



5-2015

Gaps and Barriers: Division and Revelation in Michel Butor's *La modification*

Mary L. Bauer
Sacred Heart University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/lang_fac



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bauer, M. L. (2015). Gaps and barriers: Division and revelation in Michel Butor's *La modification*. *European Academic Research*, 3(2), 1378-1395.

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Languages and Literatures at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Languages Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu.

Gaps and Barriers: Division and Revelation in Michel Butor's *La modification*

MARY L. BAUER

Adjunct Professor of English and French
Sacred Heart University
U.S.A.

Gaps divide things that can't quite come together, while cracks warn that something that was a coherent whole is coming apart. Michel Butor implants images of these two powerful symbols within his narrative of Léon Delmont's troubled relationships with his wife, Henriette, and his lover, Cécile Darcella in his novel, *La modification* (1957). Some are obvious physical manifestations, while others are figurative, yet no less real. Butor then turns the concept of gap literally on its head by using its inverse, the barrier, to emphasize the self-imposed obstacles to a healthy relationship on both sides of Léon's not-so-secret double life.

The elements on either side of a gap or barrier are related to each other because they were once part of the same whole that was torn apart or separated. So, not surprisingly, Léon's life includes many dual elements, and these pairs are always related in some way – either part of the same whole or a mirror image of each other because they are on opposite sides. Butor deftly employs these reflections to magnify the gaps and emphasize the fault lines in Delmont's two failing romantic relationships.

The real barrier, or gap, however, is between Léon and the truth. He nurtures the fantasy – which he confuses with reality -- of bringing his lover from Rome to live in Paris, where

he resides with his wife and children. According to his plan, which is clearly not grounded in reality, he will leave, but not divorce, his wife and move into an apartment with Cécile, where they will live happily ever after. He believes his children will accept this arrangement and will even come to visit him in his adulterous domicile. Only in the geographic gap between Paris and Rome, as he travels on the train to deliver the news of his plan to his lover, is Léon able to penetrate the barrier that separates him from reality. Slowly, painfully, in this great chasm between the two cities, Léon discerns the truth and realizes what he must do.

Léon not only travels in a gap, he lives in one, on many different levels. He is suspended in the space between his wife and his lover, unable, or perhaps simply unwilling, to commit himself fully to either of them, or to his children. He's also middle-aged – no longer young, but not yet old, stuck in the gap between the two ages. Even his job spans two cities, so that he is not fully a part of either the office in Paris or the main headquarters in Rome. He belongs to both, yet is not a full-time member of either. Not coincidentally, Léon's fateful journey takes place in November, in the transition, or gap, between two seasons, symbolic of his stage in life between full maturity and old age.

Rome vs. Paris

There is, of course, a great physical distance, or gap, between Paris and Rome as well as barriers, such as the linguistic divide, denoted by the different languages of the passengers on the train, and the cultural divide, notable in the differing dress, food and customs Léon reflects on as he recalls his experiences in each of the cities.

For Léon, there also is an emotional chasm between Paris and Rome. He literally lives two different lives in these two cities and has a distinctly different persona on each side of

the gap. In Paris, he is a middle-aged man living in the modern world with a worn-out marriage and four tiresome children, whom he describes as “petits étrangers sauvages” (79). His senior status at Scabelli, a fictional Italian typewriter manufacturer, affords stability and allows some degree of luxury in his life, but he is unable to take real joy in it. He slogs through the routine of a white collar, upper middle class life, but holds no connection to anyone or anything. The only miniscule sense of satisfaction he finds is in the trappings of his executive status, which allows him to enjoy certain Bacchanal pleasures, such as fine dining and quality wine.

By contrast, when he is in Rome, Léon is the lover of a woman much younger than he, and he consistently comments about trying to recapture his fleeting youth through the vitality of Rome. He admits this to himself when he first boards the train:

Mais n'est-ce pas justement pour parer à ce risque dont vous n'aviez que trop conscience que vous avez entrepris cet aventure, n'est-ce pas vers la guérison de toutes ces premières craquelures avant-coureuses du vieillissement que vous achemine cette machine, vers Rome où vous attendent quel repos et quelle réparation? (124)

And indeed Léon acts like a younger and more energetic version of himself when he is in Rome. Relieved, at least temporarily, of the burdens of family life, Léon visits museums, art galleries and architectural sites, and enjoys meals in interesting restaurants and cafés. There is a playful nature to his activities in Rome and a near-constant state of joy when he is there – the mirror opposite of his depressing, mundane, routine-filled life in Paris.

In one of Butor's intriguing double reflections, Rome itself is city with two faces – ancient and modern – that echo two aspects of Léon's personality. On one hand, Léon finds the splendor of Rome's art and architecture romantic and rejuvenating, like his affair with the much younger Cécile. On

the other, Rome, like Léon, is past its days of glory. The remnants of its former attributes are crumbling and dispersed across the wide expanse of the modern-day city, a fitting reflection of Léon, who is starting to show signs of aging, and whose dual life has spread him across a wide geographic expanse. Ironically, Léon associates Rome with feeling youthful, while his main attraction to the city is the vestiges of its ancient culture.

Although Léon does not perceive it, he also has a dual life within Paris, neatly divided by the Seine. Cécile explains it to him when he asks her what part of the city she wants to explore: “La rive droite, c’est ton travail, la rive gauche, c’est ta femme, difficile de décider.” (175)

Paris and Rome are divided not only by geographic space, but also by time because the train journey between them in Léon’s day would have taken about 25 hours. This geo-temporal gap between the two cities functions like a time-space continuum between two parallel universes. Unlike the time-space continuum of our universe, however, this continuum is governed by hidden rules that produce unexpected consequences.

Léon discovers the unwritten rules of the continuum by violating them. First, he takes Henriette to Rome, the site of their honeymoon, for a romantic replay. The city has changed and so have they. The adventure simply doesn’t work because they have violated a fundamental rule of the continuum: Henriette belongs in the Paris universe. She can’t cross over into Léon’s parallel life on the opposite end of the continuum. Demonstrating an astounding lack of finesse, Léon has brought a woman he doesn’t love to the city that houses his lover. Despite his naively benign intentions, Léon finds himself stifled by Henriette’s presence. She, in turn, senses his stilted emotions. With her high hopes for a romantic second honeymoon dashed, Henriette becomes disappointed and deeply

unhappy in Rome, and she ends up resenting Léon for bringing her there.

Having failed to discern the underlying cause of this misadventure, Léon violates the rules a second time when he brings Cécile to Paris for a two-week vacation. In a daring and unbelievably naïve move, Léon invites Cécile to dinner at his family home, telling his wife that he is returning a favor to a woman who has done him a professional courtesy. Naturally, the whole thing backfires and the mysterious continuum spews up surprising consequences. Henriette and Cécile end up liking each other and resenting Léon (185-7). In this instance, Léon's violation is a double one. He brought Cécile, who belongs in Rome, to Paris, violating the rules of the continuum, and he mixed his lover with his family, breaking the laws of human decency. He thus creates a fissure in his relationship with Cécile while deepening the already considerable divide between himself and Henriette. The only glimmer of hope is when Léon and Cécile visit a museum in Paris that houses Roman art. Bringing Cécile into the presence of Rome bridges the gap, at least temporarily, and they speak to each other for the first time since her visit to his home. The temporary connection, however, is disrupted immediately when they leave the museum. (185-6)

This mysterious continuum also seems to determine, or at least influence, the attitudes of the people on each side. As Leon daydreams about his future, imagining Cécile living in Paris, he realizes that she would cease to be a Roman and would become a Parisian. As a result, she would end up hating him, just as Henriette does (278). It seems that on the Parisian side of the continuum, Léon is doomed to be despised, no matter with whom he lives.

Léon eventually cracks the code of the continuum, more by trial and error than by any process of reasoning. As he reflects on the possibility of writing a book in an attempt to heal his emotional wounds, he acknowledges that it might be a

good idea to preserve the distance between Paris and Rome, but he decides that in his book, there would be something that transports characters between the two cities, sometimes without the character wanting it. This transport mechanism would operate on laws that are hard to decipher. He thus introduces the concept of a rift or hole in the time-space continuum between the two cities, similar to a wormhole between two galaxies or a passageway between two parallel universes.

Ne vaudrait-il pas mieux conserver entre ces deux villes leur distance, toutes ces gares, tous ces paysages qui les séparent? Mais en plus des communications normales par lesquelles chacun pourrait se rendre de l'une à l'autre quand il voudrait, il y aurait un certain nombre de points de contact, de passages instantanés qui s'ouvriraient à certains moments déterminés par des lois que l'on ne parviendrait à connaître que peu à peu. (282)

Traveling in the Gap

The door of third class cabin where Léon is seated on his fateful journey between Paris and Rome serves as a gap that gives Léon a glimpse into reality and the truth. As he boards the train and enters the compartment for the first time, Léon is unable to close the door (11), which creates a gap and foreshadows his later realization that he can't shut the door on his life with Henriette. The door is repeatedly left ajar during the trip and light seeps in, just as the truth slowly seeps in and dawns on Léon. If the distance between Paris and Rome is a gap, then the crack of the slightly open door is a gap within a gap – another of Butor's ingenious double reflections.

As soon as he is settled, Léon pulls out a book with the train schedule and a map of the various train routes. As he looks at the map, he muses to himself that it looks like “a network of little cracks” (45-6) – a reflection of the many cracks in his relationships, but he doesn't recognize this yet.

Seated on the opposite side of the gap formed by the heating grate between the opposing seats is a young couple whom Léon deduces are newlyweds on their honeymoon journey (9). They are a duplicate of Léon and Henriette on their honeymoon to Rome so many years ago and yet, they are also a reverse image of Léon and Henriette as they are in the present moment. Watching this couple across the gap stimulates Léon's thinking about his own marriage and about the love he hoped to have with Cécile. He starts out with a cynical approach, predicting the eventual demise of the young couple's union, but their loving looks and gestures eventually break through his protective barrier of pessimism and doom. Duplicate and mirror reflection, they are the key to Léon's change of heart.

Windows are omnipresent in the story. Léon's train compartment, where virtually all of the very limited action takes place, has a window on the outside wall and another window looking into the corridor, which is directly aligned with a window on the opposite outer wall of the train so that Léon can see the exterior landscape from both sides of the train as well as the people in between. As he recalls and mulls over key events in his life, almost all of these vignettes also take place in the shadow of windows.

Windows are deceptive. They are transparent, providing an opening to the other side, and yet they are solid, offering a certain level of protection. When open, they serve as a gap; when closed, they are a barrier. Léon's windows are even more complex. They are sometimes shielded by curtains or obscured by the elements (for example, "couverte de toute une toile tissé par des gouttes de pluie" (97)), indicating that there are some things in his life journey that he really doesn't want to see clearly. The repetitive cycle of the train windows becoming obscured by rain and/or fog and then it clearing mirrors Léon's thought processes, which become alternately clouded by emotion, then cleared by reality.

In his reverie, Léon remembers waking up that morning to the sound of his wife opening the bedroom blinds, which were laden with carbon dust from the city. The metal blinds are slightly rusted in spots that resemble dried blood, and when they open, frigid air comes into the room (16). By contrast, when he looks forward to his arrival in Rome at the end of this journey, he imagines himself waking up in Cécile's bedroom with sunlight streaming into the room between the slits in her window blinds (84). These window images seem to indicate that Léon clearly is much happier with Cécile than with Henriette, but this imagery proves to be deceptive as the journey progresses and reality, like the sun, eventually penetrates the fog of his self-delusions.

When night falls, the reflection of the inside lights make it nearly impossible to see outside, except when a light from a house or store is strong enough to pierce the reflected light – just as little glimmers of the truth slowly penetrate the false reality in which Léon is living. Eventually, the moon pushes through the barrier of the storm clouds and streams through a gap between them. Just at the same time, Léon starts to realize the truth of his relationship with Cécile: the fact that he doesn't really love her.

During the night, an old man tries to look through the corridor window of the compartment where Léon is seated. He's probably trying to find his own compartment, but he can't see through the window due to the reflection of the corridor lights. The old man becomes frustrated and goes away (183) – a symbol of Léon trying to see inside himself, but not succeeding because he is too occupied with external factors, such as Cécile's beauty and how both she and the city of Rome make him feel younger.

As the train makes its way from Paris to Rome, it must pass through the mountains, which means there are a number of tunnels. Butor uses these dark passages to signal a shift in

Léon's thinking as he remembers previous journeys with Cécile and Henriette and muses about his future life with Cécile.

Tunnels are a gap in the landscape, but, unlike most gaps, they unite rather than divide. They penetrate barriers like mountains and make it possible to journey to the other side. Unlike a bridge, which unites by bringing passengers through the open air, tunnels oblige the traveler to go underground, an image of exploring deep within one's self. This is why Léon has interesting shifts of thought each time the train enters a tunnel. He looks deep within himself and makes connections between his actions and the outcomes in his life. These inner voyages eventually will enable him to see his situation clearly, as when a train bursts through the opening on the opposite side of the tunnel into the bright daylight.

Bridging the Widening Gap between Léon and Henriette

Léon and Henriette were married in the aftermath of World War II. They were both young and the post-war period was one of hope and rebuilding. They were happy on their honeymoon in Rome, but something has since gone very awry. It's unclear how the difficulties between them started, but the crack in their bedroom ceiling, which Léon views reflected in the mirror of their armoire (another demonstration of Butor's use of reflections to emphasize key points) is a metaphor for the growing rift between them. Léon comments to himself that this ceiling crack is getting bigger because he didn't tend to it (16) – just like he didn't pay attention to and fix the early signs of the widening fissure in his marriage.

Each trip to Rome widens the gap between them. Henriette correctly deduces that Léon is more attached to Rome than to her. Not only does she suspect that Léon has a lover there, but she's also jealous of how relaxed and happy he seems each time he comes back (145), which seems incongruous given the physical demands and discomfort of two full days on the

train (one in each direction) plus his work duties while in Rome. She, meanwhile, is left with the drudgery of running the household and tending to the children's needs with no support from her husband. Not surprisingly, this leads to mounting frustration and resentment towards him. Henriette grows older and more tired with each passing day while Léon seems more youthful after each trip. Thus, there is a sort of emotional age gap between them that widens with each trip.

The disastrous second honeymoon trip is an attempt to spackle over the cracks in their marriage, but it only serves to widen the gap between them. Henriette instinctively knows that Rome is Léon's city now, not hers, and no longer theirs. Although Léon consistently displays an astonishing lack of understanding when it comes to the women in his life, he correctly predicts that Henriette will pull away from him, widening the gap, once they return to Paris (183).

The emotional divide between Léon and Henriette is echoed in other physical elements of the story. There is a barrier of bed linen between them while they are sleeping (42) – a physical barrier that represents an emotional barrier to real intimacy. Henriette's mouth is open a crack while she is sleeping, denoting a rift in their communication (42). In Léon's reveries on the train, he visualizes the difficulties between them as a huge wound on Henriette's face that has affected her communication with him:

Certes, cet énorme chancre insidieux qui recouvrait les traits d'Henriette d'un masque horrible se durcissant autour de sa bouche jusqu'à la rendre à peu près muette (toute parole qu'elle proférait semblait venir de l'autre côté d'un mur s'épaississant de jour en jour, de l'autre côté d'un désert se hérissant de jour en jour de buissons de plus en plus épineux) jusqu'à rendre sous vos baisers ces lèvres, qui ne les acceptent plus que par habitude, froides et rugueuses comme du granit... (106-7)

Her ability to see him also is hampered by this canker of suspicion, jealousy and hatred:

...se durcissant autour de ses yeux, les recouvrant comme d'une taie déformante, si vous hésitez tant à l'extraire, c'était par crainte de ces chairs vif que vous découvririez, comme le chirurgien quand il a pratiqué son incision, de toute cette vieille souffrance qui jaillirait d'un seul coup. (107)

This imagined deformity on Henriette's cornea makes it impossible for her to see him. She is, symbolically, blinded by rage and jealousy. Nonetheless, Léon believes it is indeed necessary to surgically remove, metaphorically speaking, the rotten tissue in their wounded relationship in order for the wound to scab over and heal (107).

Despite the growing rift between them, Henriette herself is a barrier between Léon and the life he really wants (another of Butor's delicious plays on the barrier as an inverted gap). His Christianity (read Catholic faith) prevents him from divorcing her, though it doesn't seem to stop him from committing adultery. His responsibilities as a provider to his family also trap him in his job at Scabelli's Paris office. Ideally, he would like to be in Rome and live with Cécile, but he must remain in Paris to be near the children. This is why his plan revolves around bringing Cécile to Paris, rather than asking for a transfer to the home office and living in Rome as he certainly would prefer. Perhaps he knows, on some deeper level, that if he lived and worked in Rome full time, the city would quickly lose its charm.

Léon views this trip to Rome – where he will take the first concrete step toward his new life with Cécile – as the beginning of a permanent rupture, but Butor spins it into a perfect inversion, in which the trip becomes the deciding point where Léon chooses Henriette and his family over his romantic notion of an idyllic life with Cécile.

Cécile: Living between Illusion and Reality

At the onset of his journey, Léon thinks he is moving towards Cécile and he is, in the physical sense, but emotionally, there is a significant rift between them that Léon does not yet recognize. It is a series of small cracks that have converged into a large and dangerous one. This growing crack is a replica of the widening division between Léon and his wife. Thus, there is a crack on each side of his dual life – a mirror image on either side of the gap that separates his life in Paris from his life in Rome.

As he boards the train, Léon is aware of small cracks in his relationship with Cécile, but thinks he can fill them in and restore the relationship by announcing his dramatically romantic plan to bring Cécile to live in Paris. He is completely unaware of the convergence of these cracks and the inevitability of a permanent divide.

First, there is Cécile's desire for commitment and Léon's reluctance to give it. Léon is quite content to use Cécile as a respite from the daily grind of his life in Paris, but he has been unwilling to entertain any discussion of leaving his wife, until now. As he boards the train, Léon thinks he is ready to make a commitment that will seal over this crack, but the commitment is incomplete. He's willing to leave his wife and move in with Cécile, but he's not willing to divorce his wife and marry Cécile. According to his plan, Cécile will still remain "the other," a woman with no real status in his life. In the context of the 1950s setting of the story, the cohabitation that he proposes is illicit, immoral and shameful. Léon wants the benefits of family life with Cécile, but only on an unofficial level. This would leave Cécile stuck in the gap between Léon and his family and would create a chasm between Cécile and polite society. She could not be officially received in respectable social circles because she would be a "home-wrecker" and a

“kept woman”. Though the architect of this proposed arrangement is Léon, Cécile would be blamed for it.

Christianity is the genesis of another small, but significant crack between them. Léon clings to the trappings of Christianity, which not only keeps him from divorcing his wife, but also weighs on his conscience because he knows that his relationship with Cécile is inconsistent with his professed faith. Perhaps in a subconscious attempt to placate his nagging conscience, Léon is attracted to church art, which Cécile is reluctant to visit and says she does not enjoy. She is hostile to Christianity, in part, because it is the reason Léon won't fully commit to her. While Léon's attraction to Christianity annoys Cécile, her aversion to it creates a barrier between Léon and certain works of art that he wants to visit. Thus, the spirituality gap between them also functions as a barrier that obstructs Léon from fully enjoying Rome – another of Butor's interesting inversions. In a sense, Cécile is a barrier between Léon and Christianity, while Christianity is a barrier between Léon and Cécile – an ironic twist on a love triangle.

This barrier leads to resentment on Léon's part and deepens the divide between him and Cécile. For example, Léon reflects,

Vous avez donc eu tout le temps de considérer le Moïse tranquillement à San-Pietro-in-Vincoli, bien avant l'heure du salut, bien avant le coucher du soleil, seuls dans la nef vide et très froide, sans projecteur; la statue était là comme un fantôme dans un grenier et, surtout, vous sentiez en allant d'un lieu à l'autre, d'un oeuvre à l'autre, que quelque chose d'essentiel vous manquait, quelque chose qui était à votre disposition mais qu'il vous était interdit de voir à cause de Cécile. (173)

Ironically, the one spiritual commonality that Léon and Cécile share is a sense of guilt because their relationship does not conform to the principles of Christianity. During one of their rare joint outings to visit sacred art, Léon muses:

...vous savez bien qu'elle y pensait aussi, hantés tous les deux par ces prophètes et ces sibylles, par ce Jugement absent, conscients tous deux de l'absurdité de vos promenades cette fois, silencieux tous deux sans avoir nul besoin d'exprimer l'accord de votre deception...puisque vous ne saviez que trop bien tous les deux ce qu'il y avait d'autre à Rome que ce Moïse, goûtant honteusement, douloureusement l'amertume de ce qui ne pouvait être nommé que votre lâcheté à tous les deux...[V]ous vous êtes tus rapidement, trop certains que, si émouvant fût-elle, cette *pieta* n'aurait pu arranger les choses, combler le vide. (173-4)

Léon also has certain lapses of attention that create cracks in his relationship with Cécile. In Rome, she tells him she wants to make breakfast for him and he agrees to come to her apartment the next morning, but then he forgets, leaving her alone with cold tea and toast (174). In Paris, he sees her on a Saturday and promises to take her on a tour of the suburbs the next day. Again, he forgets and leaves her all alone until he reappears on Monday for their next outing (186). These incidents cause hurt and resentment and send the message that she isn't very important to him, echoing the perpetual complaint of the long-suffering Henriette.

The ill-conceived adventure of bringing Cécile to Paris opens an even wider rift between them, which Léon describes as "ce fossé qu'avait creusé entre vous le séjour parisien" (225). The silence between them during Cécile's visit to Paris continues on the return trip back to Rome. Each of them reads a book to avoid talking to the other (225).

As Léon travels on the train in the gap between his separate Paris and Rome lives, he begins to see his relationship with Cécile more clearly. First, he recognizes that the train station from which he departs Rome, Stazione Termini, is a barrier that divides his life with Cécile from his other life. He tried to break through this barrier when he brought Cécile with him to Paris, but now he understands that it only prolonged the

goodbye that normally takes place at the station. He realizes that instead, the whole train trip from Rome to Paris was a farewell because he would not be able to see Cécile openly in the city where his family lives (150). In fact, he saw less of her during these two weeks than when they were separated by the geographic divide between his normal business trips.

Léon wanted to bring Cécile to Paris because she serves as a sort of intermediary for Rome and having her in Paris, he thought, would make Rome accessible to him at all times. Now, however, he realizes that once installed in Paris, she would lose her power to represent Rome. She would simply become a Parisian and, worse yet, she would become another Henriette, constantly blaming him for her unhappiness because she missed Rome (278).

In one of Léon's fitful dreams on the train, the street that runs through a main gate into Rome is replaced by a fissure between rocks (233). When he awakens, Léon suddenly realizes that he loves Cécile as the "Gate of Rome" – the person who makes the city available and alive for him – but he doesn't really love her (238-9). It is Rome that he loves and, in essence, she is just the personification of it. In the dream, the gate's (Cécile's) transformation into fissure, or gap, denotes that it is without substance, just as a fissure is not matter, but rather the absence of it. Cécile, then, has no substance and no value to Léon. When he realizes this, he likens himself to a fiancé holding the dead corpse of his beloved (150).

The formulation of the title "Gate of Rome" is no accident; it evokes one of the devotional titles given to the Blessed Mother: Gate of Heaven. Once again, Léon's Christianity becomes an obstacle to any real union with Cécile.

As he reflects on their relationship, Léon initially perceives that the wound – or gap – between them created by the Paris trip has started to heal, a process he describes as knitting a network over a scab (281), but then he recognizes that the silence regarding the trip, the fact that they never

speak about it, has led to a false healing, under which lies an incurable gangrene, which he describes as an “internal wound” (281). This mirrors Léon’s description of his relationship with Henriette as plagued with an infected ulcer that must be surgically removed.

He sees that if Cécile comes to live in Paris, they will separate little by little. Then, he realizes that even the status quo is not viable. The tear that has developed in their relationship will widen with each visit (228) – an interesting reflection of the crack on the ceiling of the bedroom he shares with Henriette, which symbolizes the widening rift in their marriage.

Once he realizes that bringing Cécile to Paris permanently would only lead to the complete breakdown of their relationship, Léon plans to tell Cécile the truth – that their relationship is no longer viable, either in Paris or in Rome – but he realizes that she won’t believe him. It doesn’t make sense that he would come all the way to Rome on personal travel at his own expense just to say “I’ve changed my mind.” Thus, ironically, the trip that convinces Léon that he must break off his relationship with Cécile becomes a barrier to her believing that he will leave her (242-243).

Cécile is, in effect, a mirror image of Henriette – her opposite number in the parallel universe of Rome. In the physical sense, Cécile is young while Henriette is aging, energetic in contrast to Henriette’s increasing weariness, crowned with luscious dark hair in stark relief to Henriette’s graying mane. Yet on an emotional level, they are one and the same, just as a mirror image is the same as the person, except that the image is inverted. Each wants, but does not receive, a sense of commitment from Léon. Each wants to live in peace with him, but cannot achieve a stable relationship. Each experiences a certain sense of discontent in her surroundings and, on some level, harbors an attraction to the opposite city.

Filling in the Gap and Moving On

Near the end of the novel, Léon, in a fitful sleep, has a disturbing dream:

“Votre corps s’est enfoncé dans la terre humide. Le ciel au-dessus de vous s’est mis à se zébrer d’éclairs, tandis que tombent de grandes plaques de boue qui vous recouvrent.”
(272)

The grave in which Léon dreams he is lying is, quite literally, a gap in the earth. The filling in of the grave, as frightening as it seems, is a positive sign. It symbolizes that Léon finally understands that he can no longer live in this middle place between two separate worlds. The gap between his secret plan and reality is finally being filled in, not papered over, but permanently refilled. He must, however, sacrifice his ideal of himself, the vibrant lover, which is the corpse that is being covered. This is the capstone to his earlier reverie of holding the dead corpse of his fiancée. In effect, both die in a tragic, Romeo and Juliet kind of way: the star-crossed lovers who could never have love and life together.

Almost immediately upon awakening, Léon decides that writing a book would be a way to fill the void in his life (274). So the concept of book, which had served as barrier to conversation with Cécile, now becomes a way to heal and fill the gap. The barrier is inverted and fills in the gap.

As he reflects on the revelations of this night and the definitive decision he has made, Léon speaks of a “cette fissure béante en ma personne,” which he realizes cannot be filled in or forgotten because it connects to a cavern deep within himself that has been there for a long time (276). Léon knows that he must let this fissure grow and take shape, perhaps through writing a book, which will let him bask in the reflection of the city he loves, admiring its marvels without unraveling its mysteries (276).

This new fissure becomes a sort of tunnel that offers passage beneath the entrenched gap between Léon and Henriette. As the train pulls into the station in Rome, Léon vows

...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. (285)

WORKS CITED

Butor, Michel, and Michel Leiris. (1970). *La Modification*. Paris: Les Editions De Minuit. Print.