

smouldering in his pipe, he stares out into the diffused malevolence of the night, the very picture of the Great Stone Face. Although he is very much alive I imagine him as somehow historical, embodying the verities of a rockbound province, the home truths.

But I know, or I think I know, that the home truths are only accessible to those with the power to understand them, and that the practice of art is not solely the attempt to make money or to create a masterpiece (will I ever?) but is for me a liberating way of life. In *The Mountain and the Valley* David Canaan walks up the mountain: "And some unquenchable

leaven in the mind's thirst kept sending it back for the taste of complete realization it just missed."³ I would not want to be David Canaan as moments later he lies on the ground, his thirst unquenched, snowflakes melting on his face, as only a partridge rises to make it over the mountain.

NOTES

- ¹ Milton Acorn, *More Poems for People*, (Toronto, 1972), jacket cover.
- ² George Woodcock, *Hugh MacLennan*, (Toronto, 1969), p. 7.
- ³ Ernest Buckler, *The Mountain and the Valley*, (New York, 1952), p. 360.

WHOLLY DRUNK OR WHOLLY SOBER?

Marilyn Baxter

IN ALDEN NOWLAN's early poetry (before 1969) the self is essentially a single, homogeneous entity. Although it is never "wholly removed from [its own] echo and reflection",¹ there is no hint of any actual dichotomy; and when the self inadvertently comes upon its own reflection in a pool, it does not think of that reflection as a separate being (as for instance Eve does in Jay Macpherson's "Eve in Reflection"), but is only concerned with avoiding any further encounters:

Christ, but I wish
I knew the direction
a man had to take
to keep from meeting
himself.²

With the publication of *The Mysterious Naked Man* in 1969, however, it became obvious that Nowlan's apprehension of the self had undergone a number of changes. Although there is only one poem

in the collection that explicitly mentions the "mysterious naked man", the title is appropriate because the whole volume can be seen as an exploration of the human soul stripped bare. And the human soul Nowlan is most interested in is, of course, his own. Intensely aware of "how mysterious it is / that I am looking out through the eyes / of a certain body and this body is alive / here and now",³ the poet is also beginning to see that this mystery is heightened by the fact that the "I" or self is no longer single but multiple:

You keep peeling off hollow dolls
and finding another
inside: I divide into men,
fat and thin, half a dozen
boys, children and babies
of various sizes.

I could have said it
a year ago in a Russian boutique
but it didn't happen
until tonight.

(*MNM*, 41)

Whenever "tonight" was, this is the first explicit mention of the multiple self that Nowlan makes;⁴ an image which he explores at greater lengths in his next two volumes: *Between Tears and Laughter* (1971) and *I'm a Stranger Here Myself* (1974).

There are times when Nowlan's division of the self into two or more parts seems to be little more than a happy device that enables him to present two different voices within his own psyche. In "Argument",⁵ for instance, the father in him argues, "I'll be as sentimental / as I want and if you don't like it / then to hell with you." To which the poet in him replies, "Not in my book you won't." The division of the self in this poem is essentially an artificial one, and the reader comes away not so much with the feeling that he has encountered two distinct personalities, but one personality with two voices; although one part of the self is in direct opposition to the other part, the dichotomy is not complete. In "The broadcaster's poem" (*SHM*, 78), however, it is: the one self apparently inhabiting an essentially different reality from the other one. Deciding that his failure as a broadcaster was due largely to the fact that he spent most of his time broadcasting from an empty room, Nowlan says that he was never able to convince himself that "there was somebody listening." The more time he spent at the microphone alone, the more an unpredictable, destructive part of his psyche seemed to assume control, and he was afraid that some night it

might blurt out something
about myself so terrible
that even I had never until
that moment suspected it.

The fear that torments him as a broadcaster reminds him of the fear he used to experience as a child when he was walking alone on "bridges and other / high

places", the fear that a part of "me" would "sneak up behind / myself and push."

But the other self is not always as sinister as this poem suggests. In "The dream of the old man who became a boy yet remained himself,"⁶ for instance, the man and the boy, believing themselves to be separate entities, plot to destroy each other. When the old man has a heart attack because he sees the boy doing things that he thinks are "unspeakably evil", the boy begins to think of himself as the victor, but then realizes that he is "shrinking smaller and smaller and smaller". Although the poet concludes, "I will be the first man in all of history / to leave two corpses behind him," the tone is one of mild surprise, not horror. At times the other self may assume the role of a fool. In "He finds himself alone in the house" (*BTL*, 19), a slightly mad, barbaric self gleefully takes advantage of the situation:

When a slice of beef happens
to fall to the floor
I snatch it up and eat it,
dust and all, my eyes rolling.
I purr like a lion.
Not because I'm drunk or drugged
but because I'm happy and there's nobody
else here, nobody not even myself to deny
me
the pleasure of going crazy.

The tone is more serious in "He addresses himself to one of the young men he once was" (*SHM*, 38) as the poet expresses a feeling of compassion for this earlier self. Even though he was "such / a clown" the poet is now eager to welcome him "home":

You were a fool and I am
too often tempted to
play the comedian.
I give you only
a home for your ghost,
and one
fraternal voice
joined in the general laughter.

Keenly aware of the fact that he is, in

some ways, a new person every day, the poet ponders the possible effects that the passage of time might have on his relationship with other people:

Here I am promising to love you
for ever
 when
 I was somebody else
only yesterday
 and don't know who
I'll be tomorrow.

(*BTL*, 53)

Nor is time the only dimension that proves uncertain: space too, he finds, is equally unreliable. Addressing a loved one in "Walking toward the bus station" (*BTL*, 52) he says that although there are "witnesses / who would swear / they saw us now" saying goodbye to each other, in reality "we are each of use elsewhere / and alone," or perhaps "we" have "boarded a plane / together" and are now in "Spain". No one knows in what spatial or temporal reality the true self exists. The more he thinks about the fact that each of us "contains multitudes, / every one of whose / personalities is split" (*SHM*, 46), the more he realizes how difficult it is to be certain that you ever "know" another human being. In "Dear Leo" (*SHM*, 21) he confesses to his old friend,

If I were honest
I'd hesitate
when asked if I know you,
meaning do I know the one
you usually let
represent you in public,

hesitate and grope
through the past

before answering.

But I do not wish to give the impression that Nowlan is describing a nightmare world in which new selves keep popping unexpectedly out of the woodwork. In most of the poems (including "Dear Leo") he is celebrating the multiplicity

of selves that each of us contains because it is a part of that greater mystery — just being alive.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Nowlan's interest in the multiple self is his use of it as the controlling metaphor in "The encounter, the recognition" (*BTL*, 69):

There's a path through the woods, or a
corridor
in an empty building. I enter it
at both ends and walk slowly toward myself.
I am wholly drunk.
 I am wholly sober.
We meet midway
 and recognize one another.
"Hello, Alden," I say.

That's how my best poems are created.

The path and the corridor are passages through some kind of experience that the poet wishes to explore. Whether the experience occurs in the external world ("the woods") or in the internal world of his own psyche ("a corridor"), the poet begins by exploring it from both ends simultaneously. One self is "wholly drunk": relaxed, receptive, subjectively involved (as he says elsewhere, "drunkenness / is a kind / of dreaming"); the other self is "wholly sober": alert, critical, objective. Meeting in the centre of the wood / building, the two selves recognize and greet one another. Although conversation is minimal ("Hello, Alden"), it would appear that each of the poet's selves learns something important from the other, something that contributes to the poet's total appreciation of the experience. Whatever the nature of the experience might be it is important that the "wholly drunk" self and the "wholly sober" self each have an opportunity to explore it independently, and even then the moment of their encounter will only prove fruitful if each recognizes (note title) the unique contribution that the other has to offer. There is no question of superiority — each self has its own

essential function without which the other self is diminished. It is tempting to try and measure the success of Nowlan's other poems on the basis of whether or not the "wholly drunk" self and the "wholly sober" self have each been given an equal voice, but such an analysis would be arbitrary and self-indulgent (one cannot forget Nowlan's indictment of the critic at Knox College who kept a "chamber mug beneath his bed / lest the floors of the long dark hallway chill his feet"⁸). But the terms "wholly drunk" and "wholly sober" do seem to suggest a new terminology that may be used to define certain aspects of the human condition that appear to haunt the poet's imagination and to be related to his interest in the divided self. Although Nowlan does not use these terms again, he does seem to feel that many experiences in life (not simply those that find their way into a poem) are more fully experienced when they are simultaneously apprehended by a self that is "wholly drunk" and a self that is "wholly sober". In "The beggars of Dublin" (*BTL*, 16), for instance, the "wholly drunk" self would "like to wonder / if this little lad blowing / a tin whistle could be Pan, testing me," but the "wholly sober" self condemns his "bleeding American / arrogance" and the pride he feels when he notices his shilling lying there among all the other pennies. His drunken self would like to feel sorry for the boy and also for the woman with the crying child who runs up to him after the first encounter, but the sober self knows that "she's the mother of the lad / with the whistle who is only a kind of signalman, / and of course she sticks pins in the baby". And yet he can not refrain from giving her "two shillings and six pence" and feeling "more of an ass than ever". While the poet's responses obviously cause him a certain amount of consternation, they are at least more fully human than the

other alternatives: pure cynicism or pure naivety. When the poet encounters a wounded gull in "On the nature of human compassion" (*MNM*, 62), his "wholly drunk" self is again rather naively compassionate:

Bird, I am sad for you.
If I could make you trust me
I'd take you in my hands,
carry you back to the city
and hire a veterinarian to heal you.

His "wholly sober" self, on the other hand, is unnecessarily harsh:

what you call your compassion the conceit
that all living things are Alden Nowlan in
disguise.

Only by keeping these two selves in some kind of balance or equilibrium will the poet be able to respond to the situation in a way that is fully human. In "Exile" (*BTL*, 67), the "wholly drunk" self is the "little child dreaming" and the "wholly sober" self is the God who finds himself in a world "other / than that / which he remembers / creating". Finding it difficult to keep the two selves in equilibrium, the persona concludes that his true self is the "little child / dreaming". It is always easier to deny the reality of one's objective, critical self (even when it has assumed God-like proportions) by confining it to a dream than to accept its existence and the concomitant fact that one has created, or is responsible for, the world in which one finds oneself.

But the self that is "wholly drunk" and the self that is "wholly sober" do not necessarily appear together in a poem: sometimes only one self is present and the reader is aware of the other self primarily because of its conspicuous absence. In "Marian at the pentecostal meeting" (*PJG*, 20), for instance, Nowlan describes a girl, "neither admired nor clever", who lives in a dream world of "cotton candy . . . faith / spun on a silver rod". The poet cannot condemn her but

only wishes that she may "ride / God's carousel forever". Perhaps he also wishes that Napoleon, "A tiger in the Dublin zoo" (*BTL*, 17), may be allowed to live in his fantasy world forever too. When he is "wholly drunk", Napoleon asserts that he "imposes his own order / on the space around him" and grandly declares, "I stop and turn where I choose". It is only his "wholly sober" self that reminds him that this "is three feet short / of the end of the cage". Nowlan's treatment of "Mister Name Witheld" in "After reading the correspondence in *Penthouse* magazine" (*SHM*, 69) is somewhat less sympathetic. Completely suppressing his sober self, Mr. N. W. divides his time between watching fantasy worlds on the television and creating them in the letters he writes to the magazine:

It's time to sit down
with pencil and paper
to write about lapping
anchovy butter from
the navel of of [my] wife's
nymphomaniac
adolescent sister.

But although the "wholly drunk" self can be extremely dangerous, particularly when it is allowed to have full vein, Nowlan rarely castigates those who are under its influence.

His most serious attacks are reserved for those who willfully deny the visionary ("wholly drunk") part of themselves. To do this, he suggests in "The great rejection" (*BTL*, 56) is the first, perhaps "even the only / sin, and the guilt / therefrom / a kind of worship". In "The men in Antonio's barber shop" (*MNM*, 58) Nowlan defines a world in which all the members (with the exception of the poet) have denied the existence of the visionary self and live in a bleak, joyless world of mundane certainty:

And their laughter is never accidental, or
too loud.

And each of them knows who would have
won
if Joe Louis in his prime had fought
Cassius Clay in his;
knows whether or not the World Series is
fixed;
knows which team in the National Hockey
League
will finish first, and if the same team will
win the Stanley Cup.

The hecklers in "The bull moose" (*PJG*, 45), like the men in Antonio's barber shop, also live in a world devoid of vision and joy, and their idea of "fun" is rampant with cliché and self-aggrandizement.

The oldest man in the parish remembered seeing a gelded moose yoked with an ox for plowing. The young men snickered and tried to pour beer down his throat, while their girl friends took their pictures.

At sunset when the bull moose finally gathers his strength "like a scaffolded king" and is shot by the wardens, all the young men assert their triumphant approval in the only way they know how — by leaning "on their automobile horns as he toppled".

In "Survival" the poet seems to be focusing on a situation that is almost archetypal: what happens when a man who is governed by his "wholly sober" self (Og) and his friend, who is governed by his "wholly drunk" self, encounter the same experience?

The first man who ever stepped on a lion
and survived
was Og
who afterwards attributed
his good fortune to his poor eyesight,
he having been unable
to see anything but claws,
teeth and a monstrous body
while his companion
stood transfixed by the indescribably
beautiful
visions that he saw with his third good eye.

While this is unquestionably one of Nowlan's finest poems, it is not immediately clear what the poet is saying about the visionary experience. Is he suggesting that

it is better *not* to have it and survive, as Og does, or to have the vision and cease to exist like his companion? Without explicitly taking sides, the poet's tone and diction seem to suggest that his sympathies (as we would expect) lie with Og's companion (who does, after all, see the vision with his third "good" eye) but surely a poet who has such an innate love of creaturely comforts, and is so quick to admit that it is "very good / to be alive" (*SHM*, 81) would not advocate a philosophy that had as its main tenet the idea that the body is easily expendable. Or is the poem simply an allegory on the human condition: the poet arguing that man only has two choices — either he has the vision and is destroyed by it or he does not have the vision and survives? Perhaps the full implications of the poem can only be understood by considering it in terms of the divided self. Like the self that is "wholly sober", Og is alert and practical, and when he suddenly comes upon the claws, teeth and monstrous body he comes to a conclusion that sends him smoking across the grasslands for home. He survives (hence the poem's title) but he *merely* survives. Og's companion, when confronted with the same claws, teeth and monstrous body comes to very different conclusions and sees only an "indescribably beautiful vision" that leaves him "transfixed" and subsequently, one assumes, dead. But "Survival" is not simply an allegorical exploration of two different approaches to life, each of which is potentially ruinous; rather it is an analysis of what happens to a man when he is dominated either by his "wholly drunk" self or his "wholly sober" self. Each man, as the poet says, contains multitudes: contains, among others, Og (a "wholly sober" self) and Og's companion (a "wholly drunk" self). In "Survival" these two

selves are separated and housed in two distinct psyches, and the results are disastrous: Og's spiritual death is as tragic, if not more so, than his companion's physical death. But the two selves need not necessarily be divided in real life. And if they had been unified in one personality in this poem, there would have been no tragedy: part of the individual's psyche would see the lion as "indescribably beautiful" and the other part would see the impending danger and get the hell out of there. Whether this imaginary hero would subsequently go home and write a poem or return to his hut and sharpen his hunting knife does not really matter. What does matter is the poet's implicit suggestion, in this as well as in other poems, that man can never realize his full potential as a human being if he consciously or unconsciously denies any one of the multiplicity of selves that his psyche contains.

NOTES

- ¹ Nowlan, Alden, *Bread, Wine and Salt*.
- ² ———, *Playing the Jesus Game*, p. 36. Hereafter referred to simply as *PJG*.
- ³ ———, *The Mysterious Naked Man*, p. 32. Hereafter referred to simply as *MNM*.
- ⁴ Some suggestion of a divided or multiple self seems to be emerging in such poems as "Confession" (*PJG*, 86) and "Disguise" (*PJG*, 42), but the poet does not seem to think of his lascivious thoughts or his "third eye" as something truly "other" in these poems, but rather facets of a single personality which, for various reasons, he has to keep under control.
- ⁵ Nowlan, Alden, *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*, p. 43. Hereafter referred to simply as *SHM*.
- ⁶ ———, *Between Tears and Laughter*, p. 64. Hereafter referred to simply as *BTL*.
- ⁷ *MNM*, 63.
- ⁸ *PJG*, 79.