Notes on Michel Butor, *Degrees, A Novel*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

The Prehistory of Constrained Writing

Reading Michuel Butor's "Degrees" (1960, English by Richard Howard, 1961) after reading surrealism and Oulipo -- two movements that came before and after Butor -- is a disorienting experience. (Oulipo was founded the year this book was written, but Butor was not a member.) The book is pervaded with self-awareness: the narrator sets out to chronicle what is taught in every classroom of a Lycee, and the grammar, prosody, and structure of the novel follow his self-imposed task. On the face of it, that is compatible with Oulipean constraints, but there is no authorial self-awareness here (the author does not appear), only narrative self-awareness. The result of the obsessive and hopeless attempt at chronicling every student and every classroom is endless juxtapositions of fragments of dialogue, which are in effect surreal; but the narrator (and the implied author) take no special pleasure in the unpredictable and meaningless sequences of unrelated facts, the way a surrealist would.

(At one point Butor's own voice leaks into the text, when the narrator says that just as it's impossible to represent the Earth on a map without distorting it, "it is impossible to represent reality in speech without a certain kind of distortion." That isn't something the narrator (a geography and history teacher) would have said, and he then adds, in parentheses: "(this latter, obviously, I didn't tell you in class, it's an idea that came to me as I was writing"). The "me" and "I" in that last clause are clearly the author, not the narrator. This is the sort of thing that Oulipeans would find obtrusive, because it breaks the fourth wall and in effect changes the novel's game: but it apparently didn't bother Butor. Maybe he thought he got away with it, that he didn't make his readers think of him.)

Here is a sample, which also shows the layout, in which paragraphs break in the middle of sentences:

"I had just drawn a diagram on the board to explain the time zones, how it is midnight at the antipodes when it is noon in Paris, and it was when I turned around that I saw the furtive movement of that hand, of that arm hiding itself behind Michel Daval's shoulder, which itself was half concealed by that of Francis Hutter in the first row, who was looking at his book open to an illustration on this same subject, comparing his diagram with mine, making an obvious effort to understand, then looked at the face of the clock I was pointing at while explaining that an hour corresponded on the clock face to thirty degrees, but that if the twenty-four hours of the day were put there as sometimes happens, and not only half of them as is customary, then each one of them would occupy exactly fifteen degrees, like each of the zones on this great clock which is the earth. And during the English class, Alain Mouuron went on examining this diagram that had remained on the blackboard, the circle representing the terrestrial equator, another, smaller circle underneath, then the sun surrounded by its beams, one of them longer than the rest, ending in an arrow with the word noon, and at the top the word midnight almost at the edge of the board. At his left, on the other side of the window, between two branches..." [pp. 38-9]
This sort of description, which leaps between subjects, times, and places, and keeps up a level of detail that continuously flaunts its boring endlessness, is at first like Perec's "Life: A User's Manual" or the opening of Robbe-Grillet's "Voyeur." But this isn't systematic, plotted encyclopedism like Perec's, or psychologically inflected myopic inspection as in Robbe-Grillet. It's the narrator's "project," which he proposes as a gift to his nephew, who is also one of his students.

Reading "Degrees" is like seeing poststructuralism just at the moment it was born, conscious for the first time, but not at all calculating about that self-awareness. The book is calculated in the sense that it's plotted -- I imagine hundreds of white cards, and cork boards pinned with notes -- but not in the sense that it believes expressiveness comes only from disruptions in the expected narrative.

I will consider just three points: whether Butor expected readers to keep count of all the characters; what counted for him as a complete description; and how he describes the narrator's reasons for doing such an exhausting and unrewarding thing in the first place.

1. How closely did Butor expect his readers to follow his narrative?

In the first few pages it seems Butor toyed with the idea of what would soon become a sort of Oulipian extravagance: it seems he makes nearly impossible demands on the reader's memory and attention. Here is part of a sentence whose subject is a student named Limours:

"Sitting in front of you, in the first row, Limours casually arranges on his desk his spiral-bound notebook... [skipping two lines]

he too a pupil, this year, of one of his uncles, Monsieur Bailly, who at this moment is making his seniors on the floor above read Keats's sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (Chapman: 1559-1634):

'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez.'
(Cortez, or Cortes: 1485-1547),
'when with eagle eyes
'he star'd at the Pacific--and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise--
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.'
(Darien: southernmost part of the isthmus of Panama),
a first cousin of both Monsieur Mouron, father of Alain Mouron who is in this class, and of Madame Daval, mother of Michel Daval sitting to your right, who is leaning over to ask you for a blotter, because his ink bottle, badly corked, has begun to leak all over his hands." [p. 10]

When I encountered sentences like this, I tried at first to keep notes, and I think Butor expected that response. It is not clear to me when he thought his more diligent readers would give up taking notes, because there is no clear division between the systematicity of the opening fifty or hundred pages and the hopeless attempts at systematicity in the book's final hundred and fifty pages, when the narrator is finally broken by his impossible task. In later constrained writing it is often clearer when a reader is expected to pay close attention, and when it's better to be carried along by the flow of facts that cannot ever be tallied.

2. Incomplete descriptions

The narrator interrupts his chronicle a dozen times or so in order to tell us how exhausting it was, and to describe his purpose, and update us on his progress. In one such passage he says his notes are "a literal description, without any intervention on the part of my imagination, a simple account of precise facts..." (p. 46). Note that "literal" doesn't mean "complete," but it isn't clear what counts as adequate.
I was repeatedly struck, in a way that I think Butor did not anticipate, by lapses in the supposedly complete descriptions. The game as we're given it in the first dozen pages is more or less this: we'll be told the names and families of every student and teacher in the Lycee, and we'll be given samples of what is said in every classroom. The passage I transcribed at the beginning is an example of the upper limit of detail: the diagram in question is conjured well enough so a reader can picture it. The second passage, with the quotations from Keats, is normative throughout the book: we're given couplets or single lines, just enough to conjure the subjects of each class. This brief kind of evocation is consonant with the narrator's purpose—he intends to give his nephew a mnemonic that he can read in later years.

The problem is that Butor doesn't seem to have thought out exactly how these longer descriptions might work with the briefer ones. At one point the narrator draws a sextant on the board—and that's all we're told. We can't picture it, or imagine how he discussed it (p. 33). On the same page we get the commonplace about how the globe can't be projected onto a plane without distortion, something it's unlikely the students got at that stage in their study. Other times we get summaries of talking points:

"(the various stone ages, the invention of pottery, the discovery of metals, all those tremendous obscure migrations...)[p. 36]

Apparently Butor didn't want to put Greek letters into his book, but that decision doesn't make sense, because Greek is the subject of one of the classes. As a result students are sometimes said to write "in Greek characters" (p. 42). The narrator skips things he knows (as in the previous quotation), but he also skips the things other teachers say when he doesn't know their subjects. He quotes Italian, but little German, and he has almost no interest in the science or gym teachers. Only one or two passages have any math, and it is the simplest algebra, without context (p. 100).

The result is a cross-section of the Lycee that is a portrait of the narrator's interests, exactly opposite to one of his stated purposes. (Later in the book there are two more narrators, but oddly their interests coincide with the principal narrator's.)

3. What is the narrator's purpose?

The account the narrator is building is therefore not "complete," but "literal." He says at one point that he has tried "to rely as much as possible on what I know with certainty" (p. 46). He wants to avoid "irremediable doubt" (p. 67) and be "serious" (p. 55). So the project is about facts, and it's about the possibility of avoiding "imagination." (Although later the narrator admits he has needed to make "a great imaginative effort" to write his book, p. 104.)

It remains unclear why the narrator cares only for "facts." He notes that the families of students and teachers form three groups (p. 54): but why should he care about that? Why should just this collection of "facts," some abbreviated, and other less so, some entirely absent, constitute a full description? He says that in order for his book to make sense to his nephew, it needs to be written "in a certain order and according to certain forms and systems" (p. 72). One of those "systems," it turns out, is the "system of triads" (p. 101). But why should triads be a "system," and why are "systems" necessary at all? There are other "systems," and at one point the narrator ponders whether he'll have to adopt entirely different ones (pp. 101-2). But that doesn't explain the need for systematicity itself.

The narrator says events and people have to be "situated": but why? And why is the complex, run-on grammar and kaleidoscopic temporality of the book an optimal sort of "situating" (p. 78)? The narrator says his book is to help his nephew "realize what you yourself have been... where you come from, in other words where you are going," and in that sense "Degrees" is a compulsive biography in the line of Flaubert.

At one point the narrator proposes a wider purpose for his book: "I am writing up [these notes] in your behalf," he says, "and in behalf of your classmates too, less directly, and--through you and
them--in behalf of all those who were or will have been eleventh-grade students and even--I think I have to go this far--in behalf of everyone who has any relation with people who have gone through eleventh grade...” [p. 87]

This hardly makes sense. If he’d ended by saying “in behalf of everyone who has tried to remember a day, or a year, of their life in full detail,” that might have made sense. By implication he is also saying “in behalf of myself, to keep myself sane.” But as it stands this passage is anomalous, illogical (it contradicts the entire rest of the book, which is just for the nephew), and unconvincing. It is the book’s most interesting passage.