Family Likenesses: recognizing the features of the poems of *Listening*

by Gordon Johnston

How much of Margaret Avison's *Listening* is familiar to us from her earlier poetry? There are some very long arcs in her career. Many of these poems will remind us of others, in their subjects and poetic methods: here, in the last poems, there are window sketches, and tree poems, and reflections on spring and on children, and vision puzzles, and geometaphysical explorations, and etymological speculations, and theological meditations, and the Dickinsonian stanzas. Almost invariably they are written at a very high level of wit, sonic playfulness, wisdom, and insight. That is, they are entirely Avisonian.

Some elements became increasingly prominent later in her career: childhood memories are more frequent, as are the casual asides in poems about the making of these poems. Her long-standing interest in music has more to do at this stage with being in tune, being able to play, being tuned for a coda, an ending, and, of course, with listening. Her urgent concern with the relation between ecology and cosmology plays out in a number of the poems. The ongoing pervasive question of whether to stay or to go acquires poignancy as the challenge of walking itself becomes an issue. Even in old age, 'you keep on going on' (see "We Are Not Poor, Not Rich," *AN* 2.87) in a kind of heroic doggedness, but the terrain of old age is new and surprising. Several of the poems in *Listening* deal explicitly, unsentimentally, insightfully with the realities of being old.[1] You are less certain on your feet, and prefer being seated at a window, walking and sitting both being issues for the elderly, as they were for Richard Rolle early in the 14th century.[2] He is for Avison the hero of staying put (as opposed to the long-distance runners) in "The Effortless Point" where he is described as "swift in the strength of stillness" (*AN* 2.69). Rolle is recognized as a strong advocate for the virtues of being seated and may, for that reason among others, be a favourite of Avison's:

> As I forsooth, seeking in scripture, might find and know, the high love of Christ soothly stands in three things: in heat; in song; in sweetness. And I am expert in mind that these three can not long remain without great rest. For if I would contemplate standing, walking, or lying, methought I lacked full

> mickle thereof in myself and me- seemed desolate; wherefore, constrained by need, that I might have and abide in high devotion, I chose to sit. The cause of this I know well; for if a man stands or walks for some time, his body waxes weary and so the soul is let, and in a manner irks for the charge, and he is not in high quiet and, it follows, not in perfectness; for, after the philosopher, the soul is made wise sitting or resting. He therefore that as yet is more delighted in God standing than sitting, may know that he is full far from the height of contemplation. (*The Fire of Love*, Book I, Chapter xiv)

It turns out that he was still on her mind, as she wrote these final poems. He makes a cameo appearance in "The Cloud" (*Listening* 22-23).

The familiar categories and interests in her work always overlap. For example, "Just After the Fall Equinox" (*Listening* 60-61) is a sonically playful window sketch which includes a view of trees and of walkers, and speculates geometaphysically about the nature of this orb on which, as she pointed out to us in *Winter Sun,* we are "Slung by the feet / In the universe" ("Civility a Bogey," *AN* 1.67). What is surprising in such a long poetry as hers of the sun-lit, sun-warmed earth is the recognition here of the warmth of the earth itself, the "magma we all / float on," even on a cool November day. The alignment of small with large, of candle with sun and hearth with earth, is a more familiar trope, but it too points to the greater awareness of home-fires, of something more than an "unchill, habitable interior" ("New Year's Poem," *AN* 1.82), of our own bodies' heat. The observation of 'others' (here comically presented as "raddled / sloshers out in the / walkways") is aligned with a recognition of our commonality: "we all / float on" the same magma. Characteristically, the poem's sound effects are derived from (or at least contained in) the two key words in the title: fall and equinox. Versions of the soft 'all' sounds appear in 'galoshes', 'minimalize', 'valley', 'wallowing', 'mortal,' and (twice) in 'all'. The contrasting hard 'k' sounds subliminally enact the contrasts in the poem: 'walkways', 'trickling', 'neck', and (later) 'flickering' and 'mimicking'. The word-play at the outset in which the 'No- /' of 'November" immediately turns into 'yes' in "Oh / yes!" may remind us of the same playful progression in "On?" (*AN* 2.39-40) in which the insistent rejection of the 'earth-rush'

> No no no. No
> more, I don't like being left
> alone like this

is reversed in the word 'on' and then accepted. "Yes", the speaker concedes, hanging on is a way of getting there. We can all wallow through this day whether we're sloshing outside or sitting inside.

The next poem in *Listening* is from some angles a companion piece to "Just After the Fall Equinox". It is another meditation on the otherness (and also the kinship) of the other, called "Other" (*Listening* 62-63). As is so often the case, the others here are birds who by reason of their extreme mobility seem so foreign to us. Here they are "on their way south," although temporarily they fill a pear tree at dawn. By contrast, the speaker is aware "How still I sat!" Unusual for Avison is the interest in this poem in the birds' ability to sing or communicate, rather than their ability to fly. It is, by means of a very familiar trope, among other things, a consideration of the relation between poets and birds, poetry and birdsong. But the poem begins in a curious way, easing towards its subject, almost as if unaware of it. The first three stanzas look like scaffolding for the poem which might reasonably have been removed when it was finished. The method is unnervingly casual. She mentions fish and squirrels as other others, wonders if she only met a fish's eyes once in a dream, and supposes that squirrels are only ever "friends afar" even if they seem to have hands. Then she assures us that the following event "truly happened"; perhaps she means it wasn't a dream, but then presumably neither were the squirrels. Then she gives the location of the 'true' event, the "heart of metropolitan Toronto." It's an almost comic example of the more explicitly autobiographical points of reference in these last poems. But the first three stanzas sound like notes to herself as she prepares to write the poem. The final line of the third stanza ("The birds seem few now.") is, apparently, an oblique melancholy reference to environmental degradation, or possibly a comment about the nature of memory, since the poem is explicitly about a remembered event.

"Other" presents a parable of the genesis of poems and of how the mind works, words coming to it and to the breath. It offers from memory an example of those moments of insight and expression. Its central subject is language itself. It is interested in the way birds appear both in trees (as sounds) and in books (as names). It is most interested in the relation between sounds and words. Its climactic moment is the appearance in her mind (as word) or in the air (as sound) of a word/sound: "*zephyr*". The organizing conceit of the poem (and the source of its elaborate sonic game), although it is not stated, is the fact that the words 'bird' and 'word' rhyme. The sonic structure is even more intricate than that of "Just After the Fall Equinox", and its key appears in the 'er' sound in the title word,

"Other." Aware as she is of the particular irrationality of the English language and of its orthography, Avison includes 'er' sounds created by every possible vowel, even unlikely ones like 'a' and 'y'. Hence, not only 'birds' and 'word' but also 'furry,' 'first,' 'whirl,' 'twittered,' 'gurgled,' 'were' 'another,' 'chirp,' 'shattering,' and the startling 'colourful,' and one of the few examples of 'ar' producing the same sound in "peculiar,' and then (climactically) '*zephyr*". She manages to convey a sonic commonality and a verbal diversity at the same time. The underlying question in the poem has to do with language as shared and language as private. (This was a pressing conundrum for Avison from the beginning of her career. "The Valiant Vacationist" from 1944 ends:

> Their language here you wouldn't understand.
> Myself, I find it difficult
> and so far have been unsuccessful
> in finding anyone
> Even to interpret for me to myself.
> When I have mastered it, I'll let you know.
> [*AN* 1.28])

Here, at the end of her career, she asks herself, and she asks us:

> Were they
> calling to one another, or
> to themselves, that morning?

In either case, they provide her with the sound-track for the dawn, played and replayed, heard and overheard and remembered, and like some unforgettable poems they have the ability to 'break' the 'quietude' without 'shattering' it.[3]

In the poems of *Listening* there are energies and interests we recognize more recently from *Momentary Dark*. The autobiographical dimension has become more prominent, more explicit. There are family recollections and reflections; there are acknowledgements of autobiographical 'context,' as for example, explicitly, in "Ever Greens":

> There is a context to
> breathing this forested city's
> greenness: a bald
> cumin-dark prairie
> childhood, years of it, tirelessly
> windy, bone-

drying, week upon week.
(*Listening* 58)

The casually self-conscious tone, almost as if she is writing journal entries, or queries to her editor, began to appear in *Momentary Dark* as well, as for example when she wonders at the beginning of "*horror humani,*" "Is it a stretch of / the imagination to / declare that / somewhere…" (*MD* 73). In "Pilgrim" (*Listening* 30), she comments on the inclusion of the unexpected image of a merry-go-round: "Some / impulse of new energy / may have evoked that / irrelevant fantasy." She also continues her meditations on creation conceived ecologically, or the environment considered *sub specie aeternitatis*. The fallenness of the fallen world and its relation to human failings was an interest from her early days; her mind often turned to Milton's phrase "earth felt the wound".[4] Here, from "Exchanges and Changes" in *Momentary Dark*, is a more recent take on the subject:

Sufferer of cities, hear me for
green pastures are
everywhere despoiled. Cement and paving
seal off the hope of
loam for more than our
sons' and daughters' lifetimes. Here
is what we have
meantime to learn: to
be, in cities.
(*MD* 77)

And she continues her meditations on evil and the wars in the news: the imagined poet killed in an air-raid in "*horror humani*" (*MD*, 73-4) expresses the same impulse that is expanded in "Our ? Kind" in *Listening* (38-50).

Avison's poems at every stage have been careful constructs, but we may ask of these poems how deliberate and how tentative are the alignments of their elements, how thoroughly does she arrange the materials, the images, the sounds? The question becomes an especially difficult one in this posthumous volume because she did not live long enough to put the poems in their final form. Her editors and friends Joan Eichner and Stan Dragland (to whom her readers are endlessly indebted) make this clear in their note (*Listening* 80), describing the manuscript as "almost-completed." Referring to "Our ? Kind" they remark, "To this poem and others, a few changes (of the sort that experience tells us she would have accepted) have silently

been made." No one's "experience" of her writing methods and preferences could be better than theirs. Nevertheless, scholars and close readers of her poetry will eventually want to know about the changes they made. Her editors' sense of the importance to Avison herself of "Our ? Kind" draws particular attention to it:

> "Our ? Kind," once considered as a title poem, mattered tremendously to Margaret. It was very close to being finished to her satisfaction. According to a note on a piece of scrap paper, she hoped to "anchor [this poem] in the free flow and delicate touch and effective/creative power of Goodness, in creation's beginning…and ending????"

But that anchoring seems never to have taken place, and it is difficult, given the poem's unfinished state, to see how it might be regarded as central to the book. The poem as it stands is a meditation on the nature of evil, and the evil is never counterbalanced by the presentation of that Goodness to which her note refers.

It is worth speculating about why "Our? Kind" seemed so important to her by trying to locate it in the longer arcs of her career, and considering its relation to those arcs. It is a sequence, a meditation, and a response to a story in the news. Its components include (in order) a reflection on the trial of Saddam Hussein (from October 2005 to August 2006), a brief narrative scene of an imagined swanherd in the morning, an autobiographical episode from when she was about five years old,[5] a consideration of the relation between human evil and the plant and animal worlds, another brief autobiographical episode, a return to the trial of Hussein (in December 2006), and finally a brief disquisition on urban raccoons.

From time to time, stories in the news have provoked or entered her poems. As might be expected, the earliest news report in her work, from *Winter Sun*, constructs a witty puzzling non-news-story which subverts the possibility of constructing meaning for it. The history professor in "Professor X, Year Y" is cautioned:

> Ignore us, hunched in these dark streets
> If in a minute now the explosive
> Meaning fails to disperse us and provide resonance
> Appropriate to your chronicle.
>
> (*AN* 1.88)

The story of the boy pianist with muscular dystrophy in "Black-White under Green: May 18, 1965" (*AN* 1.152-3) seems likely to have come from

a newspaper. In "A Blurt on Grey" (*AN* 2.91), a sound-effect in the present "small-wars-decades" provokes the memory of a wedding in 1940. A poem written "for the newspaper" recalls the events of April 17-18, 1970: "Poem on the Astronauts in Apollo XIII's Near-Disaster" (*AN* 2.94-5). More relevant to "Our ? Kind" is the consideration of human evil and warfare in "Processions. Triumph. Progress. Celebration." (*AN* 2.155-6), and our present forms of access to images of that evil:

> We see by satellite, screened,
> the war matériel crunch along
> tractored, mounted on massive dollies.. . . .

A plane crash is the occasion for her to consider God's compassion in "Known" (*AN* 2.179). And in "News Item" she comically redefines the nature of the news:

> Today, May 9th,
> the chestnut trees
> pagoda'd in full
> seven-fold leaf
> out of a blue sky.
> (*AN* 3.99)

From time to time throughout her career she arranged longer poems as sequences of related parts. Of course, many of the poems, although they may not have been explicitly arranged as such, are like sequences in that she layers or splices disparate but related elements. (An indicator of this structuring is often the matching indentation of some of the components.) "Alternative to Riots But All Citizens Must Play" (*AN* 3.179-182) is a fairly abstract exhortation to break out of our securities. (The need to break out is a powerful undercurrent in *Listening*.) It is a kind of moral and political expansion of the challenge presented in "Snow": "The optic heart must venture: a jail-break / And re-creation" (*AN* 1.69). But into the argument Avison splices a recollection of the department stores of her youth in which the customers' money was conveyed not into cash registers but by means of tubes and wires to a central office.

The poems constructed deliberately as sequences are individual, and characterized by their own weightings, angles, and elements. The earliest of them include "Dispersed Titles" (*AN* 1.55-59), "Apocalyptics" (*AN* 1.105-108), and "The Agnes Cleves Papers" (*AN* 1.132-143). The early sequence which is most like "Our ? Kind" is "The Earth That Falls Away"

(*AN* 1.175-184). Its components include the spliced narrative of the man blinded by a bullet (in sections ii, vi, x, and xiv), the spliced account of the Dawson City scholar, possibly derived from a newspaper story (in sections iv, viii, and xii), as well as the spliced meditation/dialogue on the blindfold of the subtitle (in sections i, iii, v, vii, ix, xi, xiii, and xv). Its interests include the difficulties of vision, the nature of evil, the tension between isolated individuals and historical realities. Its points of reference, like those of the later poem, are news stories and scripture. "The Earth That Falls Away" includes quotations from Nehemiah and the Psalms in its prefatory poem (*AN* 1.175), and ends with an allusion to the Epistle of James (5: 6-7):

> 6 Ye have condemned *and* killed the just; *and* **he doth not resist you**.
> 7 Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord.[6]

But crucially for our purposes, at a crisis in the meditation on seeing and loneliness, the speaker alludes to Psalm 11 in section xiii:

> 4 The LORD *is* in his holy temple, the LORD'S throne *is* in heaven: **his eyes behold, his eyelids try,** the children of men.

Walking in the city in the winter at night, the speaker becomes more and more conscious of isolation and emptiness, of snow on eyelashes, and thinks of God's eyelids, and of what God sees. It is worth including the next verse from Psalm 11 because of its relevance to the subject of "Our ? Kind" written decades later:

> 5 The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth.

In that later poem, the commentary on the trial of Saddam Hussein is very different in its tone and purposes, but again, as she considers the nature of evil and its place in history, her mind turns to the Psalms, in this case Psalm 146. The phrases in bold appear on page 48, in the second section about the trial:

> **5** Happy is he who has **the God of Jacob** for his help, Whose hope is in the Lord his God,
> **6** Who made heaven and earth, The sea, and all that is in them; Who **keeps truth forever**,

> **7** Who **executes justice for the oppressed**, Who gives food to the hungry. The Lord gives freedom to the prisoners.[7]

"The Jo Poems" (*AN* 2.114-137), given their autobiographical materials and the nature of the sequence as a narrative of her friend's death and a tribute and elegy to her, a commentary with expanded images and imagist fragments, might seem to be at a considerable remove from "Our ? Kind," but its final section recounts the narrative from *2 Kings 8* of the prophet Elisha and the soon-to-be king Hazael who, having been told that he is to be king, suffocates the present king. It is a surprising conclusion, an unblinking conjunction of vision, truth-telling, oppression, and suffering; its relation to the rest of the poem is never made clear. "*Job:* Word and Action, 'Confrontation and Resolution, in *Job*'" (*AN* 3.102-115) is an extended gloss or scriptural commentary (including self-conscious asides, apostrophes to the reader, summaries and speculations) largely on a single plane in terms of tone and diction field. In the last poem of *Momentary Dark*, "Shelters" (*MD* 80-88*)*, the elements of the sequence are more blended, the modulations are smoother. In it, Avison contemplates a subject that recurs frequently in the late poems, being roofed and being roofless. (It is a subject that goes back at least as far as "New Year's Poem" [*AN* 1.82] in which "dark Arcturus" shines down on the "unchill, habitable interior"). "Shelters" combines observation (of the apartments and houses in the ravine below her window) and memory (of, for example, the family homes she and her sister grew up in, in the city), and moves easily back and forth between them. It considers the nature of home and of family; it observes the trees and the cemetery outside her window; it ponders the existences of 'others'. It is elegiac and hopeful:

> In here, looking up, the starry
> night is barely
> visible; yet its scent of *far*
> breathes gently.
>
> (*MD* 88)

The sequence poem most like "Our ? Kind" and most relevant to an understanding of it is "Other Oceans" from *Concrete and Wild Carrot* (*AN* 3.146-154). It reads almost as a companion piece to the later poem, and inasmuch as it is in its final form, it provides insight into the unfinished state of the later poem. The underlying theme of "Other Oceans" is the human responsibility for creation, that is, in present day terms, the environment conceived morally and spiritually. The whole poem may be

regarded as taking place in some sort of prison in which organic forms are being replaced by inorganic simulacra. (There have been narratives or images of prisoners since the early days of her poetry; these last poems include another one: "Releases" [*Listening* 12-14]). The urgent questions about the earth's future, and ours, have to do with whether we will be active or passive in our relation to it, whether we will act individually or communally, whether the cycle of day and night can be broken, and what the divine dimension is to these inhibiting repetitions. The poem has seven parts. In the first, creation is presented in evolutionary terms but also anthropomorphized ("craggy ribs," "same breath"). Is the face of the earth's other creatures recognizably human? Are we inevitably alienated from our fellow creatures? In the second, we are given a portrait of the isolated scholar studying by night, bewildered by the phenomena of the daytime, attempting to extract language from its music. The verbs of this section have no subjects, as if to generalize the experience of isolation. The threat of solipsism has always been a danger in Avison's poetry.

The third section presents a documentary view of the prison which looks like a metallicized version of the earth. This section is the equivalent of the news story component in the other poems, and may in fact derive from the news. The prisoners' isolation leads them to persevere rather than to take action. And like the scholar of Part 2, they withdraw every night into sleep. The fourth section imagines the God of creation as an artist, and tries to remember "the holy / vanishing point / where life began and daily may / bring us alive / again?" (*AN* 3.149), but the section is dominated by questions rather than certainties, and the familiar Avisonian paradox at the end is not an answer or a comfort: "The far-off isn't, and is all / that is." The fifth section looks like an urban interlude, set in a park, but here also the living beings seem sometimes to have been replaced by metallic versions.

Part Six, the most complex section, returns to the prison, where some of us wait, hopeful of a hero, the young people "secretly hoping to turn / their hero's grisly defeat into some / concerted attempt…to reconnoitre / deeper into the / secret power and the source of power" (*AN* 3.152). But for the older people, "the hope was hope for stamina / not for success." A mysterious figure, a kind of workman/repairman with "a floor-piece on his shoulders," appears briefly but then seems to vanish in flames.

Part Six, "Out," contains a surprising insert, an explicitly autobiographical episode recalling an afternoon on the prairies at forty below, when frozen sheets were brought in from the line, and brooms were used as swords for a sword dance. It is, presumably, the memory of one of the prisoners,

and a kind of premonition of the hard-edged steely icy world to come. The final section, "After," a kind of coda, considers the challenge of post-modern thought to any notion of eternal verities, and its consequences for the prisoners. Its sense of the possible ending of everything is perfectly ambiguous: "whether some finally / together break out till / the stars fall, or / a sudden global change / freezes inhabitants' pulses". But it circles back to the beginning by turning again to the "God of all flesh," the "artist" who originally called forth "our earth, our little lives." The presence of God the artist is possibly the anchor to which she referred in her note about "Our ? Kind" which describes it as "the free flow and delicate touch and effective/creative power of Goodness, in creation's beginning…and ending????" (*Listening* 80). But as it stands, "Our ? Kind" does not include that anchor, and as a result it seems shapeless, unbalanced and incomplete. The circumlocution ("effective/creative power of Goodness") and the multiple question marks point to an uncertainty which appears from time to time in the poems of *Listening*, and which constitutes another final example of the candour and courage which characterized her entire poetic career.

That candour and courage, particularly at the end of life, are apparent in a number of the poems in *Listening* and are exemplified twice in references to John Bunyan. Bunyan was always in the retrievable background of her imagination. When he appears in *The Dumbfounding*, in "For Tinkers Who Travel on Foot" (*AN* 1.174), he is at first a figure of dogged patience but at the end of that poem he exemplifies heroic certainty and submission. He cuts a very different figure in *Listening*, where he acknowledges the fear and uncertainty which the pilgrim Christian experiences when crossing the final river. The relevant passage from *The Pilgrim's Progress* is this one:

> They then addressed themselves to the water; and entering, Christian began to sink, and crying out to his good friend Hopeful, he said, 'I sink in deep waters, the billows go over my head, all his waves go over me, Selah.'
> Then said the other, 'Be of good cheer, my brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good.' Then said Christian, 'Ah my friend, the sorrows of death have compassed me about, I shall not see the land that flows with milk and honey.' And with that, a great darkness and horror fell upon Christian, so that he could not see before him; also here he in great measure lost his senses, so that he could neither remember nor orderly talk of any of those sweet refreshments that he had met with in the way of his pilgrimage. But all the words that he spake still tended to discover that he had horror of mind, and hearty fears that he should die in that River, and never obtain entrance in at the Gate. Here also, as they that stood by perceived, he was much in the troublesome thoughts of the sins

> that he had committed, both since and before he began to be a pilgrim. 'Twas also observed, that he was troubled with apparitions of hobgoblins and evil spirits, for ever and anon he would intimate so much by words. Hopeful therefore here had much ado to keep his brother's head above water, yea, sometimes he would be quite gone down, and then ere a while he would rise up again half dead. Hopeful also would endeavour to comfort him, saying, 'Brother, I see the Gate, and men standing by it to receive us.' But Christian would answer, ''Tis you, 'tis you they wait for, you have been Hopeful ever since I knew you.' 'And so have you,' said he to Christian.
>
> (*The Pilgrim's Progress* 198-99)

Avison acknowledges Christian's "horror of mind" in "Occasional Poem" (*Listening*, 68-9):

> To us who are
> old the slippery slope
> we're on seems a
> benign
> prospect although,
> as realistic John
> Bunyan noted, there's a
> floundering in
> that river. A
> sunset glow is little
> help to the frantic
> struggler through a
> worse-than-water,
> swirling, element
> first.
>
> (*Listening*, 68)

She uses the same verb ("flounder") in "Pilgrim" (*Listening* 29-31) where she provides the larger context of our moral and failed relation to creation and the nature of final judgement, and sees the parallels between the end of an individual life and that of the planet, and acknowledges the difficulty:

> This is
> now, to do: plough through
> up-ended chunks of paving, litter,
> wrecked window-casings, then
> scuff through the dust and
> bristles of a
> (once) farm.

That's hard.

The pilgrim flounders on,
aware of them? of Him? away
beyond the
thunderous silence of
the universe.
Nevertheless, it's hard to
trust, now, in a trail, still up
ahead opening.
(*Listening* 30)

But lest we suppose that the final stage of her career is overwhelmed by the awareness of oppression, uncertainty, imprisonment, disability, and evil, we should acknowledge the poems of play, specifically God's playfulness, and the witty ways in which she accounts for free will (the creation of humankind being described as an untethering of "the rash / rover — a prank / just for the wink of an / eye's instant?") and the 'as-if-unpredictables' ("Come! With No Hostess Gift," *Listening* 26) of our existence. Sometimes it is possible to believe in a "purposive, no matter if / anywhich-way ongoing, plus / intervals" ("Pilgrim," *Listening* 30). The syntax of these lines is deliberately obscure, but it may be the belief in those remarkable "intervals" that "takes a breath-catching / simplicity." Sometimes, although she admits that old age is an "unfestive interlude" ("Slow Breathing," *Listening* 76), there *are* festivals. The late poetry for all its fierce consciousness is finally celebratory. Creation here is recognized as ongoing, and occasionally surprising. "Come! With No Hostess" imagines the occasional musical freedom of God

When the
Maker, betimes, can
relax aside, com-
posing His own di-
vertimentos!

and ends with another optative: "Let there / be sometimes galas — / out of the blue" and an invitation (*Listening* 26, 27).

The galas need not be public occasions; for Avison they are more likely to be private, earned by thoughtful or fortuitous attentiveness to what is around one or beyond one. An example of a muted gala, or more accurately of the preparation for a gala, is the remarkable poem "The Cloud" (*Listening* 22-23) which moves thoughtfully towards the possibility of being

tuned up so as to be able to play. It is another of her brilliant meditations on perception, on what happens when you really open your eyes, on where poems come from, in a long arc beginning with poems like “Snow” (*AN* 1, 69), and traceable through poems like “Watershed” (*AN* 1.101) and “Light” (*AN* 2.65-67), and later in “What John Saw” (*AN* 3.74-75). “The Cloud” constructs an enigmatic narrative of an imagined unnamed soul or sensibility who is here adult, suburban, “coping,” “in balance.” He might be regarded as a companion to the figure in another of Avison’s parables, “Cosmosis” (*AN* 3.192-94), from the “New Poems” included in Volume Three of *Always Now*. Walt, like the figure in “The Cloud,” is another homeowner who comes suddenly to know what he has only known about, but, in his case, comes to know disaster, or more bleakly from a wider angle, “one probable ratcheting up of / ongoingness, out there” (*AN* 3.194). The gardener figure in “The Cloud” when we first see him is engaged in chores, and then, having been “seen,” feels at first the pressure of it. The experience of being seen or seen through is tactile, “bracing,” and even erotic: “The Cloud embraces his / opened eyes, himself as / well.” It ceases to be a visual phenomenon and begins to ‘finger’ the gardener. It is internalized, “(within now),” and then one’s sense of oneself as separate is dissolved in a sense of being included or contained: “He no longer / feels bulged in / on. . . .” That experience of being absorbed (familiar from every stage of her poetry) is expressed simply and beautifully (and again with an erotic dimension) in one of the finest poems of this collection, “Severn Creek Park”:

> I, human, am heartsore from
> stretching to
> appropriate all that is
> lavished here
> until
> it   takes   me   in.
> (*Listening* 55)

“The Cloud” presents an account of something like a mystical experience in a secular world, and is therefore from one angle a rewriting of “The Apex Animal,” the poem placed first in *Winter Sun.* The clerk of that poem returning from noon-day to the administrative wing is another of Avison’s representative souls (*AN* 1.53). This is another very long arc, although geographically we have only travelled from the downtown offices of the clerk to the possibly suburban yard of the gardener in “The Cloud.”

If the writer who is recalled in the allusion in “The Cloud” is the 14th century English mystic Richard Rolle, the unnamed writer behind “The Apex Animal” may be Wordsworth. For Avison, the poetic source of the notion of spiritual sight, as opposed to the religious one, was Romantic poetry. The intriguing possibility of Wordsworth’s influence is derived from the conjunction of the words ‘apex’ and ‘One’ (and their relation to spiritual sight and to the sun) in the first stanza of his “Vernal Ode” from 1817:

BENEATH the concave of an April sky,
When all the fields with freshest green were dight,
Appeared, in presence of the spiritual eye
That aids or supersedes our grosser sight,
The form and rich habiliments of One
Whose countenance bore resemblance to the sun,
When it reveals, in evening majesty,
Features half lost amid their own pure light.
Poised like a weary cloud, in middle air
He hung, – then floated with angelic ease
(Softening that bright effulgence by degrees)
Till he had reached a summit sharp and bare,
Where oft the venturous heifer drinks the noontide breeze.
Upon the apex of that lofty cone
Alighted, there the Stranger stood alone;
Fair as a gorgeous Fabric of the east
Suddenly raised by some enchanter's power,
Where nothing was; and firm as some old Tower
Of Britain's realm, whose leafy crest
Waves high, embellished by a gleaming shower!
(“Vernal Ode,” *Poetical Works* 180)

Whether the spiritual eye “aids or supersedes our grosser sight” is a question whose aesthetic and theological dimensions often preoccupied Avison. And perhaps it is significant for the later poem that Wordsworth’s “One” is “Poised like a weary cloud, in middle air,” although the theological or religious source for the cloud itself is not Richard Rolle but his contemporary, the anonymous author of “The Cloud of Unknowing.”

Not only brilliant and moving in itself, Avison’s “The Cloud” incorporates many of the features of these late poems, and of her poetry as a whole. There is, for example, a moment of casual self-consciousness about how the mind works: “A name from / years back warbles its / alerting secret.” The verb “warbles” hints at the presence of a bird, and acknowledges Rich-

ard Rolle's sense of song as one of the three things in which the "high love of Christ soothly stands" ("in heat; in song; in sweetness") and points towards the music at the end of the poem. The frequent experience of remembering details from one's past is included here when the Cloud, now interior, seems to handle and present those memories to the gardener: "a / morsel here, a / crumb of his old / person, there" ("The Cloud," 22, 23). The sonics of the poem are not elaborate, but the consonant group 'prs' provides a structure, showing up crucially in the defining relation between "person" and "pressure" (the pressure of the Cloud on the person) and playing out in "surprisingly" and "prongs" and later (twice) in "perhaps." (The parenthetical "perhaps" is another example of her familiar precision and candour.) The consonant group is softened into 'brs' in "bracing" and "embraces." The 'prs' word which is absent from the poem but implied clearly in the music for which the gardener is being 'tuned up' at the end is "praise." But in its use of anaphora the structure of the poem is more clearly rhetorical rather than sonic, each stanza beginning with a line that includes the phrase "the Cloud."

The gardener's experience, which moves beyond the merely visual, cannot be conveyed as ordinary sight, and is understood rather as tactile, kinetic. It is felt as fingers, and it "unsettles / all that was fixed, / opens out the / wild beyond his / glossy hedges" (*Listening* 23). Here we see again her deep characteristic exhilarating commitment to the necessity of breaking out of stifling structures and conventions. The peroration of "Alternative to Riots But All Citizens Must Play" (from the end of *Concrete and Wild Carrot*) sums up the heroic challenge of opening out the wild:

> Nightfall is near.
>
> Break in! Break up
> all our so solid structures for the
> glory of
> nothing to hold on to
> but untried air currents,
> the crack and ricochet
> of impact. Risk
> survival! into
> some indestructible
> transmuted loss. There will begin,
> perhaps, a slow
> secret, gradual, germinating
> in the darkness.
>
> (*AN* 3.182)

The deeply resonant and idiosyncratic image-pair of bird and tree from her poetry as a whole (and implied in these lines in the air currents and the germination) is condensed in “The Cloud” into the revelatory detail of which the gardener becomes aware when, “[b]eing / seen, surprisingly / [he] opens his eyes” (*Listening* 22). What he sees is a feather on a leaf.

The final or potential experience of the poem is not visual or tactile but auditory. The difficulties of listening were of course crucially important to her at this stage of her life and writing career. In *Momentary Dark*, in another optative moment from “Prayer,” she expresses her hope:

> Let inner hearing
> create listening, so that
> the presence not here
> (not yet?)
> may speak.
> (*MD* 15)

In “The Cloud” when the pressure eases on the gardener, it releases the child in him to play and the musician in him to be tuned up and to listen, so that he can ‘play in’ his knowing. Avison’s poetry, primarily metaphysical, primarily concerned with the working of the adult mind, ends here at least with a kind of prayer (in the familiar and increasingly frequent optative form, “Let…”) that his knowing might be tuned to “play in.” It is the moment when a poem, any poem, might begin, tuned up and knowing and ready to play. “The Cloud” is in all these ways representative of the characteristic brilliancies of *Listening*; it is a worthy addition to the pantheon of her remarkable and great poems. It is recognizably like its siblings, and it is entirely itself.

Notes

1 “Still Life,” 15, “Ocular,” 18, “Pilgrim,” 29-31, “Safe but Shaky,” 64-65, “Hag-Ridden,” 66, “Occasional Poem,” 68-69, “Soundings,” 70-71, “Slow Breathing,” 75-77.

2 Richard Rolle of Hampole: (c1290-1349) English hermit and mystic. Rolle wrote about the soul’s approach to the mystic state through Purgation of worldliness, Illumination through meditation and prayer, and finally joyful Contemplation of the presence of God in *Incendium amoris* and *Emendatio vitae* in Latin and paraphrases of the Psalms, with commentaries, and *The Form of Living* in English. His emphasis on individual spiritual experience rather than the forms of religion had great influence. *Benét’s Reader’s Encyclopedia*, p. 838.

3 Her question about the bird calls is one of many questions in the poems of *Listening*. Questions were always a primary means for her of casting the mind of the poem for-

ward. By my count there are 272 questions in *AN* 1, 248 in *AN* 2, 252 in *AN* 3, 112 in *MD*, and 110 in *Listening*.

4 (“Earth felt the wound; and Nature from her seat, / Sighing through all her works, gave signs of woe / That all was lost.” *Paradise Lost,* 9.782-4.)

5 For the autobiographical reference, cf. *I Am Here and Not Not-There*. In the poem, she seems to have conflated two events from different times described on p. 34 and p. 46. The second episode mentioned in the poem, including the song “Turn your back on the KAI-SER,” appears on page 28 of the memoir, but there the song is attached to a ball-bouncing game, not to double-dutch.

6 The translation she uses in this poem is the King James Version.

7 In this later poem, she uses the New King James Version.

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