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SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN THE FICTION OF CLARK BLAISE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines various aspects of self-reflexivity in Clark Blaise's fiction. An analysis of Blaise's two short-story collections--A North American Education and Tribal Justice--and his two novels--Lunar Attractions and Lusts--reveals that Blaise's fiction, while often seen as realistic or even symbolic in intent, is preoccupied with the nature of art and with the artist's relation to the enterprise of writing fiction. This preoccupation is revealed not only through the subject matter of Blaise's work, but also through his formal concern with narratives that enlarge upon the notion of reflection, duality, memoir, and autobiography. Chapter One deals with how A North American Education's narrators are involved in recording the onset of their aesthetic awareness. Chapter Two focuses on the overlap of creative geographies that makes Tribal Justice an intense investigation of self-reflexive coming of age. Chapter Three deals with the maturation of the self-reflexive impulse as it is manifested in the autobiographical form of Lunar Attractions. Chapter Four

concentrates on the ways in which Lusts brings to light the underlying motivation for the self-reflexive impulse that guides all of Blaise's fiction.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse étudie les diverses formes d'auto-examen dans les oeuvres de Clark Blaise. Une analyse des deux collections d'histoires courtes, A North American Education et Tribal Justice, et de ses deux romans, Lunar Attractions et Lusts, révèle que la fiction de Blaise, quoique souvent perçue comme réaliste ou même symbolique d'intention, se préoccupe de la nature de l'art et de la relation entre l'artiste et l'entreprise d'écrire de la fiction. Cette préoccupation est révélée non seulement par les sujets des travaux de Blaise, mais aussi par sa préoccupation formelle pour des narrations qui élaborent les notions de réflexion, dualité, mémoire, et autobiographie. Le premier chapitre discute comment les narrateurs de A North American Education documentent l'aube de leur perception esthétique. Le deuxième chapitre étudie l'empiètement des géographies créatives qui font de Tribal Justice une intense investigation d'une maturation du processus d'auto-examen. Le troisième chapitre traite de la maturation de l'impulsion d'auto-examen telle que manifestée dans la forme autobiographique de Lunar Attractions. Le chapitre quatre étudie les façons

dont Lusts examine la motivation sous-jacente à l'impulsion d'auto-étude, l'impulsion qui guide toute la fiction de Blaise.

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INTRODUCTION

A reflective Clark Blaise writes: "I have been trying to find the center of my imagination. . . . Why am I wedded like a reborn Wordsworth to the epic of my own becoming?"[1] When Blaise is asked to describe his approach to the process of writing fiction he answers with his life. Asked to comment on his narrative strategy, he replies:

> The stories in my own mind, 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. . . . Most of my own life experiences have been like that too.[2]

Asked whether writers must now discover new ways of dealing with plot and character, Blaise responds:

> For me and for me alone, plot is not planned but plot is the revelation of inevitability, the slow disclosure of something beautifully obvious, though hidden. That's plot and that's the kind of plot that I acknowledge. I feel sometimes that you hurtle through the vastness of time--those two billion seconds that we all have al-

> lotted to us [the average life-span]--towards some point that was always there. And you embrace it finally and that's plot, but until that moment, you've had (seemingly) an infinite number of choices, and ways to avoid it. With my strong sense of inevitability I obviously have a strong sense of plot, of a certain kind of plot. (Hancock, p. 61)

Plot is "for me and for me alone," and stories are "in my own mind." For Blaise, to speak of art is to speak of the artist's life experience; to describe one is to describe the other. Metaphor becomes a psychological reality. Blaise is suspended between his art and his experience, both creating them and being created by them. Art plus life is a perpetual, inwardly directed equation, and the product of this equation, this interaction, is the self-reflexive artist. Self-reflexivity, initiated in the stories of A North American Education, becomes, as I will demonstrate, an increasingly prominent motif in Blaise's writing.

Further insight into Blaise's particular brand of self-reflexivity and its complex dynamic may be gleaned from these interview extracts. In them, Blaise names some characteristic principles of the artist's experience which are in turn reflected in his art or, alternately, artistic principles embodied by his work which are in turn reflected in his experience: the progression of narrative and of experience will unfailingly precipitate the "confirmation of what you hoped was not true," the disclosure of that which

is "obvious, though hidden," and "the revelation of inevitability." Beyond simultaneously describing art and experience, beyond standing as an illuminating enactment of the artist's self-reflexive impulse, these principles point to the importance of the function of memory in Blaise's work. Narrative and experience become, in a sense, processes of memory: they develop, in Blaise's view, through the process of recognizing and retrieving suppressed knowledge, of remembering the overlooked. Memory is a unique, subjective, individual capacity; it both forms and informs the text with the artist's singular sensibility: the text reflects the special terrain of its creator's memory. As Michael Darling observes: "Memory, for Blaise, is an action of the present upon the past."[3] Memory, then, becomes a stance the self-reflexive author and his self-reflexive text assume. Grounded in the present, the author looks backward, remembering: he reflects the past and is reflected in it.

The created reflects its creator, the act of its creation, the raw material of its creation, and its broad creative context: the text reflects its author, the specific act of writing, language, and writing in general. These are stories about language; stories which reflect their own processes of becoming; stories which discuss the nature of their own substance and composition. Memory, by means of which these stories are formed, looks backward and inward. Memory mirrors: turned inward, mirrors reflect one another

to create complex hybrid images, reflections of reflections. Self-reflexivity compounds. Blaise's fiction, then, is self-reflexive, and that self-reflexivity is channelled through and transformed by memory. The stories are reflective of the author in that they are memoirs, autobiographies, albeit fictionalized ones; they reflect the objective experience of the author, the unique, subjective processes of his memory and his dualistic nature. The stories are reflective of themselves in that they are, on one level, constructed of self-referential metaphor: they turn in upon themslves, fascinated and fascinating.

Perhaps the most blatant manifestation of the formative influence of self-reflexivity (also framed in terms of memory) is the strong and persistent element of autobiography in Blaise's work. Both the experience of Florida (as a child) and Montreal (later, as a teacher and writer)--geographic and cultural polarities united for Blaise by a common charm and attractiveness, and by racism, repressiveness, and a certain gothic quality[4]--exposed the author to "incongruities and contradictions too great and too absorbing to go beyond."[5] Constantly remembering, the writer remains absorbed: the double vision engendered by the gulf between north and south and the eternal sense of rootlessness which comes from a lifetime of itineracy, from being formed by opposing regions but becoming a native of neither, pervade the fiction. The author's parents, acting

through his memory of them, have also defined and delimited his fictional universe:

> 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. Their absurd incongruity calls up, and somehow justifies, the harshest and most beautiful images from my experience and out of my imagination. I write from an undisclosed adult perspective at a point in time after their break-up, looking back to a time before it happened. ("Revenge," p. 58)

They are the "indispensable maps leading north and south" ("Revenge," p. 58): flesh and blood and metaphor, life-givers and artistic constructs.

* * *

Blaise's fiction has generated a relatively small amount of critical material to date, and of that, very little deals overtly or consistently with the works' crucial element of self-reflexivity. Most commentary is devoted to A North American Education.

Barry Cameron and Michael Darling have formulated approaches to A North American Education which bypass examination of its self-referential nature. In a section devoted to the book in his study of Blaise's entire work (until Lusts), Cameron confines his discussion to "the

major metaphoric patterns" shaping the stories, and claims that they collectively trace "a progressive disintegration of self . . . a retreat into the past only to reveal the same tragic condition of alienation" as exists in the present.[6] Darling focuses on Blaise's concern with "texture and voice." He discusses the relevance of memory, a process which "is basically a sensual one: sights, sounds, tastes, colours evoke particular emotions or states of mind"; he points to the importance of language, in that it "convey[s] the visual through words"; and he concludes that Blaise has the power to "evoke in his readers . . . an immediate emotional response, a comprehension that precedes conscious intellectual understanding" (Darling, pp. 54, 56).

Frank Davey's writings on Blaise preclude any reading of his work that would rely on an examination of duality or metaphor. In From There to Here, Davey consigns the stories to the category of realist fiction: their form is "casual, straightforward, factual narrative. There is very little reliance on symbolism or imagery."[7] A later essay expands on this contention, and effectively denies any possibility of a dimension of self-reflexivity in the work: "Both titles [A North American Education and Tribal Justice] turn attention away from the stories as écriture and away from the author as writer."[8]

Russell Brown, W. H. New, Ann Mandel, and Robert Lecker touch on several aspects of self-reflexivity manifested

in Blaise, but only within the contexts of arguments centring on different kinds of issues raised by the work. In his review of A North American Education, Brown identifies two inherent "problems" which tend to mar the book as a whole: the stories' "shifting protagonists are distracting," and "a strained, rather schizoid, relationship between the reader and the teller of tales" is developed. Brown does, however, describe one way in which the narratives turn inward, reflecting themselves: their conclusions "have the appearance of Joycean epiphanies," but these are "pseudo-epiphanies which serve not to reveal something, but to lead the reader back into the depths of the story."[9]

W. H. New characterizes Blaise as a writer "acutely conscious of day-to-day survival," and discusses the way in which his stories focus on "related kinds of exile." Pointing to the metaphoric importance of the self-conscious act of writing in Blaise's fiction, New also touches on the work's intrinsic self-reflexivity: "The control over the language of expression . . . is an implicit statement about the process of acquiring control over the actual world through which one moves."[10]

Ann Mandel comments only briefly on Blaise in her essay "Useful Fictions: Legends of the Self in Roth, Blaise, Kroetsch, and Nowlan," but she does provide insight into the form of autobiographical self-reflexivity peculiar to his work: "The first-person stories have the sense of auto-

biography, the others of an author intentionally drawing back from himself. . . . 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."[11] (The pattern of "shifting protagonists," which Brown finds "distracting," enriches the text for Mandel.)

In his study of Blaise's short fiction, Robert Lecker tells us, "it is true that A North American Education traces sexual and social processes of initiation, but most of all it draws us into an aesthetic awakening." He also claims that the most "striking feature" of the stories is their "self-consciousness. Blaise's narrators are never content to live in their stories; they feel compelled to step back and suffer their commitment to these tales of pain, loss, failure."[12] Lecker thus characterizes the stance of the self-reflexive artist in Blaise's writing, a vital aspect of the work's overall self-reflexivity.

These few critics have made important points about Blaise's self-reflexive impulse and the ways in which it informs and vitalizes his creative output. It remains, however, to synthesize these points, to extend the argument, to fill the gaps in our understanding of Blaise's fiction permitted by a general critical neglect of the nature and function of his essential, formative, self-reflexive stance.

Notes

[1]Clark Blaise, "A North American Memoir: Revenge," The North American Review, 269, No. 4 (1984), 56-60. All further references to this work ("Revenge") appear in the text.

[2]Geoff Hancock, "An Interview with Clark Blaise," Canadian Fiction Magazine, Nos. 34-35 (1980), p. 55. All further references to this work (Hancock) appear in the text.

[3]Michael E. Darling, "Of Time and Memory," Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 2 (Spring 1975), p. 54. All further references to this work (Darling) appear in the text.

[4]Geoff Hancock, "Interview," Books in Canada, March 1979, p. 30.

[5]John Metcalf, "Interview: Clark Blaise," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 2, No. 4 (Fall 1973), 77.

[6]Barry Cameron, Clark Blaise and His Works [Toronto: ECW, 1985], pp. 23, 15. All further references to this work (Cameron) appear in the text.

[7]Frank Davey, "Clark Blaise," in From There to Here: A Guide to English-Canadian Literature Since 1960. Our Nature--Our Voices II (Erin, Ont.: Porcépic, 1974), p. 56.

[8]Frank Davey, "Impressionable Realism: The Stories of Clark Blaise," Open Letter, 3rd ser., No. 5 (Summer 1976), 65. All further references to this work (Davey) appear in the text.

[9]Russell M. Brown, "The Insolent Infinity," rev. of A North American Education, Canadian Literature, No. 58 (Autumn 1973), pp. 115, 114.

[10]William H. New, "Fiction," in Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English, gen. ed. and introd. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), III, pp. 259-60.

[11]Ann Mandel, "Useful Fictions: Legends of the Self in Roth, Blaise, Kroetsch, and Nowlan," The Ontario Review, No. 3 (Fall 1975-Winter 1976), p. 27.

[12]Robert Lecker, "Murals Deep in Nature: Clark Blaise," in his On the Line: Readings in the Short Fiction of Clark Blaise, John Metcalf, and Hugh Hood (Downsview, Ont.: ECW, 1982), pp. 39, 18. All further references to this work (OTL) appear in the text.

CHAPTER ONE

A North American Education

Beyond mirroring the experience of their author, the stories in Blaise's first book tend to mirror themselves: the development of story parallels the development of our insight into its peculiar nature, function, implication. When Frankie Thibidault tells us that he is "a reader and speller," and "a student and teacher of languages,"[1] he is also describing Norman Dyer and Paul Keeler. The three narrators whose voices comprise the tripartite A North American Education are also writers, and thus allow Blaise representation within his own fictional world--they can appropriately conduct his experience into art--but further, the fact that they are writers permits their arduous coming to awareness (Blaise's acknowledged definition of plot) to become part of an equally problematic and painful search for a voice for artistic expression, for the right language. On one level, these narrators are narrating stories about the narration of stories.

A North American Education, with such story titles as "Eyes," "Going to India," and "The Bridge," deals with the development of perception (often, ironically, in conjunction with the dissolution of identity)--the perception of the narrating voice, of the writer/narrator, of Blaise the writer. Many stories are layered with metaphors which refer to the act of writing, and to language itself. A brief look at one representative story from each of the three sections of this volume ("The Montreal Stories," "The Keeler Stories," and "The Thibidault Stories") illuminates the prevalence, the depth of entrenchment, and the vital importance of textual self-reflexivity in Blaise's fiction, even at a very early stage. For Norman Dyer in "Words for the Winter," Montreal winters "are an agony" (p. 27) of nosebleeds and headaches; they teem with cockroaches, are soiled by "the froth of mice" (p. 30), and are violated and insidiously altered by a compounding of small thefts and intrusions. "I don't know how to present it" (p. 37), Dyer must conclude: words are rapidly freezing, language has become an icy rut in a street of Montreal tenements.

For Paul Keeler in "Continent of Strangers," words become an act of love he fails to consummate, despite his imploring, his intense desire: "Do it my way, Janet. In words, by a fire. Words by a fireplace, let me read to you, and you will melt in my arms" (p. 114). Formal characteristics of the story reflect the struggle of the writer

to come to terms with his art, to control his language. The italics indicate Keeler's voice breaking onto the surface of the narrative, but his authority, his mastery of language--of fire--is quickly lost, as is made evident by a shift back to regular type. The detached presence, the regular voice of third-person narrative, wrests control of the text back from Keeler, the immature writer.

Dyer cannot find the language; it is embedded in winter, frozen and constricted. Keeler thinks he has found the language, but it repels his every attempt to assert a consistent control over it. Frankie Thibidault has language, but learns, painfully, of its inherent dangers. The interaction of art and reality is often volatile: he is beaten in school for transcending the established limits of propriety, for giving himself away, for demonstrating his singular linguistic capability. The effluence of his fertile imagination will not mingle with the dry air of the classroom. In "Snow People," he is a student and teacher of languages, an obsessive baseball statistician, the transcriber of maps (which, like language, abstract and schematize our physical geography), who ultimately becomes the cartographer, master, and destroyer of his own imaginative regions, bombing his "maps of imaginary countries . . . into rubble" (p. 226) with globs of ink from a fountain pen. "Indoors, with what he had" (p. 227) (an internal, self-contained imaginative capacity, a growing facili-

ty with language, and other abstract systems), Frankie painstakingly fabricates a dummy, an image of himself, to be hung in effigy before his parents. (His progenitor's conflicting natures comprise Frankie's own: he is the volatile link between the elements of art and reality. Frankie is thus identified with language on yet another level.) "Hey, it was just something I made, that's all. I thought you'd like it, I really did" (p. 229). His parents' shock and horror, the reverberations of his act, contribute to a vivid manifestation of the explosive power of a controlled and focused creativity. Here, language mimics, compresses, releases, and destroys. It bridges imagination and the real world, artifice and nature, and then violently severs that connection. Mother crumbles, Father "slammed a door they couldn't hear" (p. 230). Coming of age is loss of innocence, the entry into self-consciousness, and the acceptance of the danger and insularity of one's own flawed literacy.

The stories of A North American Education, and subsequent Blaise fictions, are structured on dualities: "my eye is on dualities," "my subconscious churns up confrontations that I find terrifying. So I follow those strengths into fiction" (Hancock, pp. 50, 60). This aspect of the work is crucial to its formulation and to our full understanding of it, and may be interpreted as still another illumination of Blaise's ubiquitous self-reflexivity. The concept of

self-reflexivity implies duality and, by extension, a certain tragic irony: there is the original, and an image of the original; the self, and a version of the self in another context; the original self, and an aspect of that self watching from a remove. There is Dyer, and his ideal self-image--an elegantly-attired dummy in a Holt Renfrew window; there is Frankie, and his martyred imagination--a dummy suspended from a hotel ceiling. We are presented with two teachers of language who are struggling to find a voice for artistic expression, and two dummies who are articulate mutes.

Blaise evokes a spiralling series of oppositions in his stories: north and south, east and west, heat and cold, male and female, dream and reality, artifice and nature, image and action, dislocation and rootedness, the foreign and the familiar, chaos and order, the occult and the seen, voyeurism and participation. His narrators, those self-reflexive practitioners of self-reflexive language who are finally reflected images of their creator, embody these dualities: their lives are defined by conflict. The self-reflexive stories comprising A North American Education, carefully etched patterns of these smaller dualities, also share a central, overriding duality, an essential paradox: they are about growing, about the harsh revelations which lacerate maturing perception while propelling it forward in violent lurches, and they are also about alienation, dislo-

cation, the dissolution of identity. These stories are about erosion and development, simultaneously. Here is the tragic irony: for Blaise's narrators, the painful development of literacy and awareness becomes in some way synonymous with the recognition of erosion, of the gradual yet inevitable failure to impose order, to communicate, even to survive in flux.

The self-reflexive artist is a divided being: a participant in his own life, and a detached, recording observer. Declares Blaise: "I wanted to be in the Grecian Urn [the story unearthed, remembered] and viewing it too; I wanted a different kind of measurement, to know in a different way."[2] Dyer, Keeler, and Thibidault stand at the fringes of life (the stance of one who remembers, of the voyeur, of the artist), and yet are indelibly marked by it. Implication is inevitable.

So, self-reflexivity is duality--two selves are described by a compound word--and this primary split at the heart of the fiction opens wider and wider as the succession of narratives unfold. The artist's impulse to self-reflexivity generates dualities and the monstrous, paradoxical realization these dualities can spawn through their interaction. Self-reflexivity is the source of conflict, the source of a different kind of knowledge, the source of the strength which is followed into fiction. In the following pages I examine stories from the collection as exem-

plars of a range of aspects of Blaise's evolving self-reflexivity: "A Class of New Canadians," "Eyes," "Words for the Winter," "Extractions and Contractions," and the title story--"A North American Education."

* * *

"The Montreal Stories" are a trio of memoirs, an elliptical tracing of the development of the artist's perception. Norman Dyer, in "A Class of New Canadians," "found himself freshly impressed by everything he saw . . . [and] was learning to be insulted by simple bad taste, wherever he encountered it" (p. 3). In the midst of all, he sees himself as "an omniscient, benevolent god" (p. 5). His environment impresses him, leaves its impression upon him, is reflected in him. Tourists take him to be a native, much to his delight: "he would answer in French or accented English" (p. 4). One of his English (as a second language) students discloses the arbitrariness of the immigrant's choice of destination, much to his consternation: "Canada says come right away, so I go" (p. 9). (The inadvertent grammatical error may even, ironically, reveal a certain reluctance.) Dyer is offended, for his city reflects him, as he reflects his city. The notion of arbitrariness is unacceptable: Dyer and his milieu are carefully wrought; they are aesthetic objects formed by a series of correct

decisions. He is insulted, he responds to a personal affront, he rejects outwardly-imposed versions, images, interpretations of himself and his milieu. He "learns" a capacity to be personally insulted by passive environmental factors like the bad taste of others, and so learns to believe utterly in the illusion of his own omniscience, in his own unchallengeable right and ability to select and reject, to re-create the world. But Dyer has a long way to fall: reality will be more than insulting.

A student asks Dyer to proofread a letter he has written requesting employment in the United States: "It's time for a change" (p. 13). Dyer silently refuses to act as a means by which others can reject the special status he has conferred upon himself and upon his carefully chosen city. It is particularly galling that this student, Miguel Mayor, suave, enigmatic, meticulously attired, seems to mock his instructor by effortlessly epitomizing all that he has as yet been unable to achieve himself in his rigorous aesthetic program. ("Good taste" seems as difficult to acquire as a second language.) Dyer sabotages the letter; the professional ethics of the "progressive young teacher" who takes pride in doing "something socially useful" (p. 5), suddenly become trivial, expendable; it is a question of survival, of identity. "It was as though a superstructure of exploitation has been revealed, and Dyer felt himself abused by the very people he had wanted so much to help. It had to end someplace" (p. 14).

Blaise speaks of his Florida boyhood as a vivid indoctrination into the dynamics of the "chain of exploitation": "you were always seeing things that were dead or dying, or crawling up from the mud or down from the trees" (Hancock, p. 48). One creature's food is another's predator. One man's ceiling is another man's floor. A fact, a rhythm of the natural world becomes an integral law of the social and historical order. It also becomes an aesthetic principle, a metaphor for the creative process: one is exploited by larger worldly forces, by experience, and in turn exploits that experience in the act of artistic creation. Dyer has misunderstood the full implication of this principle. He cannot accept that his "omniscience" is illusory, that it will not exempt him from having to take his place as a link in the chain; he refuses to allow others to use him as he has used them. The process, however, is inexorable: Dyer will be transformed by it.

The Montreal night is "still mysterious, still magical," but "snow blurred the arc lights," elemental forces overcome Dyer's abstract, absurdly artificial selectivity; "slushy curbs had hardened," the city is freezing, solidifying its resistance, it will no longer be evoked and defined by a single word ("superb!"); "the wind was dying" (p. 14), it is the calm before the storm. Dyer turns "sharply" from the clothing displayed in Holt Renfrew's window, now identified for him with Mayor, the immigrant

who has embraced the disorder of his existence, for whom Dyer and Montreal are indifferent way-stations in a perpetual migration. The clothing, the aesthetic dream, has been fatally contaminated by a glimpse of reality, however fleeting: even though "the moment was passing," "there had been a moment of fear" (p. 15).

To read "A Class of New Canadians" as a story guided in its unfolding by the self-reflexive impulse of its narrator and its creator is to discover in it the struggle of the artist to reconcile the ordered, the created, the artificial, the dreamed, with the unprocessed, the chaotic, the natural, the real. The story reflects the process of its own creation and conflicts inherent in that process; it is, in many ways, a story about the necessity of learning a second language, a new language for creative expression.

In "Eyes," the vanity and self-deceptions persist, but they are being gradually worn away: "you prided yourselves on being . . . masters of the city" (p. 18), but the city is a complex of closed cultures, of bewildering experiences, here expressed in language. You cannot master what you cannot understand, be it experience or the means of its expression. "You've been seeking . . . a tough urban health" (p. 19), but health is one of the benefits of being in synchronization with your environment, and cannot be granted a "semi-permanent, semi-political exile" (p. 4). The voice narrating "Eyes" in the present slips into the

past in these passages (pp. 18, 19), and betrays an increasing awareness of the innocence, the absurdity, the danger of such convictions.

Norman Dyer of "A Class" reemerges as "you" in "Eyes"; silent transformations occur in the intervals between stories. Now, he will "start to think of moving," he will "jump," however "cautiously," into "a new country" (p. 16), a new element, a new awareness; he will warily abandon the old structure, and fall carefully (can it be done?) into the unknown. He will still try to compress and contain the texture, the dimension, the precision of experience in a single word ("superb" becomes "Byzantine": "A Byzantine moment with blood and widows and dripping sides of beef" [pp. 22-23]), but here's the difference that measures the extent of Dyer's transformation: one word is an absolute while the other is an evocation of complexity, of indescribable shadings; one word is an ending while the other is just a beginning.

Eyes are the symbol of perception, inner vision, and they are fixed on the progressive disclosure of "I" (masked by the second person), the not-yet-fully-revealed; this story is an internal investigation. The narrative focuses, turns inward: Dyer, now with family, moves "down a single artery," to "the canyoned aorta of the city" (p. 16). The heart is canyoned, bicameral, fundamentally divided: this is a disturbing new way to envision the conventional metaphor of unity, yet it is coldly, scientifically precise

(vivid, doubled, like those other organs, sets of testicles and eyeballs Dyer is transfixed by at the butcher shop in his new neighbourhood). The heart of the city still harbours the splits, the sundered unity, the chaos Dyer has tried to divest himself of by forsaking the fringes: the houses are "divided equally between the rundown and the remodelled"; neighbours are young French television personalities or shuffling pensioners "in a state of endless recuperation"; "your neighbours pay sixty a month for rent, or three hundred; you pay two-fifty for a two-bedroom flat" (p. 17).

This new central territory produces a voyeur who comes, "silently," to prey on Dyer's family, bringing with him "a crate that he sets on end under your bedroom window and raises himself to your window ledge and hangs there nose-high at a pencil of light from the ill-fitting blinds." Dyer, "straining with him from the uncurtained nursery, watching the man watching your wife" (p. 17), identifies, remembers himself as an adolescent, "slithering" through night fields to peer into "those houses where newlyweds had not yet put up drapes" (p. 18). This is the crux of the narrative, the pivotal metaphor, the image of artistic self-consciousness, of self-reflexivity founded in memory and sparking powerful dualities: Dyer is the voyeur, within his own home, watching his wife (his home, himself) being watched from without. Blaise is also the voyeur, watching

his own creation (the "Grecian Urn") from a careful distance; it may be possible to learn to see it, to know it in a different way. "You" is "I" of "Words" (the next story); "I," the eye, watches himself (making of him-self two selves) by watching the watcher watching him: all metaphors, all lines of thought, lead back to the narrating persona, the self who resides (split, self-reflexive) at the centre of the story. The single narrow artery leads to the complex heart; vision tunnelled, focused, then expands; moments become Byzantine.

Dyer strains to break through the final constraining membrane, the last formidable barrier between his fractured, transforming self and the nearly tangible illusion of unified, unimpeded vision. He wants to touch the eye, to ingest it, to consume the "I," to become whole, to partake of the ritual of belonging, but it remains out of reach, an ideal, a harmonious dream. "You remove your gloves and touch the skin. . . . How the eye attracts you! How you would like to lift one out, press its smoothness against your tongue, then crush it in your mouth. And you cannot" (p. 23). The restraint comes from within--you have stripped away external hindrance to sensitivity (the glove), but then generate an internal loss of feeling: "Your finger is numb." The eye of the dead animal now reflects the narrator, and registers his paralytic fear: "the eye, in panic, grows white" (p. 23), clouds over, vision is

obscured. You would touch the eye, "you would take that last half inch but for the certainty, in this world you have made for yourself, that the eye would blink and your neighbors would turn upon you" (p. 24). The source of fear is isolated: the eye will blink, falter for an instant, and all will be lost. The order this focused vision has shaped out of chaos, and by extension the place you have carved out for yourself within that tenuous order, will crumble in a split second. The eye, unified creative vision, will fail, as creative language will fail in "Words for the Winter," to regulate and to make sense of experience.

In "Words," neighbours do turn, the exile's dream of belonging is instantly smashed: "one of theirs lay injured and I stood accused--a man, a foreigner, tall and blond--and they attacked. From below my shoulders they leaped to hurl their spittle, to scratch my face." "Listen to me," Dyer yells, "understand" (p. 33), but words are lost; he speaks another language. "I don't know how to present it . . . without breaking down" (p. 37): to present the experience is to order it with words, but the experience finally resists the imposition of order. Order and its creator will be broken down: the artist remains split, reflective, both voyeur and participant, formulating narratives about narratives out of his dilemma; his language remains foreign to experience. Words may be selected and arranged, vision may be focused and directed, the artery may be narrow and

aimed at the heart, but the living heart, the flux of experience, is multi-faceted, Byzantine, indescribable, uncontainable.

In "The Montreal Stories," Norman Dyer moves from the past, from the distorted middle distance, from that "superb" milieu in which he perceives himself to be master of language and good taste, "a legend . . . loved and a little feared" (p. 6), to an approximation of the present (distinct from the author's "undisclosed perspective . . . looking back" which is always the true present of the text), to the foreground, to that tightly focused milieu of thriving parasites, rampant and frightening disorder, creeping impotence, paralyzing inarticulateness. Dyer begins with a false accent and ends with silence.

Class is a norm (Norman), a level acquired, an abstract and arbitrary aesthetic: "Incredible, he thought, the authority of simple good taste" (p. 4). Eyes are an organ of perception, a conduit between the real world and the imagination; here, on the site where a younger Dyer had ruled his familiar playground of <u>bongoutisme</u>, eyes now perceive a "strange new land" (p. 22), and something growing, an awareness that a class-ification, a language, cannot contain. Words are the means to impart knowledge, the medium of description, but their function is now impaired: "I who live in dreams have suffered something real, and reality hurts like nothing in this world" (p. 37). Hurts like

what? Like nothing. The metaphor, the linguistic construct does not exist that could describe this pain. Reality cannot be circumscribed by language: it is too vast and too terrifying. "A Class" is related in the third person, past tense: distant, measured, controlled. "Eyes" is related in the second person, present tense: still removed, but closer. "Words" is narrated in the first person present: fully implicated in the tragic realization, the narrator must relinquish the means to tell it. These stories reflect themselves; they turn inward and, at close range, explore the minute, reverberating detail of experience, the implications of language and the development of artistic perception.

"The Keeler Stories" are linked thematically to "The Montreal Stories"; the two sections of A North American Education partake of many of the same central concerns. We are reintroduced into the problems of the erosion of identity (it rots gradually, like a tooth, from the inside out: "The pulp is lost but the enamel is good" [p. 44]); of cultural and physical dislocation (that desensitization, that fatal lack of awareness: "In Calcutta I can meet my death quite by accident, swept into a corridor of history for which I have no feeling" [p. 65]); of powerlessness ("But somehow, some day, some minute, the next long decline begins to set in" [p. 45]); of paralysis ("I've stopped walking, the passports are heavy in my hand" [p. 83]). Again

we recognize, embedded in the narrative, the writer's compulsive search for a means of expression, for a voice appropriate to his experience. The writer is eternally isolated and bound, inevitably, to the self-reflexivity from which artistic vision and creative language do not seem capable of releasing him: "something slipped. I started writing only of myself and these vivid moments in a confusing flux. That visionary gleam; India may restore it, or destroy it completely" (p. 73). But we know these cannot be stories about restoration, about the restoration of vision to the artist confined to the dark nightmare of his own narrowing life.

Beyond perpetuating these themes initiated in "The Montreal Stories," "The Keeler Stories" (particularly "Extractions and Contractions" and "Going to India"--"Continent of Strangers" being more conventionally structured)--provide a distinct formal reflection of thematic concerns. Keeler writes and summarizes: "I think of my writing. Flights are a time of summary" (p. 73). The form of the story demonstrates the arbitrariness and ultimate failure of such ordering and synthesizing processes to explain or justify the condition of reality, or to halt the inevitable erosion of the life described. Blaise has said that in writing a story like "Extractions," "the best [he] could do would be to openly insist on the disruptive, non-sequential nature of teasingly similar events" (Metcalf, p. 78). Sum-

maries constitute endings and so have no function and no meaning here, in a tragic "non-sequential" world where endings are perpetually anticipated ("The cold wind on a bad tooth anticipates so much" [p. 42]), and perpetually postponed. The narrator anticipates the extraction of a tooth, which does not occur, and his wife's contractions anticipate the birth which is delayed, and which does not occur within the story. "Extractions" is composed of twelve titled sections, discrete yet overlapping movements in a life that is stalling, unravelling, fragmenting.

In a section entitled "Mongolism," the narrator declares that he does not fear anything physical, asks himself why, and responds with a series of questions, none of which constitute a definitive answer: "Because I am a professor and tend to minimize the physical? Because I seek punishment for the way we live . . . ? (p. 51). The passage reflects the story which contains it: the questions posed as answers are the sections of the story. These compounding unanswered questions and open-ended sections are "teasingly similar," for they all spring from the alienated, divided, self-reflexive consciousness of the narrator, the generator of the narrative, and they are "disruptive"; they collide and repel one another, disordered, inconclusive, truncated like Keeler's "thwarted sense of style" (p. 47), like the events of his life. The story, absolved of binding formula, produces disenfranchised sections,

fragments; the narrator, cut off from physical sensation, is alienated, divided. Form, content, voice reflect the relentless process of desensitization: "a nerve is ripped from my body at thirty," and the deterioration begins (p. 45). (This has happened before: the gloved hand, the numbing finger, the whitening eye, the freezing avenue.) "I support, in a bloodless and abstract way, euthanasia": even death (supported, but delayed) breaks down to abstraction. Euthanasia . . . "Youth in Asia" (p. 51). Words on a page.

"Going to India" is also a partitioned narrative, but with a somewhat different effect. The pattern of linked sections in this story rapidly generates a momentum rather than a series of disruptions ("This will be a short night, the shortest night of my life" [p. 72]). The narrative is propelled forward to a climax even more vivid, disturbing, and inevitable than that of "Extractions," and it is a climax anticipated, encapsulated, and reflected in the first section.

Blaise, in his essay "To Begin, to Begin," identifies the first paragraph of a story as "a microcosm of the whole, but in a way that only the whole can reveal,"[3] and "Going to India" provides a particularly lucid example of this principle. It begins with Keeler remembering a newspaper "horror story" of a boy on a raft being swept over the Falls at Niagara. The story appeared in written form on the first day, and recurred on the second, broken down

into a series of mute photographs: "Six panels of a boy waving ashore, the waters eddying, then boiling, around his raft." Keeler can identify the horror this inevitable accident represents for him with precision: "It isn't death, I thought, it's watching it arrive, this terrible omniscience that makes it not just death, but an execution" (p. 59). Who has had language and conventional narrative structure, and then lost them both, seeing the story they have built fragment into a series of loosely-linked images ("panels")? Who has experienced both the perspectives of distance and engagement, and has thus the omniscience to see the inevitable? It can only be Keeler, the writer, the artist: in these photographs Keeler has glimpsed the death of his own creative power.

The photographs represent the progressive stages of a journey toward death at the foot of a waterfall. Later in the story, a succession of cities become the mapped, preordained stages of an equivalent journey Keeler takes across the Atlantic and Europe to India, to the engulfing continent (an unquantifiable and potentially hazardous element, like water) which may precipitate the destruction of Keeler's "visionary gleam": "We set down an hour in London, in Paris, in Frankfurt, and even Kuwait--what does this do to the old perspectives? Europe is just a stop-over, Cokes in a transit room on the way to something bigger and darker than I'd ever imagined" (p. 73). The rapid series of pho-

tographs constituting the unfolding horror story of the Falls becomes the hastily contacted series of cities forming an inexorable geographical line to India, the unimaginable, and the series of borders and disorienting time zones sundered on the routed flight into a sweltering night. All aspects of the story reflect one another, including the formal arrangement of the text: Keeler is conveyed toward the source of his fear by a raft, an airplane, time, the narrative.

At the end of "Extractions," Keeler turns away from the window (which ensures his distance, his isolation) where he has been watching his neighbours trying to start their frozen, stalling cars. He senses tragedy; desensitization is not yet complete; he has reached the brink, but is still able to pull back. "Extractions" has twelve sections and a stalled ending; "Going to India" has thirteen sections. In the second story, Keeler is carried one step further to a place where it is impossible to turn away, where the ending comes, and reflects the beginning. The rhythm of the passage that ends the story mimics the headlong velocity of the flight, the treacherous current of the river that flows to the Falls: "We are dropped in front of the terminal. . . . We have come inside. . . . I'm not prepared, not even for the answer which comes immediately: and if you're not, it says, who is?" (pp. 82-83). Keeler is in flight from his "old perspectives, " his old life, his old structure;

he crosses time zones and international borders, circles the globe, and finally turns back toward himself to confront the nightmare that had been there all along. Keeler has come to the end, the "terminal," the edge of the known, of creative power. He cannot turn back, and he cannot pass the window which divides Customs (the ordered, the habitual) from the chaos which lies beyond: "I've never been so lost" (p. 83). He makes his desperate, emphatic statement ("I'm not prepared"), the force of which must defuse the terrible momentum, the accelerating movement toward the end, but words have become impotent. The response to Keeler's statement is an unanswerable question: there is no preparation for the creative void, for death; there is no way to fall carefully; there are no more words.

The story "A North American Education," the centrepiece of the final section of the book, "The Thibidault Stories," explores the origins of what will evolve into the advanced dilemmas of Dyer and Keeler. It casts back into memory to trace the early development of Frankie Thibidault's perception, the dawning of his sexual awareness, the series of shocks, realizations, that constitute a rough crossing between adolescence and adulthood. The story is inherently self-reflexive in that it is a memoir, an autobiography, a history of a writer; it is the story of a son (now an adult) struggling to define himself in relation to his father. The story is also self-reflexive in the sense that

it is actively concerned with the problem of its own narrative perspective: in an essay devoted to "A North American Education," Robert Lecker tells us that the narrator must situate himself in his narrative by "imagining a history that will fill out the narrative frame he will eventually occupy."[4]

Lecker identifies a word used by the narrator (to characterize the origins of his enigmatic grandfather, to imagine a history that will link them with one another) as a key to an essential structuring conundrum in Blaise's fiction, particularly "A North American Education": "Demimonde. Could the word point to the characteristic structure of a Clark Blaise story in which one (the reader: the narrator) is neither in nor out, neither placed nor displaced, neither part of the history nor of invention?" (Lecker, p. 352). This demimonde principle, on closer examination, provides a consistently fruitful entry point to the story's self-reflexive dimension.

The demimonde is the milieu of "you" in "Eyes," the unique second-person perspective (linking Dyer's first- and third-person perspectives), which implicates the reader in the narrative while being the voice of the narrator's own perceptions. The demimonde is the point where Keeler is suspended: gazing at the newspaper photographs, he is safe in his living room while being swept along to a watery execution. The demimonde is the observation point of Blaise,

transfixed by the Grecian Urn (the story, the retrieved artifact), both its interior and its context. The demimonde is an established aspect of the earlier fiction, but in "A North American Education" it is explicitly constituted, the pivot, the core of the narrator's self-reflexive universe. The demimonde is the point where imagination and history, art and experience meet and erupt into story, the uneven ground of Frankie's narrative stance. The demimonde is Frankie's state of limbo; a place where his life and his father's both interact and divide radically, irredeemably.

Demi-monde, half-world, half-life, half-person: an indeterminate state where dualities thrive, where self-reflexivity prospers unabated. If the narrator cannot situate himself in relation to his own creation (if Frankie cannot situate himself in relation to his own recreated past), the imagination will find no stable ground from which to make its creative extensions. Its independence confounded, the imagination will turn inward to nourish itself repeatedly and compulsively, on autobiography, on history, on language--the subjects of its own expression.

"A North American Education" reads like a compendium of dualities, of the polarities (and the tenuously structured bridges between them) which define the tragic imbalance, the relationship of Frankie with his father and his past, his progenitors. Frankie describes a snapshot (a memory-trigger) of father and son, taken when the boy was five,

and, flipping it over, reveals the words inscribed on the back (words and image are materially joined on paper, yet are positioned back to back, opposed):

> Thibidault et fils
> Daytona, avr/46

The inscription becomes a kind of self-contained model for the narrative surrounding it. It is physically set off from the body of the text, both bridging and separating the flow of words. First, read the model up and down. The photograph catches Thibidault in place: he is at Daytona (a postcard place, a place of photographic archetypes, a family paradise) where he has chosen to stay, to begin again; he will graft his rootless family onto this new landscape. Thibidault is made concrete, legendary, by Frankie's words, as he is fixed by the photograph: in the photograph, Frankie tells us, "he [his father] is still the youth he always was" (p. 164). Fils is placed above the date. Frankie is time and its movement: the process of his education will unfold in months and years (from "avr/46"). Frankie is there, in place, at Daytona, but even so is characterized by transition, by an active self-consciousness: he tells us (from his retrospective vantage point) that in the photograph he is "already the man I was destined to be" (p. 164), yet he is only five. He simultaneously completes and enters into the process of development. He demonstrates a

premature awareness of his immaturity, and thus underscores it: he moves to cover "a fleshy little spot on my transparent pants," "but I was late or the picture early--it seems instead that I am pointing to it" (p. 165). He blurs the fixed clarity of the photograph with his motion; timelessness is disrupted. Read the model from side to side. Thibidault (fixed) is divided from fils (changing) by the word "et," a word which both connects and maintains the distance between discrete entities. Daytona (geographically rooted) is divided from the date (unfolding) by a solitary comma, the sign that both compiles and separates. Up and down, the model establishes and characterizes essential polarities, from side to side it establishes and characterizes the connections between them. This balanced diagram, this deadlock, gives rise to the demimonde.

The comma and "et" share a function, on one level, with proliferating words of mediation like "but," "or," "instead" ("I had wanted to swim but had no trunks. . . . But in the picture my face is worried, my cupped hands are reaching down to cover myself, but I was late or the picture early--it seems instead . . . [p. 165, emphases added]), the razor slot, the Princess Hi-Yalla, Annette, "my mother" (and his wife), and the ritual of fishing. All become words, marks, motifs, or images of the demimonde; all extend and illuminate our awareness of the narrator's ambivalent perspective; all represent overlaps between duali-

ties; all evoke a fluctuating, hybrid world, the intense half-world of adolescent sexuality.

The razor slot is the repository for manly implements, spent, discarded, concealed, once keen and potentially dangerous, now dull. "The used-razor slot. A little slot in the middle. I popped the paper coating with the nailfile" (p. 180): Frankie initiates his peephole; the paper hymen is broken; vision narrows; innocence is irretrievably lost. Annette, the object of Frankie's obsessive voyeurism, inhabitant of the adjoining apartment (a "mirror image" of his own [p. 176]), a "goddess" with the kind of "dormant body that kindled violence" (pp. 175, 176), is actually the focal point of the sexual desires of both son and father. Babysitting Annette's children, Frankie catches his first and only glimpse of her naked, by peeking through the razor slot from her bathroom into his own: "Bare golden legs. Then our light went out" (p. 183); Annette, in Frankie's apartment, has stepped to the other side of the mirror image, has been possessed by Frankie's father. Domains collide; barriers are thrown up. Frankie recoils, rejects the knowledge his carefully prepared vantage point has yielded. He refuses to enter fully into the little world on the other side of the wall, the world of his own creation, desire, orchestration. He will not permit himself to acknowledge understanding of what he has seen: "I never asked my father why . . . I didn't have to

--I'd gotten a glimpse of Annette, which was all I could handle anyway. I didn't understand the rest. Thibidault et fils, fishing again" (p. 183). Frankie, watching the evidence of his father's action, peeking into his own home from beyond its walls, fishing for a vision, recalls Dyer in "Eyes." They are both voyeurs, removed, yet intimately connected to what they are observing. They both exist in the demimonde, the milieu of compounding self-reflexivity.

Frankie and his father are "fishing again": plumbing the depths; exploring the occult, the unknown, while partaking of the revealed, the known; controlling the line that connects the opposing elements of air and water. Fishing is "an unquestioning ritual" (p. 168): "we never caught a muskie or a trout . . . we waited for bass . . . [in Cincinnati] we paid and we fished and we never caught a thing," but somehow, "Every cast became a fresh hope" (pp. 167-68). The ritual depends on never catching the fish, never satisfying the voyeur, never revealing the unknown, never upsetting the delicate balance of the demimonde: when the fish are finally cast onto the beach in a hurricane, "their bellies are blasted by a change in pressure" (p. 184); a glimpse of Annette, of the body that "kindles violence," is more than enough--it destroys the fragile equilibrium of the voyeur. When the "snake-like fork-boned pike" swallows the plug too deeply, the fisherman cuts the line (p. 167). When Frankie and his father make an in-

structional visit to the Princess's sexual freak show, they are to remain as aloof as fishermen who shun the catch they seek, impassive. It is their unwritten role to watch, to bait the performer, not to be baited by her. Frankie is drawn in, ejaculates, his father recoils, differentiates himself, cuts the line between them: "I think there's something wrong with you" (p. 172). There has been a transgression committed, a balance disrupted; the voyeur has swallowed the plug too deeply, the passive audience member has crossed the proscenium line, has implicated himself in the act.[5]

Frankie's developing artistic vision, which depends on the establishment of a demimonde perspective (isolated yet engaged), is subject to catastrophic upheavals and imbalances when the worlds of Frankie and his father interface. His father, through neglect, keeps Frankie in the dark about his developing sexuality, and then inadvertently, through his actions (with Annette), reveals the machinations of sexuality suddenly, devastatingly. Frankie will remain sexually disoriented; sex will ever be associated with sterile bathrooms and violent reversals. His father, with pedagogic intentions, starkly, awkwardly illuminates sexuality for Frankie, and thus inadvertently plunges him into the underside, into an experience (the Princess) so grotesque he is unprepared to cope with it. For Frankie, sex "still smells of the circus tent, of something raw and

murderous" (p. 173). Frankie's delicate, intuitive steering mechanism is thrown painfully out of alignment. Drawn out of his mediated world, his demimonde, he is unprotected, unbalanced, and ruthlessly cut down by the sheer force of undiluted experience.

Finally, though, it is Frankie's mother who ensures his consistent return to the centre of balance, to the perspective of the artist: "My mother must have taken the [snap]shot--I can tell, for I occupy the center" (p. 164). She is ever present and eternally removed: "she would be upstairs reading or sewing" (p. 168) as father and son set out to "fish"; "She went back to the car on her own" (p. 184) as father and son weather the hurricane on the beach. She is wife to the father and mother to the son, yet female, the opposite of both as male--the other. She is the bond between father and son, yet ensures their difference. She gives Frankie language and history: "My mother . . . told me stories of her childhood" (p. 166), and perpetuates "Yankee" speech in her son ("I still sounded strange [p. 167]), which renders him an outsider in Florida. Frankie's father has retained no stories to pass on to him (Boniface merely exists in a photograph--unspoken for), and abandons his native language to speak "with a passable Southern accent" (p. 167).

Frankie's mother, then, by providing him with half a history, initiates in him the creative imperative to imag-

ine the paternal half of his history. It is true that Frankie has inherited a certain facility with language from his father. (For Thibidault, the salesman, language is a tool of the trade; the art of verbal expression is parlayed into a livelihood. Frankie is the salesman's son, and instead of persuading us to buy garden furniture, he persuades us to accept a history [his story] manufactured in the factory of his imagination.) But Frankie and his father speak in different accents. Frankie's mother has given him half a past, a language that reveals (rather than conceals) identity, the beginnings of a sense of rootedness, and these inform his artistic creation, his language. The salesman sells dreams in a timeless void, with words. His son, the writer, sells dreams tempered with explosions of reality, a sense of unfolding time, the flux of history.

Self-reflexivity is a demimonde: to be self-reflexive is to be forever becoming and never complete; to exist in a state of sustained tension, anticipation; to remain perpetually split; to never choose sides; to embrace isolation and involvement; to never fully realize one's art and to never fully enter into experience. Self-reflexive art can never be finished. The self-reflexive artist lives in a dangerous and often tragic world (Dyer's neighbours will turn on him in the blink of an eye; Keeler will be swept past the point of no return into the creative maelstrom), but Frankie has experienced its brief, yet intense and re-

verberating, reward. The advent of mature creative power has allowed him to strike a momentary, yet perfect, retrospective balance. Through the synthesis of imagination and memory, he both creates and recreates the day of the hurricane: " . . . 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" (p. 184). There is an instant of peace, a fleeting moment of wholeness in the midst of the storm, in the midst of incessant and fracturing self-reflexivity.

Notes

[1]Clark Blaise, A North American Education: A Book of Short Fiction (Toronto: Doubleday, 1973), pp. 188, 165. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[2]Clark Blaise, "The Sense of an Ending," in 76: New Canadian Stories, ed. Joan Harcourt and John Metcalf (Ottawa: Oberon, 1976), p. 69. All further references to this work ("The Sense of an Ending") appear in the text.

[3]Clark Blaise, "To Begin, to Begin," in The Narrative Voice: Short Stories and Reflections by Canadian Authors, ed. John Metcalf (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 22. All further references to this work ("To Begin") appear in the text.

[4]Robert Lecker, "Frankie's 'Demimonde': Notes on Clark Blaise's 'A North American Education'," The Literary Review, 28, No. 3 (Spring 1985), 351. All further references to this work (Lecker) appear in the text.

[5]Robert Lecker presents and explores this idea in "Frankie's 'Demimonde'": "Confronted by Princess Hi-Yalla, [Frankie] merges his self with hers" (p. 356).

CHAPTER TWO

Tribal Justice

Clark Blaise's long short story "The March," from the middle section of Tribal Justice, begins like this: "My story is bound, in time and place, to the spring and summer of 1963, to a quadrant of North America that knows no borders, and to a mood that has vanished. . . ."[1] Characteristically, the passage is simply expressed, yet elaborately and artfully contrived. It acts, as Blaise has told us any good first sentence should, as "the drop of the baton that gathers a hundred disparate forces into a single note" ("To Begin," p. 22). The sentence is a distillation, a compressed reflection of the story it inaugurates and of the collection as a whole.

The sentence reflects the ubiquitousness, in Tribal Justice most particularly, of overlapping geographies: "My story is bound," simultaneously, to a section of North America and to a "mood." Physical and emotional terrains are overlaid. Consider "a quadrant of North America": a single phrase evokes both natural and human landscapes.

The continental section is a quadrant, or a quarter of the circumference of a circle. Circles, however, do not describe geographical-political borders, but they do describe, metaphorically, the tribal border, its function and effect: the tribe encircles, encloses, distinguishes, protects (so long as it endures--it has already been quartered, fractioned, fractured). The sentence also points to story imperatives: the story must re-create, concretize the intangible (a vanished mood) as it must reconstruct a place, defined in terms of borders (what, finally, is North America if not a networking of boundaries?), "that knows no borders." The sentence thus reintroduces Blaise's ongoing concern with the fundamental paradox of art: the story must contain that which cannot be contained by story, or by any kind of structure. This is "my story," the sentence tells us--"my" history, a personal expression, an autobiography. It is "bound," or tied, to memory, and, paradoxically, it is bound in the sense that it is moving--unfolding in the present, yet bound for memory.

The stories comprising Tribal Justice are about memory, paradox, art, inevitability; they are profoundly self-reflexive. Blaise, the author, and his series of narrators reflect upon the stories, the autobiographies they create. They are also reflected in them, as they are reflected in the natural landscapes that mould their imaginations (according to Blaise, "The artist is as much present in his

landscape as he is in a self-portrait [Hancock, p. 60]), and in the intersecting, often disintegrating tribal circles which both claim and repel them. These stories about tribal justice are self-reflexive in that they are, equally, stories about their own painful artistic awareness. The harsh justice accorded the wayward, outward-looking tribesman is ostracization, and this harsh sentence constitutes a metaphoric reflection of the necessary stance of the artist: he is involved yet isolated, bound to story yet expelled from it.

The critics who have commented on Tribal Justice have tended to omit discussion of its essential self-reflexivity. Frank Davey names "the abstract concept--justice" as the "primary underlying element" of the work. But here, I would argue, justice becomes the antithesis of "concept"; in Blaise's hands justice is very real, visceral, an experience. The narrator of "Among the Dead" writes out of this experience: "Most of us live with broken hearts, thumping little fists constricting in our throats" (p. 217). The heart is broken, divided, a metaphor for the dual nature which engenders self-reflexivity. Davey claims that the stories, though "notable for their lack of metaphor become as units metaphors for continental issues" (Davey, pp. 65, 74). Curiously, symbols and abstractions come to characterize what Davey has identified as "realist" fiction.

Michael Darling articulates, in general terms, the structural mastery of Tribal Justice: "[Blaise] moulds experience into paradoxes, weaving memory and desire into tapestries of contradictions which are universal, and yet rooted in a particular time, setting, social milieu, and narrative consciousness" (Darling, pp. 55-56). Darling's harmonious description, although most accurate in a non-specific sense, diverts us, ultimately, from the violence of the paradoxes and from the self-reflexive split which afflicts the narrators who "weave" them.

Barry Cameron, maintaining a broad, thematic approach to the work, sees a strong continuity between the two books of short fiction: "Tribal Justice . . . may be considered an extension or amplification of the thematic and metaphoric world of A North American Education, a world of alienation, dislocation, rootlessness, and failure" (Cameron, p. 38). Cameron claims the "central characters" of the stories are "proto-artists" (Cameron, p. 39), which clearly indicates the presence of a dimension of self-reflexivity, but this avenue into the fiction remains largely unexplored. (Cameron's choice of the term "proto-artist" is both interesting and perplexing: if Blaise's narrators are prototypes of the artist, originals, how do we characterize their creator?) Robert Lecker does identify the intrinsic self-reflexivity of Tribal Justice's narrative voices, and indicates that there has been a deepening of that self-reflexivity from the first work to the second: "Again [in

Tribal Justice as in A North American Education] we find an emphasis on individual movement, rootlessness, the wanderer as hero, but the meaning of transience has become more personal. The stories in Tribal Justice's three parts are narrated by deeply self-conscious men who make fictions about their self-consciousness" (OTL, p. 39).

In order to make a closer analysis of the motivating core of Blaise's self-reflexivity, of the self-consciousness of these narrators, and of the fiction they generate, I have chosen five representative stores from Tribal Justice for examination in this chapter: "Broward Dowdy," "Grids and Doglegs," "I'm Dreaming of Rocket Richard," "Notes Beyond a History," and "Among the Dead." These narratives (two of which are set in Florida, one in Montreal, one in both locales, and one in between), span the continent of North America. They also span the continent of Blaise's memory--moment after moment unearthed from different points in the past; the tribal continent (stories revolve around blacks, Jews, Florida "crackers" and "aristocrats," middle Americans, blue-collar Pittsburgh Catholics, transplanted French Canadians, Montreal slum-dwellers, and Outremont intellectuals); and the continental gulf between past and present, youth and age, hope and shattered dreams (the collection opens with child narrators, is carried forward by adolescent voices, and is finally claimed by those approaching middle age). Tribal Justice, then, is a kind of atlas, a North American topology, a geography book, an

ethnology, a record of migrations, of tribal interactions and their consequences. Blaise tells us that "the self-conscious . . . writer is continually reinventing the world through language" (Hancock, p. 53). In Tribal Justice the artist creates and re-creates maps with language; he charts his own fluctuating world, his formative experience, his developing awareness: he reflects his stories and is reflected in them.

* * *

"Broward Dowdy," like many of the stories in the collection (and all the stories discussed here except "Grids and Dog-legs"), is set on, and at the edge of water. Exploring the sources of his imagery, Blaise writes:

> Bodies of fresh water in Florida and Canada have had a parenting effect on my imagination. I grew up on the wild shores of Lake Harris and Lake Griffin in central Florida, back in a time when they were utterly savage. Somehow, I ingested the sights and smells of putrescence, and of primordial, unspoiled plenitude that has now vanished from the common experience. . . . We have seen a touch of the living prehistory of the planet, and a triggering of the brain's own dis-remembered past. ("Revenge," pp. 58-59)

Water, then (the narrative pivot of "Broward Dowdy"), is rich in metaphoric possibility. It has a "parenting effect," a dual role: it passes on to the imagination its reflective, mutable surface, and its unseen depths, or the

sensation of the presence of other worlds (perhaps, in some ways, resembling the seen world, but ultimately transformed, mythical, magical, mysterious). Water gives birth to the artist's imagination, which in turn gives birth to story. Story inherits a reflective surface and a region of submerged meanings. Water also triggers memory--"the brain's own disremembered past" rises to the surface; water initiates the autobiographical mode; water becomes a medium for the self-reflexivity of the artist and his expressive fictions.

So "Broward Dowdy," as first story, introduces self-reflexive water imagery into Tribal Justice. The story also marks the first occurrence in the collection of another dominant self-reflexive motif: the "alter ego," or "other," who is created to represent an alternate aspect of the artist/narrator's own split psyche, or to illuminate an element in the outside world with which he can align himself, measure himself against, or construct a bridge toward, out of his own enforced isolation.

The world Blaise establishes in the first few sentences of "Broward Dowdy" is transitory, ruled by change and movement:

> We were living in the citrus town of Orlando in 1942, when my father was drafted. It was May, and shortly after his induction, my mother and I left the clapboard bungalow we had been renting that winter and took a short bus ride north to Hartley, an even smaller town where an old high school friend of hers owned a drugstore. She was

> hired to work in the store, and for a month we lived in their back bedroom. . . . Then her friend was drafted, and the store passed on to his wife, a Wisconsin woman, who immediately fired everyone. . . . Within a couple of days we heard of a trailer for rent, down the highway towards Leesburg. It had been used as a shelter for a watermelon farmer, who sold his fruit along the highway, but now he was moving North, he said, to work in a factory. (p. 3)

The voice is detached. It is describing the general condition, the natural (dis)order: husbands are drafted (sent off to "somewhere in the Pacific" [p. 12]--a name for limbo, the unknown); homes are merely shelters, rented, makeshift; the influence of friendship is inconstant; ownership is transferable; an already tenuous stability is devastated by draftings, firings, the sudden onset of homelessness. Those present are not native (they have arrived from vague reaches like Wisconsin), and those absent are native (farmers, bound to home soil, uproot themselves and follow the highway to jobs in northern factories): this transitional world is founded on ironic reversals. The narrator and his mother, the fragmented remains of a family, drift north, then south (and later north again), along a highway which is itself a fragment--of a larger, obscure pattern whose centre shifts and is never found.

This itinerant universe is the context of the narrator's encounter with Broward. The two are worlds apart, divided by class, by Broward's illiteracy, his obliviousness to all that occurs beyond the narrow confines of his

life, and by the inevitability of their separation. But the itinerant universe does allow some precious points of tangency, some vivid accidents, some illuminating overlaps. Though the boys travel discrete orbits, they will briefly, resonantly intersect.

The story unfolds "During the sweltering nights [and days] of my ninth summer" (p. 12), which the narrator spends with "their boy my age, Broward" (p. 5). Each boy is in his ninth year, on the brink of the premature birth of adult awareness. For both, childhood, the period of imaginative gestation, is nearly over. The boys coincide in their isolation. The narrator is an only child, and Broward is alone in the midst of his siblings, set apart by his relative intelligence and capability. Both boys are, in a sense, fatherless. Broward's father, a migrant labourer, has retreated into a world of self-delusion and bizarre faith. (The patriarch of the violent, simple-minded, emotionally and physically malnourished Dowdys shouts grace, over a meagre plate of leech-ridden fish, to a God he credits with having "kept our name and blood untainted," and "delicious food" on the table [p. 10].) The narrator's father, at war, sends rare letters from "'this island I can't name'" (p. 13), and a snapshot which records him "looking happier" than he did at home. "My memory of him blurred" (p. 12). Both boys must let go of childhood and replace their fathers as mainstays of their vastly differ-

ent, yet similarly dependent and eroding, families. Both provide food (fish) and support mothers buckling under the strain of deprivation. The demands are extreme. Broward, through a harsh selection process which rewards his strengths with punishing trials, is designated the one to sacrifice worldliness and literacy to the voracious needs of the family. The narrator's father orders him to "look out for [his] mother." The boy must witness the gradually accumulating evidence of his inadequacy to the task: "Her face aged that summer, and her body grew thin on the fish I caught" (p. 12). Both the narrator and Broward are victimized for their potential usefulness to others: narrating consciousness and "alter ego" (both sides of the author's self-reflexive split) are again identified with one another; they intersect.

The boys are drawn to each other, silently, unquestioningly, across tribal boundaries; they share their own mute rituals. Their lives intersect in the ritual exchange of knowledge ("'How?' I asked. . . . Broward laughed. 'Y'all just watch'" [p. 8]), and in the ritual of understatement, of the polite conversation that acknowledges a bond of respect while maintaining distance ("Broward thanked me as he always did" [p. 5]). Understatement and demonstrated knowledge circumvent and even transcend language. Words are unnecessary. The boys also share the ritual of fishing: "Broward and I were fishing from a

half-sunk rowboat in the inlet, merely dabbing the hook and doughball in the water to attract a swarm of fish, and snapping it out fast enough to avoid hooking another one. It was hot and lazy, and we didn't talk" (p. 5). Here is a moment of harmony, of synchronization, a just balance; the boys perform as one, intuitively, drawing sustenance from below the lake's conscious reflective surface. The two explore their surroundings, feeling and perceiving in unison: "The summer was an idyll. Whenever Broward and I roamed the woods we felt that unutterable sensation of being the first who had ever felt or heard the music of the place" (p. 13). The balance, the perfection, the peace, is "unutterable," indescribable. It is "music," imagined and wordless. The boys unite: the narrator/artist makes a first resounding contact with his "other," and the sundered halves of his divided self merge. He is whole for a moment, unreflected and unreflexive. The alienating, incomprehensible flux of the outside world is held in a moment of stillness, of silence, and complex, timeless meanings. This union is beyond the scope of language, beyond art, beyond story, which all rely on the dynamic tension between things in order to exist. This union is stasis, a kind of death: it is antithetical to art and to the ever-changing experience art mimics, and so it cannot, and does not last.

Following their individual orbits, the boys move apart and come to embody the two alternatives which constitute

the end of the story. "I know there ain't nothin' you can't do if you can read and write, ain't that so?" (p. 13) Broward asks the narrator, but both know that no reply is needed. The narrator is literate and his creative power is growing: "Alone, I could gaze over the water, the sun piercing the calm surface of the lake fluoroscoped the top two or three feet of lime-tinted water, often exposing a gator drifting like a log, or schools of bream . . . " (p. 13). The narrator has found artistic isolation, the removed yet engaged perspective. He turns outward, penetrating the surface of the lake, and sees, simultaneously, a log, a gator, the danger of the world uncamouflaged. He turns inward, penetrating the surface of his own imagination. He is again self-reflexive. He will be able to write, to comprehend his experience through the creation of narratives like this one. He has the power to combine knowledge of the outside world with that acquired through minute observation of his immediate surroundings. His world thus opens wide with metaphor: for the narrator the war that Broward will never be aware of is taking place not only in the Pacific, but also in the violent natural order of the lake, and in the brutal dynamics of the Dowdy family.

Broward will remain in a separate, blinkered world he hasn't the ability to transcend: "The last I saw of Broward Dowdy were his legs, pale and brilliant against the sour

muck, sliced cleanly by the shadow of the truck and the shanties beyond" (p. 14). Forced under the truck to make repairs, Broward is seemingly martyred, crippled by the formidable shadow the truck and shanties, symbols of family rootlessness and failure, have cast over his body, and over his life. He is enmired in tribal responsibility and its demand that individuality be suppressed. "Pa says there ain't no reason to go to school" (p. 13): the tribe willfully stifles awareness, promotes illiteracy, foils the escape of its members to ensure its own survival. The migrant is rendered spiritually and creatively motionless; the artist moves toward vision.

Like "Broward Dowdy"'s narrator, the narrator of "Grids and Doglegs," an adolescent Norman Dyer, is alone. He is, as are virtually all of Blaise's narrators, an only child, and is left to his own devices by absent, working parents whose marriage is moving inexorably toward divorce. The protective tribal circle is rapidly disintegrating, and those left unshielded will be engulfed by a flood of chaos, by the dangerous world without. Normie resists drowning with everything he's got, and what he has is a cool and lucid intellect. He singlehandedly, and with the kind of dogged determination that keeps him grinding his telescope lens "one night a week for at least a year . . . while most of the charter enthusiasts fell away" (p. 49), contrives and deploys his own notion of order to coun-

ter the external tragic disorder which threatens to close in upon him. To survive, he must somehow regulate a world where "Eisenhower's heart attack, Grecian urns, six million Jews, my waddle and shiny gabardines" (p. 49) all exist in a welter of meaninglessness. To this end, he ingests the sciences ("I memorized all I could" [p. 49]), becoming a painter of sweeping "paleobotanical murals," lecturer to the "Junior Amateur Archaeologists and Anthropologists of Western Pennsylvania" (p. 47), astronomer, and (like Frankie Thibidault, David Greenwood, and the young Clark Blaise) baseball statistician and cartographer. From the knowledge he accumulates, Normie fabricates a vast, ordering gridwork, and on top of it he feels safe--and arrogant: "The Tammany Ring and follies of Hitler, Shakespeare, and the Constitution were dust; the Andromeda galaxy was worlds" (p. 50). Here all phenomena can be accounted for, everything is within reach, omniscience is possible.

But "Grids and Doglegs" is a self-reflexive narrative, a narrative about narratives, a story about the development of artistic awareness. At the heart of Normie's carefully manoeuvred battle for survival is his struggle to come to terms with art itself, and such a struggle is not so easily resolved. Scientific illusions of order and omniscience cannot be sustained; art cannot exist in a sealed, static, conflict-free universe; collision with reality is inevitable, and it can be very painful.

So Normie is not really a scientist, despite his impressive list of accomplishments. Reading more closely, we see that he is actually a painter and a lecturer, a manipulator of colour and language: science is merely a subject (and often a metaphoric one). He is drawn to the "romance," to the "courtly" aspect of astronomy (p. 49). He equates baseball with a burlesque show, and, as audience member, he actively participates in the performance, tuning it, bringing it up to his own aesthetic standards: "The pre-game averages were never exact enough for me," so in a private notebook he formulates his own. His maps, "inevitably, like Pittsburgh," are of imaginary regions: artistic transformations of real experience. They are "recorded in the primitive fiction of gaps and clusters, grids, and doglegs" (p. 47): they are maps of the narrative (Normie's autobiography) that contains them, and rudimentary narratives in themselves. They are composed of grids--the flat networking of words on a page--and doglegs--ideas, multidimensional, kinetic, unique. The cartographer is an author of self-reflexive fictions.

Normie, then, is most fundamentally an artist. He is split, self-reflexive--as unquantifiable as the world he tries to reduce to a formula. He is ostracized from his milieu for his freakishness and his intellect, and so gains a precarious artistic perspective--personally implicated, yet "unallied": "I had . . . very few friends; there were

not many boys like me. Fat, but without real bulk, arrogant but ridiculously shy. Certifiably brilliant but hopelessly unstudious, I felt unallied to even the conventionally bright honor-rollers" (p. 48). But Normie has yet to fully realize the implications of his artistry. He continues to impede his own vision, to act under the delusion of his own omniscience.

Normie loves Cyndy Godwin, but no one knows. His feelings remain unexpressed and unrequited. He spins fictions about their union in his head: "I imagined a hundred disasters a day that would wash [her] into my arms, grateful and bedraggled." Normie imagines Cyndy is perfect, archetypal; he reproportions her to the dimensions of a predetermined formula; she is his aesthetic creation. He controls her through fear. He besieges her with silent phone calls and "would hold until her voice betrayed fear beyond the irritation" (p. 51). He also controls her through insult. When Cyndy remarks that she has to "use the bathroom," Normie is outraged: "How dare she, I thought. . . . This is a date; you're a queen, my own queen" (p. 60). He invites her to make use of a hydrant up the street: maybe he can abuse her into stepping back into his fantasy. He has sold his telescope to pay for dance lessons, dinner, a suit--to pay for Cyndy--and now everything is degenerating, out of his control. He has miscalculated: love and astronomy are not equivalent, inter-

changeable, two units in the grid of safe pastimes. Normie's love is dead art. It is created in a vacuum, uninformed by and intolerant of real experience.

Normie has, however, initiated this date, this collision with reality himself. He has experienced the true human need to make contact with another; he has sensed that his feelings for Cyndy are a deadlocked fiction: "There was no drama, no falling action, merely a sweet and painful stasis . . . [which] was bound to end, only when I could break the balance" (p. 52). Normie acts to realize his fantasy, breaks the artificial aesthetic balance, and enters into contact with the real world only to discover that Cyndy, its representative, is human, incalculable, and even more unattainable than ever before. His dilemma hurts. The world is chaotic, dangerous, and he cannot abandon himself to it. He cannot relinquish his desire to order, to re-create, but neither can he retreat back into the controllable grid. "The stars, the quarries, the right-field stands [were] things that could no longer contain me" (p. 60): the grid shrivels on contact with the real world.

So Normie comes to painful terms with his art, and irrevokably positions himself in the role of the artist. As artist, he is forever divided, self-reflexive. The story is a memoir, an autobiography cloven with parentheses. The adult Norman re-creates his adolescence, searching for a lost moment of equilibrium, of peace: "I had that irony

once (I wish, in fact, I had it now)" (p. 50). Norman is divided in the present as he is divided from the past. Like "Broward Dowdy," "Grids and Doglegs" demonstrates its essential self-reflexivity by introducing an "alter ego" of the narrator into the narrative. Normie (/Norman) addresses his tale to a special audience: "(Are there others, still, like me, in Pittsburgh? This story is for them)" (p. 47). There is no one like Normie--the story is a testimonial to his utter uniqueness. He is writing to himself. His writing, his art, emanates from his intense need to heal his rift, to achieve wholeness--but such an achievement would precipitate silence, stasis, the death of art. Wholeness is thus sought and avoided. Normie functions according to the artistic paradox.

As artist, Normie is isolated (he and Cyndy "turned to take our places" [p. 61]), held at a remove from his life, yet engaged in its unfolding. He inhabits the realm of language. In that realm of conflict, clashing polarities, paradox, and self-reflexivity, the artist resides, suspended between the two silences fatal to art: the motionless perfection of the grid to which language is superfluous and the flux of real experience (as individual and as animated as a dogleg), which resists the imposition of language.

In "I'm Dreaming of Rocket Richard," as in "Broward Dowdy" and "Grids and Doglegs," "I" (which Blaise calls "the voice of isolation") persists, and "we" ("the mode of

community" [Hancock, p. 51]) evaporates. The narrative voice cannot sustain nostalgia: the powerful sense of tribal identification, of belonging generated on those euphoric winter nights at the Forum when "everyone breathed as one" (p. 66), has vanished, if in fact it ever existed; the family legacy of alienation has proven far more durable. "I'm Dreaming," like the other stories, is a memoir. Again, the narrator, from that undisclosed adult perspective, re-creates a childhood self, time, and place in order to recapture that elusive (and most likely illusory) moment of peace and equilibrium he senses is there, embedded in past experience. Inevitably, he discovers the opposite--the foundations of his dual vision, and the painful moment of entry into mature, self-reflexive artistic awareness.

The narrator desires a special tribal identity. he wants to partake of the "evangelical" communion, the "spell of hockey" (pp. 66, 65), to solidify its evanescence with the language of his narrative. He believes in magic. He discovers the potent letters--"sch"--which link his mother's maiden name (Deschênes) with that of his American uncle (Schmitz), who is a living symbol of the perpetual good life, of rampant success, of the conquest of this baffling, heterogeneous continent. The "strange clot of letters" form a blood connection (but, significantly, one which will not flow freely), and the narrator joyfully sees himself "refracted even into second and third cousins seve-

ral times removed" (p. 67). He is eager to belong to this new Florida tribe and, through his association, to transcend the grim physical and psychological confines of his Montreal slum.

But the narrator already has an entrenched tribal identity which repels all transitory or fantastical ones. It is an identity which does not yield to denial, no matter how vehement: "Lacroix, I said to myself: how could he and I have the same name? It was foreign. I was a Deschênes, a Schmitz in the making" (p. 70). Foreign as reality: Lacroix is, inalterably, the narrator's name (we never even learn his first name). With the power of a word, he is emblazoned with the familial emblem of martyrdom; the Lacroix are martyrs to poverty and failure. They are branded with an image as well: the senior Lacroix has a tattoo, "a kind of tribal marking," of "a front-faced Rocket, staring at an imaginary goalie and slapping a rising shot through a cloud of ice chips" (p. 69). The narrator imagines that others will believe he conceals his own smaller version of the tattoo beneath his shirt, for he is the junior member of the tribe that continually shoots with all it's worth but never scores, never achieves a goal, never manages to stay the flux in a moment of perfection. The Lacroix (two lines, two lives, intersecting but running off in opposite directions) spawn a solitary child who must incorporate their conflict: "So there I stood in my Boston Bruins shirt

loving the Rocket. There was always a spot of perversity in the things I loved. In school the nuns called me 'Curette'--'Little Priest'" (p. 64). The narrator, Curette, is a cross-cultural paperboy, purveyor of the word, a go-between, a mediator of extremes, linking and ministering to diametrically opposed parents. He is perverse, ironic, double-sided. His mother, in her morbid and melancholy Catholicism ("'Too long in the convent,' my father would shout--a charge that could explain my mother's way with money or her favors" [p. 63]), looks steadfastly toward the future and the promised rewards of the after-life. His father wallows in the mutable present, gambling, drinking, and drowning in bad luck. The narrator is a hybrid: aloof and involved, he combines his parents' perspectives in his own retrospective one. Leaving Montreal, the narrator travels south with his parents to the Florida coast in pursuit of an elusive fortune that only an "American Uncle" can provide. On the descent, "My father rejoiced in the cheaper gas; my mother reminded him it was a smaller gallon. Quietly, I calculated the difference" (p. 68). He is the difference, the answer to their equation. He is growing, toward a mature awareness, calculating the sum of his double nature.

The Lacroix end their journey at the hard coastline. They can go no further. The ocean is amorphous, infinite; it is the future they are barred from, for Uncle Howie, who

"walks closer to the water" (p. 70), has inevitably refused them. The Lacroix will be neither admitted to the new tribal circle, nor readmitted to the old: the narrator's father has lost home and job in Montreal to Réal, the brother he left in charge. Howie has denied them their future, and Réal has annexed their past. The family is left broken, ostracized, suspended in chaos; the senior Lacroix is "finished . . . squashed like a worm underfoot" (p. 72). This is tribal justice: the weak and the wayward will be disenfranchised.

"Broward Dowdy"'s narrator sees himself reflected in the outcast Broward, "Grids and Doglegs"'s in an imagined audience of Pittsburgh adolescent outcasts, and "I'm Dreaming"'s in his own outcast father. Overhearing the conversation of his mother and aunt, the narrator wonders "is it me, or my father" (p. 70) they are talking of. The boundaries between them are blurred. They are united by a name, a symbol, a tattoo, and by their reverence for a hero (a hero the father tragically fails to rival in his son's eyes), but they are ultimately severed by the sentence imposed/conferred upon them. The father is weak, and is destroyed by ostracization. The son is wayward, gaining strength, and is freed into artistic awareness by the penalty of isolation. "I can see all this and hear it, though I am utterly alone" (p. 71): he has the voice and the vision, the power to remember, to imagine, and to creatively

reorder experience. "I always had the sense of being the first in my family--which is to say the first of my people --to think my thoughts, to explore the parts of Montreal that we called foreign, even to question . . . " (p. 63). This narrator sounds like "Broward Dowdy"'s narrator, who also describes the intoxication of his rising creative power and his primacy in his native wilderness, but finally, the voice of the younger Lacroix is tempered with a desperation more characteristic of Normie Dyer: "I'd kept looking on the other side of things--my side--and I'd kept twirling the radio dial, for an equivalence that never came" (p. 68). He will never possess the other side; he will remain divided, bilingual; he will never strike the balance although, paradoxically, his art will be formed by his pursuit of it. His art and his psyche must remain split, self-reflexive, an array of sides, aspects, dimensions that will never coalesce.

The narrators of the three stories discussed so far have much in common: each is an only child; independent and resourceful beyond his years; precocious and thus condemned to intellectual isolation; the product of polarized, even estranged, parents; inheritor of a dual vision; an artist in the making. This pattern of characterization, established in A North American Education (with such narrators as Frankie Thibidault), becomes even more firmly entrenched and more focused in Tribal Justice. But, before we can

fully conform our understanding of the work to the pattern, the pattern is undermined. This art, and the experiences it reflects, will not be reduced to formula.

"Notes Beyond a History," like the other stories, is self-reflexive. Most evidently, it is a memoir, an autobiographical reflection of its creator. It is also, like the others, a story about art, but here we encounter the <u>failure</u> of art--the failure of the narrator's artistry, his refusal to consciously accept tribal expulsion as the price for artistic vision, and his ultimate acceptance of mediocrity.

Sutherland, the narrator, is not an only child: he has a brother named Tom, and the two are raised by their mother "to love each other" (p. 92). The narrator recalls their boyhood, spent on the shores of Florida's Lake Oshacola, and their fateful fascination with a neighbour: "Her name was Theodora Rourke and she was ninety-two." Theodora's house, enclosed by briar hedges and "twisted trees," is set back from the water: "She had not wanted to see the lake--what was it but an ocean of alligators, the breeder of chilling fevers?" Water is unbounded. It harbours the dangerous, the unseen, the occult, the mysterious "other side of things." Theodora herself is the embodiment of these qualities: "She didn't need the water" for she contains her own uncharted ocean. The Sutherlands reside at the edge of "a rich Bermuda lawn reaching to the water"

(p. 91). The boys reach to the water for imaginative sustenance--on that unrestrictive element they fish, and explore, and play at the fringes of the unknown. The qualities of water, then, are the qualities that draw the brothers to Theodora Rourke.

She is enigmatic: her origins are only marginally etched in recorded history. The rest of her story is consigned to the tantalizing, but cloudy and elliptical, realm of myth. "She was Catholic . . . the lone example of an absent conspiracy," and as such (according to the narrator's "poor tormented" mother), is a "Black Sister" who flies by night on "leathery wings" to suck the blood of innocents. Imaginative speculation is offered no restraint, for Theodora can encompass and support it all. Theodora reflects the unadulterated geography--primal, untamed, infinite: she is "the first by such a gulf that a comparison with anyone else is absurd" . . . as absurd as the Sutherlands' groomed and incongruous lawn. The Sutherlands, bound to the "Modern Era," risk being reduced, diminished, impeded by its rigorous historical evaluation and classification, while Theodora is sovereign and unquantifiable in "All Time" (p. 92).

But the Sutherland brothers do, coincidentally, gain access to the unrecorded dimension of Theodora, the offspring of "an unmarried mother of unknown origins, and an Irish father similarly anonymous" (p. 99). Propelled by

innate curiosity ("We had to follow . . . because it's there"), the boys pursue a retreating mulatto priest ("'The devil hisself,' Tom whispered"), who has been to administer last rites to the dying Theodora, on a voyage along a strange primordial creek whose mouth has been, until now, obscured from their view and whose dense, teeming life hinders their advance: "I poled half an hour, never catching [the priest]. The creek curved and branched, trees thinned and thickened, birds hooted and then were gone. There were pockets of breeze, then deadness . . . " (p. 100). This is the zone of thriving contrasts: the water gets deeper and mystery compounds in the approach to the other side. Then the boys find the entrance to the canal.

We know about the canal. The narrator has related its history in an earlier passage of his narrative which reads like an excerpt from his objective History of Hartley, and now he reintroduces it as an aspect of personal experience empowered with enormous metaphoric significance. The canal, we have learned, was proposed as a lucrative trade route, "A guaranteed safe passage between New York and New Orleans," a castrating arc linking the polarities of north and south, and severing the wild southern extension of the Florida peninsula. (The possibility of establishing a penal colony in the severed region, "the swampy, pestiferous south," was even put forward.) Crews were sent to "dynamite the forest and butcher the indigenous tribes" (p. 99),

but all plans to tame the wild Florida interior, to superimpose a canal system, were finally jettisoned. The wilderness rejected the imposition of system (as Theodora rejects the imposition of historical definition, and the other side rejects the imposition of logic and language)--the project was never completed. There can be no "safe passage" between extremes.

Tom and the narrator follow the canal into a nightmare. Their passageway curves and they enter the other side, a region beyond a history: "The records show no settlement of mixed-blood Catholics in Oshacola County in 1932, or at any other time" (p. 103). The boys have discovered Theodora's tribe--the "absent conspiracy," the issue of itinerant canal builders and indigenous women, the children of an aborted system, the living result of the enforced, unnatural linking of polarities--and they are terrified. Tom "began to retch. Then he screamed. 'There's something wrong with them.' . . . They were as light as we were, but not the way we were, and their hair . . . was just colorless. And then I seemed to be looking into the opaque, colorless eyes of [Theodora], and into the bleeding side of Jesus . . . " (p. 102). Worlds collide; the martyrs unite, fortified by anger; the colony of inbred mulattos turns on the sons of Hartley's leading family, violently, pelting them with stones and screaming "'Morte, morte.'" The narrator hopes "they'd see how young I was, how

frightened" (p. 103), but in this other world childhood and innocence are eclipsed. The brothers "were reeling backwards now, as fast as I could paddle and Tom could slash. I tried to stay near the middle, but what good was it?" (p. 102). The memory cannot be undone. There is no safe middle ground.

Tom and "I," that harmonious unit of brotherly love, are blasted apart by the force of their discovery and hurled into adulthood in opposite directions. They embody a double-sided response to the violent overlap, to the volatile eruption of the unknown and unlimited onto the smooth surface of the mundane and measurable. "I live in the dark, Tom in the light" (p. 104). The narrator becomes a historian, Tom a "builder of rockets--Apollo moon probes" (p. 93). The narrator is enmired in Hartley; Tom leaves forever. The narrator looks to the past, to an abridged and systematized history; Tom looks to the future, to a conquered universe. Both ascend to a perspective that will shrink the world to safe proportions, to a diagram, a map. The narrator's office, "air-conditioned, wrapped in tinted glass, eight floors up," affords a view of the turbulent, enigmatic Oshacola that reduces it to a "pond on some giant's greens" (p. 93). To Tom, the locale of the original nightmare must seem minute, inconsequential, for his mind now probes outer space.

The narrator knows there are two ways to write: to record "what I see with my eyes closed, books shut" (p. 93),

and to record the "objective facts"--to write a History of Hartley. The story represents his last effort with the first method, his last foray into imagination, into pure recollection. The narrator's chosen life work, his masterpiece, his History, is merely a piece; it is the most accessible part of the whole of reality. Science and history have replaced art. The world is a self-contained formula that will never be permitted to expand, dangerously, through metaphor or creative ambiguity.

The narrator, in his failure to come to terms with his past, his perception, his art, belongs to Hartley, the town with the "creeping center" (p. 94). He has allowed his life to be "landscaped" in tandem with his environment: "Oshacola is beautifully landscaped now. . . . Hartley and its suburbs are gleaming white." He has allowed his memory to become as "civilized" as the lake has become. "I am not a shrewd man" (p. 93), he tells us. He wonders if the experience on the canal compelled him "to become an historian--and prevent[ed] me from becoming a good one." We know it has because we are more capable than he of deciphering the subtexts of his narrative. His safe choices have condemned him to mediocrity, to impotence. The narrator loses the self-reflexivity crucial to the artist not because he has achieved wholeness, but because he has sacrificed his other side for a controllable universe, he has purposefully diminished his vision, he has stifled his imagination, and

he has relinquished Tom: his "other," his dimension. Without art, without self-reflexive tension, everything is left "crumbling into foolishness" (p. 104).

"Among the Dead," the final story of Tribal Justice, shares some fundamental qualities with the other stories, but must also be dealt with on its own terms. All the stories comprising Blaise's two collections deal with forms of isolation and its profound impact on artistic vision, but "Among the Dead" carries the notion of isolation to a new extreme.

Certainly "Among the Dead" stands with the others as an essentially self-reflexive narrative. We again see the world through the eyes of a highly self-conscious narrator who is compelled both to live his life story (to inhabit the Grecian Urn) and to stand back from it in order that he may describe it, infuse it with a metaphoric dimension, and render it artistically coherent: "Even as I speak to them [the anonymous narrator is a journalist who lectures on a volunteer basis to a group of penitentiary inmates] of minimum wages and equitable distribution, I see myself as a Jesuit instructing the Iroquois. I dream my immolation" (p. 221). The fantasy, the longed-for climax, is martyrdom to a unifying faith, death by fire, purification, a final melding of a tragically divided personality. But Blaise's narrators must remain divided; they must speak in two voices: Lacroix with bitter practicality and fuzzy nostal-

gia, Dyer with empiricism and ambiguity, and Sutherland with pragmatism and intuition. The narrator of "Among the Dead" is a journalist who knows "more than I can print" (p. 218), and that knowledge which cannot be stamped with a recognized political affiliation, confined to fact, limited in connotation, or expressed logically, must inevitably find an outlet ("Everything that's suppressed will eventually be exposed," says Blaise [Hancock, pp. 56-57]). It is channelled to expression through the narrator's other voice: the voice of the artist. In "Notes," Blaise finally makes the implicit double voice of narration explicit by alternating fragments of the history book with "notes beyond a history." In "Among the Dead," the double voice is there, figuratively and literally, in the first sentence (that "microcosm of the whole"). Here, we realize, the process of the integration of the two voices is advanced; the narrative is split and charged, poised on the brink of the volatile interaction of extremes which ends in silence.

The story begins like this:

> In a certain season (the late winter) and in certain areas (those fringes between the city core and the river that makes it an island) Montreal is the ugliest city in the world. (p. 217)

With remarkable economy of language, Blaise evokes the general mood and particular implications of rupture and division in a single sentence. The fundamental split is here

established to be deepened and embellished through the course of the work. Composed of information contained within and without two sets of parentheses, the sentence serves as a vehicle for the interplay of determinacy and indeterminacy. The word "certain" emphasizes the importance of the specificity of time ("late winter") and locale ("those fringes"), yet does not provide those specifications. Another voice does this, and we are thus confronted with two distinct internecine yet mutually-sustaining narrative voices. One voice has cloven the body of the text with parentheses and inserted itself, profoundly altering rhythm, compounding and creating meaning. One voice supplies what the other withholds: together they form a single yet painfully divided personality. The bracketed voice--the journalist who "want[s] to reach people directly" (p. 218)--supplies the alleged facts, particulars, ostensibly providing the reader with an objective base from which to extrapolate reality. He trades in dead language, artificially limits and situates, fixes and embalms. The unbracketed voice is the narrator as creator, as artist, whose literary language generates ambiguity, the element of unlimited universal meaning. This ambiguity is intimate yet uncontainable, it mirrors the perpetual underlying mystery of experience, and it represents that vast entity against which the artist must struggle in order to balance and complete understanding: to be engaged in the struggle, to be

rooted in one's environment, is to be alive, to have succeeded in not being numbered "among the dead." The first sentence simultaneously creates and is created by these two voices, displays their peculiar harmony and tension, division and interdependency, and foreshadows their violent interaction (precariously kept at bay by a thin parenthetical membrane) by dramatically contrasting a terse, flat description of two borderlands with the explosive word "ugliest" which characterizes the overlapping frontier.

The sentence also illuminates Blaise's typical geographical split: the divided self of the two voices is extended by and equated with a divided physical environment. Two voices, two personae, two islands: the narrative traces the narrator's journey from the island of Montreal to the St-Vincent-de-Paul penitentiary on Île Jésus, and back again. The fringe areas between the islands are a geographical region, a social microcosm, the residue of "broken hearts," the narrator's state of mind. The fringes, in every sense, are characterized by a word which emerges repeatedly in the story after having been introduced in the first paragraph. "Bongoûtisme" is a pivotal word: it is "the Quebec compromise, cropping up everywhere . . . all those self-appointed rois des bas prix, the Gaz, the Chars Usagées, the famous Chien-Chaud Steamé . . . "; in its political form it is "a kind of rampant self-expressionism that quickly becomes caricature" (pp. 217-18). The word

embodies paradox: it means its opposite. In breeding an indigenous hybrid of two powerful, removed cultures, we have appropriated the worst from each; bongoûtisme is their mongrel offspring, self-perpetuating monstrously, chaotically, projecting only meaninglessness. We are a fringe culture, a product of an unnatural overlap (an inbred tribe sequestered in a Florida backwater?). The word and the culture are italicized, foreign yet familiar, directly translatable. They are differentiated, monsters standing out from the norm and from the page: a different type set in a different type. Bongoûtisme is two words forced into one, held together tenuously by the suffix "isme." It stands for the zone of isolation, for the violent region of coalescing polarities Blaise's narrators are compelled to explore and to finally inhabit.

The penitentiary, hotbed of political bongoûtisme, is a "recognizable" reflection of its creator, the society across the river. The prison is a "new society: the ultimate in authority, but recognizable in convention, etiquette, nuance and taboo, madness, and waste. It is a society based totally in the present--the future has been legislated out and the past is irrelevant" (p. 219). "Among the Dead," the final story, is not a memoir. It is a narrative which, like its narrator (who never leaves the insulated environment of his car), like the prison house, like the fringe society and its culture, is stranded--iso-

lated in the present. Temporal continuity and the meaning, the sense of rootedness it carries, are destroyed.

Midou, the narrator's wife (his tribe, his past and future), has vanished. She got up one day, dressed, and "never came back" (p. 222). She succumbs to terminal "rampant self-expressionism." She becomes "Madeleine," political activist, "hard like a cinder . . . as though the fires of transfiguration had already passed through her and what we are seeing is not a person but the brilliant, essential residue." This death residue generates the new tribe for the new society: "Everywhere on the streets I see Madeleine Lacroixs. By the hundreds. Except, perhaps, here on Viau between the river and the Métropolitaine, still the heart of sacrecoeur country. Here between the worlds of my dead mother and my ex-wife where it's almost comic if you can keep your balance" (p. 223). This fringe land, this breeding ground for ugliness and broken hearts, is the last region where art can exist, though all art issuing from it, while of necessity split and self-reflexive, must also be "comic," diminished, debased. It would take a consummate ironist, an artist, to maintain the balance that allows for art (however tainted), and to hold himself apart from his dead past and the death-in-life which is his present. It would also take unparalleled courage. As he moves through the fringes, the narrator receives an "omen." This zone is hazardous: "I know suddenly that I'm in danger." A broken

cinder block from a speeding scavenger truck "bursts loose . . . and I helplessly slide into position to receive it." It deflects harmlessly off the car into the wall of snow that permits the driver no exit from the expressway, but the warning has registered. For the narrator, the truck is the "low, brute force of nature," and the cinder block is a chunk of the death residue of a society in ruins: he is violently repelled by their combined power. "Other cars have taken my place, in cautious pursuit, rushing to embrace the city" (p. 224). Like his counterparts in the rest of the collection, this artist is finally stalled, run off the road, stranded in limbo, isolated, self-reflexive. His narrative, like the others, is an expression of alienation. But in "Among the Dead," the outlook is bleaker than ever before.

The narrator of "Broward Dowdy" stands at the launching point of his artistry, aware of the tragic nature of existence, but also aware that he is strong and gaining strength, aware of the infinite possibility the world holds for him. Language remains to be stretched and tested. The narrator of "Among the Dead," heading into middle age, has experienced the erosion of his creative power. He has become an "easy ironist" (p. 222); he is rapidly losing the ability to give artistic expression to the tragedy he is living. His physical geography no longer fuels and sustains his art; it infiltrates, dilutes, and undermines it.

He has seen his artist voice contaminated by his "journalist" voice--the voice of dead language, of creative atrophy, of curtailed meaning. Artistic isolation, once the milieu of creative autonomy, has become a prison house. Art has become a compromise, self-reflexivity an affliction.

Note

[1]Clark Blaise, Tribal Justice (Toronto: General, 1974), p. 121. All further references to this work appear in the text.

CHAPTER THREE

Lunar Attractions

In an interview, Clark Blaise comments on Lunar Attractions, his first novel, and on his autobiographical compulsion: "It's a novel about the total development of an individual. . . . I think I will need the shell of autobiography in anything I do. . . . I will continue to accept the shape of my life as it has been given to me."[1] Lunar Attractions chronicles narrator David Greenwood's physical, emotional, sexual, political, and, most vividly, artistic coming of age; it is a telling fragment of a life (focusing as it does on David from age five to seventeen, and on his migration from a Florida swamp to a northern city) which constantly intersects with Blaise's own. The mode of autobiographical memoir, initiated in A North American Education and Tribal Justice, is again adopted in Lunar Attractions, to be extended, developed, and refined--as we will see--to a self-reflexivity unprecedented in its thorough and virtually seamless integration into every level of the text.

The limited amount of criticism Lunar Attractions has sparked (with the exception of Barry Cameron's study, only a few short reviews) examines Blaise's thematic concerns and points to his use of the autobiographical (or sometimes merely biographical) format, but does not venture discussion of the work's inherent self-reflexivity. Cameron tells us that Lunar Attractions charts "the psycho-sexual development of the protagonist towards wholeness, self-realization, and selfhood . . . expressed by his growth as an artist, particularly in terms of artistic vision and the quality of that vision." He also offers some provocative insights into the work--for instance that it is an exemplar of Blaise's idea that fiction is "a means of discovering, inventing, identity" (Cameron, pp. 52, 53)--which could serve as solid springboards for an exploration of self-reflexivity.

Sandra Martin claims that Blaise "is a solipsist . . . dredging up his own past not from anger, resentment, or undigested horror, but from curiosity." Martin believes that this inclination on the part of the author, ostensibly toward obsessive self-examination, has, ultimately, a more universal purpose: "he has the introspective technique and the sensitivity to mine his past, exposing first this part and then that to the light, and to establish the patterns that illuminate and express all our pasts."[2] Self-reflexivity, in Martin's analysis, becomes strangely impersonal;

it is just an implement to a broader kind of understanding which she does not articulate.

R.H. Ramsay identifies Lunar Attractions as "A novel of growth and identity," in which the narrator "encounters himself" as he encounters the world. The novel runs into difficulty, however, because, finally, "Experience seems wasted on David"; he "seems too naive."[3] Philip Marchand finds the novel to be "an extended biography of the character who has become familiar to readers of Blaise's previous collections." Blaise, as "a portraitist of childhood and adolescence," fails in a certain measure to fulfill his obligations, for he "does not fully weigh the reasons his hero leaves childhood and adolescence so emotionally crippled."[4] Both Ramsay and Marchand avoid dealing with Blaise's particular notion of what constitutes memoir. Both maintain a strict division between author and narrator (the work is merely biographical), and thus circumvent discussion of the implications of self-reflexivity. Both find the work partially flawed and somewhat unsatisfying.

With Lunar Attractions, it seems even more apparent than ever before that an exhaustive exploration of the work's essential (structural, metaphoric, thematic) self-reflexivity is required if we are to reach a full and satisfying understanding of Blaise's artistry.

* * *

Even the "germ" of an idea is a metaphor. Even if we manage to penetrate to the very heart of a Clark Blaise story, we are confronted with a metaphor, an equivalency, a substitute. It is the nature of his art; his story is conceived that way: "I think of a story as essentially a single metaphor and the exfoliation of a single metaphor through dense layers of submetaphors . . . every sentence [must] in some way be a part of that metaphor" (Hancock, p. 56). Lunar Attractions conforms smoothly to this model. Founded on a central metaphor, the novel generates layers of submetaphors like leaves, like skins, which shelter and enhance that central metaphor, the story's core of meaning, as the folds of David Greenwood's brain shelter and enhance their imaginative core, "the fabled salt-machine that fell overboard and kept churning, eventually filling the seas."[5]

The central metaphor of Lunar Attractions is the text itself as a literal embodiment of the narrator's developing artistic awareness, of the tortuous rise of his creative power. David learns to perceive metaphor, to see equivalence between discrete aspects of his experience, to write. Characteristically, the metaphor is self-reflexive in a variety of ways. After a brief discussion of four major self-reflexive aspects of the central textual metaphor, I will devote the rest of this chapter to an examination of Lunar Attractions as memoir, the most pervasive and the most important of these aspects.

First, the text is structurally self-reflexive. It is structured on four fragments of the mind of its creator; four verbal "pictures" of David's transforming brain are interspersed like regular supports throughout his narrative: his first shadowy recollection, a morass of melted crayons, a nightmarish tableau vivant in a museum, and "over a thousand pages in four thick binders" (p. 220)--letters sent and received from a legion of crackpot psychics and religious fanatics, aliens and con artists. The text is also divided into three sections, a formation which aptly mirrors David's stance as he moves toward artistic voice and vision. He is perpetually the third: the most oblique angle of the triangle, the unexpected result of the double-sided equation, the unlikely hybrid of contrasts. He is the "inheritor of my parents' . . . contradictions" rather than their gifts (p. 31); he is intellectually suspended in an indeterminate space between school friends Wesley, who champions "induction and elimination," and Irving, who proceeds "not by logic but by analogy" (pp. 114, 115); he is the force that can both fuse and divide Laurel and Larry Zywotko. The last, and by far the shortest, section of the novel is the most fractured by chapter divisions (there are five, as compared with three and four in the longer first and second sections). David must continually begin again. The section's fragmented structure reflects the proliferation of his already diverse range of

interests toward the end of his narrative (the end of the development of his artistic awareness), and his equally rapid rejection of these interests--these miscarried "approaches to art" (p. 133)--as his need to gain access to a definitive means of creative expression grows more acute. Lunar Attractions is also structurally self-reflexive in that it concretely demonstrates the fundamental split in David's psyche. David has a ubiquitous second voice which dissents in italics ("A voice whispered to me, this is crazy; you've done something crazy" [p. 77]), and qualifies in parentheses ("Yet I have watched my father [let me say it now: I have watched my father like no son has ever watched his father]" [p. 11]).

Second, the text is self-reflexive in that it is the autobiography both of its author and its narrator. We see Blaise through David's unfolding life, of which Lunar Attractions is an embodiment. In a recent essay Blaise writes:

> I grew to believe in the co-existence, or the simultaneity, of visible and occult worlds: duplicities, masks, hidden selves, discarded languages, altered names, things not being what they seemed. Add to that the continual moves . . . the social adjustments . . . the tension of my parents' marriage, and the gifted memory, and the ego-thrust towards immortal vengeance, and you have the formative, pre-literate experience of an eventual artist (if lucky), or a functional neurotic. It still took a series of fortunate accidents and gifted teachers to coax the writer from all that unformed, possibly poisonous sludge. ("Revenge," p. 59)

David too has discovered hidden selves everywhere (his unborn sister, the mudfish buried in the yard, Laurel, Sheila), discarded languages (his father's French, his mother's German), altered names (he learns that his real name is not Greenwood but Boisvert, and that virtually everyone has an alias). Blaise emerges from poisonous sludge; David rises from "the nightsoil of my imagination" (p. 17). For Blaise, things are not what they seem; for David, "even implacable principles are in contention" (p. 26). In every detail of the passage, Blaise describes David's imaginative formation as he describes his own.

Third, David's struggle to achieve artistic vision becomes his art's (Lunar Attractions') subject once that vision is achieved. The text is "proto-fiction" (p. 132), the seminal product of the seminal experience. It is the only true means, after all others have been exhausted, to self-knowledge: "Another thing I know--and I have learned it as I write--is that my kind of innocence, because it is so complicated, is the most dangerous, most corrupt kind of knowledge. We all 'know' this of course--what is propriety but the stench of repression?" (p. 133). To write of the formation and demise of that corrupted innocence from the vantage point of hard-won creative sovereignty is to free the word "know" from quotation marks, to activate a real, unbounded self-knowledge.

Fourth, while David demonstrates his madness, his essential split, his "paranoid schizophrenia" (p. 70) through

a myriad of "submetaphors," the most profound demonstration of his divided nature relates to the central textual metaphor. David acts both as the text's creator and as its audience. The most vivid example of this compulsion is found in a key passage situated almost exactly at the midpoint of the narrative. Here, the narrative flow is riven (bisected as neatly as its creator's personality), and interpretive commentary inserted. David tells us that "the digging episodes of my childhood and the map fantasies were approaches to art, metaphors lying beyond me waiting to be claimed, named, and mastered" (p. 133). David's father, furniture salesman (and sport fisherman) employs a catchphrase which David evokes several times in the course of his narrative, and each time it wields a greater metaphoric impact: "'He's taken the hook, let him run with it.'" "He" is the manipulated customer who "flounder[s] in his uneasy freedom" (p. 53)--the fish, the audience, the "mark." Narrator/salesman becomes his own mark; the author becomes his own audience. In this passage, David is running with the baited hook, with the line of metaphors he has already "sold" us in the first half of his story:

> Those maps were megalomaniacal fantasies, explorations of the unsettled provinces of my own and of others' bodies. . . . The mudfish, the worms in my stomach, they were real to me as projections of my body--my wretched, unresponsive body. I didn't take the equation far enough. The mudfish was my [stillborn] sister, and I killed her--yes! But my sister was my penis, and I wanted to chop it off--yes! In drawing maps

> and creating continents, I was reinventing and renaming myself; devoted, like "Mac" in those Charles Atlas ads, to my own brand of dynamic tension. I looked to those maps for confirmation the way narcissists look into mirrors, the way skinny teenagers lift weights. (p. 133)

So, spanning a north-central Florida childhood and an adolescence spent in "Palestra" (a fictionalized Pittsburgh), David's eclectic array of interests (map-making, geography, digging in the foul Florida mud--and later archaeology--astronomy, torching anthills, stamp collecting [or gathering, until he learns the difference], baseball, a particular "tableau vivant" or "stuffed display" at the Palestra museum entitled "Nubian Lion, Attacking Bedouin and Camel" [pp. 92, 93, 94], satiric correspondence with various fringe mail-order societies) are united, equivalent, in that they are all ultimately abortive approaches to fiction. So the attainment of artistic maturity and the acceptance of physical (sexual) maturity are concurrent aspects of a single process: an imaginative castration and a rebirth into a new awareness, the loss of a corrupt innocence. David rapidly exfoliates the metaphor for us; we are deflated, excluded from our role as audience, as active (albeit "uneasy") co-creators of the text. All our creative extensions of story events, all our metaphoric connections, are subsumed by his. He has reclaimed the text, refashioning it into a unit of his own self-reflexivity, and nothing is permitted to cloud the reflected image. Any

random interpretation is ruled out. David, becoming logical interpreter of the text he is intuitively creating, weaves all disparate narrative strands into a single created object. Nothing is superfluous in this controlled self-portrait--except the audience.

The central metaphor--Lunar Attractions itself as an equivalent of its narrator's artistic coming of age (encompassing his sexual, physical, intellectual, emotional, and political maturation)--is also self-reflexive in that the narrative takes the form of a memoir. Certainly the novel is an autobiography, the narrator's personal memoir in the broad context: it is the story of the life of its creator. But it is specifically a self-reflexive memoir for another reason. David is compelled to trace the gradual transformation of a single memory, and that transformation reflects the development of his artistic perceptual ability. Lunar Attractions, then, on one level, is the artist's investigation of the convoluted process of his own memory, which somewhere shelters the source of his fiction.

The voice of David's artistry, buried in "the night-soil of my imagination," in the "purple-black muck" of Florida (p. 17), in the "underground colony, [the] anthill" of Palestra (p. 140), will "not surface again for thirty years" (p. 30), and by the time it does it has become Lunar Attractions. Take your memories and submerge them, force them from the surface of your consciousness--like Normie

Dyer ("scream a memory out of existence") and Sutherland ("Not only has the lake been civilized, but so has my memory" [Tribal Justice, pp. 60, 102])--and allow it to ferment for three decades or until the transformation is complete: this is Blaise's unorthodox recipe for memoir. It serves one, divided in two. The idea appears in a more elaborate form in a piece published three years before Lunar Attractions, which introduces a number of details the novel later expands upon. Here Blaise observes:

> After 30 years of memories things have been buried long enough to be transformed, they've taken root in different soil. Night soil. After 30 years your buried selves have mouldered long enough to push to the surface again and confront you like some monstrous mistake of nature, not just dog-eating birds, but armies of snails, say, that you never thought could harm you until they slowly march across you at night, plastering your eyes shut in their wake, and sealing your mouth forever. ("The Sense of An Ending," p. 65)

The memoir, then, in Blaise's hands, is a kind of self-reflexive late-night horror story. To formulate the memoir is to dig up one's painful past at a precise moment in the development of both the memory and the one who remembers, to confront one's past with language just before it can emerge of its own accord, unexpectedly, devastatingly. To write the memoir is to write against silence, against death by (self-) suffocation.

The way in which the narrator formulates his memoir has everything to do with the conditions of his birth.

David is an only child, reminding us frequently and in many ways that he is "a freak" (p. 5): a "thin-fat" (p. 92), "partially right-handed" (p. 6) "wise-idio[t]" (p. 32), and bearer of the "only circumcision" in central Florida (p. 19). He is indelibly stamped with "the comic misprint of my genetic code" (p. 21), the incarnation of his parents' contradictions and divergent weaknesses, genetically split and self-reflexive. He is a potential artist. The conditions of his birth provide him with the artistic perspective: he is isolated and divided, pulled furiously between parental poles. The same conditions also provide him with the power source, the drive behind the search for a voice of artistic expression: in the sealed swamp of his personality unspent emotions, like noxious and volatile swamp gases, gain alarming potency. Implosion/explosion is imminent, and there are three possible results: self-destruction, murder, or the violent birth of artistic vision. David describes his conundrum:

> My passion--even my love--had no outlet. It led back to myself, and it still leads me to fall on my knees and shake the crib or the desk, to pound my fist a hundred times a day in a fit of sudden anger, remorse or embarrassment. The only child is inevitably a monster: all that love dammed up inside him . . . with nothing in his scale to return it to . . . he possesses some instinct to assure himself, even murderously, of supremacy. He exercises a sterilizing influence, destroying whatever will or potential there had been to create more like him. (p. 42)

His birthright is an unbounded ego. He must sterilize, castrate, murder all that has the power to touch him and evoke his love, and that is worlds ("my compassion, like my fear, was universal. I felt sorry for tires scalding on concrete" [p. 36]). He possesses the instinct to destroy in order to re-create in terms he can understand and control absolutely. A survival principle enacted is an act of love is an act of rage is the act of artistic creation. The narrator's ego fuses love, rage, and art, and that combined force is turned, obsessively, back on its own origins, and on its own progenitor--the narrator himself. The product is a violently self-reflexive memoir, a memoir of its own process of becoming.

David records his earliest memory in the first two pages of his narrative. It is the prototypical experience, the determinant of the meaning embedded in all subsequent experiences, and the basis of his memoir. Father and son embark on a fishing trip to a Florida backwater during which they are nearly thrown from their boat by a giant alligator whose baby is snagged on their line. David's father does not see the creature explode onto the still surface of the water, and will never credit David's explanation of the resulting life-threatening upheaval. Though he believes they "were dead already," David "snapped the fishline with a touch of the blade. My father was over me in an instant shouting, 'Good God, no, no!' and beating the

metal handle of the now-limp rod against the side of the boat. . . . His face was the darkest red I'd ever seen. His anger, for the moment, was directed at the water and sky, but he had seen me cut the line." This is the first castration, the first assertion of ego, the first act motivated simultaneously by love, rage, and the need for artistic expression, and in the space of a moment the action deeply and inexorably alters David's world. In an instant, and for the first time, the father demonstrates fear, a lapse of control, the fact that he is not invincible. In an instant, and for the first time, the son seizes the knife and the opportunity to assert his own mastery. David's love wields a lethal blade; it packs the force of a blow from an alligator's tail ("a sonic boom" [p. 4]); it is sexually aggressive (the thrusting tail, the plunging knife); it overwhelms and destroys its object. To love, for him, is to subsume, to incorporate love's object into his own ego, to be involved yet alone, to be split and self-reflexive. David enters the realm of obscure isolation, the training ground of art, the interminable lunar night: "the full moon blazed like a spotlight, and I could feel shadows under us as we rowed home in our normal silence. . . . The shadow and silence never lifted" (pp. 4-5). The bond between father and son is severed, and in effecting that severance David has destroyed a part of himself.

A brush, a glimpse of the potent force his as yet unformed persona and his ostensibly serene and orderly world are nurturing, is all a five-year-old David can bear: he buries the memory of the experience deep in imaginative soil. It becomes "the chord my imagination obsessively plays" (p. 3)--compelling and repetitive music. Its volume increases. It will not decompose. It will moulder for thirty years, acquiring a monstrous significance. Internalized, memorized, it becomes an aspect of his personality, a version of himself. In the meantime, he can <u>feel</u> the shadows it casts across his unfolding life. David tries to unearth the subterranean memory monster, the buried self, many times. He is a relentless digger. He makes major digging attempts as a child, as an adolescent, as a teenager, and finally as the adult narrator. His efforts span a lifetime--they are one of the memoir's infrastructures--but only in the final attempt is he successful. In the final attempt the recipe is adhered to; memory is at last cooked to the consistency of art.

In the first attempt, little David digs compulsively in the mud behind the family's Florida cottage. He is digging in the imaginative nightsoil: that rich and fetid loam, that welter of birds and maps and foreign words, of constellations and baseball diamonds, of radio broadcasts from shimmering enclaves in distant worlds, like Arthur Godfrey's Miami Beach and the Manhattan Stork Club. He

digs "in a dream of escaping this world." He wants to submerge himself in another: "my arms would be black below the elbow, my body gray and crusty. . . . I wanted to tear away the soil, to have my private peephole. . . . I wanted to live down there" (p. 17). He wants to dig a tunnel to fiction. He wants to retrieve the power contained in his suppressed memory. He wants to recover a means of artistic expression. One day, the boy uncovers a mudfish, a "smooth, black, and rubbery . . . cable," a "fin-headed monster" (pp. 38, 39) buried deep in the back yard--deep amid his imaginatively transforming memories. The fish's head is cloven by a fin, as the narrator's psyche is cloven by the sharp edge of his parents' marriage. The original experience has become the metaphoric equivalent of the buried mudfish which has now become the metaphoric equivalent of the narrator who is obsessed with the memory of the original experience. Metaphor compounds and circles inward, becoming increasingly self-reflexive. David kills his fish, impaling it with the sharp digging trowel in an action as deft as the flicking of a knife through a fishing line. The tool of imaginative investigation, of art, becomes a castration implement and a murder weapon. David is not yet ready for art. His strength--his love and his rage--remains unharnessed, unstructured, unrefined, uncreative. It burrows inward, undermining the imagination. It is self-destructuve. The memory must be buried again.

In his second major attempt at coming to terms with the powerful, submerged memory, a fourteen-year-old David undertakes "that long descent into the pit of Palestra" (p. 141) from the removed, omniscient prospect of his home on Daley Ridge. He crawls into another hole in the back yard and enters a zone where fantasy is realized, and where the gate between dream and reality is flung wide open. This time David's digging tool is instinct, his burgeoning sexual curiosity. He wants to live down there. In a littered apartment in a dying neighbourhood, in "the queen's chamber" of "the anthill" (p. 142), David has his first "real" sexual encounter. He is drawn to the apartment and seduced by Laurel Zywotko, the incarnation of every adolescent schoolboy's wet dream, the living monument to Fifties America--that schizophrenic decade (the larger context that could breed a David Greenwood) of abject repression and conformity, and blooming prosperity, freedom, and cultural mobility.

That which is radically divided, forcibly suppressed, buried deep in the nightsoil, must invariably undergo a monstrous transformation. David's first recollection moulders in the shadowed silence. The broken rod becomes the butchered mudfish ("alien" disembodied genitals) which, mouldering nine years and nourished by sexual confusion, takes on a bizarre new shape. At the point of simultaneous orgasm, David witnesses Laurel vanish from existence as her "brother" Larry, high-school hood and social outlaw,

emerges: "She, in the process of rising, him" (p. 147). Foraging in the pit, David has unearthed Laurel/Larry, a vivid reflection of his own violent duality--the power source of his fiction, his memoir, his quest for self-knowledge. But the mouldering process is not yet complete. David cannot yet synthesize art from raw love and rage, from imagination and experience. He rejects a full understanding of the experience, at first "convinced that I'd just been shown the secret parts of Daley Ridge's sexiest girl," and later "I both knew and refused to know" (pp. 147, 148).

When the transvestite is murdered a short time later --strangled with the leather thong he used to tie back his penis, and, of course, castrated--David is held as material witness. David could have enacted the brutal crime: Laurel/Larry is "a bigger dreamer than myself" (p. 147), a more dramatically developed split personality, a more attractive and more sexually powerful sibling, and David is admittedly driven to "assure myself, even murderously, of supremacy." He has already committed ritual acts of fused love and rage against his own, and thus against himself: the castration of the father, and the mutilation of the mudfish ("my sister . . . my penis"). He confesses to perpetrating fire-bombings, "Hiroshima-like cataclysm[s]," of "anthills" in order to confirm his own omnipotence (p. 141), and his developing sense of metaphor carries him from one kind of anthill to another. He implicates himself

within the towering walls of his own imagination, of the lunar night he inhabits, where even pop culture is a reflection of his all-encompassing ego: "in my dream, wrapped in the silk threads of my cocoon . . . I had walked down the seven hundred and eighty-three steps to Patience Street like Boris Karloff in The Mummy's Curse, and, attracted to a fellow mummy, fellow cocoon, I had murdered him" (p. 173).

The police never resolve the case: "It was too strange, too aberrational for conventional police methods" (p. 172)--methods that fail to allow for the logic of analogy, of metaphor. But, toward the end of the narrative, it is revealed to David (inadvertently, by Paul Gaylord) that Wesley Duivylbuis is the murderer. Wesley is David's alter ego. He visits a psychoanalyst under David's name and David wonders if "in some parallel universe [Wesley] just might be David Greenwood" (p. 223). "Wesley's a psycho, came a voice that almost whispered. A psycho using my name. A split personality trying to take me over" (p. 224). Wesley is "Wesley" and "David," and David is "a voice" and "David." The two sundered natures merge and identify. David ("on the side of fear, nightmare and of all unanswered things" [p. 181]) has committed the crime, then--by association, indirectly, symbolically, metaphorically. But not actually. This time he has used his habitually "unused breaking muscles," so severely strained on

the stairs descending to Patience Street (p. 141). He is learning a new strength, a new, structured outlet for the volatile feelings issuing from his divided psyche.

The ostracized and all-knowing material (and immaterial, imaginative witness), David feels compelled to guide the stumbling detectives to the realization that Laurel does not exist independently of Larry. To that end, he painstakingly composes an anonymous note, his first literary effort, which reveals the extent to which his artistic awareness has developed. David is taken aback, it's "frightening." In the completed note, "'I' had disappeared. I had become Laurel" (p. 181). David has subsumed Laurel with language, and, recreated in language, Laurel has subsumed David. Language is becoming the fulcrum for David's pain, rage, and love, and that charged, creative language, will profoundly alter the dynamics of his enclosed world, will open it wide to new possibility. The voracious ego persists, but now its essence is expressed through creative language. The ego's expression is no longer an unmediated explosion which devastates its object: the object is now endowed with a new imaginative and very potent life.

For his/her actual murderer--with his "scientific skepticism," his rejection of the "'invalid' and 'inefficient,'" his "sense of mission" (p. 208)--the victim is an intolerable anomaly, an incomprehensible perversion in a

world where there must be a logical, natural, useful place for every possible variation. But David, the junior archaeologist, has learned the value of buried artifacts, of submerged phenomena, of a contiguous collective and personal history: "'Everything is priceless,' . . . was, in fact, the essence of all I had been believing, in my inarticulate and impure way" (p. 202). Everything is the raw substance of art. Everything is acceptable, even anomaly and nightmare, even memory monsters. Blaise has said of his narrators: "Their only triumph is that they have imagination and an ability to accept" (Hancock, p. 57). If these are the criteria, David will triumph. He comes to terms with Laurel (and, ultimately, with his transforming memory) by penetrating her with his imagination instead of a lethal blade. He is learning to transcend his murderous confusion. He is able to justify Laurel by means of a series of metaphoric equivalents, a chain of self-reflexive imagery: she is his moon, his mother, his unborn sister, his own female aspect. But despite their marked development, neither David nor his submerged memory are ready to confront the light of day. The mouldering process continues. David is still "inarticulate" and "impure," still enveloped in the lunar night of his imagination. His mode of artistic expression is still crude; like the note, it is an irregular, intuitive patchwork of words clipped from a jumbled array of sources. The memory must be buried again until its significance has solidified.

The third major digging attempt occurs in the last pages of the narrative. David is seventeen and still afflicted with artistic and sexual confusion, still compelled to dig for the power deposited in a memory.

David tries to alleviate the oppressive gloom of coworker Paul Gaylord who has just suffered a rare sexual rejection: "'Next time she tells you she's got a period,' I told him (not really knowing what it was . . .), 'you tell her that's okay--you've got an exclamation point.' He liked it; he said he'd use it" (p. 258). David understands the power of punctuation: he is well-versed in the peripheral, the borderland of the imagination, the unperformed. He is intimate with the fringes, but his understanding is impaired, incomplete. He partakes of the lunar, but the solar continues to elude him; he is able to intuit the sense but not the core substance of things; he is coming to grips with the tools of his art, but its subject remains untenable.

David is increasingly attracted to "the sweaty, sunshiny experience" of others; he longs to mate it with "the long lunar night that I alone inhabited" (p. 47). He is driven by the urgency of his libido, of his sexual and artistic impulse, to be intolerant of exclusion, to encompass <u>all</u> dualities within his own experience, his own being. He must be balanced, perfectly split, absolutely self-reflexive. He feels a growing need to shed the coc-

oon, to access the memory, to crack the code, to embody both sides of knowledge--but it's so hard to do:

> I seemed to be facing precisely the wrong way, seeking chastity where there was only smut; imagining love where there was only mockery . . . it wasn't just shabby furniture that had a coded ticket on the back, it wasn't just sofas that had two prices. . . . How much of this was apparent to me then, I'll never know. Sometimes I think I knew from the age of five, that first intervention [that first castration, the mouldering memory]. I only know that seventeen was a period of passion: unacted, murdered passion in my life when the school, the store, the houses, the streets were teeming with bodies, all of them . . . writhing with desire, all of them hot and uncomfortable in their clothes, all of them willing for a price, for a wink, for a crook of the finger, to take it off, take it all-l-ll off. (p. 258)

David (like Frankie Thibidault) wants to remain in the audience and to perform the elaborate striptease at the same time. He wants to crawl inside the Grecian Urn while never losing his perspective on it from the outside. He wants to have the experience and write about it too. He wants to watch himself live. He wants to be totally self-reflexive, double-sided. In order to resurrect his "murdered passion" and to thereby attain the other side of knowledge crucial to the formulation of his art, David must engage in an unprecedented act of faith--an act of love--and there is a mounting (self-generated) pressure on him to do so.

The only kind of family life the Greenwoods have unfolds within the context of the furniture business in which

they gradually (completely, by the time David reaches seventeen) invest all the financial capital and emotional energy they possess. David, ever craving to belong, digs in, discovering an apparently safe burrow for himself in the back room of the store, amongst the broken and unassembled "home" furnishings. But in the seamy back room (the underworld, the nightsoil) of cut-throat small enterprise, he also unearths saleswoman Sheila Roberts, a ruthless opportunist who, with her own son in tow, manoeuvres to overthrow David and his mother and to replace them in the family/business hierarchy. Sheila is one of those nightmare snails capable of "plastering your eyes shut . . . and sealing your mouth forever," a threat to artistic vision and voice. She is an embodiment of David's murdered passion, a version of himself buried in the past and mouldered to a sexual grotesque, "overdressed and overmade-up" (p. 260). She incorporates all the castrated selves David has submerged in the nightsoil of memory and imagination (the broken rod, the severed mudfish, the emasculated Larry) in a single ripe and potent manifestation: "It was too monstrous to believe. This <u>creature</u> . . . " But David must be ready this time. This transformed memory will not be buried again so easily. He must now demonstrate faith in his arduously developed ability to channel brute rage and love into a controlled artistic strength; he must now confront monstrosity with monstrosity: "It was all I could do

to stay put, not to advance like Frankenstein's monster" (p. 263). David has become a match for his own past; he will be able to master memoir. The opponents square off:

> Perhaps I expected a gun, something she could hold and point and threaten me with. But of course that wasn't it. The bracelets tinkled violently, even before I saw her move, and in an instant I was confronting a lady with her skirt held high and nothing on underneath, and as in a dream I was advancing, my hands open and ice cold, advancing not for the throat but on that vision: oh, I knew so suddenly <u>everything</u>, how the parts and the passions fitted and I swear it was a moment of love--unashamed and inviolate and heedless of consequence. Then my own small pistol went off in a loud report, doubling me over as she dropped her skirt the moment my fingers touched her there and she was gone and the music came back louder than ever and I found myself clutching the same door frame for support until the spasms passed and then I ran far from the parked cars to lie in the grass under the sun and to wait for the god to invade my blood. (p. 264).

David, encased in his ornately wrought cocoon and suspended, uncomprehending, in the present, joins with Sheila, his nightmarishly transformed past ("all affinities must somehow converge" [p. 116]) for a vivid, compressed instant. That instant contains a touch, a gunshot, an ejaculation. David's touch marks the castration of his buried self; memory is rendered impotent in the sense that it no longer has the power to hold him in shadow and silence. The "report" of David's "own small pistol" marks the violent death of his innocence and inarticulateness. David's ejaculation marks his abandonment to the hot light and

voice on the other side of cold shadow and silence. Here is David's transcendent act of faith and love: he surges through the door on a wave of passion, relinquishing the ordered safety of his lunar enclosure, the support of the door frame, of all formal constraint, of punctuation. The climax (the final sentence) comes in a breathless, uninterrupted, unpunctuated flow.

Rooted in imagination, David reaches across to experience and, fusing the two, embraces art. He now knows "everything." His knowledge of "how the parts and passions fitted" is absolute (freed from quotation marks), for they are now all contained within him. He subsumes all conflicting and interlocking dualities: sun and moon, present and past, light and dark, chaos and order, voice and silence, rage and love, art and sexuality, aggression and passivity, male and female. He advances on vision and is invaded by voice.

David's monstrous buried selves, as well as his vision, voice, and memory, nurtured over a period of years, reach the peak of their strength and refinement, and, released from the nightsoil, from silence into language, take the form of Lunar Attractions. To the adult narrator, the memory he unearths for the last time after thirty years has become himself as a child--a freak and a monster. But gradually, as the narrative unfolds, through the power of a fully-developed artistry, the child takes on human dimen-

sion. Understood, as the quest for self-knowledge draws (for now) to an end, the monster-child is stripped of his power to suffocate. The price the narrator pays for his creative castration of the threatening memory (employing the tool of his artistic insight) is a life "I've lived . . . less vividly since" (p. 81). But finally, he is the mature and consummate artist--isolated yet engaged, profoundly split and self-reflexive--who becomes the sole progenitor of the perfectly self-reflexive memoir.

Notes

[1]Geoff Hancock, "Interview," pp. 30-31.

[2]Sandra Martin, "First Impressions," rev. of Lunar Attractions, Books in Canada, March 1979, p. 29.

[3]R. H. Ramsay, "The Lunar Side," rev. of Lunar Attractions, The Canadian Forum, April 1979, pp. 27, 28.

[4]Philip Marchand, "Clark Blaise's Psychic Undergrowth," rev. of Lunar Attractions, Saturday Night, May 1979, pp. 47, 49.

[5]Clark Blaise, Lunar Attractions (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam, 1979), p. 10. All further references to this work appear in the text.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lusts

Clark Blaise's second and most recent novel, Lusts, is, like his preceding fiction, written in the autobiographical mode. It is the story of Pittsburgh-bred writer Richard Durgin whose talents, after a remarkably successful first novel, begin to wane, and of his wife Rachel Isaccs, product of the incongruous mesh of California and Europe, poet and author of short fiction, whose creative brilliance eclipses Richard's own. Rachel slits her wrists one day five years into marriage, after having experienced only the beginnings of what promises to be an enduring fame. She dies quietly, just a few feet away from where her oblivious husband watches a football game. Richard retreats into silence, abandoning his art and becoming an artisan (a carpenter, like his own powerless and embittered father) in an Indian village that hovers in a kind of temporal vacuum. There he will stay until he can finally comprehend the life and therefore the death of his wife, fathom his own degree of responsibility, and, at least partially, enact his redemption. He writes a letter to Rosie Chang, Rachel's biographer, in response to her ad seeking a partner "For a

frank discussion of the life and art of the late Rachel Isaacs (Durgin)."[1] Their ensuing correspondence becomes one structuring framework of the novel, and the means by which Richard at last transcends twelve years of reflective silence to reclaim his place in the temporal flux and to finally achieve a truly self-reflexive voice for creative expression.

There are no critical studies of Lusts to date, just a scattering of reviews which, by definition, confine themselves to providing only a very general overview and assessment. Such an approach to the work inevitably leads to the omission or distortion of its more complex and paradoxical aspects, and the self-reflexive impulse, with the related concepts of autobiography and revenge, numbers among them. Mark Abley contends that Blaise's autobiographical urge is meaningful in that it serves as a vehicle for the promotion of a broad, universal meaning which we can assume is removed from any debate on the nature and function of art: "Blaise . . . has turned his highly personal sense of displacement into a graphic metaphor for the experience of modern life in North America."[2]

I. M. Owen observes that "in his second novel, Lusts, Blaise begins to push the boundaries of his fiction beyond the autobiographical," explaining that Blaise has incorporated markedly fewer objective details of his own life into this most recent piece of fiction.[3] Owen is speaking about

autobiography in its most uncomplicated sense, and he does not investigate Blaise's more expanded notion of the term. In a journal essay published a year before Lusts, Blaise writes: "when I say [the artist's] life I also mean what his imagination is capable of extracting from his life, I'm talking about . . . people who are synthesizing and thus transforming, and distorting, reforming . . ."[4] According to Blaise's unorthodox definition, Lusts, a selective, fictional patchwork of a life story, pushes further into autobiography.

Diane Turbide points out that though Lusts "looks very different from his previous work . . . [in it] Blaise explores much of the same psychological terrain he mapped out in Tribal Justice and Lunar Attractions." Turbide describes the illuminating irony that becomes evident as Richard emerges from the ordeal of acquiring an understanding of, and properly mourning, Rachel's death: "One comes to realize that what Richie may think is an explanation of a woman's despair is simultaneously a demonstration of the things that make people go on: his love for his young son Dev; his tenderness for the memories of his two dead wives [the second is Leela, whose native village he has retired to]; and perhaps most important, the need to understand the pattern of a life, and the interconnectedness of all things."[5] Yes, and that pattern of interconnections invariably leads back to the self-reflexive artist who perceives

it in the first place ("The world has become too small for me," says Richard to Rosie, his fellow auto/biographer [p. 136]. He sees referents to, and reflections of, himself everywhere.)

Turbide and Owen both find Rachel's suicide unconvincing. Abley commends Blaise for allowing the reader to decide "whether the woman or the country is to blame" (Abley, p. 43). Like the detectives in Lunar Attractions who hunt in vain for Larry Zywotko's killer, they have not investigated the possibility of an at least partially metaphoric motivation. It is the failure of art--particularly for a woman suffering from what her husband has diagnosed as "a reality confusion that functioned as art" (p. 28)--that precipitates, and even becomes equivalent to, the failure of life. To overlook the metaphor is to find Rachel's suicide lacking in credibility. To overlook the metaphor is also to read Lusts as a straightforward, non-self-reflexive text, a text whose subject is not the artistic process and which does not in any way refer to itself.

David MacFarlane's review of the novel, however, does identify it as a work deeply concerned with its own creative processes. MacFarlane's insights are informed by his awareness of the work's inherent and complicated structural self-reflextivity. Lusts is "not simply a novel masquerading as autobiography. It is, in many ways, a kind of anti-novel . . . something of a ghost, haunting the litera-

ture that surrounds its own story." It is a vengeful ghost that haunts Rachel's "twenty thousand pages (!) of diaries and day-books and drafts of poems and stories" (p. 4), Rosie's biography of Rachel, Richard's now obscure novels and stories, and articles written by Rachel's followers in their attempt to make sense of her death (often pointing an accusing finger at Richard). MacFarlane concludes: "As if done with mirrors, it becomes a novel that is never written, a biography that doesn't exist, an autobiography that is not about its author."[6]

* * *

This is the voice of Rachel Isaacs, as recalled and recreated by her husband Richard Durgin, narrator of Lusts:

> "Here's the last line. Maybe it shouldn't be said so directly but . . . Since no one who made that trip or visited that camp is alive to tell the story, I have told it again for them." (p. 213)

Not long before her suicide, Rachel reads this final sentence of one of her stories to Richard, who has, until that point, maintained himself in protective ignorance of his wife's artistic ascendancy. With her art, Rachel is constrained to return again and again to the fate of the millions who were murdered for a Nazi ideal. The Holocaust is her inherited memory, the "chord" her "imagination obses-

sively plays," and it finally engulfs her art and her life. Richard contends that "A major artist with the compulsive theme of the Holocaust must eventually find a new language, and a new form." But Rachel's facility with languages provides no salvation, and she never does discover the form: poetry is too fragile; "irony is too delicate a tool" (p. 81). She does discover that for her, no artistic form exists that can contain the horror the memory exudes, or that can render the overwhelming magnitude of its meaninglessness explicable. For Rachel, art cannot exert a final control over the recurrence of a chaotic evil. She dies at the point where art fails, after watching an episode of Hogan's Heroes.

Rachel's sentence should be spoken directly. It addresses an idea operating at the heart of Blaise's novel. In an interview, Blaise explains that Richard (preceded by Rachel) "realizes that his writing is an act of revenge, and I do think there's a lot of that in me . . . that is, I'm going to get my side of it out, and I'm going to speak for those inarticulate souls that died because they couldn't speak."[7] Blaise returns to the notion frequently. He has said that revenge is his "claim on belonging," that it is synonymous with "self-assertion. Or an attempt to hold an identity."[8] Elsewhere he remarks that it is his irrevocable mandate to write an ongoing revenge "'for all that is silent, ignorant, and superstitious in my back-

ground.' I write to give my father his voice and as a response to the pain of an innocent's illness and my powerlessness to change a thing . . . " ("Revenge," p. 57). The artist, then, must come to view his autobiography as inextricably bound in its telling to the autobiographies of others, and in relating this fused biography/autobiography, the artist must seek revenge for the silent, for the voiceless who live on in him through the power of memory: to create art is to recreate a life is to avenge that life. Thus interpreted, Rachel's sentence stands as an exemplar of a new dimension of autobiographical self-reflexivity Blaise attains with Lusts.

In A North American Education, Tribal Justice, and Lunar Attractions, Blaise creates a series of highly self-conscious narrators who are driven to excavate their pasts in search of the origins of their voice and vision. This is their self-reflexive compulsion, and they employ the self-reflexive tool of the autobiographical form, of memoir, in their search. All of Blaise's narrators write toward self-knowledge and an elusive sense of wholeness they believe is embedded in the past. Only in Lunar Attractions, though, does Blaise fabricate a narrator who can begin to know (without quotation marks) the force that motivates his artistry, and who can begin to come to terms with its ramifications. David Greenwood melds crude and chaotic love and rage, and refines them to an artistic for-

mula. But he does so only in the final moments of his narrative (hatred is love and a gunshot is an ejaculation as David finally enters the breeding ground of polarities, the milieu of absolute self-reflexivity, where he will be able to fertilize and give birth to his own voice).

Unlike David, Richard Durgin knows, from the beginning of his narrative, how he writes; he can put a name to the terrible energy that fuels his creativity. He calls it revenge; he wants "vindication" (p. 85). Revenge is an act of combined love and rage, but, further, it is an act calculated to an artistic principle. The crude disorder of the emotion has been checked and its energy exploited by a steady hand. Revenge becomes a controlled manifestation of the artist's ego. The artist shoulders a world of responsibility and embarks on his career-long mission to write his revenge for the inarticulate, the silent, and the dead --but he is in fact writing his own revenge, because the untold experience and the untold pain of others is ultimately an external reflection of his own. Their story only holds meaning in that it is his story. The writer is driven by the passion/compassion he feels for his own reflection. Revenge, as I will demonstrate, is thus an important function of Blaise's (and his artist-narrator's) persistent self-reflexivity.

Lusts, as David MacFarlane has pointed out, is an "anti-novel." It is also an anti-biography and an anti-

autobiography. It is anti all conventional forms that have proven ineffectual in the fight against pain, ignorance, and misunderstanding--all those factors that constitute the tyranny of silence and that counteract true artistic expression. Lusts, then, has two related self-reflexive imperatives: it must be an unconventional auto/biography, and it must be an act of written revenge. The artist's desire for revenge must fuel his creative acts (if they are to be vital, genuine, self-reflexive), and his autobiography (combined with the biographies of those who contribute to his formation and in whom he is reflected) must give it form.

To engage in a closer examination of revenge in Lusts, we must consider the complex form it takes in detail. Autobiography, the means with which the artist accomplishes his self-portrait--"projects onto the canvas of his times what his life has dealt him" ("Synthesizer," p. 45)--becomes doubly self-reflexive in Lusts: first the novel is an imaginative recreation of the narrator's own life (as are Blaise's preceding works), and second, the novel is simultaneously an autobiography and an overt investigation of the autobiographical form. The investigation generates confusion before it yields insight. Early in their collaboration, Rosie Chang (it bodes well for Richard Durgin at last: his dirge for Rachel may be brought to an end by the intercession of rosy change) writes to Richard: "If there's

anything a biographer learns quickly, it's 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" (p. 50). Richard replies: "I confess I no longer know what a novel is" (p. 52). As a mature artist, he must finally come to terms with his form. He must relearn, or perhaps learn for the first time, what he has long taken for granted.

In his first letter to Rosie, sent from India, Richard makes the inducement for his long-postponed contact with the world he once knew (America, academia) quite clear: "My interest is redemption" (p. 3). In order to redeem himself and regain his artistry--his slipped anchor in a "collapsing universe" (p. 159)--Richard must somehow atone for Rachel's death, and in order to atone he must understand her action and the precise nature of his implication in it. In Faridpur, "in the celibate sands of Rajasthan" (p. 22), Richard is submerged in a silent occupation (building stereo cabinets for Delhi diplomats, little shrines for a double voice) and suspended in "a kind of timeless space" (p. 147). In Faridpur, he is able to let go of Leela. The rituals, the forms are there to be followed; they are set in place for all time. He mourns and then relinquishes her in a silent conflagration, setting the torch to her mouth

which has been filled with oil as she lies in readiness on her funeral pyre. But a timeless ritual and a mouth seared in eternal silence will not suffer Rachel to rest in peace. The long sojourn in India will not bring about Richard's absolution in her terms. Abstinence, withdrawal, and silence are in themselves not enough. For Rachel, Richard must recover his voice and write Lusts.

The act of writing is more than symbolic, it's palpable: "I feel that as soon as I take that step, I'll be killing her all over again" (p. 120). Richard dreads what he must do. The ceremonial cauterization is vivid, but brief and formally prescribed; the written exorcism is a drawn-out ordeal, a task whose guidelines can be set by Richard alone. But if he can write their life and her death he will understand both for the first time. He will be writing for himself, to gain self-knowledge, and he will be writing for Rachel--because out of that painfully acquired self-knowledge can come the strength, the courage, and the vision to write Rachel's revenge. And her revenge is his revenge, as well as his redemption: she has become one of the voiceless dead, internalized by Richard (her life becoming his personal possession as it is recreated in his memory), for whom he claims the responsibility, the right, of speaking. But how will he speak?

Richard achieves a forced unity in India: he adopts Leela's father as his own, takes up a silent, manly trade,

and quietly cares for his young son ("'I am the son of a mistri [a carpenter],' I told papaji. 'Allow Dev and me to stay with you'" [p. 219]). But it is a temporary, even a false, unity. Something crucial is missing, and his life in Faridpur becomes a kind of creative death in life. He has banished his female aspect and "exhausted my defensive love of Pittsburgh and the mother lode of working-class spite that went with it.". Male and female, love and rage, are separated, defused. One part of his nature is held at such an exaggerated distance from the other that self-reflexive interaction, the series of collisions that erupt in voice, is impossible. The images remain, however, even if the voice has receded. The world continually refuses to be artificially unified, limited, and contained, for Richard cannot rid himself of the expansive but frightening gift of metaphor. ("The unexamined life may not be worth living, but the conscious life can scare you shitless" [p. 18],) He contemplates Rachel's suicide and gazes at the blood of a butchered pig splattered across his garden wall. A wall becomes a bathtub; sacrificial victims are linked. He scrutinizes his workingman's hands, acquired through years of labour in exile, and sees the story in "the road map of my palms" (p. 148). He probes the festering splinters and senses that "The tale of the splinter is the story of Richard Durgin and Rachel Isaacs" (p. 149). The life story must be transposed from the hand to the page.

But Richard stopped writing when he stepped out of time, and thus out of his own unfolding autobiography, into stasis--the creative vacuum. Only the flux of time generates the dynamic tension, the vital conflict of extremes that is required by all of Blaise's narrators in order to create. Neither can there be a personal collective history, an identity, an autobiography to write, without temporal continuity. Richard's art arises from the clash and the overlap of his transforming past and his active present. It needs time. He must step back into time--the zone of compounding self-reflexivity--to write Lusts. Richard does, warily, choose to reinhabit time. He is ready to take the final step in the healing process--the writing of Lusts--and as the novel takes on a physical shape, the narrator's self-conscious awareness evolves and his environment changes. These are the effects of time reentered. Faridpur (in accordance with natural cycles--with time), degenerates before Richard now that it no longer need serve him as a life-sustaining oasis: "The rains have come, and everyone is a little feverish. The mangoes are no longer edible, and the cricket pitch is awash in red waters" (p. 149). Silence is dispelled. Time precipitates change, which precipitates the voice that can record it.

"How in the world am I supposed to write this?" Richard wonders desperately toward the beginning of his narrative. The complexity and the sheer enormity of the undertaking

(as Rosie orders and selects from twenty thousand pages of Rachel's thoughts, Richard must similarly edit and transform a lifetime of memories) brings on visions of creative impotence: "it makes the pen wilt in my hand." But, despite dread and uncertainty, he has already begun to write, and in beginning to write he has again begun to "strain for the forms" (p. 18).

Richard tells Rosie that after Rachel's death (the three R's "triangulate" on auto/biography [p. 18]): "I tried to respond the way I knew best--in a novel," but that the response was inadequate in his own estimation as well as in that of others: "What they [Rachel's commentators] wanted was a memoir of our marriage" (pp. 3, 4). The response must be reformulated; it hasn't expressed revenge or brought redemption. Revenge is not a partial act, and if absolution is to be truly absolute, truly liberating, the confession must be unabridged. Lusts, the reformulated response, must therefore embrace a complex of artistic forms in order to address every dimension of the experience it relates.

First and foremost, Lusts is a novel. It is Blaise's novel, of course, but it is also Richard's. Richard has fictionalized his life in order to bring to light its depths and shadings, levels a straightforward autobiographical account could not penetrate. Fictionalized, Richard's life becomes a gradual disclosure of the inevitable. He

records his own existence with a novelist's sense of plot: "In separate little universes, we had made slight course corrections. We had turned to face each other, though the curve of the earth still intervened" (p. 75). Fictionalized, Richard's is a life sown with premonitions (implanted from a retrospective vantage point); a life told in self-reflexive metaphor, in a series of "firsts" posited as eternal models. The house Richard grows up in becomes the first object to be artistically transformed, to be imbued with an extended significance. "Stitched to a cliff three hundred feet over the Monogahela River, pinned in place by a blade of Pittsburgh steel," it is a house that "outlasted my fear," "survived ridicule," and "defied gravity" (p. 9). It is a house that becomes a metaphor for Richard's artistry. With his art, Richard is pinned to the steep cliffs of his experience (his native soil); crucified, he suffers his artistic commitment to his own life story (the son of Mary and Joseph, after all). A pinioned art will not finally tolerate its practitioner's--its martyr's--retreat into a non-self-reflexive existence; India must be a temporary healing interlude. But Richard's art also survives the ridicule (of critics, publishers, and Rachel's faithful), and it frees him to defy gravity, to indulge in imaginative projection without the constant support of hard fact.

Richard's first memory dates from a camping trip undertaken as a child of seven. He watches from the middle distance:

> Miraculously a stag rose from the mist: a perfect black outline with wisps of cloud still tangled in his antlers, and dense gray fog dancing at his legs. He stared at us, then turned, drawing out does from every mound of fog. Then the whole cloud bank rose in a torn wind that swallowed the thump of a dozen lemon-sized rocks fired in their direction. That memory has stayed with me for thirty years. I draw on it even now . . . . (pp. 12-13)

A fleeting image, a frozen moment, becomes a compounding, lifelong metaphor for Richard's own relationship with the aesthetic object, and with art in general. He must cast the first stone that dispels the transcendantly beautiful vision. He must destroy it in order to recreate it in order to possess it absolutely. (His response to that original vision anticipates his response to Rachel, who is, for Richard, the embodiment of a pure aesthetic: his lust for her is "something related to desecration" [p. 166].) The image becomes a demonstration of how the artist's "naked ego" (p. 143) makes violently sure that it is reflected in all that it loves and admires in the surrounding world.

In high school, Richard views a drop of his sperm through a microscope in biology class. It is his first moment of extreme self-consciousness. In retrospect, it is a moment of galvanized awareness, a moment of acute realization the repercussions of which continue to inform his

developing self-reflexive artistry: "Suddenly I knew what was meant by an inner world, a subconscious, and how unfathomable they were. Like dreams, like tumors. Each of them made in my image, but not quite me. I was a god. From that day on, my version of the ultimate fiction . . . would have a strong sexual bent. . . . The origin of everything in a not-quite-sexual act" (pp. 20-21). He has had a vision of his own subconscious and sees it as a solitary breeding ground for an "unfathomable" artistry.

As a prospective accounting student, Richard ascends the Tower of Learning at Pitt, and is struck with a sickening vertigo: "I couldn't talk . . . my life [was] crashing" (pp. 43-44). The tower is the aerie from whose heights he must formulate the creative accounting of his life; it is the embodiment of the artistic perspective (removed, omniscient). In the tower, he experiences his "first dizziness" (p. 43): the view is too much too soon. It reduces him to silence (as does the disorientation engendered by Rachel's death). The artistic perspective must be attained incrementally, for a rapid change in altitude will make the head spin. The metaphoric significance of the event deepens, becomes more and moe firmly entrenched in the mind of the novelist: "a spinning Pitt had become a giant pathetic fallacy" (p. 154).

"It's easier to deal with things the way I've recreated them" (p. 144), Richard tells Rosie, reacting to her contention that he has overlooked the presence of Rachel's

love--the love directed at him from the heart of each of her poems. Only the most self-conscious, the most self-reflexive artist--an artist both intimate with and aloof from the forms he employs--could be so completely cognizant of the depths of his own artifice. Richard structures his novel on an array of highly self-reflexive, autobiographical images: each image stretches through time, illuminating different moments in the simultaneous, and in many ways equivalent, development of his life and his artistic awareness. The conventions of the novel enrich and extend the autobiography, and thus add dimension and impact to the revenge.

Lusts, then, is a novel. Viewed from another perspective, it is also a memoir of a marriage--the memoir Richard believes is required of him by Rachel's readers and critics. The story of their five-year union is told in a series of painful, charged fragments scattered throughout the larger context of the narrative. The memoir is infused with a broad metaphoric significance by the narrative that contains it (a narrative whose subtext is the development of Richard's artistic awareness), by the structure that binds it. The tragically terminated marriage of Richard and Rachel becomes at once the marriage of crude reality ("I had reality coming out of the ears. I dribbled it") , and a pure and fragile aesthetic (she was "like those Fiji Islanders who died of the common cold" [p. 28]). "What a partnership we might have been" (p. 209), laments Richard.

How glorious the issue of that partnership might have been: a hardy yet beautifully modelled and balanced form of artistic expression. The marriage memoir becomes an embodiment of a failed search for the ideal form, and an embodiment of Richard's revenge--the assertion of his identity in the face of that failure.

Lusts also takes the form of the conventional autobiography of Richard Durgin. His life story, from his first recollection to the present, is related in intimate detail, with attention paid to accurate chronology and to the precise compilation of the legion of names and places and small facts that constitute a life, that constitute a carefully calculated revenge for critical rejection, for expulsion from an adopted literary community, and for enforced obscurity and silence. (The disposition of furnishings at Lovett's--Richard's Kentucky Alma Mater--Ramsey Hall, before and after its conversion, is recorded for posterity [p. 224], and stands as a metaphor for the dramatic historical shift that took place in America between the 1950s and 1960s, and for the profound alteration in the autobiographer's fortunes and outlook.)

Lusts is also Rosie Chang's autobiography. She reveals herself by slow degrees in her letters to Richard: "I saw [Rachel] only at that poetry reading in Berkeley in 1968, and it screwed up my head for five years. I even begged my father to let me go to China to serve my people

and learn my heritage before it was too late" (p. 142). Rosie's essential connection to her biographical task is disclosed; she finds a rootedness in bringing order to, in sharing Rachel's life (and perhaps Richard's) that her fractured heritage alone cannot provide. The ostensibly distant "biographer in the grand manner" (p. 6) is closely implicated as Lusts unfolds: by the end, she is "struggling to mediate" (p. 250). Genres are confused, demarcation lines between forms are blurred as she enters fully into the process of Lusts and begins to write her own revenge for the inarticulate victims of cultural and psychic upheaval.

"You're a biographer's dream" (p. 49), Rosie tells Richard. Acting as "human synthesizer," he has condensed the last five years of Rachel's life into a vigorously reflective heart for the voluminous body of Rosie's work. Lusts, then, also takes the form of a vital segment of a greater whole; it becomes Richard's centrepiece for Rosie's expanded biography of Rachel--a biography that perpetuates the voice of an artist committed with each written word to articulating revenge for those who perished in the maelstrom of Nazi hatred.

Lusts is, as well, a correspondence, in the course of which Richard scrutinizes his life, his art, and the revenge imperative. This self-reflexive correspondence is a cover for Richard's "novel-despite-itself" (p. 141). He can summon the courage to write the novel if its organizing

frame is that of a casually arranged series of letters to a sympathetic and receptive Rosie. (Another level of self-reflexivity becomes apparent here: identifying closely with the unseen Rosie--fellow alien, fellow biographer--Richard is, in a sense, writing to himself.) The narrative is also formulated as a journal, an ongoing, present-tense account of Richard's days: "Today--April 10, 1982, Faridpur, Rajasthan, India--as I write this, I am sitting on a porch under a ceiling fan, sandaled feet propped on blazing plaster, in 115-degree heat, with the sounds of my new life bursting around me" (p. 19). Viewed as a journal and as a correspondence, Lusts is a record of the progressive stages of an increasingly eloquent revenge--a record that gives that revenge a present context and a narrative direction.

Lusts also takes the form of a series of concise biographies of those vivid individuals whose lives have intersected with, and irrevocably changed, Richard's own. At varying intervals, Lusts charts artist Janet Bunn's ascension to a precocious womanhood; the miraculous rise of campus freak Malcolm "Chip" Roudebush (whose first campaign autobiography Richard, ironically, is coerced into writing) to an illustrious career in the U.S. Senate; college roommate Brendon McIvor's advancement to the stature of sexual legend; and the life and death of Stur Foster, Richard's first creative writing teacher (who pulled him from the "poisonous sludge" of Pittsburgh working-class resentment)

and biographer in his own right (unread, however) of obscure and long-dead great men. The biographies of these and others reflect their biographer: they have each contributed something crucial to the process of his maturation. Their biographies are valuable components of his autobiography. They are his revealing memories. Richard is the only one among them who possess a voice for creative expression, and so he must write revenge for the pain, silence, or disillusionment their lives have held: he will record their lives and accomplishments before they slip into oblivion. He will write vindication to confront death.

Lusts's forms multiply. Richard is "straining" for them. To be thorough is to merit absolution. So the narrative also becomes an investigation into the nature and function of art. Of course, the investigation encompasses the writer's art, with Richard's portrayal fo the development of his and Rachel's talents, but it also extends to painting and cinema. "This [painting of Carla Goodings--a portrait, a condensed biography of a museum guard] . . . was great art. It had social and political depth. It put art in a human context" (p. 197): painting is a medium that wields the powerful impact of silent images, instantly received; a medium that harbours meanings that lie beyond the scope of words; an important alternate medium for the expression of revenge. (Richard sees himself in the medium

his narrative explores: he is quite literally reflected in Carla's "cockshots" series.) With Lusts, Richard also investigates Italian Neo-Realism (a school of filmmaking committed to the struggle against social and political oppression--to a kind of cinematic vindication for the inarticulate) in an effort to come to terms with the formative role it plays in the lives of Ben-Zvi and daughter Rachel. For Ben-Zvi, the movement provides a temporary (and ultimately disillusioning) refuge from Hollywood Babylon. For Rachel though, the school's technique of over-dubbing silent film provides a working metaphor for the way in which she will conceive and enact her poetry of revenge: "All without words. The poem lay in the coordination of image and feeling; the language could always be added later, back in the studio" (p. 86). The words will come when the feeling of revenge is understood and balanced in its artistic conception.

"I know this may sound grotesque, Rosie, lowering Rachel to my level, or attempting to raise myself to hers, but vindication for our fathers motivated both of us in our writing" (p. 85). It is the principle of the "equivalence of disparate experience" (p. 93) that dictates the intersection of Richard and Rachel's divergent orbits ("our bloody little collision" [p. 75]), and it is revenge that characterizes that equivalence (or, perhaps, that collision). Lusts, the joint auto/biography of these disparate

equivalents (these bruised planets), must, on some level, take the form of a written revenge for Joe Durgin and Ben-Zvi Eisachs, themselves disparate equivalents: fathers of distant yet violently loving children, ill-used by the world and profoundly embittered, who inhabit vastly different social, ethnic, and political dimensions. The revenge they enact for themselves lacks an audible voice, and is ultimately self-destructive (Durgin smokes himself to death--"sixty stubby little Camels a day, Pittsburgh sludge, sawdust, and torch gas pinched his lungs to a pair of cancerous welts" [p. 10]--and Eisachs relentlessly scours the globe in search of backing for his film autobiography, only to meet with disenchantment and rejection.)

Richard writes his father's obituary notice, a pitiable little biography of fabrications and omissions. It is the best he can do, but its gross inadequacy galls and infuriates him, and fires him with the sense of creative mission: "His life was a waste, unless it had been to spawn me. . . . I was destined for redemptive things. From his ashes, I would fly . . . every part of my body aligned itself with that goal. . . . I knew I wanted to be famous. I wanted to ram my father's life down everyone's throat. And that was the slight mid-course correction that lined me up with Rachel" (pp. 72-73). Lusts contains Joe Durgin's biography (which is simultaneously his son's autobiography and a vindication for them both) in the form of Richard's

first short story, "The Birth of the Blues," incorporated in its entirety into the narrative. ("Measure twice, cut once, that was Joe Durgin" [p. 19]; "measure twice, cut once--that was Joe Keeler" [p. 101]; verify your feelings before you write, that will be Richard Durgin.) Ben-Zvi spends a lifetime planning his definitive autobiography, but it can never materialize: "His autobiography could have been glorious. He would use actual footage of German films, German riots, the War, undercut with California gothic. It was ambitious. It was unworkable . . . " (p. 84). Someone else must pick up the burden. A poem of Rachel's is integrated into the narrative flow of Lusts. It is entitled "The Filmmaker's Daughter" and it is her "kaddish," her autobiography ("Nearly everything she wrote is autobiographical" [pp. 26-27]), but it also contains the essence of Ben-Zvi's life story: "The compass steered us here, / the thirty years of Rose parades and / parties on the Palisades, the sour indecision / that left us hostage to your exile" (pp. 210-11).

Lusts, then, takes on a multiplicity of forms, all of which are grounded in the linked self-reflexive imperatives of revenge and expanded, unconventional autobiography. But ultimately, because it is all forms, Lusts is not any of them. It is an unclassifiable testing site for Richard's (and, by extension, Blaise's) self-reflexive artistry. (Richard and Rachel, whose marriage embodies the collision

of reality and aesthetics, must "wip[e] out all flimsy distinctions, once we enrage them" [p. 93].) Lusts is an ordeal that Richard survives, and will continue to survive--a penitence, a redemption, a revenge--that frees him into an appropriate voice. The epilogue shifts into third-person narration; it is the offspring of Richard's newly acquired, distant yet engaged (his love and rage have been refined, and have thus been rendered far more potent), acutely self-reflexive voice of artistic expression. The epilogue carries Richard's life story into the future from the point where Lusts ends. The story is perpetuated. The story, the autobiography, the revenge, the redemption, cannot be fully realized: their realization would bring peace, wholeness, the demise of creative tension, the eclipse of love and rage, stasis, and, ironically, the silence the artist seeks revenge for in the first place. For Blaise and his narrator-artists, the self-reflexive compulsion must be maintained if art is to exist at all. Richard explains:

> That's why I started writing, once I found the switch: to avenge myself on all that silence and to speak for the population inside me. . . . I've put my faith in it, whatever "it" is. Let's just call it blind, undiminished life. Let's even capitalize it. It's the only thing Rachel Isaacs didn't have and couldn't get [she reaches the point of absolute crisis, of stillness]. Let's call it Self. (p. 46)

And let's continue to make art--a dynamic art, and art of our own revenge, an art that is never complete--that will ever reflect Self.

Notes

[1]Clark Blaise, Lusts (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), p. 2. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[2]Mark Abley, "A Sense of Displacement," rev. of Lusts, MacLeans, 15 Aug. 1983, p. 43. All further references to this work (Abley) appear in the text.

[3]I. M. Owen, "The Outsiders," rev. of Lusts, Saturday Night, Sept. 1983, p. 60.

[4]Clark Blaise, "The Human Synthesizer," Rampike, 2, Nos. 1-2 (1982), 45. All further references to this work ("Synthesizer") appear in the text.

[5]Diane Turbide, "The Satisfactions of Lusts," rev. of Lusts, Quill & Quire, Aug. 1982, p. 37.

[6]David MacFarlane, "The Ghost of an Idea," rev. of Lusts, Books in Canada, Aug.-Sept. 1982, pp. 24, 25.

[7]Barry Cameron, "A Conversation with Clark Blaise," Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 23 (Spring 1982), p. 9.

[8]Geoff Hancock, "Interview," p. 31.

CONCLUSION

This study has been conceived as a demonstration of the way in which Clark Blaise's two volumes of short fiction, and his two novels, become increasingly preoccupied with their own means of expression--with art in general. Through his fiction, Blaise enacts his fascination with art's gestation, its painful and protracted birth, its nature, function, substance, language, and structural formations. Blaise is "wedded . . . to the epic of my own becoming," to the epic of the development of his own artistic voice and vision. The epic is an extremely self-reflexive one, and as such it is continuous: self-reflexivity is an eternally reciprocal process; it knows no end. The epic, in perpetuating itself, ensures its own survival: its absolute conclusion can hold only stillness, silence, and the enforced cessation of creative activity.

Memory is the pivot of Blaise's epic self-reflexivity. The stories reflect their author and their narrators in that they are virtually all fictionalized recollections of childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Also, each

story reveals its author or narrator by demonstrating the subjective and very unique processes of his memory: each story stands as a reflection, an embodiment, of the way in which its creator remembers. The stories finally reflect themselves in that they are constructed of self-referential metaphors--the narratives turn inward as they turn backward, remembering.

In Blaise's first collection of short stories, A North American Education, the self-rflexive compulsion is firmly established. Narrators Norman Dyer, Paul Keeler, and Frankie Thibidault must record their recollections of the prelude to, and advent of, aesthetic awareness. They focus relentlessly on the birth of their own self-reflexive artistic ability. They compose narratives about the onset of their own narrative voices, which are constantly threatened by the chaos that characterizes the world that creates and surrounds them. Each narrator recognizes, ultimately, the grave danger he is in of being engulfed by the chaotic element he strives to control with his arduously acquired creative language.

The stories comprising Blaise's second short story collection, Tribal Justice, share many essential concerns with those of A North American Education. In the second volume, as well as the first, Blaise examines the effects of rootlessness, itineracy, and failure; he explores memory, paradox, art, and inevitability. But the stories of Tribal

Justice mark an intensification and concentration of self-reflexivity in Blaise's fiction. Although the settings of the stories are diverse, and although their scope varies widely, Tribal Justice focuses and compounds self-reflexivity by consistently binding the impulse, as it appears in every story, to some broad, self-reflexive metaphors. Each tale presents the artist who narrates it as an ostracized tribesman (and thus as a voyeur and a participant, an experiencer and a detached recorder of experience), and each tale constitutes an investigation of the overlap of physical, emotional, and creative geographies.

Lunar Attractions, Blaise's first full-length novel, is again an autobiographical account of a writer's convoluted and painful rise, through childhood and adolescence, to artistic power. In the novel, Blaise's fundamental self-reflexivity is even more completely realized in that it has been deployed, with an unprecedented and accomplished smoothness, to infiltrate and inform every level of the text. Here, self-reflexivity acquires an unparalleled refinement and consistency. The novel is thematically, metaphorically, and structurally self-reflexive: David Greenwood's monstrous ego demands to witness its own reflection in every aspect of past experience, and in every aspect of the aesthetic construct (his narrative) which contains and lends form to that remembered experience.

With Lusts, Blaise's most recent novel, the self-reflexive impulse undergoes a further permutation. The author finally comes to terms with the inherently self-reflexive force that fuels his art. His mission (as is Richard Durgin's) is revenge; self-reflexivity is now infused with an extremely well calculated sense of purpose. The appropriate voice for creative expression becomes the voice that can speak revenge for the silent, the inarticulate, the dead--all those who reflect the artist and in whom he, in turn, is reflected.

Blaise writes:

> I am like a dog tied to a post and then forgotten; I have sniffed every inch of my turf, I've dug it up, I've soiled it, I've hounded my life for meaning as though it were somehow prototypical, epic and exemplary, rather than sheltered, eccentric and utterly accidental. ("Revenge," p. 57)

But stories like Blaise's, so intimately concerned with their own creative unfolding, are exemplary--in their craftsmanship--and although the kind of remembering Blaise practices in his fiction is highly personal, the reader is compelled to respond (and it is no accident), not to the precise content of the revelation, but to the strange familiarity of the impact of that revelation, to the recognition of memory's elliptical course, to the sensation of rediscovering what one always "knew" but never knew. As readers, we respond to an image of ourselves--an image of the way in which we think and feel--reflected in the self-reflective processes of the artist.

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