

CLARK BLAISE AND THE DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY

Richard Lane

I
N A DIDACTIC ESSAY, Clark Blaise details his theory (based in practice) of beginnings.¹ A number of lessons should help the reader to comprehend the Blaise text. Structurally, the beginning is given priority over the ending, the latter being a construct, a “contrivance,” “artistic and believable, yet in many ways predictable.” (*TB* 417) The beginning, however, is based upon “faith” (*TB* 415), it is “mysterious” (*TB* 417). What purpose does this meticulous construction of an opposition serve? In a strategic fashion, Blaise’s essay pre-empts and defines the role of criticism (a strategy I shall return to in the portrayal of “self”). The writer has the power of an authority derived from his practical experience: “What I propose is theoretical, yet rooted in the practice of writing and of reading-as-a-writer.” (*TB* 415) He has authority through labour — real work — further repeating this statement: “My own experience, as a writer and especially as a ‘working’ reader”; he is not a parasitic critic who does not work, who has to rely upon those who come first. Such an opposition (beginning/end) is thus not without value. Beginning is prioritized and subjugates end. But there is more. The ending is stated to be a contrivance, and “criticism likes contrivances, and has little to say of mysteries.” (*TB* 417) Thus, the critic is somehow unhappy with mystery, with difference, while the writer has direct access, through “genesis,” through creation, to those very things. Blaise is positing a metaphysics of presence (and mastery) here, where the author labours with the self-present, creative moment of mystery and writing that transcends poetry. The critic, however, is removed from the creative act with his or her secondary powers, and prefers to talk about easy endings having been denied the “powers of horror” (Kristeva). This separation of creation and criticism, with the devaluation of the latter, clearly awards the author with enlightened status — in advance. Yet my argument will not be a defence of critical discourse, since I am writing from a post-structuralist perspective where the oppositional hierarchy proposed by Blaise becomes highly problematized.

I will argue that the beginning is as much a “contrivance” as the ending, that is simply all writing is a construction. My statement thus rejects the transcendental status awarded to “the mysterious part of the story” which is said to be “that which is poetic yet sets it (why not?) above poetry.” (TB 418) In many respects, this brief essay will be an answer to the “why not?” contained within parenthesis, also indicating the narrative intrusions and directions that continuously return the Blaise narrative to notions of self, autobiography and the interplay of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ representation. However, the opposition continues; the beginning is stated to be “the purest part of the story,” an originary egg and “the unruffled surface perfectly cast” (TB 418), the place which Blaise would like to keep above those critics or “dogs” snapping and snarling away at the text,² as preserved, inviolate proof that the author can reach a point of transcendence, can write the perfect sequence of signifiers above and beyond critique. In his rejections of “hundreds of my own” beginnings, Blaise has obviously achieved this un-dated concept — without time because in this metaphysics it is beyond linearity — prior to and above the linearity of the first ‘then,’ the introduction of a soiled spacing that will distance prose from poetry from beginning. The beginning “can exist utterly alone,” yet has the mysterious powers of kinship (with poetry) and force (with prose). The beginning is both isolated from and connected to the world, yet it is not solely defined by difference. It is not arbitrary, signifying its own inherent beauty and standard that needs no Other for self-estimation. *A priori*, the beginning exists before dialogue, before interaction, recognizing its intrinsic value, superiority and aesthetic permanence. If we were merely those idle critics, we would be forbidden access to this mysterious, marvelous world. We would be left with the dreary, gray contrivance of an articulated prose, plodding along, either attempting to fulfil the promise of the beginning or destroying, violating it. No matter, the beginning transcends our world, we cannot touch it.

Constructing the a priori

The beginning as a pre-empting critique is a strategy that can be found in a series of statements made in part one of *Days And Nights In Calcutta*,³ in particular concerning the writing of ‘self.’ This direction of experience toward ‘self,’ in a wider sense, has been regarded as characteristic of “modernist culture and modernity in general,”⁴ where another perspective upon this is to see “self-consciousness” invading “experience.” Thus Steve Connor writes how the modern sensibility “is characterized by a sense of the urgent, painful gap between experience and consciousness and the desire to replenish rational consciousness with the intensities of experience.”⁵ The narrator of part one of *Days And Nights* embodies and clearly recognizes this desire. But, in relation to cultural transformation, any level of naiveté must be removed. This functions, once more, to pre-empt criticism and takes place

by the use of parody of those who “go to India to have [their] . . . instincts roused.” (DN 138) The list that follows ridicules and aims critical laughter and derision at these feeble positions: “Marxists, Vedantists, Jungians, rock groups, suburban youths, Californian librarians, all the unmended victims of Western repression: we go to India to check on our groovy karmas, we go for nothing less than transcendence and transformation.” (DN 138) In a curious flattening of difference, and a conflation of identity, along with the self-parody that follows (positioning a younger, earlier, less mature narrator in this series), the critical gaze is directed away from the narrator’s own transformation where, although the “voyage to understand India would stop ridiculously short of its goal,” the narrator states that “what I would see clearly for the first time was that whole bloated, dropsical giant called the West, that I thought I knew profoundly.” (DN 138) Thus the narrator does not consider himself involved in a quest for instinct arousal; rather, the quest is one which would reinforce a modernist conception of reason and knowledge. The “unmended victims of Western repression” could clearly be fixed through the power of reasonable knowledge, a power which has been derived in the text through a parallel experiential trip at a more balanced, liberal level.

The strategy of pre-empting criticism has extensive implications. It is quite clear that the narrative of the fire, accidents and the effacement of the material “evidence of a personal history” (DN 7) which is prefaced by the visit to a fortune-teller in Baroda, is designed to legitimate the narrator’s construction of a myth: that of the clean slate or ‘free soul,’ a *tabula rasa* upon which ‘India’ will imprint itself. Thus the narrator states: “from the moment we landed India conspired to write this journal.” (DN 10) This is the position from which the constructed reader can accept a myth of a detached, semi-neutral observer whose materialist values have been swept away, cleansed by ‘ritual’ fire. The latter is a purification rite, a rite of passage into or onto something new, a change of status and a legitimization of the more ‘open-minded’ self about to approach a challenging cultural structure. I will argue that what follows (and precedes) this effacement is actually a Hegelian metanarrative that functions to “. . . subordinate, organize and account for other narratives; so that every other local narrative . . . is given meaning by the way it echoes and confirms the grand narratives of the emancipation of humanity or the achievement of pure self-conscious spirit.”⁶ To examine this perspective further I shall explore those locations in the text that appear not to echo and confirm the “grand narratives.”

Juhu Beach and Howrah Station are locations in the story that have both parallels and differences; both can be left by the narrator, but this is one function of Howrah (among others) which, for a moment, is not so for Juhu Beach: “It was the only time in India that I felt that curious *this-is-125th-street-but-I-must-be-in-Harlem* terror of a New York tourist about to go under. At no other time in India, despite steep trails, dark nights, and devious alley, did I feel that unspoken

danger.” (DN 43) The alliteration of this last sentence foregrounds a sense of security among ‘familiar’ dangers that can be safely represented, transformed into a literary experience and language. The narrator captures the ‘ineffable’ in representation by forming one more oppositional set to add to the binary The West/India. The narrator operates with “a theory which itself continually projects the categories of its own discomfiture,”⁷ but unlike postmodernism and the pull “towards the sublime in destroying form itself,”⁸ here the narrator constructs, paradoxically, a position of mastery through representation, without “a will-to-undoing.”⁹ The narrator cannot collect shells because of the smell, but still, he can collect scenes. The people who live on the beach are not only imaged as an “undertow” — a depersonalisation — but they are also described as “Revolutionaries of the future.” (DN 43) Would this align them with those Marxists concerned with “transcendence and transformation” (DN 138)? Or, is the conflation now seen as a confusion of not only identities, but aims?

What is foregrounded in this passage is not only the representation of extreme differences in living conditions between the West and India, but also the threat to the Western Self, to a whole tradition that purports to understand the Other but ends with Graphocy, “the rule of the literary elite.”¹⁰ The threatened narrator links ghetto with a potentially revolutionary undertow, and the density and paradox of Howrah station with the possibility of teleological defeat. In this construction of “Hell,” I would suggest that the end of reason is more frightening than the abject poverty:

Howrah is the centre of life and the end of hope . . . it is Calcutta at its densest and most paradoxical. It is where village India arrives every day by the uncountable thousands and where others manage to return but not escape. It is more like a circle of hell than any place on earth that I can imagine.” (DN 297)

I absorbs Other

The beginning as a creative act is for Blaise always to “begin again” (TB 417). Robert Lecker notes how Blaise, in his absorption of the myths and rituals of India reveals: “the need he feels to re-create himself so that his aesthetic project will endure, so that he will be forever ‘*in creation*,’ the perpetually reborn subject of the fiction he lives to tell.”¹¹ Lecker thus charts for the reader Blaise’s modernist ethos, placing Blaise firmly at the centre of his own de-centred universe. Like the modernist artist, Blaise’s discourse enacts a “repeated absorption of that which is extrinsic to the Western high-art tradition, largely in pursuit of renewal and reinvigoration.”¹²

For Lecker, the self-reflexive strategy of Blaise’s narrative undermines itself to reveal and “re-affirm the fundamental honesty at the heart of his vision.”¹³ Perhaps this ground of honesty, this fundamental revelation of the Blaise narrative belongs to the transcendental space ‘beyond’ and ‘before’ criticism that was briefly examined

in my introduction. This space would be a position from which the texture and design can be represented “without distortion” (*DN* 18). It is the space that enables the author to delimit the boundaries of Western representation: “For a Westerner there is enough unknown on the steps of the Air-India Building, or with friends and family, and especially on the streets of any Indian city, to satisfy all his tastes for texture and design. To seek more is greed . . . Trust only texture.” (*DN* 19) Thus “texture” can only be trusted through an implicit trust in the narrator, a belief that the narrator can occupy this privileged site that regulates the act of representing the unknown. Clearly, here is a voice that performs a role of Enlightenment authority, “that of defining the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what may be hoped.”¹⁴ A voice which can be heard, amplified a thousand times, in Kant’s prefaces to his first critique.

Lecker’s study of Blaise is a product of a determined critical method that reads the text on its own terms; terms that I am deliberately problematising with the reference to the discourse of modernity. For Lecker, this closely guarded, privileged mode of speaking, not only enables Blaise to “transcend the North American education that informs his early story,”¹⁵ but situates him as a paradigm, supposedly, of “the author, as reader, as other.”¹⁶ This paradigm of the divided self — divided by language — I have argued, takes part in a metaphysics of presence where writing distorts the image of the self (as self-present), where writing is secondary in status to the residence of the author’s creativity in the transcendent beginning. In Derrida’s discussion of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which hinges upon the translation of the signifier “pharmakon,” this secondary status of writing is examined where “The value of writing will not be itself”:

. . . writing will have no value, unless and to the extent that god-the-king approves of it. But god-the-king nonetheless experiences the pharmakon as a product, an ergon, which is not his own, which comes to him from outside but also from below, and which awaits his condescending judgment in order to be consecrated in its being and value. God the king does not know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence.¹⁷

The Enlightenment narrator similarly regards all other narrative as a writing which comes “from below.” Clearly, there is a division between my interpretation of discursive determination (re-initiated in a more powerful way with the concept of an *a priori* defence) and Lecker’s interpretation of an existential freedom that enables Blaise to “heighten our perception of daily experience.”¹⁸ Where does this division arise?

Lecker states in his introduction that “Blaise provides us with a persistent and ongoing exploration of what it means to be a contemporary writer, and in exploring this role he grapples with some large issues that are central to contemporary thought.”¹⁹ This implies a project of self-reflexive criticism, the doubling of a

narrative that in exploring self clarifies problems of “contemporary thought.” More than this, it implies a grasp upon meaning which is one of power-knowledge. I would argue that rather than the exploration resulting in any progress of knowledge, it serves to preserve the power of the same. Lecker goes on to argue that one of the central issues Blaise explores is “how we are to live in a world that some say is devoid of authors, subjects, consciousness, meaning, and finally literature itself.”²⁰ This parody of postmodernist and poststructuralist thought, taking place at Lecker’s introductory stage of his criticism, parallels Blaise’s pre-empting strategy whereby any other critical perspective is ridiculed in advance. That is not to say that Lecker should not maintain, defend and clearly articulate his liberal humanist position — on the contrary — but, as a foretaste of the method which will be used to discuss this ‘paradigmatic’ author and ‘contemporary thought’ such a statement is strangely restrictive. Perhaps this parodic statement is not merely a rejection of such texts as Barthes ‘The Death of the Author,’ but also an objection to Foucault’s suggestion in *The Order Of Things* “that the humanist subject ‘man’ is the product of the discourses of a particular historical moment.”²¹ This destabilizing shift thus includes analysis of those structures that enable a centred textual universe to continue.

In section thirteen of *Days And Nights* (part one), the narrator has a ‘soothing vision’ of India. Outside of the Ramakrishna Mission can be seen “gray-haired men gathering blossoms from gardens that could rival a Rose Bowl float. It is the great, benign, and enduring India, not the India of the half-men we have helped create.” (*DN* 148) This vision is one of spiritual wholeness, rather than the fragmented “half-men” created by the West. However, a questioning of the narrator-reader construct here allows for a slightly more detailed discussion. The narrator is concerned with ‘image’ and the response it invokes for the Western spectator, that is, the response is shifted towards the implied reader. The images are as follows. First, the spiritual, “benign and enduring India”; second, the realisation that these participants are actually “middle-aged businessmen using the mission as a kind of hotel” (*DN* 149); third the further banal realisation that the men are different (once more). Prior to this third stage, the narrator-reader construct would “probably say of them (meaning it as a compliment), they’re just like us.” To which, in a didactic manner, the narrator responds — switching to the first person and excluding the reader — “No, they’re not, I thought that morning, they’re not like us at all. Good for them.” (*DN* 149) The implied reader is thus brought back into the scene, but only after having been taught a lesson. What is this lesson? That difference is different? That spiritual difference is “great” and “enduring,” where material gain is fragmentary and dangerous? That the reader should not be deceived by appearance and image (but if so, why not texture)?

The narrator states that “An open society is a beautiful thing, vigilant eclecticism is surely a sensible aspiration. Yet how can these men on the lawn of the Ramakrishna survive? Will we let them?” (*DN* 149) Once again, the reader is impli-

cated in this “we,” in this voice of modernist concern, nostalgia for that which the I has no need to absorb. What is soothing about these gentle flower-gathering men could be called their proper vocation, proper in the sense that they do not disrupt, compete or claim the same discursive or economic space as the narrator. What seems improper is not their aspiration to modernization, but the damage imposed by modernization from the outside — perhaps it is the other way round? And so the narrator “loves the proper”:

. . . what is proper to himself, proper to the other, proper, that is, to the always singular thing, which is proper in that it is not dirty, soiled, sickening, or disgusting . . .²²

Beginning as Frame

To further problematise the notion of beginning as before and above the text, I shall return to “To Begin, To Begin,” resisting the latter’s concept of stability and mastery. The narrator of Blaise’s short-story states that “More decisions are made on the basis of the first few sentences of a story than any other part . . .,” and, “the story seeks its beginning, the story many times is its beginning, amplified.” (*TB* 415) To capture an audience, a readership, this spatial location is obviously of the greatest importance. The question of “decisions” opens up a rapid list of structural relations, however, that goes beyond a single site of signification: the teleological narrative, the holistic “microcosm of the whole” (*TB* 415), the individual signature of style that is signed throughout the text, to name just a few. So far, I have playfully considered the beginning as a transcendental space which is also a position of defence, *a priori*, from critique.

In Blaise’s final paragraph, the narrator concludes with a brief discussion of the “delicate interplays of action and description” (*TB* 418), where character is the mediating force between the two. The “purest part of the story,” as noted, precedes this mediation, this interplay of life and death. The protagonist of *Days And Nights* (part one) is “Clarke Blaise,” an overloaded signifier that could be replaced with “the narrator,” “the author-function” or simply that vague concept “self” of autobiographic classification. The author as creator, as the labouring writer of transcendental beginnings which frame the narratives that follow, is thus both inside and outside the text. How is this so? How is the frame both inside and outside, instead of the boundary, border, the limit/break of discursive space? Does the frame function as an infinite regress? If so, the pure, inviolate beginning must be exploded. If not, then my series of questions must begin over again. In what follows, I shall use my questions as a guiding thread to discuss the beginning/frame as a power-effect which the narrator seeks to efface.

The narrator of section fourteen states that “India seems, simultaneously, a remote past and a distant future.” (*DN* 151) The narrative frame makes up the

present (present space of representation). Is this frame ornamental, to use Kant's definitions, where *parerga* do "not belong to the whole presentation of the object as an intrinsic constituent, but only [as] an extrinsic addition . . .,"²³ or, is this frame going to impair the reader's judgment by calling attention to its own 'finery'? In this section of *Days And Nights*, the framing narrative states that Calcutta is "unknowable": "Calcutta is like a moon, a satellite torn from the same molten mass as earth, obeying the same universal laws, but otherwise so changed in all its textures as to be unknowable." (*DN* 151) The language of "universal laws" signals once more the transcendental, where the following sentence equates the unknowable with the beginning: "Even the points of familiar contact, driving a car, mailing a letter, become infinitely rich and difficult." (*DN* 151) The space before articulation, before "then" is also supposedly "infinitely rich and difficult." This imagery of equation continues; the narrator "felt engulfed by enough raw significance at every moment to drive me mad." (*DN* 151) But raw significance, that which is not articulated or concluded, the stuff of beginnings, is also the material of reason, where madness is excluded or its powers contained and controlled. The narrator notes how "Everyone in Calcutta seems somehow purer, beyond analysis . . ." (*DN* 151), just like the beginning. The frame is Calcutta, Calcutta is the frame. How has this happened? As Derrida notes, ". . . the parergon is a form which has as its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy."²⁴ For the narrator, this is both the affirmation of the power of the frame where narrative and "texture" coincide, and the dislocation of the framing narrative, where "Like wood. It creaks and cracks, breaks down,"²⁵ because everyone in Calcutta is ultimately aestheticized, is "out of Balzac" (*DN* 151).

My parody of modernism must fold here, since up to now it has been reinforcing the stereotype of the West as one system or structure, one voice of Enlightenment authority. The West fragments, is fragmented; counter-discourse can criticize the West's structures from within. It is a counter-discourse that has enabled this criticism of the narrative position of the author-function Blaise, which involves the attack of "universal laws," "texture," the *a priori* defence, and so on. The narrator of *Days And Nights* states that ". . . in isolated moments we may grasp it ["India"] and escape ourselves in ways we never expected. All experience of India is a passage into myths that are still functional, rituals that still signify, art (like the classical dance) that is forever in creation." (*DN* 150-1) The beginning is forever in creation; the author-function as creative writer controls, alone, the beginning. The narrator arrives in India to discover he is already in control of the "unknowable," that Calcutta ultimately is as pure as the originary moment over and over again.

For the essential modernist process of continual absorption without the loss or downfall of the central sovereign subject, the beginning is an example of the attempt to stabilize, anchor, a system of differences which are not "devoid of

meaning" (Lecker), but where meaning is in excess. I would read the beginning as a signifier where "language's differing and deferring will always carry the play of meaning beyond any statically geometrical structure that would arrest [control, regulate, determine, map out] the production of meaning."²⁸

The frame/narrative effaces itself through language. But language is always in excess of the frame; language reveals the strategy of the frame — how it is inside and outside, how it absorbs difference, how it legitimates itself, how it controls itself in advance — all this is revealed only if the reader does not accept the narrator's implied reader-position. Only through this resistance can the reader reposition her- or himself as the writer, not necessarily to replace in finality the narrator, but to break the frame.

NOTES

- ¹ Clark Blaise, "To Begin, To Begin" (*TB*). *A 20th Century Anthology, Essays, Stories, and Poems* Ed. W. E. Messenger & W. H. New (Ontario: Prentice-Hall, 1984) : All further references cited in the text.
- ² "A true critic in the perusal of a book is like a dog at a feast, whose thoughts and stomach are wholly set upon what the guests fling away, and consequently is apt to snarl most when there are the fewest bones." Jonathan Swift. *A Tale Of A Tub* in *The Oxford Authors: Jonathan Swift* Ed. A. Ross & D. Wooley (Oxford: OUP, 1989) : 110.
- ³ Clark Blaise & Bharati Mukherjee, *Days And Nights In Calcutta (DN)* (Ontario: Penguin, 1987). All further references cited in the text.
- ⁴ Steve Connor, *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction To Theories Of The Contemporary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) : 4.
- ⁵ Connor, 4.
- ⁶ Connor, 30.
- ⁷ Connor, 30.
- ⁸ Connor, 212.
- ⁹ Connor, 19.
- ¹⁰ J. G. Merquior, "Spider And Bee: Towards A Critique Of The Postmodern Ideology," in *Postmodernism ICA Documents*. Ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London: Free Association Books, 1989) : 44.
- ¹¹ Robert Lecker, *An Other I, The Fiction Of Clark Blaise* (Ontario: ECW Press, 1988) : 91.
- ¹² M. Newman, "Revising Modernism, Representing Postmodernism: Critical Discourses Of The Visual Arts," in *Postmodernism ICA Documents*, 100.
- ¹³ Lecker, 24.
- ¹⁴ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) : 38.
- ¹⁵ Lecker, 95.
- ¹⁶ Lecker, 22.

- ¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*. Trans. B. Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981) : 76.
- ¹⁸ Lecker, 23.
- ¹⁹ Lecker, 23.
- ²⁰ Lecker, 23.
- ²¹ M. Newman, 115.
- ²² Jacques Derrida, *Signponge/Signsponge*. Trans. R. Rand. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) : 30.
- ²³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique Of Judgment*. Trans. W. S. Pluhar. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) : 72.
- ²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth In Painting*. Trans. G. Bennington & I. McLeod. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987) : 61.
- ²⁵ Derrida, *The Truth In Painting*, 75.
- ²⁶ Allen Thiher, *Words In Reflection, Modern Language Theory And Postmodern Fiction*. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press) : 88.

