139

He From Elsewhere Speaks: Avison's Spiritualized Syntax

by Carmine Starnino

For many readers of Canadian poetry, Margaret Avison is the poet of "Snow" (*AN* 1.69). This much-anthologized sonnet, which urges our "optic heart" to "venture" past reality's ordinary appearances, flatters Avison's image as a champion of subversive creativity, or, as the poem famously puts it, of "jail-break / And re-creation." First published in her 1960 debut *Winter Sun*, "Snow" is unquestionably resonant. But when we consider the full complexity of Avison's achievement, in particular the Christian ideas that enter and completely transform her poetry following her conversion in 1963, it's hard not to sense a hidden agenda of correctness in the enduring consensus around the poem.

There's nothing unusual, of course, about a challenging literary career being slimmed down, for purposes of either consolidation or convenience, to the fame of a single work. But the emergence of "Snow" as a touchstone text suggests that when Avison's strangeness was served to us hot, we blew on the spoon, as it were, to make the truth less scalding. The poems in her next two books, *The Dumbfounding* (1966) and *sunblue* (1978)—written, according to Avison, after "the living Jesus" revealed himself to her in her mid-forties—burn with unclassifiable properties (Ito 170). Hardly a phrase fails to do something beyond the normal, hardly a line happens that you can't help scrutinizing for its peculiarities. The thinking is by turns elliptical, elegant, blunt, and urgent. Sometimes it is all these simultaneously. A unique idiom, however, is hard enough to place. What do you do when those tics and quirks are the outcome of a religious awakening? How do you decipher the spiritual shorthand of a private conversation with God? Hence "Snow," an intricate poem whose sense of the numinous is fairly easy to identify and describe, becomes the sensible stand-in for a Christian poetry that exists almost entirely outside current categories, both avant-garde and mainstream. As a result, the authentic oddity of Avison's voice, as well as the notion of how her Christian beliefs gave rise to such a taut, impacted style, has never been properly queried. We mark the distance carefully between ourselves and Avison's devotional phase, as if we'd been told to knock before entering, and this discretion has kept from us the most potent aspects of her originality.

Avison's post-conversion poems, to be sure, have never been taken lightly; indeed they attract vastly more scholarly curiosity than any other aspect of her verse. My point, however, isn't that we've misconstrued these poems (academics like David Kent have in fact been exemplary promoters of their felicities) but that mainstream appreciation has failed to absorb the poetic consequences of Avison's veer towards God. If anything, tracing the religious watermark in her thinking has become obligatory, but without deeper rigour it quickly turns convenient—reading's equivalent of a free-ride. The spiritual dimension of "Snow" is easier to grab hold of because the poem insists on contemporary poetry's most available and cherished truism: the imagination as a force for self-invention, a force for transcendence. A poem like "Branches", on the other hand, whose nuanced soundscape ("The elms, black-worked on green, / rich in the rich old day / signal wordlessness / plumed along the Dark's way" [*AN* 1.186]) is raptly rooted in a specifically Christian epiphany, is literally something far-fetched: the result of an historical idea, a belief in deity, that no longer surrounds us. We might flatter such poems with the prestige of adjectives like "profound," but this, at best, is a default reaction: it nervously admits to the writing's theological air while masking our confusion at what to make of it.

The result is that the "Christianity" of Avison's poems isn't seen to rest in any self-evidently formal trait. The poems are instead read backwards from her faith. That is, they are read thematically. They serve as proof of a fervor for God, but not necessarily as adaptations of that fervor: that is, as quirky, memorable, fiercely individualistic networks of image and syntax. Christianity, however, did more than just flavour Avison's poetry with unfashionable surmises: it revolutionized it. There's no point calling her, as George Bowering does, "the founder of excellence" (80) without grasping that her genius was fulfilled chiefly—indeed, flourished entirely—in the climate of her conversion. But religious referents, especially if they seem to draw on the ardency and evangelism of organized worship, are rarely seen as pro-experimental, and Avison's conversion story only makes it easier to step past the poems into the dry-ice vapours of their sacramental context:

> But suddenly, that day in 1963, the first two Commandments bowled me over—"Thou shalt have no other gods before Me" and "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image"—but I was steadied by Exodus 20:10-11 ("But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God.") We are to share the Creator's rest and joy—every week! What looked like a sacrifice (that "priority") turns out to be a good investment. On the brink of yielding, and accepting the Lord, I cried: "But don't touch the poetry!" As the "Person," in my *The*

> *Dumbfounding* says, at that point solid walls closed in. There was no deal till I threw in the poems along with myself. (Ito 170)

A ladder has been kicked away, that much is clear. Yet the higher-realm implications of the above statement, taken from a recent interview published in *Where the Words Come From*, might miscast the poems as signposts pointing to a grand scheme beyond themselves, a pious niche to which they have to be returned. Promoted by her own apparent surrender ("There was no deal till I threw in the poems along with myself"), the otherworldly perspective is used to draw off the confusions and complexities of reading her work. This is why, whenever the poems are discussed in reviews, they seem to be moving in a cloud of ideas, constructed out of serenely venerable vocabulary and transcendental tropes. What Avison's conversion story encounters, in short, is the obstacle of secularism's tin ear. Bemused by the music, we rely, rather laxly, on hugely vague theological terms (redemption, grace, salvation) to help explain the poetry's sharp, uncommon notes. The result is that Avison's lines are left to stand at a slight distance from their acoustic value, with their sounds and shapes isolated into a series of church-going paraphrases.

Furthermore, to so completely confuse Avison's poems with her religious belief not only overlooks the confident verbal equivalencies she finds for her message—her conviction that "words alone," as Yeats put it, count (7)—but the terrifying aspects of the conversion story itself: the suddenness of clarity, the gale-force collision of mind and divinity, the sweeping away of resistance. Respecting the not-quite-consolatory side of Avison's conversion isn't simply a question of biographical truth: method is also at stake. After all, this "dumbfounding" is the very psychological drama we see enacted in the rhythmic balance, diction direction, and line logic of Avison's Christian poems. These are poems where the threat of volatility is constant, yet so limpidly is the anxiety established, so demurely is the ordinary defamiliarized, that it's often hard to say just where—and how—Avison's modesty begins to sink into something unpredictable, giddier, less in control. In the last stanzas of "Released Flow" (*AN* 2.29), for example, the poem's depiction of a sugarbush (where "runnels shine and down-rush / through burning snow and thicket-slope") ends with chanted clusters of consonants synchronizing with a straining reined-in restlessness, a near-subliminal instability of vast perception and excited language:

> The extraordinary beyond the hill
> breathes   and is   imperturbable.

Near the gashed bough the hornets fur
in paperpalace-keep and -choir.

Across snowmush and sunstriped maples
honeyed woodsmoke curls and scrolls.
Sunblue and bud and shoot wait to unlatch
all lookings-forth, at the implicit touch.

This is an exceptionally deft and discreet ending, and it is made fascinating by the beautifully destructive precision of "gashed" as well as Avison's determination to compress the language into fierce oddities, an ambition that enables her to capture the lovely "paperpalace-keep and -choir" of hornets. This compression can also be seen in the syntactic surprise of "all lookings-forth" and how it briefly confuses the sentence-sense of the previous line. It is a light-footed, spontaneous moment of disjunct that coincides perfectly with the caesura-generated hesitation of "at the implicit touch" that itself completes the poem's shift from visual noticing to a very different kind of seeing.

The scriptural frequency to which these effects are tuned may seem low, but it's in the ear of such a style—austere, impulsive, surprising, judicious—that one can hear Avison's message of communion: communion with God, with nature, and, of course, with language. To read Avison seriously is to take seriously the possibility of a poetry whose various successes (of image, of line, of word choice, of breath) are not just the lean achievements of a disciplined and gifted poet but the fuller achievements of a worshiping Christian. To appreciate what this means, it's important to first recognize that poetry is, basically, a troubleshooting art: daily mishandling jars language, and poems recalibrate it. I am reminded here chiefly of how, in a review of A.M. Klein's *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems*, Avison observed that "everybody's speech is defective" and insisted that poets need to "discipline speech into clarity" (191). Christianity thus compelled Avison to move more probingly toward the vernacular character of English, extending a revitalizing hand to its neglected possibilities. If God so loved the world that he gave up, for its redemption, his beloved Son, then poetry—and its ability to "resurrect" language from the pallid simulacrum that daily use reduces it to—became for Avison the quintessential form to preserve the concept of this love. Especially significant is how, for Avison, this insight isn't something one rubs on language, but is a natural essence of language. To be a poet who works in the service of God is to believe that words have buried fecundities—asleep until activated by faith. God is the implicit touch, as it were, that unlatches a poem's power:

He from elsewhere
speaks; he breathes impasse-
crumpled hope even
in us:
that near.

(*AN* 2.65)

This chip of dazzling concision only looks simple. Christ is being addressed, but Avison is a poet who, first and foremost, lets herself be led by sounds, so that her assertions, however theological, are always authenticated by her ear: "impasse- / crumpled hope" is spectacular, as is the way the sentence comes to rest in the echo of "elsewhere" in "near." These four lines, composed of the scrimps and economies of language, highlight the complex games with grammar that made books like *sunblue* and *No Time* so stylistically pioneering. They also remind us that Avison's commitment to Christianity does not strip her poems of their aesthetic prerogative and that her belief in Christ's resurrection is poetically useful insofar as it lights out in interesting and energizing melodic directions, as it goads new kinds of lines. Avison successfully closes the distance between her tenets as a Christian and her freedoms as poet, encoding her devotion in distinctive and compelling language. One recalls Dun Scotus's theology of the Incarnation which explained Christ's birth—the Word made flesh—as God coming into time and body (a logic that allowed Hopkins to think of his attention toward nature as a form of prayer). In the same way, Avison's unremitting inventiveness—her superb alliteration, her quick wordplay with its fertile interlinking of Latinate and Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, her animating verbs, her specifying adjectives, her gift for compound phrases—represents a tireless search for the form most fit to recall the passion of Christ.

No Canadian poet has pushed to such an extreme the relationship of form to content, where the experimental freshness of the idiom is openly made out of, and is intended to confirm, an idea that for many is as faintly preposterous as table-rapping. In other words, most striking—and virtually unique in our literature—is how Avison's doctrinal sense of the sacred, the potency of precepts she lives by, is wrapped up entirely in richly gnarled adverbial routings like "woodenly they bulk / leafless where all the air is flower-frilled" (AN 2.169) with its verbal intricacy being the premise toward which she focuses the concentrated hush of the reader's attention. She has spiritualized syntax; reading her poems always leaves our relationship with language somewhat re-angled. We see this again in lines like

A tree its twigs up-ending
November had bared:
drenched in height, brisk with
constellar seed-sprigs, thrusting
its ancient ranginess towards
the cold, the burning, spared
of leaf, sealed in, unbending.
(*AN* 1.223)

The excellence of "drenched in height" and "brisk with / constellar seed-sprigs" underscores Avison's gift for making clapped-out diction potent again, for finding an eloquence that can refresh the sensory dimension of poetic expression. But many other immediate pleasures inhere in this descriptive passage: the enjambment that sharpens Avison's thinking into a series of deft pauses and releases, the occasional ring of buried rhyme ("November" / "constellar"), or the rhyme left to casually linger at line end ("bared" / "spared'), ("up-ending" / "unbending"). Also interesting is the way Avison's lines seem to hoard their pristinity yet the outcome is never so frugal that it seems starved. Many of Avison's poems thrive on similarly minimal gestures and small, slantwise ideas. Musically, the voice is always darting about; again and again one pauses at the staggering of a sentence, the jumpy rhythm of a thought. Indeed her poetry seems to abhor the very idea of rest. Her syntax—as in last three lines in the excerpt above—resembles a camera jerking and swiveling on an unstable tripod.

These shifts, be they impressionistic and abrupt ("Misty summer / side-tracks years / to disused loading sheds sweet with the / sun on worn boards" [*AN* 2.34]) or subtle and suggestive ("In the steeped evening / deer stand" [*AN* 2.35]), make the best case I know for Paul Valéry's definition of poetry as a "prolonged hesitation between sound and sense" (73). Adroit use of this "hesitation" is what makes her lines so quirky and sensuous, seemingly responsive to every nuance of attitude and feeling, and Avison's obvious skill should be enough to discourage the notion that, post-conversion, her poems became creed-driven and cathedral-quieted. Of course, presenting these poems as objects that solicit and reward such technical analysis is largely my aim here. Avison doesn't think inside doctrine, she thinks inside style. But if her style is all tricky, shifty business, describing it is no easy task either. Often, it's only after careful study that any coherent arrangement—sonic, prosodic, metonymic, thematic—becomes evident. Even then one may translate Avison's feats correctly and still fail to convey their luster. So fully do her best poems embody her intuitions, so impro-

vised are their shapes, that her most pleasing lines fly beyond accountability:

> Grey by water   fathering fallen
>   gold by evening   or morning
>
> gritty by cinder   or glass broken
>   greasy by sliding   and sloping
>
> singing by combers   silting slacking
> sizzling by horseless   plastic and chrome
>
> acrid by acres   at canal level
>
> oakleaf smoky   at late sunlevel
>
> sour at stoneboat   marsh-lily stalk
>   AND
> sweet by wicker   or water.
>   (*AN* 2.206)

Called, aptly enough, "Making Senses" this unusual poem is constructed out of elided speech-clusters that Avison seems to have adapted from the alliterative pattern of Anglo-Saxon verse. In terms of what's being "said," the poem is profoundly periphrastic, using the centre of the line not so much as caesura but as pivot, to deflect or redirect the expected measurements. Harder to describe is the fabric of effects—or the "binding secret between words," to use Heaney's phrase (150)—that comprise the poem: how the concretizing diction, the concise details, the teetering rhythm and sound-patterns invoke a powerful air of implication that isn't compromised by the scarcity of surface-meaning. We feel an intuition floating in calculated if open-ended relation to the form, giving the occasional meaningful nudge. When I read "water" I can't help think of how John has Christ speaking of being born again "of water and of spirit" (John 3.5), with that lovely image serving as an example of language's helpless metaphoricity before a mystery. Avison's riddling poem seems partly a call-and-response to that gospel moment, a contemporary rewriting of Christ's phrase to describe her own helplessness before the unfathomableness of her rebirth.

It is the pressure of such subtexts that splits Avison's voice into its multiplicity of meanings and intents, and ensures that her poetry will always say more than Avison could choose to control. We can see this subtext-

pressure again in the exquisite series called "Sketches" (*AN* 2. 16-23) but also in poems like "Two Mayday Selves" (*AN* 1.148), "The Word" (*AN* 1.195), "Urban Tree" (*AN* 1.226), "Psalm 19" (*AN* 1.162), "The Store Seeds" (*AN* 1.168), "Once" (*AN* 1.210), "Natural/Unnatural" (*AN* 1.217), "Hid life" (*AN* 2.28), "Let Be" (*AN* 2.32), "Oughtiness Ousted" (*AN* 2.70), "In the Hour" (*AN* 2.180), "Future" (*AN* 2.199), "The Fix" (*AN* 2.202), and "Corporate Obsolescence" (*AN* 2.204). It seems important, as we discuss the details of this style, to remind ourselves of the details of the old style she set aside. Avison's poems in *Winter Sun* savoured the sound of words with a visceral relish. This sensuous immediacy, which the early poems worked so skillfully and generously to achieve, is less straightforwardly regarded in the Christian work, where Avison's aim is to render not so much the weight as the *weightlessness* of what she describes. The distance traveled from "optic heart" (*AN* 1.69) to the "de- / ciphering heart" (*AN* 1.161) arrives at an aesthetic that, in its attempt to approximate the discovery of God on the level of words, always preserves what resists verbalization:

The tethered dory thuds
in its lonely sarabande
after the speedboat's passing.
Thuds on the dock, as gradually
criss-crossing wavelets
scallop the weathered piles.
Thud. Then bump. Then nudge.

Wood shaped to shel-
ter even the clumsiest oarsman,
shaped to cumber
the sundanced waters or
the still angora mists of dawn.
Wood of the dock, wet fibring
wood piles solid on rock
fixed in cement – knee-deep
in a dry autumn, hip-deep and standing steady
when March foments the slush to gnaw
and no one sees or listens.

Wood, tied to wood,
but not by wood and
only in waiting intervals;

each mostly on its own.
(*AN* 3.54)

This poem, called "Family Members," gives us another marvelous ending, one that provides the subtlest amplification of the poem's argument: the delicately enjambed lines that expose the poem's rhythmic nerve-endings, the consonantal arrangement with its quivering sensitivity to Avison's emotional and spiritual temperature. To put it plainly, not everyone can do this: rewire verbs and nouns so that readers see a theme—in this case, connection and disconnection—freshly. Sometimes, it's true, her poems set new standards of encryption. Avison can sometimes appear to have devised an adversary English: she often uses verbs as if they were nouns; she uses nouns as verbs; she prefers compound participles to simple adjectives. Such intent has also led to the blazing oddity of her voice, the live current of its music.

Yet Avison clearly takes her ideas on journeys many of us no longer travel, so that encountering these poems means encountering, down to the micro level, a lost world of devotional thinking. Avison's poetry faces an audience for whom religious life of any sort, much less Christian, is a foreign country. To say that a poet recognizes the redemptive divinity of Christ and uses her poems to express her belief in the continuing intersection of his incarnation with mortal time—well, that sounds like so much kitsch. This is not to dismiss lightly the subtleties of our doubt for this sort of work. Part of it, of course, is our instant dislike for poetry that we feel has "a palpable design upon us," as Keats wrote. Since the Romantic movement, the emphasis in poetry has been on an individual imagination defined against, rather than in terms of, any orthodoxy. The decline of faith is a backdrop to the poems of Shelley, Tennyson, for whom religiosity was a barren base on which to write poems—not allowing the signature powers of poetry, but annulling them. But it's because Avison is aware of these ambiguities that her Christian poetry is genuine and moving, not just an exercise in willed devotion. Theologically, of course, Avison is a straight-down-the-middle Christian. The religious sentiments in her poems are not original (but neither, it should be said, were the religious sentiments of Donne, Hopkins, and Herbert). Poetically, though, her breaking of form is assaultive, alarming. Artifice is a prayerful disruption, a daredevil adventure.

That said, the routes through which intentions get into poems are complex and I don't mean to use this essay to ignore any other pressures Avison's poem might carry. It's obvious that her 1963 conversion pushed her voice—one that was already deeply sunk in twentieth-century influ-

ences—into a unique time zone. Or, as Avison puts it, "The ancient, the new, / confused in speech" (*AN* 1.161). They invite us into a space outside ordinary time language where God's presence is mediated through the poems' exemplary language, which was permitted to yield its own unique character and eccentric perfection. God works "ministerially" through agency of Avison's modern ear, who thus is herself a sort of ancillary creator. The aesthetic balance struck between ancient echoes and contemporary accents makes Avison seem a marvelous reconciliation of opposites. On one hand, her poems seem radically elegiac; one might even argue that the "contemporary" for her—defined as a striving for the unprecedented effect—is not worth bothering about. And yet Avison has stretched our recognition of what a poem can be and do.

The lazy confidence with which we misread Christian ideas as anti-experimental causes us to overlook this. Indeed the suggestion that Christianity can be a matter of innovation has fallen out of favor. It isn't dismissed outright, but something about the way we teach and learn makes it naïve to take such an idea too seriously. Milton, George Herbert, John Donne, T.S. Eliot, and Hopkins—poets who put their faith to work, sometimes on a grand scale—have had now their achievements so secularly parsed (Milton's epic, Herbert's plain style, Donne's metaphors. Eliot's extinction of personality, Hopkins' inscape) that we forget that, for them, God was where the action was, where the nature of the poetic medium was most at stake. Belief in God and belief in poetry flourished together. By paring away the clutter of conventional expressiveness, they revealed not only a thrilling mystery, but a new aesthetic. (Perhaps the most underrated lesson of the English tradition is how much Christianity has done, and continues to do, for poetic experiments.) It would, of course, be easy to write Christian poems that, by the standards of art, are ignoble. But Avison's poems—built for the grapple of spiritual contact, seeking to provoke cognition and excite our sensitivity to language—are not those poems.

Works Cited

Avison, Margaret. Review of *Rocking Chair and Other Poems* by A.M. Klein. *The Canadian Forum*. November 1948: 191.

Bowering, George. "Margaret, A Vision." '*Lighting up the Terrain': The Poetry of Margaret Avison.* Ed. David A. Kent. Toronto: ECW, 1987.

Heaney, Seamus. “Englands of the Mind.” *Preoccupations*. London: Faber, 1981.

Ito, Sally. “The Quiet Centre Inside: *Margaret Avison interviewed by Sally Ito*.” *Where the Words Come From: Canadian Poets in Conversation.* Ed. Tim Bowling. Roberts Creek, B.C.: Nightwood Editions, 2002. 159-73.

Valéry, Paul. “Poésie.” *Ego scriptor et Petits poèmes abstraits*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992.

Yeats, W. B. "The Song of the Happy Shepherd.” *Collected Poems*. London: Picador, 1990.

Contributors

George Bowering, Vancouver, British Columbia
Donald S. Hair, London, Ontario
Gordon Johnston, Peterborough, Ontario
David A. Kent, Centennial College
John B. Lee, Brantford, Ontario
Robert James Merrett, University of Alberta
Katherine M. Quinsey, University of Windsor
Carmine Starnino, Montreal, Quebec
John C. Van Rys, Redeemer University College
Jason Wiens, University of Calgary
Brent Wood, Trent University