

“THE OTHER SIDE OF THINGS”

Notes on Clark Blaise’s “Notes Beyond a History”

Robert Lecker

IN A STATEMENT THAT SERVES to describe his own art, Clark Blaise says

A writer is always trying to suggest the *other* side of things. He’s trying to create a subject and an object, not only the centerpiece but the frame, and sometimes he feeds the frame first and withholds the picture. Other times he gives the picture and withholds the fact that he’s going to hang it in the garage next to an old nudie calendar. Sometimes it may be a very beautiful thing to be deliberately destroyed. . . . It’s always a matter of working by indirection and by surprise and suggestion, which means that everything you state directly has a shadow meaning, implied.¹

Since Blaise is a writer given to fictionalizing his life and his aesthetic development (by his own account he is “wedded . . . to the epic of my own becoming”²), we can never take his self-critical pronouncements at full face value. The face is always masked. But Blaise’s words do point to two aspects of his work that critics tend to ignore. First, they direct us to the fact that Blaise is preoccupied with binaries. “The *other* side of things” evokes a world of otherness and proliferating opposites that seldom merge: subject counters object, centerpiece repulses frame, picture subverts setting, narrative preys on fact. My list is merely a departure point: for Blaise, everything is structured in twos. And as I will try to show, this two sidedness is by no means a purely thematic concern. By entering “the *other* side of things” we can understand the profound dualism central to Blaise’s approach to narrative strategy and form. Second, Blaise’s words direct us to the realization that what is *said* in his stories always covers a deeper level of meaning or consciousness that can only be exposed by probing beneath a deceptively finished surface. Blaise is right to argue that the language of his stories “reveals its kinship to poetry.”³ It demands to be read as “a single metaphor and the exfoliation of a single metaphor through dense layers of submetaphors” (Hancock, p. 56).

My sense is that the “single metaphor” most fascinating to Blaise is connected with “the other side of things” so central to his life as art. This connection is

subtly displayed in “Notes Beyond a History” — one of Blaise’s most powerful and representative stories — yet few readers have commented on its form or structure. In an earlier commentary I suggested, briefly, that “Notes Beyond a History” is “concerned with a morality of *seeing*” that involves the narrator in a search for “the imagined story beyond the recorded history,” for the “‘mythic moment’ which may define an entire period in one’s life.”⁴ True, but I ignored the formal implications of “the *other* side of things.” Barry Cameron recognized that this “densely textured, richly descriptive story . . . explores ‘the other side’ of Florida, of history, through a dialectic between the primitive and the civilized, memory and history, myth and fact,”⁵ but space restrictions made it impossible for him to follow the exfoliation of this dialectic. So I return to it now, hoping to reveal the other side of Blaise’s world by allowing myself to make connections, to pause, to double back, to play, to live in and out of this two-sided space.

THE OPENING. Draw a map of the geography described in the first two paragraphs. The other side jumps out at you. On one side there is Theodora Rourke’s “stone cottage that was a good eighty years old” and “set far back” from the lake near which she lives. She “had not wanted to see the lake.” “She didn’t need the water.” And “she was ninety-two.” That’s *her* side. Now draw “the hedge at the side that separated us from Theodora Rourke.” “We” (the Sutherlands) lived in a four-year-old “fine Spanish-style home of tawny stucco,” surrounded by “a rich Bermuda lawn reaching to the water.” She: divorced from water, surrounded by “two hundred yards of twisted trees” that had once been a Valencia grove, self contained, reclusive, timeless in her mystery. We: reaching for the water from a contrived lawn, reaching the lawn from a contrived house, imbuing the house with a contrived history that allows Sutherland to say, “we’ve always been known as the leading family and one of the oldest.”

She/We. From the first sentence, in the first paragraph, on the first page, the narrator (why is he tagged only by a *surname*?) tells us that like the geography surrounding him, he is split. Watch him enumerate the divisions that plague him from the start. “I should divide the history of Oshacola County into ‘Modern Era’ and ‘All Time’ so that both the Rourkes and the Sutherlands could enjoy their prominence.” “We were the first family of Lake Oshacola,” but she “had come with the place.” She was comparable in stature to Cy Young; we reached the less stellar prominence of Early Wynn. She knew the landscape when it was untamed, when the lake was “but an ocean of alligators, the breeder of chilling fevers.” We knew the lake from the groomed stretches of our Bermuda lawn. Let the hedge dividing their properties become a line between signifiers:

<i>Rourke</i>	<i>Sutherland</i>
"stone cottage" (ca. 1852)	"Spanish-style home" (1928)
"set far back" from the beach (200 yds.)	"fifty yards from the beach"
"She didn't need the water"	"reaching to the water"
"an ocean of alligators"	"a rich Bermuda lawn"
"the Rourkes had come with the place"	"We were the first family of Lake Oshacola, then"
Cy Young	Early Wynn
"All Time"	"The Modern Era"

It is clear that Sutherland sees the Rourkes as others representing an *otherness*. But the dividing force behind his opening words is not simply the desire to enumerate difference. The "shadow meaning, implied" is that Sutherland wants desperately to cross the hedge, to move out of the tamed, recognized, protected world of his "Modern Era" and into the mysterious, eternal, and hidden realm of "All Time" aligned with Rourke.

On one level this desire implies Sutherland's unhappiness with his own past and what it forced him to become. He wants to be other than what he is. Yet his assertion of difference, and the obsessive she/we dichotomy he sets up, speak powerfully of his need for identification with Rourke. The more he divides himself from the other side the more he knows he wants it. But why? To claim priority of social status? It's more. Rourke represents something other than permanence, prestige, and lineage in social terms. She represents a narrative realm that Sutherland, as speaker, must penetrate if his "notes beyond a history" are truly to go *beyond* the history embodied in his family, his home, his tale. History, then, becomes a metaphor for the narrative world that enfolds him in the safety of recognized progression and place. History is known, named, mapped, controlled, just as the story aligned with history will be locked into Sutherland's landscaped consciousness: "a rich Bermuda lawn," "a fine Spanish-style home."

All false. His problem: to go beyond the lawn, the house, the history, and find *another* world, ungroomed but stable, something that will last, something "set far back" from the "Modern Era" in a period that resists change. A mythical world? Sutherland seems to be saying that his story (his life) will only be fulfilled when he manages to escape the social and narrative conventions that have limited his life as a man. In this sense, his attempt to resurrect Rourke's story speaks for his need to regress, to find the childlike consciousness that once allowed him to be drawn into an experience without distancing himself to describe it. If this is true then we know the problems his maturation has brought: to be severed from experience, removed from mystery, caught in time, place, death. To move back in time is to evade this death, reverse progression, and inhabit an eternal, im-

mutable realm. But eternity can be problematic: it promises no death, and without death there is no reason to write. One writes against death. Blaise writes against death. Sutherland writes against his death. To keep telling the story, to go beyond history, he must paradoxically recognize that he must never go beyond it. The opening of the story confirms his profound but repressed consciousness of this paradox informing every word he writes. He wants to cross the hedge; he fears crossing it. He wants permanence; he wants change. He wants to be "the first family of Lake Oshacola"; he wants to be its last. The binaries move on.

The second two paragraphs introduce a new set of "other" sides that enlarge upon the implications of those we already know. The mythical dimension of Rourke's life is now aligned with Catholicism, a religion strange to Sutherland in his childhood, not only because "we had no admitted Catholics in Hartley," but also because Catholicism was a "conspiracy" of unknown rituals and rites whose power is predominantly narrative. For Sutherland, Catholicism is a story his mother tells, a nightmare tale of "Black Sisters" who "walked in loose black robes . . . and then at night they shed their robes and took to flight." By crossing the hedge and entering Rourke's domain Sutherland might penetrate a new kind of story diametrically opposed to his own, which is characterized by whiteness, daylight, learning, history — things that can be known. This story, his story, is pointedly aligned with his mother, who, as "a south Georgia disciple of Tom Watson," was repelled and fascinated by "everything strange" about Rourke. By enclosing the m(other) view within a single paragraph, Sutherland conveys both the dichotomies of faith that haunted him as a child as well as his desire to find a surrogate mother who will provide him with a new narrative life. Two worlds keep warring; Sutherland tries to win both wars.

He can't. For even within these separate worlds the other side appears. As soon as Sutherland describes his mother's realm he feels compelled to describe his father's in other terms. While she was a "poor tormented woman" who taught her children "to love each other, Florida, F.D.R., and the Christ of her choice," he was "a Hartley man with education," an "old father" characterized by his "white suits, stoutness, and eclectic learning." Mother was obsessed with "collecting the goods on Theodora Rourke." Father stood for "wisdom," "self-righteousness," "justice," "legality," "history." The oppositions *within* Sutherland's family ultimately reflect the oppositions he finds *outside* through his impression of Rourke's domain. These oppositions further reflect a dilemma Sutherland confronts: if he chooses to go beyond history he simultaneously chooses to go beyond the father who embodies history and ultimately to reject him. One of the reasons Rourke's existence fascinates him is that (as we soon discover) her world is fatherless. The implication is that only by abandoning a literal and figurative father can Sutherland find the narrative and personal freedom from his telling so desires to find. But in this conflict, as in all his conflicts, Sutherland can never

abandon either of the other sides. He wants to lose his father, yet without him he must answer for everything he does. He wants to be “freed . . . for my manhood” and to remain the protected child. He wants to invent a new story of himself but realizes that he has only his history to tell. When he wonders why his brother became “a builder of rockets . . . and left me here in Hartley, a teacher,” we know. His brother, who *is* named, managed to leave his past for the future symbolized by the “Apollo moon probes” he designs. Tom got to the other side. But his brother stays caught in the story of his past as he dreams of transcending the stable world he so loves.

NOW THERE IS A BREAK, a demarcation point in the narrative that tells us a frame has been made. The frame: story of a man telling the story of his youth as he wonders how to become that youth; story of a youth telling the story of his maturation as he wonders how to become a man. My description of the frame is meant to suggest the personal pull Sutherland feels between development and regression, but it also describes a structural pull that determines narrative perspective. When the story opens, Sutherland remembers the other side as another time; his viewpoint is retrospective. Then, having confronted the dilemma posed by his recognition of time past, he tries to evade memory by focusing on his present. But because the present provides no solace he tries to evade it by focusing on his past. For Sutherland, then, the other side of things is temporal as well as spatial.

The second section of the story finds him in his air conditioned office, “wrapped in tinted glass,” eight floors above the Lake Oshacola of his childhood. There is no mystery here. Sutherland has become the product of his family’s rich Bermuda lawn. And Oshacola itself (“beautifully landscaped now”) is the product of that “civilizing” impulse that wants to make the wilderness “humanized,” ordered, safe. Sutherland would like to believe that he can control his environment. He images himself as inhabiting a fortress from whose height his view “commands the lake.” Then he wonders: “if eight floors of perspective can do *this* to Oshacola why shouldn’t Tampa be creeping slowly to my front lawn?” Notice that the idea of commanding the landscape reminds Sutherland of his lawn; in other words, his need for control is linked to the safety of his “civilized” childhood. Moreover, he is not interested in subduing the landscape through physical intervention. His methods of obtaining command are expressed in terms of elevated perspective, as if he could dominate the landscape through his vision. Sutherland’s problem, however, is that he confuses elevated perspective with true vision. While the height he inhabits may seem to provide a commanding view, Sutherland is actually defeated and trapped — in his office, in his memories, in

his dreams of grandeur. To obtain true vision he must abandon his false commanding view, get back to ground level, tear up the Bermuda lawn, cross the hedge to Rourke's world (remember: "She didn't need the water"). Sutherland still needs it because his self understanding is intimately tied to the lake and its surrounding terrain. He knows that "not only has the lake been civilized, but so has my memory, leaving only a memory of my memory as it was then," and he wonders why "places are always remembered as larger and more unruly than they now appear to be." The answer, of course, is that as a child he had not yet developed the perspective that allowed him to believe he was in control, he had not yet abandoned his sense of the "clusters of snakes threshing mightily on Theodora Rourke's warm sand beach."

Now he has. Why? Because he never left the father image that controlled his early life. Even today, he admits, he is "more than a little bit my father's son." The father's son is tied to an imposed perspective, to a view of life seen from safe distance. Sutherland claims that "what I see with my eyes closed, books shut, was also true." That's not enough. You can't tell us you *choose* to see truth this way because you're a "shrewd man." You can't choose to have true vision. Either you shut your books, go beyond history, and live in the truth of your imagination or you remain sanitized and air conditioned, overlooking the lake. You can't have it both ways. But that's how you want it. Is that why you tell us about seeing things with your eyes closed and then give us a documentary, historical view of Hartley with your eyes (and books) wide open? Does it matter how many people lived in Hartley in 1932? Why have you gone back to the years of your childhood? Does it matter how many cars there were, or whether the buildings were dark brick? Where are *you* in the picture you paint? Still thinking of your father and the power he had. "He knew them all," all those Hartleyans you would never know. Still thinking of your brother and how he managed to escape. That pizza stand you imagine near "the complex at the Cape." Is that near where Tom builds his Apollo moon probes? Let's find out *your* name. You won't tell. You hide behind your surname, your father's name, and give us facts. Then you try to convince us that "history is all about" knowing "that *change* merely reflects the unacknowledged essence of things." History, for you, is about knowing the way things are. That kind of knowing has been your project. Rourke fascinates you because she represents mystery and a spiritual essence that will never be fully known. If you get to that other side, you might see with your eyes closed, books shut.

Try. The third section of the story finds Sutherland crossing the hedge that has obsessed him since he was a child. Theodora Rourke wants him to deliver the Jacksonville paper. This means that he must now enter her domain; their relationship is bound to change. It does. As soon as Sutherland receives the invitation to make contact with Rourke he gives her a new and significant name. Now she

is “Big Mama” to him, the Big Mama who will in some way become a surrogate mother to the paper boy who is reluctant to cross borders and enter a new life. His entrance to her world marks a conversion experience for Sutherland and a turning point in the story: now he will be introduced to a way of seeing (and by extension, to a way of knowing) that subverts the linear, pragmatic modes of perception aligned with his family and his childhood. I say his “entrance” to underscore the sexual implications of Sutherland’s initiation. This is the first time we see him conscious of making entry to an unknown world that is explicitly signed as a female domain. He hesitates “at the foot of the steps to Big Mama’s back porch,” but finally he does “go inside.” I’m forcing things here. The truth is that Sutherland “followed Big Mama inside, but not into the house.” Although Sutherland does not go right inside Big Mama’s place (“How I wanted to step inside”) it is clear that some culmination takes place on the porch as Sutherland peers into the parlour and eats a piece of cake impregnated with the image of Christ.

What is the nature of this culmination? On one level, it is aesthetic. The house is filled with “paintings and photos” while “the tables were piled with metal and porcelain objects that reflected the pale sunlight like the spires of a far-off, exotic city.” Rourke is obviously connected with two kinds of art, one that represents life as “vivid” and “eternally moist, eternally in the sun,” and another that sees it as “exotic,” “far-off,” “faint,” and “vague.” Her house bridges the gap between the immediate and the imagined, between verisimilitude and vision. This is the bridge Sutherland tries to find in his own art — a way of telling that will enable him to turn his past into a vision that he can fuse with the hard reality of his present. His conversion involves the knowledge that two worlds can be housed together when borders are crossed. On another level, the culmination is spiritual. Sutherland realizes that his religious training has fixed him in history, rather than in the “All Time” he associates with Rourke and her belief in “His immortal body.”

I want to be able to say that Sutherland embraces this body, and he does transcend the self limitations he is coming to understand. But the fact is that at this point in the story he still rejects the knowledge that is offered to him; he refuses to go *all the way* inside. This explains why he will not eat the holy wafer his cake crumbs have become (“I pressed the last crumbs into a wafer and let it drop back on the plate”), why he cannot understand Rourke’s quivering prayer sounds, and why he bolts from the room (“my only chance to get away before she could drain my blood into a cup”). Although this section ends with Sutherland’s evasion of Big Mama, it is clear that something in him has changed, for now he is ready to touch the line that divides Sutherland from Rourke. “I threw myself into the brier hedge between our properties.” I threw myself a bit beyond my history.

Not for long. The next section finds Sutherland contemplating history again, listing the “facts” about Rourke that will be recorded in his *History of Hartley*. At the very mention of this title we know that Sutherland will fail in his attempt to get beyond the book that defines his life and his mode of perception. Although his narrative might be seen as an attempt to subvert history, the fact remains that it is only a brief interlude in the life of a man who has chosen to be “responsible” for “records” and “facts.” I begin to lose faith in Sutherland, want him to throw away the history and give up the data. He won’t. His security, now and always, is tied to what is known. Look at the information he provides about the Rourkes. The only thing interesting about the “facts” is that Theodora’s husband, like Sutherland’s father, was a state senator and judge. The implications of this kinship are important, for they cast Bernard Rourke in the role of surrogate (and absent) father to Sutherland; and as we have already seen, Theodora acts as his Big Mama. So Sutherland wants new parents, replacement parents, a replaced life. The details he provides tell us he is unhappy with what he has become. But at the same time, his refusal to become anything other than what he is suggests that the influence of his safe, Bermuda-lawned childhood has been overpowering, crushing in its safeness, crushing in its ability to deprive him of his manhood.

THIS WORD — “MANHOOD” — is the one I wanted to reach in order to explain Sutherland’s opening description of the “discovery that determined my life.” He is going to tell us about “the old canal” connected with Rourke’s origins. But first, he gives us “a word, historically, on the old canal system.” The explicit connection Sutherland makes between word, history, and geography indicates that his upcoming narrative will reveal something about his own life and art. Now picture Florida, limp phallus of the South, and wonder why Sutherland is so preoccupied with “a dream of the mighty ditch” that could be “a natural divider between the productive and enlightened north of Florida and the swampy, pestiferous south.” For Sutherland, the mighty ditch would cut the phallus hanging from the body; the “natural divider” he contemplates is only an outward symbol of the much deeper psychological and sexual division he fears he will experience as a man. Sutherland is obsessed with division because he wants to remain whole. (Remember the hedge that divides him from Rourke, the glass that divides him from Hartley, the canal that divides him from his past.) Whole? Unsullied by Rourke, unsullied by time, unsullied by the act of telling. If Sutherland moves on the canal, then, he also inhabits a dividing line. Things may change. Does anything change for Sutherland that August morning on the old canal?

He is fishing with Tom. A “black, blunt” tub that comes into view, poled by a

tall man in black robes. The man lands on Rourke's "scummy beach." Sutherland realizes he is "a Catholic priest." Maybe Rourke is dead. The priest leaves. They follow him. They get lost. They find a wide ditch banked with mud and crushed stone. The ditch narrows. Grey shanty shapes appear. Then "two boys, our age" who were "squatting in the water on either side of the dike" emerge.

I follow the Sutherland boys away from their home. Watch them get lost. Wait for the significance of their journey to appear. Get bored. I know that the voyage is symbolic. When I first read the story I wrote that the search for Rourke's secret "is clearly a heart of darkness voyage that deliberately refuses light" (*OTL*, p. 53). But this refusal is not part of Sutherland's attempt to affirm Rourke's mysteriousness or his own, as I claimed. He refuses to acknowledge what is blatantly revealed: that Rourke's ancestry is not "noble," "eternal," or socially elevated in the conventional sense he respects. Her blood may be mixed. And she seems connected to the albino boys who play along the ditch (when Sutherland sees them he "seemed to be looking into the opaque, colorless eyes of Big Mama, and into the bleeding side of Jesus"). More important, she is linked to a people that reject Sutherland and call for his immediate death. Big Mama's "tribe" wants to kill Sutherland. My mother and her family want to kill me, the son. My mother wants me dead.

Any reader would say that Rourke wants nothing of this; she is *already* dead and never cared much for Sutherland anyhow. Yet it is precisely through her death, through her absence, through her neglect of this boy, that she signals her desire to leave him alone, out in the open, prey. She offers him up to a metaphorical death. Sutherland retreats from the metaphor, pulls away from Big Mama, tries to go back to a time when innocence was easy. Back to the Bermuda lawn. Back to his side of the hedge. "I started paddling backwards. . . ." "We were reeling backwards now, as fast as I could paddle." Reeling back into known time, history, daylight, commanding views, sterility, record keeping, death. Sutherland cannot win. To pursue the unknown is to find death; to return to the known is to find death. Death, death, death. Death in life. Narrative implications? He is *sentenced*. There is no safety in language or form. No solace offered by tradition. No way of telling that can ground the teller in time and guarantee his safe passage to eternity. No way of beginning that does not acknowledge every sense of the end. No way of ending that does not lament every lost beginning. No way out.

Faced with these narrative implications, Sutherland can only continue to write. Yet the mode of narration he resorts to in the last section of the story shows how completely he has failed to find the other side he claimed to want. He goes right back to the "records" that offer him a haven from the other side. This historical haven allows his tone to change: before, it could be involved, frightened, variable in its pace; now, it is reportorial, direct, rational to the point of obsession. Listen

to him recite the facts about Spanish or Creole populations, about Big Mama's estate, about her husband's paintings, about how he is not concerned with her genes "in any quasi-legal sense — only historically." He means *personally*, but by now the personal and historical are synonymous — a sign of Sutherland's failure to transcend his ordered past and the ordered narrative he fashions to enclose that past. This is why he substitutes the personal for the historical when in the next sentence he tells us that Rourke "is one of many who have left scars on my body and opened a path that time has all but swallowed up." "Scars on my body": initiation into the other side.

Sutherland is right when he suggests that this initiation "opened a path" for him that was inevitably "swallowed up." But does he recognize that by recording time — by telling — he swallows up himself? In a final attempt to identify with Rourke he compares her "lost people" to the "two children" who found them: "they too are only wanderers." Nonsense. Tom is eminently located in his Apollo moon probe quest. And you, Sutherland, are ensconced in your air-conditioned office, meditating on your narrative quest. You won't step outside, break the glass, make the passage you want come true. So you sit there telling us your tale of loss and think the story you tell has power. Wrong. There is power, but it is the power of rampant impotence. We follow you, amazed by how little you've done, shocked by how little you've grown. In the end, your story has the power of absence; it is a story thriving on its inability to be told. Perfectly, *nothing* happens to mark its closure. So confess your failure. Tell us you know you write out of nothing but your castrated consciousness. I turn the page and wait to see if you will redeem the final lines. Confess: "I live in the dark, Tom in the light." Yes. Confess more: "my experience that afternoon" did "compel me to become a historian" and did "prevent me from becoming a good one." Go on: Tom, "eyes skyward," is "indifferent to it all" while everything around me is "crumbling into foolishness." Is this the sudden end? Did I push you too far, turn you into something other than what you wanted to be? I don't care. Your other side might be mine. Let me start over. Come closer. Now tell me your story again.

NOTES

- ¹ Geoff Hancock, "An Interview with Clark Blaise," *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, Nos. 34-35 (1980), p. 51. All further references to this work (Hancock) appear in the text.
- ² Clark Blaise, "A North American Memoir: Revenge," *The North American Review*, 269, No. 4 (Dec. 1984), 57.
- 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.

- ⁴ Robert Lecker, "Clark Blaise: Murals Deep in Nature," in his *On the Line: Readings in the Short Fiction of Clark Blaise, John Metcalf, and Hugh Hood* (Downsview, Ont.: ECW, 1982), pp. 51, 52. All further references to this work (*OTL*) appear in the text.
- ⁵ Barry Cameron, *Clark Blaise and His Works* (Toronto: ECW, [1985]), p. 45.

THE BARONESS ELSA

Stephen Scobie

Imagine, then, a meeting
 which never could have taken place:
 somehow on leave from Manitoba
 a small-town schoolteacher called Grove
 has made it down to New York City
 all alone. Old, half-forgotten intuitions
 draw him to Greenwich Village: the bold
 bohemian life of the streets allows him,
 for the first time in years, to relax,
 to be Felix. He remembers a life
 of silk and champagne (a life of sordid
 toil and translation): warm cafés in Bonn
 where people would actually talk
 serious art, with no need to explain
 who Flaubert was, or André Gide.
 The years in Rapid City slip away
 as he sits at a sidewalk table, young
 and planning his first novel, Fanny
 Essler: elsewhere: Elsa. Then
 he sees her walking down a sunlit street
 towards him. He cannot believe what
 his thoughts have summoned: this woman seems
 to have shaved her skull and painted it
 bright purple, as far as it shows
 from under the coal scuttle, tarnished brass,
 she wears as a hat; on each of her cheeks
 are small, pink, 2-cent postage stamps;
 her skin is powdered yellow, her lipstick black;
 a ratty old fur coat hangs loose and open,
 her only clothing; from her breasts
 two rusty tea-immersion balls perform