2.2 Michel Butor's *La Modification*

Addressing the Unknown

> "L'œuvre d'art, comme le monde, est une forme vivante: elle est, elle n'a pas besoin de justification."
> (Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*)

[...] le terme de *Nouveau Roman,* ce n'est pas pour désigner une école, ni même un groupe défini et constitué d'écrivains qui travailleraient dans le même sens; il n'y a là qu'une appellation commode englobant tous ceux qui cherchent de nouvelles formes romanesques, capables d'exprimer (ou de créer) de nouvelles relations entre l'homme et le monde, tous ceux qui sont décidés à inventer le roman, c'est-à-dire à inventer l'homme.[159]

La Modification, published in 1957 and winner of the Renaudot prize that year, is Michel Butor's third novel and his best-known book. Emerging out of the *nouveau roman* period, the novel contains two fundamental features of the movement – formal experimentation and self-reflexivity – and contributes to the evolution of the genre by contesting it from within. The *nouveau roman,* as Robbe-Grillet describes it in the quotation above, is characterised by the writers' tendency towards formal and structural innovation in their literary work, rather than constituting a homogenous literary school with specific features.

159 | Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un Nouveau Roman*. 1963. (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2013) 10.

The movement established itself in France in the fifties, during the period of French structuralism (1950-1975) that had its primary origin in the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and signalled a shift from an emphasis on content to formal realism. Hence initially, the *nouveau roman* was seen more as a challenge to traditional realism and what was vaguely called the Balzacian novel. It developed in a time during which literature and linguistics fertilised each other and blossomed. Roman Jakobson's early formalism, Roland Barthes's study of semiology and semiotics, Claude Lévi-Strauss's application of de Saussure's structural linguistics to anthropology and Émile Benveniste's published works expanding de Saussure's linguistic paradigm at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s are all major inputs in theory and criticism that influenced the writers of the time. The *nouveaux romanciers* experienced a generally active period in other arts as well; between 1950 and 1960 photography, theatre and most importantly cinema (*Nouvelle Vague*) enjoyed a significant development echoing the needs of the time and positioning the *new human* in the post-war world.[160]

Among the ideas that were embraced by the *nouveaux romanciers* and that can be identified in Butor's *La Modification* is the recognition that description is potentially infinite in the sense that any scene could be broken into ever-smaller units, with more and more detail supplied. For the *nouveaux romanciers* there could never be a definite or definitive transcription of reality and so they endeavoured to expose the selectivity and non-objectivity of traditional realist description. In the works of the *nouveau roman* and in the particular example of *La Modification,* the description of reality is so detailed and authentic that it includes what could also be considered unnecessary detail, thus making the ordinary into a source of fascination in fiction.

160 | For a historical account of French structuralism, see Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics*. (London and New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2nd ed., 2008)

Moreover, writers of the *nouveau roman* rejected the traditional view of language as an unproblematic vehicle for the representation of reality. The objection concerned the distance between experience and writing, a distance that can never be closed in real time as new events are happening during the composition. These events multiply relentlessly the number of data points to be taken into account. The *nouveaux romanciers* rejected the concept of reducing literature to a medium for the propagation of messages to the world and argued that formal experimentation could actually make the reader see the world anew.[161] *La Modification* is the first purely second-person narrative to be examined in the project, and it will be analysed as was *Kindheitsmuster* by focussing on its narrative perspective and structure. As with all narrative examples discussed here, the focus lies on the impact of the second-person pronoun and its use and function in the narrative.

It is also important to point out that with *La Modification* and the second-person employment in the narrative Michel Butor contributes significantly to the theme of self-discovery as a key topic of second-person fiction and the fundamental question as to whether pronouns should be regarded more as a grammatical phenomenon or as related to the person, designating above all personal reference.

The Novel

Michel Butor, born in 1926, was a student of literature and philosophy before becoming a prolific writer. With *La Modification* he presented in 1957 the common story of a love-triangle though narrated from the less common second-person perspective (with some rare exceptions). Avoiding any ethical messages, he depicts both the adventures of his main character and the adventure of writing. *La Modification* chronicles the story of an intended life change which,

161 | Jean H Duffy, *Butor: La Modification*. (London: Grant and Cutler Ltd, 1990) 14-16.

however, is never realised. The plot details a sequence of minor modifications which result in a major modification of the hero's perspective on life rather than the big life change that is (ironically) implied in the title.

The book enjoyed popularity and praise from its contemporaries and was a milestone of the *nouveau roman* period: it blends the traditional format of a specific framed plot and character with a postmodern self-reflexive dimension while inscribing many of the ideas of the *nouveau roman* as briefly described in the introductory passage above.[162]

Vous avez mis le pied gauche sur la rainure de cuivre, et de votre épaule droite vous essayez en vain de pousser un peu plus le panneau coulissant. Vous vous introduisez par l'étroite ouverture en vous frottant contre ses bords, puis, votre valise couverte de granuleux cuir sombre couleur d'épaisse bouteille [...][163]

The narrative starts *in medias res*, opening with a striking "vous" and a detailed description of the protagonist's movements and surroundings. Information is limited to what the protagonist witnesses visually in his environment: a train carriage. The narrative evolves based on observations and associations, without revealing any of the character's inner thoughts or emotions. The plot and the main character's situation are gradually revealed as the narrative develops along with the journey that is about to begin. The narrator offers access only to the senses of the character and lets readers witness his experience through his eyes, without any direct characterisation but introducing the character through his thoughts and actions gradually proceeding on his journey towards self-awareness (*ethopoeia*):

162 | Duffy (1990), 96.

163 | Butor (1957/1980), 7.

par moments la pensée du voyager (qui n'est alors qu'un pur regard) se porte sur les endroits représentés par les photos publicitaires dont sont garnies les cloisons du compartiment.[164]

The story begins one morning when Léon Delmont – the main character of the book, a middle-aged man in 1950s Paris, France, who is married with children – boards a train to Rome in Paris. He is about to leave his wife for his mistress, whom he meets every time he visits the Italian capital on business as chief representative of Scabelli, an Italian firm of typewriter manufacturers. This time he is travelling to Rome for purely personal reasons and, contrary to his business habits, travels third class. He wishes to tell his mistress Cécile that he has found a job for her in Paris and that they can start a new life together there as he has decided to divorce his wife Henriette.

During the journey all manner of associations and memories overcome Léon and blend with his desires and hopes. The narrative constantly shifts between different periods of Léon's life as fragments of former journeys are evoked again and again, constantly interrupting the narration of the current trip. In the linear development of the train journey, these minor narratives involving the past or even the future appear as intermissions with a random associative order in a non-linear sequence as they are triggered by ordinary incidents and external stimuli, without any specific justification. Flashbacks of the past and daydreams of the future exceed the time frame of the twenty-four-hour journey, yet they become integral parts of the present, influencing how it is perceived. Léon is assailed by these memories and dreams and the upset they cause. As a result he is increasingly tortured by self-doubt as he approaches his destination, and the firmness of his purpose gradually erodes. [165]

164 | Michel Leiris, Afterword: "Le réalisme mythologique de Michel Butor." 1958. In Michel Butor, *La Modification*. 1957. (Paris: Edition Minuit, 1980) 293f.

165 | Mary Lydon, *Perpetuum Mobile: A Study of the Novels and Aesthetics of Michel Butor*. (Edmonton: Alberta University Press, 1980) 101.

Before finally arriving in Rome, Léon's plan has definitively altered; he has come to realise that his love for Cécile is actually connected with his love of Rome and that her moving to Paris would deprive him of having Rome as a rejuvenating getaway. Therefore, by the end of the novel and by the time the train finally reaches the Italian capital, Léon has reversed his decision: he intends to spend his days alone without seeing Cécile, revisit Rome with his wife in the form of a second honeymoon at some point in the future and record his experience in a book. In the final part of *La Modification*, Léon states his wish to keep the conditions of his life the same as before and the distance between the two cities unchanged. His adventure, however, is not diminished by the fact that his initial intention is not realised: when Léon steps off the train at the end, the need to recreate the adventure in a book is declared, implying the beginning of a new adventure, namely that of writing.

Léon's Adventure

La Modification is a book that involves two different adventures, that of its central character and that of writing. Both of them are subject to modifications and are narrated from a second-person perspective. The choice of a common narrative mode/voice for both adventures and this style of unspecified address add coherence to the narrative which appears unified although it inscribes two distinct narrative levels.

The first level, depicting Léon's adventure and train experience, involves a thematic modification and reflects the gradual reversal of his decision. The modification of Léon's determination, culminating in his final decision not to leave his wife, is presented and reasoned gradually in three different stages corresponding to three simultaneous narratives of the journey. These three narrative stages are reflected in the structure of the book, which is divided into three parts each of which is subdivided into untitled, numbered chapters.

Each of the chapters begins with Léon Delmont entering a train compartment and ends with him leaving it, marking his seat always with a book he bought at the station in Paris and which remains unread until the end. The chapters, numbered with Roman numerals, are subdivided into smaller units of varying length, and there is the same variation in the length of the sentences, which are most often long and complicated, with minimal punctuation and frequent repetitions. Similarly, paragraphs often start with non-capitalised words or phrases, thus seeming to have been picked up from a previous utterance in verse-like form.[166] This writing style reflects the obsessive attention to detail that *nouveaux romanciers* favoured in their writings; it also aligns the narrating process with the movement of the train. Flashes of views through the window of the compartment interrupt its duration and undifferentiated repetitiveness, just as the narrative about Léon's decision to change his life involves memories, daydreaming and other sub-narrative interruptions.

Part A: A Life-Changing Plan

The first part of the novel is about Léon looking forward to a new life of freedom and romance with Cécile, lingering over memories of their first encounter and hopes for their future together.

> Ce voyage devrait être une libération, un rajeunissement, un grand nettoyage de votre corps et de votre tête; ne devriez-vous pas en ressentir déjà les bienfaits et l'exaltation?[167]

Written in the present tense exclusively, this part chronicles the actual trip from Paris to Rome that Léon Delmont takes and defines the main narrative conditions of the text:

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166 | Laurent Le Sage, *The French New Novel: An Introduction and a Sampler.* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962) 72.
167 | Butor (1957/1980), 23.

Le train s'arrête et tout le monde en même temps lève les yeux, laissant sa lecture dans l'immobilité soudaine et le silence.[168]

Within these first ninety pages, the narrator describes the train environment and reveals Léon's thoughts which involve visions of Rome and Paris as well as episodes with the two women in his life, Henriette and Cécile. The thoughts in this part show his dissatisfaction with Henriette while emphasising the pleasures of being with Cécile, and they implicitly move towards Léon's decision. We can feel Léon's euphoria and eagerness for the future as the narrative is enriched with imagined future moments of his life with Cécile in Paris.

Maintenant Cécile allait venir à Paris et vous demeureriez ensemble. Il n'y aurait pas de divorce, pas d'esclandre, de cela vous étiez, vous êtes bien certain; tout se passerait fort calmement, la pauvre Henriette se tairait, les enfants, vous iriez les voir une fois par semaine à peu près; et vous étiez certain aussi non seulement de l'accord, mais de la triomphante joie de Cécile qui vous avait tant taquiné sur votre bourgeoise hypocrisie.[169]

Léon describes his current life situation as a menacing "asphyxie"[170] from which he strives to escape; confident about his decision and reassured that his intention to continue his life with another woman will save him from this menace, he keeps observing other passengers and makes up stories about their lives. Subconsciously, his perception of the future changes slightly under the influence both of invented stories and memories. Léon comments on his decision repeatedly and his tone gradually changes from a secure voice to a reassuring one:

168 | Butor (1957/1980), 46.
169 | Butor (1957/1980), 36.
170 | Butor (1957/1980), 36.

Mais maintenant ça y est, c'est fait, vous voilà libre. Il y aura encore bien des détails à régler certes, et la situation ne pourra se stabiliser avant quelques mois, mais le seuil est franchi.[171]

By the end of the first part the train is already at Dijon and Léon needs a walk to stretch his legs as he is probably tired from the confinement of his third-class seat; the professor who was travelling with him leaves the train and Léon pushes the book towards his seat, laying claim to more space and showing some irritation. The fatigue these last actions show offers a first hint at Léon's negativity and defeatism, more of which is to come, and it opens a space for Léon to have second thoughts.

Les rails et les fils se multiplient; on aperçoit les premières maisons de Dijon. Vous avez envie de vous dégourdir les jambes. Le roman que vous avez acheté sur le quai de la gare de Lyon et que vous n'avez pas encore ouvert est toujours sur la banquette à gauche de la place où vous étiez assis; vous le poussez pour qu'il la marque.[172]

Part B: Modifying the Plan

The second part of the narrative covers almost exactly the same number of pages as the first. This transitional section shows the gradual modification of Léon's perceptions that will justify his eventual abandonment of his own plan in the third and final part. At the beginning of the second part Léon is still confident about his decision:

A présent, par votre décision, par votre voyage pour elle seule, vous lui aurez bien montré que vous avez rompu ce genre de chaînes, et par conséquent

171 | Butor (1957/1980), 84.
172 | Butor (1957/1980), 90.

ces images et ces statues ne devraient plus représenter pour elle un obstacle à tourner pour vous atteindre [...][173]

As the narrative develops, Léon Delmont imagines various projections of his return to Paris, which involve connotations different from his previous thoughts. Moments of tension and disharmony with Cécile are brought to light and Léon's state of mind is challenged by doubts which confuse him. These scenes intervene unexpectedly; they amplify Léon's stress and raise doubts as to whether Cécile could indeed be Léon's salvation from his social *asphyxia*:

"Alors, quand reviendras-tu?" et à qui vous avez répété ce qu'elle savait déjà, ce que vous lui aviez déjà dit vingt fois au cours de ce séjour: "Hélas, pas avant les derniers jours de décembre", ce qui est devenu faux maintenant[174]

This part, written mainly in the future tense, describes Léon's anticipated confrontations both with his wife and his mistress upon the announcement of his decision. Images of future conversations with his wife Henriette proliferate:

Mardi prochain, lorsque harassé par votre voyage en troisième classe vous aurez ouvert avec votre clé la porte de l'appartement, quinze place du Panthéon, vous trouverez Henriette en train de coudre à vous attendre, qui vous demandera comment s'est passé ce séjour, et vous lui répondrez: "Comme tous les autres."[175]

Through these imagined future conversations the conviction of his decision and, most importantly, the anticipation of his idealised life with Cécile wane. The narrator, in the form of a voice-over, narrates this progress in reverse in a sequence of future scenes in which Léon lies about his real travel purposes and his relationship with

173 | Butor (1957/1980), 96.
174 | Butor (1957/1980), 98f.
175 | Butor (1957/1980), 160.

Cécile until his final non-realised confession. As the modification is already taking place, the future tense of the narrated scenes becomes a future of the past, proving in linguistic terms that it doesn't belong to the present anymore.[176]

Mardi prochain, lorsque vous entrerez dans sa chambre, en effet vous lui raconterez tout ce voyage et vous lui direz: "J'étais allé à Rome pour prouver à Cécile que je la choisissais contre toi, j'y étais allé dans l'intention de lui demander de venir vivre avec moi définitivement à Paris…"[177]

Meanwhile, memories of past visits to Rome, projections into the future of the arrival in Rome and the return to Paris along with museum visits and other associations are all fused in the narrative present. Before the end of the second part, the opposition between the two women, which dominates the narrative until that moment, is relativised. Léon remembers the meeting of the two women in Paris which made him feel uncomfortable and uneasy as he witnessed their similarities:

Quelle blessure, lorsque toute détendue Henriette sur le palier a supplié Cécile de revenir trois jours plus tard et que celle-ci a accepté avec une chaleur, hélas, indubitablement sincère, quoi qu'elle en ait cru elle-même! Mais vous ne pouviez pas lui crier: "N'accepte pas, je ne veux pas que tu reviennes!"[178]

At the end of the second part, Léon appears very irritated by a lack of sleep, a consequence of the inconvenience of his third-class seat and of his subconscious mental challenges. As in the other narrative parts, at the end of the second part he leaves the train compartment

176 | Lois Oppenheim, *Intentionality and Intersubjectivity: A Phenomenological Study of Butor's "La Modification"*. (Kentucky: Lexington, 1980) 150.

177 | Butor (1957/1980), 162.

178 | Butor (1957/1980), 188.

with the book on his seat to hold his place. The section ends with a general sense of doubt and negativity and prepares the ground for the definitive reversal of his plan.

Part C: Life Has Modified the Plan

The final part of the novel forms a correspondence to the first, again covering almost the exact number of pages and giving the novel a triple symmetry. This part reflects Léon's current mental state and it frequently reaches into the past in search of balance as well as to strengthen the perceived consistency of his life decisions:

> Considérer le problème de votre voyage, de la décision que vous aviez prise, du sort de Cécile, de ce qu'il faudra dire à Henriette, maintenant que vous êtes rassasié, reposé raisonnablement, et non plus dans cette espèce de désarroi qui vous avait envahi, aveuglé, égaré loin de la route que vous aviez choisie, dans les ténèbres froides et honteuses, dépouillant de son sens tout votre être présent, le fait que vous étiez ici à cette place marquée par le livre non lu, [...][179]

The imagined journey depicts the protagonist's future life after the reversal of his initial decision. The pages describe a new perspective on the days to follow now that Léon has changed his initial plans and reveal how he has started to associate his experience with his unread book. The relationship with Cécile has become a thing of the past rather than of the future; unpleasant memories of her occupy more and more space while his honeymoon with Henriette is recounted. Narrated in the future perfect ("futur antérieur/futur II") in the form of free indirect speech, part three shows the fears and hesitations that made Léon change his mind and describes Léon's reconciliation with his present life.

While the change of perspective is profound, the modification is also reflected in the sequences of the phantom of the Grand Veneur's

179 | Butor (1957/1980), 195.

obsessive questioning which develop in the course of Léon's reflections throughout the novel. The phantom appears sporadically in the text as an intertextual and historical reference to France in medieval times, an appearance that shows how reading, writing and living interact with and reflect one another, following the same modification scheme. His continuous questioning mirrors Léon's doubts and functions as a leitmotif, one that adds to the tension of the text and invites the reader not only to witness but also to *participate* in the interrogation that is taking place in the world of the narrative.

Whereas in the previous part the phantom's questions "M'entendez-vous?" on page 114 and later "Qu'attendez-vous?" on page 135 prompted Léon's plans to bring Cécile to Paris, the question "Où êtes-vous?" on page 151 actually reflects the protagonist's growing confusion. Before the end of the second part the confusion increases and the Grand Veneur asks of Léon on page 183: "Êtes-vous fou?" This question comes on Léon and Henriette's return to Paris after their disastrous second honeymoon in Rome, which they had undertaken by car rather than by train. In the third part, by page 220, the Grand Veneur's initial question has been taken up by a female in Léon's dream, and the inquiry "Qu'attendez-vous?" is now combined with the question "Qui êtes-vous?" echoing Léon's agonising search for self-awareness and determination. The voice is trying to persuade Léon to make a final decision and thereby be saved:

"Je suis venu pour vous mener sur l'autre rive. Je vois bien que vous êtes mort; n'ayez crainte de chavirer, le bateau ne s'enfoncera pas sous votre poids."[180]

The transformations of the motif of questions reflect those of Léon's perceptions.[181] When Léon visualises his unrealised life the phantom's questions become more pointed: "Où êtes-vous, que fait-

180 | Butor (1957/1980), 220.

181 | Duffy (1990), 33f.

es-vous, que voulez-vous?"[182] What he finally comes to realise is that he cannot do without Rome ("À Rome, nous serons libres"[183] – "Tu ne pourras plus jamais revenir"[184]) and that his love affair with Cécile is bound up with his feelings for the city.

> Vous vous dites: que s'est-il passé depuis ce mercredi soir, depuis ce dernier départ normal pour Rome? Comment se fait-il que tout soit changé, que j'en sois venu là?[185]
> [...]
> Vous dites: il faudrait montrer dans ce livre le rôle que peut jouer Rome dans la vie d'un homme à Paris [...][186]

By the end of the narrative, Léon remembers his promise to his wife:

> Vous dites: je te le promets, Henriette, dès que nous le pourrons, nous reviendrons ensemble à Rome, dès que les ondes de cette perturbation se seront calmées, dès que tu m'auras pardonné; nous ne serons pas si vieux.[187]

Before stepping off the train he states categorically that the two cities should keep their geographical distance, implying that there will not be any major change in his life. His ultimate aim has changed: he plans to revive in the form of a book the experience of his mental journey and decision-making, recounting the change of perspective and the final modification. The book he decides to write is actually the book we, the readers, have in hand.

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182 | Butor (1957/1980), 230.
183 | Butor (1957/1980), 213.
184 | Butor (1957/1980), 225.
185 | Butor (1957/1980), 278.
186 | Butor (1957/1980), 280.
187 | Butor (1957/1980), 285.

Vous vous levez, remettez votre manteau, prenez votre valise, ramassez votre livre. Le mieux, sans doute, serait de conserver à ces deux villes leurs relations géographiques réelles et de tenter de faire revivre sur le mode de la lecture cet épisode crucial de votre aventure, le mouvement qui s'est produit dans votre esprit accompagnant le déplacement de votre corps d'une gare à l'autre à travers tous les paysages intermédiaires, vers ce livre futur et nécessaire dont vous tenez la forme dans votre main. Le couloir est vide. Vous regardez la foule sur le quai. Vous quittez le compartiment.[188]

As a title, *La Modification* reflects both the plot of the novel structured in narrative levels that reflect the stages of the decision-making, but also their relationship, coherence and interrelation as a sequence. In addition it reflects the writing as a process involving modifications and showing its development within these changes. The latter modification is applied to the plot in the way the story is transformed from experience to verbal act, while the experience of travelling is adapted in written form. The adaptation in writing inevitably brings about changes and modifications in the way the journey is evolving and is thus represented rather than chronicled. What we actually read is not the (non-) modification of Léon's life but the modification of a real experience into a narrative act and the representation of life in fiction. This narrative can reach out from the level of fiction to that of the real world of real author and real reader and is therefore encapsulated – by the train timetable Léon holds during the journey for example – within the frame of reality so as to be credible and verifiable.

The fictional space and time within which Léon's adventure takes place is compatible with the space and time of a real Paris to Rome train journey at the time. The train timetable that Léon holds during the journey has this function. The allusion to real life echoes ideas of the *nouveau roman* about formal realism and implies that the ordinary can be the source of fictional representation even for something extraordinary. The real-time effect is also emphasised by

188 | Butor (1957/1980), 285f.

the tenses of the verbs ("present" or "passé composé") that evoke a sense of concurrence with reality as well as the use of various deictic pronouns ("cet," "cette") that foster a sense of immediacy in the visual apprehension of the fictional world.

> [C]ette serviette noire bourrée de dossiers dont vous apercevez quelques coins colorés qui s'insinuent par une couture défaite, et de livres sans doute ennuyeux, reliés, au-dessus de lui comme un emblème, comme une légende qui n'en est pas moins explicative, ou énigmatique, pour être une chose, une possession et non un mot, posée sur le filet de métal aux trous carrés, et appuyée sur la paroi du corridor, cet homme vous dévisage, agacé par votre immobilité, debout, ses pieds gênés par vos pieds: il voudrait vous demander de vous asseoir, mais les mots n'atteignent même pas ses lèvres timides, et il se détourne vers le carreau, écartant de son index le rideau bleu dans lequel est tissé le sigle SNCF.[189]

The structure of the narrative corresponds to the protagonist's thinking, and it evolves as the train progresses to its final destination, thus reflecting a mind in flux with – oftentimes – contradictory associations. The action of the book lasts as long as the journey from Paris to Rome, consequently somewhat less than twenty-four hours. The perspective of the text is framed according to what a person could see and perceive within such a timespan; the *Zeitdeckung* (engl. in 'real time', *erzählte Zeit = Erzählzeit*) – a technique frequently used in *Nouvelle Vague* films – strengthens the link between fiction and reality. This real-time effect links the fictional world with the external world in which both the real author and the reader are located and adds to a sense of credibility and verifiability.

189 | Butor (1957/1980), 8f.

The Adventure of Writing

Mais ce livre qui, pour l'auteur supposé, est un fragment d'autobiographie et, pour l'auteur réel, une fiction dont l'*authenticité* (à défaut de sa véracité) ne saurait être mise en doute et qui doit donc plus ou moins retracer (en termes transposés) l'expérience qui conduisit à son élaboration, ce livre auquel l'auteur réel comme l'auteur supposé ont abouti, et qui n'a pu que les aider – l'un comme l'autre – à savoir qui ils sont, est un pas fait vers une réponse et une solution.[190]

By the end of the novel, readers recognise writing as the second narrative level of *La Modification*. The written representation of Léon's adventure suggests a recreation of the plot, namely that which readers actually read in *La Modification*. Léon's adventure offers the core plot, which is the basis upon which the specific version that we actually have in hand is narrated, hence it provides the grounds for the generation of the second narrative level, the written representation.

This duplicity and mirroring of the two levels is reflected in the two books that are mentioned within the story: the train timetable and Léon's book that he bought at the Paris train station to read during the journey, though he never does. This book is a material representation of the one Léon announces he will write at the end of *La Modification*; the same book we have in hand, completing a perfect narrative circle.

[...] ce livre qu'on peut dire *parfait* en ce sens qu'il se referme sur lui-même et qu'il n'est pas autre chose que le récit de sa propre genèse, le résumé aussi schématique qu'il soit de ce qu'on pourrait nommer son contenu manifeste montre d'emblée qu'il joue sur plusieurs plans.[191]

190 | Leiris (1958), 312.

191 | Leiris (1958), 292.

Butor inscribes both levels in his novel, that of happening (the plot) and that of narrating/writing, and he presents the story of a fictional author narrating the adventures of Léon shortly after his journey of self-discovery. His aspiration to be authentic is reflected in the narrative convention according to which he is writing the story, though taking the reader's perspective, as if he was unaware of its final outcome. Hence the story is presented as if it was concurrent with the process of narration. Hints of this narrative level are difficult to locate in the text: Butor's elevated style, the sense of contemporaneity and the homogenous use of the second-person pronoun to designate both levels make it hard to separate them. It is only through certain allusions that readers feel the narrative might reflect another narrative after all (before the end of the text when this reflection is made explicit). An example is the way fellow travellers are described in the book, implying the possibility that the narrator is in the middle of a composition process.

Si vous êtes entré dans ce compartiment, c'est que le coin couloir face à la marche à votre gauche est libre [...]. Un homme à votre droite, son visage à la hauteur de votre coude, assis en face de cette place où vous allez vous installer pour ce voyage.[192]

All the stories that Léon makes up about their lives are part of the narration and imply that the fictional author is exploring his imagination not distractedly but instrumentally: that is, for his writing exercise. Also, when the writing style of school essays is recalled in the passage below, yet another allusion to the writing process is made, this time as a hint about the writing method the fictional author might have chosen. Like *Kindheitsmuster* the narrator reveals parts of the writing process adding a self-reflective character in the narrative:

192 | Butor (1957/1980), 8.

Des livres de classe peut-être s'il est professeur dans un collège, s'il va y rentrer déjeuner dans quelques instants [...] des analyses "A rapporter avec la signature de vos parents", des narrations "vous écrivez une lettre à vos amis pour lui raconter vos vacances", [...] "Imaginez que vous êtes monsieur Léon Delmont et que vous écrivez à votre maîtresse Cécile Darcella pour lui annoncer que vous avez trouvé pour elle une situation à Paris", "On voit bien que vous n'avez jamais été amoureux"; et lui, que sait-il de cela?[193]

La Modification is a story of self-discovery: for its hero Léon Delmont it reflects his journey towards certainty while for the fictional author it mirrors the journey towards knowing the unknown. Léon, who is the addressee of his own story, moves from stability to doubt and back to stability. The fictional author addressing the story to his narrative hero shows the creation of a narrative persona and, to that extent, the making of a person. Léon is a narrative persona created and defined within the narrative, in a sense within the recreation of his own story. As a character he emerges through the way his actions are presented and through his own process of self-confrontation. Consequently, the narrative is composed partly in the form of questions that highlight these reflections and the way in which Léon tarries before a major change in his life:

Alors terrorisée s'élève en vous votre propre voix qui se plaint: ah, non, cette décision que j'avais eu tant de mal à prendre, il ne faut pas la laisser se défaire ainsi; ne suis-je donc pas dans ce train, en route vers Cécile merveilleuse?

The questions of the narrative offer their answers in the narrative itself, resembling a dialogue performed while travelling:

Mais il n'est plus temps maintenant, leurs chaînes solidement affermies par ce voyage se déroulent avec le sûr mouvement même du train, et malgré tous vos efforts pour vous en dégager, pour tourner votre attention ailleurs,

193 | Butor (1957/1980), 114f

vers cette décision que vous sentez vous échapper, les voici qui vous entraînent dans leurs engrenages.[194]

The adventure of writing suggests a parallel narrative level that the reader can recognise only at the end of reading the main story. It belongs to the narrative itself, being part of the fiction as in Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster,* and reveals elements of its process of generation – even in a fictional disguise – that reflect on a *real* meta-fictional level which concerns writing and reading as a narrative theme but also as a mechanism for self-awareness. Like the narrator in Wolf's novel, Léon is created within the narrative, reflecting the making of a person and the journey of self-discovery involved, and realised within writing and narrating.

The Narrative Perspective

The use of the second-person pronoun instead of the traditional and more usual first and third still requires discussion. Why is Léon's story not narrated using the *je* nor the *il,* and what are the reasons for and functions of *that* poetic modification that Michel Butor seems to have prioritised? The author discusses the topic in one of his essays published after the novel.

C'est ici qu'intervient l'emploi de la seconde personne, que l'on peut caractériser ainsi dans le roman: celui à qui l'on raconte sa propre histoire.[195]
C'est parce qu'il y a quelqu'un à qui l'on raconte sa propre histoire, quelque chose de lui qu'il connaît pas, ou du moins pas encore au niveau du langage, qu'il peut y avoir un récit à la seconde personne, qui sera par conséquent toujours un récit «didactique».
Si le personnage connaissait entièrement sa propre histoire, s'il n'avait pas d'objection à la raconter ou se la raconter, la première personne s'impose-

194 | Butor (1957/1980), 162.
195 | Butor (1964), 66.

rait: il donnerait son témoigne. Mais il s'agit de lui arracher, soit parce qu'il ment, nous cache ou se cache quelque chose, soit parce qu'il n'a pas tous les éléments, ou même, s'il les a, qu'il est incapable de les relier convenablement. Les paroles prononcées par le témoin se présenteront comme des îlots à la première personne à l'intérieur d'un récit à la seconde, qui provoque leur émersion.[196]

For Butor the choice of the second-person plural form is dictated by the fact that the main character is unaware of his own story, hence by the aspiration for self-awareness, Léon's narrative persona is created the moment the story is generated. Léon Delmont suffers from a lack of self-awareness and determination, and he is challenged by a difficult life decision that challenges his self-reception and understanding and connects not with a new self but with a new self-perception. The purpose of the narrative is not to chronicle what has happened but to help Léon understand the process and to experience what he is going through. As a result his adventures are narrated and addressed to him in the second-person by the fictional author in order to restore Léon's authority over them, aspiring to transform the adventures into a conscious choice and to make his personality more solid and determined.

As discussed in connection with the narrator in *Kindheitsmuster,* Léon finds it difficult to tell his own story from the first-person perspective as he in not fully aware of it yet. His situation is different to that of the narrator in *Kindheitsmuster* who ended up using the third person and inventing Nelly Jordan, due to a problematic relationship with the past. Léon's difficulty with saying the *I* comes from the fact that his *I* is being formed within the narrative and it has no association with feelings of historical guilt or an estranged childhood; it is linked with the process of creating a person. In his case stimuli and associations that are investigated align with his state of mind and chart his progress from uncertainty to stability and determination.

196 | Butor (1964), 66f.

The alienating third-person perspective is therefore unnecessary, but as the self-discovery is in progress and the first person is not available to Léon, the second person is the only valid choice to reflect his consciousness and the transitional state in which he finds himself. It reflects the two narrative levels that coexist in the book: that of the central protagonist story and that of writing. Léon's situation resembles the self-cross-examining narrator that we have encountered in Wolf but expresses different narrative needs and circumstances. These are performed in a more implicit though extended form through rhetorical questions and interplay with the Grand Veneur, and oriented more towards the present and future rather than towards the past and an attempt at autobiographical writing. The second person qualifies as a functional device in the rhetoric of self-discovery, designating the perspective of the unknown and reflecting a troubled consciousness by showing the distance between thinking and acting. It mirrors the notion of contemporaneity and highlights the making of a person (and a book) as a continuous, live "happening-now" process.

If *La Modification* were written in the first person, the narrative would also require a temporal displacement from the experience, and its crystallisation as the modification would have had to occur before the recounting of it. In that case it would not be possible to distinguish the level of action from that of writing as they would be identical; this, however, would run counter to the *nouveaux romanciers'* idea of realism. The first person, an indication for determination, can be employed only once a decision is made and so would not work to reflect Léon's changing his mind and his evolving journey towards self-awareness.

Therefore we rarely see any first-person excerpts in the novel, and whenever instability and the overwhelming power of the imagination take over, the second person returns and the tone becomes that of an indictment through interrogation. When the narrative is not centred on Léon dealing with his uncertainty and mental challenges or when it drifts from the core plot, the second-person voice that stimulates the modification can be and is temporarily

suspended. It is definitively abandoned only towards the end of the novel, when Léon Delmont announces his project to transform the experience of the modification into writing. Then we see the first person being preferred, signalling that Léon might have reached the level of certainty and self-awareness associated with the first person. In this way, the fictional author indicates that Léon Delmont's narrative persona is now (by the end of the novel) completely shaped and created.

Je ne puis espérer me sauver seul. Tout le sang, tout le sable de mes jours s'épuiserait en vain dans cet effort pour me consolider.
Mais pourquoi restez-vous debout dans l'embrasure à vous balancer selon le mouvement qui se poursuit, votre épaule heurtant le montant de bois presque sans que vous vous en rendiez compte?[197]

The third person, too, is used only rarely in *La Modification* although more frequently than the first person. It appears as a manifestation of the unconscious, for example in Léon's dreams. The dream sequences offer access to a realm in which repressed thoughts and censored desires may appear, and they highlight Léon's difficulty in understanding and verbalising his thoughts and recognising his mental state. Most importantly, the third-person pronoun is used when the experience of the modification is projected onto the hero of the unread book, that is when the episode of Léon Delmont's life is fictionalised as if it belonged to another, revealing his being as a version of his self.

[…] dans ce livre que vous aviez acheté […] il doit bien se trouver quelque part […] un homme en difficulté qui voudrait se sauver, qui fait un trajet et qui s'aperçoit que le chemin qu'il a pris ne mène pas là où il croyait, comme s'il était perdu dans un désert, ou une brousse, ou une forêt se refermant

197 | Butor (1957/1980), 196.

en quelque sorte derrière lui sans qu'il arrive même à retrouver quel est le chemin qui l'a conduit là.[198]

Butor's novel could not generally be narrated in the third person as this would estrange Léon radically from his own adventures and destroy the immediacy of the experience narrated. Léon may suffer from finding it difficult to say *I* as he is challenged by uncertainty and self-awareness but, nevertheless, he recognises the narration as his personal experience which is valuable enough to merit being transmitted in written form. Neither would the third-person perspective work for the fictional author as it would not reflect the attempt to create a character within writing. As with the first person, the third-person perspective would fail to reflect a mind in flux and the simultaneity of the narration as it would convey in a definite form an adventure already over and understood.

Donc préparer, permettre, par exemple au moyen d'un livre, à cette liberté future hors de notre portée, lui permettre, dans une mesure si intime soit-elle de se constituer, de s'établir.[199]

In summary the second person is the only narrative perspective that can merge both narrative levels – the one of the plot and that of narrating – efficiently and coherently into one while respecting their distance and differences. It reflects the elevated style of the book and the remarkable narrative artefact that Butor created with *La Modification*.

Il fallait absolument que le récit soit fait du point de vue d'un personnage. Comme il s'agissait d'une prise de conscience, il ne fallait pas que le personnage dise *je*. Il me fallait un monologue intérieur en-dessous du niveau du langage du personnage lui-même, dans une forme intermédiaire entre la

198 | Butor (1957/1980), 197f.
199 | Butor (1957/1980), 276.

première personne et la troisième. Ce *vous* me permet de décrire la situation du personnage et la façon dont le langage naît en lui.[200]

The second-person voice indicates a voice-over narrator narrating to Léon what he actually experiences. Butor himself comments on the absence of a first-person narrator as an outcome of the fact that his novel reflects "une prise de conscience." He explains that his goal was to find a form in which to depict a monologue, one that would evolve beyond the level of language in an intermediate form between the first and the third person. As Butor states above, the use of *vous* enabled him to capture in a genuine form the situation in which language is born within a person.

In fact, the second-person perspective partly involves the first- and partly the third-person perspective, in the sense that it reflects neither total authority nor total estrangement; it bridges the author with the narrator and the hero and offers a way of dealing with thoughts as yet unarticulated, thus mirroring the subconscious. Hence, *vous* as the voice of the subconscious stands as a bridge communicating between the two levels, that of plot (happening) and that of narration (narrating), reflecting the intermediate space (the middle-distance as described in the first chapter, based on Grimsley's observations) and shifting its status from thinking to acting.

The second-person plural form includes an *il* and a *je* and presupposes their interaction. Only seldom is the use of *vous* a plural reference, for example for both Léon and Cécile. Most often it addresses Léon according to the French social code of politeness and refers to him as a single male person. To understand the poetic and semantic value of *vous* better it is instructive to compare the translations of the novel into other languages. The significance of *vous* instead of the singular *tu* becomes more obvious when we look at the English translation of the book, for example, where there is only the one form *you* to reflect all second-person variations:

200 | Butor (1957/1980), 290.

Standing with your left foot on the grooved brass sill, you try in vain with your right shoulder to push the sliding door a little wider open. You edge your way in through the narrow opening, then you lift up your suitcase of bottle-green grained leather [...][201]

In the English version the narration is necessarily in the only *you*-form available, without any contextual sign of the form of the second person intended. However, as we read on in the English translation, we find several pronouns and phrases that are not translated. They reveal the problem as they offer evidence for the lack of a legitimate equivalence between the French *vous* and the English *you* and stress the significance of the choice of pronoun in terms of form and meaning for the narrative.

Before your next trip, you had written to let her know you were coming – the first letter you had ever written to her, very different from today's letters, for since then "Dear Madam" has given place to "Dear Cécile" and now to lovers' pet names, **vous** has become **tu,** and polite formulas have been replaced by kisses. [202]

You won't want to laugh. You won't have the least temptation to say **tu** to me, I'm sure of that. For all your directorship you're just a boy, at least when you're with me, and that's why I love you, because I want to make a man of you, which she has been unable to do in spite of appearances.[203]

Crossing through the woods of Fontainebleau, where the Great Huntsman called out to you, "Êtes-vous fou? Are you mad?" how you longed to be back in Paris at last, in your own room, in your bed! And when you were stretched out there together she murmured, "I'm very grateful to you, but I'm so weary, that journey was so long!"[204]

201 | Michel Butor, *A Change of Heart*. 1958. Trans. Jean Stewart. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959) 1.

202 | Butor Trans. Jean Stewart (1958/1959), 100.

203 | Butor Trans. Jean Stewart (1958/1959), 152.

204 | Butor Trans. Jean Stewart (1958/1959), 156.

The translator has to use the French *vous* or *tu*, to define the development of the relationship from a distant correspondence between strangers to an intimate love affair. This also happens in the Grand Veneur's questions. Léon Delmont doesn't address himself in the second person in the form of an intimate self-inquisition to which the reader is allowed access, as is the case in Christa Wolf. Butor chooses the second person plural/polite form to show – also in narrative form – the progress Léon makes, the alienation of his choices and self, and his ultimate self-determination. The voice narrating his life and actions reflects second thoughts, hesitations and inner fears, those witnessed when the perspective of the *Other* is employed via the narrative *vous*; it articulates and expresses what he cannot, designated by the proper French *vous* instead of an intimate and more personal *tu* that would sound inappropriate for Léon Delmont, before he reaches the state of self-awareness and can take over a more proximate (*personal*) perspective on himself and his decisions.

Conclusion

In addition to the thematic and formal modification, *La Modification* presents a meta-fictional one rich in theoretical and philosophical implications. The third modification deserving discussion refers to the reader and the reader's relationship with the world of fiction and the author himself. The fact that the second-person perspective is by definition an invitation to the reader to feel addressed and referred to raises questions for the reader's identification with the narrative *vous* and his/her involvement in the text.

Butor's *vous* doesn't urge the reader to identify with Léon, nor does it imply a generalisation of the experience or the attempt to build a pattern of collective identity as in Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*. Léon's name, the detailed state of his life and the clearly male perspective adopted prove that the aim of the narrative is the development of *his* persona and *his* self-discovery without aspiring to create a sort of canonical text, a model novel, but rather a unique story of

that character. That it is, however, a representation, a version of *his* story, both de-personalises it and makes it more impersonal, and hence more inviting for the reader in that sense.

The reader may not be offered space to participate in any way in the textual activity but is encouraged to feel invited and familiar with the narrative through the dominance of the second-person pronoun and is given some beneficial insights into his or her own life in the form and echo of a guideline about life decisions and self-understanding. Butor's continuous references to visual perception have the following effects: firstly the achievement of formal realism and the visual perception of the narrative world enable the reader to participate in the experience of the book, catching the attention of the audience and making the narrative more attractive and engaging; and secondly it offers a genuine conception of the narrative world that adds to the realistic effect.

In addition to this, the narrative perspective of the text creates an inherent didacticism, resembling a sort of *how to* basic narrative category which has blossomed in the contemporary literary production, presenting patterns of happiness or success and self-help manuals. The novel can be read as an encouragement by Butor to the reader to see the world anew and to assess it in different ways and expressive modes, like that which is presented within his writing as well as the writing itself. In his "Réalisme mythologique de Michel Butor" Michel Leiris comments on the use of the second-person plural form and its didactic meaning as well:

> L'usage de la deuxième personne du pluriel dans l'ensemble d'un récit qui, envisagé sous cet angle, apparaît comme un immense énoncé de dissertation ou un canevas détaillé pour méditation ou examen de conscience semble donc se présenter – quels que soient les motifs d'ordre compositionnel qui ont déterminé ce choix – comme une façon de renvoyer sur vous (sur ce *vous* anonyme qui pourrait se dire *tous*) l'interrogation dont il est l'annonce ou le rappel tout au long de ces pages où, de l'impressionniste au didactique, tant de genres s'enchevêtrent à partir d'une anecdote si

commune qu'on est tenté d'y voir un attrape-nigauds à mesure que, scrutant le livre avec plus d'attention, on le découvre plus riche en arrière-plans.[205]

According to Leiris the didacticism of *La Modification* is not limited to an ethical treatise on love affairs, social conventions and so on. Echoing the ideas of the time, the novel encourages readers to narrate their reality and reconcile it with their routine. What emerges from *La Modification* is that sometimes the social asphyxia that we often suffer from can be resolved by way of introspection and by seeing things anew rather than by a radical change. Readers are encouraged to reconcile themselves with their *vie quotidienne* implying that, should they undergo any process of self-discovery and re-evaluate their lives, they might value things and circumstances differently. In short, they are instructed as to how to find peace and a balance between desires and aspirations, idealism and routine.

Committed to the idea of literature as research,[206] Butor's *La Modification* is a fine example of the tension between story and experiment, one that characterised much of the literature of the fifties.[207] *La Modification* shows the profound influence of other art forms such as film and photography as well as disciplines such as linguistics. These influences manifest themselves in terms of techniques such as the voice-over narrative mode and the obsessive attention to the visual. They show in aesthetic ideas such as the focus on form as part of the meaning of language and in literary themes such as the journey (of self-discovery), the genesis of a book and the making of an author.

It is intriguing that although Michel Butor was not the first to publish a second-person narrative – Ilse Aichinger, for example, had already done so in 1949 with the prize-winning *Spiegelgeschichte* – it was his novel that triggered a lively discussion among theorists about

205 | Leiris (1958), 313.

206 | "Le Nouveau Roman n'est pas une théorie, c'est une recherche." Robbe-Grillet (1963/2013), 144.

207 | Duffy (1990), 11.

second-person narrative as a distinct narrative phenomenon that needed to be analysed in detail autonomously rather than as an elaboration of, or exception to, another narrative form. The reasons why *La Modification* signalled the beginning of this long-lasting debate are easy enough to guess. The first might be linked to the author's popularity and productivity. Butor's strong presence on the literary scene of his time through essays and literary works certainly invited special attention. Another reason may be its time and place of publication in France during the fifties which had a very lively literary scene. Moreover, his book is among the few examples of pure second-person narrative in a longer work (Aichinger's *Spiegelgeschichte* is a short story).

In this thesis, the analysis of *La Modification* follows Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*. This sequence runs counter to the chronological order in which the two books appeared but serves the purpose of highlighting the second-person perspective in both texts. Both Wolf and Butor use the second-person perspective as a means of dealing with the difficulty of saying *I;* Wolf, however, employed all possible pronouns in her narrative and specified the use of the second person *du* as depicting aspects of the writing process. In *Kindheitsmuster, du* refers to the self-examination of an *Erzählfigur,* applied to childhood memories and her own reflections, a process undertaken while she is writing her childhood autobiography under the name of Nelly Jordan in the third person. Wolf uses the second-person perspective partly to reflect the process of becoming *I* and also to reveal aspects of the generation and writing of the book in the moment of the present.

Butor also employs the second-person perspective to deal with the difficulty of saying *I,* but he does so throughout the whole text. In his case the second-person polite/plural form *vous* is used throughout the narrative; that is, unlike in *Kindheitsmuster* it is created at both narrative levels, strengthening the link rather than distinguishing between them. Butor uses the polite/plural *vous* to weave a more complex narrative that benefits from the ambiguity of the pronoun. Moreover, in his text *vous* is not a self-controlling mechanism but

reflects the apostrophe towards an unknown addressee who refers to the uncertainty of his own status at the level of character and refers to a semi-developed narrative figure at the level of the fictional author.

Seen as part of the writing process and echoing the dynamic sense of representation, the narrative (in the second person) leads the narrating persona to a conscious choice (certainty) and towards acquiring a defined identity while aspects of the writing process are revealed. The postmodernist self-reflexive dimension of the narrative of *La Modification* reflects encouragement to readers to undergo a modification of their own by becoming authors themselves, inventing further versions of Léon(-like) stories. Readers are thus invited to familiarise themselves with narrating and writing as an effective means of self-confrontation and self-discovery; they are even given tips about writing such as the following reference to the writing method for a school essay:

> Vous à qui, par le truchement de ce roman, aura été passé le mot, parvenez à ce qui sera *votre* livre (sans être nécessairement un livre) et se révélera peut-être fort différent de ce que, primitivement, vous aurez cru chercher, car pour vous l'itinéraire peut se modifier comme il s'est modifié pour le personnage [...][208]

The text to be discussed next, though written during the same period as *La Modification*, evokes a different era. When ten years later in 1967 Georges Perec published *Un homme qui dort*, he elaborated the phenomenon of second-person narrative further, using the singular and more intimate form *tu* for his narrative and chronicling a much shorter episode of life in terms of space and time. The use of *tu* instead of *vous* in Perec's case reflects the time in which the book appeared.

In the France of the fifties, *vous* was not only regarded as a form that indicated distance, alienation and politeness appropriate to

208 | Leiris (1958), 314.

formal situations; at the time Butor was composing *La Modification, vous* was also frequently used for closer relationships such as that between children and parents, as well as at school, and therefore not only when talking to a stranger. While Butor chose to narrate *La Modification* in the most appropriate form according to the French cultural context of the time and simultaneously succeeded in referring to the unknown and showing the making of a person within the narrative, Perec could not use the same form ten years later without expressing formality and alienation.

In Perec's case the use of *tu* is an intertextual allusion to Franz Kafka and a reference to a personal, intimate story: his second-person journey of self-discovery is not a manifesto of life's possibilities and mental infinity as in Butor but instead shows the dead ends of consciousness and the limits of the human mind. With Perec we move from the limited space of a train compartment to the limited space of a student room in a dorm. From the positivity of Michel Butor we shift to a comparatively more obscure and pessimistic attitude towards reality and the absurd, one elaborated in an even more limited setting.

Perec introduces an experimental text not just in terms of its narrative form and agent, but also in terms of its structure and content. In his text *tu* is the main narrative figure. With *Un homme qui dort* we reach a part of this thesis where the use of the second person is closely linked to metatextual properties expanding the discussion of second-person storytelling further onto a metatextual level focussing on more liminal texts.