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"This is about me": A Consideration of Spirituality and Desire in Avison's Poems

by Elizabeth Davey

When we reflect on the poetic legacy of Margaret Avison, we think of a giant or, as noted in one obituary, a "'titan' in modern Canadian poetry" (Kubacki) incongruously embodied in this shy, diminutive woman. Critics have long admired her often-dense poetry, attracted to her "ironically allusive manner" and her "spiritualized syntax" (Merrett 95, Starnino 139). David Jeffrey commends her for her "testimony to a philosophical and spiritual progress" (59). "Margaret Avison has probed and celebrated how we apprehend and envision the natural world," Robert Merrett notes, "in the process acutely yet tactfully embodying the metaphysical issues that stem from our sensations and imaginations" (95). In the mining of her rich poems, admirers have taken cues from her careful selection of subjects in lyrics of complexity and ambiguity. We expect demanding intellectual and spiritual exercise from engaging in the process. I have wondered, though, at her and our reticence to explore one particular subject, perhaps because of assumptions we make about her status as an unmarried woman and her proclivity to eschew conversation about her private life. Little—but not nothing—is said in Avison's poems about intimacy and sexuality, reinforcing our silence. If we put on different lenses of inquiry, we discover several clues that validate the poet's experience and occasional expression of desire.

To begin, it would be inaccurate to assume that because Avison never married, she did not know passion or experience sexual desire. In her autobiography, *I Am Here and Not Not-There*, she alludes to a number of men who were important to her throughout her Bohemian adult life as she moved from one rooming house to another, taking different jobs, always focused on her writing. Her male university professors, mentors, co-workers, fellow-writers, editors, and other intellectuals all played a significant role in her emotional and intellectual life. She speaks of some relationships that went deeper. In her last year of university there was Elford Cox (who was later a well-known sculptor); the war altered their involvement and he ended up marrying someone else (*I Am Here* 85–86). She was conflicted

with the interest of the older (and married) A. J. M. Smith and speaks of her scruples in her account of their friendship (95–96). She mentions an unnamed photographer for the National Film Board who wanted her to live with him (96). More significant to her was her attraction to an American, John Frederick Nims, who taught at St. Michael's College during the 1945-46 academic year. "But though Nims' wonderful sense of the absurd and his verbal wit made our companionship sparkling that year," she writes, "he was Roman Catholic and I was not" (96). He returned home and married someone else. Her longest relationship—a long-distance one—was with the American poet and associate editor of *Poetry,* Frederick Bock, from 1956 to more than two decades later. From his letters to Avison preserved in the University of Manitoba archives we learn of their deep affection and his (and her?) thwarted desire to marry. His frail health, their vocational pursuits and responsibilities, and her all-absorbing embrace of faith in 1963 seemed to close off that option. A poignant exchange in 1966 reveals a sense of their familiarity and gentle humour. Bock writes:

> I don't think you ever need to worry—o well-tempered one!—as one letter said a while back—about getting a spinsterish personality. If anything, you are more like a radish I had to go out for my first grocery bunch of the year when midway through the book [of her poems he was reading]—as a cute, hot, comforting homeopathy for several of your bravest, most melting understandings and sensings of this world. (Bock to Avison, 22 June 1966)

These reminiscences from the autobiography and correspondence assure us of her passion and desires; at the same time and unlike many of her sister writers, she has published few poems that directly acknowledge her sexuality. Avison has only given rare glimpses of a woman's heart—that hidden place of desire and vulnerability. In fact, in the poems Avison has chosen to preserve, she is highly selective in mentioning women, let alone vulnerable and desiring women.

Nevertheless, several key lyrics throughout her large collection of poems point to a woman's sense of intimacy and desire, and Avison signals permission to move in this direction, albeit discretely and not without subtlety. Earlier poems—"City of April," "Our Working Day May Be Menaced," "Jael's Part," and "The Agnes Cleves Papers"—offer glimpses into a woman's heart. Poems from *The Dumbfounding*—"The Word," "Searching and Sounding," and "A Story"—transfer those desires into spiritual yearning of a new Christian believer. Finally, two poems—"Continued Story" and, much later, "Hot Noon"—are the most daring of all in imaginative and sympathetic identification with two "fallen" women in their

response to Jesus. The poet has kept her heart under wraps for all these years, but in these poems we sense a vulnerability in Avison that endears her to us in new heartfelt connection. "City of April" begins the process.

After "a lifetime of writing," Margaret Avison introduces the poem, written in her early twenties but never published, in the Foreword to her *Always Now: The Collected Poems* (*AN* 1.13). In expressive and sensual language the dramatic monologue provides the prelude for her poems to follow:

> This is about me, and you must listen –
> You who sit naked on the bed, folding your hands about your toes
> Knowing how foolish it is to do so
> but alone, so safe and free to be foolish.
>
> (*AN* 1.14)

Startling in its expression of vulnerability, desire, and ambivalence in a young woman's private thoughts, the poem compels the reader to attention. The repeated declaration, "This is about me, and you must listen," reinforces a particular urgency in the emerging awareness of self for the speaker. At the same time, Avison calls "City of April" a poetic manifesto, based on her grade nine teacher's advice, "For the next ten years do not use the first person in any poem you write."[1] The poet subtly—or not so subtly—directs her readers to interpret her lyrics as gestures away from the self:

> This is about me, and you must listen
> Because tonight I have been staring
> At the shadow of chairlegs on this attic floor
> Seeing them as they are . . .
> So bear with me and look
> At that shadow of chairlegs on the floor.
>
> (*AN* 1.15, 16)

There is irony in the monologue. An awareness of self has led to this deliberate posture turned away from the self. Her empathy for the disfigured man in "Scar-face" ("His face is a good / face, looking-out-from" *AN* 2.78) reveals her method, but she employs the shifted gaze for different purposes here. And we have obliged in this deflection.[2] We have seen the poet as witness—as observer, as pointer—and with good evidence to back up the claim.

In her poetry Avison has taken us through a range of places. We have looked long at trees, at birds, at insects; we have learned to see both far and near. “Sparrows in the curbs / and ditch-litter at the / service-station cross-roads / alike instruct, distract” (*AN* 1.62). We dip into any one poem and come up with sightings specific and sensous: “Red apples hang frozen / in a stick-dry, snow-dusty / network of branches” (*AN* 2.28); “Asparagus, once established, bustles / it grows so vehemently, / cone by cone nosing out towards / those (unseen) garbled acres” (*AN* 2.79).“With her careful guidance—her “particular instance of / The kind of lighting up the terrain”(*AN* 1.117)— we know the landscape better. “Signs and runes / gleam out in the last / tapestried evening sky” (*MD* 24), and “Skies are worth watching” (*MD* 36). We pay attention now as she has taught us how to see as she sees with originality and insight. We appreciate her sensitivity to both the seen and unseen world—both the “chairlegs and the shadows” in “City of April” and “those in-and-out plosions, focused, / remote” and in “the bronzing beech tree” in “What John saw (Revelation 4)” (*AN* 3.74, 75). She has taken us on her journey to wholeness and spiritual awareness focused in a religious vision, nurtured by years of absorbing the Scriptures in private study and in the context of a specific church community. We note her admirable simplicity and singular focus, albeit articulated in syntax and style that challenge that simplicity. We hear integrity of voice as she speaks of the struggles of a lifetime reconciling human failures and difficulties with divine comfort and direction. There is humility in her observation in *A Kind of Perseverance* that “truth is final, but our mortal grasp of it never can be final. The word of truth is living and probes us continually as we live our days and nights” (71).

At the same time, “City of April” signals a soft undercurrent of thought. While reinforcing Avison’s early commitment to avoid the confessional impulse in her poetry, the poem still registers an appealing note of vulnerability and desire. The title of the poem hints at the opening lines of T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*:

> April is the cruelest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain.
>
> (Eliot 38)

His mood in speaking of memory and desire matches Avison’s reflections about her younger self: “An underlying melancholy, an edginess, marked me as a young writer” (*AN* 1.13). The first stanza alludes, Prufrock-like, to

an unidentified "you"—a sister or friend? Or is she talking to her other self?

> If you toss your hair from your shoulders in the dark hall
> And move exquisitely, in the air blowing
> through the open window, seeing
> the soft folds of the hangings sway
> and walking a shipdeck on a nightwarm sea
> that you believe in, because you are sixteen
> and spoiled, and growing lovely

The mood shifts in the second stanza's hints of memory and loss, where the speaker is "staring / At the shadows of chairlegs on this attic floor / Seeing them as they are" (*AN* 1.15). Her earlier fantasies in front of the mirror have been replaced with a visit to the attic, a hidden and uninhabitable place for storing old, unused furniture or precious memorabilia one cannot discard. Positively, this "staring" unleashes a variety of significant images from the past of people and places outside the city of April. In the third stanza the "you" is more puzzling: "For I make no claim on you else," she insists,

> But I would call you 'thee' if I could
> As the Russian translations do
> Only it does not half convey
> How I love you. Wherefore, listen
> For I have no directions to give, and lay no claim

Again, to whom is she admitting her love? In the process of musing aloud, still melancholy—"there is so much alive tonight / And so much rigid"—she is emerging from her preoccupation with herself. She urges her unidentified interlocutor to see what she sees:

> So bear with me and look
> At that shadow of chairlegs on the floor
> Till your throat is swollen with tears and exultation
> (*AN* 1.16)

This experience does not merit that much emotion—"tears and exultation"—unless it means more than it appears. We wonder what she sees in the shadows of the chairlegs. Is this sighting like Hawthorne's "Custom House" romance vision of ordinary household objects transformed by contrasting firelight and moonlight? Where is the young poet's imagination

here taking her? Is “City of April” an announcement of a spiritual epiphany? At the same time, there is an element of sacrifice implied in this early poem. The third stanza could be moving forward with its witness motif; it could also be moving full circle back to the desiring and vulnerable young woman in the opening stanza—one well hidden for years in Avison’s complex metaphysical poems. The enigmatic ending of “City of April” suggests a wistful sense of loss:

> Rigid face
> one *pfui* and I crack you. O goodnight
> Yes yes I want to be alone now please
> It does no good. Goodnight then.
> Still, some day
> We will . . . remember. . . .
> (*AN* 1.16)

A later poem in *Winter Sun* names the transition more vividly: “The insect of thought retracts its claws; / it wilts” (*AN* 1.151).

In his monograph *Befriending our Desires*, Philip Sheldrake reminds us that “Desire lies at the very heart of what it is to be human. There is an energy within all of us that haunts us and can either lead us to set out on a quest for something more or frustrate us with a nostalgia for what we do not have” (11). In this early poem, “City of April,” we feel that energy, but in Avison’s perceptive observations throughout her many subsequent lyrics there is a reticence to speak much of passion or sexuality, that “paradigm of all human desire” (Sheldrake 12). For instance, when she broaches the subject of love and desire in “Apocalyptic” (*AN* 1.104), she cynically speaks in general terms (“This treadmill turns by us, and of itself”) and mostly from a male perspective (“‘Write fair insurance for our wives and die’”). Finally, “All mustiness around the living I” of the “treadmill” and “radioactive rays” precludes any warmth and fulfillment. “Love in absurdity rocks even just men down / And doom is luminous today.” We sense disillusionment that reinforces the poet’s private nature.

In *Winter Sun* Avison features only three women. There is Madeleine in “Our Working Day May Be Menaced” who “we / With unrest, sensed, in her, / A certain clarity, a caritas, / But wood-wild” (*AN* 1.110). There is a hint of desire in her strange actions of pulling away from the assembly line of pointless production:

> It was our guess
> She feels perhaps she nourishes a

Shameful little something of a bruise
In at the fusion-point of those peculiar
Burning-wires under the breastbone.
Some of us, privately piqued, privately speculate.
(*AN* 1.111)

Then there is Jael from the strange Old Testament story of Judges 4 and 5 who does a soldier's job of cutting down the commander of the enemy army in dramatic fashion:

And in her haze-white evening,
Sprawled like a glutton, Sisera
Lay on the tentfloor of Heber the Kenite
Pegged to the dust under the smothering tentskins
By Jael, blessed above women
The wife of Heber the Kenite.
(*AN* 1.120-21)

Nothing in the original story or little emotion in Avison's re-telling of it in "Jael's Part" indicates what the event means to Jael—only that she has prevented the women of the Israelites, including herself, from becoming part of the spoils of the enemy army. Another woman, Sisera's mother, "Cried out, leaning and peering from the window / For Sisera and his spoils" (*AN* 1.120). The instinct of self-preservation trumps desire, in this case!

The main poem in *Winter Sun* with a named woman character is "The Agnes Cleves Papers" (*AN* 1.132-43), another much longer narrative—this time, a dramatic monologue by an older disillusioned woman living alone in a "circular apartment" with "too many doors." "Why is it necessary for me to have / So many means of egress?" she laments (*AN* 1.135). She has many disconnected vignettes—poetic images and fragments of stories—to tell her young listener, each fraught with obscure significance: "What story do you want? / Tales of young love, or of that horse with wings…." (*AN* 1.132) These disjointed but vivid memories of childhood experiences, of people she has met, of places she has been, of stories she has read, point to some elusive meaning she fails to attain. Her memories enhanced by her imagination hold a kind of melancholy charm in their peculiar mixture of detail. "My thoughts / Are fuzzy and whitish in previous awareness / Of the next hour" (*AN* 1.135), she observes in one stanza. Later she acknowledges

And I am much alone, as well as old,
And fearful sometimes of the tedious fondness

> Peculiar to my kind, where the soft light
> Plays among things remembered.
> (*AN* 1.137)

Two stanzas later, she admits, "How is it that by now / The shaft of vision falling on obscurity / Illumines nothing" (*AN* 1.137-38). Ernest Redekop connects Agnes Cleves' "shaft of vision" of the imagination with "The optic heart" of Avison's "Snow" (*AN* 1.69), only the dramatic persona in this poem fails to receive the illumination she seeks. Along the same line, Jon Kertzer speaks of Agnes Cleves as "a reluctant artist" with "wandering sensations, emotions and thoughts" that are "disciplined into a poetic argument" (18). Hers is

> a quest for knowledge of a larger and better world that she hopes to discern, not by transcending the small concerns of daily life, but by confronting and assimilating them in a vision of the truth. (17)

In this context of seeking meaning in the stories of her little life—"the way of the obscure," as she puts it (*AN* 1.138), and at the heart of her monologue—she suddenly bursts out: "One evening, just a year or two ago, / The simple penetrating force of love / Redeemed me, for the last perhaps" (*AN* 1.137). Here begins a startling stanza, detailing not what she has observed about objects, scenes, and other people, but revealing her own desiring heart. Agnes Cleves does not explain the source of this love, but she emphasizes its import for her:

> I've seldom dared, since,
> To approach that; not that it would go out,
> But it might prove as centre of all
> Revolutions, and, defined,
> Limn with false human clarity
> A solar system with its verge
> Lost, perhaps, but illumined in
> A mathematical certainty
> And for my secret I would have a universe.

The metaphors she employs to explain this "penetrating force of love" are as large as the "centre of all revolutions" and "a solar system with its verge lost," but nothing comes of it. She stops herself, changing the subject: "The need to tell you is exciting / And very bleak." She then tells a long meandering story of two thwarted would-be lovers, Miss Rothsey and Garnet, who cannot reveal themselves to each other: "Because they met / Each

could achieve a doomed specific gravity"—in the style of Antony and Cleopatra, she adds (*AN* 1.141). Their defeat seems to be hers in some strange identification. And she moves on to other reminiscences. "Telling it in plain words / Makes me see how I feared the wrong thing" (*AN* 1.142). She sighs,

> this iris bed
> Is scarfed in dreadful mist
> And no sun comes
> Beyond the yellow stoneway….
> (*AN* 1.143)

This vignette of failed love life stands out among all the reminiscences in the "The Agnes Cleves Papers." We can identify with her (and Miss Rothsey and Garnet, as well) in her (and their) predicament. While the narrative is admittedly bleak, Avison's subtle naming of unfulfilled desire in this closing poem of *Winter Sun* is strangely reassuring in its acknowledged vulnerability.

The subject of a woman's desire and sexuality is not broached again for some time in the *Collected Poems*. In *sunblue* there are only three poems referencing women: "Intercession" (*AN* 2.74), "We Are Not Poor, Not Rich" (*AN* 2.87), and "Wonder: A Street-car Sketch" (*AN* 2.109). In later volumes—*No Time*, *Not Yet But Still*, *Concrete and Wild Carrot*, and *Momentary Dark*—women appear more frequently. Avison celebrates and mourns various women important to her, particularly in *The Jo Poems* about her friend, Josephine Grimshaw (*AN* 2.114-37), and in the poem about her mother's death (*My Mother's Death*, *AN* 2.170–77); she honours her friend, Joan Eichner (*AN* 2.242); she grieves the loss of the novelist, Margaret Laurence (so different from Avison in her probing stories of women and their sexual desires; *AN* 2.149); she offers tributes and elegies to Jessie MacPherson (*AN* 2, 152), Karen Beaumont (*AN* 2.212), someone named Audrey (*AN* 3.138), and Angela Bowering (*MD* 21). Once she alludes to women in the social contexts of work and fashion in two poems, "A Women's Poem: Now" and "A Women's Poem: Then and Now"(*AN* 3.55, 56). Another time she speaks out about sexism in the office (*MD* 14*)*. She laments the sad predicament of "Milton's Daughters" (*MD* 1–2). But again, little is said in Avison's poems about intimacy and passion. Consequently, it seems significant that the older poet releases and highlights an imaginary persona with such desire in the remarkable poem "City of April."

The language of desire, particularly as a woman might express it, blossoms in Avison's early post-conversion poems "The Word" (*AN* 1.195-96), "Searching and Sounding" (*AN* 1.199-202), and "A Story" from *The Dumbfounding* (*AN* 1.164-67). She vividly describes her newly found love for Jesus Christ as an intense passion, not unlike that of a woman deeply in love with a man. In the tradition of other spiritual writers like St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Julian of Norwich, *eros* is spiritualized and love language has been co-opted to express her emotional attachment to her Lord. In "The Word" she uses her repeated phrase, "*forsaking all*," borrowed from the marriage declaration, to exclaim her joyful awareness of the implication of her commitment:

> you implore
> me to so fall
> in Love, and fall anew in
> ever-new depths of skywashed Love till every
> capillary of your universe
> throbs with your rivering fire?
> (*AN* 1.195)

A few pages later in "Searching and Sounding" she contrasts one moment—"I look for you / who only know the / melding and the forming of such heart" (*AN* 1.199)—with a frantic reminder of the inherent difficulty of loving the Unseen:

> I run from you to
> the blinding blue of the
> loveliness of this wasting
> morning . . .
> And as I run I cry
> 'But I need something human,
> somebody now, here, with me.'
> (*AN* 1.199-200)

The experience is intensely emotional and even heart-wrenching in its naked vulnerability. She sees herself like those burnt out dwarf stars, exhausted in her quest for love. At the same time, there is sweetness in the comfort of fulfillment:

> Dwarf that I am, and spent,
> touch my wet face with
> the little light I can bear now, to mirror,

and keep me
close, into sleeping.
(*AN* 1.200-01)

In "A Story," the language of passion is veiled in metaphor. In the multiple-framing story of a daughter telling her mother of her listening to Jesus telling the crowds the parable of the Seeds and the Sower (from the story in Matthew and Mark's Gospels), the daughter conflates the story-teller with the man sowing the seed—the gardener in the story-teller's story. The daughter is mesmerized by the tallness of the "gardener" (*AN* 1.167) and the "star-shine of / the seed he spent" (*AN* 1.166):

that walking all day and night
would be lovelier than sleeping if
sleeping meant missing it, easy
and alive, and out there.
(*AN* 1.165)

The seeds that flowered, the young woman mused, "shed / their strange heart's force/ in that wondering wilderness" (*AN* 1.167). There is a wistfulness and concern at the end of the poem as she repeats her earlier sad observation about the storyteller—"He was alone" (*AN* 1.164)—and she is not there with him. Again, these latter poems are not sexual in nature, of course, but they draw on the language of desire, affirming some sort of connection between physical intimacy and spiritual love.

Two other poems, "Continued Story" (*AN* 1.48-49) and the later "Hot Noon" (*MD* 46-48), are the most explicit of Avison's poems in naming desire or using the language of *eros* to emphasize spiritual connection to Jesus. In both poems he is not named; the two women are not named either. This silence does not really hide identity because the details in the poems suggest specific incidents in Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection; but not naming the key actors in these vignettes both universalizes and personalizes the felt passions. "Continued Story" reaches into the heart of Mary Magdalene, that former outcast woman but now devoted disciple of Jesus, coming to the empty tomb on Easter morning recorded near the end of John's Gospel. Avison's poem explodes with the anguish of an abandoned woman:

What woman would not
scald her eye-sockets with those
painful slow tears, largely unshed?

to have lost even
loss in an
empty new day?
(*AN* 1.48)

The opening lines of the poem merge sexual imagery with the preparations for burial the women of Luke's account intended: "At early dawn they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared" (Luke 24.1). (Luke's and John's accounts differ in the identity of the women, plural or singular.) Avison intensifies the desperation:

What woman would not try
blindly every device – vigil
by the night window, perfumes –
before facing it? No
lover beloved. Nobody.

There is lovely irony in the central image of the encounter with, again, the unnamed Jesus: "Whoever did this thing / is enemy: to me, now – / and to our friends" (*AN* 1.48) the woman cries. The continued part of the story is her report to the other disciples who seem to be skeptical. The conclusion has shifted the referent of "enemy":

What woman, what man
dared believe her
here in enemy country?
(*AN* 1.49)

This first witness to the resurrection of Jesus, as the poet interprets her, experiences both glory and excitement in her restored hope and desire fulfilled, but now she has taken on a strange new burden—an obligation that will bring another kind of alienation. A new pain surfaces in this new role. Avison herself might note that reality in her own acceptance of her role as Christian witness.

"Hot Noon" (*MD* 46-48) is perhaps the most vivid and moving of what I'm calling Avison's poems of desire. The lyric is a re-telling of the familiar story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. The biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders has noted the implicit bridal imagery in Old Testament accounts of visits at wells, suggesting a possible intent in the Gospel writer's inclusion of this particular encounter.[3] Avison herself has been drawn to this story. She has referred to it before in a short

poem, "Having," in Part 6 of *The Jo Poems*, emphasizing Jesus' need for a cup to hold water. In the biblical text Jesus initiates the conversation: "Give me a drink" (John 4.7). In Avison's first variation, the Samaritan woman talks first. Jesus' reply closes the vignette:

> 'You have a cup
> when I have nothing.
> Both must be
> for still refreshing overflowing new-day
> joy to be.'
> (*AN* 2.132)

In this first re-telling Avison stays close to the Johannine account in calling attention to Jesus' offer of living water: "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4.14), but she uses only the single image of cup and water to refer to the text. She is clearly drawing comfort as she mourns the death of her good friend.

In "Hot Noon" the story is nuanced to quite different effect. Further, from the perspective of the woman, its emphasis has shifted away from the Gospel account. Avison knows well the Gospel of John. She understands the writer's declared purpose: "These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah" (John 20.31). The poet is meticulous in her reading of Scripture and appreciates its profound meanings. "Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel" from *No Time* (*AN* 2.148) is one such theological reading of the mystery of the incarnation.[4] In the narrative of John 4 she sees the theological import of this contrasting piece with the previous one in chapter 3 of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night—in secret. While the learned religious leader seems to struggle to understand Jesus' revelation of himself, the frail fallen woman (with her more than five husbands) coming at "hot noon" responds with intelligent belief and quickly goes to bring others to Jesus. Avison appreciates the significance of the theological discussion about worshiping God "in spirit and truth" in which Jesus and the unnamed woman participate (John 4.24.) Avison knows the woman's response to his declaration that he is the Messiah as she assumes her role as witness.

The story of "Hot Noon," I would suggest, plays out far differently. In this rendition of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman Avison ventures into the tenuous, tender, and essential part of our human psyche to connect our spirituality with desire. It is not difficult to read the title "Hot Noon" with a double meaning—both outward temperature and time signalling inward passion and feeling. The telling is not as buoyant; a jubi-

lant tone is conspicuously absent, but its poignant inconclusiveness fits with human experience.

The primary figure in the poem is the woman, not the man. (Once again, as in the earlier poems, Jesus is never named in this account.) The Samaritan woman is tersely identified as "The labourer / in a constructed wilderness" and "sometimes desiccated"—dehydrated, dried up, despairing. As a labourer—dare we call her a sex worker—she is working and worn out from her work.

> 'I'm weightless, rootless. There's not a breath
> stirring, to move me. If
> only I could have one last
> sip of life! Then
> let it be night. For good.'

In light of her "desiccated" human condition, Jesus' words, "Give me a drink," seem painfully ironic. Further, neither the Gospel writer nor the poet indicates whether she complies! Instead,

> Startled, she let him
> introduce himself, or rather, she
> did it for him, almost too
> struck by his notability. And then
> she ran off.
>
> (*MD* 46)

This short stanza is a condensed version of their conversation. The poet seemingly glosses over the theological discussion between the two, normally interpreted as the heart of this event. Avison illustrates her own definition of poetry as "always in / unfamiliar territory": eye astray, looking to see "who picks up the bat the runner / flung out" rather than "the hit most matters" at a ballgame (*MD* 27).

In contrast to the intimate exchange between Jesus and the woman at "hot noon,"

> In the cool of the evening, in twos and threes
> they left, he with his friends.
> She watched them fade from view,
> sighed, headed her own
> way, all but alone.
>
> (*MD* 47)

Two stanzas in the middle of the poem offer parallel expressions of near-desolation: in the one stanza, "Tomorrow, / or ever, would this day / have to be /*remembered*?"; again, in the next, "Tomorrow/ the day would have to be / absorbed, alone." The metaphor ending the two stanzas changes in an important variation from disappointment to faint hope.

> those surprises that
> linger, faintly strange and
> bright like yesterday's stars
> and planets?

This image is one of memory—an event that is fixed and past. The following stanza speaks of ongoing effect.

> It was as
> unsurprising, now,
> as watching the last light
> fade and stars and planets
> shine out, far out,
> for good.
> (*MD* 47)

Avison, of course, is clever in her double sense of "for good"—the third time the phrase is used in the poem. Is the event—the "star-shine" of his words (we recall the gardener "and the star-shine of / the seed he spent… in showers" in the earlier poem "A Story")—over "for good" for the Samaritan woman? Or has she been transformed in some hidden way "for good"—her good? The last two stanzas of the poem imply a new life emerging from the encounter:

> What makes a human being co-
> alesce with the other just in
> finding something to
> belie, forever, her
> usual sultry past,
> perhaps?
> (*MD* 48)

Nevertheless, the sequel to the story remains a series of questions about fidelity and a possibly lonely life—"a naturally / unsupported, solitary," albeit "gradually less and less/ defensive life." The last phrase of the poem "with reverence now for / anyone human, / even herself" takes us back to

Avison's *Jo Poem* sequence where the poet explains that "reverence for persons is what / love, truly, can be" (*AN* 2.129). "Hot Noon" is in keeping with what Avison sees as transformation, but she does not ignore the realistic pain that accompanies any desire for intimacy—that coalescing "with the other"—that includes one's own separate journey to wholeness.

The poems above have reassured me as a woman reader. I see Avison embracing womanhood, particularly, in its expression of sexual, desiring beings—not in frequent or dramatic detail—but in her characteristically enigmatic, probing tropes. Writing from the margins of both society and church over her long career, Margaret Avison engaged in large theological, ethical, and philosophical issues of her day with sophistication and insight. She faithfully fulfilled her calling to be a witness to Jesus Christ. Finally, in these later years, she removed a veil of privacy on matters of vulnerability and desire, expanding her own sense of reverence for "anyone human, / even herself." We resonate with her lyrics more for the risk she has taken.

Notes

1 In her autobiography *I Am Here and Not Not-There,* Avison phrases the teacher's advice a little differently: "For ten years, do not write any poem with any first person singular pronoun in it" (54).

2 In *A Persevering Witness*, I emphasize the importance of this poem as a paradigm for interpreting Avison's posture and habit as a witness: "Her focus is not on the emerging woman but on the emerging woman who sees." See Chapter 3, "Come and See," 81–85.

3 Schneiders observes, "We find the pattern in the story of Abraham's servant finding Rebekah, the future wife of Isaac, at the well of Nahor (Gen. 24.10-61); Jacob meeting Rachel at the well in Haran (Gen. 29.1-20); and Moses receiving Zipporah as wife after his rescue of the seven daughters of Reuel at the well in Midian (Exod. 2.16-22)" (135).

4 See *A Persevering Witness*, 168–172, for a full discussion of "Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel."

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