

## Margaret Avison's Metaphoric Annunciation

by Jeffery Donaldson

It makes a kind of plainsong: an ordinary morning breaks, a street scene unfolds, a child looks from a streetcar window, a piano tuner listens, runners jog towards and away, an ant tows a blade of grass, a harvest basket fills, a tree rustles. In the midst of the ordinary, the Margaret Avison poem holds itself open, not quiet trembling—for that would be too forward, too aggressive an expectation—but in readiness for a visitation, for what ever might happen next. Her poetry's deepest conviction is that "What happens, means" ("The Bible to Be Believed," *AN* 2.62). It is a question of focus, of how and where to look. Hold your hand up in front of you and gaze directly at it; think about how you are seeing and not seeing everything around it. The ordinary in Avison is a form of preoccupation, an attempt to look the other way, without staring. Out of the side of your eye, from away, something comes clear and abides: surprise, awe, delight, poems taken aback by the onset of the unexpected or unaccountable. Maybe they won't even say so, but it will have been.

Every poet inhabits an imaginative cosmology of her own making and every line invokes the means and ends of that cosmology. If you write about cracking a boiled egg with a spoon, you project a world where there are eggs and spoons, where certain physical laws obtain, weights and measures, needs and desires. An entire world falls into place. As in the worlds you create in your dreams at night, all your assumptions are creations. In that sense, Avison's work is deeply creative. Her personal cosmology is often explicitly religious. I mean explicit in the sense that she wrestles openly with her understanding of the stories and laws of Christian faith and her own relation to them.

Readers will often speak of a poet's spiritual rather than religious attentions. In our current anxious idiom, the word spiritual is thought to leave more room for materialists like myself, agnostics, atheists, varieties of poker-faced theist. Yet I know that in some cases you can misrepresent a poet's convictions if you shy away from using her own vocabulary of faith, and so misrepresent her determination and courage in sharing them. At the same time, Avison makes a generous allowance for cosmologies (and their convictions) that shade away from her own. In the ordinary scene of her

poetry, there is again that secular dimension that renders the poems unassuming in every sense. It seems almost their purpose to be as grounded as possible in a reality that is source and nourishment for the strangeness she perceives. Yet Avison's sense of spirit, as opposed to her sense of religion, is central to her work for other reasons. The French word *esprit* should always remind us that questions of spirit are questions of mind and imagination, which are questions of consciousness and conscious awareness. Avison's poetry is intensely conscious. It is always trying to wake up, shake us from our (and itself from its own) mental torpor. For a poet of course (if not for all of us), this is naturally a question of language, a poem's verbal disposition towards its own habits and routines, its usual way of saying things, and its desire to startle itself, metaphorically speaking, into a new knowledge of reality. The "real utters forth," Avison writes in "Paraphrase of Ephesians 2:1-6" (*AN* 2.200). There is always this sense in her work of words trying to rise above their own conditions and come clear, like a revelation.

In one of the chapters of my book on metaphor and evolution (Donaldson), I explore the relationship between metaphor and spirit. Beginning with Northrop Frye's claim that when the Bible uses the term "spiritual," one can often substitute "metaphorical," I push the inferences still further. Our conceptions of God are forms of imaginative exploration. Both gods and metaphors are creative initiatives. Both create by uttering forth, making this out of that. Both say let there be light, and there is light. Both abide in the gaps between things, in the unseen and the possible. In both, the world is other than what we assume. An encounter with either is a moment of intensification and revelation. In both there is a sense of all things in relation, encompassed by their reach. "God and the imagination are one," said Wallace Stevens in his Blakean spirit (Stevens 444). Avison's work never wanders far from that possibility.

Some form of spiritual encounter is always at hand in Avison's work. Novice readers must feel the intuition rise in them very quickly that the poems are squirmy and restless in their state. Both very concrete and very metaphysical, they lurch from what they are. The intuition derives from a kind of language density in her work. Her encounter with the unseen or immeasurable is an encounter with language's own capacity to embody and receive verbal energies, whatever their source:

Walking on thistling grass  
in sandals stepping in the crisp  
drought-barnacled grass-crust,  
I see a city gardener smoke

through weed-crumbs with his mower. But  
 the park pine is still glossy:  
 its roots still stab down, and deep  
 in, find the winter run-off still.

I swallow

depth. My thirst would fill  
 dark reservoirs against a  
 dessicating brightness.

Hope rises very deep.

("City Park in July," *AN* 2.78)

Every line here is a metaphoric crucible: thistling grass, barnacling drought, the smoke of weed-crumbs surrounding a lawn mower, roots stabbing down, swallowing depth, a brightness that desiccates, ups going down and downs up. In Avison you have both the subject (as here, seeing how natural growth perseveres in times of drought) and its attempt to receive something more than it readily says, which in a sense is to find that "something more" in what it is already saying. This might only be the necessary formula of any successful poet, but in Avison the sense is very strong of poems waking up because something has come to them, or readying themselves for what comes that they may wake up. They announce the advent of something not yet here, but coming to be, something that in time they might themselves give birth to. For a spiritual thinker like Avison, this is the language of the Annunciation, and here we come to the subject of this essay.

The story of the Annunciation can be found in the first book of Luke. The angel Gabriel appears before Mary to inform her, with great ceremony, that she is pregnant with the son of God: "the angel came in unto her, and said, 'Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women'" (Luke 1.28). The scene breaks down into two parts: a message is delivered (the Latin root of the word annunciation, *nuntiare*, means to bear a message), and the recipient's response is recorded. Indeed, the otherworldly nature of the visitation demands that the response be carefully scrutinized. Given the shock of the moment, we naturally want to know "what happens," that is, what the bringing of this news *makes* happen. Mary is said to go through five stages of response (cf. Baxandall 49-56):

*Conturbatio* (disquiet): "She was troubled at his saying"

*Cogitatio* (reflection): "And cast in her mind what manner of salutation this

should be”

*Interrogatio* (inquiry): “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?”

*Humiliatio* (submission): “Be it unto me according to thy word”

*Meritatio* (merit): “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.”

Words are spoken and a change occurs. I like to think that the popularity of the story among painters (especially in the Renaissance) has partly to do with the power of any creative event, where an inspiration is “received,” then embodied or channeled so that something yet untold may come to be. Like many stories in the Bible (Moses on Sinai, Jacob wrestling with the angel, Paul on the road to Damascus), the Annunciation wonders about the mystery of creativity in its own right, where our powers of making are transformed by an agent whose source is mysterious to us. For a poet like Avison, for whom the metaphoric jolt is so central, the scene suggests the significance of metaphoric moments themselves. What I mean is that the scene is a metaphor for how metaphors work. In an ordinary moment, an ordinary woman (a potential mother, a maker, a poet) is visited by a strange spirit who announces to her that she will provide the means for a divine coming-into-being. The announcement itself causes a stir, so to speak, and a scrambling to make sense of the words heard. Something seems amiss, paradoxical, and throws the world Mary thought she understood into question: “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man” (Luke 1.34). Gabriel simply says again what he has already said, not explaining so much as reassuring Mary that he is to be taken at his word, adding that with the particular power he represents “nothing shall be impossible.” Mary replies, as any worthy poet must when a conception comes to her out of nowhere, “be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1.38). Gabriel uses the future tense in saying “thou shalt conceive in thy womb” (Luke 1.31), but there is a further curious sense in which the mere announcement of Mary’s pregnancy makes it so. Athanasius of Alexandria is believed to have said in one of his sermons, “Come and gaze upon this marvelous feat: the woman conceives through the hearing of her ears!” (Smith). This is certainly the case with Elizabeth, whose pregnancy with John the Baptist is announced at the same time: “Behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren” (Luke 1.36). That word “behold” (like its near synonym “Lo!”) carries so much weight: not “come and see what I’ve done,” but rather, “my speaking this word will perform what follows it.” And so it is. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth: “And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the

Holy Ghost... ‘For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy’” (Luke 1.41-44). To perform something by announcing it: by telling, doing. The words recall their former type in Isaiah 55.10-11:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

These moments in Luke and Isaiah are about the effect or yield of spoken words, the sense of their doing measurable work, of seeding or giving birth to something that lives. They are more than just *things about*.

Paintings of the Annunciation usually offer a kind of diptych format or architecture that serves to define the two ontological spaces at stake: the actual or earthly home of Mary—where she might be found (tellingly) reading or praying—and the otherworldly space of the divine visitation. The angel Gabriel is variously accompanied by a beam of light from the heavens (revealing the divinity’s path of descent), a dove (signifying the act of conception), and a lily (signifying purity). The space of a poem of course appears to be more singular, as it were, less divided into distinct chambers, but like the painting as a whole it too houses or embodies the marriage of the ordinary (descriptive) and spiritual (metaphoric) energies that delivers the spark. While the word annunciation itself clearly aligns with the merely descriptive function of language as servo-mechanism (like Gabriel, a poem can be asked to “deliver a message”), the story tells of more. It tells of language’s “more,” that is, language’s power, at particularly intense moments of metaphoric expression, to receive within itself, but from seemingly away, a paradoxical, otherworldly, creative energy that changes our perception, transforms what we think we see, and makes here-and-now actual what was there-and-then merely said.

I would like to put the case that most, if not all, of Avison’s poems give voice to a moment of annunciation, where ordinary scenes are transformed by the bringing of a certain kind of news. But it might help my case if I started with a poem where the scene of annunciation is more obviously on the speaker’s mind. “Prelude” (*AN* 1.61) begins with three italicized lines that appear in the manner of an epigraph: “*The passive comes to flower; perhaps / a first annunciation for the spirit / launched on its seasons.*” If the spirit has seasons, then this is its moment of awakening, how it comes to be charged with the fruit of its labour. The poem is not so much about

spring as about the prelude to spring, the “passive” condition that precedes (Wallace Stevens once punned on the homonym “pre-seeded” [Stevens 451]) actual creative work: the moment of inspiration itself. “The turning-point is morning,” she writes. Metaphors are tropes of course and trope means “a turning.” The moment of turning here has to do with the arrival of light, and it is indeed light that becomes the stirring agent from above that changes everything. “Prelude” is an unusual poem. Three pages long, it shuttles among a variety of domestic scenes and contexts unified seemingly by nothing more than the speaker’s desire to wonder about them:

Somebody’s grandpa came  
in shirt-sleeves, solid  
and asymmetrical, rooting the word  
‘trunk,’ for a child, as right  
for man or tree.  
He stood, and gnarled  
silently, while he talked over our heads  
to some invisible neighbor  
we did not bother glancing up to see.

The grandpa is interesting among the various outdoor types who look up to see the arrival of spring in that he seems to be aware of the otherworldly “neighbour” no others have noticed. The poem moves between the concrete details of change under the new sun (“Under the dry fence / gooseberries dangled on thin stems”) and a kind of abstract attention (“The palaces of sense”) that stirs before it. Throughout, there is sunlight and a flowering among stones. We are “touched to pallor” and “suffer the cryptic change” (*AN* 1.62): “Light, the discovering light, is a beginning / where many stillnesses / yearn.” The poem ends with a solitary figure “rinsing clouts beside the holy river, / who does not bother glancing up to see” (*AN* 1.63). Washed mundane rags are immersed in the divine element. It is the instant again of a passive readiness, an unexpectancy, if you will. It is the unexpectancy of the poem itself. It *unexpects* simply by describing things. It goes about its business, like the Virgin Mary, and shies away from an explicit revelation of its own or any otherworldly purpose. It leaves itself (and its inhabitants) habitual and unassuming.

What arrives, of course, is light: the light of spring, the first sign of the seasonal change, the promise of growth and the actual inspiration of that growth, the means of making it happen. In the Annunciation, the light is both messenger and agent. It makes happen what it “delivers.” In a poem, naturally, it isn’t actual light that arrives (except insofar as you are able to

read the page—a factor not to be discounted if we want to think of the reader as a kind of unsuspecting recipient of a revelation). What arrive are the metaphors and images of light: “In the moment of held breath / the light takes shape”; “in each at least light finds / one of its forms / and is” (*AN* 1.63). If the first light of spring announces *and* initiates the birth of flowers, if the arriving light in the Annunciation announces *and* causes the coming of a saviour, it is metaphor in poetry (here particularly the metaphors of light) that *makes so* the reality it announces. There are metaphors of light, and then there is the light that metaphor is. What that means is that metaphor *is* the self-revealing illumination by which the poem sees.

Metaphor is in every figurative sense Avison’s winter sun. That is the early phrase and book title that came to characterize a poetry in which the metaphor of a certain kind of light (winter juxtaposed with sun) comes to represent both a reality and a poetic procedure. The place of metaphor, so to speak, is both a fallow winteriness where nothing real comes to be, and a “visited” domain where (because it is what it is), something may be shown that might yet, as it says, come into being. Metaphor stirs the world of the poem, awakens its citizenry, and transforms its ordinarinesses into an annunciation of its own promise, its own spirit. Avison’s poems go quietly about their business having to do with things of the world, as Mary herself might have done, while opening themselves at the same time to a visitation of sorts, the otherworldly transforming energy that is metaphor itself.

It only remains for us then to notice how Avison’s poems are continually visited and stirred by metaphor, by all her metaphors certainly, but for our purposes here by the metaphors of light in particular. These moments of annunciation flare up, as it were, in the midst of the most unassuming poems, poems not thematically related to the Annunciation at all, or even explicitly religious. This is after all the dynamic of the Annunciation itself: into the poems’ plain-speaking, a mysterious apperception descends and has its say.

The representative examples can be organized straightforwardly enough, where the scene of the Annunciation provides us with some simple categories: appearance, reception, and effect. Start with the moment of descent itself, an appearance out of nowhere:

The light has looked on Light.  
 He from elsewhere  
 speaks; he breathes impasse-  
 crumpled hope even  
 in us:

that near.  
("Light," AN 2.65)

"The shaft of vision falling on obscurity / Illumines nothing, yet discovers / The way of the obscure" (*The Agnes Cleves Papers*, AN 1.138). Poems themselves of course begin out of nowhere, conjured from nothing. A reader need only flip through any of the three volumes of Avison's collected work to notice how many of her poems begin with light arriving, with morning come, with night ending, with approaching daylight. Here's a random sample: "Ribbed sand under clear shallows, / stray, shadow-probing pebbles, / receive the quiet light" ("Late Perspective," AN 3.34); "After a noisy night of rain / sun comes flooding" ("We Are Not Desecrators," AN 3.36); "Blind under dazzle" ("Midsummer Christmas," AN 2.100); "Stilled yet by / the gauzed withdrawingness of / midmorning sky..." ("Prodded out of Prayer," AN 3.76); "Though through the early murk / the sun, a tangerine ball, / bulged, briefly..." ("When the Bough Breaks," AN 3.27); "Golden meadows of morning" ("Too Towards Tomorrow," AN 3.189); "It was a clear bright world / from a shining source" ("Hope," AN 2.71). And so on.

Often a poem's attention might be drawn towards our awareness of light and its arrival, our struggle to make room for it. It isn't simply that light arrives, but that someone, usually the speaker, notices that it arrives and says as much: "I note self-shadow on / stone, cement, brick, / relieved; and look to the sunblue. // So, now" ("Light," AN 2.66). The attention paid to noticing can modulate into how best to notice:

It is first light.  
The quiet lake four miles away  
breathes fragrant peace to this  
hill window.  
Breathes, not reflects.

Who or what can be  
a lake to light . . . ?  
("Contemplative Hour," AN 3.18)

So a poem might ask of itself, with a response implied in the metaphoric restatement of the problem. What can be a lake to light? The poem answers in a sense by using the metaphoric question "What can be a lake to light?" as its own way of being a lake to light. In just this way, it doesn't so much reflect the problem as breathe it in, make it a part of itself.



Out of the question of reception comes the issue of effect that is so central to the Annunciation scene, where again the bringing of a message to Mary actualizes the content it bears and makes it so: “Be it unto me according to thy word.” So in Avison we find an emphasis borne on what the arrival of light might or does make happen: “After a noisy night of rain / sun comes flooding...we, providing an unlikely / context for miracle, maybe, alone, / are inwardly kindled” (“We Are Not Desecrators,” *AN* 3.36). Often enough, as we saw, the metaphor of effect is that of natural growth, which is indistinguishable from a mindful or emotional awakening:

The diamond-ice-air is ribbon-laced  
with brightness. Peaking wafering snowbanks are  
sun-buttery, stroked by the  
rosy fingertips of young  
tree shadows  
as if for music;  
and all the eyes of God glow, listening.

My heart branches,  
swells into bud and spray:  
heart break.  
 (“March Morning,” *AN* 2.30)

We want to keep in mind how intensely metaphoric Avison’s language is. Her figures are condensed, rarified, almost collapsed in on themselves: “diamond-ice-air,” “wafering snowbanks,” “sun-buttery.” She will often avoid similes and other such formulas that make apologies for the sheer audacity of the metaphoric leap: the poetry is “self-gulping,” as she says of the sound of water under a dock in another poem (“Water and Worship: An Open-air Service on the Gatineau River,” *AN* 2.33). It concentrates itself in what it is. And as such, it enlivens its subject, *causes* the looked-for transformation:

(Would it perhaps set swinging  
the little horn-gates to new life’s  
illumined labyrinths if, released  
from stifling,  
creatures like us were planet-bathed  
in new-born light?)  
 (“Intra-Political,” *AN* 1.99; parenthesis in the original)

This next is a favorite, with its fairly explicit suggestion of the Annunciatory moment:

It was  
As if a spoke of the final sky  
Snagged her suddenly.  
For what seemed only one  
Queer moment, she was swept  
In some sidereal swerve,  
Blotted sheer out of time...  
("Our Working Day May Be  
Menaced," *AN* 1. 111)

The singular beam of light, the catching of attention, the strangeness of the illumination, and the telling "sidereal" swerve (a reality beside) that carries the perceiver sheer out of time: all bespeak the cause-and-effect movement from appearance, through perception, to effect. Yet the passive construction speaks volumes. Metaphor is strange to us because it is both part of the poem's toolbox of intentional devices and something that seems to happen *to* the poem as it unfolds, knocks it clear of itself. The source of the paradox lies in the diminutive "as if," which when asked to explain, simply repeats, like the angel Gabriel, what it says.

I would like to finish with a poem that makes a rather unlikely Annunciation, in either its revelation or effect. I choose it partly for sentimental reasons, since it is one of the first Avison poems I can remember reading. It was 1989 and I was standing in The Bob Miller Bookroom where I worked, leafing through a copy of *No Time*, which had just come out. I came upon a seemingly modest little piece that has somehow stuck in my mind ever since. What strikes me now is its willingness to wonder about itself and about the state of mind that transforms the everyday, what its source is, and who, or what, ultimately summons it:

Why did they put the  
blue and white live  
balloons out with the trash  
this morning just because  
the party's over – when they  
thub on the cardboard still  
roundly, and lift on their leashes?

Having balloons about on an  
overcast morning is

celebration. O in the grey  
nothing distracts from the bobbling  
lightsomeness of a drift of  
all-alone trembling to be touched  
balloons.

(“A Small Music on a Spring Morning,” *AN* 2.220)

We have some of the ingredients we need. It is again a morning scene, though this one is overcast. The grey light doesn't so much illuminate the balloons as set them off from their dismal surroundings. An element of belatedness stands out. Whatever the “party” represents (an earlier time of proper celebration in relation to which our current moment is but “trash”?) we seem to have missed it and are witness only to this unnoticeable, and yet still noticed, after-effect, where a “lightsomeness” insists upon itself. But this is hardly a moment of divine revelation. Even the metaphors are quietly descriptive, rather than diamond hard, crystalline. But that again makes part of our point. In this unlikeliest of back-alley scenes, an unlikely recipient (balloons as Virgin Mary?) is visited by a moment of grace, dimly, greyly perceived. It is the grace of metaphor itself, of the imagination that happened to visit the scene and bestow upon it a hopeful “overcast.” Even when the revelation rheostat is turned to its lowest, that grace may still illuminate, and celebrate, and be touched by its own powers. It is a grace that any poet, no matter how secular, might do well to receive, saying with Avison: be it unto me according to your word.

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