THE DIVIDED SELF

Gary Ross

"the labyrinth holds me" ("A night in the Royal Ontario Museum")
"I am the cause" ("It is dangerous to read newspapers")

IN *The Animals in That Country*, as in her other volumes, Margaret Atwood gives her poems direction and movement. This book takes the rough shape of a journey: it starts with a departure, moves progressively closer to a confrontation with horror, then finds an exit and moves toward it. The volume deals less with discrete experiences than with modes, patterns. The poet imposes a grid on experience in an attempt to expose the elements of myth and ritual, characteristics beyond the thing itself — in an attempt, that is, to make sense of what otherwise would be an incomprehensible avalanche of minutiae.

Things assume a kind of legitimacy, a tentative order, when viewed as representative types, signs of something more fundamental and widespread. The animals "in that country" exist in formal, ceremonial situations:

> the fox run
> politely to earth, the huntsmen
> standing around him, fixed
> in their tapestry of manners
>
> the bull, embroidered
> with blood and given
> an elegant death, trumpets, his name
> stamped on him, heraldic brand.
>
> ("The animals in that country")

These circumstances — fox hunting and bullfighting — are ones in which men brutalize and victimize animals. Perhaps we move toward an understanding of our institutionalized cruelties by focusing on the ritualistic elements of the slaughter; as the poet writes in "The festival", "it is the ceremony/ they say, that gives a sacramental/ meaning to butchered meat". Why does man bother to

dress his killing in dignity? Perhaps because the bull "is really a man". Then, man recognizes his own mortality each time he sees life end? Surely not, or why would he be causing the cessation of life? Perhaps we kill simply because we like to kill, or because we'd like to kill ourselves, or other people, and animals are the best substitute.

Just where or what "that country" is, is not clear; but it doesn't matter. The only difference between there and here is that in "this country" the deprivation of life is unintentional, and thus not ritualized. The animal victims are anonymous, inhuman (they have the "faces of animals", of "no-one"); their deaths are "not elegant". Nor is it clear which country Atwood belongs to. The word "this" might seem to tell us, except that the voice in the poem is flat and disembodied. She may belong to either country, or both. Each is horrifying, since each is a landscape of man-inflicted death.

"The trappers" pursues the themes of violence and mortality. The poet writes of "the abstract hunger/ to trap and smash/ the creature"; but as soon as the hunger is sated, the trappers feel guilt both "because/ they are not animals" and "because they are". Again, the person who exploits an animal's vulnerability is reminded of his own; the man who dictates life and death to other creatures holds no such power over himself. In "The festival", what are we to make of the hunters who "circle tensely among the trees", waiting "for the god to appear,/ crossed in the sights of their rifles" — especially when the god turns out to be "a man with antlers"?

GRADUALLY, inevitably, the poet arrives at a painful realization: the only difference between a random world and a structured one is form. The disheartening content is unchanged; indeed, the framework of myth and ritual, like a gift-wrapped, empty box, only serves to emphasize what it encloses. The exploration of modes of experience tends also to give universal dimensions to the findings; these are not isolated incidents, after all. As an ordered place, a set of rhythms, rituals, repetitions, the real world is simply a landscape of futility, constriction, desperation, slaughter. The further into the book we proceed, the more evident that fact becomes.

Atwood conveys this aura with images that are always telling, frequently brilliant. "The surveyors" have left a "trail of single reason" through the bush, but the trail is now merely a collection of

> signs without motion, red arrows
> pointing in no direction; faint ritual
> markings leached by time
> of any meaning.

It would not be far-fetched to suggest that the trail bears a certain resemblance to the path of the poet's life. She inhabits an atmosphere of impermanence in which even the most basic natural laws are without meaning.

> The plates are on the table
> to weight it down.
>
> I call you sometimes
> To make sure you are still there.
>
> Tomorrow, when you come to dinner
> They will tell you I never lived here.
>
> ("Roominghouse, winter")

Somewhere along the line something has gone wrong. Priorities, logical orders, have been inverted. The slain green giant is not a murder victim, he's an "essential/ fact for the practice of their [detectives'] art, these cool/ dissections" ("The green giant murder"). "A night in the Royal Ontario Museum" stands as a microcosm of the poet's journey toward pure, monolithic horror, and as the ultimate metaphor of human isolation. The condition is one which offers little hope of escape.

> Under that ornate
> golden cranium I wander
> among fragments of gods, tarnished
> coins, embalmed gestures
> chronologically arranged,
> looking for the EXIT sign
>
> but in spite of the diagrams
> at every corner, labelled
> in red: YOU ARE HERE
> the labyrinth holds me.

She exists amidst stopped life, living a sort of death in life; she realizes her predicament, seeks a way out, but is trapped. Physical escape is not only impossible, it's literally unimaginable. Subconscious attempts just to envision flight are futile:

> and when I dream images
> of daring escapes through the snow
> I . . . wake up shouting.
>
> ("The landlady")

As in *The Circle Game*, the need for love is an unfulfilled constant. As it remains unsatisfied, it transmutes itself into an irrational, desperate hunger that

becomes a "wish to assimilate", to draw "everything into its own/ space" ("More and more"). But too many conflicting forces are at work, and the poet is unable to take refuge, to find comfort, in another. Attempts to do so are useless, one-directional:

> If he could cram his mind
> into my body
> and make it stay there,
> he would be happy.

The attendant emotions are solitary or frictional, and without value.

> Across the table
> each of us reflects
> the despair of the separate
> object. Paper despair.
>
> ("Part of a day")

What possible sustenance remains? For a poet, the final resource is words, but they by themselves are inadequate.

> Why do you need
> the blanket of another body
> . . .
> Aren't there enough words
> flowing in your veins
> to keep you going.
>
> ("The shadow voice")

Like people, words have become encrusted, altered. When the poet speaks of "an armoured skin/ that is a language", she is at once defining the failure of communication, and explaining it. The currency of language has lost its significance and precision, making interpersonal commerce all the more difficult. Clearly, something has been lost. The missing element is meaning — in its broadest sense, and its most specific one.

> The words lie washed ashore
> on the margins, mangled
> by the journey upwards to the bluegrey
> surface, the transition:
>
> these once-living
> and phosphorescent meanings
> fading in my hands
>
> I try to but can't decipher.
>
> ("Notes from various pasts")

In *The Animals in That Country*, the physical, perceptible wilderness — lakes, mountains, cut stumps, glacial rock — is condensed and incorporated into a larger setting. We still encounter trappers and totems in these poems, but we also come across Frankenstein, giant tortoises, Captain Cook, the green giant: fictional and historical and fantastic beings. They inhabit a rarefied, rootless place, a "blank void" of which the physical world is simply a component. Atwood is progressing beyond the personal, "real" world; she adds imaginary fragments to her vision. This new landscape is more intimidating, more terrifying still: it is all-inclusive.

The poet's explorations describe increasingly larger orbits about the self. She moves further away, into different, more forbidding atmospheres. But though the orbits grow larger, they are concentric; always at the centre is the hollow, bleak self. The vision is elaborated, moves through the personal toward the universal; and the landscape expands proportionally. This movement — the journey mentioned earlier — takes place on two levels — an inner, psychological one as well as the surface, quasi-physical one. The psychological movement is towards absolute schizophrenia, a total division of the self, and the eventual escape takes the form of reintegration. The poet sets up this dualism quite deliberately, and we can follow inner progress by noting outer signs; the expanded landscape operates on both literal and figurative levels.

The title poem presents a bifurcated world — "this country" and "that country". The poet's place may be uncertain, but her very dissociation prefigures a more basic separation. By the time we reach "The shadow voice", a persona has detached itself ("My shadow said to me/ What is the matter"). In "A fortification" there are two distinct selves; body and mind have diverged: "I get up, extend the feet/ into my body which is a metal spacesuit." Moreover, she is fully aware of her schizophrenia. In her awareness lies the possibility that she has consciously created it.

> Still for an instant I
>
> catch sight of the other creature
> the one that has real skin, real hair,
> vanishing down the line of cells
> back to the lost forest of being vulnerable.

Her only escape from the outside world is invulnerability to it, and she can make herself invulnerable only by severing herself, making two selves. It's as though one part of her being, a sort of nebulous moon, is circling around the physical being — that part of the self that cannot escape. The moon drifts further and further away; the connection between the two parts grows weaker. In

"Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein" the alter ego has broken away, gone careening off into "a flat void/ barren as total freedom". The poet has created another self all right, but she has taken her creation a step too far. She has made it complete, autonomous ("I will not come when you call"). In effect, she has made a monster of herself.

More important, she is aware that she has done so. Here, for the first time, she implicitly accepts responsibility for her state. The effect of the outside world is paradoxical: it both alienates and implicates. Her schizophrenic stance is defensive; the world forces people into self-protective postures. It would be simple enough to leave it at that, to say the world is brutal, irrational, responsible: it has made me what I am. But such an assertion fails to consider that the world, like all human institutions, is moulded and governed by people. An army can be regarded as an abstract, devastating, faceless entity, but to see it exclusively that way is to overlook an important point — an army is composed of individuals. To use an analogy more appropriate to Atwood, the error in perception is like failing to see the trees for the forest.

Thus the issue of personal responsibility is raised. At what point is an aggregate horror the result of individual horrors? The problem is introduced directly in "A night in the Royal Ontario Museum". The opening lines are more germane than they may seem: "Who locked me/ into this crazed man-made/ stone brain." The museum, a metaphor for the poet's dilemma, is "man-made"; and while someone may have locked her into it, she no doubt entered of her own accord. So the dilemma may be not only man-made, but self-made. (I don't want to draw too many convenient implications from one poem, but that much is surely reasonable.) She feels victimized by others, yet she is aware that others are similarly trapped, equally victimized. She recognizes, in other words, that she is an inflicter of misery and isolation, as well as a sufferer: "*each of us* reflects/ the despair of the separate object."

A more subtle illustration can be drawn from "A fortification". When the poet says "I have armed myself, yes I am safe: safe", she makes a striking, and I'm sure not unintentional observation. Arming is more than protecting, or at least it's a forbidding genre of protection: it's potential retaliation. It is easy to justify arms — physical or emotional — as defence. Unfortunately, the situation can only perpetuate itself; everyone must follow suit lest they be left vulnerable; and the pool of latent violence swells. The following line — "The grass can't hurt me" — demonstrates the paranoia evoked by an atmosphere, a landscape, so intensified. In two lines, she conveys the general harm done in the name of individual welfare, and shows at the same time that the alienating process is one from which she herself is not exempt.

The question now is, how to restore meaning, to break out of the circle game of isolation? There appears to be little hope of an answer. "It is dangerous to read

newspapers" indicates the profound extent to which the poet is trapped, the totality of her helplessness.

> While I was building neat
> castles in the sandbox,
> the hasty pits were
> filling with bulldozed corpses
>
> and as I walked to the school
> washed and combed, my feet
> stepping on the cracks in the cement
> detonated red bombs.

As a child, she inferred a connection between her own actions and violence. She sees herself now as endangered by the world, a potential victim to be sure; but also as a source of harm, an unwitting perpetrator:

> I am the cause, I am a stockpile of chemical
> toys, my body
> is a deadly gadget,
> I reach out in love, my hands are guns,
> my good intentions are completely lethal.

When she writes

> Each time I hit a key
> on my electric typewriter,
> speaking of peaceful trees
>
> another village explodes

are we to think that, as an adult, she has simply accepted a logical fallacy — argument from correlation to cause — or is she actually convinced of, and correct in assuming, a causal link between herself and destruction? This is the most terrifying possibility of all: perhaps the logical bridge is not fallacious: the world is simply beyond comprehension, and beyond remedy.

"GETTING AWAY WAS EASY", writes the poet in "Astral traveller", "Coming back is an exacting theory." Why, then, try to return at all? Why not abandon the self to its secure division? The answer must be that isolation, the emotional fortress, is not worth it. The security it affords demands the absence of all genuinely human association, and for the poet — or anyone, perhaps — that is too great a price. She's like a city dweller who grows increasingly paranoid about the crush of humanity around her — the unpredictability, the

chance of harm — and builds and inhabits an igloo in the middle of nowhere, to be safe. Inevitably, she must realize that the sterility of her shelter is worse than the things she fled in the first place.

The return to humanity takes the form of the reintegration of the self. The poet's task is to become whole again, to overcome her inability to contain the polarities of self, the two halves. This process is not unlike the one she describes in "Chronology". She must peel away the built-up layers of protection — not a simple task, because by doing so she revokes her most prized quality, invulnerability. She is fully aware of the risks ("I will be unshelled"), yet chooses — a conscious effort is involved — to trade her dead security for the precariousness of "blank innocence".

As in *The Circle Game*, such a reintegration can be achieved only in the presence of another. In "After I fell apart", it is another person who is actually performing a reconstruction. Perhaps because she herself takes no active role, she remains two beings, one there, submitting ("my neck turns, moved/ by your mending fingers"), the other outside, observing ("With what taut/ attention I watch you/ fitting me back together"). It's only when she sees the equivalent of her condition in others ("I search for you/ in your body"), only when she appreciates the unifying function she too must serve, that progress is made. "A pursuit" is in fact two simultaneous pursuits — the seeking of another ("I look for you/ in this room"), and of the self ("Through the tangle of each other/ we hunt ourselves").

The movement toward an integrated self is paralleled by a return from the rootless, rarefied landscape to the physical one:

> Through the wilderness of the flesh
> across the mind's ice expanses
> we hunt each other
>
> I keep being afraid
> I will find you
> dead in the snow.

Perhaps the final step can never be taken, the unification never achieved ("These expeditions/ have no end"); but the direction is clear, and has been deliberately determined. It leads inexorably "towards that undiscovered/ cave, heavy/ archaic treasure:/ my own/ obsolete body, my face,/ my own fingers" ("Astral traveller"). It leads at the same time toward another's completion. Human touch is reciprocated, and as it is the landscape is infused with the burgeoning wholeness of those who would deny its chaos:

> Axiom: you are a sea.
> Your eye-
> lids curve over chaos

My hands
where they touch you, create
small inhabited islands

Soon you will be
all earth: a known
land, a country.

("Axiom")

OROZCO'S CUPOLA: ASTRONAUT AND ASTRAL SELF

Tom Marshall

man of fire
hurtles into air
for sustenance of gods angels
what you will

consuming himself

I had not seen him
when I wrote
"burning man fall outward
into ardent space"
ten years ago

now I want to be a man of air

cool dry air

be consumed
infinitely slowly beautifully by god

rising without flame or movement

entered by sun water

leaning over earth

floating as trees

clouds house island planet stones float

eaten away by air