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Inscribing Distance: Narrative Strategies in James Bardon's Revolution by Night

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Abstract
In a climate of review of historical cartographies and narrative methodologies post-colonial writers have modified their fictional strategies to demonstrate diverse and relative ways of seeing and saying. In this liberation from textual imperialism the capitalised voice of English has been more properly located as 'one among others' and its authorised forms of literary expression reassessed as post-colonial writers reconsider 'not just the tradition but the episteme which underpins it'.

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Inscribing Distance: Narrative Strategies in James Bardon’s *Revolution by Night*

The European’s determined representation of reality in terms of images, the residue of living gestures, as writing, the reliquary of voices, as historical dates, the coffins of the present – all this strikes the Pintupi elders as a desolation of the spirit. What is the nature of this people who substitute disembodied signs for sounds and gestures?

Paul Carter, speaking of James Bardon’s *Revolution by Night* ¹

In a climate of review of historical cartographies and narrative methodologies post-colonial writers have modified their fictional strategies to demonstrate diverse and relative ways of seeing and saying. In this liberation from textual imperialism the capitalised voice of English has been more properly located as ‘one among others’ and its authorised forms of literary expression reassessed as post-colonial writers reconsider ‘not just the tradition but the *episteme* which underpins it’. ²

Transgressions of generic boundaries (between poetry, prose and life-writing or history and fiction) have transformed discourses and there has been new interest in ideological perspectives and intertextual spaces other than those inscribed by colonial prerogatives. The previously dominant veracities of the ‘reflectionist or mimetic model of cartography’, with its ‘self-privileging western modes of knowledge’ have been interrogated.³

In this process, the power-breaking functions of language, legend, naming and spacial appropriation have been revealed and there has been an overdue acknowledgment, consideration and representation of indigenous realities. This has its inherent dangers: an Australian historian recently reminded enthusiasts that ‘speaking for is not the same as speaking with’ and, in this society, the opportunities for indigenous people to speak out for themselves, remain circumscribed.⁴

Relativising readings and deconstructing historical fictions has not solved on-going social injustices or the protracted trauma of Aboriginal people. However, fiction is valuable as a licensed space which provides
the means of depicting cultural practices and privileging previously silenced voices. It provides the opportunity to consider the constraints of logonomic systems and provides an arena where hierarchies like those that have prevailed between history and fiction, (dichotomies of real and fictional, truth and lies) may be contested. Jane Marcus, has observed that:

If all history (or at least historiography) is a fiction, as contemporary theorists tell us, an interesting question for the literary critics is whether all fiction is history. It is easier for the literary critics to accept the new narrativity of historians and, since Foucault, the study of history as discourse. Can historians, accustomed to raiding the literature of an age for examples, accept an equal revelatory force in fiction as in events, as evidence of a lived reality?....the writing of history is all a matter of the construction of more or less plausible plots.

This argument relates specifically to the elision of women's voices from Australian history, (Marcus, like Kate Grenville's 'Joan', observes that 'when women read traditional male history...they throw up their hands at its bias and prejudice') but the view of the constructed nature of representation is echoed and confirmed by Carter's analysis of 'cultural conditions' as he defines Australia as 'a place in which meanings are not fixed but created in utterance'. In this climate, the writer of fiction is no longer confined by mimetic allegiances or single views of 'truth' and the narrational modes of contemporary writing reflect acknowledgement of diversity. The celebration of difference, without idealisation of alternatives or undervaluing inherited cultural perspectives, represents a central challenge for Australian writers.

This discussion outlines the narrative strategies employed in a remarkable fiction exploring ontological propositions in relation to cross-cultural contact. James Bardon's *Revolution by Night*, depicts indigenous people as islanded within a sea of white ignorance and disempowered by racial violence. The range of the investigation is epic and its outcomes tragic, but the novel does attempt a significant cross-cultural translation and investigation of a non-white world view. Aboriginal writers, like Sam Watson and Mudrooroo, have explored cultural and linguistic representation through fiction but Bardon, writing from the 'outside' has different agendas. He does not presume to 'speak for' but rather sets out about the limitations of his culture's logocentricity and attempts to find a language that might convey the struggle to understand, acknowledge, dignify and prioritize being rather than saying: a communication system which is completely foreign to his narrator. This is a text about access rather than authority but I would argue that it does not represent a neo-colonial appropriation of Aboriginal language or lore but rather offers a revelation of different ways of seeing.
*Revolution by Night* enacts a journey inland both physically and metaphorically and the mapping of topographies of place and mind are integral. The narrative’s structure, content and mode of expression is designed to emulate and celebrate ‘the aesthetic and compositional properties of a Central Australian sand painting.’ The narrative has 21 short sections and addenda which includes:

- Notes for an Imaginary Language
- A Monograph ‘Interior – an analysis of Australian art’
- and a [fictionalised] fragment of Charles Sturt’s visions.

The narrator of *Revolution by Night*, is Professor Jack Terrence Dutruc, a survivor of the Williora Massacres, who eventually commits suicide but leaves a diary which represents one aspect of the journey of the text. Given the skin-name, *Tjungerrayi*, by the Aboriginal people, he is entrusted to record their story, ‘so all the white men will know’ (p.206). For reader and writer this is difficult territory as the monologues and instructive dialogues are patterned by the hesitations, anxieties, silences and difficulties of translation of the witness striving to encompass the ‘fullness of gesture’ of another system of language and knowledge:

I transcribe and I itemize the signs upon my notebook and ask how the relationship between the signs made the story talk. Billy Titus-Mindah is sort of growling and wheezing at once about how each sign can mean this, then mean that, it can have two or three meanings depending on where everything else speaks. When it speaks here, he whispers, when it speaks there, when I come and add this place to that. No time in the story, I try to say, yet he won’t talk about time, he doesn’t want to know where it’s at, spreading out more spaces before me so as to say what the story said. I am trying again, marking in my notebook the story-lines which he is singing, *uiri*, the names of, because sing means name ‘Same word’, he says, he trickles his fingers about in the shape of the cave he has told me of and seems to waste his thumb upon the incising now. The water-man emerges out of his song, he says, like this, *You see*, this, and he dabs his thumb into the direction he is singing, where the track went in the story he has brought to me this afternoon, and I understand there is no time in the story, only space, time can only be known by the names of the places over which the song goes, talking so softly you can only gradually catch their words, they are sliding their fingers upon the paper, closing their eyes as they do, and suddenly I am thinking of how I, of all the people, have brought myself here to watch them put the lie to what McDouall Stuart and Sturt thought. (p.23)

This story of the Central Deserts has historic precedents and tensions between documentation, life-writing and intellectual speculation, shape the text. Geoffrey Bardon, the author of *Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert* and *Mythscapes: Aboriginal Art of the Desert* and the brother of James Bardon, the author of *Revolution by Night*, travelled together in central Australia in the 1980’s. It was Geoffrey Bardon’s experience in
the 1970's as the art teacher who supplied western painting materials and encouraged the work of Pintupi indigenous artists in the Papunya region in the 1970's, which provided the stimulus for this fiction.\textsuperscript{11} It has been suggested that the Pintupi people, 'demoralised by their dispossession', found some dignity and incentives to produce art work, and achieved a revolution in art.\textsuperscript{12} Paternalism is countered by James Bardon's fiction which records event but foregrounds the deprivation and loss inherent in this black/white transaction. Unlike the author of \textit{Songlines}, this writer is appalled by his 'apocalyptic vision' and the narrator's view is not presented as privileged or proprietorial. Unlike Chatwin's view of a dying culture, Bardon reverses the mirror to suggest that white absence from black history is a kind of 'death' and his fiction thus turns away from established forms to revalue and re-inscribe what Sturt, with his Eurocentric view, labelled the 'far language' (p. 67).

The narrative structure is not bound by western conventions of time, space and sequentiality and it crosses between genres merging dreams, visions, recollections and diary entries. Instead its patterns echo integrative oral traditions. The prose emulates: 'the song [which] is spacial in its repetitions, because it uses its tone by affirmations, not unlike a figurative and therefore expanded sense of the literal in language' (p. 230).

There are diverse linguistic translations of painting sequences: honey ant, wind or water dreamings, ice-dreaming, special children's dreaming, naughty-possum or Yam spirit dreamings, each with their varied tones and modulations. These lyrical passages contrast with Sturt's self-conscious highly wrought meditations about the 'veiled continent' or the linguistically distant and debased utterances of those countering black knowledge with white violence. There are also hallucinatory renditions of drunken distortions of reality.

In terms of structure, the narrative works backwards, or perhaps more accurately, revolves, simultaneously, from the most 'surreal' but regrettably 'real' experience of the Williora massacre, with its nightmare evocation of colour and sound being re-envisioned by the painters' singing, through to the abstract dissertation which accounts for these events retrospectively Stephen Mueke suggests that:

Bardon does not want his readers to see what he describes, he wants to trace out the line of his meaning physically, ...by reciting his words aloud, perhaps by breathing the same long deep breaths as his prose breathes.\textsuperscript{13}

Muecke re-uses Geoffrey Bardon's term 'haptic art' to define the progression from eye (a visualization with equates with distance) to experience, implying closeness or identification), to suggest the characteristics of Dutruc's conversations with 'the makers'.\textsuperscript{14} For
example, meaning is extra-lingual in this transcription of the honey-ant dreaming where the syntax, soft sibilances and kinaesthetics of the prose, evoke sensation enacting the distance between representational art and transformational depiction:

There are night sun-bursts of voices to that where the children sit and tell very quietly how the honey-ant made the sand, how the stippling and hole-shadow, the dotted shadowed balls which set a ground firmly about are the small balls of sand the honey-ant makes, and then the children touch softly by forefinger and thumb, the index of each circle crossing the arc, where you see their fingers drawing themselves about softly, where children’s fingers move as they sing, calling the darkness out of the signs so they can see nothing before the signs are put in. And I see the paintings again, the way the eye sees, and the soft outlines of the silences between words saying the little stories of the animals they have seen, because those animals were sleeping now without shutting their children’s eyes. ...and I say ‘What ngari, what that?’, pointing at the round balls of sand they hold up for me in the warm whisper-filled dark. ‘What ngari me?’ I say, and they, ‘Honey-ant here, here,’ and point at the physical sign of the earth. ‘You mean the honey-ant makes the painting?’ I say, and someone whispers back, ‘Becomes the honey-ant, becomes’. [my italics] (p. 38)

Barry Hill has claimed that:

Our culture’s distinctive cast of mind is to separate from the object in order to know it rather than identify with it as subject in order to understand it and the larger scheme of things.¹⁵

In the monograph entitled ‘Interior’ which investigates ‘hieroglyphs in Australian Art’ Bardon has Dutruc suggest that a further difficulty in cross-cultural relations is that: ‘we are culturally set in such a way that the visual representation of our consciousness is understood as being quite different from and in many instances in opposition to the worded idea’ (p. 227). Bardon also explains that:

The form of the hieroglyph is in the worded image or image as word, the very thing-in-itself after which so many painters in the western tradition have sought. The paintings, as transcriptions of sand-paintings, or body or churunga inscriptions, which themselves are transliterations of the sand-painting forms, seem to be both representations and embodiments of matter. (p. 225)

The paradox of word as medium but inhibitor of identification is apparent in Bardon’s text. Walter Ong considered a similar phenomenon in Interfaces of the Word where he analysed the consequences of the print medium’s visual emphasis and the loss of sound/sense dimensions of orality: the distance between mimesis and irony.¹⁶ This is also the province of post structuralist theory – determining the linguistic frames through which we construct reality – but the debate between the prioritization of orality and literacy is extended here by the analogue of transformation and by an inversion of presumptions about the colonizing of the spoken word. Here the
sign is not merely spoken or written, but *lived* in the synthesis of speech, body, and art.

Bardon cites the acknowledged, but still salient demonstration of different ways of seeing, in the European reliance upon a horizon – 'the European way to feel that the landscape had form'.\(^{17}\) He suggests that if the view of the world and its configurations is mapped in another way, seen from above, horizonless, scripted by hieroglyphs which not only indicate but embody meaning, this represents 'an affinity with the land' and a radical re-thinking about metaphysical relationships:

The human body is the only structural horizon in the sand paintings and as such is internal to the observer and therefore unexpressed in the designs ...It is as if one were looking down upon the earth beneath one's feet and imagining the designed and patterned earth as an immense centrifuge. (p. 225)

Aptly, the structure of the narrative is therefore not linear but centrifugal, 'revolving' from the death of Tjapaltjari who has, at the outset, the dreamings which are then created through the narrative in his hands. This 'history of creation', is painted in the sands of the desert, on bodies, turungas and ultimately on the fifty foot scroll which culminates in a depiction of the extremely potent night dreaming entitled' Katjala Wananu: Son after the father', which has the 'unspeakable' power to 'take back all the white man's towns and cattle stations' but is as yet unfinished (p. 207):

It was such a titanic journey full of hundreds of great chapter-doors or windows along the inward-invocations of the painting and each huge window of a track or dreaming seemed to speak to and of the main in a brooding, sinuous track massing to a thousand miles. And it was full of such cruelty and power that you could feel the danger well up about the sometimes crouching, sometimes squatting men now the making had begun. (p. 204)

*Revolution by Night* might be described as a 'singing into being' of events in need of re-inscription in a white community at risk if it fails to recognise that its way of seeing might be, from an indigenous perspective, blind. This text questions the very basis of European thought and sets it in a time frame whereby it becomes merely one transient picture in an ancient song line. It challenges the 'cult of forgetfulness' that obliterated black history and offers a demonstration of this culture's simultaneous life and art\(^{18}\) Dutric, the outsider, insists that:

They are a captive nation and they understand this. ...They measure their enslavement by the lifetime of any ordinary man they say now and four such men have been born and died as children of a father since the captivity has begun. It is not enough to have made all the seen earth from what was before unseen, and they know this. (p. 26)
In these ways the mapping/making/creation (story-telling, history-making, truth seeking) devices of two cultures are juxtaposed. Sturt’s journey is mapped by time, space and deprivation. In contrast, the Aboriginal song-journey brings into being an ancient oral legacy embracing a history of existence, the law, culture and knowledge of forebears – a huge creative space suspended in a kind of living hell defined by the word ‘captivity’. Barry Hill, notes that European ‘maps wrote out local knowledge’ but it was the whole language with its attendant ideologies which obliterated definition. ‘They aridly appropriate ‘new’ ground as distinct from a fruitful encounter with territory more than likely owned by someone else. Such a map tends towards dogma, a relic of a once lived thing’ (p. 74). In direct contrast between the dead past and the live present, we are told that: ‘In the desert hieroglyphs there is a sense of becoming’ (p. 227). In this text, Sturt is enough of a visionary to be troubled by the limitations of his maps and the premise of ‘form emerging from formlessness’ is questioned:

In my dreams I saw that great map upon the wall of the house in which I slept, and on the map were inscribed pedigrees, time-grids, interior-clouds all circumscribing the older worlds and the map was a kind of mirror, of a blindness, which I could not quite understand, the dream said, for recorded history and ordinary form had long since left whatever now remained. The exactitude of truth had quite vanished here, and what the hand drew was not what it saw. And this is an unconsolated place, the map said, and what dies in part must always deny the conscience of the act, and therefore become the whole. (p.15)

In ‘The Approach to the Night Continent’ we are told that:

Sturt had written in the margins of his notes about symbolic form the words, ‘Revolution by night’, and beside the words, ‘Therefore the form is its very lack of certainty or shape. It is strange to understand that all possible meanings may be exhausted by what you may see. How you cannot symbolize that which has no form’. And then he wrote of a great night-book he was entering in, in which there was no human order in the words. That he understood that he read a very silence in order to see that sand and stone, and it was all like the Devil telling you what darkness your flesh had made. (p. 21)

This narrative suggests that we have played out the premise of ‘form emerging from formlessness’, that European ‘blindness’ or failure to see seems only nameable in terms antithetical to those already used in describing creation - hence the western recourse to dualist terminology and the summoning up of the devil as the epitome of darkness. The text suggests a stirring in the desert, that, a revolution is at hand, as another reading may now supercede this version/ vision of creation. What we are left with is a post-christian (or prior understanding) of Satan’s fall. He informs Sturt that: ‘you are at the coastline of that
unimagined land of Sacred Names Written in Sand that the night travellers might believe his true death came with his own eyes’ (p. 201). Paul Carter observes that: ‘Sturt’s true confrontation was not with landscape but with the figure of Death; but Death was not a feature of the country but a mirror of his own metaphysical enclosure’ (p. 84). Thus framed, the ‘non-pastoral’ land fails to offer something of value to those seeking other than what is there. While the white men search for water, the Aboriginal painters explain that the ‘sand is everything’ but this truth and link with the land is also lost to western eyes. Sturt notes that: ‘the Night Continent was ... like an error in the imagination of the world. ...you never see this night continent but only what it is not...’ (pp. 66-67) and the further he explores (geographically and introspectively), the less able he is to equate his language with what is seen or understood: ‘I have whispered to my journal that we have become men painting a landscape from another world’ (p. 115).

In the narrative’s post-script Sturt decides that in the face of this reality a new language is necessary to facilitate seeing. What begins as a demonstration of radical difference and culturally isolated visions momentarily ‘lightens’ to admit a small potential – a realisation that understanding may not have been entirely obliterated by the learned cast of thought which has previously inhibited sight. The diarist begins again like a child undoing ‘blindness’:

So that I made each letter in a kind of alphabet in the shape of stones, clouds, trees, sand-drifts now, sometimes like the exact shape of the object we saw. Sometimes made greater or abridged by shouts in that dark, like some story told to you long ago about animals which could not speak unless they were seen. Interiors of great stars, like unspoken words, all hidden in Night, where an original language was, and possessing me for dreams. (p. 217)

This narrative is nothing less than an attempt to articulate and review the parameters of European discovery, the imaginative horizons whereby we define ‘our’ world and the language and style of fictions whereby such knowledge has been perpetuated. It is also an attempt to right an imbalance – to re-value alternative ways of seeing which pre-date the intellectual constructs of our age.

When the story is complete there is an abstract dissertation, at a safely encoded academic distance, but this adjunct to the preceding narrative does not authorize but contextualize. It completes the author’s thesis by demonstrating its distance from the life of the text. While it serves an interpretative function the scholarly words now seem ‘foreign’ as the narrative has already embodied and prefigured it. The authority invested in both worlds is, therefore, set side by side.

Except for the brief moment when the explorer/visionary reaches the limits of his language and is forced to consider an alternative expression for the world he encounters, Bardon’s narrative illustrates
subject/object distinctions and the in-between states of those ‘travelling towards the other’ but does not foresee reconciliation. Communities remain isolated by their readings of place and each other and language does not wholly provide an agency of communication of anything other than inscribed distance. The monograph ‘interior’ considers Cassirer’s understanding of the provisional nature of language as a means for ‘discovering rather than representing’ truth and articulates a need for:

an idiomatic eye, one which temporizes words through a spatial naming by form. If the hieroglyphs do nothing else they do this. This is Goethe’s ‘exact sensory imagination’. We should be shaping sensible matter by letting its form shape us, thereby acting out the original dreams of mankind to be in harmony with what we presume to understand. (p. 226)

While this fiction mirrors cartographic practices, it deliberately avoids the arrogance of documented certainties:

The implicit claims of maps to accuracy are undercut by the fact that they are embedded in a continually transformative discourse, and thus tend to utalize obsolete forms. A network of classical and medieval myths are found in explorer’ constructions of Australia and especially in the metaphoric references to mapping within the text...Australia needs to be examined in terms of Europe’s ‘othering’ of the rest of the world. 

and in adopting a ‘transformative discourse; perhaps testifies to Wilson Harris’s view of the potential of new fictions as a means of reinscription:

on the surface post-colonial texts may deal with divisions of race and culture which are apparently obdurately determined, [but] each text contains the seeds of ‘community’ which as they germinate and grow in the mind of the reader, crack asunder the apparently inescapable dialectic of history. 

It is probably not a coincidence that a recent, visiting exhibition of surrealist art commemorating the work of European writers and philosophers, whose art reflected their interest in the subconcos workings of the human mind, was called ‘Surrealism: Revolution by Night’. If Surrealism caused a major ‘revolution’ in the way of seeing and re-interpreting the world from within a western perspective, then the Revolution depicted or foretold in this narrative – the entirely different way of representing, viewing, reading and recording the world – from an Aboriginal perspective – is of a larger scale and far more revolutionary in its implications.
NOTES

3. ibid, p.116.
7. James Bardon, Revolution by Night (Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, 1991). All further references are for this edition and are included in the text.
8. Huggins, op. cit. p.43. Huggins warns of the general inadequacy of white literary representations of black 'speaking' as demeaning or exaggerated but Bardon avoids these pitfalls in his representation.
10. I am indebted to Professor Stephen Muecke of the University of Technology, Sydney who referred me to Barry Hill's article 'Mantric Maps: lost and found' in Voices 1991, pp.74-84 and his own article 'Haptic Visions: Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation', Agenda No. 33, September, 1993, pp.21-23.
11. Carter, Overland op. cit., p.83. Carter notes that Bardon has another story to tell: not of a burgeoning Renaissance, but of impending apocalypse.
12. Hill, op. cit., p.80. In 'Mantric Maps' speaks of Geoff Bardon as 'a kind of angelic midwife to a cultural re-birth' but later qualifies this view with the recognition of the contrary aspects of white appropriation of Aboriginal cultural artefacts/ knowledge.
14. Muerke, op. cit., The thesis on representation is more elegant than this brief reference indicates.
17. Ashcroft, op. cit., p.41. Bill Ashcroft reviews this 'Excess' in De-scribing Empire where he notes that: 'crucially the horizon itself is created by language. As Wittgenstein (1976:56) says, 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world...the model of the horizon also links space and time because the contextual horizon initiates a process of traversal by the act of consciousness. This linking of space and time leads to the further conclusion that consciousness is language.' The latter claim is contentious.
19. This may be a further reading of 'the son after the father'.
20. Carter, Overland, op. cit., p.84.
21. Simon Ryan, 'Inscribing the Emptiness' in De-scribing Empire p.117.