75

A Right Self-Effacement: The Holy Ghost and Margaret Avison's Poetry

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> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.
> (Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro")

During a 1972 reading at Regent College in Vancouver, Margaret Avison undertook to recite "Of Tyranny, in One Breath" (*AN* 1.236-42), her translation of Gyula Illyés's poem associated with the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. She prefaced her reading of this potent poem with these words: "It's like an inverse of teaching about the Holy Spirit. It's all that teaching inside out." In other words, whereas the Holy Spirit is associated with liberation, this poem probes the chains that tyranny imposes on the self and society. The poem's title points subtly to this juxtaposition by placing "Breath," associated etymologically and religiously with spirit, in close proximity to "Tyranny." The poem then unfolds as an elaboration of its opening lines, "Where tyranny sets in / it settles in" (236). At one point in this one breath, the speaker confides, "not only where / faces are blank, shuttered in / is tyranny" (237); nearing the one breath's end, the poet declares, "but *you* / are the prison bars you're staring through" (241). Tyranny turns the self, blank-faced, into a prison. The conjunction of Avison's prefatory insight about the Holy Spirit with the poem's exposure of tyranny's traces on the human face effectively reveals a crucial element of her poetic: a kind of liberation theology found in the working of the Holy Spirit. Quite rightly, Avison has been characterized in her post-conversion poetry as a poet of the Incarnation: the person of Jesus Christ is at the centre of salvation and of her poetic vision. However, undergirding that Christology is a pneumatology, a sense of the Holy Ghost's power to free the self, paradoxically through self-effacement, a power that in Avison's poetry is also the source of imagination she exercises in her craft.

This paper will tease out this thread of Avison's poetic first by exploring the Holy Spirit's conjunction with self-effacement in her poetry, particularly through a reading of "…Person *or* A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost"; second, by contextualizing this reading through a study of Avison's statements in lectures, letters, interviews, essays, and autobiographical writings, primarily *I Am Here and Not Not-There*; and third, by explicating this concern for self-effacement in both her pre-conversion and her post-conversion poetry.

i. The Third Person

After her conversion in January 1963, Avison experienced an outpouring of poetry that explored and testified to the new life she had found. That outpouring resulted in *The Dumbfounding*, containing some of Avison's most powerful devotional poems about Jesus, including the title poem, "A Story," "Person," "The Word," and "Searching and Sounding." Situated among those poems is "…Person *or* A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost" (*AN* 1.192). In the volume, the poem that immediately precedes this hymn is "Person," a poem where "The door / was flesh" (*AN* 1.191). What follows the hymn is "Five Breaks," which presents the speaker "Top-spun, swiftly / paid out," "toppled and listening"; in the buffeting of her experience of God, "a careful face / shone bare" (*AN* 1.193). This poem is then followed by "The Word" and "The Dumbfounding," both of which speak directly to Christ of his self-sacrificial act of salvation, a salvation the speaker experiences in wonder. Situated in this way among these poems, "…Person *or* A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost" clearly gains a particular significance, Avison perhaps signaling the Trinitarian depth of believing experience, the collocation of *I AM*, Son, and Spirit in her newfound faith and her transformed poetic.[1]

While this hymn is widely admired, it has received relatively little sustained critical attention, possibly because of its very nature. In her recent study, *A Persevering Witness*, Elizabeth Davey reads the hymn through the lens of her concern for telling, which "originates in the mind and mystery of the invisible third person of the Trinity" (220). Davey adds that Avison "condenses the mystery of the shared roles of human and divine witness as she elaborates the Spirit's miraculous freeing of one 'from facelessness'" (220). In his study of power and knowledge in Avison's poetry, J.M. Kertzer sees the hymn as a prime exemplar of a paradox in her work, that "poetry is asked to use ordinary words in extraordinary ways in order to speak about what is ineffable" (41). Prefacing his direct reference to the hymn, Kertzer argues that "[t]he experience of despair and frailty that her poems attempt to overcome is dramatized verbally as an experience of speechlessness" (41). In "Light, Stillness, and the Shaping Word: Conversion and the Poetic of Margaret Avison," David Lyle Jeffrey reads the hymn as the "most concise and beautiful realization" of a "new posture . . . of humility" in Avison's post-conversion poetry:

> What she asks for is not, as we might casually expect, for Light to see by and words better to write about it, but rather to be herself led into the Light so that, listening to Light 'articulating,' she may come to know herself as one who is seen; instead of imagining herself to be doing all the interpreting, she herself asks to be read out and interpreted. It is a courageous prayer.
> (Kent 69)

The admiration that Davey, Kertzer, and Jeffrey express for the hymn points to the poem's mystery, to its approach to the ineffable, to silence and speechlessness, to being known in that silence. It is perhaps this mystery that makes the poem resistant to sustained interpretation: what the poem means is seemingly simply there.

Nevertheless, a close reading of "…Person *or* A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost" reveals the intricacy of spiritual experience and the importance of the poem to Avison's larger body of work. Right away, the title presents us with puzzles and choices. The ellipsis with which the title begins suggests a gap, a pause, something left out, or a link backwards. What inhabits that space? Is it a word such as "Third," which might be used to describe the Third Person of the Trinity, while simultaneously implying the First and Second Persons in the open space? Does the ellipsis point back to the previous poem in the volume, also titled "Person" but there directed toward the person of Jesus Christ? Is that the move, the elision, that the title's opening punctuation makes? The prominence of the word "Person" in the title is also suggestive, open to the possibility that the poem will explore divine personhood, human personhood, a grammatical category, or perhaps all three. When we remember that etymologically *person* is rooted in the Latin *persona*, meaning an actor's mask or a character in a play, the title's first word reverberates with questions about identity, about surface and substance. The italicized *or* then places before readers a choice: they can read the poem one way or another, simply as "Person" or as "A Hymn." In the *or*, is the poet struggling to articulate the poem's focus and purpose, or is she encompassing the poem's possible multiplicity? While Jeffrey quite rightly characterizes the poem as a prayer, the second title declares it to be a hymn, typically a song of praise to God used during worship, and to worship. Potentially, *hymn* signals the poem's musical and public nature, its testimonial and communal function. Avison's use of "on and to" similarly complicates the rhetorical situation of the poem, meaning that the poem serves double duty in being both about and directed toward the Holy Spirit; significantly, this doubling of the prepositions also indicates that readers of or listeners to the poem are overhearing the speaker's address, that readers are themselves witnesses. Finally, Avison chooses

"Holy Ghost" over "Holy Spirit," which has become the more common contemporary usage among Christians. Why? It may be as simple as the assonance of "Holy" and "Ghost," with the drawn out "o" requiring a long exhalation of breath. It may be the juxtaposition of the two words, where in contemporary culture (whether Avison's 1960s or the present day) ghosts are rarely associated with holiness but are rather agents of haunting. Or it may be that Avison is invoking earlier translations of *Holy Spirit*, such as that of the King James Bible, as well as the origins of *ghost* in the Old English *gāst*, meaning *spirit* or *soul*. In this sense, *Holy Ghost* may subtly imply a more forceful and individual encounter between the speaker and the Third Person of the Trinity.

The poem that opens up from this suggestive title is rich, thoughtful, and moving. Comprised of five quatrains, the poem's lines are short (from four to seven syllables), thoughtfully enjambed, and loosely tied together with final words linked through assonance, near rhyme, and true rhyme, including such significant pairings as "effaced" and "released" in the fourth stanza, and "liable" and "visible" in the final stanza. As in many Avison poems, the power of her hymn comes from a whole-hearted play with language, including word play and twisted syntax. Indeed, the entire poem is comprised of two sentences, the first a question and the second a petition. Here is the question, as found in the first two stanzas:

> How should I find speech
> to you, the self-effacing
> whose other self was seen
> alone by the only one,
>
> to you whose self-knowing
> is perfect, known to him,
> seeing him only, loving
> with him, yourself unseen?

The poem's opening lines express a longing or perhaps even an anxiety, a desire for words that will speak to the Holy Ghost and in some way be fitting; in that longing, the speaker is perplexed. That perplexity is perhaps found in the Holy Ghost's nature as "self-effacing," as modest (almost shy and retiring) and invisible; as a verb, *efface* involves an act of erasure, of making something inconspicuous, "self-effacing" thus suggesting a chosen humility. The urgency of the speaker's desire to find workable words is felt in the repetition of "to you" at the beginning of the second stanza. Before and after this repeated address, the speaker weaves together a series of clauses and phrases that relate the Holy Ghost to the other Persons of the Trinity in such a way that mysterious one-in-three-ness is evoked. This mystery is captured by the openness and ambiguity of "you," "other self," "only one," and "him." Equally suggestive are the constellations of words found within the opening question: the tension of what is effaced and unseen with what is seen and known, as well as the play of "self" and "other" and "love" and "only." The question of the opening two stanzas, in other words, expresses the speaker's deep desire to approach in words the perfect self-knowing of the loved and loving, self-effacing Holy Ghost.

The petition of stanzas three through five, again formulated as a single, syntactically twisting sentence, might thus be interpreted as the speaker's attempted answer to the opening question, as human speech approaching the Holy Ghost in supplication:

> Let the one you show me
> ask you, for me,
> you, all but lost in
> the one in three,
>
> to lead *my* self, effaced
> in the known Light,
> to be in him released
> from facelessness,
>
> so that where you
> (unseen, unguessed, liable
> to grievous hurt) would go
> I may show him visible.

Structured around the "Let . . . . so that . . . ." pattern, these stanzas bring the speaker into relationship with that mysterious godhead presented in the first two stanzas, as felt in the greater presence here of "me," "*my* self," and "I," making the speaker both object and subject, receiver and actor. Particularly striking is the speaker's continued characterization of the Holy Ghost, the triple repetition of "you" in the third stanza, culminating in the paradoxical phrase, "all but lost in / the one in three," along with the final stanza's parenthetical aside, "unseen, unguessed, liable / to grievous hurt," phrasing that exposes the Holy Ghost's vulnerability, this Person's silent and invisible work. It is this Holy Ghost who shows the speaker "the one," presumably Christ but potentially a host of others. It is this Holy Ghost whom the speaker asks to intercede with Christ so that Christ, in turn, will ask the Holy Ghost to liberate the speaker's light-effaced self from facelessness. It is this Holy Ghost whom the speaker will follow to make Christ visible. As Francis Zichy explains, "[i]n this formulation the ironies which attend all efforts at self-assertion are transcended in a religious paradox, a self-effacement in which a new, larger self is discovered—new but the same, larger but still the distinct self" (243). Perhaps this process actually goes beyond paradox into enigma. Self-effaced, the speaker gains face—not through the erasure of the self, the donning of some sort of Jesus mask, the wearing of a WWJD (What would Jesus do?) bracelet, or the gluing of a fish symbol to the back of one's car. Rather, the speaker's petition is that authentic, redeemed selfhood will shine through via the intercession of the Holy Ghost. For the speaker as poet, this petition amounts to an invocation to her muse, and the poem enacts the speaking that the opening lines seek.

Almost as striking as what the poem contains is what is missing from it. Among the constellations of pronouns, the play of self and face and effacement, there are virtually no concrete images, no figures of speech, no symbols. Avison eschews established, biblical symbols such as dove, wind, and tongues of flame, with the exception of Light. Instead, she resides within the mysterious invisibility, that self-effacement of the Holy Ghost. It is within this intimate spiritual territory that the poem's action unfolds, and it is this intimate spiritual territory that informs much of Avison's work.

Nevertheless, the presence of the Holy Ghost in the larger biblical story surrounds and informs this poem, and that presence is felt through much of Avison's poetry, both pre- and post-conversion. While it is not necessary here to develop a full pneumatology, a theology of the Holy Ghost (*pneuma* being Greek for *breath* or *spirit*), it is useful to sketch some key elements presented in scripture, specifically those that inform Avison's verse. The Hebrew Scriptures anticipate the New Testament focus on the Holy Ghost by speaking of Holy Breath, the Spirit of God, and the Spirit of Wisdom. This Spirit is manifest in creation, in prophesy, and in human life. Already in Genesis 1.2, the Spirit of God hovers above the waters during creation, and it is this breath of life that God breathes into Adam (Gen. 2.7). The Old Testament speaks of this Spirit as present in and throughout creation, as sustaining that creation. It is this Spirit that meets prophets and inspires or in-spirits them, as does the I Am who speaks to Moses in the burning bush (Exod. 3), giving them the words they must speak. Before and after the powerful Pentecost pouring out of the Holy Spirit recounted in Acts 2 (manifested in wind, tongues of flame, speaking in tongues, salvation, and baptism), the New Testament speaks frequently of the presence and working of the Holy Ghost. That Spirit is present at Mary's conception of Jesus, at John's baptism of Jesus, during Satan's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, and within Jesus' ministry. It is this Spirit that Christ bestows upon his disciples and promises as Comforter when he is gone. It is this Spirit who is manifest in the lives of believers through salvation, as well as in particular gifts bestowed and various fruit generated, cultivating within believers an *imitatio Christi.*

This brief sketch of the Holy Ghost's nature as revealed in scripture suggests a larger relevance for Spirit within Avison's poetry, beyond "…Person *or* A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost." It is as subtle and profound as Avison's repeated references to *spiritus*, breath, and speech. For example, in "Light I" from *sunblue* "the stick-men, plasticine- / people, clay-lump children" come alive with "breath of delighting," and to bring new life to these shadow-making selves, the Light speaks: "he breathes impasse- / crumpled hope even / in us: / that near" (*AN* 2.65). Quite rightly, David Kent has noted that "[t]his breath, the pentecostal spirit of God, recurs throughout *sunblue* as a central and binding motif" ("Margaret Avison" 58). But this Spirit-spirit, God-human relationship is manifest in both earlier and later poems. In "The Word" from *The Dumbfounding*, the poet speaks of Christ's call for us to fall fully in Love "till every / capillary of [God's] universe / throbs with [his] rivering fire" (*AN* 1.195). Avison's Trinitarian vision, herself attuned to the Spirit, is present still in *Listening: Last Poems*, particularly "Enter, Within" (24-25). This poem's opening lines perhaps recount her conversion in spiritual terms: "Suddenly the One, / given, constant, good, / entered." As the poet nears the end of her life, she rests within the larger purpose and design of God:

> At full or at
> ebbing tide, the welcomed One
> has His own in and
> outflowing purposes.
> Already we are bonded. None-
> theless the eternal
> Person is
> willing to
> watch with me, listen, look
> ahead, knowing
> His host must joyfully in
> time
> yield to some not
> yet visible to me
> design.

Decades after her hymn on and to the Holy Ghost, Avison continues to meditate on the Spirit's nature in her life and in larger life. Instead of that rivering fire in "The Word," this poem aligns God's Person with the ebbing and flowing tides of time, linking Spirit again perhaps with the brooded-over waters of creation.

In between "The Word" from *The Dumbfounding* and "Enter, Within" from *Last Listening*, two poems from *No Time* also underscore the long-standing relevance of the Holy Ghost for Avison's faith and her poetry. In "Self-mirrorings" (*AN* 2.249-50), with its title suggestive of humanity's struggle to know itself, the speaker proclaims "Only the fiftieth day and the light poured / from somewhere not of us / does any good." In "'Don't Touch the Glory'" (*AN* 2.245-46), Avison offers a Trinitarian meditation that complements beautifully her presentation of that mystery in her hymn on and to the Holy Ghost. Here, the title, borrowed from an article that Avison read many years before, alludes to both the allure and the fearfulness of God's glory. The first stanza then presents an open flower as emblem of the godhead: "its sheath an opalescence, / pure white petals, golden fair / the fragrant heart." The second stanza's meditation on the relationship between the Father and the Son gives way in the third stanza to reflection on the Third Person:

> The Spirit, Jesus's, in us
> prompts, heals, suffers rejection,
> breathing in stillness, dim with grace
> to wake us to that loveliest face
> and Holy resurrection.

Here, the echoes of "…Person" are strong in the Holy Ghost's nature and purpose. The fourth stanza unites once again the three Persons of the Trinity in the emblem of the flower, locating the godhead's perfection in love and "total humility," while in the next stanza the speaker bluntly announces of our human condition, "Pride is the enemy." The final stanza then turns to a possible human union with God:

> The flower burns on in the heart,
> fragile, timeless, pure,
> timeless There, here in soil and hurt
> still working out His beautiful art
> of Self-effacing power.

In the burning flower, Avison returns to that rivering fire, to its flowing in and out of time, in the There of eternity and the here of human experience and suffering; in this fire, the triune God continues His artist's task, again of self-effacement that will release from facelessness. Critics such as Elizabeth Davey (220), Katherine Quinsey ("Dissolving Jail-Break" 31), and David Kent ("Margaret Avison" 61) are right to claim that Avison's poetry is Incarnational, focused on the saving work of Christ[2]; however, as "…Person" and the poems discussed above suggest, Avison's poetic is to a larger degree Pentecostal, in the broadest sense. The Son cannot be known except through the Spirit. Moreover, for Avison's poetry to live and breathe, it must also be in-formed, inhabited, even haunted by the Holy Ghost.

As the concluding line to "Don't Touch the Glory" indicates, the Holy Ghost's association with self-effacement, whether His own, the believer's, or the poet's, reverberates through Avison's poetry. Indeed, this final line is a direct echo of the self-effacement found in "…Person," but now capitalized. What then is the nature of this association, and why is it so important for Avison? To explore these questions, it will prove useful to determine the meanings of *face* and *efface*, to reflect on the nature and significance of faces, and to explore further instances of faces within Avison's poetry. Biologically and culturally, the nature of the human face is clear and so obvious that people give little thought to it, but the face is arguably the most expressive part of our bodies: the mouth and its articulations, its lips that kiss, the mouth that with the nose is the means of breathing, of exchange with the world; the eyes out of which people view the world, and which function, in that common phrase, as the window to the soul. The human face is the expressive surface of ourselves; the word's origin is in the Latin *facies*, meaning form or appearance. As a verb, *facing* can be literal or figurative, a turning the face toward or a confronting of some challenge. This is the double sense Avison uses, I believe, in the following proposition shared during her first Pascal Lecture at the University of Waterloo in March 1993: "*A growing person keeps facing misunderstanding, and keeps breaking through*" (*AKP* 19, italics hers). Metaphorically, *facing* can also refer to putting a skin or covering over the surface of some object. *Effacing*, then, is literally an act of erasing, metaphorically the process by which something is made smaller, less significant, almost invisible. In life, faces are deeply significant. In the light of day, it is what people show to the world; it is how they face the world, though their faces are relatively invisible to themselves, except in mirrors, photographs, and videos—images reversed, stilled, or moving. The face is one of the crucial ways that the self encounters the Other, as suggested in Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro." We learn to recognize, read, and rely upon faces in our daily encounters. (For people with visual impairments, such reading may indeed involve touching faces.) To be faceless is one way of speaking of those who are marginalized, who are invisible to those having face, having power. We speak of "saving face" as a rescue from embarrassment, or worse.

How, then, can Avison see self-effacement as healthful, as a rescue from facelessness? While we will turn to this question more fully in the third section of this paper, suffice it to say that she considers the face both a positive and negative signifier of the self. In a poem such as "Branches" (*AN* 1.185-86), the face is associated with "diseased elms" lashing the air and selves staring at mirrors in movie theatre washrooms. This is the poet's own face that she meets in "The Word" (*AN* 1.195-96), "far fallen in the / ashheaps of my / false-making, burnt-out self and in the / hosed-down rubble of what my furores / gutted, or sooted all / around me." The lament "In Truth" (*AN* 1.188-89) begins with a meditation on "[t]he fact of a dead face," on "grief for the known face"; here, the face is a signifier of the lost self, though later in the poem the speaker references the resurrected Christ ("one stone-dead face / lived, is, will be"), characterized profoundly by his speaking; she concludes, "who trusts him in this / learns all, past time: a voice / no deafness drowns, at last / a face." Through Christ, dead faces, voiceless faces, are promised, in the end, a living face; face as negative signifier, effaced in death, is transformed into a positive signifier. This positive interpretation of the face is found pithily in "Scar-face" (*AN* 2.78), where the speaker admires the scar-faced man's courage, his 'prowing' through life, and concludes, "[h]is is a good / face, looking-out from." This is one small indication of how Avison seeks to make strange and reorient her readers' sense of face and facelessness, self and selflessness.

ii. Converted

Some readers, both Christian and non-Christian, may nevertheless be reluctant to accept Avison's poetic of self-effacement; they may be suspicious that this process does not truly release from facelessness but rather denies and suppresses the self. By exploring Avison's thought in letters, essays, interviews, and autobiographical writings, we may approach this suspicion and address it in the central fact of Avison's experience, her conversion through an encounter with holy presence.

It is indeed tempting to find various explanations for Avison's emphasis on self-effacement, aside from the spiritual ones she herself gives. We might begin, for example, by questioning her loyalty to self-effacement, given the irony (or paradox) that she was working on her autobiography, *I Am Here and Not Not-There*, until her death in 2007. Perhaps recognizing the possibility of this objection, the autobiography's editor Stan Dragland emphasizes in his foreword that "[a]usterity and self-effacement were characteristic of Margaret's life and her attitude to her reputation" (8), and after remarking that she lived first for her Lord and second for her poetry, Dragland adds, "[n]obody who knew her would expect a confessional" (9). Indeed, Avison's reticence about the role of the poet, about prizes, and about self-promotion is similarly emphasized by David Kent in his introduction to *'Lighting up the terrain': The Poetry of Margaret Avison* (i). That said, readers of Avison's autobiography may be attracted to a range of explanations for her self-effacing poetic. Some may conclude that such self-effacement finds its source in her personality or more broadly in psychology. Such explanations may find evidence in Avison's social unease, as, for example, when she discusses attending awards receptions such as the one for the Griffin Prize, where "social chit-chat" is difficult and the solitary nature of the poet is in conflict with the public event (222). Here, self-effacement is a product perhaps of introversion.

Similar evidence for a psychological explanation may be found in her childhood. She speaks, for example, of her family's move from Calgary to Toronto as "cataclysmic" (*I Am Here* 46). Even more potently, she speaks of the adolescent changes to her body as something hateful, as something to be resisted so she could remain a child, and her resistance took the form of anorexia. "In order that my body should lose its new swellings," she writes, "I resolved to stop eating and to walk off my fat. . . . Such walking allowed me to shed, temporarily, the self defined by family, school, home neighbourhood, and so on. Freed from such frames, I could appropriate a new identity as though I'd become some unknown person as suggested by new views" (51-52). Additional evidence for this psychological reading of her self-effacement might be located in the social conditions under which Avison grew up: the Depression and WWII, in particular. For example, she shares that during school "an undercurrent of sadness ran steadily under the security of day-to-day events" (50), and she later adds that "gloom kept deepening my personal climate" (55). Reflecting on the pain her anorexia must have caused her parents, she confesses, "It chills my blood, as I try to speak truthfully about those years, how my *feelings* seemed cut off from all that I was carefully *observing*" (58). Particularly powerful is her recollection of the news that an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. "Revulsion for all human beings, myself included, was stifling," she writes

(99). In her introduction to the first volume of *Always Now*, Avison similarly shares, “An underlying melancholy, an edginess, marked me as a young writer” (13). She speculates that its source may have been a reluctance to leave childhood, along with the “general climate of disillusionment” during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s (14). Finally, a less obvious, less generous, and more difficult to support reading of Avison’s self-effacement might be located in gender, in an argument that her father—a much loved but somewhat tempestuous Methodist minister—was somehow an overbearing force in her life or that, as a single, childless woman raised under the traditional gender constraints of mid-twentieth-century society (a woman who had experienced anorexia in her youth), Avison was of necessity self-effacing, or, worse, that she was some sort of spokeswoman for Victorian standards of self-effacing womanhood. While such explanations have a certain attraction, they are, I believe, to be resisted, for reasons that I hope will become clear, including that Avison’s autobiography does not support such simple psychologizing of her spiritual identity.

Possibly, an explanation for Avison’s persistent call to self-effacement can be found instead in a poetic principle central to Modernism as a sloughing off of Romantic and Victorian lyricism. Critical here is the often-told account of Avison’s experience with Gladys Story, the teacher who supervised the poetry club when Avison was in Grade Nine. In her foreword to *Always Now*, Volume 1, Avison recounts being pulled aside by Story, praised for a poem the young Avison shared with the group, and then advised, “‘For the next ten years do not use the first person in any poem you write.’” Avison then comments, “The impact of that advice is likely perceptible down through the years” (14). In her autobiography, Avison elaborates the effect, saying, “I had radar out against using [first-person pronouns] for any self-indulgent reasons” (*I Am Here* 54). In the piece with which Avison intended to end her autobiography, “Poets Learn from Poetry,” she returns to this advice, still potent decades later, describing “therapeutic writing” as “an abyss against which my grade nine guide, Gladys Story, warned me” (229). While occasionally Avison confesses that she may have taken this advice too far (see her interview with D.S. Martin in the autobiography, particularly page 337), she argues for self-effacement as essentially a poetic principle and a poetic technique, part of a Modern ideology suspicious of self-expression and instead attuned to image, word, and world.

This explanation is perhaps more helpful, but it is still incomplete. Growing out of this stance on therapeutic writing, Avison expressed prior to her conversion a struggle with the identity and role of the poet, including in relation to readers. This wrestling can be heard in letters from that period of her life. In a 9 June 1945 letter to Miriam Waddington, Avison claimed that "[a]n artist is highly self-conscious and inalienably solitary" (*I Am Here* 256). Elaborating on the impact of that isolation in a 13 Dec. 1945 letter to Waddington, Avison added that "[t]he poet, whose reservoir is the whole of the continuing human tradition, is forced to speak either in broken generalizations, or in a painfully personal specific reference" (259); making her statements individual, Avison added, "if I ever had any illusions about having a tangible identity, they are dispersed. Happily my respect for the rest of the world, vegetable, animal, and human, has increased enormously as my self-respect has shriveled" (260). These 1945 statements and revelations suggest that Avison was struggling with her personal and poetic identity, with what the self-conscious writer could say without a discernible identity, without self-respect.

More than fifteen years later, Avison articulated this struggle with specific reference to self-effacement in a letter to Cid Corman. In a short piece entitled "Dear Margaret" written 15 April 1983 (in Kent 3-6), Corman offered his recollections of Avison going back to the 1950s when they became acquainted. In January 1962 he published some of Avison's poetry in *Origin*, but he made the mistake of also publishing without her permission one of her letters to him, a letter that she likely wrote during the winter of 1961 (Kent 4-5). At the time, Avison was upset about the letter's publication, seeing it as a violation of her privacy, but in his recollection some two decades later, Corman—perhaps mischievously—feels free to quote from this letter. In it, Avison confesses, "There is some corner I have to turn yet, some confronting I have to do – as you would instantly agree, I think, it must come about at the deepest levels in order to find free singing voice" (qtd. by Corman in Kent 5). She feels that something must be faced in order to find an authentic, liberated voice. In the following passage from the letter, Avison seems to speculate on what the corner is that must be turned, on perhaps a wrong turn that she has taken:

> In order to find harmony between the 'inrushing floodlight of imagination' [a quotation from Aaron Copland] as writer, with the reader's, I suspect one must listen painfully and long to the experience of living – albeit today an *anti*-poetic one – as amateur listeners know. Somewhere, in this effort, a wrong self-effacement has taken place in me. I can *feel* the blindfold, the strait jacket – but cannot so far discover where the knots and hooks are to undo them. Maybe this discovery is what I must do in order to come to that conversation with you. (qtd. by Corman in Kent 6)

Here, Avison speculates that what is required for a harmony or balance to be achieved between the poet's imaginative expression and the reader's complementary experience is attentiveness to living; her fear is that in aiming for this harmony she has instead imprisoned herself in what she calls "a wrong self-effacement." Her characterization of this imprisonment is vivid, as she cannot see her way or escape the ties that bind her arms. While Avison does not elaborate what constitutes this "wrong self-effacement," it appears to be related to a flawed listening to life. Given that Avison wrote this letter approximately two years before her conversion and when she was already seeking for answers to religious questions, we can speculate that this "wrong self-effacement" was spiritual in nature. Already in 1961, Avison was struggling with the agnosticism she had come to embrace decades earlier as her childhood faith faltered. It is hard not to hear in Avison's expression of her problem some preparation for the conversion that would bring about a right kind of self-effacement, a self-effacement produced by the working of the Holy Ghost in her life.

To understand the nature and role of a right self-effacement in Avison's poetic, we therefore need to plumb the central event of both her faith life and her life as a poet: her conversion experience on 4 January 1963. This is the "pivot for significance," to borrow a phrase from "The Mirrored Man" (*AN* 1.126), a metamorphosis from Old Adam to New Adam. While Avison has recounted this conversion experience in a number of places, her fullest treatment of it is understandably in her autobiography. There, she recounts the surprisingly long process (years long) that culminated in conversion: the strange encounter with a believer in the Victoria College ladies' cloakroom, including that believer's pointed question and the offer of a church address (*I Am Here* 139-40); Avison's decision two years later to attend that church, Knox Presbyterian at Spadina and Harbord in Toronto (141); and the advice she eventually received from the minister, Dr. Fitch, to read and reread the Gospel of John each day (141). Avison then narrates how she dutifully worked through the first thirteen chapters, though the text appeared to be "shapes and colours that conveyed little meaning," until on the morning of January 4 she began reading chapter 14, "You believe in God, believe also in Me." She recounts what happened then in these terms:

> I did believe in God. Whoever had spoken, the 'Me' – it was not visual, but not a mere feeling – that Person was impingingly present, before me. Not even questioning this strange visitation, I spoke: 'If I believe in You, You will take over. I'll believe, but oh, don't take the poetry. It's all I've got left.' An ancient poet describes the confrontation: 'Put me in remembrance; let us con-

> tend together. State your case' (Isaiah 43: 26). It infuriated me to feel that my 'case' was weakened and about to crumble. Finally I hurled the Bible across the room and said, 'Okay, take the poetry too!'
>
> I think I expected to lose my identity then. But what happened was odd. On the cleared desktop, what looked like iron filings appeared, all joggled about, until they began to arrange themselves in a design – angles, arcs, curving lines. After a few moments the desk was its plain, old surface again, cluttered with papers. (*I Am Here* 142)

After describing this encounter and vision, Avison continues that she went about her business for the day, seeking to block out what had happened. Nevertheless, she began to sense a "new direction" declaring itself; her senses were "noticeably quickened"; "[c]reative ideas abounded"; and a new openness to friends and even an "unpopular spokesman" asserted itself. She concludes, "a new design had come into my life, like that iron-filing display taking shape on the desk!" Even more surprisingly, the next morning she experienced the need to write a new poem ("A Story"), which was followed in the subsequent days, weeks, and months by an outpouring of poems that would become in relatively short order *The Dumbfounding* (*I Am Here* 142). Among many discoveries was the discovery that believing did not require that she sacrifice her poetry; in fact, believing had the opposite effect, sanctifying poetry as a gift and a calling.

I have traced Avison's account of her conversion in detail because I believe that it offers a clue to her escape from a wrong self-effacement into a right self-effacement. What is striking about Avison's account is the years-long struggle that preceded the day, the encounters with people that led her to that point, and the confrontation that the gospel offered, a "facing" culminating in an almost Augustinian conviction. Even more striking is Avison's certainty of the presence of a Person, not the physical presence of Christ but the "impingingly present" Spirit of Christ, which is one way that the New Testament speaks of the Holy Ghost. With this Spirit she wrestles—over belief and surrender of self, even of her poetry, until she flings her Bible across the room in frustrated acceptance. And what she receives is not an erasure of her identity, a wrong self-effacement, but a reorientation of her identity through a fresh, Spirit-led, and Spirit-focused design for her life, an open, outward-looking, and creative engagement with the world—a right self-effacement. Jeffrey describes this impact as "a self-abandoned reordering of priorities for her whole life" (Kent 67), while Davey claims that "the poet's surrender of her poetry becomes her greatest gift of witness" (18). Not that such surrender was easy or simple for Avison. In her 1968 essay, "Muse of Danger," she explained that "[w]hen a writer gives his life to the Lord, he admits God's right over every aspect of his energy, imagination, use of time and communication" (Kent 145). Decades later, in her Pascal Lectures, Avison looks back on 1963, when she experienced her conversion and then went to graduate school, undertaking a study of Bryon. "At times," she says, "I felt like two persons, or two-faced in either context. The commitment to a Christian priority was clear, and genuine. But so was the response to the literature with all the undertow of other values it brought in" (*AKP* 23). As the "two-faced" term suggests, her conversion led not only to a creative outpouring but also to a process of reconciling her new Christian commitments with her love of literature. This might be described as the post-conversion project she undertook as a poet.

More fully, what were the implications of this self-effacing, Spirit-led conversion for Avison's poetic? In some respects, the results are a fulfillment of the phrase "I am here and not not-there," Avison's perplexing answer to a question about the poet's identity given at the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference (just months after her conversion), a statement that became the title of her autobiography (*I Am Here* 145). While this statement might be teased out a number of ways, it seems to imply a both-and dimension to the poet's nature, a nature both rooted and outward-facing. In a number of places, Avison seems to be pointing to a cultivation of receptiveness, of vulnerability and openness to danger that results from a reaching across from the self, including in the poet-reader relationship. In her second Pascal lecture, "Understanding is Costly," she begins with a restatement of the proposition above as the believer's challenge, and she reflects, "That last proposition is not a riddle. It points to a modifying one learns from the experience of heartfelt sympathy," what she goes on to describe as "human openness" or a "faculty of receptiveness" after referencing Keats's negative capability (*AKP* 39). Later in this lecture, she reflects on our insufficient "[m]isty gropings" and asks, "Does this sound inward-looking, me-centred?" She answers, "It is not so in practice. The Lord is the central person, the Lord, Wisdom, who was the 'craftsman at his side' in creation, the Lord who was 'filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind'" (70-71). In her quoting from Proverbs, Avison argues that human searching can, in fact, be outward-focused, Wisdom-oriented, and Spirit-led, as she invokes the Holy Spirit's creative nature, a nature characterized by delighting and rejoicing. It is this creative nature of which the poet seeks to partake in her own craft.

Paradoxically, this participation in Spirit-led creativity, while involving self-effacement, does not require the erasure of the self, but as suggested above a new design for life and direction for the self. In her autobiography, Avison recounts the origin of her sonnet “Butterfly Bones” in the feeling she got that those poets who had been through the Iowa writing program had been reduced and constrained. “Their individuality,” she observes, “was worked out of them, somehow” (*I Am Here* 133). In an aside elsewhere in her autobiography, she celebrates “the wonderful uniqueness of every human being, that created basis for all human woes and wonders in relationships” (217). Even more pointedly in her interview with D.S. Martin, Avison affirms selfhood in all dimensions of her life, including her 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 it’s myself when I’m with people who don’t know anything about the faith. I would hope to be myself everywhere. The poetry is just another dimension of that. (*I Am Here* 327)

In her poetry, then, Avison is being herself; self-effacement seems not to erase or mask that self. In the writing of poetry, this selfhood requires an openness. For example, when Avison discusses the importance of walking for her creativity, she talks of finding a rhythm that brings on “a slight dissociation of sight and hearing, so that undirected receptors allow the world around to flow uncensored into consciousness,” bringing her to a state of synaesthesia “necessary to writing a poem” but “hard for the depersonalized experiencer to sustain” (*I Am Here* 210). In “Muse of Danger,” she speaks of the believer becoming “a living witness,” including “in a poem” (Kent 145), and she concludes that “[p]oetry is the *whole-hearted* use of language” (Kent 149, italics hers). In the end, this whole-hearted use of language is directed towards readers. As Avison says earlier in this essay, “[t]he poem can no more be a ‘safe’ venture than a direct human encounter can” (Kent 145). This statement implies that the poem is an indirect human encounter, and as such is a risky venture. The importance of this outward direction of the poem is, however, central to Avison’s self-effacing poetic. As she remarks in her interview with D.S. Martin, “It isn’t a poem until it is received. It’s important to find the person to receive it and get beyond being your own private poet” (*I Am Here* 328). Indeed, reaffirming the advice she received from Gladys Story, Avison explains to Martin that “[i]f you feel, you should feel for the people out there to whom you’re writing, as well as for yourself” (337). Here, again, self-effacement within the poetic exchange or transaction is affirmed as an openness, a receptiveness, even a vulnerability. In short, the new design Avison discovered in her conversion, in her encounter with the Person of the Holy Ghost and her vision of the iron filings, involved a release from an old, burdened self into a new self, liberated and outward-directed toward God and others, including in and through poetry.

iii. A Poetic of the Liberated Self

This exploration of Avison's conversion experience, particularly in her own words, suggests that we can explicate her concern for self-effacement in both her pre-conversion and her post-conversion poetry. With respect to her poetic, that new direction for her life can also be read as a new direction for her poetry, as a new design for her poetic. As Carmine Starnino has argued, "Christianity . . . did more than just flavour Avison's poetry with unfashionable surmises: it revolutionized it" (140). He specifies that this shift includes a turn to a "spiritualized syntax; reading her poems always leaves our relationship with language somewhat re-angled" (143); in the end, her poems are "built for the grapple of spiritual contact, seeking to provoke cognition and excite our sensitivity to language" (148).[3] The new Adam came to replace the old Adam, both within the content and form of her work. Avison articulates the character of this change powerfully in these opening lines from "Two to One," one of her later poems from *Momentary Dark*:

> It was some torment, those long years when
> the "spiritual
> man" moved like a
> wraith, outside
> the "natural man," the one
> dogging the other down the
> worldways. Sometimes by night
> one of them would extort a
> "Who am I?" One
> alone
> knew, one alone.
>
> (64)

Here, the speaker characterizes her long struggle as that of the wraith-like spiritual man chasing down and haunting the natural man she was. That struggle is captured effectively in the long first line, drawing out the "torment," succeeded by short lines with their pointed enjambments building to the existential question, along with the isolation of "alone" and the repetition of "one alone" indicating the turn from the self to God. In a sense, these twelve lines suggest the pivot that Avison experienced in her life and her poetry.

Looking backward from her conversion, readers can locate in Avison's earlier poetry that haunting of the spiritual man. The agnosticism that predated Avison's turn to belief must be both acknowledged and respected, as it is part of her whole story as both a person and a poet. It should be noted, for example, that she never destroyed or disowned her pre-conversion poetry, as Gerard Manley Hopkins famously did. As David Lyle Jeffrey emphasizes, "[a]ll of Margaret Avison's poetry is marked by a persistence in self-questioning, by a desire for honesty that goes beyond the merely intellectual, but which is profoundly intellectual in character" (Kent 62). That persistence in self-questioning is pronounced in much of her pre-conversion poetry. In a study of confinement and liberation in Avison's poetry, Francis Zichy claims that some of these earlier poems "sharply present the struggle of the self to liberate itself and present that struggle as ironic and self-defeating" (233); Zichy also sees a parallel between this entrapment and Avison's "tendency as a careful artist to fix and enclose," making her "a formidable jailor of herself" (233). The result is a "dialectical tension between confinement and liberation" (241). These insights are apt, though it could be argued that the struggle of the self for liberty goes beyond the realm of irony: in its discerning of the prison bars, it is at times moving and illuminating, gesturing towards a kind of tragedy but perhaps even anticipating hope; similarly, Avison is suspicious, as in "Butterfly Bones," of rigidly confining forms and instead practices a poetry that gropes toward revelation and light.

Hints of that movement can be heard in poems from *Winter Sun* such as "Intra-Political" (*AN* 1.97), which begins, "Who are we here? / boxed, bottled, barrelled / in rows?" and then proceeds to explore all our "*us*-es." The perplexed question of the opening line is succeeded though not answered by the almost comical images of "us" in our varied containers, with the alliteration of the plosive "b" driving home our predicament. Perhaps more hopefully, "Apocalyptic?" (*AN* 1.104) explores human desiring and the treadmill of life; in the midst of that, the speaker exclaims, "Praise / The light that we can breathe it, and defy / All mustiness around the living I." Both choosing to live and moving knowingly toward death, we can nevertheless, the speaker seems to argue, find "[a] splendour in our hearts," an "amnesty" that "shines," a "doom" that is "luminous today." Here, the speaker holds out hope that a breathable (thus, spiritual?) light will preserve the living self against any foul air (i.e., forms of tyranny?) that surround and seek to invade.

Such moments of humour and hopefulness are complemented in *Winter Sun* by darker searchings and soundings, by imprisonment and fearful facings. Representative of this note in Avison's pre-conversion poetry is "The Mirrored Man" (*AN* 1.125-26). With its suggestive title (one that anticipates the post-conversion poem, "Self-mirrorings," *AN* 2,.49-50), this *Winter Sun* poem begins with three tight quatrains structured around cross rhyme, the first stanza alluding to Lot's "mortal lot," the second to our steadfast flight from Eden though "ardent / For lost eternity," and the third to our turning away from Canaan because it is "mortal to enjoy / The Promise, not the Land." Reflecting on the curse hurled after us "through the void," the speaker arrives at this speculation:

> So each of us conceals within himself
> A cell where one man stares into the glass
> And sees, now featureless the meadow mists,
> And now himself, a pistol at his temple,
> Grey, separate, wearily waiting.

This mirror of life, located within the self's cell (hence the need for a "jailbreak," as in "Snow," *AN* 1.69), reflects two possible realities: a foggy, almost impenetrable world and the desperate self awaiting self-destruction.[4] From this point, the poem explores how we, as "comic creatures of our piebald day," fashion responses to these mirror images, to what we face, whether through ignoring, evading, or deluding. The poem's final stanza articulates the longing and secret desire that all people feel:

> All of us, flung in one
> Murky parabola,
> Seek out some pivot for significance,
> Leery of comets' tails, mask-merry,
> Wondering at the centre
> Who will gain access, search the citadel
> To its last, secret door?
> And what face will the violator find
> When he confronts the glass?

Structured around two questions, this stanza's opening lines characterize our existence through an astronomical metaphor, the "flung" parabolic orbit of some heavenly body around an unknown centre. In that orbit, we don our face-hiding and visage-altering masks with pleasure; we avoid the streaming particles of the comet's tail, searching for some stable spot from which we can make and discern meaning. However, this characterization of our existence gives way to the first question, a query about a citadel (the self? the world?) and who might possibly breach its final defense. Presumably beyond this "secret door" is again a mirror, for the second question speculates on what visage will appear when the one that breaches the door faces the glass. The imagery here, if interpreted figuratively to refer to the self, suggests violence, penetration, and fearful discovery. Whether this discovery will be productive of life-giving insight is left uncertain; what is strongly implied is that the self, caught within the mirror's frame, is in need of saving. The self is parabolic and parable, an enigmatic sign.

The sense of the self haunted by the spiritual man in these pre-conversion poems is made manifest in a poetic manifesto that Avison wrote in her early twenties. In her foreword to volume one of *Always Now*, Avison recounts Gladys Story's advice about the ten-year moratorium on first-person pronouns and then shares an unpublished poem she wrote just before the ten years had elapsed, entitled "City of April" (*AN* 1.14-16), a poem in which the first and second persons figure prominently. The forceful first line, "This is about me, and you must listen," echoes as a refrain periodically through the poem and vigorously breaks out of Story's advice in order to announce Avison's hope for the poet-poem-reader relationship. This transaction, to borrow Louise Rosenblatt's term, is driven home by the poem's sustained attention to "you," whether that you is sitting alone in her room, riding a streetcar, or striding a ship deck at night. Why must the "you" listen to the "me"? The poet offers various answers. At one point, it is "Because tonight I have been staring / At the shadow of chair-legs on this attic floor / Seeing them as they are." The poet later returns to this image, asking the "you" to look at it "Till your throat is swollen with tears and exultation." Aside from this listening, the poet makes no claim, but this claim is forceful, as "there is so much alive tonight / And so much rigid, and fluid, and all the rest / And all of us verging towards that placid age." The speaker makes manifest the purpose of this listening when, before bidding the listener goodnight, she declares "Rigid face / one *pfui* and I crack you." The poet is the dispeller of illusions, the breaker of fixed visages, of face masks, with her single "phooey." In this way, Avison's early poetic manifesto declares love for the reader; moreover, it anticipates the new direction of her post-conversion poetic.

Decades after Avison wrote this youthful manifesto, she discussed with D.S. Martin the evolution of her writing since her conversion. In this 2004 interview, she explains that she experienced the excitement of biblical exploration, though her new belief was "obtrusive at first," requiring that she edit out moralizing tags. "Gradually," she shares, "there developed a peaceful confidence that my Lord knew who I was, knew my joy in writing with my ear in our good language, and had freed me from any obligation except thankfulness for his companionship" (*I Am Here* 338). These statements suggestively characterize the arc of Avison's post-conversion poetry and the self-effacing poetic she has practiced there. In a sense, Avison's comments take us back to "…Person, *or* A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost." In its meditations on effacement, Avison's hymn explores the Spirit's effacement, the speaker's resulting effacement and face-gaining, the poet's resulting desire to make Christ's face seen (in life and in the poem), and the saving companionship that comes of that seeing. These four qualities can be traced more fully in the subjects and forms of Avison's post-conversion poetry.

First, then, Avison's post-conversion poetry celebrates, ponders, and exalts God's self-effacement, not just as Holy Ghost but also in the Incarnation and Crucifixion. Her poems seek to involve the reader in this mystery of God's whole-hearted salvation. For example, the poem "For Dr. and Mrs. Dresser" (*AN* 1.204-05), based on an anecdote of missionaries eating grubs, expands into praise for a saviour who inverts his own being for the sake of his creatures:

> You, once for all,
> offered and dwelt – you, fairest beyond call
> of mortal imagining:
> here, taking on yourself not only
> our spoiled flesh, but the lonely
> rot of the rebel, of the solitary,
> of all not-God on earth, for all
> who claim, in all your range of time. And still
> without one queasy termor, you could wholly
> swallow our death, take on our
> lumpish wingless being, darkened out
> to cold and night . . .

God would become our lumpish wingless being, plumb hell for us, return in the flesh, flood us with "risen radiance," and bid us to "'take, eat— / live'," these last lines echoing Christ's words at the Last Supper. For Avison, this emptying, this effacement, is the truth her poems seek to share. Perhaps the most passionate proclamation of God's effacement is in "The Word" (*AN* 1.195-96), where Avison meditates on Christ's act of forsaking and his being forsaken and his asking his followers to forsake all. The poem presents the meaning of Christ's cry on the cross, his forsakenness by God, as "This measure of your being all-out, and / meaning it." From this thought follows Avison's elaborate play with the line people draw around Christ (a stick portrait of him as teacher, popular spokesman, doctor—a mask imposed on his face) and how he crosses that line, and in fact effaces it:

> The line we drew, you crossed,
> and cross out, wholly forget,
> at the faintest stirring of what
> you know is love, is One
> whose name has been, and is
> and will be, the
> *I AM.*

Christ's self-effacement paradoxically triumphs in erasing lines, nurturing love, and affirming the godhead's profound identity, un-tense-able being.

These lines from "The Word" suggest Avison's concern in her post-conversion poetry for her own and humanity's effacement as it is involved in God's self-effacement. This human effacement, then, is the second thread to be traced out of her "Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost" with its focus on personhood. What is our personhood according to Avison? Is everything settled, clean, pure, calm because of Christ's effacing Incarnation and Crucifixion? Yes and no. In the poem "As a Comment on Romans 1:10" (*AN* 2.60), Avison reflects on Paul's imprisonment in Rome, on his knowing that his neck might not be saved. She says, "he knew beforehand that when light appears / it must night split and earth quake." God's effacing light can heat up violent change, and so many of Avison's poems explore the pain of transformation, of dropping masks. Such transforming self-effacement is not obliteration and identity-erasure, but looking out and going towards, rejecting the mirror and accepting the Sun/Son/Light—a new direction for life. This same painful renewal is voiced again in "Heavy-hearted Hope" (*AN* 2.258-59) where the poet asks, "You grow by going towards? / Yes. Also: growing cells / are the most vulnerable / to cancer." Later in the poem, she questions, "Do we replace a living / with our own fictive person? / Are we forestalling even / hope then? / O, can we err so far?" The questions about our fictive selves—our masks—are indeed real, and result in a cry for God to instruct the poet's grieving heart.

The poem “Branches” (*AN* 1.185-86) speaks of this pain movingly. The poem, clearly referring to our connection to Christ and his identity, wrestles with our fallen identity. The poem begins with disease:

> The diseased elms are lashing
> the hollowing vaults of air.
> In movie-washroom-mirrors
> wan selves, echoing, stare.

These lines introduce the parallel between the branches and our uneffaced selves—mirror-haunted, empty, staring, in a movie theatre washroom. Why a movie theatre? Perhaps because of the celluloid images thrown on the screen, images that are just one more mirroring. The second stanza follows with a lament:

> O Light that blinded Saul,
> blacked out Damascus noon,
> Toronto’s whistling sunset has
> a pale, disheartened shine.

The poet desires the blinding Light that erases self-mirrorings, pale and disheartened. The poem proceeds to explore this identity crisis through questionings and searchings, the poet asking, “Can *this* kind of blanking / bring us to our knees?” She turns to Christ who is silent and blindfolded, beaten and scourged by soldiers, and finds in his once for all death, his “hanging the cherried heart of love / on this world’s charring bough,” resolution for our “Stray selves crowding for light.” The result: “We scatter to tell what the root / and where life is made.” The poet’s (and reader’s) identity in branchness rather than mirroring—that identity is hard-won, painful, but God’s doing and his creatures’ living outwards.

Other poems, while mindful of this pain, portray more explicitly the newly effaced being, the New Adam, living whole-heartedly by hope, going out and towards, wrestling those fictive replacements to the ground. In the “Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel” (*AN* 2.148), the poet affirms, “But Truth is radiantly here, / Being, giving us to Become: / a new unfathomable genesis.” Similarly, the poem “Person” (*AN* 1.191), with its clear emphasis on identity and rebirth, on the *I AM* and His relationship with “I am,” ends with the poet “drenched with Being and created new,” drawn into community, the flock, a “wooly, willing bunt-head” that “draws near / the Morning Star.” This release from facelessness into renewed being is expressed powerfully in “Psalm 19” (*AN* 1.162), a meditation structured around "*Clean* is the word with *fear*" and "*Enduring* is the word with *clean*," words the poet draws from the psalm into a meditation on the self "longing for clear / sunlight," to be so known that "the sighing- / over-the-marshlands me / might all evaporate, wisp away." Being known so fully reveals both living water and sour pools of the self, and opens the possibility of new life growing on and splitting out of boulderstone. A portrait of the New Adam, Spiritual Man, drawn to the cleansing sun—this poem captures the effacement of Old Adam, Natural Man, in image after image: the fear of losing the marshland, gassy self; knowledge of the sweet and sour misty self; existence in running water and standing pools; being not the burning but the cupped rock, mossy with life, with enough crack in it for an emerging pine. Each image here vibrates with the new life growing out of light that effaces rather than obliterates. Poems such as "Psalm 19" in effect provide what Jean Mallinson characterizes as "a dynamic mapping of the world, a kind of geography or cartography of the spirit" (12).

God's effacement and the poet's—these first two threads of Avison's post-conversion poetic are woven with a third, an invitation to the listener to find liberty in and to live through such self-effacement. Have the poems explored thus far made that relationship plain? The poet's effacement erases facelessness so that in all things, including the poem, people may see the effaced Saviour. Avison's poems invite readers not to consume the poem or to use it as a mirror, but to move towards and seek out the Word, to participate as a branch in that root, to let Christ efface them into wooly, willing bunt-heads, to let water and sun perform their miracle on rock. Avison's poems challenge the reader to take the whole-hearted risk of effacement; she says, in effect, "Stop looking in the mirror, and turn to the Word. Discard your masks, your fictive selves, and look upon the shining face of the self-effaced God. Find your face, your identity growing towards that face." Strangely enough, we can hear this challenge in a poem that is not overtly devotional in nature, "Canadian/Inverted" (*AN* 1.214):

> Frozen blocks of air –
> a flag congealed in one –
> triangulated by
> tin roofs, splintered
> where under-mantle Life whanged on a tree-root,
>   nailed earth to sky:
>   Here I move
>   proving

no block of air can stay me
spiritus.

In this uusual declaration of personhood, Avison flips traditional identity. At first, we as readers might conclude that a Canadian's identity is found in the cold, those frozen, geometrical blocks of air. However, the poem takes a sharp turn, and so does this "fixed" identity, with the word and action "splintered." Our conception of Canadian identity itself is splintered as Avison affirms instead the power of "under-mantle Life" whacking that by now familiar tree root, and nailing earth to sky. Vertical, living identity is affirmed in this reference to the crucifixion and its work—here at the center of the poem. The rest of the poem ties the speaker's identity to that nailing, in the motion that proves her *spiritus*—spirit, heart, breath, the life-giving breath of the creator in Genesis, the Holy Ghost hovering over the waters. In its inversions, the poem moves readers to accept identity not in a frozen flag, the face of a nation, but in God's invisible breath, in *spiritus*.

This invitation to the reader suggests the fourth thread that is part of the weave of Avison's post-conversion poetry—companionship, to use the word from her interview with D.S. Martin. Such companionship takes many forms: with the Spirit of Christ, with the reader, with the newly directed self, with city and nature, and with words themselves. It is communion with the Person who is her muse, the stimulation of imagination that seeks the image of God in fellow humans, that seeks the restoration of *imago dei.* It is the poet walking the city streets, riding the streetcar, traversing parks—encountering both culture and nature in people and pigeons and trees, seeking signs of the city of God and of the garden. And it is the poet's profound communion with language and the poetic line, plumbing and pressing the possibilities of words. Readers experience such companionship already in "Two Mayday Selves" from *The Dumbfounding* (*AN* 1.148-149), a poem that describes spring's emergence in grackles and June bugs, that offers an invitation to the self to emerge as well. Such communion of self and world is similarly heard in "Responses" from *Concrete and Wild Carrot* (*AN* 3.137), where the poet shares, "These listening leaves / quiet me who am all / eyes; even the dangling / leaves on the young trees listen."[5] In another late poem, "Beneficences" from *Momentary Dark* (12-13), the poet explores, as the title suggests, those actions that benefit others, that improve their lot or prevent harm. In the opening stanza, the speaker posits, "I know of only two / ways into the / person-freeing silences." The first pathway to such liberty is a time of solitude that allows beauty to enter "within an / absent-minded moment." Here, the self is freed through a communion with the world while the mind is inattentive. The second pathway to freedom of the self is paradoxically through the everyday company of “congenial people, none of them / individually central, just / familiar. All are focused / outside ourselves.” Under these conditions, insight and communal unity may suddenly flourish.

Even the poems in Avison’s posthumously published *Listening: Last Poems* sound the note of such companionship between the poet and the world, mediated through a Spirit-led self-effacement. A psalm-like poem of praise, the lovely “Severn Creek Park” begins, “Awe is heartwhole” (55). The poet then describes the beauty and vitality of the park—the trees in the ravine, the grassy flats, a cement bench, even gnats. The second, final stanza dwells meaningfully on the speaker’s selfhood in relation to this world:

> I, human, am heartsore from
> stretching to
> appropriate all that is
> lavished here
> until
> it takes me in. I am
> rinsed free of all but
> eyes and
> branch-bowered heart.

Here, heartwhole awe leads to a purifying heartsore as the speaker seeks to enlarge herself to encompass this world, until paradoxically that world takes her in. In that process, the poet is self-effaced, liberated of all but eyes that see and heart that feels. In this stanza’s short lines, with the suggestive breaks and even the elongated spacing of the sixth line, Avison captures the simple profundity of her communion with this world, and by implication the reader is encouraged to attend to this verbal experience but more so to live more fully outside the page.

The well-known lines from Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” that serve as an epigraph to this study offer a haunting image and metaphor of the ghostly and fleeting, anonymous yet beautiful faces of the modern urban landscape, a landscape familiar to Margaret Avison. Both before and after her conversion, her poetry was characterized by a concern for faces and effacement as these relate to issues of selfhood, identity, and poetic practice. In this respect, “…Person, *or* A Hymn on or to the Holy Ghost” functions as a pivotal poem elucidating her commitment to Spirit-led self-effacement as a stance from which to experience her faith, the world, others, and language. It is this stance, I would argue, that makes her poetry both challenging and companionable. In "Curious Encounter," a 1992 review, George Bowering praised Avison's poetry for its "enactment" of her faith. "The very sharp images, and the difficulty of following their grammar," he wrote then, "are moral instruction, that finding a way to live and to mean in the world is difficult and possible, and requires an outgoing from the self" (106). Bowering's insight captures the nature and function of self-effacement in Avison's poetry, and it points perhaps to the larger purpose of poetry. In a letter to Miriam Waddington dated 9 June 1956, Avison shared this hope: "it may be irrepressible optimism speaking, but I think poetic understanding could be, and one day will be again, a widespread thing. I think people need it, & are at present suffering from lack of it – that lack is one dimension of current unhappiness and restlessness" (*I Am Here* 273). After her conversion in January 1963, Avison's hope turned to the Word, her savior; however, in the new design and direction of her life, the poetry remained as an expression of that hope. Arguably today, in the age of selfies and social media feeds, when many lives are lived on the aptly or ironically named *Facebook*, we inhabit a hall of mirrors and feel the slide into narcissism, into tyranny rather than liberty; as a result, the face today is the site on which we write our identities and etch our anxieties. Now more than ever, readers can turn to the self-effacing poetry of Avison for relief from that restlessness.

Notes

1 For a full discussion of the ordering of poems in *The Dumbfounding*, see David Kent's "'Composing a Book': Denise Levertov, Margaret Avison, and *The Dumbfounding*."

2 In an essay on Avison's "Jo Poems," I similarly characterized her post-conversion poetry as "filled with Incarnational awe" (62). See also Lawrence Mathews on Avison's turn away from the Romantic imagination, stating that "the Christian poet is creative insofar as he uses his imagination to read the poem Jesus has written" (Kent 50). A further exploration of this Incarnational emphasis can be found in Ernest Redekop's *Margaret Avison*, especially chapter 4, "The Mathematics of God," in which Redekop writes, "Christ as Being, as the essence of existence and life itself, is fundamental to Avison's poems about spiritual rebirth" (114). This statement clearly suggests the relationship between Christ and Spirit.

3 While Avison's conversion is clearly a watershed moment in her life and her practice of poetry, it is possible to see continuities between her pre-conversion and post-conversion poetry, as well as new directions. For a discussion of continuities in Avison's use of irony, see Brent Wood's "Irony in Avison's *Winter Sun*." For another perspective on the importance of Avison's conversion for her poetry, see Ofelia Cohen-Sfetcu's "Margaret Avison: The All-Swallowing Moment," especially page 342.

4 For a discussion of the relationship between the "jail-break" in "Snow" and the "dead-

end of despair" in "The Mirrored Man," see Katherine Quinsey's "The Dissolving Jail-Break in Avison," pages 22-23.

5 For a more complete explication of Avison's relation to nature or her ecological sensibilities, see Robert Merrett's "Margaret Avison on Natural History" and Katherine Quinsey's "'Our own little rollicking orb': Divinity, Ecology, and Otherness in Avison."

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