

'FAUNA OF MIRRORS': The Poetry of Hébert and Atwood

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I

IN *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Jorge Luis Borges includes a Chinese myth of the world of mirrors and the world of men. The myth tells of a time when harmony existed between these two worlds, though the mirror world existed independently of the human. Travel back and forth from the mirror world was possible. But "One night the mirror people invaded the earth."¹ Overcome as a result of the Yellow Emperor's use of magic, the mirror people were forced to retreat. Their penalty was imprisonment within the mirror world. From that time dates the mirror's task of reflection for this was the sentence laid upon its people. Their enslavement will not be permanent, however, as the spell under which they have been laid will finally wane. First to awaken will be the Fish, dimly visible deep within its mirror. Other shapes will begin to stir, and some believe that "we will hear from the depths of mirrors the clatter of weapons" as the mirror people prepare to break through the crystalline barriers. "Side by side with these mirror creatures, the creatures of water will join battle," and this time they will not be defeated.

Borges' fauna of mirrors teach the concomitance of mimesis and blood, of eye and drowned self, of the worlds of glass and water. Self's entrapment in either world is occasioned by the arbitrary nature of the reflective code and human seduction through visual memory. Loss of reflection is loss of our world; upon the harmony of glass and self our language itself feigns dependence. For, as Borges' parable reveals, the mirror world's defiance of enchantment not only fractures the code of

mimesis but will also bring about the submission or death of those who required it. To require it absolutely is to drown in its aqueous rebellion. To dream of an equilibrium between its worlds² is perhaps to risk dissolution in both.

II

*Aucun arbre de parole n'y pousse ses racines silencieuses
 Au coeur noir de la nuit.
 C'est ici l'envers du monde
 Qui donc nous a chassées de ce côté?*

— Anne Hébert, *Poèmes*, p. 53

In her masterpiece, the sequence of poems entitled *Le tombeau des rois*,³ Anne Hébert presents four stages in the life of a woman, perhaps of women collectively: awakening and innocence; entrapment (imaged in both physical and psychological terms) in childhood, in memory, in anguished situations of love and passion, and in an equally painful domesticity; a middle stage of change or reversal characterised by a dream of escape or a bitterly ironic resolution to act on illusory freedom; and finally the death of the self, entombment in the underworld of the kings. Just as in the title poem, the last of the sequence, the speaker hardly realizes that she has herself passed over into the kingdom of the Shades, perceiving her final imprisonment in the world of the living dead as only a "*songe horrible*" (p. 61), so in a poem like "*Il y a certainement quelqu'un*" she is able to describe the "*danse parfaite*" (p. 51) of her murderer abandoning her in the road. But death seems hardly the point here; it is virtually an irrelevance. Leaving his victim bound and standing in the road, the murderer has 'forgotten' to close her eyes "*Et permis leur passion perdue*" (p. 51). It is a question of the ecology of passion rather than of the encounter with death, yet this too is the fulfilment of an earlier pattern, for her heart is

*... dans son coffret ancien
 Les prunelles pareilles
 A leur plus pure image d'eau*

(*Poèmes*, p. 51)

As the "*coffret ancien*" is an element of a metonymic code encompassing the chateau, the tomb, and the reliquary which she had earlier put in the place of the lover's excised heart,⁴ so the eyes function as part of a parallel code of water, mirrors, and reflection.

Complicated by the bifurcation of the self treated explicitly in an early poem like "*Image dans un miroir*,"⁵ the eye code contains two subsets, the one denoted by the use of "*prunelles*" signifying the inner world (that which is "*immortelle en moi*"), and the other by "*yeux*" signifying the outer ("*... cette autre/ Qui n'est qu'image*"). A voice of lost order echoing through the sequence, the bird and its song function as guide and as avatar of death in "*Le tombeau des rois*." The acceptance of the speaker's sacrifice of self to the spirits of the kings is thus indicated most strongly by her question:

*D'où vient donc que cet oiseau frémit
Et tourne vers le matin
Ses prunelles crevées?*

(Poèmes, p. 61)

for the falcon bears upon its own body the agonizing blindness which the speaker perceives only metaphorically in terms of her own experience. "*J'ai mon coeur au poing./ Comme un faucon aveugle*," she says at the beginning of her descent into the tomb itself for this is the apogee of the excised heart image throughout the cycle, itself the presentation of stages of descent and recouplement, half-understood by the speaker. Her imprisonment is most complete, her blindness most absolute, in the fact of her failure to recognize its circumstances as morning initiates the cycle once again. Finding herself in "*L'envers du monde*," she (one of several "*filles bleues de l'été*" in the poem) hears the voice of the bird searching for the lost door of memory and, after laying her ear to the earth and discovering that they are "*Au coeur noir de la nuit*" (p. 53) in this reversed world, she searches in vain not for a way out but for memory itself. Though they have been 'hunted' to this place, their longing is for the "*arbre de parole*," the "bitter

tree" (p. 43) of memory's words. It is the tree of "*Les pêcheurs d'eau*":

*Les pêcheurs d'eau
Ont pris l'oiseau
Dans leurs filets mouillés.*

*Toute l'image renversée;
Il fait si calme
Sur cette eau.*

(*Poèmes*, p. 19)

A sacrifice to the inverted order of nature, the bird becomes an image of Crucifixion as a woman, "*ses deux mains brûlées*," sits at the foot of the tree, sewing, making reparation for the wrongs of the world. Sacrifice made, "*Il fait si calme*," as, in "*En guise de fête*," a woman dances around her tears while asserting, "*Le monde est complet/Et rond le jardin*" (p. 35).

Committed to the vocabulary of domestic order — of polishing, of furniture, of dust, of planting and growth — the speaker accomplishes her dissolution with decorum. In "*La fille maigre*," she polished her own bones "*sans cesse/Comme de vieus métaux*" in preparation for the day when "*je saisirai mon amant/Pour m'en faire un reliquaire d'argent*." Hanging herself in the place of his heart, she receives

*... ton tremblement
Comme un don.*

*Et parfois
En ta poitrine, fixée,
J'entrouvre
Mes prunelles liquides*

*Et bougent
Comme une eau verte
Des songes bizarres et enfantins.*

(*Poèmes*, p. 34)

It is a stage in the initial descent into the tomb, self surrendered in death to the lover, eyes open upon a world receding into the past. The same world is to be found in "*Vie de chateau*" in which, though stripped of the business of daily life (table, fire, dust and carpet), "*miroirs polis*" remain. In fact, "*La seule occupation possible ici/Consiste à se mirer jour et nuit*."

Polished mirrors easily mutate into "*fontaines dures*" into which an image of the self "*sans ombre ni couleur*" may be cast. Receiving the image, water becomes ice, the living become part of the kingdom of the Shades awaiting them in a world of mirrors which are "*armoires*," repositories of memory. "*C'est un chateau d'ancêtres*," ordered by the creatures of the Borgesian mirror world reaching out for the woman who enters their domain. Her own reflection submerged, she is covered by the one who lies in wait "*sous le tain*" and who

*S'ajuste à toi, mince et nu,
Et simule l'amour en un lent frisson amer.*

(*Poèmes*, p. 54)

—an anticipation of the transformation scene at the end of the sequence in which the "*frisson*" of stimulated love becomes the shudder of possession in death: "*Sept fois, je connais l'étau des os/Et la main sèche qui cherche le coeur pour le rompre*" (p. 61).

If in "*Vie de chateau*" the speaker simply finds herself in the mirror world, in "*Nos mains au jardin*" she chooses her fate with some deliberation. Literalizing the ancient metaphor which D. H. Lawrence expressed as "plant[ing] ourselves . . . in the universe,"⁶ hands are amputated, planted, and imaged as "*Petits arbres d'ossements*." Again, the experience of pain is at best oblique, rather a result of the trees' failure to leaf than of a perception of a wound experienced upon the flesh. Here woman's inability to integrate herself fully into the process of growth which lays claim upon her body (and thus her inability to abandon her consciousness of both will and otherness) affords one focus. "*Nos ongles polis*" fail to function as devices of life (as, before amputation, they refused contact with the world of flesh). The other focus is of death for

*Nul oiseau
Nul printemps
Ne se sont pris au piège de nos mains coupées.*

(*Poèmes*, p. 49)

Hope resides only in seasonal change, in winter's absolute death bringing life with the melting of ice (and thus of mirrors, both images of death in *Le tombeau des rois*) "*Et nos mains fondues comme l'eau*" (p. 50). Where Saint-Denys Garneau experienced the Cartesian-Jansenist "*image de la tête coupée,*" Hébert's persona articulates the body as appendage to a will powerless to control its movements through the world. In the kingdom of mirrors, there is neither self nor the comforts of reliable mimesis. Encountering "*Une petite morte / . . . couchée en travers de la porte,*" we accept it as a sentence of imprisonment:

Nous nous efforçons de vivre a l'intérieur
 Sans faire de bruit
 Balayer la chambre
 Et ranger l'ennui
 Laisser les gestes se balancer tout seuls
 Au bout d'un fil invisible
 A même nos veines ouvertes.

(*Poèmes*, p. 47)

As her flesh decays, she moves into the mirror world, bathing in the moonlight of "*ce miroir limpide*" while the living mime her progress in "*mouvements lents*" in order not to disturb. "*Trop de lumière empêche de voir,*" as we hear in "*Un bruit de soie*" (p. 57). Where the appearance of "*la petite morte*" simply accelerates life-in-death's inversion to the mirror state of death, the light which appears in the place of the lover's face not only blinds the speaker but results in the couple's passage together into earth. "*Les espèces sont réduites à deux*" and, arms extended, they proceed into the forest only to awaken and discover that earth has taken them over. Containing all species, they have become forest and tree whose shadow extends over them.

III

To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live without mirrors is to live without the self. She is living selflessly, she finds a hole in the stone wall and on the other side of the wall, a voice. The voice comes through darkness and has no face. This voice becomes her mirror.

— Margaret Atwood, *Two-headed Poems and Others*, p. 48

And eventually the mirror becomes her husband in Margaret Atwood's prose poem, "Marrying the Hangman."⁸

Atwood's woman moves from literal to metaphoric prison, her first crime stealing clothes from her employer, her second wanting freedom. "What did she say when she discovered that she had left one locked room for another?" Hers is the language of sensuality, his of death. To her belong eyes, lips, hair; to him, "the end of walls, the end of ropes."

He said: foot, boot, order, city, fist, roads, time, knife.

She said: water, night, willow, rope hair, earth belly, cave, meat, open, blood.

They both kept their promises.

Gaining her freedom, she loses herself to the ethic of dominance, the territorial urge:

He wants only the simple things: a chair, someone to pull off his shoes, someone to watch him while he talks, with admiration and fear, gratitude if possible, someone in whom to plunge himself for rest and renewal. These things can best be had by marrying a woman who has been condemned to death by other men for wishing to be beautiful. There is a wide choice.

And they both disappeared, she having paid the traditional price for the violation of the ancient taboo against the surrendering of shadow or reflection.

In one of the poems of *Power Politics* the lover enters bringing empty love, filling the room with absence, while the object of his quest sits "on the/ edge of the impartial/ bed, I have been turned to crystal," she says:

Like a deep sea
creature with glass bones and wafer
eyes drawn
to the surface, I break

open, the pieces of me
shine briefly in your empty hands

(PP: 42)

and seem to vanish unnoticed as, in Buñel's film "*Cet obscur objet de désir*," the questor seems unaware of the fact that he is courting two different women. Serving only as reflection, woman is granted sole existence within the Narcissistic paradigm of the lover but existence is no guarantee of

identity. In "Tricks with mirrors" (*Y*: 24) he embraces glass while, in "The Circle Game" where love is a duel of mirrors, he "will not walk from the glass,/ be separate" from her (*CG*: 36). Finally, in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, the phenomenology of "Looking in a Mirror" is clarified:

(you find only
the shape you already are
but what
if you have forgotten that
or discover you
have never known)

(*J*: 25)

The hangman looks for verification of self: his wife, for identity. Like Mrs. Moodie's husband, "The Planters" (*J*: 16-17), the pioneer with his "progressive insanities" (*Animals*: 36-9), the hangman takes his reality where he finds it and imposes his own order at will. He is comfortable in his sense of dominion. But Susanna Moodie, excising her eyes from a picture of herself (*J*: 7), allows the new world. Refusing to look in a mirror and discover only her own personification of a lost order, she gropes for a new language of eyes and words. Needing "wolf's eyes to see/ the truth" (*J*: 13), she opens herself to the animals until, in "Departure from the Bush," she has almost been "moved into":

I was frightened
by their eyes (green or
amber) glowing out from inside me

(*J*: 27)

Though she leaves the bush for life in Belleville with her lady's appurtenances of "stuffed sofa," "uncracked plates" and a "china teaset" (*J*: 47), Moodie retains her vision almost in spite of herself. Ruinous age comes upon her ("I am being/ eaten away by light" she says of her "Daguerreotype taken in old age" — *J*: 48) but it is the vision of wolf's eyes which triumphs. "Turn, look down," we are told, for

there is no city
this is the centre of a forest
your place is empty

(*J*: 61)

As Atwood says in her "Afterword" to *The Journals*, Moodie "has become the spirit of the land she once hated" (*J*: 64).

Two codes of eyes, two concepts of language, structure not only the Susanna Moodie poems but Atwood's work as a whole.⁹ The eyes of the pioneer and of the lover perform the equations of cartography upon the land and the bodies of women. The eyes of the animals, on the other hand, "flash once in car headlights/ and are gone" for "They have the faces of/ no-one" (*Animals*: 3). Like the fish with its "neckless headbody"¹⁰ in *Surfacing*, they are free of the strife of mind and body imposed by the territoriality of language. Their order, "the green vision" (*Animals*: 39), transcends the man who would "impose himself with shovels." Their language, an aphoristic one of encounter, is "a tree-sprout, a nameless/weed" (*Animals*: 36), the utterance of a world which does not give back human reflection. "The moving water will not show me/ my reflection," as the voice of Susanna Moodie says:

The rocks ignore.
I am a word
in a foreign language.

(*J*: 11)

"Things" refuse the names which the pioneer would impose upon them in an effort to create his own order out of what he perceives as chaos. An expression of his inability to work with a new order, the pioneer's inflexible language preserves the opacity of his vision.

Components of the human subset of the eye code, mirrors and cameras are imaged as working in the same way for they are the daily agents of the "tension/ between subject and object" which results in the last of his insanities. In a series of reflexive mimetic poems, Atwood presents women bisected by images which appear as optional realities, focussing most often in terms of the photograph:

(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,

eventually
you will be able to see me.)

(CG: 11)

Amputated by parentheses, the image presented in the first half of the poem "This is a photograph of me" is reflected back through the aqueous media of water and print (both photographic and typographic) though distinctions between reality and reproduction are blocked just as the interaction of water and light is skewed. Neither patent illusion nor patent reality offers itself as locus of the voice. As in Julio Cortázar's short story, "Blow-up,"¹¹ photography's mirror world offers no solution but only the technology for endless replication of the mind's phantoms. Announcing its photographic analogue, the poem mocks the precision of its own language, verbal photograph deploying the mimetic code in service of its own displacement.

"Delayed Message" functions in a similar way. Again a simple narrative is presented first: two people sat "by the shore/ one evening, arms around each other. . . ." A woman emerged from the lake and "stood looking at us. . . ." Parentheses open and the woman speaks in her own voice:

(I rose for a long time through
silver, until the light broke
over my head

I saw you there together
against the trees, in the distance the
house door, the lantern

...
 ... I stood looking at you
 through the eyes which were empty holes)

(Procedures: 19)

More than an exercise in two views of the same scene from different points of view, the poem anticipates the *Susanna Moodie* theme of a revelation through symbolic wounding of the self. Like the eye-slits of a mask, eyes here are "the eyes," and not alone "holes" but with emptiness specified. Self encounters the ghostliness of its other. But which self? Which other?

IV

Nothing is finished
 or put away, she said.
 I don't know where I am.

— *Two-headed Poems and Others*, p. 39

*Les jours sur ses mains
 L'occupent et la captivent.
 Elle ne les referme jamais.
 Et les tend toujours.*

*Les signes du monde
 Sont gravés à même ses doigts.*

— *Le tombeau des rois*, p. 21

Sitting "au bord des saisons," a woman observes her own suffering, her hands bearing the pain of all the days in "offrande impitoyable" (p. 22) like a stigmata. Defined by her own suffering, she seems mesmerized: "Elle est étrange/ Et regarde ses mains que colorent les jours." The image expands across *Le tombeau des rois* as these hands take up the tasks of living death: the polishing of bones and mirrors, the arranging of boredom, the planting of hands. They will finally be the only signs above ground of the woman and her lover. Love's vivisection is complete in this tailoring of the flesh to accommodate the other. If in Atwood the politics of love involves a bitter game of dominance and irony, in Hébert there is no question of woman's power. Life is done to this

woman. As she descends of her own dazed volition into the tomb, death is done to her also though she becomes one of the Shades without realizing it. Hesitating neither to mutilate herself nor to comply with the will of another, she foregoes all thought of aggression, even the verbal aggression of a shift in perspective. For the counterpart in *Le tombeau des rois* of Atwood's parentheses is a series of four poems¹² which punctuate the book with dreams of escape or change or with an ironic resolution to act upon a freedom which is in fact unavailable. That conscious irony within the persona which is so much a part of poems like "The Circle Game" or "Tricks with mirrors" never appears in Hébert's work where such irony as there is operates structurally. The language of physical pain in Atwood bridges these levels, available immediately to both persona and reader:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye

(PP: 1)

In contrast, the power of Hébert's imagery is the result not, as her critics have often maintained, of the presentation of a woman (often mistakenly interpreted as the poet) in anguish. Rather the speaker's pain resides precisely in the fact that she is unable to break through to the direct experience of it. Neither cure nor amelioration is available, in part because of the state of emotional desensitization which is her customary mask. The imagery is deflected to the reader, the pain made generic through the use of nonspecific (though always female) voices.

But individual will is always an option in Atwood. "This above all, to refuse to be a victim," says the narrator of *Surfacing* (p. 191). Of her own choice she has undergone a rite of initiation into the language of nature. Released for a time from the authority of the skin and the dualism of

technologized language, she encounters a seamless world to which her dead parents act as guides. The environment and memory of childhood enable her in this vulnerable state to integrate past with present, to receive the riddle of the Trickster with understanding. Forced into analogous circumstances, Atwood's Susanna Moodie experiences a partial enlightenment and, leaving the wilderness before she has been fully 'lived in' by the animals, she is completed only in death. Like the wilderness creatures before the coming of "The Settlers," she moves at last in primordial time:

They dug us down
 into the solid granite
 where our bones grew flesh again,
 came up trees and
 grass.

Still
 we are the salt
 seas that uphold these lands.
 Now horses graze
 inside this fence of ribs, and

children run, with green
 smiles, (not knowing
 where) across
 the fields of our open hands.

(CG: 79-80)

It is a liberation utterly impossible in the world of *Le tombeau des rois* where childhood memories lurk on the far shore of a river of life whose analogue is the Styx, and where there is no guide save the mirror creatures with their imitation of love, and the long wait for another season, another dream controlled by "*L'auteur du songe . . .*" (p. 59). Dream, like a skin over experience, is the tomb of those who must exist with seeming equanimity in the world of the kings, the world of mirrors, waiting for the sounds of weapons to set them free.

NOTES

- ¹Jorge Luis Borges and Margaritta Guerro, "Fauna of Mirrors," *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, rev. ed., trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni and Jorge Luis Borges (New York: Avon Books, 1970), p. 105.
- ²Cf. Anne Hébert, *Les songes en équilibre* (Montréal: Les éditions de l'arbre, 1942).
- ³Anne Hébert, *Le tombeau des rois* (1953), reprinted in *Poèmes* (Paris: Editions de seuil, 1960). Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses within the text.
- ⁴"La fille maigre," *Poèmes*, pp. 33-4.
- ⁵*Les songes en équilibre*, p. 78:
 Cette partie qui est immortelle en moi
 Regarde cette autre
 Qui n'est qu'image,
 Et toutes les deux
 Sont tristes
 Comme une seule personne.
- ⁶D. H. Lawrence, "A Propos of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*," in *A Propos of 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 119.
- ⁷Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, *Journal*, Cahier VIII (1938), in *Oeuvres*, ed. Jacques Brault and Benoit Lacroix (Montréal: Les presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1971), p. 561.
- ⁸Margaret Atwood, *Two-headed Poems and Others* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 48. Abbreviations of other titles by Atwood referred to in this paper are as follows: *Animals* — *The Animals in that Country* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968); *CG* — *The Circle Game* (Toronto: Anansi, 1966); *J* — *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970); *PP* — *Power Politics* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972); *Procedures* — *Procedures for Underground* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970); *Y* — *You are Happy* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974). It is interesting to note that Atwood included Anne Hébert in a list of poets drawn up circa 1964-5 (among others: James Reaney, George Johnston, Margaret Avison, Milton Acorn, E. J. Pratt) found among her papers deposited in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library of the University of Toronto (MS Collection 43, Box 6). I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Sherrill E. Grace, for bringing this material to my attention.
- ⁹For a detailed discussion of these codes in Atwood's poetry, see my essay, "Meridians of Perception: A Reading of Margaret Atwood's Poetry," forthcoming in *The Achievement of Margaret Atwood*, ed. C. and A. Davidson (Toronto: Anansi, 1979).
- ¹⁰Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Don Mills: Paperjacks, 1973), p. 120.

- ¹¹Julio Cortázar, "Blow-up," reprinted in *'End of the Game' and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), pp. 114-31.
- ¹²*Poèmes*, pp. 13 ("*Eveil au seuil d'une fontaine*"), 37 ("*Une mur à peine*"), 45 ("*Retourne sur tes pas*"), 49 ("*Nos mains au jardin*"). Influence of *Le tombeau des rois* on Atwood's poetry may be present in such poems as "A foundling" (*Animals*: 5), "The revenant" (*Animals*: 52), perhaps "A Night in the Royal Ontario Museum" (*Animals*: 20) and, in MS Collection 43, Box 5, "Childhood under Glass" ("... the branched aorta of our single tree/ Spurts down its dropping leaves on us/ In showers of red stones").