

AIRLESS ROOMS, STONY CORRIDORS

Sarah Hopkinson

In order to diminish the distance from my own reality I must plunge back into my winter, set out a relief map of myself so as to trace the pattern of shadows cast by my days over one another, forward and backward to the present moment... I have outlived myself.¹

Jacques Revel, young Frenchman, export clerk, diary-keeper, map-reader, amateur detective, labyrinth-walker, begins writing seven months after his arrival, but starts his diary from the first day of his year in Bleston, an unremarkable city in the north of England. To account for the breach, each page is headed by two months, the first corresponds to the month in which Revel is writing and the second, in italics, to the month he is writing about, then each sub-paragraph is headed by the specific date of the diary entry. This would seem straight forward enough if Revel was simply attempting to catch himself up, however, he returns to the same events, places and conversations over and over with slight variation, introducing new content before it is due and mingling present thoughts with recollections, with a mission to solve a crime that we are for the most part unaware of, and never wholly convinced exists. The book inhabits a disjointed, distorted temporal plane as the protagonist goes back to pursue his lost time (and subsequent truth, clarity, meaning), and at the same time is swept forward by process of his pursuit.

Passing Time is a novel about the problems of memory, among other things. Revel labours under the impression that if he can piece together the fragmentary, scattered moments of his past and extract secrets from Bleston's history, which he believes to be somehow linked, that they will, quite simply, make his life more meaningful. So, he revisits moments, events, conversations, and physically revisits sites, that he believes have bearing on the unfolding of later events until his entries become so circular, so monotonous, so homogenous, that his *temps perdu*, his year in Bleston, appears condensed, or somehow abridged: 'All of those weeks seem to be contracted into a single immense week, a dense, compact, confused week. The past appears to consist of that unvarying motion.'² Revel's diary is not the musings of a man lost in nostalgic reverie, he suffers no epiphanies, nor flashes of *memoire involuntaire*, instead he consciously, forcibly dredges his memory for clues that will appease his increasing senses of meaninglessness. Revel's psyche, as discharged into the page, is riddled with doubt, anxiety and frustration (at times so much so that it is difficult to read) as his memories prove inadequate and refuse to cooperate, to fit into the structure



Saskia Leek, *Knights End* 2007, oil on board, 27.5 x 35.5 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.

he imposes upon them. As we realise the hopelessness of the anticipation that alleviates the tedium, the reader begins to question whether the past is even worth retrieving in the first place, whether it is worth the effort.

Revel's diary remembers its traditional form – the structure and conventions of a detective novel (exemplified in the narrative by the book, *The Bleston Murder*), but it lacks an identifiable 'crime' to justify a linear, causal form. To compensate Revel assigns meaning to apparently meaningless things and events, leaving the reader with a perplexing multiplication of would-be redemptive/revelatory moments that perpetually recur throughout, including but not limited to, the reading of *The Bleston Murder*, initial visits to the Old Cathedral, New Cathedral and Museum, his first meeting with George Burton, Christmas with Horace Buck, a certain lunch at the Jenkins', the burning of the map of Bleston, the 'accident' on Brown St and the always-not-quite-reached date of February 29th.³ It doesn't take long for the narrative to collapse in upon itself as the tenuous cause and effect between past and present unravels (and even becomes inverted as Revel starts to believe that his actions in the present have altered those in the past), spinning instead a diaphanous and gnarled web based on an ever-changing interplay of its parts, fragments separated by 'zones of darkness':

...the sequence of former days is only restored to us through a whole host of other days, constantly changing, and every event calls up an echo from other, earlier events which caused it or explained it, or correspond to it, every monument, every image sending us back to other periods which we must reawaken in order to recover the lost secret of their power, for good or evil, other periods both remote or forgotten, whose density and distance are to be measured not by weeks or months but by centuries, standing out against the dark blurred background of our whole history...⁴

...a whole series of resonances of varying intensity separated by broad intervals of silence, like the harmonics into which the timbre of a sound is broken up.⁵



Saskia Leek, *3 days alone*, 2006, medium oil on board, 20.8 x 29.3 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, purchased 2006.

...(the) fundamental pollution of the air, the exudation, that terrible sour noxious breath that Bleston exhales, insidiously stupefying, paralysing and depressing the soul, relentlessly clouding the mind, that iron grip so seldom and so imperceptibly relaxed...⁶

...Bleston, that city of doom and oblivion, hounding me relentlessly, that hydra, that octopus disgorging its black ink over us, so as to make us unrecognisable to one another and even to ourselves...⁷

For Revel, Bleston is a beastly antagonist that conspires against him, continually frustrating his efforts for sense and clarity with its elemental forces, its ubiquitous fog and blurring darkness. Revel blames the city for his failures, his inability to make his world work for him, and it is the central and pervasive source of his increasing senses of alienation. To combat Bleston's stifling shadow, Revel becomes obsessed with light, a recognisable symbol of man's power to create order from chaos, and fire, an element long associated with violent purification. Revel reads the 'flames devouring Athens in the last tapestry in the museum', 'the red sky behind Cain's city on the Old Cathedral', and the uncannily high occurrence of fires in Bleston (at the fairground and his restaurant, The Oriental Bamboo) as 'personal messages', clues in an increasingly bewildering and contradictory battle between his ancient binaries of light (good, knowledge, authenticity) and dark (evil, blindness, inauthenticity), in which he is both arsonist and alchemist, who will, with his newly acquired knowledge, banish Bleston's shadows and turn its grimy dust to gold.⁸

...fire, started by the very flame which had burnt the map of Bleston in this room, that flame denatured, corrupted and contaminated by its long journey through your veins, which you had succeeded in taming and turning against me...⁹

As the book progresses we see evidence that Revel is aware that his paranoia, the notion that Bleston is consciously opposing him, is unfounded and illogical, but paradoxically blames Bleston for his mental state, putting his hallucinations down to the contagious effects of 'narcotic exhalations' of the



Saskia Leek, *Untitled*, 2009, oil on board, 36 x 28 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.



Saskia Leek, *Blue/Yellow Net*, 2007, oil on board, 27.5 x 35.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.

Slee (the river that snakes through the city), his weariness, and 'the contagious influence of the wretched weather.'¹⁰

Of all the places he visits and re-visits in Bleston, there are two sites that hold a particular kind of fascination for Revel. The first is the stained glass window in the Old Cathedral that depicts the biblical tale of Cain and Able, a 'magical heiroglyph' of the 'first murder'. This is the same 'Murderer's Window' that features as scene of the crime in the novel-within-the-novel, *The Bleston Murder*, that Revel, believing it to be more fact than fiction, uses as a *vade mecum* for his own 'mystery'. The second is the Museum, home to a series of tapestries that weave the Greek myth of Theseus, conqueror of the labyrinth, slayer of Minotaur, friend of Pirithous, beloved of Ariadne and Phaedra. Revel is infatuated with these two archetypal narratives, he trusts their veracity because they are ancient, cohesive, and in representation he can see and hold them, they are contained, static, finite. Conversely, he mistrusts his own 'story' because it can only be scattered, fluid, anomalous,

atypical. In an attempt to reconcile the two and compensate for the connection his actual past lacks, Revel imposes a mythological structure on his own life, assigning his friends and colleagues traits of the lead characters regardless of whether they conform or not, and assigning himself various roles, usually that of the tragic hero, depending on what narrative strain he happens to be stuck on.

...little by little I came to feel that my bad luck was due to some malevolent will and that all these offers were so many lies, and I had to struggle increasingly against the impression that all my efforts were foredoomed to failure, that I was going round and round a blank wall, that the doors were sham doors and the people dummies, the whole thing a hoax.¹¹

For Revel the stories of Cain and Theseus, as well as *The Bleston Murder*, are beacons (both guiding lights and danger signals), in his attempt to uncover something deeper, more original, more authentic; they are potential sources of meaning or underlying truths that have been necessarily obscured. Simultaneously the meta-narratives put Butor's book *en abyme*, into an unstable but ultimately productive wrangle between the two opposing structures (centred and un-centred), between surface and depth, myth and reality. If we follow Levi-Strauss's on myth, it is Revel's own imagination that builds and 'projects' these myths and eventually his own text that dismantles it: 'the unity of the myth is never more than tendential and projective... It is a phenomenon of the imagination, resulting from the attempt at interpretation; and its function is to endow the myth with synthetic form and to prevent its disintegration into a confusion of opposites'.¹² At the end of his diary, with the realisation that his two worlds are eternally irreconcilable, Revel is forced by his own hand to see that authenticity can be nothing but mythical – like all of his ideals and binaries, it empties out to nothing in the end.

Theseus' labyrinth is spatialized in the city of Bleston, or more precisely in Revel's experience of the city. On his arrival Revel purchases a map from Ann Bailey (the Ariadne to his



Saskia Leek, *Third Wish*, 2007, oil on board, 27.5 x 35.5 cm
 Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.

Theseus) to help him navigate the maze, but he gets lost immediately, fooled into thinking (again) that experience can be clearly represented in grid and line, flattened, transcribed, mapped. Of course, when depicted in the map the city makes sense (just as the myths and biblical stories 'make sense' in representation) – it has a centre and clear trajectories that Revel can follow, however, when he starts to use the map, translating it into the space of experience, the city again becomes uncentered, labyrinthine.

*...I have written two sonnets; in the first, a man is supposed to be making his way through the dusty and stony corridors, and he hears a distant bellowing in the night. And then he makes out footprints in the sand and he knows that they belong to the minotaur, that the minotaur is after him and that, in a sense, he too is after the minotaur. The minotaur wants, of course, to devour him, and since his only aim in life is to go on wandering and wandering, he longs for the moment. In the second sonnet I had a still more gruesome idea – the idea that there was no minotaur – that the man would go on endlessly wandering. That may have been suggested by a phrase in one of Chesterton's *Farmer Brown* books. Chesterton said, "What man is really afraid of is a maze without a centre." I suppose he was thinking of a godless universe, but I was thinking of the labyrinth without the minotaur. I mean if anything is terrible, it is terrible because it is meaningless.*¹³

Revel's Bleston (and by extension his universe) is Borges' 'monstrous building built around a monster' that is now monsterless and thus insensible, illogical. Revel begins his diary after burning the map of the city, an iconoclastic attack, and comes to see writing, 'that rope of words', as the thread that will lead him from the maze, however, he eventually comes to suspect, as the reader does, that his diary is double-crossing him. The text itself becomes a labyrinth, a mirror, tapestry, that 'grows and alters' as he builds it and in doing so asserts its own autonomy – moving from an unsuccessful report to a successful thing.

The book finishes as it began, with Revel on the train at Bleston station. His time is up and he has not made sense of the city, his memories or his life, he has not got the girl or solved the crime, or at least not in the way he intended. His diary, that he was relying on to answer the question of his year in Bleston, the 'mirror' in which he would 'trap' the city, remains incomplete, unfinished. His constant deferral and displacement of his experience into the realm of memory, myth and fiction, has alienated him from the people around him, distracted him from living, from 'being in the world' and the journey into his past has failed to make his present any

less difficult, discrepant and unruly. So, Revel leaves ostensibly more wretched, weary and bitter than when he arrived.

However, one can't help but feel that redemption is possible for Revel, just not in the form he would have liked or could ever have imagined. While Revel strives to shape his experience into a tidy narrative arc and provide a legible resolution, his own hand unwittingly, radically unwrites the optimistic ends of any such traditional interpretative pursuit. Revel's diary provides a far more accurate account of a contemporary condition marked by the doubt, anxiety and uneasiness wrought by the erosion of a classical structure that, if we think through Jacques Derrida for a moment, is governed and organised around the desire to find a 'centre' or fixed origin, *teleos*, *arche*, *aletheia*⁴. Rather, in the act of writing, Revel discovers 'the play of the world and the innocence of becoming... a world of sign without fault, without truth, without origin which is offered to an active interpretation'.¹⁵ Revel may start the labyrinth in search of a centre but somewhere on the journey, with all its false hopes and dead ends, he begrudgingly comes to recognise the unruly, contradictory nature of his world, its empty signifiers and means without ends.

Notes

1. Michel Butor, *Passing Time*, (trans. Jean Stewart), Faber & Faber: London, 1961. p.242.
2. Ibid, p.35.
3. February 29th is the 'midpoint' of Revel's year in Bleston, but a date he never reaches in his diary. For Lorna Martens this date is symbolic of the unreachable, 'empty' centre or redemptive moment of Butor's novel. See Lorna Martens, 'Empty Centre and Open End: The Theme of Language in Michel Butor's *L'Emploi du Temps*', PMLA, Vol. 96, No. 1, Jan 1981, p.49–63.
4. Ibid, p.262.
5. Butor, p. 260.
6. Ibid, p.64.
7. Ibid, p.219.
8. Martens, p.52.
9. Ibid, p.241.
10. Ibid, p.114.
11. Ibid, p.48.
12. Claude Levi-Strauss as quoted in Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (1967), The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1978. p.287.
13. Jorge Luis Borges and L.S Demos, 'An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges', *Contemporary Literature*, 11, Summer 1970. p.318, also quoted in Laura R. Kubinyi, 'Defense of a Dialogue: Michel Butor's *Passing Time*', *Boundary 2*, Vol.4, No.3, Spring 1976. p.887.
14. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (1967), The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1978. p.292.
15. Ibid, p.292.