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Avison and the Postmodern 1960s

by Jason Wiens

In his introduction to the recently published *bpNichol Comics*, editor Carl Peters argues Nichol "remains a devotional writer" (Peters 14)—most obviously in Nichol's life-long poem *The Martyrology* with its canon of various "Saints" (St. Range, St. Ranglehold, etc.). Peters goes on to assert "there is nothing more daring—nothing more 'experimental'—than a (postmodern) writer who attempts to speak to his God!" (15). Why would Peters see this attempt as "daring" or "experimental"? Perhaps because from certain perspectives postmodernism and Christianity could be seen as oppositional, as postmodernism celebrates the end of certain "grand narratives" of which Christianity remains one of the most powerful, positing both a transcendent origin and an eschatological end. Perhaps postmodernism could be read as antithetical to Christianity because postmodernism is often regarded, accurately or not, as advancing a nihilism which runs counter to Christian faith. At any rate, my project here might be seen as similarly contradictory: discussing the work of Margaret Avison, a devotional Christian poet, in relation to a branch of Canadian literary postmodernism, in terms of its formal practices, representative practitioners, and enabling institutions.

By discussing Avison's work in relation to postmodern practices I am not attempting to situate her as a postmodern poet; indeed, as David Kent and others have observed, categorizing as singular a poet as Avison under the rubric of either modern or postmodern (or, for that matter, devotional or Christian) would be reductive, inaccurate and unhelpful. Frank Davey, in his entry on Avison in *From There to Here*, traces a movement from the earlier Avison of *Winter Sun*, which he compares to "the modernist work of A.J.M. Smith and Jay MacPherson" (Davey 37), to the Avison of *The Dumbfounding*. Davey notes a significant shift in style to what he might describe as postmodern, given the criteria he sets out in his introduction to that volume: "It is no longer synthetic and deliberate, but now moves in natural rhythms, colloquial syntax, and less formal diction" that lend the poems a sense of "emotional spontaneity" (39). Many of the poems in *The Dumbfounding* were composed during the early 1960s, both before and after her "conversion" to Christianity, and her activities of that time—from the publication of the special Margaret Avison issue of *Origin*, to her par-

ticipation in the Vancouver Poetry Conference, to her intermittent publication in experimental little magazines—will be my focus here.

I am using the often-contested term "postmodernism" in much the same way Davey uses it in *From There to Here*: first in opposition to a Modernism he describes as "essentially an elitist, formalist, anti-democratic, and anti-terrestrial movement" (19), secondly to describe an anarchic impulse in which the postmodernist works towards "the decentralization of human power" (21), and finally as descriptive of a kind of writing embodying "variety, fragmentation, non-linearity and unpredictability" (21). My reference to "The Postmodern 1960s" is not intended to situate that decade as marking the birth of postmodernism, either globally or specific to Canada—though I think a more convincing case can be made for the latter than the former. I wish rather to recognize multiple, simultaneous, and often conflicting 1960s, with my focus being on the literary activities and practices we might describe as postmodern. Fredric Jameson has addressed the perils of periodization when talking about that particular decade in his essay "Periodizing the 60s":

> To speak of the "situation" of the 60s, however, is necessarily to think in terms of historical periods and to work with models of historical periodization which are at the present moment theoretically unfashionable.... [T]o those who think that cultural periodization implies some massive kinship and homogeneity or identity within a given period, it may quickly be replied that it is surely only against a certain conception of what is historically dominant or hegemonic that the full value of the exceptional—what Raymond Williams calls the "residual" or "emergent"—can be assessed. Here, in any case, the "period" in question is understood not as some omnipresent and uniform shared style or way of thinking and acting, but rather as the sharing of a common and objective situation, to which a whole range of varied responses and creative innovations is then possible, but always within that situation's structural limits. (Jameson 178)

If we consider the poetic practices and sites discussed below as manifestations of "postmodernism," we would be hard pressed to characterize postmodernism as anything but "emergent" during the decade in the sense that Jameson—following Williams—uses the word, however much in retrospect it may appear increasingly dominant.[1]

What has come to be known as the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference was actually a Summer Poetry Course at the University of British Columbia, offering both credit and auditing options, supplemented by a series of readings and talks by guest lecturers, including Charles Olson, Robert

Creeley, and Allen Ginsberg as chief lecturers, with Avison, Robert Duncan, and Denise Levertov in secondary roles. The correspondence between Creeley and Warren Tallman, who was instrumental in the organization of the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Course, reveals Tallman's concerns and goals in planning the event. In an early letter he refers to the need for "prestige people" and "real people" (Vidaver 3)—people like Olson, Duncan, and Creeley—to attract students from afar and to deepen the impact the conference will have on those students. Throughout the correspondence it becomes clear that such "prestige people" and "real people" are by default male and American, though to be fair he did later suggest bringing Denise Levertov, who would eventually attend. However, such assumptions would not bode well for any early consideration of Avison as a potential participant, and indeed the Canadian name bandied about through the early correspondence was Irving Layton. In the letters Tallman expresses a condescending frustration for the need to include a token Canadian, telling Creeley that "As I say, it may come down to one Canadian as a concession to national whatever pride" (8), and that "We thought that the third of the one-week poets ought to be out [of] Toronto-Montreal or some Canadian place" (11). Indeed, it was Earle Birney who at the early stages of the planning wanted Layton as a participant, because, according to Tallman, Birney "thinks that Layton's Toronto-Montreal mob still don't know that UBC exists" (3). Birney would soon be off the committee in part due to his frustration over UBC's refusal to hire Layton at his urging. Tallman writes: "Earle is in the process of a monumental tantrum (because the University has it seems not gone for Layton) [and] has pulled out of the [organizing] committee, off the boat, and since he abandoned us this will leave us free to abandon Layton as a passenger" (8). Acknowledging that at least one Canadian participant might be warranted in a contemporary poetry course at a major Canadian University, Tallman writes to Creeley that with Layton out that leaves "one Alden Nowland [sic], or Dudek or a prairie poet, Wilfrid Watson or a Toronto area academic name of James Reaney" (11). Given Tallman's somewhat restricted understanding of the Canadian poetry scene in the early 1960s (not to mention a limited knowledge of the geography of southern Ontario), how then might Avison's name have eventually come up for consideration? There is a lengthy gap in the correspondence between June 17, 1962 and July 3, 1963, and it is apparent that within this gap the decision to invite Avison was made, since in the latter letter she has been scheduled as a participant.

It is possible that Tallman became aware of Avison through the special issue of *Origin* dedicated to her work (#4, Spring 1962). Her publication

in the American journal, edited by Cid Corman and which published a number of writers whom Tallman admired (including the Black Mountain poets), would likely have served to legitimize her and her work in the mind of Tallman. But it seems most likely that it was by a suggestion of Creeley himself that the wheels were set in motion for the eventual extension of an invitation to Avison. In a letter dated June 12, 1962, Creeley enumerates a number of possible Canadian alternatives, revealing a far more sophisticated understanding of the Canadian poetry scene at the time than Tallman's:

> And, too, Irving [Layton] was, as you'll know, an old time contributing editor on the *Black Mountain Review*—is sympathetic to both Olson and myself, and I of course did publish one of his books under the Divers so-called imprint, and another as a job etc. I do think he would draw people there certainly, and I can think of no other poet who would prove as active—despite your qualifications which I do understand. So, supposing you can't agree, reasonably enough—I'd then suggest Raymond Souster, really for his decentness, and his long work for Canadian poetry—or, for more technical development, either Jay Macpherson or Margaret Avison—but you'll know the limits of either, clearly enough. I'd favour Margaret Avison myself. But you see, Irving does have much over all of these, for the context in question—a trained teacher, an effective poet in the given place, and a large following. I really do think he is unquestionably the best choice. Louis Dudek is also active in a way, but I've never really believed it….

Despite the "limits" which Creeley refers to with respect to Avison (and Macpherson), or the fact that he would have preferred Layton, he would later write in a brief memoir about the Vancouver event,

> Margaret was by no means a token choice. I can think of a number of others, decorous and conforming, who would have served that possibility far better. We wanted altogether the opposite, that is, a Canadian who could be as particularly rooted as Olson, say, yet also share in that range of technical authority or habit which might characterize Marianne Moore or Elizabeth Bishop. (Creeley 34)

Creeley further notes that they did not want her to participate as a token woman, and cites Levertov's involvement to support this assertion. Creeley's reconstruction of events seems to contrast with the overall assumptions and sentiments of Tallman's correspondence, but his noting of her tangential affinity to Olson (and to certain female U.S. writers) suggests that indeed the decision was made based not on literary politics, but on

poetics. Tallman would eventually invite Avison in a letter dated September 11, 1962, and in a letter to him in response of September 26, she accepts his invitation, calling it "irresistible, although sharing a panel with people I stand so in awe of as Olson and Creeley is sobering to contemplate."

The bookjacket of *The Dumbfounding*, as W.H. New reminds us, argues that "As a regular contributor to Cid Corman's *Origin* in the 50's and early 60's, along with Zukofsky, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, and Denise Levertov, her work has rightly been associated with theirs in the minds of American readers" (235). We should take such book-jacket comments with a grain of salt as they usually have marketing concerns in mind, and given that *The Dumbfounding* was first published by W.W. Norton of New York, the appeal to American poetic authorities (the blurb also cites Pound when it states "Hers is a poetry of what Ezra Pound called 'true testimony'") could be seen as an attempt to attract a specific U.S. audience. Moreover, a number of critics have been careful to note that we should be wary of placing Avison within the Black Mountain camp. David Kent notes her "fiercely independent style and self-imposed isolation" which have "minimized her connection with other writers," and that this stance "makes it dangerous to link her too closely with the Black Mountain poets" (33). Similarly, Frank Davey points out that "Critics have associated her with post-modern exponents of organic form" but notes that "Avison's achievement is largely parallel to that of these poets, and certainly highly individual" (Davey 40). Indeed, Avison shares with those poets less an affinity of style than of stance, especially the Avison of *The Dumbfounding*: a sense of the poet as participant in the world rather than authoritative explainer of that world. As George Bowering, a student of Creeley's and indirectly of Olson's in the early 1960s, would put it, "Avison says that the poet, reader, poem, should participate not dominate, should be used by things even as we use them" (58). Despite such an affinity, there remains a sense that Avison was somewhat and perhaps self-marginalized at the conference, which she dubbed an "Olsonfest," and Creeley has noted her shyness and reticence throughout the events, including panel discussions in which she was a participant. In fact, listening to Fred Wah's audio recordings of the event which are available online at slought.net,[2] we rarely hear Avison speak up at the panel discussions. In a letter to Aaron Vidaver dated 2 August 1999, decades after the conference, Avison recalls the social dynamics of the event:

> Impressions of the Conference? There was an odd sense of being out of sync in such a dominantly U.S. context, humanly speaking. There were West

> Coast poets in attendance. I had read and still read some of them, but we did not meet (perhaps because my father's death snatched me home early). Of course the whole project was to introduce "these new voices" from south of the border. Would that Roethke had been included too! Naturally the visiting teachers and discussion leaders had met and talked ideas together often before. I remember one pre-class occasion in somebody's house, Tallman's I think, where I was delighted to see Denise Levertov, but she and Duncan were absorbed in continuing an earlier conversation. Everybody had to get put together for their evening duties. It gave me a strange observer / outsider sense.

Her performance at her own reading also reveals a somewhat self-deprecating figure, who often dismisses her poems just as she is about to read them. Her selection of verse for the reading is also telling: most of the poems which she read—such as "In a Season of Unemployment," "Urban Tree," or "Transit"—and eventually published in *The Dumbfounding*, appear at the end of that volume. Structurally, as Richard Tillinghast observed in a 1967 review of the book, her less overtly devotional texts bracket her more Christian poems which are "modestly placed in the middle of the book, so that one discovers them gradually, coming to see her Christianity as a natural part of her love and tenderness towards the world" (Tillinghast 266). Despite the fact that the Summer Poetry Course took place the summer after Avison's much-noted "conversion" to Christianity (perhaps better described as her being "born again") in January of that year, Avison quite possibly selected for her reading verse in which her spirituality was more attenuated with an awareness of the more secular stances and poetic principles of her audience, as well as her co-instructors (although she did open her reading with "The Dumbfounding"). Consider the concluding lines of "In a Season of Unemployment," for instance; the earlier part of the poem describes a park setting in which the speaker sits, reading a newspaper, then observing a man on another bench:

> On that bench a man in a
> pencil-striped white shirt
> keeps his head up and steady.
>
>   The newspaper-astronaut says
>   "I feel excellent under the condition of weightlessness."
> And from his bench a
> scatter of black bands in the hollow-air
> ray out – too quick for the eye –
> and cease.

> "Ground observers watching him on a TV circuit said
> At the time of this report he
> was smiling," Moscow ra-
> dio reported.
>
> I glance across at him, and mark that
> he is feeling
> excellent too, I guess, and
> weightless and
> "smiling."

This passage, with its variable margins and juxtaposition of various discourses, implies a similar juxtaposition (and thus comparison or contrast) of the poet's private observations ("I glance across at him, and mark that / he is feeling / excellent too, I guess, and / weightless and / 'smiling'") with the public observations of the "'Ground observers watching [The newspaper-astronaut] on a TV circuit'" and noting "'At the time of this report he / was smiling'" (*DF* 85). This seems at least to approximate Olson's practice if not directly follow the command of "Projective Verse" that "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (Olson 17) in terms of the poem's juxtaposition of various perspectives. Furthermore, the blurring of the private/public distinction (cemented with the echo in quotation marks of "smiling") reminds us of Olson's admonishment against "the-private-soul-at-any-public-wall" (15).

If Avison's participation in the Vancouver Conference seems obliquely appropriate, in terms of stance and poetics, though less in terms of personality, the same might be said of her contributions to experimental little magazines in Canada in the 1960s—such as *Ganglia* or *blewointment*—and her relationships with their editors, bpNichol and bill bissett. Kent notes her "generous patronage of…experimental poetry magazines in the late 1960s" which speaks "of her encouragement of other writers who share her continuing fascination with the fundamental resources of language…in the service of meaning" (33). A look through her correspondence with Nichol and bissett, in both her and bissett's papers housed at York University's Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, reveals that this encouragement went beyond advice, verbal support, exchange of books and magazines, and the occasional contribution to their magazines; Avison intervened on behalf of the younger poets in their negotiations of funding structures such as the Canada Council, and she also taught Nichol's work on at least one occasion, writing to Nichol in November 1967 that "I 'teach' you this spring." In an undated letter from Nichol in

which he calls her his “spiritual advisor in poesy,” he asks if he could list her as a reference in a Canada Council application, and in another letter asks her for a letter of recommendation. Indeed throughout his correspondence a young Nichol consistently situates Avison as mentor, writing on May 10, 1965, that “there are many things I would like to ask you some day when you have the time as there are many things I have much to learn about, being, as it were, a complete novice at this stage of the game.” As for bissett, in a letter dated November 14, 1969, she mentions submitting a Canada Council form on his behalf, while in an earlier letter that year (March 25) she laments bissett’s recent stint in prison, and openly proselytizes to him (as she does elsewhere in their correspondence): “You take Jesus on as other people put him to you. His own terms for himself are tougher, clearer, & make that innocence plain…. Try it too, & on its own?”

Some of Avison’s contributions to these little magazines, as well as to Nichol’s concrete poetry anthology *The Cosmic Chef [Glee & Perloo Memorial Society under the direction of Captain Poetry presents an evening of concrete]* (in which Nichol makes Avison more prominent by following the title with “poems by Margaret Avison, and others”), appear at first glance to depart substantially from her aesthetic. Nichol has written in a critical piece on Avison that in 1965 she remarked to him that she wished “to have the kind of freedom to sketch that painters have, i.e., to not always have to make a ‘complete’ composition” (Nichol 111) and that it was she who gave him the title for his early sound poem “Not what the siren sang but what the frag ment” (111). Indeed there is even more of a sense of fragmentation and spontaneity in these experimental pieces than we see in poems which made it into *The Dumbfounding*. “Hialog (any number can play),” which Nichol published in the first issue of *Ganglia* (1964), has been described by Jon Kertzer as an example of an Avison poem in which meaning is “solely contextual because Avison manages to invent words that have no internal, metaphorical, or allusive significance. These poems are playfully nonsensical, and seem to be about the deviousness of language. They present meaning flirting with nonsense” (Kertzer 13):

“A het hilip,”
        He hed.
“Hockem?” a hed.

“Hiliping hood
        Hep,” he
            Hed.

"haden o," a hed.
(horry, hallus horc
A o.)

Kertzer is right that meaning here is solely contextual, and the particular context for the generation of this poem was the correspondence between Nichol and Avison. Although Kent suggests that "Hialog" provides an example of the influence of "the playfulness she admires in the poetry of E.E. Cummings and Stevie Smith" (50), Nichol is the key influence here, for two reasons. First, as other commentators have noted, the letter 'H' has replaced a number of the first letters of otherwise recognizable words, such as the "d" in "dialogue" or the "s" in "sorry," and the letter 'H' was, of course, Nichol's favourite letter, partly for reasons of symmetry, and partly for versatility (it can make, according to Nichol, both a consonant and vowel sound). Secondly, the manuscript of "Hialog" is found along with a little magazine that Nichol apparently sent to Avison called *Flour*, edited by Cecilie Kwiat, as well as the poem "fugitive" and a note reading "bpni-choll" [sic]. The "hilip" which is repeated in the poem is not so much a result of substituting a 'h' for another letter as it is of dropping the 'p' in bp's middle name "Philip." Given the poem's textual proximity to materi-als exchanged between Avison and Nichol, as well as its clear homage to Nichol's name and favourite letter, "Hialog" should be read less as an example of nonsensical experiment (though it certainly is) and more as part of a enigmatic, contextual exchange between the two poets.

"Hialog" would not make it into *The Dumbfounding*, though two other poems Avison published in that first issue of *Ganglia* would: "Store Seeds" and "In Eporphyrial Harness." I would like to focus here on the latter poem, as it appears more experimental in form than "Store Seeds," so much so that, although it was included in the reissue together of *Winter Sun* and *The Dumbfounding* in 1982, it was dropped in the most recent collec-tion *Always Now*, along with the second poem in the book, "The Two Selves." Here is "In Eporphyrial Harness":

Hill-hoe
till the liberal varnish, the
daze-sun go
down and the pin-

flare-
finish
star-bright

become alltoday, furnish
us sun (eyes) (ice).
(*DF* 77)

"The Two Selves," in its columnar dialogue form, does not substantially depart from other poems published by Avison, and so its removal may have less to do with its poetic incompatibility with the rest of the volume than with evaluative considerations, i.e. she (or her editors) decided that it was not a very good poem. The same might be the case for "In Eporphyrial Harness." And yet "In Eporphyrial Harness" has at least received, relatively speaking, significant and somewhat positive critical attention. Kent, in discussing Avison's Hopkinsian use of "compound epithets to concentrate and enrich her descriptions" cites the poem as an extreme example of this "elliptical manner" (40). New, who sees Avison's puns as evoking "the very momentariness of perceptions," within which "flux" she "looks for a self, and for both release and illumination" (237), refers to "In Eporphyrial Harness" as an interesting employment of her punning technique. And Bowering also approvingly cites the poem as an example of Avison's "striving" towards "perceptions not totally available to human knowledge" (57):

> Here every moment of the poem, including those moments between words, is supercharged, made to do more work than the normal speaker or writer would ever demand. With all the simultaneities of pun, rime, juncture, and so on, we feel the poet trying to do more than words can accomplish, to tell of more than the perceptions can fix. (58)

For these critics, "In Eporphyrial Harness" seems to be less an example of experimental or nonsense verse than an extreme example of tendencies and tactics we see throughout Avison's writing. I tend to agree with these assessments, though it also seems clear when juxtaposed with other poems included in *The Dumbfounding* that "In Eporphyrial Harness" appears incongruous, and the recent editorial decision to remove the poem from *Always Now* implies a contemporary desire to render a more consistent poetic throughout *The Dumbfounding*. Given that the poem was not removed in the first re-issuing of her book, this decision points towards a more recent re-assessment of the appropriateness of its inclusion. This might tell us more about editorial (or authorial) understandings of her contemporary audience's expectations than suggest any profound shift towards a more conservative or conventional poetic on Avison's part.[3]

Tillinghast, in his *Poetry (Chicago)* review of *The Dumbfounding*, argues that her devotional poems fail at times because “A person in a state of religious ecstasy is beyond language; as the LSD enthusiasts say, one must free oneself of petty word-games” (266). Putting aside for the moment the fact that many of Avison’s critics, including New, Kertzer, Bowering and others, enthusiastically embrace Avison’s “word-games,” not to mention the interesting opposition Tillinghast sets up between spirituality and the 60s experimental counterculture, his reference to the transcendence of language in a state of ecstasy brings up the connections between postmodern poetics and Christian theology that critics such as Kertzer and Bowering have already advanced. Kertzer notes that “[t]he problematic relation between experience, knowledge, and language appears as the paradox of the Logos” and that “this condition suggests in religious terms a problem prevalent in modern poetry and criticism. On one hand is the utter certainty of Avison’s faith,” and on the other hand “is a principle of indeterminacy within faith and essential to it” (Kertzer 15). We can note a homology, where we might have seen an opposition, between Avison’s increasingly powerful Christian faith during the 1960s, and her participation in sites important for the development of a Canadian postmodernism over the same period. We can also identify a similar homology between Avison’s devotional poetics and elements of postmodern poetics, including an epistemological uncertainty or skepticism, an embrace of open or experimental forms, and an emphasis on the materiality of language.

Nichol has explicitly linked such elements of Avison’s work to her Christian faith. In his essay “sketching,” for instance, he suggests that “what she was dealing with in part was a theory of knowing, that knowledge is in itself fragmentary, that we are lured onto the rocks *not* by what the siren sang but what the frag meant…We can take this further into our relation to the divine, what we know of the metaphysics of it all” (Nichol 111-112). In a playful comic strip entitled “What is Can Lit?: A Review,” Nichol observes that “Margaret Avison reasserted language’s place as an object in a world of objects—central for an understanding of the many poets who have followed her in Canadian poetics” (Nichol 110). Avison herself shares an emphasis on a processional poetics with writers like Nichol and Bowering, a poetics in which the poet is not an exterior authority manipulating language according to some predetermined goal, but an explorer immersed in language and letting it speak. “The Christian writer may have a strong anticipation of what he wants his poems to be so that they measure up to the rich meaning opened to him through Jesus Christ”

writes Avison in her brief essay "Muse of Danger," "[b]ut to list the fruit of the Spirit is not straightway to bear it. And poems share some of the mysterious timing of organic processes of growth" (Avison 146). Certainly Avison, Nichol and many of the poets who belonged to or have followed Nichol's generation, despite apparent and real differences, share a poetics which could be summarized by quoting the opening lines of the gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word."

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the help and permissions of Margaret Avison, Eleanor Nichol, and The Contemporary Literature Collection in Simon Fraser University's W. A. C. Bennett Library Special Collections and Rare Books Division.

Notes

1 As Jameson himself has famously noted, the audacious, oppositional elements of post-modernism become attenuated once we recognize that "it is no longer 'oppositional' in [an anti-bourgeois] sense; indeed, it constitutes the very dominant or hegemonic aesthetic of consumer society itself and significantly serves the latter's commodity production as a virtual laboratory of new forms and fashions" (Jameson 196).
2 Specifically www.slought.org/content/11110/
3 In an e-mail to me (1 August 2006), Avison noted that the poems she dropped for *Always Now* she considered "substandard."

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