

APPROACHES TO THE CATARACT: BUTOR'S NIAGARA

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6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde,¹ written after Butor's year as visiting professor at the University of Buffalo in 1962, is not the first of his experiments in combining literature with other arts or media. Like his earlier work *Mobile*,² it is subtitled *Etude*, but this time an *Etude stéréophonique*, which suggests a combination of electronic technology with the music. Initially puzzling, *6 810 000 litres d'eau...* is concerned, like its predecessor *Mobile*, with the artist's interpretation of a geographic reality that he elects to present in a series of interrelated parts, very much like a Calder mobile in which the whole makes up a single work of art. As in Butor's *Réseau aérien*,³ we are given the words and thoughts of various characters, identified by alphabetical letters, juxtaposed to those of others, to create ever-differing impressions. Like *Réseau aérien*, *6 810 000 litres d'eau...* was originally intended as a radio script, but with all the sounds and music printed in the written text as well as produced in the broadcast. As in Butor's subsequent work, *Description de San Marco*,⁴ the primary focus of description is treated objectively and thoroughly, but not by means of *San Marco*'s cinematographic technique. The possibility of multiple readings is suggested, for the reader is given the option of skipping sections or reading selectively, following the author's scrupulous directions, which are theoretically applicable to a stereophonic radio or phonograph system, somewhat like the audience's choices in Butor's *Votre Faust*.⁵ Unlike *Votre Faust*, however, the plot of *6 810 000 litres d'eau...* is not dependent on the reader's choice, as there is no one single plot line to be thus altered. *6 810 000 litres d'eau...* thus has aspects in common with each of the earlier works,

but is more than a rearrangement of techniques previously explored.

Butor has explained the selection of the title for his novel in the following way: "6,810,000 liters of water a second is the average output of Niagara Falls, and evidently it was important for me to set as a title an output, that is, the constant of something mobile, and something very mobile, the constant of a precipitation."⁶ He goes on to say that he also selected the title because it was so long and so difficult to remember and yet indicated something that moves rapidly.⁷ He adds that, although he had "Niagara" put on the publisher's sealing band of the book, he intended the prospective reader to hesitate and wonder about the title, since one does not know at once, without the band, which water is meant, or even that it is falling.⁸

As far as form goes, the primary organization or structural grid of this stereophonic *étude* on Niagara Falls is provided by nature: the passage of time. There are twelve chapters, corresponding to the months of the year, beginning with April, the onset of nature's renewal. In Chapter II, May, entitled "The Couples," a striking clock is added, which will continue from 9:00 A.M. of the first day through 1:00 P.M. of the fourth and last day. This hourly time passes more and more rapidly: one hour in April, two in May and so forth: by Chapter XII, entitled "Coda," March, twelve hours are treated in eleven pages. The carillon and clock scarcely finish sounding an hour before the next has begun to strike. Butor has said of it: "It is a book written entirely on the theme of acceleration."⁹ "Behind this time which is accelerated, there is a kind of absolute acceleration, of immobile acceleration, whose image is formed by Niagara Falls themselves."¹⁰ Both monthly and hourly time are reflected in the action: the successive flower festivals in the spring, the excursions under and around the Falls in the summer, whereas in winter and at night the action is confined to the hotel rooms or the snow-covered parks.

Within each chapter are sections called "Parenthèses," each entitled according to an included action which is at least mentioned, and in some cases completely developed, within that particular parenthesis. Together these parentheses actually make up the greater part of the work. Some of them deal first with everything but the subject indicated in the title; this subject is then treated

in one line. Others are more to the point; for example, the Third Parenthesis of August, entitled "Post Cards," which depicts two of the characters as they finally decide to buy post cards in a souvenir shop. During the parentheses all sound effects are omitted entirely. This silence must be very effective in performance, as dead air suddenly surrounds the voices.¹¹

Butor employs sound effects extensively. After Chapter I, "Introduction," which opens simply with: "A bell peals once, very loud," (pp. 4; 12)¹² each chapter begins with a "Little Prelude" for a given hour, which enumerates a selection of sound effects, typographically set as emanating from left, center, or right stereo speaker: sighs, leaves rustling, car doors slamming, thunder, and others. From the central speaker, new effects are added each month, appropriate to the season or time of day: "automobile in snow," "footsteps in snow," "icicle falling," and "Christmas chorale *Von [sic] Himmel hoch* on the organ," (pp. 190-1; 200) in December; and at 6:00 P.M., "showers," "ice clinking in a glass," (pp. 84-5; 94) etc. The selection varies as the sounds are repeated, with instructions as to how loud they should be, and which characters may be drowned out by them. The author explains in October: "The sounds can vary in pitch or duration, but they vary especially in meaning: the name given them designates their form and origin, the sense they take on automatically in a context in which the same word appears, but there is not a single one of these sounds that cannot be used at times to describe water" (pp. 141; 150). Butor has said that for "Litanie d'eau" in *Illustrations*: "I made up for myself a vocabulary of verbs which could apply to the sea, and then a vocabulary of liquids...";¹³ therefore he already had a collection of such words at his disposal. But here they are put to a very different use, serving as amplification to the human scene rather than as "illustrations" of the water scenes shown in the engravings of Gregory Masurovsky.

These watery sound effects are subject to the listener's or reader's control, and so are all the performers but the Announcer and Reader. In fact, the possibility of multiple readings is an important principle of the work.¹⁴ In the directions preceding each chapter, Butor indicates which of the ten "tracks" the reader should follow, depending upon whether he is busy or can read at a leisurely pace. Characters may be omitted or suppressed by

following a given "track," or by adjusting the volume of the right or the left speaker. "Since the mobility of reading is much greater than that of any listening, you may imagine, with book in hand, all kinds of combinations" (pp. 13; 20).

Against this background of sound effects appear, then, human soloists who are more or less audible, depending on the interpretation of the reader. The first of these is the Announcer who speaks always from the central speaker and whose relative volume is always "loud" until the "Coda," where it diminishes to "fairly loud." Only in the "Coda" do the directions allow for drowning out the Announcer, but only for a moment (pp. 259; 272). He serves as conductor of the orchestra and as tour guide for the reader by giving the history of those who — with or without success — have challenged the Falls with barrel and tightrope, by leading us through the Cave of the Winds, to Green Island, on the Viewmobile, into hotel rooms, for a wet trip of the Maid of the Mist, and by describing the weather, various individual activities, and the souvenirs. His speech is discontinuous, constantly interrupted in mid-sentence by the characters or by the Reader reciting Chateaubriand (whom we will examine later).

Except for the precisely indicated time sequences, the Announcer is the primary unifying element: he serves the function of objective viewer by meticulously and unemotionally describing with endless factual detail the scene or the historical event in question. (The 6,810,000 liters of water a second is the one detail he does not give.) He can, however, as the situation warrants, wax poetic, as in the month of September, entitled "Rooms," which contrasts the wedding night of a pair of newlyweds with an older couple's disillusion, and with a black couple's delight in each other and in a thunderstorm:

Announcer The last souvenir shops close.
 Rain beats on the windows of all the rooms.
 Only some dance halls and bars are still open.
 The clouds are torn for a moment.
 Doors bang in the hotel corridors.
 All the showers in all the hotel bathrooms.
 All the air conditioners buzzing like swarms of enormous flies, or enormous birds, with bloodshot eyes, sharp-edged beaks, ripping talons.

On the windowpanes the hundred thousand torrents
streaming down.
Everything which streams over foreheads in cheap
hotels.
In each night table a Gideon Bible.
Lightning, through all the streaming windowpanes,
throws its light on the sheets,
in the black night,
in the black rain;
blood;
rain of blood,
rain of black blood,
rain of old black blood in the night,
blood of the massacred returning moaning in the black
night;
and through the open windows a puff of cool air slips
in.
The calm storm calms a little, recedes a little; the
clouds reveal little by little the moon, still lashing
it, still caressing it.
Very soft rain, now softer and softer, which fades away
a song of rain of sweat of blood of sweet tears of
night black pearls and of moon.

(pp. 124-9; 133-8)

The characters, the musicians, are given alphabetical names, which change each month while retaining the identity of the type assigned each letter: Abel and Betty, the newlyweds of May, are still Arthur and Bertha, newlyweds of June, and Alfred and Beatrice of the following March. C and D are an older married couple that returns for a second honeymoon, and E and F are a married couple of black gardeners, always readily recognizable by their fascination with the flowers and by the use of flower imagery in their dialogue. There are unhappy lovers: G, the older married woman who was there before with her husband, and H, her gigolo. I is the vile seducer, J the easy prey. And finally there are the lonely ones: K, a young man alone; L, a young woman alone; M, N, O and P are white and black widowers and widows; and finally Q who is a (recognizable) Frenchman, a visiting professor at the University of Buffalo, who speaks only once in the "Coda": "And I who am far from my living wife, separated from her by the whole width of the Atlantic..." (pp. 260; 273).

Butor has observed that "alphabetical order . . . is the ideal convention—it is the only means to achieve a truly amorphous enumeration, to defer all conclusions which might be drawn from relationships of proximity among the various elements on the page."¹⁵ He expands the use of the alphabet here and suggests an infinite number of each character type: there are more pairs of A's and B's, newlyweds, than of any other category. There are decreasing numbers of the others, unevenly, as some of the single ones leave with a brief "Adieu" before the end; and not all characters speak in each chapter. But whether named Gertrude and Hector, Gene and Humphrey, Gerda and Hubert, Georgia and Henry, Gracie and Hugh, Grace and Horace, Gina and Helmut, or Gaby and Herbert, the old madam and her gigolo carry on the same endless, fruitless conversation; Gaby and Herbert eventually repeat verbatim some of the early conversation of Gertrude and Hector. Speaking of his work, *Degrés*, Butor has said: "In a book such as this, the beginning sets up a certain system of references which will be utilized by what follows, and what follows will develop this system of references, which will permit reading what follows next, and . . . that which, at the beginning of the book, required several pages will, in the middle of the book, require a few lines Thus at the end of the book one can almost say that every word is laden with an extremely complex and precise meaning."¹⁶ And that is precisely what is accomplished: Elliot need only say in the "Coda": "Your fingernails painted like petals fallen to earth," (pp. 263; 276) to recall the whole sequence begun by Elias and Fanny in June, when, their dialogue intercalated with that of two other couples, they spoke of the flowers:

Elias Thorns.

Fanny Red fruits.

Elias One day a drop of blood on your mauve skin.

Fanny One day a whole stained-glass window of savage blood in the yellowish white of your eyes of bronze.

Elias And the petals of your purplish pink lips velvety with black so perfumed, plucked by a ray of sunlight in your boss's basement.

Fanny The translucent red thorns stationed all along the cuttings you planted at your bosses' place.

Elias Your fingernails painted like petals fallen to earth.

Fanny Your hands covered with earth which you washed in order to caress me, but which smelled of soap and earth with the scent of roses above the manure, your nails still all framed in earth like young sprouts.

(pp. 49-50; 57)

And as E and F continue, they gradually reveal their relationship with the "boss" and his children, the whole complex background of the character types they represent, all recalled by the economy of one phrase, just as Butor had stated.

The Reader plays a different role from that either of the Announcer or of the alphabetically designated individual characters. Heard throughout from the central speaker, his voice cannot be silenced and continues always "fairly loud," until the moment in the "Coda," when the directions require that his volume be greater than that of the Announcer. In April he presents the whole text of Chateaubriand's imaginative 1797 description of the Falls, based on his supposed visit there in 1791, complete with its prehensile-tailed badgers that hang from branches out over the water, trying to catch drowned elks and bears.¹⁷ From then on the Reader repeats the words of this text, rearranged in endless permutations and combinations, as if they were variations on a ground bass.

Butor refers to his treatment of Chateaubriand's text as a kind of canon: "it is done as if the text, the same text, were recited twice by two different readers, with a slight displacement of the readers The words of the second reading will thus be intercalated in the interior of the words of the first reading, which will form a third text The collision of two words which, in Chateaubriand's text, are separated by many lines, will produce new images, more and more strange, more and more fantastic."¹⁸ The canon form is easily recognizable here at the beginning:

It is formed,
it,
by the river,
is formed,
Niagara,
by the river,
which springs from Lake Erie,
Niagara which springs from

Reader

and empties
from Lake Erie

(pp. 16; 23-4)

By December, the variations on the canon give:

descend in spirals the badgers swept along by the air current
and the eagles hang, adorn the scene;
in the depths of the abyss, rocks cut into phantom forms,
wild walnut trees, badgers, pines, swept along by the air current,
like the smoke of a vast forest fire of eagles above the trees

(pp. 194; 203)

One can find examples of the "new images" anywhere following the first statement of the text. Butor has added a few words to suit his time scheme, for example, "to have a nocturnal version,"¹⁹ but his additions are carefully limited, given the variety of possibilities offered by his transformation of the basic text.²⁰

If the treatment of the Chateaubriand text is a canon, its function in the musical structure of the whole work is rather that of a ground bass. Butor points out himself: "This text has been used as a kind of background in front of which two elements stand out: first a narrator, a speaker, who leads the reader or listener around the Falls and has him visit them, and then the conversations, sometimes monologues, come in, of the people who come to Niagara Falls . . ." ²¹ In the "Coda," finally, the Reader recites intact the 1801 version of Chateaubriand's description, from *Atala*, and its identification is the Announcer's last piece of information.

On the simplest level, the characters play out their stories to their predictable, unavoidable, eternal ends: the newlyweds leave with the same hopes and illusions that the old couples had had as newlyweds and have subsequently lost. The older woman tries to coerce her young man into promising to send postcards every week after she has returned to her husband and the young man to his mother. The vile seducer feels dissatisfied with this girl and plans to try another, while she in turn knows that she too will repeat the same scene over and over. The black gardeners recognize a former boss's children, who contrive not to notice them; the young man and young woman alone do not get together; the widows and widowers leave as lonely as they were when they came.

This is the simplest level; the typography facilitates reading in a wide number of different ways.²² The words of the Announcer are printed in boldface, the sound effects in italics, set off by dashes, the dialogue of the characters in roman type, and the Chateaubriand Reader in italics. Each chapter's careful instructions for "stereophonic" reading indicate not only the various "tracks," and how to adjust the voices of the characters against each other and the sound effects in order to obtain different renditions, but also, as Butor indicates: "It is to be noted that the change in balance transforms not only the relative volumes, nor only the number of characters present, but also their relations in space; if the right-hand channel is lowered, Franny, Carrol, Klaus and Billie remain at the right before being silenced, but Judy and Henry move toward the left" (pp. 139; 148). Thus the development of the stories of individual couples as they interact with each other, or of the lonely ones as they think and dream, is only the beginning. The counterpoint as the conversation of one couple, say, from the right speaker, is superimposed on another on the left, creates the stereophonic effect. For example, in the Third Parenthesis of September, entitled "Irving's Triumph," (omitting here both Announcer and Reader) Gerda and Hubert speak from the left, Irving and Jane from the right:

<i>Gerda</i>	Want something to drink?		
<i>Hubert</i>	I suppose so.		
		Scotch?	<i>Irving</i>
		No.	<i>Jane</i>
<i>Gerda</i>	It will give you courage.		
<i>Hubert</i>	But you, you're not drinking.		
		I don't frighten you?	<i>Irving</i>
		No, but everything is turning around.	<i>Jane</i>
<i>Gerda</i>	I'm already drunk.		
<i>Hubert</i>	Not enough.		
		Stretch out on the bed, let me undress you, let me.	<i>Irving</i>
		No, help me to go back to my room.	<i>Jane</i>
<i>Gerda</i>	I beg of you, please, why are you laughing?		
<i>Hubert</i>	Come here.		
		Why, you can't even stand up; there, don't	<i>Irving</i>

be afraid, don't cry,
I'm going to put out
the light.
Don't leave me! Jane

Gerda All that you want I'll give
you, I promise you.

Hubert Let me sleep, be quiet.
Rest now, sleep. Irving
Why are you laughing? Jane
(pp. 130-2; 140-1)

Here are two basic variations on the same theme. In the case of G and H, G is the predator; with I and J, it is I. Independently, the stories are records of dialogue easily recognizable as realistic. Juxtaposed, their meaning is amplified, for it is G, the predator, who is drunk in one room, and J, the victim, drunk in the other. H, the victim, is laughing in one room; I, the vile seducer, in the other. The musical technique of variation evokes different thoughts in the reader: on the basis of one story alone, the reader might react against the predators, in sympathy with the victims; but reading both scenes together, he will recognize that nothing is simple. He will feel, if not whole-hearted sympathy for the predators, at least understanding for characters who are neither completely vicious nor completely virtuous.

Another more complicated example of the affective dimension of the stereophonic treatment is taken here from the Third Parenthesis of July, entitled "Story of the Shirt." The couples A and B, C and D, are both heard from the right-hand speaker, but alternately. Following A's and B's dialogue only, one would read:

Do you want a flag?	<i>Andrew</i>
American or Canadian?	<i>Bettina</i>
A flag with a waterfall.	<i>Andrew</i>
To put on our car?	<i>Bettina</i>
Or in our room.	<i>Andrew</i>
What size?	<i>Bettina</i>
If it's for the car, it shouldn't be too big.	<i>Andrew</i>
Maybe it would be better to buy something more useful.	<i>Bettina</i>
Plates?	<i>Andrew</i>
We don't have enough money to buy a whole set of these plates; it wouldn't be sensible.	<i>Bettina</i>
I'm not talking about a whole set; I only mean one plate that we could put on the mantle for a souvenir.	<i>Andrew</i>

But then it wouldn't really be something useful *Bettina*
and it would be so much more of a souvenir
if it were something we could use every day.
Not necessarily every day, but holidays. We *Andrew*
could buy two and every Sunday you could
serve our breakfast on those plates.
Then we would need some little plates and we *Bettina*
could see if they don't have some teacups,
too.

(pp. 77-9; 85-7)

Whereas, C and D are saying to each other:

Do you remember that set of dishes we bought? *Clem*
It didn't last long. *Dorothy*
We got some bowls and some plates. *Clem*
And some little salad plates, too. *Dorothy*
The quality probably has been improved since *Clem*
then.
I think we have only one chipped one left. It *Dorothy*
must be in the refrigerator, and the picture
is almost worn off.
I don't see any more engraved glasses. I re- *Clem*
member we wanted to buy some, but they
were much too expensive for us at the time;
it wasn't in this shop anyway.

(pp. 77-8; 85-6)

Reading them both together as they are printed, or as they would be heard, gives:

Do you want a flag? *Andrew*
Do you remember that set of dishes we bought? *Clem*
American or Canadian? *Bettina*
It didn't last long. *Dorothy*
A flag with a waterfall. *Andrew*
We got some bowls and some plates. *Clem*
To put on our car? *Bettina*
And some little salad plates, too. *Dorothy*
Or in our room. *Andrew*
The quality probably has been improved since *Clem*
then.
What size? *Bettina*
I think we have only one chipped one left. It *Dorothy*
must be in the refrigerator, and the picture
is almost worn off.

(pp. 77-8; 85-6)

Then, as Andrew and Bettina begin to discuss buying dishes, Elmer and Flossie are introduced from the left-hand speaker:

Elmer Do you remember that shirt the daughter of one of my bosses brought me back from the falls?

Maybe it would be better to buy something more useful. *Bettina*

Flossie She didn't bring it herself, she simply put it in the mail with a note. She didn't have time. We never saw her again. We never saw her husband again.

Plates? *Andrew*

.....

Elmer Before we even opened the package it had begun to fade.

.....

Flossie I washed it and washed it and washed it until there was nothing at all left of the picture or the writing, and then I dyed it dark purple.

.....

Did he ever go to the falls himself? *Clem*

.....

Elmer I don't remember. *Dorothy*
One day, the boss's wife said to me, "Did you like that shirt my daughter brought back to you from the falls?" "Oh, yes, ma'am," I said. "I wear it almost every day." I had the shirt on at the time.

(pp. 78-9; 86-8)

As the dialogues of the three couples are thus intercalated, the time theme emerges, the erosion of human illusions by time; for certainly C and D once talked just as A and B do now. If we listen to Elmer and Flossie alone, their story is bitter. But heard in conjunction with the others, their story adds a deeper resonance to the counterpoint already in progress:

And when you gave it to the gardener, *Clem*
he put it on once to please you, but
at heart he didn't like it very much.

Flossie But you couldn't wear it very long.
Are you sure he actually wore it once? *Dorothy*

Besides, since then we haven't really seen them again. It's too bad. Because we simply must take something back to our gardener, and I wonder if he, too, wouldn't like a shirt, you see, like this one.

Elmer I tore it up that very evening.

Maybe we didn't pick out one in a *Clem*
loud enough color.

Flossie It made me some dishrags.

What we need especially, I think, is *Dorothy*
something good and substantial
which isn't likely to tear the first
time he tries it on.

(pp. 80; 88-9)

Read stereophonically, the passage presents the lack of understanding on both sides, the misconceptions of each side about the other, although Butor's representation depicts the whites as clearly the more misguided. Meanwhile, the Reader's recitation of Chateaubriand's rearranged words suggests, on the one hand, the slow erosion of the Niagara River's rocky bed contrasted with the relatively rapid erosion of human dreams, and, perhaps, on the other hand, the smoke and fire which already in 1965 had resulted from the continued misunderstandings which E and F so clearly demonstrate.

If one thinks of each couple as musical instruments, it is easy to imagine the possibility of hearing each individually. By means of the typography, however, we can indeed read them all together and, as in music, "hear" them in combination simultaneously, surely an example of an "intellectual chord."²³ For, regardless of the route selected by the reader, whether through each of the three typefaces from beginning to end, or following one couple at a time, or the whole consecutively, he is inevitably always aware of the rest of the text on the printed page.

However, the instrumentation read as a chord in the mind of the reader is only a part of the musical structure. The Announcer contributes to this sequence only one line, "Flags, hairbrushes, plates," (pp. 78; 86) a line which recalls his earlier extensive enumeration of souvenirs, just as three distinctive notes of a leitmotif may recall a whole musical passage, an example of Butor's "system of references" mentioned above.²⁴ If the characters are conceived

- Igor* Wash myself entirely, wash myself of her and of me, wash myself.
Wash myself of him and of me, wash him. *Judy*
- Igor* No, days and days of intimacy; nights and nights more or less in hiding, and she will hate me . . .
He who hates me already for what he's done to me, and it would be useless to try to make him believe . . . *Judy*

(pp. 158-60; 169-71)

And finally, the couple who has never met:

- Lana* Alone . . . I would have liked to question her. *Klaus*
Try to tear from her gently her secret to deliver her from it. *Klaus*
- Lana* If only someone could deliver me from my secret, tear it from me very gently.
I hadn't seen that scarf rolled around her neck. *Klaus*
- Lana* I fear my return has only restored my illusions, but what was I looking for?
But now I see that she is with someone else, what was I thinking of? *Klaus*
- Lana* I'm not going to be able to keep myself from following them, enticed by their radiance, and from imagining that I, too . . .
But I won't be able to tell her, I wouldn't even be able to tell her if she were the one, even if I see her. *Klaus*
- Lana* And if I ever found it again, that glance, and if even this time it were real, but it can't be real, and I would know very well this time not to believe in it.

(pp. 157-60; 168-71)

We have here the ironic alienation of each member of a couple from the other, each couple from the other couples. Stereophonically treated, the banal loneliness each suffers achieves meaning when it is shared, when all are read together in harmony, although only the reader knows this. The Announcer's dry, factual recital of the

boat's itinerary and his objective description of each character as another tourist would see him, contrast vividly with the reader's intimate perception of each suffering human being.

One other important feature of Butor's "intellectual chord" derives from Butor's dimension as a critic of art as well as of music: his use of colors. The Announcer gives the dates of the tulip festival, the lilac, iris, rhododendron, peony and finally rose festivals. The characters talk with each other about the flowers; they read their extravagant names on the labels, remember or plan gardens, and especially describe the colors. This floral theme serves a function beyond that of realism, *i.e.*, of indicating that there are flowery parks at Niagara Falls: the immensely varied hues color the whole work. The Chateaubriand text is general: "all the colors of the prism," "rainbow," with only "reddish" ["rougeâtre"] specifically named.²⁵ In "Litanie d'eau," where the engravings studied are black and white, Butor deliberately introduces color in his poem: "I wanted my text to color the engravings, rather as the flowers color Chateaubriand's text."²⁶ He discusses at some length his selection of color names for the flowers of Niagara, his study of American seed catalogues, of the relationship between the flower's name and its color, and then remarks: "...flowers: there is another region of reality which demands a vocabulary of hues, of nuances, incomparably more varied than that which one ordinarily uses."²⁷ Thus although the original Chateaubriand description is black and white, it becomes, so to speak, technicolor through the vocabulary of the flowers.

The colors of the flowers are then utilized again by the characters during the evenings as they watch the Illuminations. In Butor's words: "All the themes present in these names given to the varieties of roses, of gladiolae, of iris, will serve as commentaries, as reverberators ["résonnateurs"] in a way, to the dialogue between the different characters who stroll about These floral colors will tint, in a way, the flowing water, which prepares in the nocturnal moments a reversal of all that, because it is these precise floral colors that will be used again to describe the Illuminations, the way the Illuminations are colored."²⁸ It is essential that the artificial colored lights of the Illuminations be brought out, as Butor feels it is particularly American to want to improve on nature: "whereas the Falls themselves are a phenomenon of an already astounding power of color. The water attains at certain moments extraordinary

depths of green and, in addition, there is a constant generation of rainbows." ²⁹

In describing the effect of words or phrases printed in a gloss or margin, Butor has said: "The word acts then as a color. Names of colors . . . will have a particularly remarkable power of diffusion on the page." ³⁰ Indeed, the flower colors not only affect the Chateaubriand text and the Illuminations, but also the Announcer himself. If one reads his part straight through, one is struck by the flatness of its coloration compared with that of the dialogue. He uses the unqualified adjectives "red" and "blue" once each to describe the American and Canadian flags (pp. 17; 25). He explains that the "Isle of Green" should properly be "Green Island," as it is a man's name: he thus suggests the color green, but paints it out at once (pp. 63; 70). He uses "orange" once for raincoats, "yellow-gold" and "yellow" six times for rain-gear and once for a smoke-stack. There is one "reddening light" in October, at 6:00 A.M., and Chateaubriand's "reddish" has not appeared at that point since June, some hundred pages earlier. ³¹ At Christmas, a normally colorful time, the Announcer tells us only of "Christmas trees covered with multicolored garlands" (pp. 199; 208). Otherwise, with one significant exception, everything is black or white; straw hats, faces, raincoats, especially black night, black rain and black blood, and white snow. Even the women, so very colorful in the *Description de San Marco*, are painted "with too much make-up, with dyed or discolored hair" (pp. 90; 99). ³²

Thus the Announcer presents pages of black and white, with one orange spot, a very few spots of flat red, blue and yellow, and a reddish light: it is justifiable to think of Mondrian, given Butor's appreciation of his works. ³³ In November, the Announcer calls the water "a sublimated emerald" (pp. 169-70; 181), maples are "turning from ruby to garnet" (pp. 173; 184), and then we see by the "— last rays of the red sun among the trees and waves —" (pp. 182; 193). Because the emerald, ruby and garnet all are jewels as well as colors, they form a particular group, a glittering treasure in the midst of drab, gray, foggy November, followed immediately by that other spot of red, again like Mondrian's. In this way, the Announcer read straight through alone is a Mondrian, but read in harmony with the dialogue about flowers, his narration takes on a very different coloration, and in the "intellectual chord" he is heard, like Chateaubriand, in technicolor. ³⁴

One may wonder whether, in the midst of all this musical and pictorial art, there is still a message. Butor has said of Proust's development of Elstir and Vinteuil and their works: "Through the painting, or through the music, Proust will be capable of becoming aware of what he is doing and of illuminating it for us."³⁵ Butor here uses painting and music in a different way to accomplish the same end. He has explained that he seeks "characters who shall be metaphors of others"³⁶ and that he is increasingly interested in the plural as opposed to the singular.³⁷ He has stated that the contemporary novel can no longer be the story of only one individual, since characters exist only in relation to their surroundings. As the epistolary novel of the 18th century, followed by the social realism of the 19th, were already polyphonic, so polyphonic structure is all the more necessary to interpret today's reality, and polyphonic writing must allow the reader to pursue different courses through a given work. These "mobile forms" will then provide new directions for the novel, but also "will put at the disposal of each of us instruments to understand the movement of the groups of which we are a part."³⁸ This is surely not art for art's sake, because the "mobile form" is clearly intended to harmonize with a universal content.

In the earlier stereophonic works the message was always present — a challenge to perceive, perhaps, but present: a melancholy but tolerant interpretation of human nature, a representation of the human condition which is hopeful, despite its realism. *6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde* illustrates Butor's concern for mankind more strikingly than any previous work: the reality of the human condition, as Butor interprets it here, draws its force precisely from its representation against the implacable, immutable, indifferent reality of the Falls.

But one must allow for multiple readings, since in polyphonic writing each reader must follow his own route. One typical critic writes of the work: "Everything is in it. On a sort of dare, Butor has wanted to put everything in This ends in creating pandemonium, from which only the thousand-year-old Niagara escapes scot free."³⁹ Another explains: "Here the reader is invited to determine his own way through the text, which is laid out in such a way as to make a consecutive reading almost completely nonsensical."⁴⁰ And another comments: "Honeymooners flock to Niagara Falls, curiously drawn to that roaring divide, as though it were particu-

larly suited to an erotic holiday There, forgetting that somehow the 'gouffre' ["abyss"] with its glimpse of the Styx, speaks to their desire, they sing this comical counterpoint Romance is the way culture forgets the divergences because of which it is always constituting itself as its own ruins. Romance is desire forgetting the difference between male and female. It makes lovers murmur about their eyes while managing not to see the threshold to Hades. It is eroticism becoming one of the commodities with which commercial empires fill all gaps, conceal all differences."⁴¹ It would appear that these critics have been reading a very different work from the one considered here. What better indication of success for the "mobile reading"?

The complexity of Butor's structure has indeed been considered baffling, yet it is decipherable and it is through his unique presentation of the endless renewal of nature and the endless change of human beings, against a background of sound effects, by means of precise typography, with the Chateaubriand description continuously reflected against the reality, musically structured to evoke harmonious "intellectual chords," the whole colored by the flowers, that he achieves his intended purpose: his stereophonic vision of Niagara.

NOTES

¹ Michel Butor, *6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde, étude stéréophonique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

² *Mobile, Etude pour une représentation des Etats-Unis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

³ *Réseau aérien, texte radiophonique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

⁴ *Description de San Marco* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

⁵ "Votre Faust, fantaisie variable genre Opéra," in collaboration with Henri Pousseur, *Nouvelle revue française*, Nos. 109, 110, 111, January, February, March, 1962. Other versions have appeared subsequently published separately.

⁶ Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Michel Butor* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 135.

⁷ Charbonnier, p. 136. Indeed, the American editor of the English translation decided the title was too difficult for the public and unfortunately also arbitrarily changed the subtitle: *Niagara: A Stereophonic Novel*, Trans., Elinor S. Miller (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1969).

⁸ Charbonnier, pp. 138-9.

⁹ Charbonnier, p. 135.

¹⁰ Charbonnier, p. 140.

¹¹ In regard to parenthetical remarks, Butor has said that Hugo appears, in *Les Misérables*, to be more interested in the parenthetical chap-

ters of the novel than in the continuing saga of Jean Valjean. He distinguishes between two kinds of parentheses in Hugo, corresponding to the arias of cantata or opera. ("Victor Hugo romancier," *Répertoire II* [Paris: Editions de minuit, 1964], pp. 216-20.) Butor's "Parenthèses" also bear a certain similarity to the operatic aria, in that the clock does not strike and time does not pass. Since the passage of time is the primary movement of the work, they do not thus advance the action.

¹² References to page numbers given in parentheses within the text are to the English translation (v. note 7), in arabic numerals, followed by page numbers of the original French in italics.

¹³ Charbonnier, p. 183. Already in "Litanie d'eau" (in *Illustrations* [Paris: Gallimard, 1964]) he utilized brief suggestions of the Chateaubriand text that forms the ground bass of *6 810 000 litres d'eau...*, similarly rearranged, as well as fragments of his own tourists' conversations previously published in *San Marco*. In "Les Montagnes rocheuses," also in *Illustrations*, he suggests sound effects in some of the brief stanzas of mainly three- and four-syllable lines, but in *6 810 000 litres d'eau...*, as in *Réseau aérien*, the sound effects are intended to be heard audibly in a production, and even in a reading they assume a less surreal and more precise relationship to the text than in "Les Montagnes rocheuses."

¹⁴ Butor seems to have been intrigued by multiple readings for some time. As early as 1950, he specifically brought out Raymond Roussel's suggestion that readers who were not initiated in his art would "benefit by reading this book first from page 212 to page 455, then from page 1 to page 211." ("Sur les procédés de Raymond Roussel," *Répertoire* [Paris: Editions de minuit, 1960], p. 175. The essay was initially published in 1950.) He has suggested an epistolary novel with letters from the correspondants printed always on verso and recto opposite each other: "One will thus have a coherent mobile in which each reader may vary his route." ("Individu et groupe dans le roman," *Répertoire II*, p. 87. This essay was originally published in 1962). He has posed the question "whether one might not and should not provide in the interior of the novelistic edifice different paths for reading, as in a cathedral or a city," and he has treated *La Comédie humaine* as already "a work conceived in distinct blocks, which each reader, in actual fact, approaches in a different order." ("Recherches sur la technique du roman," *Répertoire II*, pp. 98-9. This essay was originally published in 1963.) Indeed, he points out: "It is a question of what might be called a novelistic mobile." ("Balzac et la réalité," *Répertoire*, pp. 83-4. This essay was originally published in 1959.) But Butor would go farther still, toward "a higher mobility," when the reader shall himself be responsible for the outcome. ("Recherches sur la technique du roman," p. 99.)

¹⁵ "Le Livre comme objet," *Répertoire II*, p. 113. This essay was originally published in 1962.

¹⁶ Charbonnier, p. 19.

¹⁷ Butor has discussed his choice of this text in some detail: "I found myself before an object which posed in the most formidable fashion the problem of description, and I had opposite a description which had been made, which was a classic of the French language." (Charbonnier, p. 143.)

¹⁸ Charbonnier, p. 145. Butor has used the canon form before: "I have studied canon form in classical music and *L'Emploi du temps* is completely organized as a sort of immense temporal canon." (Charbonnier, p. 106).

¹⁹ Charbonnier, p. 148.

²⁰ "Twilight" (pp. 92; 102) and "daybreak" (pp. 155; 155) each once; "dawn" twice (pp. 144 twice; 153 twice); "soot" five times (pp. 93; 103, 98; 108, 118; 128, 120 twice; 130 twice); "moonlight" eleven times (pp. 96; 106, 97; 108, 114; 123, 119; 129, 120 twice; 130 twice; 131, 124; 133, 135; 144, 199; 208, 245; 255); and once, "sweat" (pp. 125; 135). This last appears at 1:00 A.M. in September, "in a sheet of sweat" in the midst of the three juxtaposed bedroom scenes previously mentioned. *V. supra*, pp. 36-7.

²¹ Charbonnier, pp. 145-6.

²² Butor has discussed the use of typography for poetic effect more than once, encouraging more imaginative use of margins, divisions of text on the page, and typefaces. Speaking of a page from one work reproduced as a page within another work he says: "Often in scholarly works, citations are printed thus in lines shorter than the rest. The eye follows paragraph indentations quite naturally; there is in this the possibility of playing off several texts the ones against the others, like voices, the attraction between the different sections of the same column becoming all the stronger as the break which separates them is less natural, for example, if it occurs in the middle of a sentence, as in Balzac in *La Muse du Département* or even of a word." ("Le Livre comme objet," p. 121.) He cites Mallarmé's "Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard" as offering an example of typography which suggests differences in volume, placement of pauses, intonation and timbre. ("Le Livre comme objet," pp. 118-9. *V. also*, "Sur la page," *Répertoire II*, p. 100, originally published in 1962.) In *Mobile*, whatever the poetic effect may be, the three typefaces and three margins are virtually indispensable to comprehension, and the reader may follow whichever path he chooses through the labyrinthine work by following the typeface and margin. Indeed, Aubral points out that the more than ninety stanzas beginning, "La mer," dispersed throughout the work, always printed in italics, can be read as "un grand poème marin," because of the typography. (François Aubral, *Michel Butor* [Paris: Seghers, Poètes d'aujourd'hui 209, 1973], pp. 60-2.)

²³ The term is Bernard Weinberg's, in *The Limits of Symbolism: Studies of Five Modern French Poets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). As early as 1961, Butor referred to "the typographical arrangement of 'Un Coup de Dés...' [as] for example, not being immediately intelligible except to one who has some familiarity with orchestral scores." He went on to cite Mallarmé's preface describing the poem as: "'for the one who is willing to read aloud, a score.'" ("Mallarmé selon Boulez," *Répertoire II*, p. 244.) Weinberg, in his brilliant analysis of "Un Coup de Dés..." states: "The clue to the whole passage lies in the term 'partition' ['score']; for with it the whole musical analogy is stated." (Weinberg, pp. 242-3.) His further explanation of the limits to Mallarmé's combination of music and poetry is most useful in considering Butor's stereophonic works: "Musical sounds may actually be produced simultaneously—the resulting complex sound may be completely intelligible; likewise, whole lines of such sounds may be pursued together in a way to create a single composite line which need not anywhere lose its perspicuousness. But were two single words to be pronounced together, neither would be understood; and were two or more lines of thought to be read simultaneously, say in a choral reading, only complete confusion and unintelligibility would result.... Thus there is analogy only, not identity..." between music and poetry, "...for there can properly be no chords in poetry." However, the typographical arrangements of the poem do allow the reader "to form a composite 'image' (in his mind's eye) that will be comparable to a composite sound that his ear would be fully capable of hearing.... The two thoughts could not have been printed as simultaneous,

nor could they be read silently or aloud as such; but the mind of the reader may grasp and apprehend them together. The intellectual 'chord' is possible" (Weinberg, pp. 246-7). I am grateful to Dr. Patricia Lancaster, Rollins College, for pointing out to me the Weinberg analysis of "Un Coup de Dés"

²⁴ *Supra*, p. 38.

²⁵ It may be that if Chateaubriand indeed never saw the Falls, he preferred to avoid possible error by avoiding specificity in this respect. In any case, as Butor says, "Qu'importe qu'il y soit allé ou non; c'était pour lui le coeur même, le foyer, de cette nature différente." ("Chateaubriand et l'ancienne Amérique," *Répertoire II*, p. 182.)

²⁶ Charbonnier, p. 183.

²⁷ Charbonnier, p. 180.

²⁸ Charbonnier, pp. 182-3.

²⁹ Charbonnier, p. 179.

³⁰ "Le Livre comme objet," p. 117.

³¹ "Orange" (pp. 39; 47), "jaune d'or" (pp. 69; 76, 71; 78) and "jaune" (pp. 73; 81, 75; 82, 76; 84, 160; 171) and (pp. 156; 156); "lumière rougeoyante" (pp. 145; 154).

³² Speaking of the colors used to describe the fingernail polish, lipstick, and hair of the women in *San Marco*, Butor has said: "I made a crowd pass in front of or, more exactly, under that other crowd represented in mosaic, and I wanted there to be exchanges from time to time between the crowds. I wanted the people belonging to the crowd of tourists to be able to reverberate ["résonner"] with the characters represented above, which was facilitated for me by the fact that dress plays a very large role in the mosaic art of Saint Mark's." (Charbonnier, p. 177.) Butor's use of the same idea, reverberation, indicates his intention that the flowers of Niagara's parks should serve the same harmonic purpose here.

³³ "Le Carré et son habitant (Mondrian)," *Nouvelle revue française*, Nos. 97, 98, January, February, 1961. Reprinted in *Répertoire III* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1968).

³⁴ Butor has said of the gray of *Passage de Milan*: "If I take a range of grays, nothing but grays, they will remain gray; I will have a delicate, distinguished, etc., harmony; but if I set in relation to that range of grays a black, all the grays will take on color: the blue-grays will become blues, the pinkish-grays will become pinks." (Charbonnier, p. 83.) Treating words used as part of a painting, Butor described Jasper Johns' "Jubilee" as "a canvas almost entirely gray, but one reads on it many names of colors, words springing forth: 'red,' 'blue,' 'yellow,' in such a way that it becomes more and more colorful as I look at it and read it. I begin besides to perceive all the subtle nuances of colors which distinguish the different grays." (*Les Mots dans la peinture* (Geneva: Albert Skira, Les sentiers de la création, 1969), p. 171.)

³⁵ Charbonnier, p. 63.

³⁶ Charbonnier, p. 27.

³⁷ Charbonnier, p. 189.

³⁸ "Individu et groupe dans le roman," pp. 85-7.

³⁹ R.-M. Albères, *Michel Butor*, 2d ed. rev. (Paris: Editions universitaires, Classiques du XXe siècle, 1964), pp. 105-6.

⁴⁰ John Sturrock, *The French New Novel (Simon, Butor, Robbe-Grillet)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 107.

⁴¹ Ann Smock, "The Disclosure of Difference in Butor," *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 89 (1974), pp. 656-8.