Introduction

by David A. Kent and Katherine M. Quinsey

The Globe and Mail for 25 March 2006 contains a review by Fraser Sutherland of two new books of poetry by P. K. Page and Margaret Avison. In “Colossi of Canadian verse” Sutherland briefly compares these two women writers in terms of influence and technique and wryly notes that whereas Page has been publishing her poems in book form for 62 years, “Avison, the neophyte,” has been publishing hers in book form “for a mere 46” (D10). In calculating forty-six years back from Avison’s new collection Momentary Dark, Sutherland is referring, as he indicates, to the poet’s first book, Winter Sun, published in 1960 when she was already forty-two years of age. Those familiar with Avison’s publication history through Francis Mansbridge’s bibliographical work will know, of course, that she has been publishing her poems sporadically since her high school days in the 1930s when her work appeared in Hermes, the student publication at Humberside Collegiate in Toronto. If we take this fact of periodical publication into consideration, we should say that Avison has been publishing her poetry for over seventy years, an astonishing continuum of creativity.

Consulting the poetry manuscripts deposited at the University of Manitoba in her official archive discloses that, in fact, Avison’s first publications appeared even earlier than her high school publications. They began seventy-eight years ago in The Globe and Mail for 1929 in “Playtime,” a part of the paper devoted to children’s writing within a larger section headed “The Circle of Young Canada.” Between 1929 and 1934, when she turned sixteen, Avison published over a dozen poems here. All the poems subsequent to the first one are signed with the pseudonym “Willamac.” One of them, “Charon,” written at thirteen and published 7 May 1932, is from the point of view of someone on Charon’s ferry and has no rhyme scheme but a powerful rhythm. Margaret’s mother felt impelled to include the note “—Certified by her mother, Mrs. H. W. Avison” just in case anyone doubted her precocious daughter’s authorship. Most of Avison’s contributions to “The Circle of Young Canada” feature descriptions of nature (in poems such as “Mosquitoes,” “Black,” or “Icicles”) marked by catalogues of observations or of states of mind (“Sleepless” or, more seriously, “Depression”). Avison’s talent was soon being recognized. There is one Prize Poem (“Night Driving” for 14 October 1933), and of the two prose pieces, “The Street Lamp’s Soliloquy” and “Some Call It Fame,” the sec-