

## **Avison at Western: Writing at the Limits of Vision**

**by Donald S. Hair**

Margaret Avison was Western's first writer-in-residence—that was in 1972-73—and at the time I was part of the teaching team in English 138, the pioneering Canadian literature and culture course designed by James Reaney and Richard Stingle, among others. A principal feature of that course was a so-called “Third Hour” (so called to disguise the fact that it was actually a fourth hour every week) when we had writers and poets read, and people from other disciplines speak—anyone who would help fill out our picture of Canadian culture. Avison's “Third Hour” was memorable.<sup>1</sup>

If the measure of a poet's success is the extent to which his or her words enter into one's consciousness and thinking patterns, then Avison certainly succeeded. One thing she said then I have used ever since, and that is that “the devil is *et cetera*.” I have used that to combat the kind of vague thinking I encounter when students tell me that they're “readin' books 'n' stuff” or when they end a statement with “or whatever” and a shrug. Those same students tell me they don't like poetry because it's so “abstract,” but of course it's just the opposite, concrete and particular, and an Avison poem above all forces a reader to respond to the particularities of the text. That struggle with the text startles the reader out of the torpor of ordinary perception and effects a revolution in our ways of seeing, a radical change which Avison tropes in the sonnet “Snow” as a “jail-break / And re-creation” (*AN* 1. 69). That is one major thing we value in Avison: the extent to which she liberates us from the tyranny of the five senses and of linear thinking. I remember Avison looking round the room—we were several hundred people in Middlesex College Theatre—and talking about it (I'm quoting from my notes taken at the time) as an “opaque world, a world up against your eyeballs,” she said. Then she went on: “The thing I'm after somehow permeates what I'm up against, but I don't know how to get through it.” Nonetheless, she said, “Write at the limits of vision—when you've got it, you can see farther.” What has always fascinated me about Avison's poetry are the techniques she uses to “write at the limits of vision” and the kind of reading needed to appreciate such a use of language. When I was teaching poetry to my students, I had to keep making the point that

reading a poem is not a single linear movement, like reading a best-selling novel, but a circling round and round, exploring the text, making connections among its parts, looking for configurations. There was another prejudice I had to counter in those early free-wheeling 1970s, and that was that discipline and freedom were opposites, and that any form or structure was inherently bad, whether it was the university administration or course requirements or poetic form, such as a genre or a rhyme scheme. So I was pleased when Avison told our students, “Forms create rather than destroy; they leave space for more things.”

I’d like to focus on writing at the limits of vision as seen from a teacher’s perspective, because a large part of my experience of Avison’s work has been in the classroom. There are some practical things to be said about that. First, never underestimate the power of anthologies. We used Milton Wilson’s *Poetry of Mid-Century 1940-1960* (first published in the New Canadian Library in 1964) and Gary Geddes’ *15 Canadian Poets* (published first in 1970). Their selections made certain poems readily available, and those were the poems which, because we struggled with the problems of how to teach them, became central to our experience of Avison. Of the twenty-one poems chosen by Wilson, five entered into our thinking: “New Year’s Poem,” “All Fools’ Eve,” “Snow,” “Butterfly Bones,” and “Thaw.” Geddes included two of those, and (among his selection of fourteen poems) added two that also became central: “A Nameless One” and “The Swimmer’s Moment.”<sup>2</sup> I’ll talk about teaching some of those, but there is a second bit of practical advice, and that is, don’t ever assign a poem that you love as a sight poem on a final examination in a first-year literature course. We made the mistake of using “Thaw” on an English 020E exam, and after I had marked several hundred dull readings and unimaginative misunderstandings, it took years for the poem to recover its original magic for me.

One of our guiding principles in the Canadian Literature and Culture course was that such a study must begin with the impact of the country upon the mind, and what is more Canadian than winter and snow? We were big on snow then: we had a whole section of poems about it, including Anne Hébert’s “Neige,” P. K. Page’s “Stories of Snow,” Gilles Vigneault’s “Mon pays,” and Raymond Souster’s “The six-quart basket,” which (I am interested to see) is the epigraph to Avison’s collected poems. Avison’s “Snow” is difficult enough, but, surprisingly, the poem worked well in the classroom. Students like puzzles and challenges, and they like obviously “difficult” poetry that they can “solve” (though they are usually not nearly so sensitive to those aspects of Avison’s poetry which are not puzzles but

enigmas, for which there is no solution). I remember we spent a lot of time on the lines “All ways through the electric air / Trundle candy-bright discs,” wondering what on earth they meant, and I remember how revelatory James Reaney’s comment was: he said that’s what neon lights look like when you observe them through snow flakes or rain drops on your eyelashes.

Students have to love language to love Avison’s poetry, and once they became aware of Avison’s word play, they could begin discovering all sorts of wonderful things. The poem “Snow” at first seems to be a sequence of images without any apparent connection, but as we move around in it an exciting configuration gradually establishes itself. That configuration Avison tropes as a star, which appears in several ways in the final three lines of the poem:

Asters of tumbled quietness reveal  
Their petals. Suffering this starry blur  
the rest may ring your change, sad listener.

There is so much going on here that I can point to only one or two things. “Aster” is the Latin word for star, and asters and stars are non-linear configurations, like snowflakes. What snow does to the landscape—and we all, as Canadians, ought to know this—is blot out everything that clutters the eye, revealing the essential patterns of things. So the tumble and the blur are revelatory and change-inducing. Avison embodies those configurations in her sound patterns, such as those “r’s” which appear first at the end of “starry blur” and then at the beginning of “rest” and “ring.” That reversal points to the form Avison is using.

“Snow” is a sonnet, and since we also read “Butterfly Bones” (*AN* 1. 71), the subtitle of which is “Sonnet against Sonnets,” our students must have thought that the only poetic form we ever taught was the sonnet, and it was an unfortunate choice because the great ages of the sonnet—the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries—had passed, and the genre was (and is) moribund. So it was hard to convince students of Avison’s skill in bringing it back to life. Our students, of course, knew about the octave-sestet division, and knew also that some word or words at the beginning of the sestet signalled the “turn,” as the words “But soft” do here (words which Avison borrows from Romeo’s *aubade* in *Romeo and Juliet*). So what does the form have to do with the content? If one traces the sequence of images, one notices that apparently random movements gradually order themselves into circular ones: discs trundle and prayer wheels spin. The sonnet too turns from octave to sestet and in doing so spins opposites round: there is

a shift to the other side of the world (from the “rivery pewter” of Toronto’s Don to the “yellow Yangtze”), and a shift in the “colour of mourning” (black to white). The whirling of those opposites in a single pattern also suggests the relations of life and death—and at this point our students would groan, since in their experience the whole of literature dealt with only two subjects, sex and death, and here we were yet again talking about death. In Avison that subject is always bound up with her faith.

Avison’s actual experience of faith and doubt permeates everything she does, whatever the content. She has said about “choosing the subject” for poems that “no subject matter is ruled out, or in, in advance for the writer (whether Christian or not). No specific ‘content’ can be prescribed for a poem.” Moreover, “there are no ‘right’ forms” (“Muse of Danger” 145, 147). Such openness makes possible profound expressions of faith in unexpected contexts and ways. I’m particularly fond of her “New Year’s Poem” (AN 1. 82), which is an elegy, a genre where one expects expressions of faith, but what one does not expect is Avison’s taking of images from a Christmas party and playing a game of x’s and o’s with them. So evergreen twigs and needles and a “solitary pearl” are juxtaposed, related to the “crisscross of seasonal conversation” and to “the queer delightful skull and crossbones / Starlings and sparrows left, taking the crust.” The patterns suggest death and hint at new life, and there are the lines that point obliquely to a more traditional consolation:

I remember  
Anne’s rose-sweet gravity, and the stiff grave  
Where cold so little can contain....

The poem which came to seem most central to us was “The Swimmer’s Moment” (from *Winter Sun* 1960; AN 1. 89), and we used it on the poster announcing Avison’s appointment as writer-in-residence. Aside from the interest of the poem itself, it had great value as a teaching tool: it is a summary of a recurring plot in literature, and was therefore useful for setting essay topics and examination questions. That recurring plot is the journey, the confrontation with death, and the outcome of that struggle. In Christian literature the most influential version of that plot is in Bunyan, and “The Swimmer’s Moment” is a watery version of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, without explicit Christian content.

Avison read “The Swimmer’s Moment” during that “Third Hour” in 1972, and her listeners who knew the printed poem realized that her voice could not convey everything in that text, particularly in the climactic and final lines:

Of those who dare the knowledge  
Many are whirled into the ominous centre  
That, gaping vertical, seals up  
For them an eternal boon of privacy,  
So that we turn away from their defeat  
With a despair, not for their deaths, but for  
Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret  
Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth  
Where one or two have won:  
(The silver reaches of the estuary).

If the poem is read aloud, you cannot hear the colon that ends the penultimate line, and you cannot hear the parenthesis that encloses the final line, yet both are crucial. The “moment” the poem explores is a moment of decision: everyone confronts the whirlpool,<sup>3</sup> which is death, and how one does that determines in part the outcome. There are those who “refuse” to “contest” the “deadly rapids” and so circle round forever (the closed circle is hell). Avison said of that refusal, “it’s a fear that if you go, everything will be irreversibly different.” The fear seems well grounded: those who do in fact “contest” the rapids die. The poem maintains the perspective of the observer or outsider, who sees the deaths but “cannot penetrate their secret” or “guess” at the ultimate outcome.

But the poem does end with a guess, which takes the form of an image, a colon, and a parenthesis. The image is “the silver reaches of the estuary,” and of that image Avison said, “it’s not an idea but a visual experience.” The emotion accompanying that experience is one of relief at being carried into shallow and bounded waters and perhaps washed up on shore. Also a “visual experience” are the colon and the parenthesis. A colon is a promise of something to come, and in this instance the colon promises to say what “the anonymous breadth” is. The verb “won” seems to suggest that that “breadth” is life after death, and so there is the promise of words defining that ongoing life. The promise is even more explicit if one focuses on the words “anonymous breadth.” I’d also ask my students if “anonymous breadth” were an image, and when quite a few of them would insist that it is, I’d tell them, “OK, draw it,” by way of teaching them that, if you can’t draw it, it ain’t an image; it’s an abstraction. (I was ignoring images that appeal to senses other than sight.) So that colon is the promise of a move from the abstract to the particular, to an image, and we do get one in the final line. But that image is not the thing itself, life after death, but something substituted for it or associated with it—metonymy, in other words—and that substitution for the thing in itself is supported by the parentheses,

a parenthesis being literally that which is put in beside something else. Here that something else is unnamed, and beyond the capacities of our senses. The colon points to it and the metonymy substitutes an image for it and the parenthesis is beside it, but the thing itself remains unsayable and largely unknowable, an enigma, though it is not any less actual for being just beyond the limits of our perception—a typical Avison moment indeed!

The reason for the tension between the visual—reading the text silently—and the auditory—hearing the text read aloud—now becomes apparent, and that reason is an implied analogy: just as the colon and the parenthesis are beyond the capacity of our ears but readily apparent to our eyes, so life beyond death cannot be apprehended by our five senses but—such is the implication—might be easily witnessed by a sixth sense that we have, perhaps, only in a rudimentary form, at the very limits of our vision. Avison said she didn't know how to get through the "world up against your eyeballs," but "The Swimmer's Moment" shows that she knew a lot more about the "how" than she was letting on.

## Notes

- 1 The date was October 10, 1972. The members of the teaching team that year were Stan Dragland, Jim Good, Don Hair, Bruce Lundgren, James Reaney, Richard Stingle, Tom Tausky, and Joe Zezulka.
- 2 Those poems are all from *Winter Sun* (1960) except "A Nameless One," which is from *The Dumbfounding* (1966).
- 3 Avison said during that "Third Hour" that the setting for the poem was the fast current she had observed at the point where the Elbow River flows into the Ottawa River. I used to think that bit of information was of no help at all in understanding the poem. I still think so.

## Works Cited

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