

## **“Our own little rollicking orb”: Divinity, Ecology, and Otherness in Avison**

**by Katherine M. Quinsey**

*Yet O my city, rich as  
fistfuls of raisins, down here  
already, are you not,  
in spite of the  
rancid smell, the milling of  
every sprig that has  
found its foothold through a  
broken sidewalk,  
are you not, in  
some breathtakingly  
scary or brilliant moment  
momentarily touched by,  
bathed in,  
a far-breathed holiness?  
("The Implicit City," *Momentary Dark* 40)*

Margaret Avison is not strongly visible on the radar screen of either ecocriticism or urban studies. Yet Avison sharply focuses these two areas of current interest. In her poetry both the nonhuman world and the city are organically interlinked on many levels: physical, social, theological. The fundamental premises around subjectivity and dominance that inform eco-poetics, and the comparable framework in urban studies for examining community, isolation, class struggle, and cross-cultural dynamics, are not only overtly engaged in Avison's work but are radically re-imagined. Her poetry crosses and transcends boundaries between subject and object, self and other. In her work an urgent sense of social and environmental justice coincides with a radical faith in an encompassing, immanent and transcendent Other; it is this faith that underlies her poetic vision, with its challenge to the norms and hierarchies of conventional ways of knowing.

Avison is rarely identified with the eco-poetic movement. Nonetheless, according to at least two well-defined sets of criteria for eco-poetic writing,

her poetry meets, if not exceeds, each one. Lawrence Buell's definitive list (here paraphrased as cited in Scigaj 10 and Bryson 5-6) stipulates that ecologically-oriented texts should (1) represent the nonhuman environment as itself primary and encompassing, as opposed to being merely a vehicle for human experience; (2) acknowledge that nonhuman species and the environment have histories and texts of their own, rather than being the subject (or object) of human narrative; (3) include in their "ethical orientation" the accountability of humans towards the environment; and (4) see the natural environment as a "process" constantly changing and growing, not a static object to be exploited. Environmental writers attribute to nature its own voice and perspective, as opposed to the anthropocentric fallacy of nature reflecting human feeling (Gilcrest 6, 40; Pack in Scigaj 11). Bryson adds to these his own list of three distinguishing characteristics of ecologically-inflected writing: (1) an ecocentric perspective recognizing the nonhuman world as an independent entity, as a community in itself; (2) an imperative towards humility in human relationship with the environment; and (3) skepticism about modern overreliance on reason and technology (5-6).<sup>1</sup>

Even a superficial reading of Avison's poetry, particularly that of *sun-blue, No Time, Concrete and Wild Carrot*, and the new collection *Momentary Dark*,<sup>2</sup> will show that her poetry incorporates and yet transcends most of these criteria. In Avison, the subjectivity of the perceiving self is continually broken open as poems take on the points of view of trees, rocks, animals, and humans, and as these perspectives meet and intersect, often ambiguously. Environmental degradation, social inequities, and original sin are linked both literally and symbolically. Earth is both a planet in space and a cosy little home, and space itself is an environment both cosmic and domestic. As Avison's poetry characteristically blurs and unites metaphor and referent, so in her work nature is not just a metaphor for human "reality" or a reflection of human feelings; rather, it is represented as having its own reality and experience. Trees, for example, are often the model for Christian patience in an eschatological context, but at the same time they are portrayed primarily as trees waiting their own natural, seasonal time.<sup>3</sup> "Innocent / of awareness" of winter destruction to come (note the resistance to attributing human consciousness to trees' perspective here), trees are "yielded to / the glow of now" "ready to let it all / go now" ("No Dread," *MD* 66); trees "are stretched, waiting / in trust, even in thirst" ("3 a.m. by Snowlight," *MD* 36). Trees both enact and symbolise the peace of self-releasing, the trust in the moment, that is key to the Christian experience in the world. (Indeed, one could say these poems are not anthropo-

morphic so much as arbomorphic; trees are not like us, rather, we are—or should be—like trees.)

More deeply, Avison's work—both pre- and post-conversion—is based on a challenge to the self-centred nature of perception, the Enlightenment “eye/I” that is the foundation of modern technology and science, associated in environmental criticism with a logic of dominance and exploitation, the objectification of the natural world by a powerful observing human subject.<sup>4</sup> Here Avison alters the categories of dominance and subjection, in proposing a radical challenge to our understanding of subjectivity. Avison's questioning of the constructed sweep of self-centred perception, which begins early in her career with such poems as “Perspective” and is more fully developed in the “jail-break / And re-creation” that result from the venturing of the “optic heart” in “Snow” (*Winter Sun*, AN 1.69), is most fully realised in her later poetry in the “opening-out” of the self in its radical encounter with the transcendent Other.<sup>5</sup> The act of perception becomes one not of knowing and defining, but rather of being known by an other who is not only the ultimate Object of knowing but also the original Subject. This relationship is both the model and the medium for the self's relationship with all others, not only human but also nonhuman—and it is at the core of Avison's poetics.

In this sense Avison provides an alternative to the Western Christian model of domination, exploitation, and alienation of the nonhuman other that, as Lynn White argued some time ago, underlies Western technological progress from the medieval period to the present (107-108); Avison's concept of shared “creatureliness” is more like the Franciscan recognition of nonhuman creation as equal fellow creatures (White 113-115). This humility in relationship with the other, whatever other it may be, springs from the incarnational Christian belief at the core of all her writing; the Incarnation, the ultimate crossing of boundaries of being and perception, the ultimate identification of Self with Other no matter how remote, is the encompassing context for the breaking down of all self-other boundaries.

Avison is not popularly conceived as one of Canada's urban writers; that distinction belongs classically to the novelistic worlds of Richler and Ondaatje. Nonetheless, the city is the dominant setting for most of Avison's poetry; it is central to her vision, as both physical, social, and theological entity. In Avison's work “nature” and the city intersect; in a recent interview, in response to the comment that to describe her work as “urban nature poetry” seemed oxymoronic, Avison responds:

...the nature I know is here. “Concrete and wild carrot” says it: it's the concrete of the city, and the wild carrot you can find by walking along mews and

laneways or looking through the subway window along the open cuts. ("A Conversation" 74)

As both Deborah Bowen and Rob Merrett suggest, in Avison the landscape of the city, whether constructed building, trees and water, shopping malls, or "(peopleless) park[s]," is suffused with God's power, both natural and supernatural; all is sacramental (and see Merrett, "Natural History" 100-01 and Bowen 190, 192). Avison challenges the traditional distinction between regional / rural / landscape writing and urban writing in Canadian literature (cf. Fiamenzo *passim*). Her imagination is continually informed by the transition from prairie farm to Toronto town house (Kent, "Introduction" 6); her subject is city parks, streets, city children, street people and commuters—these are her place, her people, yet all are suffused with prairie light and open space, the same light and life in all. As in all Avison's work, structured hierarchies of conception and metaphoric reference disappear, as neither nature nor city is privileged as the defining entity. City trees become the model for Christian patience; groundhogs and commuters see eye to eye; shopping mall food courts blur into the actual body of the shopper, as the digestive enzymes of the stomach have their own "emporium."<sup>6</sup>

The city is the setting for imaginative transformation in such poems as "Prelude," where the epiphanic moment occurs as the stone flower on a building tip "stares through a different sun" (*Winter Sun*, AN 1.62). The child, emblem of imaginative vision in Avison, is almost always a city child: in "This Day" (MD 45), a child dances into a tree shadow on a city street, evoking such memories for the adult; in "From Age to Age: Found Poem" (s 102) the imaginative vision of a young child in a street car both recognises and newly recreates the elements of light and water in the original Edenic moment of wonder, and the poem portrays the same elements available to adults, threaded through car windows. The visionary freshness more usually associated with Romantic rural landscapes is found in a supremely urban context, mediated through vehicle windows; a recurring image in Avison is that of a car or plane as a sealed-in technological cell nonetheless possessed of windows, symbols of perception and subjectivity, through which light may be perceived and received.

Finally, it is in the city that the challenge to self-centred perception is repeatedly enacted. It is in the city that Avison's Christ is found; both incarnation and redemption take place here. The needed transformation of the self comes about through deep identification with the other, not only the transcendent Other but also those others with whom He is most deeply identified. Avison's work does not fit easily into current categories of inter-

est in studies of urban literature; she is not the disengaged, observing flâneur, and rarely does she address cultural crosscurrents and conflicts. Yet few writers ascribe more potentiality to the city, as its own ecological place, where the same light and life that work in the natural world are at work in both physical locale and human community. The city is the place where Christ's work is done, where the transformative vision of poetry takes place, where wild carrot and asparagus may burst through the concrete at any moment, abounding in life.

To understand the ecological self-other relationship in Avison's poetry one must begin with her re-invention of perception and knowledge, of the basic dynamic of viewing and naming, from her earliest work. "The optic heart must venture: a jail-break / And re-creation" ("Snow," *Winter Sun*, AN 1.69). The optic heart unites sense (eye) and inner being (heart) in a multi-dimensional vision that breaks through conventional structures of perception. "Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes": this kind of seeing is an active process, linked to inner identity, the "I" behind the eye. Paradoxically, however, in order to see for yourself you must venture both out of a self-centred point of view and out of the framework of things as seen "for" you by conventional boundaries and angles of perception, space-time coordination, categories of visual objects, preconceptions about importance, and the like. This is the "jail-break" suggested in such early poems as "Perspective," and the surrealism of many poems in *Winter Sun*; it is transformed to a fuller "opening-out" in Avison's post-conversion poetry where, in order to be re-created, the seer must abandon self-definition and self-enclosure to be drawn out of the self, both into the world she perceives and into the source of that world's light—"trusted to fire, drawn / towards an enduring sun" ("Psalm 19," *The Dumbfounding*, AN 1.162). Frequently perception becomes an encounter, in which seer and thing seen may change places:

My heart branches,  
swells into bud and spray:  
heart break.  
(*"March Morning," s 25*)

Avison's poetry thus fundamentally challenges the conventional hierarchy between perceiver and perceived, subject and object.

As suggested by bp nichol,<sup>7</sup> in Avison knowledge is not something to be acquired and possessed; it is not an invasive act that objectifies what it thinks it knows and thus does not know it at all, but rather knowledge is a "found" experience, an act of celebration and openness, a changing of the

self—one knows, and is known in the process. In Avison, the ultimate Object of knowing is also the primary Subject, a transcendent and immanent Other who both encompasses and permeates the self, and, with the self, the creation in all its variety, breaking down divisions between self and Other, self and others. In an ironic version of the Western dynamic of exploration and domination—a recurring theme in Avison—the Discovered is much larger than the process of discovery, changing the one who discovers; in “Prospecting,” where the image of mining and exploration is applied to all human enquiry, experience, history, and the cosmos itself, at its heart (the “node”) the process of discovery itself translates into the One discovered:

For at the node  
all energies become  
that unrewarded effortless and  
ruthless kindness,  
Person.

(CWC 53)

The humility this relationship engenders also governs relationship with the nonhuman creation, as objects of knowing or perception become subjects in their own right. In “Butterfly Bones: Sonnet against Sonnets” (*Winter Sun*, AN 1.71) and in “From Age to Age: Found Poem” (s 102), Avison specifically contrasts these two types of knowledge of the nonhuman creation, linking them through allusion to Adam’s naming of the animals (the topos for domination in Judaeo-Christian tradition). In the first, the knowledge that objectifies and kills, the relationship of domination by definition, appears in the image of the pinned butterfly; it is contrasted to the unalterable remoteness of the butterfly’s own world of perception (“the world cut-diamond-eyed”), from which men are cut off, “struck blind” by the object they have made of the insect, the “sheened and rigid trophies” that are paralleled to (or cut off from?) “Adam’s lexicon” buried in the mind. In the later poem, the same lexicon is invoked in a radically different context, through the Edenic experience of wonder in the child’s response to fountaining water; here naming becomes celebration, recognition, primal joy in shared being, “as in the morning day / when Adam names the animals.” The child is “shaman di- / dactic,” sharer of mysteries, but also of a pre-rational language of joy and response, as opposed to naming and definition that exerts power over the other.<sup>8</sup>

Avison’s work also challenges the boundaries of the self, redefining the category of “subject” in all its senses. Characteristically, Avison’s poetry

plays with pronouns and shifts point of view, continually blurring the relationship between first and second, first and third person; a typical example occurs in “Alternative to Riots but All Citizens Must Play” (*CWC* 77), which begins with an imperative addressed “To myself everywhere,” blurring distinctions between the subjects and objects of global politics. A similar blurring occurs in the earlier poem “SKETCH: End of a day: OR, I as a blurry” (*s* 19); as nichol points out, the title is *not* an abbreviation of the first line of the poem (“I as a blurry groundhog bundling home”); rather, the first line deliberately alters the meaning:

“‘I’ is a concept not in focus, or perhaps composed of multiple elements that together blur it, or create a blur in their flickering back and forth...” (Kent “*Lighting*” 114).

The seeming syntactical break adds to the “blurriness” of the point of view, the eliding of animal and human in the first line (“I as a blurry groundhog bundling home / find autumn storeyed”). Ambiguity in point of view continues: it is unclear whether one is at groundhog height or human height. Moreover, it does not matter, *because* autumn is “storeyed,” from “leaf-stain” in the street to “disappearing clear,” all perspectives equally present and valued, and because of the “creatureliness,” the identity and perspective, shared with the groundhog.

The same ambiguity is applied more radically, to the boundary between human and divine, created and uncreated, in the evocation of the subjectivity of the Incarnate God in “On a Maundy Thursday Walk,” which imagines the unimaginable intersection of human body and uncreated God, of “finely-tuned senses” and “a clear serene constancy.” The Incarnation, that ultimate intersection of Self and Other that is at the heart of Christian redemption, is the “essential / pivot” (*CWC* 71-72). Avison’s poetry is thus intensely concerned with otherness, with breaking down conventional self-other boundaries: not only politically recognized ones like class, disability, appearance, and age, but also boundaries between categories of being: human/animal, animate/inanimate, created/uncreated.

Avison’s work insists on using otherness of perspective to challenge the assumed centrality of the self, erasing boundaries not only between self and transcendent Other but also self and other others—boundaries, for example, between the literate, middle-class self and those on the margins of society. This challenge is rooted not only in Avison’s theology and spiritual experience but also in her deep social commitment and longtime experience working among those least privileged in society. In “Searching and Sounding,” the speaker *becomes* the down-and-out man in the rooming

house or the drug-damaged youth; indeed, this identification is essential to the divine re-creation of her own self:

But you have come and sounded  
a music around me, newly,

as though you can clear  
all tears from our eyes only  
if we sound the wells of weeping with  
another's heart, and hear  
another's music only.

(*The Dumbfounding*, AN 1.200)

In her Pascal lectures of 1993 Avison carefully outlines the nature of this close identification: "*the true believer's problem*" is "*how to say 'I am here,' and not be saying 'I am not not-there'*" (48).

It points to a modifying one learns from the experience of heartfelt sympathy.... It is all very well to "walk a mile in his or her moccasins," but that is not knowing what it is to *be* him or her.... an excellent way to begin working in the inner city is to spend a morning in the application-queue at a welfare office. But to confuse a deepening sympathy with *really* knowing what it is like to be "there" is to drift towards determinist attitudes that rob the poor of the dignity of moral responsibility...No, if we are *here*, we cannot genuinely be "there" as well. But we can hope to be "not not-there." (49-50)

The permeability of boundaries between normally separate categories of being (animal, mineral, vegetable) has long been a key idea throughout Avison's work. Not only is it at the heart of the Christian notion of Incarnation and redemption, and of social justice, but it is also reflected in Avison's environmental philosophy, where an interpenetration of categories is essential to organic life and health, indeed to true identity:

Trees breathe for any  
who breathe to live.

Stone makes every thing  
more what it is:  
sun-hot,

late November bare,  
cold in an early April morning;



age in being  
always.  
("Two," *CWC* 59)

While it is literally true that trees produce oxygen through their own "breathing" process (a touchpoint of global environmental politics), and that rocks are not good insulators, the poem represents these elements as participating in the ongoing act of creation. "Breathing" is a key concept in Avison, associated with life, seeing, and being, with God's power in creation; and all things are connected in an organic environment, as trees breathe not just for themselves but for all who breathe. Stone is usually associated with the inert and inorganic, not with the power of making and identity; "stone" here (the element or principle, not the object, as in "stones") is represented as embodying or intensifying the effects of seasons, taking its part in creation by making "every thing / more what it is". Similar imagery appears in "Enduring," another tree poem, where the interpenetration of categories—bark, arteries, rivers, light—becomes the principle of organic life, also reflecting the love of God in creation:

Love articulates the sunset-flooded  
bark and arteries  
deep rivers into  
evening breathing.  
(*No Time, AN* 2.219)

Recognition of this interconnectedness of things is urgently important, as indicated in the imperatives of "The Ecologist's Song":

Everywhere's ocean of sun, late-flowing, knows  
the dark tides too, the netted shores  
of land and air wrapping the lovely planet  
round, and one knot of the net  
loosed, one strand plucked in the net,  
wake resonances through the hemispheres.

Attend. Attend.  
In pool and sand and riffled waters, here is  
significant witness of an event.  
(*No Time, AN* 2.266)

Animals appear repeatedly in Avison's poetry as Other and yet related to human; the poet enters into their alien perception, stressing the limits of the

reasoning by which humans claim dominance and centrality. This is well exemplified in the title pun in “Seeing So Little,” a dramatic monologue from poet to sparrow, that acknowledges the limitations of the traditional subject-object dynamic of investigation:

I do not want to face the fact that  
loving watching you, over  
ranges of long time, I  
learn so little – yet too much  
to ‘look you up.’

(*No Time*, AN 2.159)

As in many Avison poems, the pun in the title looks two ways, referring both to the littleness of the sparrow and to the limits of human ability to enter into the sparrow’s world. The poem is structured around an implicit contrast between two kinds of Adamic knowledge: definition and objectification versus recognition and celebration of otherness. The monosyllables describing the sparrow’s movement show the limits of human definitive language, with the suggestion of another non-human language, as do neologisms like “snooting,” suggestive not only of the movement she observes but of the sparrow’s subjectivity—its kind of sensing, its own purpose for its movement. The fact that the sparrow cannot walk (“parade”) like a human—the strangeness of the movements—emphasizes its otherness, and also the idea that the human frame should not be conceived as normative: why *should* sparrows have knees? The use of participial and gerundive forms (“loving watching”) combine action and state of being, suggesting the tension between the two kinds of knowledge, while the “fact” she doesn’t want to face is that “loving watching” teaches her too much to look up through definitive research, to debunk the mystery—or that that kind of research will never “know” the sparrow.

Similarly, in “Relating” (*CWC* 22-23), the insect-human encounter (poet watches ant on its “diligent” way) focuses on both their respective alienness and their shared “creatureliness.” Alien forms of perception and purpose (the “more segmented strange / awareneses” that intricately impel the ant’s movement) are “beyond / this other living creature’s grasp.” Like the stars that cannot be seen in the morning, or the languages spoken by others that the poet has never learned herself, the ant may represent a communal world of being and knowledge far beyond any human understanding:

Is your being one  
pictograph, seed of a  
word, the gateway to  
a language nobody speaks?  
So none can read this  
unsegmented, unsmall,  
shared reality.

Yet both are linked to the “radii of power” (literally, the beams of the mid-day sun; metaphorically, the creating and life-giving power of God) that shape their being and identity, focusing “down and in / on you and me over our / warped little shadows”—evoking another relationship with otherness beyond perceptive limits, yet an otherness that relates, that accommodates, intimately (adjusting to their movement in “this midday instant”); note the piling up of prepositions to indicate the intensity and complexity of this relationship. This perspective leads the poem to conclude with the possibility of dialogue, where at the intersection of two separate paths, two alien beings might meet:

I greet you on your way.  
You greet me too, departing?<sup>9</sup>

In another of Avison’s city animal poems, “Early Morning (Peopleless) Park” (*No Time, AN 2.185*), the title emphasizes the absence of human perspective. Here the central metaphor of the poem, in which grass and bushes create their own “storied” tapestry, replaces human iconographic representation by natural self-representation. The poet’s own perception, which creates or translates, is through a form of negative capability—the expressive poetic language that creates a beautifully evocative description of a world as sensed by and through a dog’s movement in the quiet of early morning.

An ornament-coloured hound  
prances among autumn’s  
quivering tassels – morning and mist  
in swaths, bright-dangled, tapestry  
his lissome zigzags.

The paw pads on the grass-mat  
are felt, the pads, now, cushion-whispering  
pressing softly and swiftly where  
sungold is storied,

roomed down,  
this rich only as touched now.

The poem invokes a conventional animal subject of medieval tapestry—the “ornament-coloured hound” “prances” among “tassels” like the heraldic animals of medieval art—and turns it into natural life; “tapestry” here turns from a noun, an artifact created by humans, to a transitive verb, the agent of which is the dog’s experience, the dog’s movements, as woven by his environment of “morning and mist.” The language and art of this world are “felt” and created in one act, felt by both the dog and the grass, in one moment (“only as touched now”); in the immediacy of natural subjectivity, grass and paws, even the inanimate world underfoot, have “senses.” “Sun-gold,” the emblematic colour for power of God in creation, is here “storied,” part of the extended metaphor of tapestry; and there is too the breath of a pun on “storied” and “storeyed,” with the juxtaposition of “storied” and “roomed”, the suggestion of rooms as dwelling places in storeys of buildings, of layered perspectives, as well as of nature as having its own story, here even creating its own story.<sup>10</sup> As in the ecopoetic concept of nonhuman nature as a speaking subject, a different world of speech without words and without definitive telling, in Avison, “utterance is everywhere” (“Knowing the New,” *Not Yet But Still*, AN 3.28).

The alienness of animal experience is linked to our shared “creatureliness,” a concept at the core of Avison’s environmental perspectives. This is expressed through imagery of dwelling places, not merely of earth as planetary “home” but also of dwelling places from all perspectives whether microscopic (e.g., the “emporium” or parallel shopping mall of the enzymes in the shopper’s stomach as she sits eating in the food court of a human shopping mall, “Shop and Sup,” AN 2.192), humanly urban (as in “Shelters,” the concluding poem of *Momentary Dark*), or planetary (cloud-roofs, astronomical ceilings). This blurring of domestic and cosmic perspectives does away with any constructed or preconceived hierarchy about which perspective should be normative.

In “SKETCH: End of a day: OR, I as a blurry” (the poem which coins the term “creatureliness”), as we have seen, this layering of perspectives is the core image; as “autumn” is “storeyed,” layered from “leafstain and gleam of wet” to the “disappearing clear,” all perspectives are equal and valued. Cosmic principles such as wind and clouds are described with domestic imagery (“paraffin-pale wind,” a riddle on two things that are both invisible yet seen in their effects, and “cloud-thatch,” clouds as a roof). And the definitive aspect of “creatureliness” shared with the ground-hog is the need for home (indoors “promises” “creatureliness”); this

springs from the notion of the creature as being in its own place (home and identity), its proper environment, cared for (overtones of “creature comforts”). In another coinage, that shared creatureliness itself “disinhabits” the “cold layered beauty” observed outdoors, emphasizing that the outside cold and infinite sky are not its proper habitation. In her later poetry, Avison will develop the image of earth as a planetary home perfectly designed and adapted for its “creatures” (see for example “Making,” *MD* 29-31) Thus human and animal are related as fellow creatures, similar in their relation both to the earth and to the infinite sky.

“High Overhead” (*MD* 18-19) also develops the idea of a planetary home, imbuing the cosmic with the domestic, and ironically adapting pathetic fallacy. Here Avison plays with perspective again, as the earth-bound human perspective, which can more readily believe in a pre-Copernican flattening of the horizon on a “wide earth-morning” in a prairie spring, is contrasted to astronomical principles that govern the seasons, which we know to be true “book-facts” but which are alien and abstract to us. Yet even these physical principles operate by principles linked metaphorically with familiar human emotions. The imagery imbues cosmic activity with conventional human seasonal emotion, describing the turn of the seasons from spring to summer and fall as the “hotly earth-embracing / swerve” that “will / steady the too- / rambunctious heart.” The attribution of passion to the atmosphere, to the cosmos, to physical principles (“wind-fierce” “hotly earth-embracing”) is not pathetic fallacy, which privileges human emotion and treats nature as a metaphor, but rather but a blurring of perspectives, combining vividly accurate physical description with emotive sensibility, blurring individual and cosmic, human and nonhuman. The domestic, familial image used to describe the cosmos—the “fatherly” sun, and its own extended family, fathers of fathers—is like human families, but is also meant to show both vastness and connectedness, followed by the admission of limitations on our perspective, our natural preference as creatures for our own home “where / we live and, breathing, are simply glad...” Here earth is described as a globe, planet, and home at once—“our own little rollicking orb”: “rollicking” to describe rotation as well as suggesting partying, play, the abundant life of spring. Yet we are not without significance and responsibility: the earth is held steady in its orbit of the sun by forces beyond our control, but “Is it up to us too to / hold steady . . . irresistibly / going straight on?”

As suggested earlier, poetic language, while human, attempts to hear nature as a speaking subject, blurring boundaries between seer and object, speaker and listener, and hence between metaphor and referent as well.

Avison's poems are both intensely vivid physical representation and layered symbolically; one meaning is not privileged over the other. The light in creation is both natural and divine, as God is both transcendent creator and immanent life and light; God is both outside creation and inside, delighting in it, creator and created united, in continual evocation of the Incarnation moment.

In "March Morning" (s 25), for example, the metaphor and reality of the natural world intermingle; both are equally "real," as the poem blurs the boundaries of sense perception, of familiar and alien experience. Here in the equinox, the turn of the year, Avison interweaves winter and spring images, metaphor and literal sense ("rosy fingertips" are tree shadows on snowbanks, yet they suggest the actual tree tips of spring, and even the epic formulation for dawn), blending different elements of sense perception, shadows stroking the snowbanks "as if for music." "Sun-buttery" captures precisely the quality of light at that time, the moment of transition from winter to spring caught in the image of snowbanks on point of melting in brightness. Rob Merrett helpfully discusses the iconographic significance of this image ("Unpredictability" 97); these, with the "wafering" banks, combine sacramental overtones with physical particularity, capturing exactly the moment of dynamism and change from winter to spring; the meaning of one (Easter / communion / sacrifice) informs the other (spring / new life). The description culminates in a conflating of physical light and ineffable presence:

and all the eyes of God glow, listening.

This breathtakingly vivid description of the effect of March light in the snow takes one of the more alienating images of God and makes it familiar, part of the sensing of the created world itself, uniting transcendent and immanent: God's eyes in creation (perceived and perceiving) and God on his throne (image from Revelation and prophets). As part of the same process, "my heart branches"; like the Creator, the seer becomes one with the thing seen, in an act of the optic heart, in the "heart-break" of opening, melting, spring, new life, and the breaking open of self-centred vision. The colloquialism describing the emblematic child—"the neighbour's kid"—suggests the homeliness of the scene as suffused with divine life and light, precisely articulated in the characteristically ambiguous syntax of the final lines; the "kid" shrugs off his winter jacket and

...wondering looks breathing the  
crocus-fresh breadwarm

Being —  
easy as breathing.

The point of view of the poem transfers here from poet to child, observer to observed; “being” is both noun object of boy’s “breathing” and noun described by adjectival phrase “easy as breathing,” creating a circular grammatical construction “breathing / Being / breathing”, like the motion of breath itself.

“Palette,” which contains the title phrase of *Momentary Dark* (68), also mixes elements and categories of creation in its precise evocation of mid-spring landscape, in which the “palette” of “yellow and blue-green young / cottony leaves...are / four hues over the / wintry rack of branch and tip – / a still becoming form – that summer / trees will enfold fully.” Three seasons flow into one another; nature is seen as process, continuous, self-powered, and living, as bare branches themselves are a “still becoming form.” In this poem the nonhuman world is complete, independent, and the human figure is alien:

Such blueness in a windy tumbled  
sky, and yet so still!  
Mist on the lake water is  
gashed by an afternoon swimmer;  
healing (tiny orblets  
of air, resolving welter)  
comes even as the  
crunch of homebound footsteps  
dies away, the towel-draped  
swimmer dashing home again  
after his icy plunge.

The lone human figure “gashes” the morning mist, hinting at destructive capacity, but the mist heals itself, becoming “tiny orblets / of air, resolving welter” (a hyperbolic image evoking violence of waves, confusion, from the swimmer’s plunge), as the human figure retreats. The potential rift is healed in the mingling of categories of being, a mixture of elements; “welter” is “resolved” in evaporation, as water becomes air, “orblets,” a liquid image for moisture-laden air. As elsewhere in Avison, the blending of elements is a fundamentally natural process, key to environmental health. Here, too, in giving nature a voice and emotions Avison invokes pathetic fallacy with a quotation adapting a familiar weather adage; but the emo-

tions are solely elemental, not human, as the leaves themselves become a source of light, "dancing" with life, movement, ongoingness:

"Laugh before breakfast – tears  
by bedtime"? A sudden shower  
fans out from camel-coloured clouds.

The little new-drenched leaves  
glow in the momentary dark,  
dancing.

("Palette," *MD*, 68)

While subtle, precise, ambiguous, evocative in these ways, nonetheless Avison frequently confronts environmental issues and human responsibility directly, often through a critique of how human interpretation and domination obscure, distort, and exploit ("despoil" is a recurring verb) the nonhuman creation. In "Orders of Trees" (*No Time*, *AN* 2.160), Avison criticizes human self-centred perspective in portraying artificial human order imposed on natural: "Forests existed before us / ancient and vast. / Now we have made our planet / bare-faced." The perspective is global, and emphasizes the need for penitence and humility in relation to the environment, with a reminder that nature exists separately from and prior to humans. "Bare-faced" is usually an adjective for "lie," impudent crime, or arrogance, a version of the sin of pride; often in her work Avison associates pollution with the theology of the Fall, with spiritual sickness. Similarly, "The woodlots, orchards, farms and groves / make arithmetical comment. / Not contrite, boasting no improvement, we / nonetheless persist." Human order imposed on natural is associated with arrogance and obduracy; with the term "contrite," from confessional liturgy, Avison stresses the need for humility in our relationship with nature as with God.

Where Avison diverges from the mainstream of ecocriticism is that in her work the natural order has spiritual significance. Environmental pollution is linked with spiritual and moral pollution, and is frequently placed in an eschatological framework; pollution is both a metaphor for and a result of original sin. And, as in the Fall, there is hope for redemption:

Interpreters and spoilers since the four  
rivers flowed out of Eden,  
men have nonetheless  
learned that the Pure can bless  
on earth *and* from on high



ineradicably.  
("Light (III)," s 61)

Derivatives of the term "spoilers" recur in Avison's later poetry, referring on at least one level to pollution and distortion of the creation; here, attached to "interpreters," it suggests the Adamic knowledge that dominates and distorts (a theme begun in "Light (I)" with the potential for building and undermining, with "the harpsweep on the heart" and "the constructed power / of speculation"). Yet even from within an airplane, an enclosed technological cell, one can nonetheless apprehend "the source of light." Similarly, in "We Are Not Desecrators" (*Not Yet But Still*, AN 3.36), the human figure is portrayed as intrusive, as distorting the natural world by her very presence, echoing the ecocritical concept of human language and perception as inevitably distorting the language of the environmental other; yet there is the potential for human receptivity to that environment, and even the "despoilers" are the subject of the "miracle" of transformation, or redemption—

My kind out there sullies  
it all, as I do being here.

Yet we, providing an unlikely  
context for miracle, maybe, alone  
are inwardly kindled.  
(The songsparrows, for instance, are  
wholly given to improvising their  
immemorial singing – further  
compelling us despoilers  
to pure awareness!)

A number of poems from the new collection *Momentary Dark* particularly focus this conjunction of human environmental responsibility and eschatological context, with varying degrees of directness. "A Weather Front, Early Spring" (9) describes, literally, barometric pressure dropping and pre-storm heaviness in the city; air pollution is blurred with overcast skies and low pressure, with the promise of cleansing and clearing in the storm to come. "Seeping vaporous sludge" blurs natural storm cloud with smog; the contemporary question "What do I breathe..." is answered by "No industry's / foul breath is being / forced on those at the / pedestrian level"—rather, it is car exhaust, insidious, "creeping" as pressures build. Even in the murk of the city, however, there is possibility for redemption, and the

murk itself is part of the process, “build[ing] toward a far / sure, exhilarating / storm” that will “blow in / an applegreen evening”:

...the limp trees then  
will all be plumage-tossers! And  
we people will  
walk out into  
the last skyshine  
to breathe, again.

The storm is “sure,” suggesting purpose as well as inevitability. As “limp trees” become “plumage-tossers,” plant and animal categories are blurred, vividly evoking the “silver leaves” effect, the freshening wind before a storm, but with overtones of celebration. The “last skyshine” is literally sun after storm in late afternoon; yet the image is repeated elsewhere in the collection in a more eschatological context, and is here linked with “breathing,” with all that word implies in Avison—breathing of cleaner fresher air, fuller being.

“Reconnaissance” (24-25) evokes more directly the theme of apocalyptic environmentalism; the earth is envisioned as a person exhibiting symptoms of a mortal illness, or a “dangerous / stretch of highway,” and signs, symbols, and symptoms pointing to this dangerous situation are ignored until it is too late. Apathetic “earth-dwellers tend to / amble about in spite of / being alerted,” finding excuses for ignoring the danger signs, saying it is

... “Probably  
all a dead issue,”  
the tone as flat as the map  
of a land that ends in a  
knife-edge over nowhere.

This wilfully bland ignorance is as egregious as that which believed the earth was flat, with less physical evidence to support it; the image also suggests the dead-end implications of this world view, with the precariousness and danger of a “knife-edge.” As in “Alternative to Riots,” in the apocalyptic landscape of this poem there are multiple possible references: environmental degradation; the end of the world in Christian eschatology; life without vision, limited perception, leading to the enclosed despair of “nowhere.” Eschatological overtones become more explicit in “the last / tapestried evening sky,” and the symptoms that are “all spent,” having run

their course, and that now “open on / silence”: the silence of apathy or death, with none left to perceive them. The attention required—and absent—here is that which is enjoined in “The Ecologist’s Song”: the command to value each detail, to recognize the interconnectedness of the creation—here lost in aimless vacancy. With a comparable shift to the imperative mood, the poem enjoins the reader to “seek out the person who / endures here. Or two or five / perhaps, or a thousand thousand.” The trope of survivors of global catastrophe blurs into biblical remnant; but even in this grim anonymous landscape there is the possibility of hope, as one individual who endures can multiply to a thousand thousand (language suggesting the other side of apocalypse here, the heavenly side, praise of saints?). These individuals who “endure” are those whom “Necessity / [has] held...in reserve / as, ultimately, sign and symbol”; warning signs and symptoms are transmuted now to people, as those who endure these times become themselves a sign—not a symptom, rather a sign pointing to the “significance of an event.”

“Making” (29-31) unites theological and environmental perspectives more directly. The poem opens with the image of respective “roofs,” blending cosmic and domestic:

This is not mist. It’s myriad  
snowflakes, the fine-grained kind. Our roof  
breathes them. Their roof is  
mothering cloud-mass. Its roof is  
sun and air. Their roof  
goes black, where space creates  
dark context for  
lovely blue-green solitary  
little earth.

What is “space” to one order of being is roof to another, on to infinity; space itself is a “roof,” created as such, and providing the “context” for earth as planet, tiny in the overall universe, yet domestic home (here “solitary / little earth” and “one little orb”), a context that shows both tininess and significance. Mist-flakes and sky become organic, almost sentient; the sky “breathes” them and the cloud is their “roof” and “mother,” literally and figuratively. The poem is built on a wondering contrast between the vastness of the universe and tiny domestic earth, and God’s delight in both vastness and detail:

... Your  
imagination had been riotously  
playful, spindling out a  
universe, with many  
minor and massive whirlings and  
vast arenas where they can wheel).  
Why, here, a  
coddling space around  
one little orb, clothing it  
with air and seas and continents and  
tiny life-forms, magical in  
detail, most of them, too,  
minutely alive?

This conjunction of infinity and tininess, like Christ's crossing of the boundaries of being in the Incarnation, challenges conventional understanding of scale; so humans are both "privileged" and "paltry," placed by this poem at the intersection of teleological time (the fall of Lucifer "in ancient time") and cosmic space, both equally provided and indwelt by God. "Earth" is placed in "context" of both physical space and spiritual time. Human sin and hope for redemption are described in terms of our own relationship to this environment:

... You  
foreknew us who would  
muddle, mangle, despoil, degrade – moreover, with  
a mind meant to  
be like Yours.

The effects of human sin are described in recognizably environmental terms; "spoiling" implies conquest, linked with "mangle" and "degrade." But they are applied more broadly—these verbs have no specific object. The destruction, distortion, stripping, applies not just to the earth but to creation, i.e., fullness of being in a broader sense, ruined by self-centred vision; God foreknew that the "earthen people" (made of dust, or earth-dwellers) would "have their own notions" and "despoil" both the home and being given to them. These effects, this distortion and narrowness, are contrasted to the "mind" we were meant to have, which, like God's, should take infinite delight in each tiny detail, "such lovely / patterns and impulses, each / unique in every / new-minted morsel!" (This is also the mind of poetry; see "Poetry Is," *MD* 27-28).

The hope lies in divine foreknowledge, which is both question and answer. God is “not time-bound” and even the degrading of His creation by our sinfulness will be ultimately taken up in an “ultimately irreversible / mortally perilous / purpose: Your / ‘delight!’”. “Delight” is the ultimate goal of being, the divine purpose, both alpha and omega, and it is the model and the context for human relationship with their own “coddling” environment. Humility, the dissolving of preconceptions of value and importance, is key to “delight.”

As suggested at the beginning of this essay, it is impossible to address Avison’s ecological poetics without acknowledging the significance of the urban setting of most of her poems. While the city can represent the distorting constructs of technological arrogance and “honeycomb[ed]” sense (“Prelude,” *Winter Sun*, AN 1.61), it is also the place where vision can be transformed and life can abound. Avison treats the urban landscape as having the same potential for natural growth and renewal as the natural world (cf. also Merrett, “Natural History” 103-04). In “Ineradicable Promise” (*No Time*, AN 2.183) the fundamental contrast between the natural rhythms of the farming year and the technology-locked streets of urban experience expands into the realization that the potential for such growth and renewal also exists in the city, be it only “pocket and patch.” In the rural world, when spring softens the soil, “all new, all sun-embrowned, / the is seems what it ought”—metaphor and reality, ideal and actual, are one, in provision for the natural creation; the nonhuman world itself exemplifies openness and receptivity—”Still, slowly, more and more is known / of sun, and rain.” “The farmer heart” could refer both to the human heart possessed of such receptivity and closeness to natural world, or to the heart of Christ the sower, seeking to reach us in our “computer channeled / currency-funnelled packaged and marketable / fabrications where / we scud and skulk, puzzled / by static, loosed to veer / towards lunacy....” The urban technological environment obscures both spiritual and natural signals with “static;” inhabiting that environment becomes a form of avoidance of such reality, either rudderless “scud[ding]” or fearful yet aimless “skulk[ing].” We have a sense of “need” but not of how to fill it, hence vacancy and existential meaninglessness (eloquently portrayed in Avison’s earlier poetry). The poem then turns direction on the key question

No metaphor for cities under tillage?

Can a city be as receptive as a farmer’s field, to plow and planting? Is there no “metaphor,” no way of understanding it in a sensory capacity? (Note

that the question implies that “cities under tillage” is not itself a metaphor: that it is what it says, and does not need something to represent it.) The answer, in the final verse paragraph, is “yes.” The image of city gardens elides receptivity of the soil to spring with receptivity of the human spirit to divine tillage: “Pocket and patch it may be, but still, here / is where-withal to receive.”

“Exchanges and Changes,” from *Momentary Dark* (77-78), reads in some ways like a more pessimistic version of “Ineradicable Promise,” but in this poem environmental images meld more overtly into issues of social justice. Here the city can know redemption, but the dominant image is of farmland being paved over, cement cutting off the “loam” or rich soil of life, literally referring to building up, “developing,” over farmland. The poem opens with a prayer:

Sufferer of cities, hear me for  
green pastures are  
everywhere despoiled. Cement and paving  
seal off the hope of  
loam for more than our  
sons' and daughters' lifetimes. Here  
is what we have  
meantime to learn: to  
be, in cities.

The “hope of / loam” suggests the ongoing association of soil with hope, potential growth, and renewal, as in other poems like “Ineradicable Promise,” but it also refers literally to the loss of the family farm after generations, a fact of urbanization. The loss of roots to the soil, the loss of the family farm, becomes as such an emblem for postmodern world, cut off from spiritual sources of life by technological pragmatism, materialistic greed, and acquisitiveness. The term “despoiled,” repeated twice in this poem, focuses this double meaning; the “green pastures” are an almost archetypal image for Edenic peace and divine provision, associated with the kingdom of heaven in the commonplaces of Christianity, yet also referring to literal farmland. The theological resonance of the phrase expands the significance of the “despoiling” from the natural to the social and spiritual.

The reality is, however, that we must learn “to / be, in cities,” as Avison did herself. This address to “sufferer of cities” creates several levels of meaning: one who puts up with cities, suffering them in patience (as does the poet / speaker herself and other dispossessed farmers); or the street per-

son who suffers in his/her city existence; and Christ as Sufferer and Redeemer, Whose redemptive suffering took place in the city and still takes place there, in identification with the other “sufferer.” Hope is seeded in through enjambement repeatedly isolating and emphasizing the term “Here” (as in the here and now, where we have to be, not some ideal world where we wish to be): “Here / is what we have / meantime to learn: to / be, in cities” becomes, in the same line, “Here / too are choices, given / the will, and minimal earnings.” Considering that “be” in Avison refers to more than mere survival, refers to life itself, to fuller vision and service, she translates that “being” into “choices” that will enable “change,” the title theme of the poem. The will and means needed to be able to live fully in the city is translated directly into the most obtrusive aspect of city living for middle-class comfortables, the encounter with the other as street person, those on margins of society; “minimal earnings” are immediately taken up in “‘Change, / please,’ chants the street-corner fellow.” At this point, the poem changes ground, too, initially to address the social inequities that are one of chief evils of urbanization, and then to place the whole in an eschatological context. Avison plays on the term “change” as both noun meaning small money and transitive verb, so the request from the panhandler can become an imperative:

Doesn't he know the  
verb is transitive? “Change  
my lot with a quarter  
of your huge holdings! Change  
my role, make me a  
giver who keeps back  
only the minimal means for a  
simple life. I'd like  
to look employable again, in time to  
work again.”

“Change” now means to change places, to change society, to change the self. The language here keeps the agricultural reference but adds a capitalistic element (“huge holdings” can refer to both landholdings and to capital assets; “lot” can be both a plot of land and a situation in life). Change is required at the social level, a turnover whereby the person in need can himself become a “giver,” with the model for such giving being the traditional medieval teaching on the use of riches, giving from one’s superfluity and keeping back only the necessity for life.

With the end of the imagined quotation from the street person, the poem turns back to prayer, still with the key verb “change,” as the voice of the street person blends into the power of the “sufferer of cities”:

And then change everything  
with not a single despoiler’s energies  
agglomerating, ever  
again. And then  
change everything

one last time – hear me – to  
those almost unimaginable  
green pastures.

The term “despoiler,” suggesting degrader of natural environment and of fruitful farmland, is now linked with “agglomerating,” the capitalistic greed often associated with environmental degradation in today’s politics. But the vision of social and environmental healing is superseded by a final change (eschatological “one last time”) to farmland again, these the “almost unimaginable / green pastures,” where the farmland is transformed into the pastures where the “sufferer of cities” is the Good Shepherd, and where all are provided for. Here, imagery of farmland elides eschatological justice with justice in this world, enacted through the layering of the poem’s title: “change,” “exchange,” overturning existing order, transforming and making new, is brought about by the ability to “exchange” places between self and other.

The city is the locale for “change,” for transformation of vision and ultimate encounter with the other, both human and non-human; it is the place where Christ’s transforming work is done. Avison’s own experience with those on the margins of society, her intense sense of social justice, arising from and with a sense of environmental justice, is expressed through the urban experience in its contrarities. More, in Avison’s evocation of the natural world in the city, human community and human experience become one with the non-human environment, in harmony with it, and the life-principles of one help inform and renew the other.

These principles are whimsically encapsulated in “For a Con Artist, Who Had Given the Worker a False Address” (*No Time*, AN 2.161). Based on Avison’s experience in social work, this poem links social worker and fugitive under the same sun; concepts of community (“neighbourliness”) blur with the natural world portrayed as alive, sharing its consciousness with those who inhabit it:



This morning, another con  
 I guess. Nobody known  
 that name this address.  
 Snow sun aflame children  
 fawn dogs dreambound green  
 leafmat under snow...  
 but nobody I know  
 though I am nobody to  
 hide from, God knows.  
 The wide blue  
 morning is alert lovely wordless  
 with me: waiting.

The imagery of other city nature poems—“fawn dogs dreambound,” children, and “green / leafmat under snow”—suggests the light of March, the potential for spring and growth and renewal, as well as its own independent world and awareness; the “worker” is at one with this environment—both are “alert,” “waiting,” and open, both “wordless,” like the natural language that is not dictated by human words and telling, as well as that social openness that does not talk at or dictate to the other. Yet this immersion in the environment is closely tied to human identity and isolation, subtly highlighted through the repeated rhymes on “nobody,” “know,” “known,” with “snow”; the speaker is deeply identified not only with the nonhuman environment but also with the absent fugitive, seen in the circular expression “nobody I know / though I am nobody / to hide from.”

The poem also focuses on neighbourliness, the urban human community, where people aren’t “nobody.” “To knock next door is / neighbourly” (as if she herself belonged, were being neighbourly), and “This sunny little block / right on the cartracks feels / friendly”; connected to the larger community via streetcar tracks, the street is also connected to the environment, as the sunshine of blue morning and the sunniness of the “friendly” block are both intuitively sensed. The poem concludes with wondering about the lost one, in this communal context:

Walking away  
 into the wide of day  
 I wonder why  
 threads fray so under a  
 blueness and shine. My  
 foolishness podgy with joy  
 contemplates the absurd  
 credibility of the

shouted-by-ranges-of-angels-down-to-earth  
 reality that embraces  
 this street and her not on this street but somewhere,  
 indulged, a little, at least  
 for now.

In the repeated rhyme “away” “day” “fray,” the poem gently presses the question, why and how can the threads of human community and connection “fray” under such warmth and life, with the underlying question, how can the individual lose his connection to God under the “blueness and shine” that embody God’s love in creation? As she contemplates the “reality” of that love, which is both credible, a pun meaning either a matter of credence, or a rationally plausible truth, and “absurd,” challenging the boundaries of conventional human categories of appropriateness, one is reminded of the stretching of perception at the core of Avison’s poetry and belief; in a radical conjunction of the natural and the ineffable, the natural morning and the human community are elided in a love that is ineffable yet “shouted” down to earth by “ranges of angels.” Her “foolishness” that contemplates this morning is the Gospel foolishness, the childlike receptivity that is required for such “joy”—“podgy” means overstuffed, slightly ridiculous, meaning both that human standards of normalcy are irrelevant, and also evoking the excess of joy that is received in “good measure, pressed down and flowing over.”

The “reality that embraces” both community and fugitive con artist and self is beyond the individual perception; “indulged, a little, at least / for now,” like the fugitive, we are all under the same wide blue morning—and only under temporary reprieve from an encounter with that love, and that world. At the heart of Avison’s urban ecological vision, both city and natural environment, human community and isolated individual, are bathed in the same “far-breathed holiness” in which “unimaginable green pastures” and “opalescent city” are one (“The Implicit City,” *MD* 39-40).

### Notes

- 1 It is interesting that Bryson repeatedly characterises Avison’s early friend and editor Denise Levertov as an ecopoet.
- 2 All quotations from *No Time* are taken from *Always Now*, vol. 2, abbreviated as *AN 2*. Quotations from *sunblue*, *Concrete and Wild Carrot*, and *Momentary Dark* are taken from the first editions, abbreviated as *s*, *CWC*, and *MD*. Quotations from *Winter Sun*

- and *The Dumbfounding* are taken from *Always Now*, vol. 1, abbreviated as *AN 1*. Quotations from *Not Yet But Still* are taken from *Always Now*, vol. 3, abbreviated as *AN 3*.
- 3 Rob Merrett suggests that in her tree poems in *No Time* Avison “presents trees as speaking life-forms and as natural and man-made signs” (“Natural History” 101).
  - 4 See, for example, foundational work on gender and early modern science by Evelyn Fox Keller and Carolyn Merchant. See also Lynn White, below.
  - 5 “The Bible To Be Believed,” *s* 57. This transformation in the “jail-break” is discussed at length in my earlier essay “The Dissolving Jail-Break in Avison.” The self-other dynamic in Avison is the focus of my forthcoming article “Word, Eye, and Other in Margaret Avison”; some segments are reprinted here.
  - 6 “Patience” (*No Time, AN 2*. 140); “3 a.m. by Snowlight” (*MD* 36); “SKETCH: End of a day: OR, I as a blurry” (*s* 19); “Conglomerate Space or Shop and Sup” (*No Time, AN 2*.192).
  - 7 “We can see here that whole notion that knowledge is always beginning anew, that we exist not in a state of knowing but in a state of not knowing, that we are constantly being born again into the world not knowing...the title here...points to knowledge as “found,” not possessed...” (“Sketching,” in Kent “*Lighting*” 113).
  - 8 In ecocriticism, naming as “conceptual control,” definition, separation of self from the other (Merwin in Scigaj 30-31; Gilcrest 42), is contrasted to language that reflects pre-verbal experience, arising from a connection to natural ecosystems (Snyder in Scigaj 31). According to Ammons, poetic language reflects an initial pre-verbal experience; a poem occurs when language stretched to reflect the freshness of that experience (cited in Scigaj 30).
  - 9 The concept of “voice” and subjectivity of the nonhuman is contested in ecocriticism. While attributing human voice to the nonhuman is still problematic, and could be seen as human-centred “colonizing,” in “post-humanism” non-human others can be “constituted as speaking subjects rather than merely objects of our speaking” (Murphy in Gilcrest 40); they have their own voice, beyond linguistic rules of telling and naming (Gilcrest 48). In Avison, “utterance is everywhere”; creation speaks of, reflects, and embodies God’s creating word, but does so through its own voices, what we would call subjectivity.
  - 10 Cf. Rosemary Sullivan’s observation on autumn being “storeyed” in “SKETCH: End of a day” (51).

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