

MYTHOLOGICAL ALLUSIONS AND CLASSICAL NAMES
 IN MICHEL BUTOR'S L'EMPLOI DU TEMPS

Betty J. Davis

Brooklyn College

The City University of New York

Among the many devices Michel Butor uses in L'Emploi du temps to present a complex view of a dualistic universe are allusions to legends of classical antiquity and to works of art. In the novel, Jacques Revel, a young Frenchman, feels himself isolated and lost in Bleston, a modern industrial city in England. Revel, whose firm has sent him to Bleston to spend one year working for an English export company, attributes his feelings of hopelessness and alienation to the nefarious influence of the city, which becomes for him a mythological adversary.

Bleston is the antithesis of Revel's ideal of a warm, classical country, such as Greece, Crete, or Rome, with pure water, transparent air, and a clear, blue, sunlit sky. It is dark, cold, rainy, with blackish, foul-smelling water and smoke-filled air. Bleston is an anti-Greece in which the classical elements are deformed and covered with thick layers of paint, dirt, or grime. Revel observes that the Doric columns of the train station are "si couvertes d'écorce noire qu'elles font penser à des fûts de conifères restés debout après l'incendie

de la forêt et l'effondrement de leurs parties hautes" ("so covered with black crust that they make you think of the trunks of evergreens left standing after a forest fire and the collapse of their upper parts").¹ He also mentions the blackened ionic columns of the Bleston Museum of Fine Arts (p. 69) and the pillared porch of his hotel, covered with a thick coat of whitish paint (p. 19). In contrast, in the News Theater, a place reflecting the longed-for reality of Greece, Crete, and Rome in the travelogues it projects week after week, the columns are covered with mirrors (p. 101).

The city of Bleston appears in many incarnations. She is a female enchantress: Circe, Medea, the Medusa. Revel feels that he must tear himself away from Bleston, from that Circe and her dark enchantments, in order to regain his human form (p. 115), for Bleston had transformed him just as Circe changed Ulysses' men into animals. He implies that it is her jealousy which separated him from the woman he loved (p. 244). He also identifies Bleston with Medea in references to the black phial with which Medea wished to poison young Theseus (p. 157) and his descriptions of the water of Bleston as black and poisonous. Bleston, which Revel calls "terrible ville-larve que je hais" ("terrible larva-city which I hate") (p. 252), is also pictured as a hydra (a water or marsh serpent killed by Hercules) as well as other dangerous water-dwellers (p. 244).

Bleston, for Revel, is a modern-day equivalent of the Cretan labyrinth, in which he seeks to orient himself by means of various guides, some in human form, some in the form of documents. Revel's first guide is a coworker, James Jenkins, who has lived all his life in Bleston, who, in fact, has never been outside the city. In many ways, Jenkins is representative of the spirit of Bleston, and the places to which he guides Revel reflect the undesirable qualities of the city. After Revel arrives, for example, Jenkins takes him to a hotel called the Ecrou (the nut, as in "nuts and bolts"), "a word, in French, referring to a commitment to jail."² The room is small and dark. It has no table, and the window looks out onto a wall of bricks at the end of a courtyard (p. 20). Sensing the destructive quality of the room, Revel says to himself: "je ne puis pas rester ici, je ne dois pas rester ici, je suis perdu si je reste ici, dès demain je vais mettre en quête d'un logement meilleur" ("I cannot stay here; I must not stay here; I am lost if I stay here; tomorrow I am going to begin my search for a better place to live") (p. 20). His search for a room which can serve as a sanctuary and a rampart against the destructive forces of the city will be the first expression of Revel's quest to find himself once more as well as his initiation into the meaning and mysteries of the Blestonian labyrinth.

Revel's first documentary guide to the city is a map, really two maps, one showing the bus lines and one giving the names of

the streets, which Revel must superimpose one upon the other, just as the multiple interpretations of the city and the multiple roles played by the characters in the novel are superimposed one upon another, just as the past and the present will be superimposed one upon another and as other cities will be superimposed on Bleston, as Rome will be on Paris in Butor's later novel, La Modification. Revel's experience will add reality to the labyrinthian lines on the maps he has chosen, though even the map Revel constructs for himself will contain gaps and unexplored territory, as does the map of Bleston given in the front of L'Emploi du temps.

After seven months of disorientation and despondency, Revel burns the map of Bleston, symbolically murdering the city. He then feels impelled to buy another identical to the first and to consign his experiences to paper. By writing, he hopes to find himself again in the Blestonian labyrinth and to recover from his feelings of lassitude and depression. His words to him are like Ariadne's thread was to Theseus in the Cretan labyrinth: "ce cordon de phrases est un fil d'Ariane parce que je suis dans un labyrinthe, parce que j'écris pour m'y retrouver, toutes ces lignes étant les marques dont je jalonne les trajets déjà reconnus, le labyrinthe de mes jours à Bleston, incomparablement plus déroutant que le palais de Crête, puisqu'il s'augmente à mesure que je le parcourt, puisqu'il se déforme à mesure que je l'explore" ("this string of sentences is an Ariadne's thread because I am in a labyrinth,

because I write to find myself, all these lines being the marks with which I indicate the paths already known, the labyrinth of my days in Bleston, incomparably more misleading than the Cretan palace since it grows larger as I explore it") (p. 187).

Revel found the meaning of his stay in Bleston not only in written documents and through the intermediary of those around him, but also in contemplating and interpreting works of art and by drawing parallels between those works and his own situation. After having been in Bleston for over a month, Revel was called to police headquarters to obtain an identity card (p. 69). While waiting for his pictures to be developed, he visited the Bleston Museum of Fine Arts. There he saw for the first time the eighteen tapestries recounting the legend of Theseus which would reveal to him his identity in the mythological framework he would construct for himself.

Since Revel had no guidebook and since there were no signs on the walls to indicate the subjects of the individual tapestries, he at first recognized only vaguely just one scene, the one which showed Theseus slaying the Minotaur. It was only later that he was able to give names to the scenes in the tapestries, but since Revel's descriptions correspond to his psychological preoccupations and since the descriptions are scattered throughout the book, it is difficult for the reader to have a complete idea of the content and the disposition of the tapestries in the museum.. The scene with

Theseus slaying the Minotaur is the eleventh panel in the fifth room, he says. He notes that he was drawn initially to panels two, three, four, and five, which showed Theseus approaching Athens and his victories over Sinnis, Sciron, Cercyon, and Procrustes, four criminals which infested the countryside, because the trees represented during the four seasons of the year were so obviously inspired by those of the Ile de France (pp. 70-71).

James Jenkins, Revel's coworker, pointed out an essential characteristic of the tapestries. They all depicted actions which lasted for a certain time (p. 211). Tapestry number one, "The Childhood of Theseus," for example, recounted the story of Aethra, wife of Aegeus and mother of Theseus, from the time she fled with her young child until Theseus, having reached adolescence, left his tutor with a dagger as proof of his identity, the dagger with which he would kill Sinnis, a son of Poseidon, who tore travellers to pieces by bending down pines and then suddenly letting them go; Sciron, who forced travellers he had robbed to wash his feet and then kicked them into the sea, where an immense tortoise devoured them; Cercyon, another son of Poseidon, who compelled passersby to wrestle with him and then tied them to trees, which he let go so that they would be ripped apart; Procrustes, who laid his guests on his bed and, if they were too short, stretched them to fit, and, if too long, cut off as much of their limbs as necessary to make them short enough; the

Pallantides (Pallas, who had deprived his brother of the throne, and his fifty gigantic sons); and the Minotaur, son of Pasiphae, queen of Crete, and a bull, a monster with the head of a bull and the body of a man, housed in the Cretan labyrinth.

Number six portrayed "Theseus Recognized by His Father," a tapestry in which Aegeus recognized his son in time to save him from drinking the poison which Medea, whom Aegeus had married after Jason betrayed her, had advised him to give to the stranger, whom she had recognized (p. 157). After reflecting on the encounter of Oedipus and Theseus in the seventeenth panel, Revel came to understand that the meeting of the kings of Thebes and Athens was inevitable. Both as children were ignorant of their birth. Both killed monsters which infested the countryside. Both solved riddles. Both killed their fathers, Theseus, not with a sword, but through negligence, for he forgot to change the black sail to a white one when he returned from Crete after having slain the Minotaur. Both were forced to leave their kingdoms and died in exile (pp. 173-174). The eighth and the ninth panels pictured the abductions of Helen and Antiope (p. 156).

A tortoise in the Theseus tapestries appears among those evil forces--Sinnis, Cercyon, and Procrustes--which tear men apart (pp. 155-157). That tortoise and others in the book are related by their shape to the hexagonal nut which was the emblem of the Ecou, the prison-like hotel where Revel spent his first

unhappy weeks in Bleston, during which he, an unfortunate traveller, felt that he was being destroyed by the evil forces of the city.

Revel returns again and again to the museum and to his personal interpretations of the tapestries. By the time his stay in Bleston draws to a close, he has succeeded in interweaving the scenes portrayed in the eighteen tapestries and the people and events in his own life. He himself is Theseus. His French friend Lucien is a young prince, Pirithoüs, who, in tapestry number fifteen, descends with Theseus to the underworld to carry off Persephone, and also Dionysus in the twelfth, who sees Ariadne abandoned when he comes ashore at Naxos (p. 173). Revel's Ariadne is Ann Bailey, who sold him the sheets of white paper which were to become his weapon against Bleston, his thread to find his way out of the Blestonian labyrinth. Ann's younger sister Rose, to whom Revel turned after having first loved Ann, is his Phaedra, Ariadne's younger sister, whom Theseus married after having abandoned Ariadne. Unlike Theseus, Revel will lose both his Ariadne and his Phaedra because of his preoccupation with the myth of Bleston.

Even though Revel's search for the meaning of his experiences in Bleston was costly on a personal level, his gradual discovery of the significance of the tapestries showed him the value of finding one's own interpretation of a work of art and the danger of relying too heavily on written sources. Revel did not obtain a catalogue describing the tapestries until he had already begun to penetrate

their meaning on his own. He then wondered: "Que m'auraient dit alors ces quelques lignes imprimées? Bien loin de m'aider à pénétrer dans le domaine circonscrit par les dix-huit portes de laine, je crois qu'elles m'en eussent à tout jamais interdit l'accès, car, sans même en apprécier la valeur, je les aurais sans doute jugées suffisantes . . . je ne serais peut-être jamais revenu dans ces salles . . ." ("What would these few printed lines have said to me then? Far from helping me penetrate the domain circumscribed by the eighteen woolen doors, I believe that they would forever have forbidden their access to me, for, without even appreciating their value, I would no doubt have judged them sufficient. . . . I would perhaps never have returned to these rooms . . .") (p. 156).

Revel sees another manifestation of the meaning of the city and of the role he plays in a stained glass window depicting the murder of Abel by his brother Cain located in Bleston's Old Cathedral and described in the opening paragraph of Le Meurtre de Bleston (The Murder of Bleston), a detective story which served as one of his guides to the city. He is able to link Cain to Theseus because of similarities in the artistic portrayal of the two. The stained glass window shows the murderer of Abel in a form-fitting breastplate with ribbons floating on his thighs like Theseus in the tapestries, almost in the same attitude as Theseus fighting the Minotaur, bent over like him, with his left foot on the chest of his victim on the ground, who was lifting his

bare, already wounded head (p. 72). The Theseus tapestries themselves established the link between Theseus and Oedipus, while the author of the detective story, Le Meurtre de Bleston, drew a parallel between Oedipus and the detective (pp. 148, 173-175).

Revel at times sees himself not only as Theseus, but also as Oedipus and as Cain, for he felt himself responsible for an apparent attempt on the life of the anonymous author of Le Meurtre de Bleston when he revealed the author's name, as his own name, Revel, implied he would do. Like Oedipus, he revealed secrets of the city, and by his negligence, he, like Theseus, almost caused the death of the author of the detective story, making Revel, at least in his mind, a murderer like Cain.

Jacques Revel was able to begin to recover his lost identity by interpreting his world in terms of legends and myths of classical antiquity and in relationship to works of art. By allowing us to participate in Revel's quest for order and self-understanding, Butor suggests a method of dealing with the disorder of our own world. As John Sturrock observed: "For a man to stand up amidst the furor, he needs, says Butor, a myth to guide him, and the novelist's job is to show him how to create one."³ While we may find help from outside sources in our search for the hidden meaning of our multi-leveled world, no one source can ever prove totally satisfactory. As Revel learned, all outside sources of knowledge are either incomplete, incorrect, or lacking

in depth. Each person must become his or her own final authority, though personal interpretations may well come from interweaving, intertwining, and superimposing those elements received from outside.

In L'Emploi du temps, Revel's task is not only to reveal the secrets of the inner and outer world, but also to reawaken the lucid consciousness which had been lulled to sleep by Bleston's evil powers and to reawaken us to the mystical power of the world around us.

Betty J. Davis
Brooklyn College
City University of New York



NOTES

¹ Michel Butor, L'Emploi du temps (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957), p. 17. All references to L'Emploi du temps in this article are to this edition. The English translations are my own.

² Leon S. Roudiez, Michel Butor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 16 .

³ John Sturrock, The French New Novel (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 154.

