

Meeting Margaret Avison

by Maureen Scott Harris

Poetry does not care
what things are for but is
willing to listen to
any, if not everyone's,
questions.

("Poetry Is," *MD* 28)

My coming to know Margaret Avison in person, an unexpected and remarkable gift, came about through my work as Production Manager at Brick Books. Some time in 2001 (not long after I started that work) Kitty Lewis, Brick's General Manager, told me we were going to publish a new collection of Avison's poems. I was delighted but also, I confess shamefacedly, stunned: it was so long since I'd heard her name I'd assumed she was dead.

Long before that embarrassing moment I'd met Margaret Avison in her poems. In 1967, I'd bought *The Dumbfounding* and made some notes on the beginning pages of the book. Perhaps I didn't read much further, for I found the poems increasingly difficult to follow, and I was put off by her turn towards Christianity. In 1968 I audited the Canadian literature course taught by Milton Wilson and Gordon Roper at Trinity College, University of Toronto. Our text was the New Canadian Library anthology, *Poetry of Midcentury, 1940-1960*. Its gathering of Avison poems snared me, but I also found them greatly puzzling. I remember poring desperately over images and lines for a class presentation, wondering what they meant. I've long forgotten the specifics of what I said and I'm sorry, for I'd love to know what my 25-year-old self finally made of them.

At the time I was trying, with little confidence, to write poetry. For reasons I've written about elsewhere I didn't believe in my writing enough to continue it. Nor did I believe I was up to the possibility that Avison embodied and enacted in her poems: the work of the optic heart spelled out, felt perception/perceived feeling rendered into language. But my longing for her poetry didn't stop. Marty Avenus at the Village Book Store on Gerard Street found me a copy of *Winter Sun*. Those poems had resonance for me, and I still have that book in its pale yellow jacket.

The thought of actually meeting Margaret Avison all these years later plunged me into a mix of shyness and excitement. I was in awe of her, one of my heroes for her early poems. But did I even now understand them? What could I say to her? I hadn't read her in years.

In my work at Brick Books I read each edited MS several times. I approached *Concrete and Wild Carrot* with some trepidation, but to my relief it wasn't impermeable, as I had feared. Indeed, I was taken with its precisely observed details of both the natural world and the city: "Mid-morning paraffin film over the / dayshine has / incidentally opened the ear / to little clanks and whirrs / out there, the hum / of a world going on, / untroubled by the silent witness, sky" ("Cycle of Community," AN 3.156). However, its syntax was demanding and so was its thought. As I prepared the MS for the printer, when unsure of the thought I usually consulted Stan Dragland, Margaret's editor, before drawing up questions for Margaret herself. Because of her age and her health—and because of my shyness and fear of appearing stupid—I was reluctant to approach her directly when puzzled by a poem.

Margaret was living in Fellowship Towers, a retirement home on Yonge Street. Her friend, Joan Eichner, was her first reader and amanuensis, transcribing her poems into a computer, and dealing with requests and inquiries. For the final copy-edit I wrote up my questions and comments about *Concrete and Wild Carrot*—mostly to do with punctuation and spacing, as I remember—and sent them to Joan. She discussed them with Margaret and sent her replies back. Copy-edit completed, the MS went to the printer.

When the book was ready, I took several copies of *Concrete and Wild Carrot* (and my copy of *The Dumbfounding*) to the Yonge Street apartment for Margaret to sign. Wondering if I was overstepping, I also brought a copy of *A Possible Landscape*, my first book, to give her. How I wanted her to read and like it! As Margaret signed her books, we talked about poetry and writing and Denise Levertov, another of my heroes. Because Levertov had introduced Margaret to Norton (U.S. publishers of *The Dumbfounding*), Margaret signed my copy in her memory. In *Concrete and Wild Carrot* she wrote: "For Maureen, who writes and so generates writing ... long may it continue." I left feeling I'd been blessed.

Margaret and I had more to do with each other over launching *Concrete and Wild Carrot*. It's a reality of the small-press world that the launch is a primary way to both celebrate and promote a title. Sales there represent a significant part of the monetary return for the book. So the launch of a Brick Book is an important event for the press, and also—usually—for the author. However, Margaret was averse to a launch, as she was averse to

most forms of attention. Via Joan both Kitty and I corresponded with her about one, and eventually an afternoon event at Regis College fell into place.

I still have Joan's email conveying Margaret's agreement to the launch, and her voice is so audible in it that I'll share her words:

Margaret has written out the following for emailing to you: 'True, I am uncomfortable with publicizing my poetry; the negative noises I have made about the launch arise from that distaste. And as you will know in your own case, praise is embarrassing, though one likes to know readers have appreciated the poetry.

All this to explain the fussy demurs I made about the launch. The Regis evening last week demonstrated that I enjoy reading my poems, and that one may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. I.E. I'm sorry I inhibited Brick. Please feel free about launch publicity. It is not exhaustion I fight off—the adrenalin (and a chair to sit on before or during reading, given good light that way) will look after that, at least for an afternoon. What I fight off is attention to person rather than poetry.'

I was thrilled to introduce Margaret at the launch. Knowing I'd be too excited to speak without a text, I wrote out my introduction. I spoke of what it had felt like to read her poems when I first encountered them: "Within the space of the poems I felt a terrain open around me that was unfamiliar, and also wider and grander than what I knew. In it I glimpsed possibilities about language and the human mind that were new to me." In beginning I'd mentioned being thrown off balance by my excitement. When Margaret got up to read she thanked me, and added she understood the need to write things out because she also had been excitable as a young woman. Another blessing.

Because Stan Dragland couldn't be there, I sent him an email describing the event:

The room was a large one . . . [with] a podium at the front, and Father Gilles Mongeau, the young priest who is interested in Margaret's work, put a table there with a mike on it. Margaret sat to read . . . Large round tables with flat maroon table covers on them were spread about the room so it felt much less formal than chairs in rows. Margaret read for 15 minutes or perhaps a bit longer, half a dozen or so poems, including "Alternatives to Riots," which she read wonderfully well. At the end of that one, there was a whispered "Wow!" from somewhere behind me. Following the reading she took questions for 15 minutes (moderated by Father Gilles). She responded to them all in her non-nonsense clear-thinking way. She signed books before and after the reading.

At the end of the afternoon Margaret was tired, but had enjoyed herself. Sales of her books had been brisk, and she was pleased for Brick's sake.

In the wake of the launch, I had a conversation with Barry Dempster and Russell Brown about my wish to celebrate Margaret and her work. As we talked an idea emerged: what better time for a celebration than April 2003, when she would turn 85? We could bring together poets who admired her work for an evening or afternoon with her, at which each poet would read one of her poems. I mentioned our idea to Margaret and, given that the event was not a public one but by invitation only, she was receptive to it.

An intensely private person, and dedicated to her writing, Margaret tended to avoid public events. Throughout her working life she had taken seemingly unimportant jobs that would keep her free of career pressures and ensure she had the maximum time available for writing. She liked solitude and preferred a certain anonymity. Praise and attention made her uncomfortable.

Though she didn't like a fuss being made over her, Margaret could—and did—rise to the occasion when a fuss happened. In 2002, when *Concrete and Wild Carrot* was shortlisted for the Griffin Poetry Prize, she bore requests for interviews and then the interviews themselves with grace and calmness, and she read extremely well. I don't know how she felt about the crowds and noise at the Awards dinner the night after the reading, but when she was named winner and helped to the microphone, she stood for a moment, more or less speechless, and then, clearly flabbergasted, said: "This is ridiculous!" A wave of affectionate laughter went up from the audience. Perhaps embarrassed at her own candour, she went on to say that the occasion, the party with its celebrities and lavish food and drink, even indeed the prize itself, were far removed from the circumstances that generate poems. Or for which, at least in her practice, poems were generated. For the better part of the next year Margaret was kept busy with readings and travels as a result of the award, and we had to abandon our celebration plans.

I'm uncomfortably aware that I've been writing about Margaret Avison the person. Her comment, 'What I fight off is attention to person rather than poetry,' keeps sounding in the back of my head. Now I want to consider Avison the poet, and the gifts her practice and work have given me.

When Margaret died on 31 July 2007, I was writing a brief appreciation of her work, an afterword for the Italian translation of *Concrete and Wild Carrot*. I'd intended to ask her to read it when finished, to be sure I'd found the proper balance in my remarks. The news of her death left me bereft,

and startled at the depth of my grief. My sense of loss told me she'd been more important to me than I knew.

Reflecting on my grief, I've come to understand that Margaret Avison was an exemplar of what I myself hoped to be as a poet. She was also a forebear who showed me something of what Gerry Shikatanani calls "the way of poetry," its possibilities and my own. Even in my early and uncertain readings of them, her poems spoke to things I couldn't articulate: not just my longing to believe myself a poet, but a way of knowing that poetry tries to explore and express, a knowledge that seemed to me at that time alien to most of the world around me.¹

From before the publication of *Winter Sun* in 1960 until *Momentary Dark* in 2006, Margaret Avison worked steadily at what was given her to do: write poems of demanding complexity, rich in music and sensuous detail, that attend to the movements of thought and bear witness to its necessary difficulty. She wrote with little or no regard for her public presence. Her faith and perseverance—as a poet, not as a Christian—embodies a grounding in practice that I envy and struggle to achieve.

What I've found most exemplary and moving in her work is her acceptance of uncertainty: by which I mean her openness and receptivity to the world, and to spirit. I believe this openness is embedded in her awareness of—and love for—the living world. To be alive in this living world is to grow, and to grow is to change. It's as simple as that. I've read no one so ready to make a statement and then question it, or to turn a statement into a question.

Avison doesn't so much tolerate uncertainty as engage with it. She suspends the need for final answers, constantly correcting, expanding, taking in new information, seeing new possibilities. To be open in this way is not simple. It requires daring and bravery. And faith in the process of discovery. To change or surrender a belief or long-held idea, with no clear notion of what might replace it, can feel like stepping off the edge of a cliff, the self dissolving as one falls.

I don't want to suggest Avison was/is a kind of will o' the wisp, changing ideas and beliefs with every shift in the weather. Her commitment to what she knew and valued is rock-solid. But she recognized the need to question herself to keep those values and that knowledge clear. Questioning combats the laziness of habitual thinking and practice, and keeps one awake to, and in, the world.

Avison's poems reflect and enact both her thought and her delight in thinking. One of her gifts to readers is her willingness to model the hard work of thinking something through. Questions addressed by the speaker

of a poem to herself, line breaks and even word breaks, interruptions in syntax, all mirror the ways her thought moves. These techniques (if techniques they are) slow us down and make us pay attention. As she feels her way, step-by-step, through complex experiences and ideas, we are invited in and encouraged to think alongside her, to examine the thought as it unfolds in the poem. Reading her, our minds are stretched, as hers was.

Her commitment to thought and ideas makes Avison a demanding and idiosyncratic poet rather than an obscure one. I believe it's her commitment to poetry as a way of thinking that leads to the idiosyncrasy of her syntax. She insists on precision and clarity, and her syntax guides the reader to that clarity. She has been called an abstract poet, but her concepts are generally embodied in the concrete sensory world, continuous with it, not separated from it. For instance, consider "Two":

Trees breathe for any
who breathe to live.

Stone makes every thing
more what it is:
sun-hot,

late November bare,
cold in an early April morning;

age in being
always.

(*AN* 3.165)

Her thought moves not only within a single poem, but throughout the body of her work. Her perceptions shift and her understanding changes over time and through experience, revealing the compatibility of faith with awareness of change and difference. Or perhaps she teaches us that the relationship between faith and awareness of change is more accurately described as a dance (her poems being measures in that dance) because human understanding, even of the self, is limited. As she writes, "There's too much / of us for us to know" ("Dead Ends," *AN* 3.159).

Avison's ability to track the mind's shifting progress demonstrates her remarkable capacity for attention. This practice of attention, essential to her thinking, is connected to her awareness of the living world. Reading her I'm struck again and again by her sharp eye for detail. Many of her

poems begin with noticing some small thing—an ant for instance, or the wild carrot pushing up through cracks in the city concrete, the way light falls on leaves, its quality in the sky, what passes outside the train window—and discovers in that thing an image or an idea from which the poem emerges. She experiences the world as a constant revelation of both itself and the human mind.

In “Poets Learn from Poetry,” an essay first published in *Arc 53* (2004), Avison wrote: “I have both read and written with my ear” (*I Am Here* 225). Listening (to the self and to the world), a particular form of attention, is central to her practice; it demands humility as well as the capacity to rest in uncertainty and to learn from what you hear—to pause in the midst of life’s goings-on and take time to get your bearings: “it’s time to get down to / listening, learn to talk too / without interference from / yourself, doing what’s been / given to be done” (“Four Words: A Gloss on I Cor. 14:6,” *AN* 3.173).

Perseverance, dignity, self-containment, reticence, are all qualities met in Margaret Avison, in both the person and poet. The voice that speaks her poems is unusual, in part for its frequent reluctance to speak as “I.” Though “I” is not insisted on, someone (an “implied ‘I,’” as bpNichol noted) is clearly looking, listening, thinking in her poems, a someone who doesn’t need or want to insist on herself, only to speak what she sees, hears, thinks.

Towards the end of high school, Margaret’s teacher, Gladys Story, instructed her to avoid the use of the first person for the next 10 years in her writing, advice Avison followed for much of her life. But given her practice of rethinking, it’s no surprise that, in an interview in 2004 with D.S. Martin (included in her autobiography, *I Am Here and Not Not-There*), she said: “I think in a way it’s gone a little too far with me. I think ‘I’ could come back into my poetry more now” (*I Am Here* 337). She had questioned its disappearance even earlier. In her foreword to *Always Now* Avison includes a poem written shortly before the end of those ten years, calling it “a poetic manifesto.” Each of the three stanzas begins, “This is about me, and you must listen” (“City of April,” *AN* 1.14-16). In her manifesto Avison mixes first and second person ambiguously, a practice she will return to throughout her work. The first stanza addresses a “you,” perhaps imagined, or perhaps the speaker addressing herself; with stanza two, “I” speaks directly and “you” disappears; in the final stanza “I” addresses “you,” with love, and the two momentarily become “we,” sharing the same vision and feelings before “I” pulls back from the intimacy, but concludes “We will...remember...” (ellipses hers).

Throughout her writing life Avison generously read and responded to the work of younger poets. At 19, Gwendolyn MacEwen encountered her poetry, and sought her out. They met several times and, in MacEwen's words, "talked about poetry and people and I don't know what else, because I was so enchanted to be in the company of this superb poet and wonderful human being that I didn't retain much of our conversation" (Kent 132). I recognize that enchantment. It's akin to what I felt in Margaret Avison's presence. Perhaps it was her capacity for attention that enchanted. In my experience she listened and heard what one said, and replied to it.

To the best of my knowledge Avison rarely wrote directly about writing, but in "Muse of Danger" she responds to the question of how to write Christian poems, a question she must often have been asked. Her reply is instructive for any poet: "First, let the writer who feels the impulse to write poetry accept the activity involved, the fact of the impulse, and himself as writer. No subject matter is ruled out, or in, in advance for the writer (whether Christian or not). No specific 'content' can be prescribed for a poem... The body of poetry at large is the range where a writer of poems is free to read, and where as poet he is responsible" (Kent 145).

She goes on to a nuanced consideration of the potential conflict, for Christian writers, between faith and artistic drive, noting, "both are compelling." Complete absorption in and dedication to writing is required, but she adds a second fact the Christian writer must accept: "the tentative nature of his mortal involvement, in art as in anything else." Here is a paradox. In examining ways of dealing with it, Avison makes a valuable general observation: "Poetry is a great boon in testing honesty. Shadows of unsureness, shreds of lingering mist, emotional colourlessness, unexamined phrases, empty words: these show up for what they are in a poem" (Kent 146). Wonderful cues for revisions!

At her conclusion she turns to the use of language: "the poet uses language as an artist's raw material. Consequently, his words have potential effect at every level—not only the intentional or logical levels." "Poetry is the *whole-hearted* use of language, then." Faithfulness to material (language) and the poem will at times lead every poet into zones of discomfort and conflict. "The practice of poetry is as dangerous as this next hour of life, whoever you are" (Kent 149).

In that interview with D.S. Martin, he asked her to explain what she meant in saying she found no difference between writing poetry in secular and Christian circles. Her response is remarkably clear about the practice of poetry: "I think, simply put, it's myself that does the writing, and I am

myself when I write. It's myself when I'm with Christians, and I'm myself when I'm with people who don't know anything about the faith. I would hope to be myself everywhere" (*I Am Here* 327).

Martin goes on to ask how she would advise young or beginning writers, particularly Christians. She replies: "They have to find their way. I can't tell a young poet what to do" (*I Am Here* 337). Avison's recognition that each poet needs to find her own way of course includes learning from other poets and from one's own experiences. In "Poets learn from poetry" she noted her "jackdaw's familiarity" with a wide assortment of poets, and concluded: "finding a 'voice' depends on hearing many voices" (*I Am Here* 30, 32).

Margaret Avison's voice sounded in many keys. Reading and rereading her poems while working on this essay I've been freshly struck by her capacity for joyful play, a capacity that stayed with her to the very end. In *Listening: Last Poems*, published posthumously, I was delighted to find it emerging in this unexpected and lively image:

I like the word
"particulate." Its dictionary
meaning has slipped my mind. But
do let's have a cluster of
particulates that I can
dance among, with castanets.
("Two Whoms or I'm in Two Minds," *Listening* 7)

What joy for this Avison reader to encounter, in this image of dance and sound, both the poet I was privileged to meet, and the excitable young woman she mentioned she once was.

Notes

- 1 Much of what follows is drawn from observations I made in 2008, on a panel dedicated to Avison at the League of Canadian Poets AGM in St. John's. My intentions were to remember and praise her, and to call attention to her work. She had things to teach us.

Works Cited

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