

## Margaret Avison on Natural History: Ecological and Biblical Meditations

by Robert James Merrett

*We all walk about in a cloud of our own comprehension, seeing what we already know everywhere we look, elaborating what we grasp, and yet we know we are, marvellously, never quite cut off from what is out there. (Avison, *A Kind of Perseverance*, 70)*

As my epigraph shows, Margaret Avison's idea of perception, knowledge, and understanding is paradoxical. According to her, we move about the world not in direct contact with reality, for we are contained by our comprehension, which obscures rather than mediates creation. Knowledge clouds our perception; in looking out upon nature, our comprehension impedes apprehension, our sensing mere recognition. Since we see only what we have apprehended, our perceptions are always already seen and in the face of reality we merely project what we have formerly grasped. Yet, despite the intellectual grounds for solipsism, we are not severed from what is outside ourselves; we can know more than our own minds; we can trust to more than cognition for being in contact with the cosmos.

In her provocatively witty manner, Avison hints in the epigraph at how we realize this trust. We may approach her ironically allusive manner by recalling how T. S. Eliot holds that such trust resides miraculously in the meditations of the heart. Citing the mystical treatise, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in "Little Gidding," Eliot locates this trust in the love and calling of Christ: through "the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling," humanity can accept the paradox that history is a pattern of timeless moments (*Four Quartets* 59). This ultimate realization is reached only via a dialectical process that assimilates the ways of ignorance and darkness. *The Cloud of Unknowing* defines darkness as "a lack of knowing": spiritual insight will be reached only by those who cultivate the cloud of unknowing and forgetting in their "inward eye." They must accept this cloud's perpetual existence between themselves and God (58). In the epigraph, Avison ironically upholds the recommendation of *The Cloud of Unknowing* by

metaphorically equating common sense and dullness to God's miraculous hand in nature .

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From the beginning of her poetical career, Margaret Avison has probed and celebrated how we apprehend and envision the natural world, in the process acutely yet tactfully embodying the metaphysical issues that stem from our sensations and imaginations. "Neverness, Or The One Ship Beached On One Far Distant Shore," composed during the Second World War and first published in 1943, may well be her signature poem (*AN* 1.24-26). Its title invokes what neither happens in time nor may be reached in space: it links the dimension that is beyond the temporal and the historical to a unique, stranded vessel, rendered further incapable of voyaging by inaccessible space and distance. In ways reminiscent of Eliot's oblique allusiveness in *Four Quartets*, that vessel is associated with biblical typology: the mythical, or, in Northrop Frye's phrase, "counter-historical," image of "old Adam." This ageless figure with his "sunbright gaze" recurs in the dreams of millions of people, serving them as "a pivot for the future-past," as a still point around which time cycles, while paradoxically instilling in them a visceral nostalgia for pre-history and the permanence of death.

In contrast to "old Adam," Avison invokes the image of Anton van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723), the Dutch microscopist and naturalist, who in 1674 became the first to observe free-living protozoa in pond-water and who, three years later, described spermatozoa. She is unimpressed with his claim to have discovered the single cell that supposedly pre-existed Adam and constituted a grain of the firmament. She denigrates the historicity of Leeuwenhoek's one-celled plant: his scientific vision is but peering and glimpsing. The "squinting Dutchman" did not realize how much his telescopic night-time observations, besides constricting his eyesight, displaced his synaesthetic appreciation of springtime Holland, with its range of compelling indoor and outdoor smells.

However, scornful dismissal of an overly optimistic scientist is easy in comparison with facing the problems of modern city life, dominated as it is by business rules, social isolation, and alienation from nature (e. g., most hands "have never felt an udder"). If scientific positivism cannot map our "metaphysic cells," how are we to track them? Our world is "bleared": it is beyond clear seeing or precise measurement; it has evolved far past the "one-cell Instant." As a result the poet lusts for "omnipresence": she hun-

gers to address fellow citizens who are collectively imprisoned in modern selfhood, citizens for whom the office job and the urban scene are equally bleak and lonely. As in *Four Quartets*, modern citizens “sprawl abandoned into disbelief.” They thus take Adam to be an empty type, a mere “pivot-picture.” Distrusting the future, they are tempted to think of history as over-and-done-with. Yet, for the poet, the cycles of myth that transcend history are not necessarily redundant. Hence, she questions whether the image of Adam will be increasingly blurred by the mists of actuality. Will our unfixed vision stare so hard into those mists that we shall suffer a blinding agony that shuts out even the mists? Is it the case that responses to such questions may be generated from studying the ecology, rather than the economy, of the “unshut world”? How may the unavailability of the vessel “Neverness” steer us towards reviving the typology of Adam by pondering natural history? Perpetual renewal of such questions is Avison’s quest.

This quest may be partly traced in terms of tenets in literary theory that, starting with Matthew Arnold and including T. S. Eliot, end in Frye’s “imaginative literalism,” a concept developed in the belief that orthodox views of sacred history ask too much of secular history. To Frye, literal-minded searching for a “credibly historical Jesus” in “nooks and crannies of the gospel text,” far from constituting a spiritual quest, is an excuse for “despising and rejecting” the Messiah. Faith in Christ is not faith in history or anti-history, but faith in the “counter-historical.” The gospels show that Christ “drops into history from another dimension of reality,” thereby exposing the limitations of “the historical perspective.” For Frye, “genuine Christianity” is less a matter of historical record than of charity, which entails an “imaginative conception of language.” The inherently paradoxical nature of metaphor underlies Frye’s attitude to sacred and secular history. Metaphor, because it holds that two things are “identical though different,” is “neither logical nor illogical, but counter-logical.” The paradoxes of metaphor ground words, getting them to do “the best they can for us.” Hence, the “literal basis” of faith is mythical and metaphorical; it is an “imaginative literalism” that enlivens dogma and turns negative into positive spiritual action. Frye’s provocative statement that “Literature does everything that can be done for people except transform them. It creates a world that the spirit can live in, but it does not make us spiritual beings” helps us to follow Avison’s integration of biblical faith and natural myth (Frye 16-17).

In raising questions about how the degraded and enclosed modern urban world may be informed by a spiritual vision that draws on imaginative concepts of theology, “Neverness” seems to confirm that, if Avison

distanced herself from Eliot's high-church theology, she closely followed his mythopœic strategies.<sup>1</sup> In *Four Quartets*, Eliot renews poetry by means of meta-language: poetry becomes an ultimate discourse by reforming grammatical and rhetorical modes. Thus, Eliot's imperatives are less commands than "acts of guidance, formulations of an orientation," as R. A. York observes. Moreover, Eliot's sense of fallibility, uncertainty and probability privileges equivocation and analogy. Since, in his mind, language is holistic conduct, he delimits poetry as meditative, incantatory and prayerful process, not as univocal utterance. Belittling personality in theory and mocking his own in practice, Eliot subordinates comprehension to apprehension, reference to signification, his meta-linguistic experiments realizing the recursive aspects of discourse that also render it a source of spiritual values. As a result, his "conservative restraint" holds "dissatisfaction with the actual" in equipoise with "a sense of aspiration" (York 134-35).

In coming to understand that rhetoric cannot be abandoned if poetry is to be renewed, Eliot taught himself to reject his early impatience with Matthew Arnold. He saw that Arnold's attempts to bind imaginative apprehension to spiritual insight were not glib, as he first opined. In fact, when Eliot promotes seeing things as they are in order to create tropes and schemes that defy materialism and narcissism, he is following Arnold, as he does too, when he holds that cultural criticism, far from simply resisting convention, must educate skepticism and cultivate disillusionment. Eliot enacts personal distress and social disorientation in *Four Quartets* to show not only that poets may not achieve transcendence by declaring it but also to imply that the renovation of spiritual vision may arise only from undergoing purgation in the dark night of the soul. In so doing, he bases his enactments, to a degree, on Arnold's views of biblical poetry. To Arnold, the Bible's language is "fluid, passing, and literary, not rigid, fixed, and scientific." Disclaiming exegetical and theological systems, Arnold views the word "God" as "a term of poetry and eloquence, a term *thrown out*, so to speak, at a not fully grasped object of the speaker's consciousness, a literary term in short." *Literature and Dogma* shows that biblical words are performative acts, not theoretical categories. After explaining that "The *not ourselves*, which is in us and in the world around us, has almost everywhere, as far as we can see, struck the minds of men as they awoke to consciousness, and has inspired them with awe," he explores the problem that, in interpreting Israel's spirituality, we forget that "his words were but *thrown out* at a vast object of consciousness, which he could not fully grasp," thereby blinding ourselves to what Israel's words serve: "the great concern of life, *conduct*." Long before Eliot and Frye, Arnold urged read-

ers to oppose their own habitual positivism. Thus, he finds paradoxically “plain proof” of Christ’s supremacy in the disciples’ interpretive ignorance: “The depth of their misunderstanding of him is really a kind of measure of the height of his superiority. And this superiority is what interests us in the records of the New Testament; for the New Testament exists to reveal Jesus Christ, not to establish the immunity of its writers from error” (*Literature and Dogma* 37, 182, 187-88 & 258).<sup>2</sup>

While the present essay aims to plumb the inventive depths which Avison enjoins on readers and to suggest how her works draw on sources of theological criticism running from Arnold through Eliot to Frye, its main purpose is to convey how her imaginative engagement with natural history reveals that for several decades she has been renewing the rhetorical discourse of poetry and biblical spirituality through ecological perspectives that generate a powerful aesthetic of transformation.

In “The Ecologist’s Song” (*AN* 2.266), first published in *No Time* (1989), she presents water, sand, wind, light, and heat as witnesses. Objects of perception, they are also agents of perception. Dynamic signs, these fundamental elements of creation solicit double vision. They are perceptible not as simple ideas but through apprehensions that posit transferred meaning to their agency in the cosmos. For Avison, lexical and syntactic functions are multiple: lexical words are never merely names, and syntactic words shift ranks to displace hierarchical structures that once may have located them firmly. As with Eliot, Avison’s discourse resists how rhetoric hypostasizes description, narration, exposition, and persuasion. In her cosmology, creation is not static or complete: it is evolutionary and revelatory. Since the Word directs the cosmos, her words honour revelation by mixing representational with performative meanings. She heightens the metaphorical and metonymic interactions of words and deploys syntactic symbolism—making grammatical structures imitate and heighten transferred meanings—to enable readers to gain a necessary sense of verbal creativity that offsets an equally necessary humility before creation. In her cosmos, words mediate humanity: we live amid images that, far from being passive instruments, are agents that defy certain notions of human control and power.

“The Ecologist’s Song” posits interactions between sky and earth: pillars of vapour “plunge” up, “pelting hail sweeps down.” If the sky sometimes darkens the earth, its cloudless, blazing light may darkly illuminate. In the midday sun, a beach “welters in silence,” not only absorbing heat but refracting the sun’s rays to form a cool, “plum-coloured” pool—a mirage. This “dark sheen” arises from absence of sound as much as from abundant

light and heat. As the wind blows stinging golden sand across the ecologist's view of the mirage, questions arise about creation: can one suppose an omnipotent maker who is both gardener and glass-blower, and what, given the coolness and heat, aridity and fertility, are flower-buds, bruised petals, and dew? Is the dew glass since only molten glass can be blown? If flooding light forms an "ocean of sun" with "dark tides," is the earth both caught in and fished from this sea? If the netting is planetary, is escape possible? How has "one knot of the net" been loosened, "one strand plucked" out? Is the story of Christ causing the nets of his unsuccessful fisher-disciples to break as a token of their becoming fishers of men relevant here (Luke 5.6; Mark 1.17)? How otherwise may a broken net resonate "through the hemispheres"? Do we recall Job's complaint that God compassed him with His net, his lament that he was unheard, his way fenced up, and darkness placed in his path (Job 19.6)? Do we recall how Matthew compares the kingdom of heaven to a net in which the angels at the end of time separate the good and bad catch (Matthew 13.47)? Why does "The Ecologist's Song" glance so obliquely at the Saviour and the Saving Word?

One way of beginning to respond to this last question is to see that Avison is in tune with progressive thinking about the environment, as becomes clear if we relate her poetry to the work of Ann Whiston Spirn, a practitioner and theorist of landscape studies who opposes the view that the pragmatic and the poetic are conceptually distinct and who insists that cities and man-made landscapes belong to the natural world (Spirn 3). In *The Language Of Landscape*, Spirn proposes that "Landscapes were the first human texts, read before the invention of other signs and symbols" (15). She claims that there is a language of landscape the grammatical rules of which govern our environs. These rules, which derive from local and universal conditions, may be spoken and read without first being codified (20). Spirn's architectural theory holds that, since all land-forms are shaped by air, earth, water, and sun, no aesthetic distinction may be made between natural and artificial landscapes (3, 24). To Spirn, unless landscape is celebrated as a partnership between the earth and its creatures, we lose our ability to imagine "possible human relationships with non-human nature" (23). If we ignore the language of landscape and forget the partnership between people, places and all life-forms, we not only degrade humanity but threaten its future since we have an increasing capacity to transform the earth without understanding how this transformation harms symbolic forms. For Spirn, there is a natural and artificial dialectic in landscape that fuses image and reality for collective and global well-being (25-27). Such concerns recur throughout Avison's poetry. For Avison upholds

the concept that landscape, like language, is a dimension not only within which we live but also one which mediates our humanity.

Given Spirm's compelling account of trees, namely, that the "Size, shape, and structure—low-branched or high, densely branched or spare—reflect dialogues between a tree and a group of trees in open field or dense forest" (17), let's consider how Avison in poems first appearing in *No Time* presents trees as speaking life-forms and as natural and man-made signs. In "Patience," conifers merit the virtue of the title because they resist the "obliterating blasts" of winter even as they are prepared for the internal forces and transformations to be visited on them by spring—the season "inconceivable" to humans in winter (*AN* 2.140). The conifers "dwell" virtuously in the present because they are responsive to seasonal cycles. "Orders of Trees" names architectural features of "colonnades" and "canopies" in French woodlots, the military "grenadiering" and wheeling in "columns" of Christmas-tree farms in Canada, as well as uncultivated clumping of bush under beech-trees and its thinning under white pines. The "harmonious proportions" of new growth in clear-cut and burnt-out woodlands illustrate both the pre-history of forests and the "bare-faced," unrepentant evasiveness of humans with regard to the "arithmetical comment" that trees make about our ignorance of living antiquity (*AN* 2.160).

By contrast, Avison speaks to trees in "Enduring" because she trusts to their language; she participates in a dialogue in which she hears that they endure the elements fragrantly. Anticipating their life-span, they link earth to sky; weathered by the elements, they transcend the materiality of wood, their marks of suffering engaging life with love and veiling mystical truths (*AN* 2.219). In "Future," the leafing of trees and surf of wind in tree-tops figure a "forceful current," the aquatic analogy conveying "joy inexpressible" in the face of the unknowable (*AN* 2.199). "The Cursed Fig-Tree" presents Mark 11 through a first-person plural invocation of Christ that attributes to Him a reading of the tree as type of Himself. The disciples suppose Christ curses the tree, but He does not, because He knows that figs are out of season. While the disciples' supposition fails to foresee His life on earth ending, the withered tree displays, even as it suspends, Christ's power: His invisible fruit—universal forgiveness—hangs on that tree (*AN* 2.243-44). The pun on "depend" in the final line playfully emphasizes that through his dialogue with the withered fig tree He can read it as an emblem of Himself. By representing trees as plural signifiers and using them to integrate natural signs and spiritual analogies, Avison indicates how natural history may reform symbolic ideas, how ecological grounds are essential to the renewal of religious thinking.

Other poems in *No Time*, in their openness to natural history and landscape processes, encourage an equivocal questioning of traditional emblems and theological concepts. "The Singular," an unorthodox prayer, holds that the divinity of man is neither to be denied nor gloried in, unless the agent of that glory is seen as bedrock. Yet, in demeaning himself as a "willing slave" for "inglorious us," Christ pierced bedrock that "first morning" so that his "Amen / breathes and will shine / in time to everyman" (*AN* 2.247). The double sense of bedrock as Christ the foundation of faith and as the materiality of death transcended by Him holds emblem and metaphor in provocative aesthetic tension. "Oh, None of that!—a Prayer" parodies the Litany to displace liturgical form and theological dogma ironically. This prayer seeks delivery from "cloaking faith" and "omnibus / contrition," from pride in disowning shame and evading its "ominous freight." It resolves into the dialectical notion that healing depends on exposing oneself to "absolute scrutiny" (*AN* 2.251). As "Out" shows, this is far from comfortable, since "the holy given" is often a "way of refuge." So, the poet prays that Christ will be "alone our refuge" since He went beyond refuge in "urgent hope" (*AN* 2.263). The route to that apparently unreachable destination is paradoxical analogy. In "The Touch of the Untouchable," Avison sees Christ's compassion as a sweeping wind that penetrates the dampness of her dimness with "fresh stinging rain" which turns the internal world into a "star-studded / autumnal night" (*AN* 2.260). With self-disparaging humour about hay fever, breathlessness, and fear of dying, Avison turns the motif of breath in "Nostrils" into a meditative leap: quick, shallow breathing is like the surge and slack of tides on shores while deeper breathing resembles the calm depth of mid-ocean. Commitment to plumb the deep leaves more than sense and pulse suspended; once launched beyond fear, one feels the breath of spiritual life (*AN* 2.264).

That Avison's cosmology turns away from classical theism, even as it draws on rhetorical humanism, may be clarified by examining Thomas Berry's ecological critique of Western civilization.<sup>3</sup> According to Berry, society is moving "beyond democracy to biocracy" by engaging "the larger life community in our human decision-making" (xiv). Confident about this trend, he urges that we "need to present ourselves to the planet as the planet presents itself to us, in an evocatory rather than a dominating relationship" (14). Discontent with both "liberal progressive" and "conservative traditionalist" attitudes to the "Western historical process," he holds that the only feasible stance to its anthropocentrism is ironic (17). A "biocentric norm of reference" should make us "recognize ourselves not simply as a human community, but as genetically related to the entire community of



living beings, since all species are descended from a single origin” (21). Western religion has been “so preoccupied with redemptive healing of a flawed world” that it ignores how we actually experience creation, thereby demeaning “our functional role within the creative intentions of the universe” (25). Conflating ecology with evolution, Berry urges poets and natural historians to create a mystique of the land that will counter technological illusions and transcend “our species’ isolation” (30, 33, 42). In saying this, Berry expresses admiration for Jacques Ellul, whose *Technological Society* “outlines the invasion of the technocratic process into every phase of human life” (58-59). Herself an admirer of Ellul, Avison seems to share some of Berry’s views about the West as she looks for new ways to find the divine in nature.<sup>4</sup> Yet, if she shares Berry’s sense that traditions must always go “beyond any existing expressions of themselves” (117) and that the Bible’s “narrative mode” is superior to the “philosophical mode” of classical theology (136), she joins faith in Christ the Redeemer to appreciation of nature as a primary medium of divine presence. This is illustrated by a survey of poems first published in *Not Yet but Still* (1997).

In this volume the challenge of being open to the cosmos is a topic enhanced by the motif of windows. One aspect of this challenge is the relation of the man-made environment to the physical world. To what degree do architectural forms protect us from the world and to what degree do they heighten the nature of creation by mediating its plenitude and absorbing otherness? “Old Woman At a Winter Window” proposes that the “congealing” winter air shut out by quartered and frosted panes of glass looks like beautiful rock “marbled” by smoke rising from “valiant chimneys.” The geological images of the outside air and the windows with frost on the inside bring home to us a wonderful ambivalence: the exterior winter cold has “a fearful, / glorious amplitude” (*AN* 3.15). But how may we sustain ourselves in looking beyond the duality of indoors and outdoors to realize the immensity of space? In “Contemplative Hour,” the poet at “first light”—which looks like “precious stone”—observes a lake from inside a hill-top window. Far from seeing reflected light, she senses the lake breathing “fragrant peace.” By contrast, defensive inhabitants of cities with no geological sense of time huddle in darkness by shores “heaved up out of water.” So, says the poet, cities need “more window” and a greater metaphorical sense of stone because such looking out will enhance social and spiritual being (*AN* 3.18).

Far from subordinating cities to wilderness, Avison, like Spirm, finds them as natural as the countryside. In “Knowing The New,” spring perme-

ates cities with “moist / earth smell.” Spring speaks urban landscape into being; its “utterance” reaches into city trees so that their new leaves are “blossomy in frills and lace,” while an exotic magnolia creates a halo of domed space above itself in “an eloquent soundlessness” understood by the birds who “re-voice [it] for the wide world” (*AN* 3.28). Here Avison makes traditional poetic diction coexist with radical tropes: the pathetic fallacy of new leaves wearing ornate human dress and the paradox of the magnolia pushing out its branches into a built holy space convey support for, and opposition to, anthropocentrism. Avison does not simply subordinate cities to countryside, because pollution can have a positively revealing effect on light; it clarifies renewals that come with tempests as well as with spring. If the vile city air of “Sultry Day” is hosed away by summer thunderstorms rendering the city’s windows into the blue transparent again (*AN* 3.29), in “Air and Blood,” the hard rural light of “pitchforks and pieties” is refined by city light, softened by pollution’s haze. Country folk flee to the city because there they can breathe fuller spiritual being (*AN* 3.32-33). If people sully a rain-freshened summer morning, seemingly belying the title of “We Are Not Desecrators,” that they are “inwardly kindled” is “context for miracle.” Unlike sparrows that improvise “immemorial singing,” humans stir with “long-lost rememberings” of sudden summer that open up “New / antiphonal vistas.” Not creatures of nature like the sparrows, in their seeing and singing humans are as paradoxical as birds; humans sully the world but do not unmake its holiness, for they renew it by embodying liturgical expressions (*AN* 3. 36).

Avison introduces theological concepts into *Not Yet but Still* from a sense that humans both do and do not belong to nature. The volume’s riddling title realizes the tension that comes from seeing humans as creatures of nature and as beings who create themselves through a faithful outlook. As in “Neverness,” the title invites us to wait calmly; it balances what has not happened with what may yet come about even as it opposes what will not come with what is fixedly present. That is why in “Potentiality,” the bond between a seed too small to cast a shadow and infinite space that embraces light and dark is teleology (*AN* 3.37). Of course, there are problems with cultural notions of self-construction, as appears in “Cultures Far and Here,” in which Avison proposes that individuals frightened by the uniqueness of experience club together to create protective stories. Comforting themselves with “overlapping awareness,” they “build a vault of a / shelter from the wholly unknown,” only to have nature “disregard our / walls,” and displace this collective action. Every displacement makes the cosmos less familiar and more frightening: daylight insidiously pours in

featurelessness, planetary light and tides erasing private experience and cultural history (*AN* 3.50-51). Avison heightens disillusionment with cultural history and social science in “To Counter Malthus”: humans have not learned “how to live,” nor is demography helpful about the theoretically ideal size of the population. Whereas social engineering is the dream of desperate people, “Presence” stings us alive by making our spiritual hunger keen. The theology of presence alone counters the displacements visited on us by nature (*AN* 3.72). Jeremiah’s challenging awareness of the enlivening power of the Logos—divine presence—that it “speaks / all things into being,” is captured in “Proving.” For Avison, truth speaks being so deeply into our bodies, “carves, incises / to the bone / and between bone and marrow,” that we inevitably turn away. But the miracle that truth loves, although it died from love, shows prophetic utterance and being in equipoise (*AN* 3.79). If in the two previous poems Christ is represented by abstract images of presence and truth, in “A Kept Secret,” He is a bird in the mode of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Its momentarily glimpsed flight from “greengold” to “indigo” shadows, the startling flash of its “wide sky-combing pinions” that fuse the “dark and dazzling” shadows, supports Avison in her opposition to naive, modern ideas of pessimism, like Thomas Hardy’s. For darkness, once comprehended, becomes knowledge that is to be trusted although beyond human attainment. By the same token, light, no more than darkness, is within human reach. Christ is the bird which enlightens us about the dynamic relations of darkness and light (*AN* 3.96). This poem with brilliant obliqueness transposes Matthew 10.27: “What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops,” a verse in which Christ demands that his disciples both clarify and publicize the secret, parabolic nature of his message. Avison’s brilliance lies in guarding the secret while making it poetically accessible.

Her inventive fusions of ecology and theology may be clarified by Luc Ferry’s critique of the Sierra Club’s postmodernism. In *The New Ecological Order*, Ferry decries deep ecology because, when it was first institutionalized by Nazi romanticism, it granted animals legal rights in imitation of medieval, ecclesiastical superstitions. By contrast, he endorses Enlightenment views that man is by definition an “anti-natural being” and that, as for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he is the creature whose essence is to have “no essence” since he escapes natural cycles, attains to culture and morality, and lives by laws. Humanity, since not bound to instinct, has a history in which generations follow one another without necessary resemblance whereas animals “transmit no new legacy from generation to generation”

(xxviii, 5). The animal kingdom observes “perfect continuity,” its customary modes of life lacking culture and history (41). Refusing to equate the Enlightenment with “the forces of instrumental or technical reason,” Ferry defies what he sees as the return to barbarity in deep ecology’s holistic claims that the “ecosphere” is more valuable than humanity (49, 55, 66). He does not deny that we owe animals “circumscribed respect,” but he insists that this is neither “inscribed in nature” nor obliged by civilization (56). He rejects deep ecology’s insistence on “our total immanence” in nature, preferring the “uncertainty characteristic of all democratic questioning” (80-81, 87). Championing Simone de Beauvoir’s egalitarian, humanist views of female emancipation, he refutes deep ecology’s claims that progress can come only from women because to say that they are more natural than men ties them to biological determinism (124). Ferry’s views appear to correspond to Avison’s ecological stance: the integrity she attributes to the homeless and uprooted, her refusal to uphold simple notions of wilderness or to create merely local myths, shows that her concerns for transcendence and teleology and for the continuity of biblical and humanist poetry are closer to Ferry’s democratic tenets than to Berry’s biocracy. If Ferry dismisses teleology and denies collective force to theology (135, 138), his call for a concept of “infinity,” of infinite space for reflection and action, represents the type of secular humanism which Avison appropriates to her poetic vision.

This is not to say Avison ignores deep ecology. She confronts it in *Concrete and Wild Carrot* (2002). In “Relating,” the poet, observing an ant as it moves “intricately / impelled,” ponders her location under an invisibly starry sky on a July morning. While “this other living” creature is beyond her grasp, she thinks the ant marks itself with “segmented strange / awarenesses.” The ant may be a pictograph, one of many unspoken languages, the multiplicity of which means that no creature can control this “unsegmented, unsmall, / shared reality.” If poet and ant have “warped little shadows” as fellows under the sun, they are incomprehensible to one another: they emblemize the unreadability of the cosmos (*AN* 3.135-36): in greeting the ant, the poet grants it the respect of companionship but not rights. Far from simply opposing urban renewal to natural scenery in “Lament for Byways,” the thunder of falling masonry caused by the wrecker’s ball cannot drown out the heart-beat of the “harrowed city” in former “lanes and mews.” The poet still recognizes in a boarded-up warehouse an “old friend” (*AN* 3.161-62). “Rising Dust,” a title alluding to resurrection, explores motifs of water: our bodies are more than half water; humankind needs water increasingly; the planet is largely water; the sky and earth

always breathe it. If no more than “leaky firm,” Avison is “Kin to waterfalls / and glacial lakes and sloughs / and all that flows and surges.” Yet, in embodying design that remains beyond explanation, she can be creative until her dissolution, for she is another substance: a thread on a loom or a strand in a pattern. She cannot control how her body relates to her *telos* but she can rise to her own metaphysical level like water and land (*AN* 3.163-64). The volume’s final poem, “Alternative to Riots,” promotes a faith unrestricted by modern culture. Urging that we “Explore only the ranges / beyond our mastering,” the poem spurns the normative worldliness of art, business administration, capitalism, imperialism and globalism, which leads only to a “monstrous sameness” that affects “the whole ungeographical / world of us.” Landscapes that once bespoke humans—“signatures / bespeaking persons”—are now anti-symbolic “categories” that offer mere illusory fictions and shackle us with shameful security. Identity politics are to be shunned for similar reasons; their security is self-destructive. Moreover, the passive security of the silent majority is increasingly intolerant. In urging that all structures be thrown over for the “glory / of nothing to hold onto / but untried air currents,” Avison once again imitates the prophetic voice of Jeremiah: survival must be risked for “some indestructible / transmuted loss” since “a slow, secret, gradual, germinating” can happen only “in the darkness” that biblical poetic tradition has mystically perpetuated (*AN* 3.179-82).

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In her most recent poems, Avison continues to link ecological and theological themes, with great imaginative energy probing their reciprocities for meditative ends. Take “The Fixed in a Flux” (*AN* 3.185-86) in which she derives from relative aspects of speed and vision a compelling aesthetic. Assembling the experience of looking out from moving vehicles, be they cars or trains, lets her record how the particulars of rural scenery detach themselves from their surroundings. Carried speedily through the landscape and freed from “everyday eyework,” she enjoys images which produce a visionary sense of the natural world’s transitoriness. This “non-seeing” involves a passive and peaceful reception of images, a heightened openness to material reality. There is no question of withholding acceptance of this “present” that is “not quite here.” When time and place are thus separated, they render perceptible the flux that common-sense reality hides. As in the present poem which delivers an acute but unconventional sense of “here” as a conjunction of present time and location, Avison

delights in the physics of light; she rejoices that light need not move in straight lines, that it may be bent by gravity, that the planetary system is centrifugal, and that time and space are relative, nor absolute, phenomena. Her poems register the unsolved mysteries of material reality to give her religious outlook an aesthetic basis.

The paradoxical way in which she adopts theological perspectives could not be better illustrated than by “Betrayed into Glory (John 13.32).” The biblical text cited announces that, since God is glorified in Christ, God in Himself shall glorify Christ by immediately glorifying His Son. In the next two verses, Christ tells his disciples that, since they shall seek Him without being able to follow him, they are to follow his new commandment to love one another. Setting aside Judas, Avison’s poem dwells on the idea that to be glorified Christ must separate himself from humanity. Then it doubts that we can obey his commandment. For, in passing through the wall of material reality into a dimension which humans can neither enter nor approach, a dimension that renders the grammar of their prepositions redundant, Christ is out of sight. Not being the object of our vision, has He, Avison asks, required the impossible of humans? Having been given no instructions how to love one another, we are seemingly faced by the impossible situation of passing through the wall like Christ. However, since He is the wall through which we have to pass, our only way forward is to move ahead wordlessly and stubbornly to holy ground. Experiencing the trouble inherent in the way forward will be to discover the love that Christ prescribed. Following him is not impossible but it comes with huge difficulty because we have no model but Himself (*AN* 3.205).

If “Betrayed into Glory (John 13.32)” conveys a human perspective on Christ’s Resurrection and if the words of its title fit the experiential anguish which the poet confronts in the body of the poem, its biblical reference is questioned. As in “Neverness,” Avison shows that typology is less a matter of hermeneutic formulæ than of sensitively performative conduct, one informed by an aesthetic sense of paradox. Her poetry does not describe spiritual questing; it is the quest itself, made so by mythopœsis, as we may perhaps underscore by finally considering her presentation of the sacramental light of beauty in “The End Not Yet” (*AN* 3.204). Resisting the possibility of self-sympathy at the prospect of death, she pictures sinuous lines of beauty in distinct life-forms: in the curl on a baby’s newly-washed head, in “the wisp [of its hair] unfurling in sunshine”; in the plants on an abandoned prairie farm, in their gleaming “Filaments” and curling “fronds”; in the ruins of a cottage burned in a forest fire, in the “tentative curl of smoke ...touched to an auburn arc” by a sunbeam. Beauty even transforms the

pain of grief and loneliness “livingly,” “every prong” of which “loveliness anoints” into vitality. Not only is Avison’s aesthetic one that places human and inanimate life in the same environmental and spiritual realm of life but it is also a personal manifesto that there never can be a reason for not seeking out and creating beauty until the very end, for to do so is to be alive. Perseverance aptly describes Avison’s poetic commitment, for she aims to refresh sight and renew insight by steadily looking at those features of nature and daily life that gather aesthetic power from being re-imagined through a cloud of meditative unknowing.

## Notes

- 1 Kent, “Introduction,” “Lighting” vi. For Avison’s reservations about Eliot’s theology, see her review of his *Selected Essays* in the *Canadian Forum* (March 1951).
- 2 I elaborate these interpretive issues in Presenting the Past. See also my “Faithful Unpredictability” in Kent, “Lighting” 82-110.
- 3 The best definition of rhetorical humanism I know is offered by Paul Fussell in *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism*. As a result of conversations with Sheila Watson, I considered Avison’s doubts about classical theism and existential search for spiritual being in “The Ominous Centre’.”
- 4 In a note concerning her friend George Grant, Avison calls Ellul one of the two writers “central” to her, the other being Dostoyevsky (*Concrete and Wild Carrot* 83). In her Pascal Lectures she had earlier said: “Wasn’t it Jacques Ellul who declared, though he is an economist, that the devil in the 20th century has been Efficiency? There is nothing today to compare to the heady excitement Englishmen felt at the time the Royal Society was founded, . . .—science’s achievements having taught how to blow up, burn out, or otherwise devastate this planet through social mismanagement?” (*A Kind of Perseverance* 38).

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