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The Intricate Relationship Between Space and Autobiography (Space Narrated in *I Had a Father* by Clarke Blaise)

“I had to have Montréal.”
 (“Resident Alien”, 29)

“Si j’aurais choisi le chemin de mon père.”
 (*I Had a Father*, ix)

Abstract

My intention in this paper is to analyse Clarke Blaise’s novel I Had A Father (A Postmodern Biography) (1993) from the point of view how spacialization and autobiography are linked in his identity formation. Space is of particular importance in the process of trying to define his bilingual and bi/polycultural identity. His father was French-Canadian, his mother was English-Canadian and he lived much of his life in the USA. The “multiple personality syndrome” in his case is strongly connected to space and therefore to places in an idiosyncratic way. This narrative of self-definition cannot be separated from spatial interaction with the environment. The spatial polarities among which he keeps moving aim towards Québec; he would like to become a Québécois and is searching for his roots there, and therefore it is a quest for his father as well, who was present in his life by his absence. The article will conclude by supposing that the varied spatial configurations in the novel support an ambivalent fixity, which, however, is set in a deep-rooted Québécois self.

Résumé

Dans la présente étude, je me propose d’analyser un roman de Clarke Blaise, I Had A Father (A Postmodern Biography) (1993), du point de vue des rapports qui s’établissent entre spatialisations et autobiographie dans la formation de l’identité de l’auteur. L’espace est d’une importance particulière dans son effort pour définir son identité bilingue et bi/polyculturelle. Né d’un père canadien francophone et d’une mère canadienne anglophone, l’auteur a passé la plus grande partie de sa vie aux États-Unis. Dans son cas, le « syndrome de la personnalité multiple » est fortement lié à l’espace, et par conséquent à certains lieux, de manière idiosyncrasique. Ce récit d’autodéfinition ne pourrait donc être séparé de l’interaction spatiale entre l’histoire et l’environnement. Les polarités spatiales où se meut le narrateur le dirigent vers le Québec ; il voudrait devenir Québécois, partant à la recherche de ses racines là-bas. Cette quête est en même temps celle de son père, qui a été présent dans sa vie précisément par son absence. L’étude se terminera par l’hypothèse selon

laquelle les diverses configurations spatiales du roman représentent une fixité ambivalente qui, cependant, est fortement enracinée dans l'identité québécoise.

In order to give legitimacy to the choice of my theme it is essential that a brief comment be made on Clarke Blaise's life. He was born to an English-Canadian mother and a French-Canadian father in Fargo, North Dakota in 1940. He spent most of his youth in the USA, where his father worked as a salesman, moving from one place to another in the eastern and southern parts of the country. Blaise graduated from Danison University, Ohio and then studied creative writing at Harvard and Iowa, where he presently teaches creative writing. He felt an urge to go to Montréal, which he did in 1966, and was active on the literary scene. He was a member of the Montréal Story Teller Group together with John Metcalf, Hugh Hood, Raymond Fraser and Ray Smith. He acquired Canadian citizenship in 1973, stayed in Montréal till 1978, then went to Toronto only to leave Canada in two years' time for the USA. He married Bharati Mukharjee from India, an internationally acclaimed writer and co-author with Blaise of a travel memoir called *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977).

I have chosen Blaise because of the discrepancy in his sociocultural background, since he is both bilingual and bicultural, if not polycultural. My paper seeks to examine a narrative of self-definition, Blaise's *I Had a Father (A Post-modern Autobiography)* (1993), with references to one of his short story collections, *Resident Alien (RA)* (1986) from the point of view of *spacialization*. My central interest lies in finding out how important spacialization is in his identity construction. His text, as we shall see later, lends itself to this kind of an investigation. I agree with the commonly accepted view that identity formation involves not only social, political, religious and linguistic processes but also spatial interaction with the environment.

I would like to engage in finding out how the phenomenon of the "multiple personality syndrome" is manifest in Blaise's relation to space. My point of departure is based on a topological position, therefore theoretical clarifications are in order. I shall use Mieker Bal's definition of space: "[t]he concept of place is related to the physical, mathematically measurable shape of spatial existence. ... [p]laces are linked to certain points of perception. These places seen in relation to their perception are called space" (133). Existence is spatial, and space is a continuum in more than one sense of the word. Space is temporal (the conceptual category of space cannot be separated from time), it is imaginary, mythical, cosmological, empirical and gender specific. As Doreen Massey claims, "Space is very much on the agenda these days" (249). Since Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1971) and Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) appeared, the concept of space has gained multifaceted meanings. Inter- and multidisciplinary investigations have mushroomed around it. Critics (Warley, 1) argue that knowledges, including self-knowledges, are partly a function of our positions in our relationships to particular spatial environments,

including the space of the gendered, racialized, class-demarcated and medicated body. Foucault also argues that the 20th century will be the “epoch of space” (22). The ever-growing interest in the humanities and social sciences in studying all aspects of space is evident. There was, for example, the biennial meeting of the International Comparative Literature Association held in Munich in 1988, where the theme of the conference was “Space and Boundaries in Literature”. In Canada, the *International Journal of Canadian Studies* devoted a special issue to “Time, Space and Place” (15, Spring 1997), and this was followed a year later by an issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* entitled “Mapping the Grounds in Canadian Literature” (1998, Vol. 23, No.1), which was devoted to the same subject. Blaise states in the introduction to his work that writing and space are closely connected in his mental landscape: “Vacant space and occult gravities are the stuff of fiction. ... I should say only that knowing *where* to look – the geography of ontogeny – does have a correlation to writing. Geography is destiny” (x). In his case we cannot speak of “cartographical metaphors” because his self-examination is precisely based on topoanalysis. *I Had A Father* is not only a postmodern autobiography but an ontological quest, too.

Autobiographical impulses are present in earlier works as well, both *A North American Education* (1973) and *Tribal Justice* (1974), but it is only in *I Had A Father* (1993) that he explicitly expresses his intention to write autobiography. The easy flow of language can be deceptive at times, concealing the intricate matrix of juxtaposed identities. The authorial control is sometimes loose exactly because we see him in the process of trying to place himself in the world’s complex spacial and temporal coordinates. As Robert Lecker notes, “Of primary importance is the fact that through writing he is beginning himself” (94). For Blaise space is an all-inclusive category because of his topophilia, therefore space as such also contains the very text he produced in which space becomes a textual protagonist. His self-awareness is manifest in the “author-become-his-own-text” process.

The autobiography is also a search for his French-Canadian father, who was present in his life by his absence. As such it has much in common with Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* (1982). Ondaatje’s exploration narrative reveals his way of trying to come to terms with his dead father, who was denied to him when he was young. Blaise’s father was an alcoholic (just like Ondaatje’s), and as a salesman he was always on the road in the USA. Unfaithful to his wife and neglectful of his family, he married several times, renounced his French background, and spoke English almost all the time with sporadic, subconscious remarks in French. He changed his French-Canadian name *Blais* to *Blaise*, hiding his true identity.

The autobiography abounds in spatial indications because just like his father Blaise has changed places in his life almost thirty times so far. As he puts it, “The first road was for him [his father], as it is for me, a life of constant self-invention” (15). The first French word he learnt from his father “[w]as one of his [his father’s] favourites: *coincé*. Cornered” (29), indicating the strong desire to break out. Blaise often uses French words, phrases, sentences in his travel narrative together with their English equivalents, thus creating a

bilingual ambiance, and making clear the intersections of language, space, time and identity.

The way space is articulated in his discourse is *remembered* space, emphasized by the very nature of the autobiographical genre. As Gaston Bachelard notes, "Spaces remain in our memories and become creative" (10). Indeed, his work is set in an experienced present in a self-reflexive manner. The self-reflexivity is unavoidable for him, "My problem, if you haven't guessed it yet, is that I am a meta-self at times, a construct of pieces adding up to a self, even to the person writing this" (45). In a similar fashion, "He [his father] is a meta-father, a concept of 'fatherness'" (45). Blaise, however, wants to deconceptualize him, and makes attempts to enliven him. In the late 60s and in the 70s when he was in Montréal his intention was to find his personal roots, particularly the ones related to his father. As he words it, "My real dream, I realize now, had been to transform myself into a Canadian, preferably French, to link up with Montréal, as the true son of my parents" (120-1). He calls Montréal "his parents" (30) in "The Voice of Unhousement" (*RA*) because of the French-English conflicts, which remind him of his parents' divorce. He also says, "What I am suggesting is that Montréal even in the late 60s, still spoke as my personal intellectual and literary sense of the *universe*" (124, emphasis added).

Later he went to rural Québec, to Mégantic where he researched his family, tracing it back to 1669. It is true that it is by investigating both time and space that we can fully articulate what it means to be situated as human beings. He sadly remarks that his first visit happened only in 1990, suggesting that he should have gone there long before. The desire to re/discover his father together with Québec pervades the autobiography. Some of his second and third cousins still live there (23). The textual strategies he uses here are references to church ledgers, letters, newspaper clippings and personal interviews.

In his reading of Québec, the exterior place becomes internalized in his psyche; the earlier destructed space becomes reconstructed. In his case the journey is not a psychological trope but a lived experience: his endeavors to focus on making space knowable for himself. He claims, "Despite the fact that I was never a French-Canadian, never spoke the language as a child ... Québec is in a profound sense my home" (101). He himself is torn between the centripetal force towards Québec and the centrifugal forces towards elsewhere(s).

The spatial polarities among which he keeps moving also include East and West, South and North in different countries and continents, and they gain so-called spatial meanings. His spatial practices evolve around living in constantly shifting spaces which include sociopetal and sociofugal spaces as well. He asserts, "I come from nowhere, I live nowhere, my future is noplacement" (38). The spatio-temporal dimensions are obviously linked. In an autobiographical text the mental construct of time is of particularly great significance. Belonging nowhere is also something that he has in common with his father, "Because my father never shared Mégantic with me, because he seemed to come from nowhere, I fabricated a hundred identities,

memorized maps and geographies from age of five, and made myself at home, on native terms, with every place we ever settled" (111). No wonder the physicalistic approach is very strong in his narrative of quest.

His many cross-cultural encounters are narrated in a discourse of difference. One may ask whether his Québec identity is a real one or not, but certainly it is an emotional and spiritual space for him. Blaise's space is a continuous elsewhere. He acknowledges, "When I ask, as I always do, *Where do you come from?* I mean to ask *who are you?*" (35). It reminds us of Northrop Frye's often quoted observation, "It seems to me that the Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'" (Frye, 220). Blaise says, "Travel is my professional medium; it is indispensable to what I do for living" (44). He writes travel literature. Ever since his childhood he has been preoccupied with moving between different geographical and cultural zones. His first artistic outputs were paintings about ships, cars and trains (58), and later he wanted to become a bus driver (33). His thinking is situated in a perpetual movement. According to Bal, "In many travel stories, the movement is a goal in itself. It is expected to result in a change, liberation, introspection, wisdom or knowledge" (137). This is exactly what happens to Blaise, too. "A new place meant the hole in my character, the incompleteness, could be filled up, muddled over [...] The promise that each transformation would disclose a hidden identity" (111).

He does not consider his self to possess a chameleon-like nature; instead he insists on continuously crossing borders (60). He lives with a "border consciousness" (60). In contrast, Antonio D'Alfonso (poet, fiction writer and critic from Toronto) in *The Other Shore* (1986) does compare himself to a chameleon; the essence of his existence is to be able to transform himself through languages and cultures: Italian, French and English. He discovered that his own identity is based on constant changes, that he is a continuation. In Blaise's view, "Borders offer the opportunity to be opposing things without deception" (60). He developed his own theory of borders in one of works called *The Border as Fiction* (1990), in which he claims that he has a personal relationship with borders'

The concept of borders has been deeply investigated by a great number of scholars in human and social geography as well. According to Randy W. Widdis, "[i]dentity and place, both interdependent concepts, are defined by borders, borderlands are regions of interaction where functional relationships are established" (49). Despite the fact that Blaise claims that he lives between borders, we can maintain that life and work flowing into each other constitute a possible borderland for his existence. Borderlands can be traced in the semantic context of his spatial representation, where physical, temporal, visual, auditory, olfactory, thermal and tactile spaces support each other. Thus the indication of places happens on multifarious levels, and the spaces created bear a close relationship to one another. The physical dimensions of his spaces embrace the whole universe divided into smaller

units: the globe, nature, continents, countries, states (USA), provinces (Canada), counties, urban and rural spaces, streets, buildings, houses, the inside of houses (even drawers for example). In the work, part one is called "My Life as an *Atlas*", and part three "In My Father's *Houses*" (emphasis added). As Bachelard points out, "Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others stimulating, one another" (6). In *I Had A Father* we are constantly reminded of the author's reference points: when and where each and every part was written, without following a chronological order but shifting in space and time; thus it is the reader's task to put the fragmented pieces together. As Linda Hutcheon points out, "[p]ostmodern texts like Ondaatje's and Blaise's have reintroduced production in their stress on performance" (83). The physic actuality of the performative action involves both the author and the reader.

The reader is left with a dubious feeling concerning the title *I Had A Father* and the last sentence "Father!" (204), which reads/sounds almost like a revelation of some truth. Has Blaise really found his father and his Québec self in his individualized travel experiences? He considers himself French-Canadian, yet the varied spatial configurations support a polycultural identity configuration, an ambivalent fixity. His relationship to space is engendered by his close feeling to different places; there seems to be no alien place for him as he transforms spaces into lived places. His specified form of identity is never fixed and is always based on constant shifts, finding its ultimate expression in his deep sensitivity to places and spaces, which is *mapped out* even literally in his autobiography. The author's psychological integrity is supported by the text's thematic integrity. Despite the ambiguities that originate in Blaise's transient places, which that serve different functions in constructing his idiosyncratic identity, we should assume that ultimately it is his deep-rooted *Québécois* self that allows him to open to his different selves and to *les ailleurs* as well.

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