

STUDIES

Irony in Avison's *Winter Sun*

by Brent Wood

Irony is both a central device and a central concern of modernist writers. Margaret Avison is one of Canada's great modernist poets and also one of Canada's great Christian poets, yet in many ways irony is antithetical to Christian cosmology and morality. Occasionally the Christian God is portrayed as an ironist or even a trickster, but so much more often is the Devil or indeed Death itself. The Christian message must ultimately be earnest and honest, a message of genuine hope. Paradox, in the sense of apparently contradictory or illogical propositions, is a salient feature of Christian discourse, but such paradox is almost always resolved in a mystical unity rather than a cosmic or worldly irony. In charity, for example, we resolve the tension between self and other; in faith, that between logic and fancy; and in Christ, that between God and man. Avison's poetry is full of paradox, but employs comparatively little irony. Metaphor, rather, is a primary rhetorical feature, the principal method by which the poet conveys the richness of the genuine experience of faith, and the principal way in which paradox resolves. Both irony and metaphor allow us to express ideas that reach far beyond the merely literal and violate the surface sense of our expressions. Irony obliges us to recognize the deceptive and the fateful elements of the universe, and the tendency of our words and actions to turn back upon themselves, while metaphor shows us the reality that lies beyond the limitations of our everyday modes of perceiving and conceiving.

The poems comprising *The Dumbfounding* (1966), Avison's first collection following her own personal epiphany of Christian faith, are in many cases centered explicitly on the communication of this faith in metaphorically rich and ultimately earnest observations and revelations. In some poems from *Winter Sun* (1960), predating the epiphany, irony still has a role to play. There is spiritual focus in this book, but it is not yet Christ. In fact, the only explicit reference in the book to Christ himself, in the sonnet "Unbroken Lineage" (AN 1.70), is in an ironic mode. Christ appears as a tragic figure alongside Oedipus and perhaps Hamlet, as "a King of the Jews," recalling the double irony of the use of this title in the Gospel of Mark, in which the mockery intended by Christ's persecutors is revealed

to be an unwitting truth even as his murder results in eternal life, and through which the understanding of the irony in the use of the term creates a community of faith in those who know (Booth 29). The searching, criticizing, and debating that goes on in the poems of *Winter Sun* is more conducive to the use of irony than the affirmation of the poems composed later. Metaphor is dominant, but here and there irony is at work, provoking, deflating, challenging, and finally inviting the reader to share the intimacy of wit.

In his article “Each in his Prison / Thinking of the Key’: Images of Confinement and Liberation in Margaret Avison” (1978), Francis Zichy takes note of a dialectic of imprisonment and freedom evident in Avison’s earlier poetry which was subsequently resolved in *The Dumbfounding’s* image of Christ as the door (“Person,” *AN* 1.191). Zichy argues that “some of Avison’s best and most characteristic poems enact this dialectical struggle in which the individual works ironically against himself” and that “the poet may be seen as working towards a vision in which this irony can be recognized” (Zichy 232). Zichy compares Avison with T.S. Eliot, explicitly in the body of the text and implicitly in the article’s title’s epigrammatic quotation from “The Waste Land,” noting how both poets turn from “near despair” to Christian redemption. Zichy sees a sense of modern tragedy in Avison’s early work, in which “the individual’s undoing is seen in an ironic, diminished perspective” (233). And yet Avison is not much of a tragedian *per se*; the world may be fallen, but the falling itself is rarely her poetic subject. Zichy’s reading of “Snow” as despairing is debatable at best, as I have argued elsewhere (Wood 60-2), and indeed the poems of *Winter Sun* in general project not a vision of human failure but of divine comedy.

The symbolic pairing of “winter” and “sun” in the volume’s title resembles those pairs which provide the titles for Avison’s subsequent volumes of poetry *Not Yet But Still* and *Always Now*, but here the pairing is of image rather than concept, and although we certainly may see Christ as the sun who shines hope and life in the cold desert of winter, we are not obliged to do so. The winter sun may be seen as weak, distant, low, or indeed as the opposite: superlatively bright, its rays reflected and magnified in snow and ice, appreciated all the more against the cold air. In Frye’s terms, winter is the *mythos* of irony, beginning in the “fall” of tragedy and ending in the “spring” into renewed life, represented by the cosmic irony of fate and the satiric irony of social critique (Frye 223-39). Even if irony does not play a large role in her work as a whole, one may easily see that Avison’s vision of the mortal world strays between the poles of satire and tragedy, but is

ever rescued from them by faith, or, in *Winter Sun*, by a proto-faith evident in an ironic but humane wit. The tension between opposites that is implied in the simple image of the “winter sun” provides one model for irony in reading several poems from the volume: “Voluptuaries and Others” (*AN* 1.117), “The Mirrored Man” (125), “The World Still Needs” (79), and the sonnets “Tennis” (68) and “Butterfly Bones: Sonnet against Sonnets” (71) display varying degrees and kinds of irony, evident in Avison’s tone and in her use of metaphor and paradox.

Gordon Johnston, in his article ““Out of the Painted Grove, My Buck’: the Escape from Irony in Avison and Page,” offers a lovely reading of the poem “Watershed” (*AN* 1.101) from *Winter Sun*, from which he draws his title. Johnston argues that the poetry of Avison and P. K. Page in general “provides a model for an alternate and female version of transcendence, and a means of resisting the characteristic irony of modernism and its concurrent slide toward extreme groundlessness” (97). Johnston attributes the “ironic voice” of modernist poetry to “the collapse of orthodoxies, including the religious ones, and the concurrent doubt about absolutes” and also to a need for “reaction against the hollow rhetoric of inflated pieties.” This specifically modernist “ironic voice” to which Johnston refers but doesn’t discuss at length may perhaps be heard in modernism’s mocking and mimicking of hypocritical official voices, in its subversive yet elitist wit, and in its minimalist yet sophisticated approach to criticism of the vast and complex, a critique which inevitably outstrips even metaphor’s capacity for poetic economy. Yet irony is hardly the exclusive province of modernism, nor does it depend on the collapse of orthodoxies for its efficacy. Socrates is perhaps the original *eiron*, the dissembler who provokes and deflates, bringing us closer to the complexity of truth through negation rather than affirmation. And fate, exemplified in the power of the gods or in tragic blindness, provides a firmament against which dramatic and cosmic irony may be played out, illuminating integral dimensions of the human condition. In neither of these cases are we in danger of sliding toward “extreme groundlessness.”

This fear of the potential for descent into chaos resulting from multiple layers of irony, or from the use of irony itself as a provisional or mock foundation, has in many senses been largely realized in postmodern aesthetics and philosophy, and is acknowledged in Wayne Booth’s study *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Booth compares the growing power of both metaphor and irony in modern times, and contrasts them using a simple formula: metaphor involves a kind of addition of meaning to the nominal, while irony necessitates a kind of subtraction. “Since irony is essentially ‘sub-

tractive’,” writes Booth, “it always discounts something, and once it is turned into a spirit or concept and released upon the world, it becomes a total irony that must discount itself, leaving...Nothing” (Booth 178). The potential for *reductio ad absurdum*, exploited by Socrates in his attempts to undermine the arguments of his opponents, nevertheless becomes the great fear of both logic and morality when projected on a cosmic scale. In Christian philosophy this is prevented by Christ himself as Word of God and moral center. In “Watershed,” the buck emerging from the “painted grove” becomes for Johnston a figure of the Christ who will emerge into the center of Avison’s personal and poetic reality, redeeming the modern “waste land” and carrying us out of the “quicksand” indicated at the end of the first stanza of Avison’s poem. Here indeed is a “watershed” moment, where the buck who will provide the means for Avison’s “escape from irony” first appears.

One may detect in Johnston’s brief discussion of the “harm” and the “charm” of irony the persistence of moral critique. He asks, “what is the charm of irony?” and answers “the self-congratulatory recognition of hidden meaning, the shared stance of superiority, or indifference, the pose of the *dégagé*” (107). The recognition of hidden meaning Johnston makes out to be egocentric, while the element of sharing becomes elitist or disengaged. These may be the charms of selfish temptation, perhaps, but one can as easily find charm in the intimacy of shared understanding, in the humility borne of the knowledge that no one is exempt from ironic forces, or in the moral maturity displayed in the ability to navigate through the use of irony a complex and contradictory world, and to live, like Keats, amid doubts and uncertainty.

The Donne-like unexpected extended metaphor in “Tennis” (*AN* 1.68) displays on one level a vision of Sisyphus in the “cruel ellipse of service and return,” but this perception is not that of the players or spectators as “no one minds” it; they are either blissfully ignorant or, as implied in the poem’s opening observation, find the joy in both service and in watching service. Life itself here is a game which must come to an end, the meaning of its dance of love and volley relative and provisional. While the “long burn- / ing arc to nethercourt” which “marks game and set” may imply Satan’s underworld court (Calverley 212), one may nevertheless envision behind this cosmic tennis match a God who is a “supreme ironist,” like the one Booth and D.C. Muecke cite Hegel as envisioning in his characterization of divine Providence as “absolute cunning”:

God lets men do as they please with their particular passions and interests;
but the result is the accomplishment of—not their plans, but his, and these

differ decidedly from the ends primarily sought by those whom he employs.
(Booth 269; Muecke 134; Mure 257)

One may see this attitude in the observation which opens the sestet: "Purpose" here is personified as an ironically dozing umpire, dreaming not "white galliards" or "albinos" but "golden balls whirring through indigo." The end result is the dance which, like music, inscribes its geometry in the most ephemeral medium of air. The game is a dynamic of motion which accomplishes nothing, but at the same time is beauty itself, innocently unaware of this dimension of its movement, not unlike the Fool in his "foolscap" who ironically speaks the truth through his metaphoric jest. The use of "score" to indicate both "tally" and the simple "marking" like a liquid in air furthers a good-humoured sense of irony as the poem concludes. This echoes that evoked by the earlier use of "volley" against "love," indicating both the flight of the projectiles of warfare and the quick exchange of strokes by tennis players against the chief redeeming human capacity, love, which in tennis is also the symbol of nothing, a clean slate, the beginning. The relative detachment of the observing voice further contributes to the aura of irony around this poem, as we are invited to observe this, our own, tennis match along with the poet as it is described in these cryptic and clever terms, knowing that we are both players and observers, and we are thus forced to recognize our own ironic position as self-aware human beings in a universe ultimately beyond our understanding.

The examination of paradox is furthered in "Butterfly Bones: Sonnet against Sonnets" (*AN* 1.71). The alliterative but contradictory image "butterfly bones" complements the overt paradox in the self-reflexive "sonnet against sonnets." In this poem the bringer of death, cyanide, "seals life" as if protecting and preserving it. The search for certainty brings more strangeness, and insects become the focus of "law and wonder" that are incomprehensible from the point of view of the insect itself. The lifeless specimens stare back at the "peering boys," who risk being struck blind by this kind of knowledge, recalling the "tragic" irony of Audubon, who had to kill birds in order to paint them as if alive. The question posed as the concluding rhyming couplet is not, I think, meant to be rhetorical; on the other hand, neither is its answer, as Zichy claims, a foregone conclusion. We are required to ask and ponder the question ourselves, and the answer is likely to be both yes and no. Genesis 2.19 and 2.20 imply that whatever Adam named the creatures of the earth became their proper names; here Avison wonders whether these human-given names might, in the mode of idolatry described by Owen Barfield and under critique in "Snow" (*AN* 1.69; Barfield, Wood 57), blind us to the real nature of these living beings. In the

very posing of this question the poem escapes the fate an unequivocal “yes” answer would imply: the poem may have the potential to arrest a moment of life and make it a museum specimen, but the potential for both responses underscores the dialectic of knowledge and uncertainty dramatized in the body of the poem.

The paradoxical, bifocal vision and communion between speaker and reader are also marked in “Voluptuaries and Others” (AN 1.117). The speaker here strikes a mildly conspiratorial tone in her opening word, “that,” implying that “that Eureka of Archimedes out of his bath...story” *must* be one the reader knows and can likewise sum up—a commonplace. It is “that story” in the third line, and still “that story” at the end of the poem as it circles back to its opening, a motion atypical of Avison’s work. The opening figure itself, of a scientific epiphany, is put in ironic perspective by the speaker’s claim that it “kills what it conveys,” in this sense echoing “Butterfly Bones.” The displacement of water by Archimedes’s body which inspired the mental action is reversed by his body’s leaping from the bath upon physical expression of that mental action. What is Avison implying that story is meant to convey: the kind of epiphany possible through scientific awareness? Or the interrelationship of the principles of density and volume? Zichy assumes the message is simply the principles, and the “story” simply the “eureka.” But is there not some significance to the context of the action of Archimedes’s discovery, made (according to “that story”) in the process of aiding a tyrant in his own discovery of the displacement of the gold he had provided for a new crown by silver in the hands of a deceiving goldsmith? The ambiguous answer will be ultimately irrelevant, perhaps, as the speaker subsequently concludes that the “story” (not the principles) is, ironically, “not a communicable one.”

The tennis-like point-counterpoint continues as the story is termed “a particular instance of / The kind of lighting up of the terrain / That leaves aside the whole terrain, really” but which nonetheless constitutes an “advance” in it, which in all its provisional glory becomes, maybe, “the core of being alive.” The deliberate and beautiful clumsiness of the phrasing together with the “definite maybe” might make us wonder if we’ve wandered into a John Ashbery poem by mistake, until the point-counterpoint which concludes the first stanza provides an underlying unity to the aesthetic duality in the poem we wouldn’t find in Ashbery’s work, and requires of the reader the quick formation of a “negative” image in which light becomes dark. By this point in the poem it seems clear that the “first kind” of lighting-up is the local step forward into the mystery of life, while “that other kind” is a greater, more comprehensive understanding ulti-

mately incommensurable with the first. Zichy sees the first as a figure for the poetic struggle for understanding “in which the struggler works ironically against himself,” and the second as a “definitive, imprisoning,” “baneful vision” which obscures by over-lighting, but seems to suggest that these are simply different moments along a continuum of ironic attempts at understanding, the second a limit which may never be reached (242-3). This reading negates the distinction the poem’s speaker makes between the two “kinds” of illumination, however, while unnecessarily restricting the range of interpretation which the deliberate ambiguity of the diction would seem to encourage. Zichy sees the “prosaic awkwardness” and “ill-shaped run-on lines” as a manifestation of the “struggle for definition and its necessary frustration” (242). As in the analysis of “Snow” earlier in the same article, however, the potential for deadpan wit is overlooked, resulting in a reading which takes the speaker’s observations too much at face value, and the whole poem is not fully considered in a reading which ends with the conclusion of the first stanza. Zichy’s reading shows the irony of the struggle, but not of the perspective taken on it. In addition to the alternating affirmation and negation and the roundabout and awkward colloquial phrasing, there is a piling up of abstractions in phrases like “Neither is it / A constrained voiding of the quality of immanent death,” and the use of the obsolete “consists in” to describe the relationship of yet another participial subject, “the measuring,” to the other kind of lighting up. The underlying message of the poem may be relatively straightforward, but the peculiar way it is expressed suggests parody.

The second stanza returns to the colloquial diction of the poem’s opening. “The Russians” is on the same tonal plane as “that story,” as is “Russian women scientists,” the final term in a list which awkwardly attempts to equate them with entire sciences of physics and chemistry and with the pathetically generic “equipment.” Bathos itself is finally reached with the dog’s heart’s “phluff phluff” on the central “slab.” The basic principles of Archimedes are parodied by this grotesque and artificial “successful experiment” described as if by a twelve-year old reporting on a movie seen in school. The “chasm of creation” created by this experiment recalls the “voiding” of the first stanza, indicates the absence of the dog’s body, and implies a great vacancy in the world of artifice which seems destined to empty itself of everything but human beings—including, perhaps, God. In response, it may be plain hopefulness that enters at the poem’s conclusion, in which the speaker suggests what the reader may have already thought, that “the Russian women scientists” aren’t going to strip off their cotton gowns and rush from the operating room shouting “Eureka,” nor are the

watchers of the movie. Will some other kind of tyrant profit from this apparent desecration of vital forces in the name of scientific progress? The final line seems to redeem the Archimedes story, which in spite of killing what it conveys “does get into public school textbooks,” perhaps displacing other items the way Archimedes displaces the water in his bath. The view of intellectual recognition offered here is at the same time cynical and hopeful, playful and critical, again inviting readers to share in the judgment without letting us forget that we are part of this ironic world in which our measurements cannot be measured and each moment of enlightenment may serve to further obscure the rest of the terrain. The enigmatic title, “Voluptuaries and Others,” implies again a kind of idolatry in the reliance on those aspects of reality which present themselves to our limited senses, which is the basis not only of hedonism but also of science. Yet there is no pleasure or luxury described in the poem except for that of Archimedes himself in his moment of recognition, creating an ironic distance between title and subject matter which frames the repeated “displacements” which make up the poem itself. Both Archimedes and tyrant are voluptuary and each’s Other, as are the readers in relation to them.

“The Mirrored Man” (AN 1.125) is another poem from *Winter Sun* whose sense of irony has probably played a part in its relative popularity. Curiously enough, this poem is absent from Zichy’s analysis despite its explicit use of the image of inner imprisonment, echoing that in the Eliot line quoted in the title of Zichy’s article. Echoing the poems already discussed here, in “The Mirrored Man” both the three-stanza song-like introduction and the subsequent metaphorical narrative about the inner confrontation with the mirror are structured around pairs of opposing reflections. The punning echo of “lot” at the end of the second line, which is then rhymed with its opposite, “naught,” are the first “mirrored” pair in the poem other than the matching letters “m” in the title. In the story of Lot and his wife from Genesis 19, the wife is transformed into a pillar of salt for “looking back” against God’s command. In so doing she has become part of the ungodly ways of the people of Sodom whose town is being destroyed, and, Avison implies, she must likewise be left behind. This looking back is likened to humanity’s ongoing flight from Eden, in which we are tragically caught between a desire for paradise lost and our momentum away from it. A succinct twist of phrase sums up this introductory section and brings the first real note of irony in this paradox:

We always turn our heads away
When Canaan is at hand,

Knowing it mortal to enjoy
The Promise, not the Land.

Here humans are characterized as forever turning willfully away from the fulfillment of God's grace, choosing to remain in an endless state of deferral, focusing on the joy of the promise of fulfillment rather than on the fulfillment itself.

Even the heathen of the dark, the speaker next recognizes, understand something of the ironic nature of mortal life at the mercy of a God who is both creator and destroyer. This dilemma is portrayed by Avison as an inner self, secreted from the rest of the world, seeing its image in a mirror at the mercy of the destroyer, perhaps in despair. The alternatives, the speaker claims, are to ignore this inner condition, even though it is itself a reflection of our outer "piebald" or motley, dark-and-light world, or, in spite of the essential comic nature of our very creation, turn "gravely" to the task of unlocking the inner cell as if it itself were the paradise we turn or flee from. Another necessary paradox arises in the mind of one such creature, who finds that the denial of God which fuels despair cannot be itself denied, and so simply gets it over with, accepting the destroyer, eliminating the trapped self, and creating an inner emptiness with an open door reflected in the remaining mirror.

The extended metaphor continues with further elaborations, not unlike those in "Tennis" or "Butterfly Bones." The second option reported is to turn that inner prison into a "love-nest" of some decadence, as the subsequent images of sensual luxury imply. The use of "entertain" in the sense of "attending to" to characterize what the love-nest guests' relation is to these sensory illusions hints at an ironic reversal realized in the last lines of this stanza, as privacy is granted the host by the guest. The final line clusters three terms which create another layer of irony as the privacy is "purchase[d]" by what is supposedly given freely in "hospitable" spirit, even in the "favour" of having chosen these guests as guests. If the guests are our own inner reflections of other people, we have successfully evaded despair at the price of creating a "glass floor" in our relationships, opting for a sensually-focused social exchange at the expense of true intimacy.

The commentary offered in the final stanza introduces a new macro-metaphor, the one parabolic arc which we are "all of us, flung in," while searching for a multiplicity of foci which we hope will provide "significance" (meaning or meaning-making) for our otherwise senseless lives. The comet tail here becomes the beginning of our flight from Eden (or perhaps what we think is Eden but is really Sodom), and we are at its head, skeptical of the "tales" that go along with these star-shards that streak

across the sky and foretell fate. We wear masks of merriment and are made merry with the masking, suggests the speaker, returning to the metaphor of the hidden cell, which becomes a pun on the biological cells of which we are composed. The parabolic arc, however, is one which does have a single geometrical focus, a property Archimedes himself is said to have exploited in constructing a large parabolic mirror by which to focus the reflected rays of the sun onto invading fleets, thereby setting ships on fire. The structure of the poem's discursive dimension is also "parabolic," a parable of the ironic system of reflections which seems to provide a model for human being in the world. Our confinement within this reflective universe, as Zichy suggests, will be ended with Christ as the living door, but here what is at the centre is wonder, a posing of a question with two parts: who will gain access, and what will his reflection look like?

Avison's own parabolic mirror focuses light, illuminates her readers, not necessarily to set us ablaze, perhaps, but to bring what is all around us together and set it before us. These poetic parables speak of irony, and use irony, and like Jesus's create a community around the interpretation of metaphor. But in addition there is a sense of wit in showing us the ellipses' bifocality, and a modern ironic sensibility refining the scope of the potential community but at the same time creating a depth perception in the vision offered those within it. "The Mirrored Man" implies an interior mirror and an exterior single focus. The self who plumbs her own depths may, perhaps, find in her centre of gravity a graceful parabolic motion around a focus through which she can sense the power of that focus, but here this self is referred to as "the violator." Does the term give the poem, to this point having conducted its readers through a series of microcosmic ironies, a dark turn? Or is it too meant to be ironic, an overstatement, a hint of hyperbole which suggests its opposite: one who will perhaps not "gravely" labour to fashion a key, but who will realize that we confirm our own prisons, create our own need for keys, and thus will simply enter "the citadel" of the soul in search, a "violator" who has broken through psychological walls?

As in "Watershed," one may see in "The Mirrored Man" a glimpse of the door about to be opened for Avison. It is important to recognize, however, that irony in Avison's early work is not necessarily despairing, groundless or tragic. Here, as in "Tennis," "Unbroken Lineage," "Butterfly Bones: Sonnet against Sonnets," and "Voluptuaries and Others" we are privy to a poetic intellect not unlike Donne's, "metaphysical" in subject matter and in reliance on wit, deliberate obtuseness, clash of image, phoneme and grammar, and implying a vision of a cosmos inescapably reflec-

tive in nature. Here God is indeed an “iron” committing irony, as science-fiction writer Spider Robinson suggested, rather than a felon committing felony, or a messiah uniting flesh and holy spirit—perhaps even an *eiron* proper, a dissembler who hides himself behind a mirror reflecting his existential interlocutors, humanity, in order to show us the truth.

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