

“A Word Fitly Spoken”

by Don McKay

Next to the chair in which Margaret Avison did most of her reading and writing during her later years she kept a copy of Klein’s *Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, which she consulted often. After she died, I received this hefty, well-thumbed volume as part of her will. What a gift. And how aptly paradoxical that I should be struck dumb by a dictionary. For quite a while after it arrived it occupied a place of honour on the shelf, and, although it rubbed covers with the *Shorter Oxford* and the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, pretty much lived the life of an icon: a presence to be revered and spared the rough spade-work of reading and writing expected of its lexical neighbours.

Of course I realized that I should not be pedestaling Margaret’s cherished dictionary as though it were a relic rather than a companionable instrument, and that this was exactly contrary to her intention. I ought, in fact, to have looked up “pedestal” in its pages and taken heed of its humble provenance, including “foot” (L. *pedum*) and “stall” (OE *steall*: stall, stable). To say that Margaret was not a fan of pedestals, podia, stages, pulpits, cathedra, or rostra (L. *rostrum*: beak, snout, muzzle, or ship’s prow, whence orator’s pulpit) is to understate extravagantly, as anyone taxed with having to coax her in front of one of these things can testify. I feel she would have enjoyed re-introducing pedestal to foot and stall, a salutary humbling (not humiliation) of one symbol of officialdom. I think of the passage in “Prelude” where “Somebody’s grandpa” arrives, “rooting the word / ‘trunk’, for a child, as right / for man or tree” as he stood and “gnarled / silently” (AN 1.61).

Etymology re-roots words in their histories, frequently grounds abstractions in everyday events, and always reminds words of their contingency. For a poet like Margaret Avison it works against their tendency to become “unsung,” as she says in “Technology Is Spreading” (AN 2.43)—official, abstract, static, unmusical. Etymology insists that words have histories, like folk everywhere who enquire about the roots and geographical connections of your name. An etymological entry also relates a word to others, in often surprising ways, so that, within a few lines of cryptic text, you can feel how it has evolved, bent, deformed, grown sideways and settled down, or leapt into the abstract. Where an ordinary dictionary defines and delimits, an etymological one elaborates and complicates with rela-

tives and back story; it sits you down in the kitchen where your great aunt speculates on some of the strange twists in your family tree, including those rogue uncles and black sheep.

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I met Margaret Avison when she came to the University of Western Ontario as writer-in-residence in 1972. I was a newly minted professor of English who wrote poetry, or tried to. Had, say, T. S. Eliot come to Western as writer-in-residence I would not have been more in awe. Back in the early sixties, when I was an undergraduate, *Winter Sun* had been on the Honours English curriculum along with Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, and to my mind her vision rivaled those of the great modernists. First of all—and most superficially—Margaret Avison was just as hard to understand, at a time when obscurity was, especially among us undergraduates, taken as a virtue in and of itself. (“I read your poem in *Folio* but I couldn’t understand it.” “Yeah, thanks.”) Second, and slightly less superficially, her poems spoke of a widespread mistrust of mass culture and conformity, the sort of society in which

Nobody gapes skyward
Although the notion of
Commerce by air is utterly
Familiar

and “all suburbia / Suffers, uneasily” (“To Professor X, Year Y,” *AN* 1.87-88).

Such sentiments seemed to echo those of “The Waste Land,” but unlike that modernist classic, *Winter Sun* offered a remedy for mediocrity and inertia.

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.
The optic heart must venture: a jail-break
And re-creation.

(“Snow,” *AN* 1.69)

It was these lines especially, with their Blake-like exhortative power and metaphorical zap, that worked for many of us as a motto we could carry through life, not to mention some of *Winter Sun*’s tougher passages. We’d studied the Romantics; we knew about imaginative re-creation through Shelley and Blake. But here was an actual, live, Canadian visionary, able

to inhabit an urban inferno as banal as Toronto, characterize its deadening malaise poetically, and overcome it with supremely agile acts of attention. These were at once as heartfelt as the Romantics, as ‘optical’—rooted in perception—as phenomenology, and as dense as any modernist heavy-weight.

But while there was a Promethean muscularity to this vision, it was generally delivered with a quick twist of wit, an abrupt shift in vocalization or form, a subtle skewing of expected diction.

Form has its flow,
a Heraclitus-river with no riverbank
we can play poise on now.
(“Intra-Political,” *AN* 1.100)

Like Cratylus, Avison does the master one better, removing even the bank of that river into which no man steps twice. And notice the delicate ambiguities rising out of “play poise” (ME. *Peisen*, F. *peser*, L. *pensare*, ‘to weigh carefully,’ says Dr. Klein), an activity unavailable to us in the ‘unboxed’ condition she imagines.

Reading *Winter Sun* as undergraduates under the inspired tutelage of James Reaney, we encountered a poet of radical immanence—fierce, Protestant, angular, bracingly intellectual and, above all, visionary. Professor Reaney said she gave us the points of view of the archangels and the worms, and at the same time. Wherever she went, into back streets or cellars or china shops, the cosmos was watching.

To walk the earth
Is to be immersed,
Slung by the feet
In the universe.
(“Civility a Bogey,” *AN* 1.67)

Sometimes her lines would resonate with a sudden sentence, reaching back to a cadence like the Eliot of *Four Quartets* (“Asters of tumbled quietness reveal / Their petals”; “Snow,” *AN* 1.69) or flash forward to a riverbankless idiom we could not yet identify as Black Mountainous. And she could just as easily ply such elderly devices as poetic inversion to turn syntactical time back on itself and create a pocket of calm.

Gentle and just pleasure
It is, being human, to have won from space

This unchill, habitable interior
Which mirrors quietly the light
Of the snow, and the new year.
(“New Year’s Poem,” *AN* 1.82)

How often, coming indoors to a warm space in winter, have those lines come back to me, with their scrupulously measured minimum requirements (unchill, habitable), their snagging of light within their small inversions: gentle and just indeed.

There are also points of sudden formal grip, with rhyme creating epigrammatic closure:

Doors slam. Lights snap, restore
The night’s right prose.
Gradually
All but the lovers’ ghostly windows close.
(“All Fools’ Eve,” *AN* 1.54)

Or, more colloquially:

Alec drove a two-door sedan
And worked for the Continental Can;
(“The Agnes Cleeves Papers,” *AN* 1.134)

Such a couplet, like Eliot’s women coming and going and talking of Michelangelo, suggests a jingle, which might carry on from the Continental Can into something like

Sang his song by the light of the moon
And married a gal from Saskatoon.

Instead, of course, we have a rapid zoom out, modulating into a complex point of view which conveys, like a subtle watercolour, an exact sense of the prairie ethos and landscape.

When you looked at him you knew that he knew
How the blood of a gamebird spilled in snow;
Alone out there on a prairie mound
With a grain-tinged skyline narrowed around.
(“The Agnes Cleeves Papers,” *AN* 1.134)

Canadian's Paris), and even in Wales—so the term 'poet' remained a hope for the future which was not remotely bright. (You could say I was 'playing poise' on two eroding riverbanks, neither prof nor poet but a pretender to both existential conditions.) Margaret was not only humble and unassuming, but anti-assuming, implicitly rejecting any of those podia or pedestals that might, given her stature, appear in her path. But her presence was vivid, a *chi* so strong I might as well have been talking to a wolverine. Our editorial session was an awkward, silence-saturated affair, during which she observed that my work suggested a professor and a poet who were not exactly comfortable with each other. Never mind that neither term applied; I was thrilled. And later she called on the phone to say, "You're really a poet, that's what I should have said." Which left me more profoundly speechless than any subsequent event except for the birth of children, kestrels, lovers, the Loss Creek–Leech River Fault, and the arrival of Dr. Klein's etymological dictionary in my mailbox.

In *I Am Here and Not Not-There*, her autobiography, Margaret remembers seeing me at a downscale repertory cinema in London, a showing at which we were the only members of the audience. She had been, as so often, engaged in a long walk.

Once, after miles on the sidewalks and deep in the working-class area of London, I came upon a movie theatre advertising a re-run of *M. Hulot's Holiday*, a film which enchants me afresh every time I see it, though revivals are few and far between. The seats were uncomfortable, the place shabby, but I sat happily through the feature I'd come to see. When the lights came up at the end, I saw only one other person in that matinee audience, long legs sprawled out into a far aisle further forward, and recognized Don McKay, the poet, then professor of English at UWO. (He did not see me.) (*I Am Here* 187)

My own memory, a fallible instrument to be sure, recalls a different version. I think the film was Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*, and I think this because I only realized Margaret Avison had been there when she later chided me for not having offered her any of my popcorn, and we went on to discuss our dissatisfactions with the film, and with Bergman in general, who is a tad heavy on the solemnities which Byron helped Margaret to avoid. I think *M. Hulot* was another occasion, later, but who cares. I'm going to hold onto my version for its fine irony and aesthetic reflexivity: two poets (or one poet and a pretender), both well-versed in introversion, watch a Bergman film while a very Bergmanesque scene of non-communication is played out in the theatre. Margaret may well be right, in a crude

empirical sense, but my version fits too well into the vexed Kafka-like annals of introversion, and academia, to relinquish.

Other encounters, as her residency progressed, were livelier. She had, for one thing, met up with Stan Dragland, a kindred spirit in creativity and verve, which they exercised together in starting a magazine for student writing, *The Pom Seed*, printed by hand on a press in the basement of University College. Fittingly, Stan became her editor for *Concrete and Wild Carrot* and, with Joan Eichner, brought her uncompleted autobiography into existence. Having taken an austere flat downtown, Margaret would walk to the university along the river rather than the streets, and I recall her telling me that it's best to walk in 6/8 time, something she often advised which comes back to me often during long hikes. Any trudge is relieved of its tedium by the blessed addition of the third thing: it has the effect of teaching doggedness (to adapt another indelible Avison line) to dance.

Oh yes, the title of this piece: it comes, as you may already know, from Proverbs 25.11, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." I use it because it serves Dr. Klein as the epigraph for his dictionary, presently sitting on my desk amidst the clutter of books, drafts, knick-knacks, coffee cups, and rocks. And I doubt if either Dr. Klein or Margaret Avison would mind that I have mentally pressed on "fitly" to step beyond "well adapted to suit" to take in "being in shape," "athletic," and "ready for action," like the lithe sung words she's left us.