

INTRODUCTION

by David A. Kent

The centenary of a major writer's birth presents an opportunity to consider impact, influence, and enduring significance as well as to reaffirm the importance of a body of work. The present collection of memoirs, poems, reflections, analyses, and an updated bibliography tries to fulfill that mandate for a writer who during her life avoided self-promotion and was embarrassed by public attention when she received it. At least for a period in early adulthood, she was, as George Bowering suggests, "famous in Boston and Tokyo and unknown in her icy home town by the lake" ("The Weight").

Margaret Avison (1918-2007) began writing as a child with the encouragement of her mother. Her publication history stretches over a period of more than seventy-five years, from the autumn of 1929, when her poems appeared in the children's section of the *Toronto Globe*, until 2006 when her last collection of poems, *Momentary Dark*, was published.¹ Always a single woman (though marriage was a possibility more than once), for the first half of her life she dedicated herself to the vocation of artist and worked hard at it, reading widely, writing poetry and reviewing books, and sacrificing career security whenever it threatened her freedom to write. In the second half of her life, following an experience of conversion in 1963 she often described in interviews, Christian faith became her defining identity and centre of gravity. Throughout her long life, there were obstacles, periods of depression, and physical suffering. Although she lived into her ninetieth year, she had repeated bouts of ill health to survive, from anorexia nervosa as a teenager, to rheumatic fever as a young adult, to lupus as an older woman, all of which she faced with gritty courage. Under a pseudonym, Angela Martin, she described some of her childhood challenges from the perspective of an achieved Christian faith. This essay, "I Wish I Had Known that...I couldn't have my cake and eat it," was an act of witness she was persuaded to make in the aftermath of conversion. It is uncharacteristically self-revealing, at least until she wrote her autobiography towards the end of her life. It is reprinted here, along with another essay, "...At Least We Are Together," which demonstrates her compassion for the marginalized as well as her appreciation for the intractable problem of urban poverty. She speaks of the poor from experience grounded in volunteer and then full-time work at Evangel Hall, a ministry sponsored by

the Presbyterian Church in downtown Toronto. A courageous and resilient person, nurtured by loving parents, she delighted in nature and music, loved humour and witticisms, and inspired (and sought) loyal friendships. Despite the many forms of recognition she received during her lifetime—honorary degrees, Governor General’s Awards, Officer of the Order of Canada, among others—the centenary of Avison’s birth offers an occasion to further acknowledge her achievement as a poet and to disclose elements of her life story she preferred to keep from public scrutiny.

Avison early chose to ally herself to the artist’s independent and solitary way of life, as she repeatedly turned away from any of the limited career paths then open to young women. Growing up as a “PK” (preacher’s kid) in Methodist and then United Church manses in the years between the twentieth century’s two world wars, she increasingly felt the muffling constraints of middle-class life and, as the economic depression deepened during her adolescence, became painfully aware of the social inequities in the existing political structure. She rebelled against her upbringing, allied herself with the political left, and came to value truth tellers—the musicians, painters, sculptors, and writers who stood outside established social structures and offered their own visions of reality. While writing was her chosen form of expression, music remained an important presence throughout her life. Her mother was an accomplished pianist, and Avison took piano lessons for many years, delighted in concerts, and later enjoyed playing the recorder. She had the gratification in later life of having poems set as hymns by Jane Best, her friend Joan Eichner’s daughter, and to know that other poems were inspiring music by composer John Burge (Faculty of Music, Queen’s University). As a younger person she wrote fan letters to Gertrude Stein and to e e cummings, and, in 1962, to Glenn Gould. She bought paintings when her meager assets allowed it, and an early boyfriend was the sculptor Elford Cox. For long periods of time she lived in a room, ate sparingly, did free-lance editing to earn maintenance money, and read and wrote compulsively.

Avison’s attraction to outstanding works of art meant that her aesthetic standards in writing were so elevated that the unpublished poems in the University of Manitoba Archives are as numerous as the published, and her first book, *Winter Sun*, did not appear until she was forty-two years of age. By then she had developed the singular voice that was unmistakably her own. As Richard Tillinghast reflects (266), while reviewing her second book, *The Dumbfounding* (1966), and quoting lines from “Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes (in Prospect)” in the first (*Winter Sun*), “Who else could have written that?” Among the contributors to this special

issue who are poets, Ken Babstock and Jill Jorgenson both pay tribute to Avison by enacting elements of her distinctive style and manner to engage, disrupt, and challenge readers: e.g., the frequent use of the interrogative, suspended syntax, compound epithets, subtle and indirect allusions, and (as Jorgenson puts it) “verbal cross-pollination...hyphen-surprises and unexpected linguistic manipulations.” In another superb contribution, Mia Anderson, the daughter of Avison’s friend Violet Anderson, captures what Avison meant to her as a girl and then young woman and acknowledges her indebtedness while using a complex poetic form the older poet would have admired.

A shy and introverted person, Avison could perform in public and engage in social events when necessary, but she preferred to avoid such occasions and to dwell and work in quiet anonymity. She believed that poetry should speak for itself and avoid the first person pronoun. It is the absence of stated personal desire in the poetry that motivates Elizabeth Davey’s analysis and leads to her characterization of Avison’s embrace of womanhood in her later years. In spite of her authentic humility and self-abnegation, Avison nevertheless attracted attention through the power of her personality and the integrity of her principles, and won critical approval by the sustained quality of her work. She combined intimidating intelligence with unexpected vulnerability; the first generated respect, while the second inspired affection and love. One-to-one exchanges with another person were her preference and strength. Anne Corkett unexpectedly became a friend from a younger generation. Her recollections of being with Avison illustrate the poet’s gift for attentive intimacy, and others could certainly testify to a similar experience. As Stan Dragland observes, “She poured her whole self into the most casual exchange. I have never known a person who gave so much of herself to everyone she met.”

Yet Avison’s insistence on being independent, on going it alone, on not ‘being beholden,’ is partially belied by her debts to those (including A. J. M. Smith and Northrop Frye) who believed in her genius and to those who first helped her publish her poetry in books: the Coleridge scholar Kathleen Coburn in the case of *Winter Sun* and the American poet Denise Levertov for *The Dumbfounding*. Out of a concern for privacy, both on behalf of her friends and herself, Avison was not always prompt to acknowledge intellectual debt. When Sandra Djwa sought information about Avison’s friendship with Roy Daniells while researching a biography of the venerable English professor from the University of British Columbia, Avison responded by downplaying her relationship with Daniells.² She had been his student in her first year of university, but in a letter

of 21 November 1998 she insisted that she wanted to remain anonymous and not be included among Djwa's list of young writers whom he had encouraged. Djwa had done her homework, however, and on 2 December 1998 sent Avison a chronological list of multiple references to her by Daniells over the years, including a few short letters Avison had written to him. That prompted a "truly contrite" response in which she made some qualifications, admissions, and explanations. For example, Avison admits being "too tyrannical" about the "anonymity issue." She also claims that

not one trace remains in my memory of any contact between us [her and Daniells] since the Vic freshman class! Why, I cannot tell. By that stage I was a wage-slave paying off a monstrous debt and increasingly loving the identification with fellow-employees and raw-footed walkers from downtown to rooming-house districts to save carfare. It obliterated college contacts for awhile?

The earlier letter to Djwa on 21 November contains a passage expressing her animus against biography that may help to explain her failure of memory:

Yes, I do 'wish to remain anonymous' — because it is the only way to keep writing; the 'personal story' is irrelevant; yet that, not one's writing, is what is clamoured for on the impetus of an 'entertain-us' bias. So I duck everything that could feed this appetite.

William Aide's essay, "'I Will Write,'" discloses a similar awkwardness on Avison's part in the case of Margaret Clarkson, the mentor during her first years as a Christian and for several years afterwards one of the most important people in the poet's life. Remarkably, she is never directly named in Avison's autobiography, and her absence raises questions. Aide also ran into resistance from Avison when he resurrected older poems he wished to quote and she preferred forgotten, though on the key issues she eventually conceded his rights to examine and speak about them. All these matters have to do with personal life, 'personal story,' and Avison's efforts to restrict and control the narrative about her private life, something I have long been interested in exploring.

Given her profound need for privacy, her reluctance to endorse my research into her life for the purposes of a critical biography is understandable. It may be of interest if I briefly review my challenging relationship with Avison on this question. I first proposed to write a critical biography in a letter to her of 15 September 1986. She had already been very co-oper-

ative with respect to three of my projects involving her: a monograph (1989: for the series “Canadian Writers and Their Works”), a collection of essays, appreciations, and bibliography (1987), and an anthology of Christian poetry (1989: ECW Press was the publisher in each case). I therefore asked her permission to proceed with a grant application (SSHRC) to support a biographical work. I was seeking her approval and cooperation for yet another project. That was, in retrospect, a naïve hope. I did not hear back from her immediately but, after attending a reading she gave as part of sesquicentennial celebrations at Victoria College on 6 November 1986, she gave me a grudging “Okay, go ahead” as she rushed past me to greet Gwen MacEwen on a bicycle in the hallway outside the lecture hall. I seized on this comment as an endorsement rather than understand it as an impatient aside in an awkward situation. In any case, I immediately submitted the application (it was successful), and nothing further was said about it when my wife Margo and I attended a December concert at St. George the Martyr Church in downtown Toronto to which Avison had invited us. When I later talked to her on the phone in January 1987, however, she wondered how I had reacted to the November letter she had sent me about the proposed critical biography. The trouble was, as I told her, I had never received any letter from her. (She later described it as the “most naked” letter she had ever written; it was dated 18 November 1986.) Then, in February 1987, I heard news on the radio that an abandoned postal truck had been found full of undelivered mail. I immediately imagined that that was where Avison’s letter had ended up, though the probability seemed low. In fact, as it turned out, Avison’s letter was, indeed, in that truck. Her long-delayed November 1986 letter finally reached me in mid-March 1987 with an explanatory note, replete with passive verbs, from Canada Post’s Customer Service confirming it had been found in the truck, but without specifically saying so: “The enclosed item of mail has been found in Unused postal equipment and forwarded to your attention. Although a thorough investigation has been conducted, responsibility cannot be placed. Please accept the regrets of the Post Office Department for this unfortunate occurrence.” I immediately sent Avison a copy of this note.

I had expected her letter to express her disapproval of my grant application to begin a critical biography. However, it did not say that at all. It was, instead, as she later characterized it, a ‘polite stall.’ In the letter she mentions that she had recently read and given workshops on poetry at a Christian writers’ conference at the Ontario Bible College:

During the struggle to see more clearly — and your projects have forced this upon me, for which I am deeply grateful — I had too to cope with Reading-

as-Public-Event, and with talking about poetry to people who like me are involved in the ambiguities of being Christian and 'into' poetry.

One discovery, and its corollary, she describes in this way:

There is one priority, and that is the Word, written *and* Living Lord. And by so declaring, in faithfulness to the declaration step by step, some choices are made *against* the aesthetic, i.e. a less good poetry may be, probably is, involved in the choice. So okay!

Here is a surprising admission—the aesthetic quality of a poem may have to be sacrificed to faithful Christian witness. A second discovery had to do with the discomfort of putting her self at the centre of public attention:

At the reading I could feel my ego gratified and wondered very much whether the poems can be heard — since they are written for *readers* not audience-in-a-once-over-reading — and therefore whether the focus was not on ego things all round. At this workshop, my own poems were not involved, so that I could focus free of this ego-dread. The people present 'deserved' the best energy-communication we could find together. And the experience, for me, was positive, gratifying, without the down-drag of the ego-feeling.

Avison's anxiety about her ego's craving for recognition and praise through her art was a recurring concern as she worked out the relationship between artistic self-expression and religious faith. Her letter concluded these reflections with a few comments on my proposed project:

Your sabbatical project *seems* non-literary as I grasp it: the witness (in my ways & work) is from God, and interests you as you seek to glorify Him by your witness — the Christian basis, yes. But that is oddly private isn't it? — in you & in Margo & in me, sharing? To focus on the *poems* is okay; once they are published they are there for anybody's purposes. To focus on the person though? As you can see, that is not yet clear to me. We can talk? (Avison to Kent, 18 November 1986)³

Avison was doing her utmost to remain open to my proposal, but she distrusted the genre of biography and, while she did not refuse her co-operation, she did want further discussion to clarify my purposes.

There was some talk about the biography at a picnic Margo and I shared with her by the Humber River in June 1987. We had vainly hoped to persuade her of my benign intentions. It was on this occasion that she stated her wish that I would wait until she was dead (when I could "have every-

thing"). Nevertheless, just a day later and reflecting her ambivalence, Avison called to suggest I start by speaking with her old friend Violet Anderson (mother of poet Mia Anderson). After the grant period began in the autumn of 1987, we met again and had a two-hour talk at "Jason's," a restaurant on Yonge Street near her apartment in Fellowship Towers. A central issue she wanted defined was her role in the process I was initiating. She knew she had to clean up her unpublished poems and letters, and she agreed to talk with me if I encountered any problem and needed clarification or elaboration. She then suggested I talk to Northrop Frye who might, she said, have an interesting perspective.⁴ In a later November conversation she reiterated that a posthumous biography remained a "very attractive idea." In December 1987 it was time for my research trip to the National Archives in Ottawa and to visit with her sister Mary, whose address she had given me. She gave me permission to consult materials in the Public Archives of Canada collections, though the idea that private letters had found their way into the archives was troubling to her. The short, irritable letter for the PAC reads in part as follows: "David Kent tells me that you need from him permission from me to give him access to anything pertaining to me which you may have procured, though I have never given you permission to obtain anything!" When I came by to get her signature on the letter of permission, we sparred briefly. She wondered about the usefulness of my undertaking: "Was it important to know that, in crossing Westminster Bridge, Wordsworth was going to Mac's for a quart of milk?" It was a good question. I was saved that time by the telephone's ringing and quickly excused myself.

I did spend the 1987-1988 academic year doing preliminary research on Avison's biography, sometimes by interviewing people, several of whom she had recommended I contact. For the following two years I tried to do some additional research while teaching full-time. However, it was when I received a second SSHRC grant to support additional research for 1990-91 that her patience ended. I told her about the second grant in October 1990, and she immediately urged me to reexamine my conscience. Her growing resistance had suddenly solidified around my perceived disloyalty and was followed by a letter that began in this way:

Communication between us has been a major difficulty I am afraid, ever since that initial request you made to write my biography when my negative reply was apparently lost for six months in an abandoned Canada Post truck. It was my understanding that, because you had already proceeded with a grant application during that six months, we agreed that I would not hinder

you – as indeed I cannot – in any research you do in materials in the public domain. (Avison to Kent, 3 November 1990)

The missing letter has here assumed the status of a “negative reply,” and there seems to be a suggestion of doubt (in her words “apparently lost”) about my story of the lost letter. Avison went on to admit her real response to my undertaking (“the distress a private person feels at being treated as public property”) and to say that my “encroachments” on her privacy meant “rising tension” and a sense of helplessness. She enjoined me to make clear to people I wished to interview that they should feel no obligation to cooperate for her sake since she neither wanted nor endorsed the project. She also requested a list of people I had talked with so she could apologize “for any pressure they may have felt to accommodate me by giving you what you asked.” Lastly, citing the papers of Margaret Clarkson, which had recently gone to York University Archives, she encouraged me to identify the University of Manitoba as her preferred repository.

After absorbing some of the implications of this strong letter, I replied a few weeks later (10 December 1990). I presented a chronology of events from the 1986-87 period, including a reminder that the lost letter did not contain a “negative reply” but that it led to a series of conversations in which I believed we had worked out a way of proceeding. I was to advise anyone I wished to talk with that the phrase “reluctantly agreed” was the best way to describe her attitude to my project. I also agreed to withhold publication for the “indefinite future.” (Since her mother had lived to the age of 102 years, I hedged a bit on that agreement!) I reminded her that she had herself suggested many of the individuals I initially talked with (e.g., Grace Irwin, Audrey Gibson, Doris Mosdell, Northrop Frye; her sister Mary). I also clarified that her friend from Knox Church, Margaret Clarkson, had approached me, and not I her, and offered to talk with me about their friendship, particularly regarding the conversion and early days at Knox Church. When Clarkson wanted to deposit the papers she had that featured Avison (most of her papers would go to Wheaton College in Illinois), I suggested York University Archives, since that was where papers had been placed in 1984 as she moved from the apartment she had shared with her mother to her final address at Fellowship Towers on Yonge Street. Only after I helped in the deposit of Clarkson’s papers at York did I learn that Avison had arranged for the University of Manitoba to be her official archive.⁵

Several weeks later a long reply, much more conciliatory in tone, reached me (it was dated 28 February 1991). “It *is* difficult, communicat-

ing!” One difficulty Avison identified “has been a certain disorderliness in our readings of our written undertakings”:

Another difficulty has been that so much that each of us heard and remembered from conversations has been differently edited by our different ‘desired ends’ so that you are startled by my impressions of what was included, and I by yours; and it does not help that my memory blanks out all too often... Further difficulty has arisen from the fact that I tend to give mixed signals – viz. the ‘polite stall’ rather than a straight negative reaction to your initial ’85 [1986] letter; and what you heard as a ‘terse’ grudging “okay” rather than, at least, a refusal to try to deal with something so problematical to me at a time and place that already had me rattled. Lent is a good season to confess a form of dishonesty that can trouble my dealings with people, a desire to see from their viewpoint and be accommodating even while cherishing a private point of view that will not, in the long run, accommodate.

Now the missing letter is correctly characterized as a “polite stall” rather than “a straight negative reaction,” and Avison confesses that she too often generates ‘mixed signals’ as she strains to accommodate others while simultaneously retaining her private judgment. She went on to admit that her friends “like myself, could have refused involvement” in my research, and she accepted my new proposal to state to potential interviewees that the project did not have her endorsement and that no one should feel obliged to co-operate with me “through the claims of friendship.” She restated her preference for “the intrinsic ‘life’ that is right in a literary text, without biographical amplification from outside.” And she concluded in this way: “We will not agree on the *genre* issue, I know. And we must at this point simply agree to disagree and keep out of each other’s knitting, I think. Thank you for wanting to go into this fully.” Avison had interpreted my acquisition of a second grant as an act of disloyalty. The result was a polite severing of relations.

My last substantial letter to her enclosed a photocopy of the November 1986 letter that went astray for several months so that she could re-read its detail and see that she simply wanted to discuss my intentions in more detail. I also reasserted why I thought a critical biography was essential. However, for the remaining sixteen years of her life, I did little further research on the biography. What I did do was framed by the qualifications she wanted stated to potential interviewees. I did occasionally keep in touch by letter with her about poetry readings I was organizing, publications I was involved in, and permissions I needed for quotations from her work in articles I was writing. Only in the past few years, and with the

approval of Joan Eichner, Avison's trusted literary executor, have I returned to work on the biography. When it is eventually finished, given all the delays, it may set some sort of record for length of gestation.

What prompted me to begin a critical biography in the first place was that the more I learned about Avison's life and work, the more interesting and fascinating the interrelationship between them became. Although she chose to be a writer, she worked at many different jobs during her life, both part-time and full-time, to support herself. In the end she managed to engage in most of the vocations open to women of her generation that her friends had embraced, including librarianship (University of Toronto), publishing (Canadian Institute of International Affairs), social work (Evangel Hall: though she would strenuously avoid the professional designation of social worker), teaching (Scarborough College), care-giver (to her mother and others, her volunteer work in the Palliative Care Unit at St. Michael's Hospital), and church work (at Knox Church, Toronto). She was by nature fiercely independent and abhorred debt. She had had to borrow money to complete her undergraduate degree at Victoria College and never forgot the psychological burden that put on someone who grew to maturity during the economic depression of the 1930s. She was always apologetic about accepting the one grant she received, the Guggenheim Fellowship that gave her time to write and develop a manuscript while she lived in Chicago for six months in 1956-57. She felt that financial support for the arts should foster audiences, not provide money to writers. During her many years of apprenticeship, she resisted the temptation to seek advice and approval from other writers, spurned invitations to publish when these were based on nationality rather than quality, and chose to work out her own salvation as a writer by sacrifice and determination.

It is the range of Avison's experience that is most striking when her life is viewed in its entirety. As a writer, she participated in almost all aspects of the craft, from acting as an editor and publisher, doing free-lance editing, to translating poetry from another language (Hungarian) into English, assisting in scholarly publications, ghost writing a biography, acting as a writer-in-residence (University of Western Ontario), to being on an editorial board (*Crux*). Her professional life revolved around the University of Toronto where she received her post-secondary education and where she often found work as a freelance editor. While working at the Canadian Institute for International Relations, from 1941 to 1945, for example, she worked with scholars on books and pamphlets and found ways to promote the sales of these publications. In spite of her stated discomfort with academics, she spent four years in graduate school at the University of

Toronto (1963-66), completing all the doctoral requirements but the dissertation, and then taught for two years at Scarborough College (1966-68) before acknowledging that she did not see herself continuing in this career. When she left academia in 1968, she immediately began full-time work at Evangel Hall, the storefront mission on Queen Street in downtown Toronto where she had already been volunteering. Her compassion for the poor and dispossessed, joined to her Christian commitment, led to four years of full-time employment there and then later to such work as the Visitation Evangelism program at Knox Church, to the office of Mustard Seed Mission, and finally to volunteer work in the Palliative Care Unit of St. Michael's Hospital.

As a poet with a reputation of increasing prominence, in her later years she reluctantly became a public figure who had to deal with repeated requests for readings, for advice with literary work, and for evaluative help in grant applications. Just as she ministered to anyone who was ill or troubled in her faith community, so too she nurtured younger writers who needed support and encouragement. Her correspondence with Gail Fox, Anne Corkett, and William Aide bears out this concern. It is fortunate that recipients of Avison's letters retained them since much of her incoming correspondence was lost or destroyed, at least until Joan Eichner began managing her communications. Eichner shared an intimate friendship with Avison over a period of 40 years. Her essay, "Margaret: Snapshots," is therefore especially poignant, offering the reader a close-up of the poet at different times in her life. Readers will also learn much from Graham Jensen's diligent research. The section of his updated bibliography describing Avison's manuscripts and letters offers a much-enhanced and more complete tabulation of her correspondence than we have hitherto had. That section, indeed the bibliography as a whole, discloses some unsuspected literary relationships and connections and should encourage new research in a variety of directions.

The pivotal event in Avison's life remains her conversion experience of 4 January 1963. She has described it in her autobiography as well as in numerous interviews. Occurring just prior to her forty-fifth birthday, this 'turning around' neatly bisects her life between the first half of artistic self-involvement (which she subsequently viewed as a form of idolatry) and the second half of service and Christian commitment. 'Getting religion' disappointed a number of her friends, acquaintances, and admirers. Yet those who knew her best believed that she needed the discipline of a conservative theology and that the severe adherence to 'sola scriptura' she found at Knox Church in Toronto answered this requirement and led to years of

intense study of the bible. As an associate minister, Donald MacLeod met Avison at Knox and became a friend. With the insider's knowledge, he writes about some of the challenges she faced during her nearly forty-year relationship with that church, including its sometimes "vicious" politics. Her religious commitment mirrored a shift in her poetry from the modernist impersonality of *Winter Sun* (1960) to the witnessing to Christian belief in *The Dumbfounding* (1966). That commitment led to a relaxation in her difficult style but also changed how her work was received and regarded; *sunblue* (1978) reinforced a divide that had begun to develop in her audience. And yet, in spite of her firm convictions and stringent theology, she often took positions that stretched the limits of the acceptable within her own community of believers. Northrop Frye told me that he and A. J. M. Smith at one time thought Avison would "sweep the stakes in Canadian literature" and achieve everything that Margaret Atwood has since become. The difference in Frye's view was that Atwood knew what the public wanted, whereas Avison "says to hell with them."⁶

Avison was an obsessive reader, always exploring unusual corners of literature and perpetually on the watch for new voices. Her openness to younger and often more experimental writers led in the 1950s and early 1960s to friendships with Cid Corman and Charles Olson and her fleeting association with Black Mountain writers. The friendship with Denise Levertov was more enduring and immediately consequential as it led to her second book, *The Dumbfounding* (1966), while Levertov was poetry editor at Norton. In turn, Avison supported and encouraged bpNichol and bill bissett. Bissett affectionately remembers she "told me nevr give up n was always encouraging 2 me." She felt a kinship with George Bowering, too. He thought very highly of Avison ("called her the country's best poet, living or elsewhere"), and they continued to correspond over a period of forty years. She met both Don McKay and Stan Dragland during her posting as the first writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario (now Western University) in 1972-73; both speak eloquently of her influence and example. For McKay, heir to her copy of Klein's *Etymological Dictionary*, she was "an actual, live, Canadian visionary, able to inhabit an urban inferno as banal as Toronto, characterize its deadening malaise poetically, and overcome it with supremely agile acts of attention." More important, she helped him believe in his own creative gifts. Avison led Stan Dragland to become a better editor through her respectful editing of his poetry. He came to admire her "intuitive intellect" and some of her poems, such as "New Year's Poem," became, he states in his essay, "part of the permanent lining of my mind." Later, as a trusted editor, he worked with her and Joan

Eichner on several publications, including the collected poems prior to her death as well as her autobiography and other books posthumously. Even in the last two years of her life, Avison remained open to new voices when she undertook “a brief but lively correspondence” with poet Robyn Sarah of Montreal—a very “human exchange” that ranged widely and was mutually inspiring.

As she wished, Avison’s reputation is ultimately grounded in her poems, and this special centenary issue of *Canadian Poetry* is fortunate to have several contributors who eloquently describe and demonstrate the power of her art. For Jeffrey Donaldson, Avison’s poetry “is always trying to wake us up.” He brilliantly uses the Annunciation to explore how her poetry so often concerns itself with the “mystery of creation” as that is grounded in a “moment of annunciation, where ordinary scenes are transformed by the bringing of a certain kind of news.” Gordon Johnston knows Avison’s poetry as intimately as anyone, and he shows how her posthumous volume, *Listening* (2009), revisits the themes and forms that have always preoccupied her (including memories of childhood, news stories, and sequences). He identifies important links to writers in the English literary tradition such as Bunyan and Wordsworth and to the religious writer Richard Rolle. Katherine Quinsey also skillfully explores Avison’s final volume to demonstrate the poet’s remarkable insights into the natural world and how that relationship reflects an incarnational theology. By close attention to the language of Avison’s lyrics, she meticulously discloses how listening—with an emphasis on being and receptivity—succeeds the active venturing of the optic heart that was Avison’s earlier metaphor for “poetic perception.” Avison had displayed a consciousness of environmental degradation early in her career, but Quinsey shows that the last poems reiterate her commitment to that cause. John C. Van Rys perceptively explores an essential topic when he studies the importance of the Holy Ghost to Avison’s poetry. Using “...Person, or A Hymn on or to the Holy Ghost” as a “pivotal poem,” he elucidates “her commitment to Spirit-led self-effacement as a stance from which to experience her faith, the world, others, and language.” His essay ranges widely through Avison’s lectures, letters, interviews, and essays, and he explores both her pre- and post-conversion poetry. As an editor at Brick books, Maureen Scott Harris had an important role in bringing *Concrete and Wild Carrot* into print. Her close editorial work with the poems helped her appreciate how an Avison poem works, especially how her syntax replicates the “hard work of thinking”: “Avison’s poems reflect and enact both her thought and her delight in thinking. One of her gifts to readers is her willingness to model the hard

work of thinking something through.” Just as “Snow” initially drew Jill Jorgenson to Avison’s work, so it was “The Swimmer’s Moment” that impressed upon Tim Lilburn what poetry could do, and he learned from the experience: “Its effect on me was immediate—illumination and liberation. So this is what could find a home in a poem, acute phenomenological report, philosophy, mystical theology—what a fleet, substantial instrument a poem could be.”

I will conclude with a final story. In one rejected passage for the introduction to *I Am Here and Not Not-There*, Avison recalled our picnic of June 1987:

David & Margo Kent one sunny day picked me up, by invitation, in their car and drove out to a grassy park on the east banks of the Humber River, for a picnic lunch. It was a place I rejoiced to see again, full of associations with tireless walking there in high school days. Over lunch I learned that David had sorted out a sequence of my life events to date, from patient work in various records. This too was pleasing, for my papers and notes of events are perennially scrambling together, and resist me perhaps because writing what I feel like at the moment maybe makes them know they’re neglected.

What Avison especially remembered, however, had to do with her declaration to us that she would write her own account of her life:

However, when I learned that his purpose was to proceed to a book-length biography, away ahead of stretches still to unfurl before me, I astonished myself by exclaiming, ‘Oh, you must not do that. I want to write my autobiography, you see? Please promise to leave that book for me to do!’ He ruefully agreed & over the years I have been grateful to him for the published form of his careful preliminary work, as distractions and ageing memory began to blur the ‘when’ of remembered events.⁷

I did not record this declaration in my own notes of that day, but I may very well have repressed the recollection out of anxiety for my own project. A few years later Avison read her friend Denise Levertov’s short memoir, *Tesserae*, and praised her for it while at the same time restating her criticism of biographers: “It is a glorious corrective to the intrusive biographies of living notables.”⁸ Avison was soon writing short memoirs for the newsletter at Fellowship Towers and then embarked on her autobiography, *I Am Here and Not Not-There*, a text that my activities seem to have prodded her into writing and a narrative I am sure we would not wish to be without.

Notes

- 1 A posthumous volume of poems, *Listening: Last Poems*, and her autobiography, *I am Here and Not Not-There* (both published in 2009), were readied for publication by Joan Eichner and Stan Dragland. My sincere thanks to Joan Eichner, William Aide, and Len Early for reading this Introduction and making very helpful suggestions.
- 2 The exchange of letters between Sandra Djwa and Avison about Roy Daniells runs from the later months of 1998 until January 1999.
- 3 The correspondence between us will one day be donated to the University of Manitoba Archives.
- 4 In a later November conversation, she wondered if I might redirect my topic and treat emerging poets of the 1930s and 1940s, but when she consulted Milton Wilson about this possibility he told her that it would require too much prerequisite work.
- 5 It may be that Clarkson remains unnamed in *I Am Here and Not Not-There* partly because Avison felt she had betrayed her privacy and co-operated with “the biographer.”
- 6 This interview took place on 8 April 1988 in Toronto, Ontario.
- 7 Joan Eichner kindly provided me with copies of the early drafts for the Introduction to *I am Here*.
- 8 Avison to Levertov, n.d. August 1995. Quoted with the permission of Joan Eichner, literary executor for Margaret Avison.

Works Cited

- Avison, Margaret. Letter to Denise Levertov. n.d. August 1995. From a copy in the Avison fonds, Mss 64, University of Manitoba Archives.
- Djwa, Sandra. Letters to and from Margaret Avison in the Avison fonds, Mss 64, A. 01-22, Correspondence, Box 1, folder 5, University of Manitoba Archives.
- Frye, Northrop. Personal interview on 8 April 1988, Toronto, Ont.
- Tillinghast, Richard. “Seven Poets.” *Poetry* [Chicago], 110.4 (July 1967): 265-66.