



Special Collections

Clark Blaise

Biocritical Essay

by

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Clark Blaise is a master of a form on the border of autobiography and fiction--what he calls "'personal' fiction".¹ When you read the first six published books, what is striking is the extent to which they all seem to be part of one larger, ongoing work. Ranging in form from short stories and novellas to novels and a travel memoir, these works create a unified Blaisian world. At the centre of each fiction is a perceiving self, engaged in remembering, inventing, imagining, and presenting the conditions of his own existence. Blaise's own life supplies many of the raw materials of place and incident, but remembered situations are transformed and reshaped anew from one story to the next.² Typically the stories are told in the first person by a male narrator who looks back on significant events of his life, trying to make sense of things. This narrator is always an outsider, partly because his Canadian parents are never quite assimilated into American life. However, the most significant fact about the parents is their difference from each other. They represent the antipodes of the son's imagination. The triangle formed by the perceiving me-character and his parents is a recurring design element in this ongoing Blaisian work.

But what is the reader's experience of reading a Clark Blaise fiction? In Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, readers talk about the kinds of book they would like to read--for example, "The novels that I prefer...are those that make you feel uneasy from the very first page"--and the very next chapter is the opening chapter of just that sort of fiction. What sort of description would call forth a Clark Blaise book? Perhaps "The book I'm looking for is one that creates the texture of a life poised on the lip of a volcano" or "The books that interest me present a self constantly re-inventing himself out of the givens of his own experience".

The givens cannot stand on their own, of course. Take the most incontrovertible facts of a life: time and place of birth. "I was born in Fargo, North Dakota, in 1940" is the first sentence of the autobiographical fragment "Memories of Unhousement" in *Resident Alien*.³ The flat understatedness of this beginning suggests an

unselfconscious assertion of identity and belonging.⁴ However, it soon becomes apparent that Blaise is never unselfconscious: sentences that sound casual are the result of deliberate craft. Identity, in particular, cannot be taken for granted but must be strenuously achieved, as Blaise suggested in an interview with Geoff Hancock:

Anyone who led a life as tenuous as I did, fraught with almost daily evidence of evanescence, is obviously going to be concerned with establishing a place and a name and an identity for himself that he could not have established in life. I did not ever have a sense of place, or belonging, in my life. So I had to create it, fabricate it, in my art. That's why my stories and novels have such a strong genealogical impulse. I don't think I have ever written anything in which I did not in some way say, "I was born in this place or that place." Or, "My mother or father or grandparents were born in this place." This is all a kind of fraud. I was born in a town that I've never seen. I moved from Fargo, North Dakota, when I was six months old, and I've never been back.⁵

Blaise has to date published two collections of short stories, *A North American Education* (1973) and *Tribal Justice* (1974); two novels, *Lunar Attractions* (1979) and *Lusts* (1983); one autobiographical travel memoir, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977); one book in which short stories are sandwiched between autobiographical fragments, *Resident Alien* (1986); and one work of journalism, *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987). With the exception of this last book, the entire body of work is concerned initially with finding or inventing an identity and later with deconstructing an identity. Again and again, Blaise goes back to the essential experiences of his life and rearticulates them, reshapes them, dreams them over again.

Reading the fictions and the autobiography, we are confronted by a sensibility preoccupied with interpretation. Blaise has taken on the hermeneut's task of penetrating the surface of things and revealing the secret, concealed meanings. "A writer", Blaise has told Hancock in an interview, "is always trying to suggest the other side of things".⁶ And later in the same interview, "[My] stories...tend towards a kind of confirmation and towards the discovery of that which you wanted to keep hidden, and to a kind of confirmation of what you hoped was not true".⁷ In the Blaisian world, events seem random and lives are subject to chance episodes of pain and violence. As Blaise put it in an interview with me in November 1988,

I want to write a fiction which is sufficiently broad to contain random, chaotic, accidental qualities. There's nothing more moving in fiction to me than the sense of an authentic randomness. I want to create a fiction that is sufficiently broad so that it can contain the notion of all of the accidents and contradictability that is part of life itself.⁸

But the typical Blaisian persona is driven to interpret--to find the hidden meaning in what seems like randomness, to push toward some terrifying peripeteia.

The first accident to be interpreted has to do with the mystery of birth and of origins, the theme of many of his stories. The "only Canadian writer born in Fargo, North Dakota" (RA 165), Blaise has explored the

significance of his "accidental placement inside an emblematically Canadian family" (RA 175). A recurrent episode in the stories and novels is the character who has a sense in early adolescence that his identity has been tampered with in some profound way when he discovers that his family name is not what he had always supposed: not T. B. Doe but Thibidault in "The Thibidault Stories" in *A North American Education*; not Desjardins but Gardner in "The March" in *Tribal Justice*; not Porter but Carrier in *Resident Alien*. And, we might add, not Blaise but Blais.

A related mystery is his parents' apparently incongruous relationship. Blaise's French-Canadian father, Leo Romeo Blais/Blaise--furniture salesman and long distance traveller--was handsome, extroverted, charming, and untrustworthy. Described in *Resident Alien* as one of the "dark, self-destructive, violent sociopaths" (p.27), this father is the prototype for the fictional fathers in Blaise's stories, the tattooed ex-boxers and wrestlers who like sexy women and flashy cars. The father represents glamorous, untamed potency. Says Blaise, "it was a legacy I wanted to claim. Myself as gipsy, as criminal, outcast" (RA 39). In contrast, Anne Marion Vanstone, his upright, resolute English-Canadian mother from Wawanesa, Manitoba, was one of the "bright, confident, assertive, informed people" (RA 27). The daughter of a man of substance--a prairie doctor who later became the driving force behind an insurance company in Western Canada--she graduated in 1927 in art from Wesley College (now the University of Winnipeg), taught school in various prairie towns, and in the early 30's became a student of design at the Bauhaus. "To me it's an extraordinary thought", said Blaise, "that she was this girl from prairie Canada in the midst of the Bauhaus studying interior design with high functional modernism".⁹ Fleeing Germany in 1933 when Hitler came to power, she went to Prague, then to London, and then home to Canada in 1937. Called back to Montreal to be head decorator at Eaton's, she met Leo Blais, furniture salesman on the floor. This was the accidental encounter that transformed her life and set up the tortured relationship examined in many of Blaise's fictions.

Interpreting his own life much as one would a literary text, Blaise looks for the one event that gives meaning and structure to the whole. He finds it in his parents' divorce when he was nineteen. This event is also offered as a key to interpreting the stories. It accounts, he says, for the continued presence of child and adolescent characters in the fictions: "I am dependent on a world made explicable by my mismatched parents in their desperate marriage. So long as they are together, all things are possible....I write from an undisclosed adult perspective at a point in time after their break-up, looking back to a time before it happened, when the potential for divorce, the *logic* for divorce, the *imperative* for divorce, was temporarily set aside" (RA 12). The family situation is a microcosm for the opposition of cosmic forces held perilously, for a time, in some sort of balance. The stormy relationship between his parents seems to have brought into alignment for Blaise a series of polarities: French and English; glamour and reliability; the life of the body and the life of the mind; the raw and the cooked.¹⁰ Blaise specializes in writing about a character divided in his loyalties. This character feels pulled by the opposed forces that are personified by his mother and his father, but he withholds final commitment. In fact, the typical Blaise character is a compulsive border-crosser.

Blaise himself has been a man on the move for most of his life. Most commentators on Blaise's work have remarked upon the themes of uprootedness, dislocation, and alienation, which they relate to Blaise's own experience. That move from Fargo when Blaise was six months old was the first of many: he moved thirty times before the eighth grade and attended twenty-five different schools. He spent his childhood in Alabama, Georgia, and central Florida, later in the American midwest, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh, but always returned to his mother's family in Winnipeg whenever his father "ran out of work, or was run out of work, or town" (RA 167). So more polarities are added to Blaise's experience, ready to be exploited later in the stories:

swampy south and cold north; all-night journeys following maps across the great American desert and the homecoming; seedy disreputability and established social position. The cardinal points of the world of a Blaise story were established early on.

The first was Florida. Blaise spent the years from six to ten in the swamplands of north-central Florida soaking up images of a fecund, watery world teeming with monstrous life: swamps full of alligators and primitive lungfish; social orders full of nightmarish cruelty and legendary poverty. He says, "And so the images of the unconscious were planted early and privately by the peculiar wealth of southern poverty, and I grew to believe in the coexistence, or the simultaneity, of visible and occult worlds: duplicities, masks, hidden selves, discarded languages, altered names, things not being what they seemed" (RA 14). Fertile, raw, and unevolved, the Florida that Blaise recreates as the settings for many of his stories is a place of buzzing insects, purple-black muck, and underground lakes--it is the primitive and unhumanized.

Another cardinal point is Canada. In *Resident Alien*, Blaise recalls how his mother would tell him stories of an heroic girlhood, walking to school in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, at sixty-three below zero: "Down in musty Florida, she'd told me the story of walking on crusty snow that sounded like avalanches, of flinching from footsteps two blocks away, of tasting blood down her throat as capillaries exploded" (RA 27). Blaise remembers coming to Canada for refuge when he was five, following an assault charge against his father in Pittsburgh, and again when he was ten, following one of his father's frequent business failures. Canada is associated with the houses of his Winnipeg grandparents and uncle: large, formal establishments with libraries and guest rooms, built for prosperous, accomplished people. Later he associated Canada with the voice of the CBC that crackled over the airwaves, speaking "of continuity, assured values, a unified voice" (RA 29).

In his stories and autobiographical statements, Blaise describes a child with an insatiable appetite for facts who is apprenticing as a polymath. The narrator of *Lunar Attractions* is typical: "Fish guides, bird guides, atlases, insect books, and star charts all fascinated me in my first ten years. I was helpless before those lists. I stayed in bed one entire summer attempting to memorize them all".¹¹ The most important book for David Greenwood in *Lunar Attractions* (LA 31), for Frankie Thibidault in "The Salesman's Son Grows Older" (NAE 150), and for Blaise himself in "The Voice of Unhousement" (RA 10) is the atlas. Starting by memorizing facts--names of countries, capitals, important geographical features--this child went on to creating his own personal mythology. Here is David Greenwood, describing his godlike power over his imagined world:

But now I was only beginning. I started with familiar continents or with the outlines of ancient empires, and I carved them into new divisions....Then I abandoned the familiar continents all together. I created countries of my own: oceans, rivers, and mountains of my own; developed their own cities and coastal towns, networks of road and rail; drew for hours with ruler and hard pencil the city maps....Gradually these new maps replaced the old, the "real" ones, on my walls and in my affections....[Then I would bomb them.] That was also me, dropping a fountain pen on my creation from a few inches above my elaborate chart. (LA 34)

It appears that Blaise the writer deals similarly with the facts of his own experience, sometimes using these

facts without much change and sometimes cavalierly transforming them into new imagined patterns. Blaise went to high school in Pittsburgh, for example, and so did Norman Dyer in "Grids and Doglegs" in *Tribal Justice*, David Greenwood in *Lunar Attractions*, Richard Durgin in *Lusts*, and Phil Porter in "Identity" in *Resident Alien*. The gritty industrial landscape of Pittsburgh is the setting for a cluster of experiences represented in different ways from book to book: the retail furniture business with its insider language of the floor, markets, territory, traffic, and the road; Pirates games, batting averages, and third string teams in seedy stadiums; clubs for bright adolescents who get together to play chess and discuss archaeology, anthropology, and astronomy; occult signals from distant cities pulled from the airwaves by rabbit-ears and directional antennae; sexual discovery with girls like Wanda Lusiak in *Lusts*, "the kind of girl who married early".

For Blaise, escape from Pittsburgh in 1957 came in the form of admission to Denison University in Granville, Ohio. While still a geology major in his sophomore year he took a writing course from Paul Bennett (to whom his fifth book *Lusts* is dedicated). Writing "Broward Dowdy" as his last story for the writing course was decisive. He switched his major to English and began his apprenticeship to the craft of writing. The same dedication once given to learning the names of fish, birds, and stars, he began to devote to literature: he resolved to read a book a day, he started a book reviewing column for the weekly paper, he co-edited two campus literary magazines to which he contributed his own stories and poems, and he won campus writing awards. What Blaise has since called "the luckiest move in my writing life" (RA 19) followed graduation from Denison, with acceptance in 1961 to the summer writing class in creative writing offered by Bernard Malamud at Harvard. Blaise entered the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa in February, 1962. The first day in Iowa City he met the Calcutta writer, Bharati Mukherjee, who had come from India to attend the Writers' Workshop--"so formal, so proper, so beautiful, I thought of her name as Miss Missmukherjee" (RA 24). In September 1963, he married her. Blaise graduated from Iowa in 1964 with a M.F.A., having written as his thesis a short story collection called "Thibidault et fils". By the fall of 1964, Blaise seemed to be settling into the life of an American academic and writer: he was married, had an infant son Bart Anand, and had started his first teaching job at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. But some unassimilated residue of Canadianness inherited from his parents realigned his life and set him on a new course that lasted for fifteen years. Later he said, "I don't know what it is that made Canada so real to me that it became a compulsion to go back to it. But in a sense, in going back, I reversed the flow of history. I did something that an immigrant shouldn't do".¹²

Blaise came to Montreal in 1966 and remained for thirteen years until 1978, the longest time he has ever stayed in one place. In the first year in Montreal he taught night classes at McGill and wrote a second version of his novel "North America", extant parts of which manuscript are held in the Calgary collection.¹³ Later he taught modern fiction and creative writing at Sir George Williams (Concordia) while Bharati pursued a parallel career, teaching English at McGill and writing fiction.¹⁴ Their second child, Bernard Sudhir, was born. Montreal, Blaise says, took "the place of my warring parents" (RA 30), presumably by providing a similar locus of opposites held together under pressure. The city seemed to empower Blaise as a writer: "A new kind of unforced, virtually transcribed story (new for me, at least) was begging to be written....I'd never been so open to story, so avid for context" (RA 32).

Moreover, Montreal gave Blaise a sense that he had not experienced in the United States of being part of a community of writers, of what Margaret Laurence has called one's "tribe" of writers.¹⁵ Blaise became a member of the Montreal Story Teller Fiction Performance Group, started by John Metcalf in late 1970.¹⁶ The storytellers consisting of Hugh Hood, John Metcalf, Clark Blaise, Ray Smith, and Raymond Fraser gave their first reading "on a fearsomely cold afternoon in February, 1971".¹⁷ During the five years that the group existed, they gave more than fifty readings in universities, colleges, CEGEPS, high schools, and bookstores. John Metcalf recalls the long

car journeys to and from readings as "taken up with Hugh and Clark swapping baseball trivia... Clark often detailed yet another financial reversal. On the day he told us his house had burned down, we all, I think, accepted the news as somehow unexciting and *inevitable*".¹⁸ The Story Tellers promised to do their best to make their stories both interesting and related to the lives of the hearers. Blaise often read one of his Montreal stories, "Eyes", which Hugh Hood recalls "used to fascinate audiences in such settings, especially the menacing closing lines concluding, "and then your neighbours would turn upon you". These listeners obviously appreciated the contrast between what Clark was describing, and his quiet, neat, self-contained personal appearance".¹⁹ Further describing reading style, Hood notes:

We all read rather effectively. Of the other four, the one whom I'd least have expected to be a success on the platform was Clark Blaise, but he was an amazingly persuasive reader. He insinuated his histrionics, rather than allowing you to see that he was acting the story out. He would stand there in dark, unobtrusive clothes, looking what he is, a grave, supernally intelligent artist, and enthrall the audience by some recital of a series of terrific disasters, never raising his voice, but managing to chill everybody's imagination very sufficiently.²⁰

Blaise's work was first published in Canada as part of Clark Irwin's anthology *New Canadian Writing*, 1968.²¹ Blaise's Introduction is remarkable for its apologetic tone (It begins, "It is easier to criticize these stories than to explain or defend them") and for the elaborate interpretation that Blaise provides of his own stories. For example:

In each an adult voice of unspecified age and circumstance describes a test that he failed years earlier, and the deeper chaos that has resulted. Each narrator has struggled for enlightenment or recognition: for a living history with a meaning, a tolerant regionalism, a compromise with official power, and each has been deceived. The failure stems not from a lack of nerve or ambition or courage or even intelligence...but rather from a sudden contact with infinity....These are stories, however, about final visions and about men with only passing claims to promise and potency. It is the hint of unfathomable complexity, the insolent infinity that defeats our humanity, that interests me more than the delineation of individual character.²²

Blaise had been writing for almost fifteen years by the time he published his first collections of stories, *A North American Education* (1973) and *Tribal Justice* (1974). These two volumes are interconnected in various complicated ways, both in terms of the history of their writing and in terms of their themes and concerns. Most of the stories in *Tribal Justice* were written considerably earlier than the stories in *A North American Education*. Blaise has said that the second version of "North America", written in Montreal in 1968, was the "Ur-manuscript to *North American Education* and to parts of *Tribal Justice*".²³ A single manuscript containing many of the stories in the first two books was rejected by various Canadian and American publishers, who all gave the same response: the stories were good, but too literary to be commercially successful.²⁴ Published eventually by Doubleday Canada, the two collections never became bestsellers but were critical successes, got onto reading lists of Canadian literature courses, and established Clark Blaise as a distinguished writer of short fiction.

In these two books, central characters variously called Norman Dyer, Paul Keeler, and Frankie Thibidault present facets of the composite Blaisian character that readers have since come to recognize. This character with his Florida childhood, Pittsburgh adolescence, and Montreal adulthood looks back, with an elegiac sense of loss, at significant moments of experience. The tone of mourning can be heard, often at the end of stories, as the narrator draws attention to his awareness of "everything else around us crumbling into foolishness" (TJ 104), for example: "I who live in dreams have suffered something real"²⁵ or "I'm still a young man, but many things have gone for good" (NAE 161). The title story of *A North American Education* ends with a celebration of lost innocence: a fragile but triumphant moment of closeness with the father when the narrator is very young. Although an offshore hurricane is ready to strike, the narrator

Frankie Thibidault remembers that it was "the best day of fishing we'd ever had, and we walked hand in hand for the last time, talking excitedly, dodging coconuts, power lines, and shattered glass, feeling brave and united in the face of the storm. My father and me. What a day it was, what a once-in-a-lifetime day it was" (NAE 184).

The stories are not so much plots as they are arrangements of materials held together by a human voice or presence. A juxtaposition of details achieves significance in relation to some cataclysmic and transforming event. Many stories contrast two time periods--the time before and the time after the central character's recognition of an unnamable horror. Sometimes the character, while still a child, is put into the role of eavesdropper or peeping tom and learns something about his parents that shakes his sense of identity. At other times, the event triggering recognition of the terror beneath the surface may be an encounter with the sub-human world of insects, leeches, or lungfish--disturbing evidence of the intractable presence of something raw, primitive, unhumanized. In "Extractions and Contractions", a father notices "glistening shapes staggering from the milky foam" and thinks, "*My child has roaches*, his belly is teeming, full of bugs, a plague of long brown roaches is living inside him, thriving on our neglect" (NAE 56).

Although the first two books deal mostly with the Florida, Pittsburgh, and Montreal experiences, one story in *A North American Education* points to India as a source of material--a source that becomes increasingly important in Blaise's work. "Going to India" centres on the narrator's intense uneasiness as he prepares to go to India and meet his wife's Brahmanical family. The story opens with the image of a child on a raft plunging over Niagara. India, it is suggested, will be a similar experience of terror and transformation.²⁶ This idea is given fuller development in Blaise's third book, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977).²⁷ Part 1 written by Blaise and Part 2 written by Bharati Mukherjee provide contrasting perspectives on the family's experiences spending a sabbatical year in India in 1973-4.

The shaping theme in Blaise's section of *Days and Nights* is the expectation of India as a place that turns the psyche inside out. Part 1 begins with details that indicate readiness for transformation. Between December and April of 1973, Blaise fell on the ice and broke his left hand; the babysitter started a fire that burned down the rented house along with Clark's and Bharati's manuscripts, their furniture, Indian paintings, rugs, two thousand books, gerbils, and rows of avocado plants; and their new Volvo was destroyed in a multiple car accident. In Part II, Bharati connects these mishaps: "Going to India was Clark's idea. I was surprised by his enthusiasm....India, I warned, would be the fourth and fatal accident" (DNC 168). Blaise, on the other hand, regarded India as a necessary test. He told John Metcalf in an interview before he left on April 23, 1973, "I'm on my way now for a year in India to write a book that will show me I can do it [write a novel] now--or never".²⁸

Blaise's part of *Days and Nights in Calcutta* was not that novel, but it does have many earmarks of a novel: richly textured settings; a variety of different character types brought to life through telling detail; the depiction of cultural differences; an overarching design that holds in place the wealth of detail; and a perceptive centre of consciousness who registers his responses to selected events. As Blaise remarked to Barry Cameron, "Days and Nights...was a novel for me, very much a non-fiction novel, with a clear sense of myself-as-character, making me a little more naive than I was, a little more priggish than I am, in order to, I hope, create a believable transformation of character by the end".²⁹ Blaise-as-character is shown confronting, with delight, frustration, and bafflement, the confusion and intensity of India. He says, "I felt engulfed by enough raw significance at every moment to drive me mad" (DNC 151).

For someone with Blaise's compulsion to interpret and give shape to the raw material of experience, India presents the ultimate challenge. India, says Bharati at the beginning of her part of the book, "is full of uninterpreted episodes; there is no one to create heroes and define our sense of loss, or right and wrong, tragedy and buffoonery. Events have no necessary causes; behavior no inevitable motive. Things simply *are*, because that is their nature" (DNC 168). But reading Blaise's part of *Days and Night*, we are in the presence of an extremely intelligent narrator whose interpretive activity constantly strives to discover in the confusion some kind of shaped significance. Each specific detail is chosen and placed to illustrate, clarify, or explain some emotion, some aspect of Indian life. The contrast between the approaches taken by the two authors can be illustrated by an episode in a story in Bharati Mukherjee's collection *Darkness*. The wife Ratna serves her cashew-lamb pilaf to dinner guests and begins to tell "hesitant anecdotes about pickpockets and beggars" seen on a recent holiday, but after dinner her husband Graham will "shape and reshape the tropical confusion", showing slides that extract from the "chaotic greenery...some definitive order".³⁰

The next book was a novel, a form in which Blaise had long said he wanted to write. However, *Lunar Attractions* actually reads like an interlocking collection of short stories centred on the same character. Narrator David Greenwood reconstructs, from an adult vantage point, the formation of his identity in terms of his relation to his parents, his response to school politics, his initiation into sexuality, and his development as a writer. So *Lunar Attractions* is, among other things, a *künstlerroman*, an account of the education of an artist.

The book appeared in 1979, became a critical success, and won the fourth annual *Books in Canada* award for first novels.³¹ Readers responded to its rich texture and to the distinction of its prose, although some had reservations about its un-novel-like structure and what was felt to be its melodramatic plot elements. The source of the title is a poem "*Lunar Attractions*" from a poetry collection by the narrator's writing teacher that contrasts the Apollonian and Dionysian poles of experience. The book deepens motifs introduced in the two story collections: the focus on the sensitive child of warring parents; the presentation of a swampy Florida childhood and a gritty adolescence in a city resembling Pittsburgh; the concern with piecing together an identity; the elegiac sense that many things are gone for good; and the use of autobiographical elements. Blaise addresses this last point by stating on the acknowledgement page that "*Lunar Attractions* is fiction in the mode of autobiography, but that life was never lived".

The narrator David Greenwood/Boisvert grows up the only son of parents who to him were "not people, not personalities, but contending principles in the universe" (LA 11). The mother is a pale, genteel woman with a belief in order and civilization. The father is a dark, handsome, philandering, outgoing salesman, suited to hot sunbaked Florida and the life of the road. As an ex-boxer, he wants to make a man of his fat, asthmatic son, but the mother repudiates the violent world that the father represents: "'This is slaughter', she cries, putting a stop to a boxing lesson. 'You'll never be like him....*This--these gloves*--this is all he knows. He had no chance--he used what God gave him and it brought him here. You must use *this'--her* fingers brushed my hair and gently buffed it out of my eyes--'to get away from here and to get away from these people'" (LA 29). The son's unfulfilled yearning for his father's approval is a dominant theme introduced early. The novel opens with David Greenwood's memory of himself at the age of five, out in a boat with his father fishing on a Florida lake. What he sees, or thinks he sees, that day slices apart the placid surface of the lake and remains in his memory as an obsession:

I have never completely rid it from my memory; it is the chord my imagination obsessively plays. Rising behind [my father] nearly as tall and thick as a tree trunk, hung for just an instant the gnarled, stony tail of a full-grown alligator. (LA 3-4)

After that moment everything changed: the narrator's father never took him fishing again and the "shadow and the silence never lifted" (LA 5).

This early episode with the alligator is the first of several incidents similar for the way that David incorporates an event from his life into a fantasy world of terror and guilt. Digging in the sour purple Florida muck behind his house, nine-year-old David uncovers an alien "fin-headed monster"--a mudfish, it turns out--that he kills with his trowel and then later associates with the miscarried foetus of his baby sister. As a thirteen year old at the Museum in Palestra (Pittsburgh), he is fascinated and repelled by a stuffed *tableau vivant* "Nubian Lion, Attacking Bedouin and Camel" that seems to him to have the malignant quality of nightmare. As an almost-fourteen year old, he is brought by police to the scene of the crime of transvestite Laurel/Larry Zwotko's murder and mutilation. These scenes become mental landscapes of David's attraction to the lunar nighttime world. He comes to the realization during his involvement with the Zwotko case that he is "on the side of fear, nightmare and of all unanswered things...on the side of the caterpillars and not the butterflies" (LA 210).

By 1978, Blaise's thirteen-year period of staying put was over. He left Montreal to become a Professor of Humanities at York University in Toronto. In 1980 he left Toronto, not without feelings of regret and resentment, to go to Saratoga Springs, N.Y., to share a position at Skidmore College, teaching with Bharati on alternate years.³² The movements of the Blaise family over the next few years become complex and hard to follow. Between 1981 and 1985, they established a home base in Iowa City so that their sons Bart and Bernard could finish high school without the constant moves that had characterized Blaise's own growing up. Clark and Bharati alternated teaching at Skidmore and teaching in the Writers' Workshop in Iowa City so that until Bernie's graduation in 1985 at least one parent stayed in Iowa City. To complicate the story further, Blaise spent a semester in the fall of 1983 as writer-in-residence in Fred Wah's integrated writing program at the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, B.C. The next semester in 1984, Blaise was back in

Iowa City and Bharati was writer-in-residence at Emory College in Atlanta, where she wrote almost all the stories in *Darkness*. By the fall of 1985, Bharati was teaching in Montclair State, N.J., and Clark would soon be teaching as an Adjunct Professor in the Graduate Program at Columbia. Since 1986 they have lived in New York City.

Well before Blaise left Toronto in 1980, he was working on his next novel *Lusts*. [Lunar Attractions as the final work of my personal quest for identity. Hereafter I will be taking up questions very removed from autobiography, very removed from identity and locale. The novel I'm now working on has nothing to do with childhood, adolescence, or being Canadian, or French, or English](#).³⁴ An article in *Quill and Quire* quoted Blaise as saying that his second novel is written in the third person and comments that the book "appears to be somewhat of a departure".³⁵ We can only assume some radical revisions were made to the text because the novel published in 1983 is essentially a first person narrative, despite its epistolary form. English Professor Rosie Chang has published a notice announcing that she is writing a biography of the late poet Rachel Isaacs (Durgin) and wants to hear from anyone with information about her. Ex-writer Richard Durgin contacts Rosie from his exile in Rajasthan, India, initiating a correspondence that consists of brief letters from Rosie and thirty-five page letters from Richard. The purpose of this correspondence is to uncover the mystery of why Rachel killed herself--the cataclysmic event that turned everything inside out for Richard and silenced him as a writer. To provide a context for Rachel's death, Richard tells Rosie his own story, starting with his working-class childhood in Pittsburgh as a carpenter's son, continuing through his years as a scholarship student at an elite Kentucky university and his meeting with Rachel while at the Writers' Workshop at Iowa, and ending with their married life as writers in New York City. Like Blaise's earlier narrators, Richard tends to take an elegiac perspective on events, for example: "For most of my life I've been an accidental observer of a passing order" (L 41)³⁶ or "our lives are really a series of breaks, falls, bubbles, and crashes. Life refuses to assume a predictable shape....It's not so much my day-to-day diminishment (graying, balding, sagging) as it has been a series of sharp, sudden, unforeseen breaks that brought me here" (L 145).

As Richard tells his story, we begin to understand something of the complex attraction that drew together two people who are such opposites. This is Blaise's interpretation of his characters:

In *Lusts* I wanted to create something outside my experience. The character and his background is a totally imagined work. I had a sense of a character born in the centre of America--working class, armpit America, Pittsburgh--who lusts for inclusion, who lusts for finer things, the will to lift himself into a finer, nobler world. But because of class and the urgencies and hungers in his own background, he really destroys just about everything he touches. I wanted to talk about the limits of that kind of hunger....I wanted to have as a counterpoint for him someone born on the effete rim of America who wants very much to enter the centre. So the wife is someone born with all the privileges of America. She's been spared all the grime of America, but she then wishes to have it. For her and for him, there is a kind of tragic transection....It's a story of people fated to collide because they each represent an idealization of what the other wanted.³⁷

Although some readers of *Lusts* have sensed the presence of Sylvia Plath's ghost or detected similarities between Richard's marriage to the eminent poet Rachel and Blaise's own marriage to Bharati, Blaise himself says that the need for the novel is his parents' relationship: "I realized more and more that it's a portrait really of my parents....In a sense, [Richard] was a lot like my father. In a very Americanized way, it's more a portrait of my father than it is a portrait of myself. The same thing, I think, drove my father to be that kind of a violent person".³⁸

A further source of interest in the novel is the question of writing itself: the education of writer; the nature of biography and autobiography; and the relation of biography to fiction. We are given samples of Rachel's autobiographical poems, Richard's autobiographical short stories, and Rosie's biography. Moreover, various characters provide comments of a literary critical nature on their own and each other's work. We hear about Richard's fiction: his first novel about innocence and ambition in Pittsburgh called *Will You Be Coming out Again After Supper?*; his sixties campus novel called *Smoke* about the American dream "turning to nightmare and spitting

you out the bottom" (L 52); and an unpublished novel *Missing in Action* "about a modern marriage between two decent artists, that ends tragically" (L 50). After Rachel's death, Richard gave up writing fiction, but the account he writes becomes the novel of redemption that he needs to write--"a novel-despite-itself" (L&nb141). Rosie comments on this collaboration with Richard, saying that "the line between autobiography, biography, and fiction is a matter of emphasis that must continually be redefined: I am writing a biography of Rachel's life, incorporating your autobiography and a little of my own--and together we might be writing a novel" (L 50).

Blaise's sixth book, and possibly his best to date, gives further consideration to the boundary between autobiography and fiction.

Introducing *Resident Alien*, he says "This book is a journey into my obsessions with self and place; not just the whoness and whatness of identity, but the *whereness* of who and what I am. I call it an autobiography in tales and essay, though it contains some of the most thoroughly invented stories I have ever written" (RA 2). Two so-called "autobiographical fragments", "The Voice of Unhousement" and "Memories of Unhousement", begin and end the book, enclosing the middle section made up of four short stories about the character Carrier/Porter. Readers can therefore trace the shifting autobiographical and fictive forms taken by such motifs as the Florida childhood, the narrator's love for his father, or the final break-up of his parents' tortured relationship. At the same time, they will notice many elements in Carrier/Porter's experience, such as his French Montreal Education in "North", that are totally imaginary. When I asked Clark Blaise what he could tell me about the writing of *Resident Alien*, this was the answer:

I wanted to write about a world that was reasonably sunlit and clear and lucid from my mother's point of view and that was tortured and sick at its core from my father's. I wanted to put the two together and show that it was possible in one life to lead both worlds, to have access to those worlds. I felt that as a real statement about how a segment of North America is. And I wanted to also be true to things that had died, things that had passed, things that are no more, like the South that I had known as a child, the Quebec that I had known, and the really twisted Jansenist Catholicism of the pre-René Lévesque, pre-gentrified Montreal. I wanted to be faithful to all of those experiences. I wanted to be faithful to a Canada that was still authoritatively British, confident. My sense of English Canada was always its confidence. I never knew a Canada that had an inferiority complex vis-à-vis anywhere. Especially the States. My relatives in Winnipeg pitied the States....So I wanted to be faithful to the fact that it was a Canada of virtue and rectitude and resolution and confidence. I wanted to get all of those things in.³⁹

Some portions of *Resident Alien* were written in 1983 while Blaise was teaching in the writing program at the David Thompson University Centre. Because teachers were expected to produce writing each week to share with students, Blaise wrote short autobiographical pieces such as "A Passage to Canada"⁴⁰ and "Mentors",⁴¹ which ended up in somewhat revised form in *"The Voice of Unhousement"*. He also wrote the story "North" in Nelson, B.C., a setting that he says affected him as follows:

A sense of the particularness of Montreal came flooding through to me when I was on the shores of Kootenay Lake in B.C. I was writing that story then and feeling very close to a world that I never knew....I think I was responding sentimentally, in the Flaubertian sense of sentimental, to the realization that Montreal was now lost, was now taken from me. I was responding...to the tragedy in my life of being torn up from Canada. I was projecting into a different character what I was going through.⁴²

A short-cut to conveying the flavour of the Porter/Carrier stories might be to talk about their titles. "South" and "North" refer to the cardinal compass points of Porter/Carrier/Blaise's journeys represented by Florida and Quebec. "Identity" is about a turning inside out that occurs when the narrator is twelve and discovers that he is not what he has always thought himself to be. When the Porter family flees Pittsburgh for Montreal in the middle of the night after his father assaults a man at work, the narrator is told that his real name is

Philippe Carrier, not Phil Porter as he has always believed. The story ends with the family crossing the border into Canada as the mother says, "You can be anything you want to be". "Translation" probably refers to a lot of things, among them the literal translation of Porter's autobiography *Head Waters* into a French edition *Les Sources de mémoire* by Carrier as well as the metaphoric translation of life into art and past into present.

One powerful theme in both the biographical and the fictional portions of *Resident Alien* is the stripping down of an identity. In "Translation", Blaise gives Porter the disease of epilepsy in order to suggest the provisional nature of our sense of self and sanity. In "Memories of Unhousement", the same theme of the precariousness of identity is suggested by the Alzheimer's disease that reduces Blaise's grandfather from the grand patriarch who built up Wawanesa Mutual to an old man who doesn't know his own name. Alzheimer's is the "family disease" (RA 178) that has since claimed Blaise's mother, who died in February 1987 in Winnipeg. Just as Blaise has treated his own childhood experience as "emblematic" of Canadian experience, so he uses his family disease as emblematic of a twentieth century experience of wiping out memory and identity, the progressive loss of both personal and cultural memory.

Blaise has not flinched from topics that are painful, and painful in a personal sense. In *The Sorrow and the Terror*, Blaise and his wife collaborated on a book on the Air-India tragedy of flight 182, in which 329 people were killed by a terrorist bomb. As the Introduction puts it, "As Canadian immigrants ourselves, with twenty years' involvement in the Indian-immigrant life of North America, we were driven to write this book as citizens bearing witness".⁴³ The authors began research in January 1986, some six months after the disaster, motivated by their concern that this tragedy was being "unhoused"--treated by the Indian government as an overseas incident and considered by the Canadian government as an Indian event, despite the fact that the victims and the victimizers were Canadian citizens. The book they wrote, based in part on interviews with the bereaved families, is an elegy for the individual victims as well as an indictment of Canada's immigration policy.

What next? Two new books are written and await publication and a third is in the planning stage. According to Blaise, the two completed books differ substantially in their intended market. *Embassy* is a Graham Greenesque adventure novel about a corrupt embassy on a Caribbean island. *Man and His World* is a tortured book of stories whose themes include Alzheimer's disease as well as the various dislocations and violence of this century. The third book, a novel with the working title *Brothers and Sisters*, is about a man *sans identité*. Behind this book, says Blaise, lies the "sombre realization that a very few of us are denied an identity and denied a community or a country or a history that is truly our own. I'm a little more interested in the demolition of an identity than I am in the establishment of a painful accretion of shards of identity. I'm going to take someone who seems to have a very clear sense of identity and systematically strip him of all layers of assumed identity or assumed purpose. So it's going to be a reversal of *Lunar Attractions*. It's a little bit like what happens to the character of Carrier/Porter in *Resident Alien*".⁴⁴

A Canadian by choice as much as by parentage, Blaise has taken as his main theme the central Canadian dilemma of identity. The self, caught between the poles of father and mother, French and English, energy and order, continues to reinvent itself in stories that confirm, despite all the losses, a human presence and a human voice.

NOTES

1. Blaise uses this term in John Metcalf's "Interview: Clark Blaise" in *Journal of Canadian Fiction* (Fall 1973), p. 78: "I think the real reason I'm fond of 'personal' fiction is that two things move me in fiction--texture and voice. *Texture* is detail arranged and selected and enhanced....By *voice* I am referring to the control, what is commonly referred to when we mention the 'world' of a certain author, the limits of probability and chance in his construction, the sanctions he leaves us for our own variations, what we sense of his own final concerns and bafflements".

2. Ann Mandel is writing about *A North American Education*, but she could be speaking of the whole Blaise canon when she says, "a rich presence of place and physicality of imagery becomes possible when the self is freed again and again from one story to the next, to see itself *there*, and then *here*, when each story is imagined *again*". "Useful Fictions: Legends of the Self in Roth, Blaise, Kroetsch, and Nowlan", *The Ontario Review*, 3 (Fall 1975-Winter 1976), p. 30.
3. *Resident Alien* (Markham, Ont: Penguin Books Canada, Penguin Short Fiction Series, 1986), p. 165. Henceforth abbreviated to RA.
4. Readers who come upon the sentence "I was born in Fargo, etc." have to consider that less than fifty pages earlier Blaise has made his character Philip Porter speak slightly of those "self-biographers who began their books with the fatal words, 'I was born...'" (RA 117).
5. Geoff Hancock, "Clark Blaise on artful autobiography: 'I who live in dreams am touched by reality'", *Books in Canada* (March 1979), 31.
6. Geoff Hancock, "An Interview with Clark Blaise", *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, 34/35 (1980), 54.
7. *Ibid.*, 55.
8. Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "An interview with Clark Blaise" (Guelph, Ontario, November 12, 1988). Blaise was in Guelph to participate in the conference "Coming of Age: John Metcalf and the Canadian Short Story", organized by J. R. (Tim) Struthers at The University of Guelph. Henceforth referred to as Ross Interview.
9. Ross Interview.
10. For an excellent discussion of the raw/cooked tension in Blaise's stories, see Robert Lecker, "Murals Deep in Nature: The Short Fiction of Clark Blaise", *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 23 (Spring 1982), 27-67.
11. *Lunar Attractions* (Toronto and Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1979), p. 13. Henceforth abbreviated to LA.
12. Ross Interview.
13. The first version of "North America" was written between 1961 and 1963 and destroyed one night in Iowa City in an episode described in *Resident Alien*, p. 24.
14. Bharati Mukherjee has written four books in addition to the two that she co-authored with Clark Blaise: two novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975); and two collections of stories, *Darkness* (1975) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988).
15. Commenting on the sense that Canadian writers have of being part of a tribe, Blaise said that in the States "there's no community of writers. That sense of a tribe of writers or a community of writers is not present. Every one is an individual with their own career in mind. There's not a sense that you are creating the consciousness of your race". Ross Interview.

16. For an account of the origin of the group, see Hugh Hood, "Trusting the Tale", in *The Montreal Story Tellers: Memoirs, Photographs, Critical Essays*, edited by J. R. (Tim) Struthers (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1985), p. 9.
17. Hugh Hood, "Trusting the Tale", p. 12.
18. John Metcalf, "Telling Tales", in *The Montreal Story Tellers*, pp. 24-25.
19. Hugh Hood, "Trusting the Tale", p. 19.
20. Hugh Hood, "Trusting the Tale", p. 16.
21. *New Canadian Writing, 1968* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1968). Four of Blaise's stories were included: "The Fabulous Eddie Brewster", "How I Became a Jew", "The Examination", and "Notes Beyond a History".
22. *New Canadian Writing*, p. 68.
23. J. R. (Tim) Struthers. "'Expressions of your breath': An Interview with Clark Blaise" (Guelph, Ontario, November 12, 1988). Henceforth referred to as Struthers Interview.
24. John Metcalf, "Interview: Clark Blaise", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 2, 4 (Fall 1973), 79.
25. *A North American Education: a book of short fiction* (Toronto and Garden City: Doubleday, 1973), p. 37. Henceforth abbreviated to NAE.
26. In fact, during his first visit to India in 1970, Blaise was confined to bed with hepatitis for two months of a three-month stay.
27. Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee. *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. Toronto and Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1977; reissued by Penguin Books with a new epilogue "How It All Turned Out", 1986. The penguin edition is cited hereafter as DNC. The title echoes Bengali film-maker Satyajit Ray's film title *Days and Nights in the Forest*.
28. John Metcalf, "Interview with Clark Blaise", 77.
29. Barry Cameron, "A Conversation with Clark Blaise", *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 23 (Spring 1982), 23.
30. Bharati Mukherjee, "The World According to Hsu", *Darkness* (Markham, Ont.: Penguin Books Canada, 1985), p. 38.
31. "Blaise of Glory: Breaking from a strong field, Clark Blaise gallops home to win the \$1,000 purse for the best novel of 1979", *Books in Canada* (April 1980), 3.

32. Blaise has explained the reasons for moving: "Life in Toronto was simply unbearable in the late 70's. It was a matter of having to choose between my home and what empowered me as a writer, which is Canada, the idea of Canada" (Struthers Interview). See also Bharati Mukherjee's article "An Invisible Woman" in *Saturday Night* (March 1981), 36-40, in which she explains how she left Toronto in anger at the racism that she experienced there directed toward Indo-Canadians.

33. Michael Ryval, "Confessions of a reluctant patriot", *Quill and Quire* (April 1979), 21.

34. Geoff Hancock, "Clark Blaise on artful autobiography", *Books in Canada* (March 1979), 30-31.

35. Michael Ryval, p. 21.

36. *Lusts* (Toronto: Doubleday & Co, 1983; Markham, Ont.: Penguin Books Canada, 1984). The Penguin edition is cited hereafter as L.

37. Struthers Interview.

38. Struthers Interview.

39. Ross Interview.

40. *Books in Canada* (June/July 1985), 15-16.

41. *Canadian Literature*, 101 (Summer 1984), 35-41.

42. Struthers Interview.

43. *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (Markham, Ont.: Penguin Books Canada, 1987), p. ix.

The title echoes Marcel Ophuls's epic documentary film *The Sorrow and the Pity*, about French collaboration during WW2 with the Nazi occupation.

44. Struthers Interview.

The Clark Blaise papers: first accession and second accession. An inventory of the archive at the University of Calgary Libraries.

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