAÍN**

FIONA COX, who delivered the paper

NOTES

1 See Butor, 'L'Espace du roman', *Répertoire II*, p.44: 'Toute fiction s'inscrit [. . .] en notre espace comme voyage, et l'on peut dire à cet égard que c'est là le theme fundamental de toute literature Romanesque: tout roman qui nous raconte un voyage est donc plus clair, plus explicite que celui qui n'est pas capable d'exprimer métaphoriquement cette distance entre le lieu de la lecture et celui où nous emmène le récit.'

2 This is the title of the English translation. Michel Butor, (trans. Jean Stewart), *A Change of Heart* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958).

3 See Eleanor Dand, *Mythological Structures in the works of Michel Butor*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 1978.

Jean Duffy, *Butor: La Modification* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1990).

Mary Lydon, *Perpetuum mobile*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1980).

Françoise van Rossum-Guyon, *Critique du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

4 All translations are our own unless otherwise indicated. All references to *La Modification* are to Michel Butor, *La Modification* (Paris: Minuit, 1957).

5 As cited by Thomas Connolly, *Mourning - into - Joy* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1994), 1.

6 For an illuminating discussion of this see Jean Duffy, *Signs and Designs: Art and Architecture in the Work of Michel Butor* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 109-110.

7 'I shall further suggest that the name Cecilia was applied to the Christian cult that grew up here not from any association with the Roman *gens* of that name but because the cult concern of the goddess for *caecitas*, blindness, interacted in some way with the same Christian cult.' (ibid, 41)

'Right through the developing cult of Cecilia, to the end of the Middle Ages and beyond, the saint would be associated with *claritas*. The concept permeates Chaucer's treatment of her, for instance in *The Second Nun's Tale*. But this contrasting of confusion and clarity is precisely what must have fuelled the aspirations of the pilgrims who sought relief from their diseased eyes from the Good Goddess in Trastevere.' (ibid, 53).

8 *Ibid*, 2. See also 'But within this whole area of change, of mutability, one kind of change - change in the heart - seems to have been Cecilia's particular domain.' (4).

9 We owe this point to Diana Spenser.

10 We owe this point to Dick Collins.

11 It is worth noting that the name of this church 'della Valle' is in direct opposition to Léon's own name, 'Delmont.' We owe this point to Dick Collins.

12 See Jean Duffy, *Signs and Designs: Art and Architecture in the Work of Michel Butor* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 113: 'If Cécile represents freedom, it is curious that he should relish the prospect of a freedom that can only be enjoyed because of her absence.'

13 J. W. Goethe, *Italian Journey* tr. W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (London: Penguin, 1962), 129.

14 Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: J.B. Bury, 1909-1914),VII, 13.

15 See Charles Martindale 'Introduction: The Classic of all Europe', 1-18 in Martindale (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.

16 James Zetzel, 'Rome and its traditions' in *Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, 188-203, 191.

17 Martindale, op.cit., 5.

18 F. Plessis and P. Lejay (eds), *Œuvres de Virgile* (Paris: Hachette, 1919), liii.

19 For an interesting discussion of this passage see Edwards, *Writing Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

20 Jean Duffy makes many interesting observations in her discussion of Delmont's Roman Paris. op. cit., 138-9.

21 Zetzel, op.cit., 201.

22 W. H. Auden, 'Secondary Epic' in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1976), 456.

For a discussion of these issues see Cox 'The Presence of the Past: Fama and Fata in the Shield of Aeneas' in *Aeneas Takes the Metro: The Presence of Virgil in Twentieth Century French Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), 1-15.