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## Introduction

by **David A. Kent and Katherine M. Quinsey**

*The Globe and Mail* for 25 March 2006 contains a review by Fraser Sutherland of two new books of poetry by P. K. Page and Margaret Avison. In “Colossi of Canadian verse” Sutherland briefly compares these two women writers in terms of influence and technique and wryly notes that whereas Page has been publishing her poems in book form for 62 years, “Avison, the neophyte,” has been publishing hers in book form “for a mere 46” (D10). In calculating forty-six years back from Avison’s new collection *Momentary Dark*, Sutherland is referring, as he indicates, to the poet’s first book, *Winter Sun*, published in 1960 when she was already forty-two years of age. Those familiar with Avison’s publication history through Francis Mansbridge’s bibliographical work will know, of course, that she has been publishing her poems sporadically since her high school days in the 1930s when her work appeared in *Hermes*, the student publication at Humber College in Toronto. If we take this fact of periodical publication into consideration, we should say that Avison has been publishing her poetry for over seventy years, an astonishing continuum of creativity.

Consulting the poetry manuscripts deposited at the University of Manitoba in her official archive discloses that, in fact, Avison’s first publications appeared even earlier than her high school publications. They began seventy-eight years ago in *The Globe and Mail* for 1929 in “Playtime,” a part of the paper devoted to children’s writing within a larger section headed “The Circle of Young Canada.” Between 1929 and 1934, when she turned sixteen, Avison published over a dozen poems here. All the poems subsequent to the first one are signed with the pseudonym “Willamac.” One of them, “Charon,” written at thirteen and published 7 May 1932, is from the point of view of someone on Charon’s ferry and has no rhyme scheme but a powerful rhythm. Margaret’s mother felt impelled to include the note “—Certified by her mother, Mrs. H. W. Avison” just in case anyone doubted her precocious daughter’s authorship. Most of Avison’s contributions to “The Circle of Young Canada” feature descriptions of nature (in poems such as “Mosquitoes,” “Black,” or “Icicles”) marked by catalogues of observations or of states of mind (“Sleepless” or, more seriously, “Depression”). Avison’s talent was soon being recognized. There is one Prize Poem (“Night Driving” for 14 October 1933), and of the two prose pieces, “The Street Lamp’s Soliloquy” and “Some Call It Fame,” the sec-

ond received the designation Prize Essay (it was published 20 October 1934).

The first poem Avison published in the newspaper, “Nature’s Calendar” (19 October 1929), was preceded by a short letter in which the eleven-year-old Avison sought membership in “The Circle of Young Canada” and stated the following: “We came out from Calgary, Alberta, recently, and miss the beautiful mountains and green foothills very much, but find Ontario, with its clear lakes and stately trees, lovely also. I have a little hobby of writing, so am contributing this rhyme.” At the end of the poem is the following note in parenthesis: “This is Margaret’s work and is original.—Mabel K. Avison, mother.” Mrs. Avison wanted Margaret’s work to be recognized for the gift it was, and publication in the newspaper was perhaps a way of initiating a new life in the east. The family’s move from Calgary to a Toronto home in 1929 (the manse on High Park Avenue), mentioned in Avison’s prefatory comments, was disruptive and upsetting for a child of eleven. Indeed, her reaction continues to echo seventy-seven years later where it reappears in the lengthy closing poem of *Momentary Dark*, “Shelters” (80-88), dedicated to her sister Mary. Just before the centre of “Shelters” are two juxtaposed quotations (83), the first expressing a child’s dismay at moving to a new home and the second the parental rationalization and itemized benefits:

“Why did we have to  
move? This is a  
stifling city. This house is  
too narrow. Can we go  
back – once winter is over?”

“Up those stairs  
is a room for you girls. You’ll have  
your bed, a table, and  
chairs to do your homework and  
a bureau with its own mirror.”

As a whole, “Shelters” is an extended meditation on houses and homes and families, featuring memories and reflections. We catch glimpses of Avison apparently looking out over Toronto’s Rosedale Valley Road from the seniors’ apartment on Yonge Street, where she has lived since 1984, to the homes in Rosedale to the east. Later she recollects “Houses for visits at / Christmas,” such as her sister Mary’s home in Ottawa, as well as the temporary homes made of newspapers to which urban transients and the mar-

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ginalized may resort. Homes mean hospitality, visits with family and friends, but also privacy. Homes have changed, too, from “big old / houses” (now often “rooming houses”) to the honeycombing condominiums of the present. Change can also alter families and dissolve what seemed a solid home: “someone / takes an apartment, another / goes north for work. One daughter / marries!” The last parts of the poem seem to describe her own seniors’ home: “A spinney of old women, thin- / branched valley of old men – all / find the sunlight dim; / suffering from weather, still they / stoutly find the watery afternoon / passable, even ‘good.’” Other poems in *Momentary Dark* pick up the general theme of home. “Lemmings” (14) portrays a homecoming scene with domestic chores being divided between husband and wife. “High Overhead” describes the “homesick” (19) state of those contemplating the galaxies. “Spaces, Verticals” recalls “a happy playhouse” (52) constructed during childhood vacations in B. C. In “Palette” (68), running home after swimming is a pleasant memory. In “En Route” (71-72), however, “homegoing” (used twice) could have been fatally delayed and threatened a fisherman’s life. “Grades of Intensity” (59) mentions an intruder, while “*horror humani*” (73-74) imagines the home of a Sudanese writer being bombed.

Throughout *Momentary Dark* are also allusions by which the aging Avison seems to view life and our world from a certain distance and objectivity, a perspective born of living to such an advanced age. These references are to mortality (“Children of dust,” 2; “the final harvest,” 11) as well as to humanity and the world seen more objectively (“human creatures,” 3; “our own little rollicking orb,” 19; “Earth-dwellers,” 24; “lovely blue-green solitary / little earth,” 29; “one little orb,” 30; “those / still on earth,” 41; “our / space under heaven,” 52). In “Shelters” Avison eventually turns to humanity’s final home, the grave. The closing section of the poem takes place in a cemetery. Almost as if in a dream state, she suddenly comes upon her parents’ grave plot and records the effect:

One in an urn under a  
stone marker is the first  
here with this surname.  
Wait. It’s my parents’ stone. It’s lonelier  
here than even first grief was.

(87)

Her thoughts turn to cremation and to burial practices in ancient Egypt and the discomfiting thought that even those graves were eventually disturbed, some mummies ending up in our museums. The cemetery is then

set in its place among the trees and below “the starry / night” (88). The poem concludes with an echo of some lines from earlier in the poem when she was making observations about homes across the valley:

A throughway, yes, buzzes and  
whines beyond this quiet place; over  
its far embankment houses  
are heaped, lives only  
partly private, though at this distance vision  
touches on just one  
upper-storey window; a slow car pulls  
into its driveway. Safe for the night.

There is no substitute for that sense of security home confers, but Avison by this point is thinking about her home beyond this life, about going home in that final sense. *The Hymn Book of the Methodist Church* (1918), a familiar text of her childhood, figures the next life as the true home of the wayfaring Christian: “our eternal home” (#47), that day “When all shall be brought home” (#553), “Jerusalem, my happy home” (#558), “Our everlasting home above” (#561), “Home of my soul” (#562), “Heaven is my home” (#565), “The home of God’s elect” (#571), or “The homeland” (#580).

As a writer in the final phases of a long and remarkably productive career, as a person thinking about going home, Avison in *Momentary Dark* reflects on the past and draws some conclusions. What, in retrospect, is to be valued in life? She values those “odd moments” that have been “deepened” (“Prayer of Anticipation,” 58) by faith. She believes that we must all be “gradually less and less / defensive” (“Hot Noon,” 48) in our approach to experience. “Beneficences” (12-13) describes two ways into “person-freeing silences” (12): “solitude” and “communal oneness” (13) in a family or other group “absorbed” in otherness. The members of a family, such as her sister and she, are part of an indissoluble family bond that she testifies to in “Shelters” (86). Elsewhere, “Let inner hearing / create listening” (“Prayer,” 15) is part of the first way to the freedom of silence, and many other poems in this collection testify to the riveting attraction of quietness to the elderly Avison. In “Why Not” she speaks to the blessings of silence, particularly the transfixing moment in nature: “For a brilliant moment the sun appears” (38). In such moments the “awakened eye” (“Diadem,” 41) and the “readiness for the / receiving” (“Comment/Comeant,” 44) coincide in a posture of receptivity. And in such moments, she enters the “unfamiliar territory” of poetry (“Poetry Is,” 27): “The little new-drenched leaves /

glow in the momentary dark, / dancing” (“Palette,” 68). While such moments are the generative source of much of her poetry, Avison as a Christian would imply that death, too, will be but a moment of silent darkness before the final awakening. As Donne phrased it in “Death be not proud,” “One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally / And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.”

This group of essays grew out of a joint session on Avison held at the meetings of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English and the Christianity and Literature Study Group at the University of Western Ontario in May 2005, and a celebration of her work that took place at Brescia College on the same occasion. The essays cover the range of Avison’s work from the earliest publications through to her most recent collection, which appeared while this volume was in process. That the freshness, plenitude, and intensity of Avison’s creative power have increased, not diminished, with time is most vividly evident through her poetry itself; the awarding of two Governor-General’s awards 30 years apart, and the Griffin Prize for poetry three years ago, merely underlines this fact. The essays to follow help illustrate Avison’s role in the development of Canadian poetry; they also highlight the singularity and rich innovativeness of her work, which transcends the limitations of most schools of theory and poetics, yet which responds amply, precisely, urgently to the most current of critical concerns. Opening with a commendatory poem by the first Poet Laureate of Canada, George Bowering, the collection comprises historical and textual studies, critical essays, memoirs from Avison’s period as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario, and one of her poems from that period, here published for the first time.

Brent Wood examines the mode of irony and paradox in Avison’s first collection *Winter Sun* (1960), suggesting more of a continuity between these poems and her “post-conversion” work than is usually posited; he sees Avison’s use of irony as not “tragic” or existential but rather more like Donne’s wit applied in a modern and postmodern context—“ironic but humane.” Avison’s vision, in the sardonic and probing complexity of this first collection, is not one of “human failure but of divine comedy.” Avison’s irony invites the readers to share in judgment, in the experience of a world where enlightenment obscures the terrain, where irony does not show negation and nihilism but rather a parabolic depth and intensity of focus.

Two essays consider Avison’s role in the early days of poetic postmodernism in Canada and the United States, the era that saw the production of *The Dumbfounding* (1966), Avison’s first collection following her conver-

sion experience in 1963. Jason Wiens discusses Avison in relation to the early days of Canadian literary postmodernism, when Canadian poetry was emerging in genres and voices distinct from the monumental American presence. In a biographical and textual study, Wiens examines Avison's role in this process: the Avison issue of *Origin*, her participation in the Vancouver Poetry Conference of 1963, and her contribution to the experimental magazines of the 1960s, as well as her role as friend and professional mentor to bp nichol and bill bissett. Wiens posits a "homology," not opposition, between Avison's Christianity and her involvement in the development of Canadian poetic postmodernism, between devotional poetics and certain elements of postmodern poetics. Avison is also a prime exemplar of the new movement in poetry away from poetic language as authoritative towards poetry as process and the poet as participant, allowing language to speak for itself—as Wiens suggests, the same kind of openness that is required in religious faith.

David Kent throws new light on the role of Denise Levertov in the "commissioning, creation, and publication" of *The Dumbfounding*, demonstrating through careful biographical and textual study that Levertov "seems to have been largely responsible for the book in the form and shape we have come to know." This essay makes a persuasive argument for the specifics of Levertov's role in the title, final selection, and arrangement of *The Dumbfounding*, as well as for its genesis and presentation for an American public (it is Avison's only American-published collection); it outlines the important role of collaboration even for a poet so "singular" as Avison. It also shows the significance of editorial packaging, ordering, and arrangement as a part of the poetic process itself. Levertov's principles of creative ordering, her use of structure in arranging poetic collections, are evident not only in *The Dumbfounding* but also in Avison's subsequent collections *sunblue*, *Not Yet But Still*, and *Concrete and Wild Carrot*.

The collection includes two memoirs from Avison's time as Writer-in-Residence at the University of Western Ontario, 1972-73, during the seminal period of Canadian Literature as a university discipline. Don Hair writes as an instructor from that time, recalling Avison's participation in the pioneering course in Canadian Literature and Culture designed by James Reaney and others, and the extent to which her thinking informed his own subsequent classroom engagement with poetry and students. Particularly her injunction to "write at the limits of vision," with her challenge to linear thinking and "the tyranny of the five senses," was a key element in the playing out of classroom experience of poetic texts. The understanding of the interplay of visual and auditory, for example, in the colon and

parenthesis at the end of “The Swimmer’s Moment,” which can’t be heard yet are key to understanding, helped open the poetry up to students, pointing to a world just beyond the limits of perception. Poet John B. Lee writes from the perspective of an undergraduate student of the time about Avison’s powerful personal influence on him as a budding poet. Her two pieces of advice to him were, first, “Mind your prepositions” (those little connecting words so prevalent in unsettling and changing relationships in Avison’s syntax) and, second, “discover what your taboos are and BREAK THEM ALL.” These signposts to poetic speech, openness, and risk have gone with him into his poetic career ever since. Included with this memoir, and here published for the first time, is a poem written for John in manuscript at the time and kept framed by him as a reminder of Avison’s presence in his writing.

Two essays examine sequences of poems from later collections: the Governor-General winning *No Time*, and the very recent grouping at the end of Avison’s recently published collected works *Always Now*, “Too Towards Tomorrow.” John Van Rys examines the elegiac in Avison’s work, and the larger theme of suffering, looking particularly at the “Jo poems” sequence in *No Time*. Both in these poems, which particularly focus these themes, and in her other work, Avison engages suffering with characteristic directness and probing honesty. It is central both to her faith and to her poetics; the risk and “danger” of the poetic venture is part of the venture of faith, and the full engagement this process requires is marked by suffering. There can be no hope without real grief, no resurrection without death; in the Christian paradox, one must “spend all to gain more than all.” Van Rys explores the structure of the Jo sequence, tracing the process, from direct, even numerical, documentation of the fact of suffering, to reflection on the paradox that one must directly face the reality of suffering to know resurrection hope. In these “most personal yet most universal lyrics” Avison engages her readers in “painful growing.”

Gordon Johnston looks at poems from “Too Towards Tomorrow,” the group appearing at the end of the third volume of Avison’s collected poems, *Always Now*. (This essay was written before the appearance of *Momentary Dark* in February 2006.) Johnston sees in this grouping both the primary subject reflected in the title, the lateness of the day, and at the same time dynamic oppositions articulated from Avison’s earlier poems: travel, home; privacy, commonality; safety, danger; community, isolation; indoors, outdoors. He particularly focuses on the idea of “ongoingness” in the context of the lateness in the day of Avison’s own life. Walls may protect but they must be “gone through,” as the body of a seed must split, for

growth; thus ongoingness becomes “going through,” of loneliness, of death, or of separation. Also apparent in these poems is the idea of community, both affirmed and questioned in the radically individual nature of the “breaking out” process.

The two penultimate essays consider Avison’s ongoing engagement with perception of the natural world in relation to her faith, placing her in relation to current theories of ecocriticism, and showing the extent to which her poetic imagination incorporates and transcends this framework. Rob Merrett finds the context for Avison’s integration of biblical faith and natural history in Frye’s “imaginative literalism,” and in Eliot’s mythopoetic strategies, whereby poetic language is a transformative process not an authoritative univocal speech. Like language, creation is not static—it is in process, “evolutionary and revelatory.” Avison’s engagement with natural history over several decades renews the rhetoric both of poetry and of biblical spirituality through ecological perspectives “that generate a powerful aesthetic of transformation.” Her poetic language combines representation and process, integrating natural sign and spiritual analogy; this ecological vision is essential to the renewal of religious thinking, as nature becomes a primary medium of divine presence. Yet, as in deep ecology, nature is also other, unreadable by structured human perception. In Avison ecology and theology combine to register the “unsolved mysteries of material reality,” enacting spiritual quest.

Katherine Quinsey considers Avison, divinity, and ecology with particular reference to the most recent collection *Momentary Dark*, which highlights many of the themes that particularly mark Avison’s ecological thinking: the integration of nature and the city in the process of growth and renewal; the blurring of boundaries between cosmic and domestic, with emphasis on earth as our planetary home perfectly designed for us, our “little rollicking orb” for which we nonetheless have accountability; the layering of current ecopolitics with Christian theology, as pollution is both physical and spiritual, with a radical hope for renewal nonetheless. Avison’s ecological perspectives incorporate and yet radically expand the tenets of ecocriticism—the otherness of nature, the need for humility, the recognition of the subjectivity of a nonhuman other, the responsibility for the environment—because they are rooted in her transformative poetics and her Christian faith.

Concluding the volume, Carmine Starnino meditates on the fundamental fact of Avison’s poetry: contemporary criticism, mired in conventional pieties and politics, fails to grasp the extent to which Christianity “revolutionized” Avison’s poetry, and has thus been kept from recognizing “the



most potent aspects of her originality.” The terrifying aspects of the conversion experience itself are set at a distance, glossed over, and with them the “fierce oddities” and most innovative aspects of Avison’s verse. The experimental freshness of Avison’s idiom is rooted in this experience; “no other Canadian poet has pushed the relation of form to content to such an extreme,” as Avison’s “unremitting inventiveness...represents a tireless search for the form most fit to recall the passion of Christ.” Her language is incarnational, transformative; reading Avison changes our own relationship to language, as the details, concision, rhythm and sound-patterns, and evoking of sub-texts create a powerful sense of implication, multiplicity, and open-endedness even through the seeming spareness of the form. If Avison’s theology is orthodox, her poetry is not; “assaultive, alarming” in its breaking of form, it is the poetry of the “grappling” that is spiritual experience, not dogma.

In reading Avison we experience change: in mind, in perception, in ways of thinking about language and experience. It is writing at the limits of vision.

### **Bibliographical Note**

In the following essays all citations from Avison’s poetry are taken from *Always Now: Collected Poems*, vols. 1-3 (Erin, Ontario: Porcupine’s Quill, 2003-2005), unless otherwise indicated.