

SEARCH AND DISCOVERY

Margaret Avison's Poetry

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IN “Love (III)”, the poem which concludes his “picture of many spiritual Conflicts”, George Herbert portrays the culmination of the religious quest in unexpected discovery. Unaware that she herself will one day describe such experience, the Margaret Avison of *Winter Sun* feels intrigued into envious comment. Having probed about in a world of Heraclitean flux and materialistic preoccupation, she marvels that

George Herbert — and he makes it plain —
Guest at this same transfiguring board
*Did sit and eat.*¹

And indeed Miss Avison's own poetical achievement in *Winter Sun* (1960) and *The Dumbfounding* (1966) merits consideration as spiritual quest and discovery. The first of her books is marked by a continual seeking, while the second speaks of fulfilment in lyrics which have been hailed as “among the finest religious poems of our time”.² Aside from sheer literary excellence, what makes the two collections remarkable is that, far from being tacked on as a “Christian” afterthought to her previous verse, Miss Avison's later poems seem to grow out of her earlier searching ones in a sequence which if not that of simple cause and effect, is yet that of authentic experience.³ Search and discovery are thus like two sides of one coin, or like two main parts of that one thing Claudel declares every poet is born to say in the totality of his works. In this essay I propose to examine Margaret Avison's poetry of search and of discovery, noting the way in which search leads into discovery.

If to be secular means to be fully engaged in the world of the “here and now”, then all of Miss Avison’s poetry is secular. If to be religious means to care about meaning, to have (in Tillich’s language) an “ultimate concern”, little of her poetry is not religious. The search for the ultimately significant in life stands out as a main feature of *Winter Sun*, but it is not always obtrusive. “The Apex Animal” manifests a leisurely, playful curiosity as to the nature of “the One . . . Who sees, the ultimate Recipient/of what happens.” Fancy suggests to the poet, as it surely could not to a Christian, that this ultimate being is none other than a cloud formation shaped like a horse’s head, since after all the latter has a commanding view of things in its “patch of altitude/troubled only by clarity of weather” and seems free of matters in “mortal memory”. Under the fanciful surface of the poem, and hidden away before the parenthetical conclusion, there lurks a note of concern about the human individual, in this case the clerk whose “lustreless life” has been touched by the “ointment of mortality”.

“Dispersed Titles”, both more serious and more profound, also displays an ambivalence as to the spiritual nature of its quest. The “titles” of the title form a poem of their own, which aids in threading together the central metaphor of flight in its various transformations:

[FLIGHT]
 [HAS ROOTS]
 BUT IS CUT OFF
 EXCEPT FROM ALL ITS SELVES
 THE EARTH HAS OTHER ROOTS AND SELVES
 THE NAMELESS ONE DWELLS IN HIS TENTS
 AND “UP” IS A DIRECTION.

The “flight”, beginning as the modern scientific conquest of the air, is soon traced back to that other flight made possible for Kepler by his “Orpheus”, the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe. The escape from the old cosmology (“the defiant break/with cycles”) has left a “weird hollow under the solar architrave”, and the repeated invocation of Tycho Brahe (suggesting man’s Narcissistic self-worship during the Renaissance and later) is accompanied by a feeling of corresponding emptiness within man himself:

Something wrought by itself out of itself
 must bear its own
 ultimates of heat and cold
 nakedly, refusing
 the sweet surrender.

For Tycho Brahe's sake I find myself,
 but lose myself again for
 so few are salvaged
 in the sludge of the
 ancestral singular.

Miring the person in the past rather than freeing him for flight, the new humanistic religion has apparently reversed the old paradox, "he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 10:30). But such awareness of modern man's plight does not in itself set him free, and while the poet senses something beyond the known ("Things I can't know I smell/as plainly as if invisible camp-fires/smoked"), the conclusion of the poem reveals no joy of discovery, but at best the musing of one who wishes there were a Christian reality, yet feels compelled to conclude that "up", as the post-medieval cosmology demonstrates, is after all only a "direction". Thus, in the final twist of the basic metaphor, Christianity is seen as a "flight" from reality. Still the vividness with which the poet depicts man's persistent idea that the world is a cosmic "stage" betrays, despite the overt rejection, a quest for a reality beyond scientific humanism.

MUCH POETRY of religious search reveals a potentiality for "finding". Paul Claudel once said that the past is "an incantation of things to come, . . . the forever growing sum of future conditions."⁴ A Christian outcome may be implied but not necessitated by these poems. For the time being, the overt religious references point chiefly to frustration. The "waste land" quality of the "gardenless gardens"⁵ in "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball" is aggravated, strengthened by the allusions to myrrh and to "rams-horn thickets", which like the gardens themselves mock the very thing they seem to promise. It is the very bleakness that is religious. Disheartening scenes are frequently encountered in *Winter Sun*: the "Fallen, Fallen World" is a world of "breathing murk and apprehension of/Slow sure estrangement from the sun", an "enforced passage" through "vacant corridors". Life often seems like a "choked day, swollen to almost total swamp". Just as the piled-up consonants in these phrases help convey the sense of obstruction, the prevailing complexity of surface and structure throughout Miss Avison's first book reflects the difficulties of an as yet unrewarded search.

The quest proceeds under a variety of moods. The gentle speculation of "The

Apex Animal" yields to a more despairing note in the descriptions just given, and even to something like rebellion: "Since Lucifer", the poet says, "waiting is all/A rebel can." Yet since there is still the search, questions are raised in "Atlantis and the Department Store" as to whether she really is a rebel, and if so, what she is rebelling against. She proceeds to describe what she elsewhere calls "dull repudiated house" — the earlier religious ideas which she "did not hate" but nevertheless has rejected in favour of a secular world. The latter's "splendid/Echoing stairways" she contrasts with the "steady escalators" of organized religion.

But while the religious emporium's "stunned" hierarchies ignore the life behind "soiled concrete walls", the inquiring poet is only too much aware of the problems of modern society. "The World Still Needs", Miss Avison entitles one poem, and the incompleting transitive verb suggests the endlessness of the need. She sees not only the "communal cramp of understanding" which produces suburbia, and the masses, their eyes "swimming with sleep" at a concert, but the lonely and confined housewife suffering literally and symbolically from "Sore throat and dusty curtains" and the engineer "watchful and blank" who "had no Christmas worries/Mainly because it was the eve of April." Colloquial phrases here mark an occasional movement toward simplified expression which is to be more fully exploited in the poetry of discovery, and is in this poem accompanied by hints of coming harmony in the allusions to "piano-tuners" and "another spring". But the lucidity and lyric power of another "social problems" poem is both witty and grim: the pun in the title of "Mordent for a Melody" cleverly suggests just that combination of pungency and lilt that perfectly describes the poem itself. Fully alert to modern developments in science and society, Miss Avison adroitly mocks man's unthinking enthusiasm about them. However, it seems more typical of the searching poet to express a tragic realization with sympathy, as in "Apocalyptic?" (the question mark in the title is significant), where the poet explores the possibility that a "luminous" doom may be what frees us from the "tread-mill" of life.

Facing man's situation is an indispensable necessity, but, as the poet of *Winter Sun* realizes, what matters beyond that is how one responds to it. In these poems of search, Miss Avison explores various alternatives, but does not advocate any particular response — she is not ready yet, and the search itself, together with her hopes or fears, is all that she can share. In "Unfinished After-Portrait", a poem of mourning, the poet expresses her own dissatisfaction with the repeated frustrations of her quest:

Start-and-stop despairs of
 that royal moving
 keeps trying other sleights
 as rockets roar for the interlunar
 only to piffle out in
 the ocean's suds.

This trip and gamble cannot be
 the best, the looked-for.

The continually varying line-lengths, emphasized by indentation, reflect the erratic course of the searchings. Most of the remaining lines consist of just such "Start-and-stop", such "trip and gamble", and if the conclusion does not "piffle out", it is only because the poet is willing to settle for a somewhat vague feeling of a "human presence".

An increasing sense of urgency in the quest seems to develop in some poems of *Winter Sun*. "The Mirrored Man" articulates this increased intensity with artistic power. The opening rhymed quatrains (I quote the second and third) state the paradox of man's search which is at once a refusal to search:

So now we flee the Garden
 Of Eden, steadfastly.
 And still in our flight are ardent
 For lost eternity.

We always turn our heads away
 When Canaan is at hand,
 Knowing it mortal to enjoy
 The Promise, not the Land.

This re-statement of the gist of George Herbert's "Miserie" leads through a brief Miltonic evocation of a flaming sword and curse to a thoroughly modern yet, one feels, timeless picture of man's existential self-confrontation:

So each of us conceals within himself
 A cell where one man stares into the glass
 And sees, now featureless the meadow mists,
 And now himself, a pistol at his temple,
 Gray, separate, wearily waiting.

In the succeeding lines, alternative responses to the dilemma are pictured: ignoring the "burden" of self and thus turning the quest into "trivial ramblings"; despairing, and choosing actual or virtual suicide; or deliberately inculcating

illusion in an exploitation of the self. Realizing the futility of each possibility, the poet sums up the search in haunting, poignant lines:

All of us, flung in one
 Murky parabola,
 Seek out some pivot for significance,
 Leery of comets' tails, mask-merry,
 Wondering at the centre
 Who will gain access, search the citadel
 To its last, secret door?
 And what face will the violator find
 When he confronts the glass?

The passage itself mirrors the enigma that is life, its beginning and ending shrouded in mystery (implying some unknown Other in “flung” and “violator”), and even the relatively known element partaking teasingly of “murk” as well as of precise mathematical pattern (“parabola”). The central lines beautifully sum up the search itself, suggesting its purpose, hopes, fears, and protective disguises. Such is man’s quest, seen from the point of view of one who has not found — not basically, though sensitivity to everything observable makes possible moments of calm and wonder such as that recorded in “Easter”.⁶

A delightful poem which strikes one as being earlier than the more serious ones in *Winter Sun* is “Meeting together of Poles and Latitudes (In Prospect)”. This poem of search comments on the seeming unlikelihood that active energetic seekers should ultimately “encounter at the Judgment Seat” the more relaxed, ambivalent explorers of life, who want “for death that/Myth-clay, though/Scratch-happy in these (foreign) brambly wilds”; yet the poem implies that such a “curious encounter”, will take place. One feels that the poet herself in *Winter Sun* partakes first in the leisurely playful search, then in the more earnest kind. Of the latter kind are her poems on death. As the quest becomes more serious she begins to think of ultimate judgment as a cataclysmic “singeing-day” or a “universal/Swallowing-up”. The poems “Jael’s Part” and “Span” both, in carefully non-theological language, probe into divine judgments on sin.

GRADUALLY in this first volume of Miss Avison’s there begins to emerge a realization that some radical renewal, some transforming rebirth might be possible, and might, if attained, turn out to be the true goal of the search. In one poem the struggle to “win belief in a new burgeoning” is,

(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?)
 (Glee dogs our glumness so.)

Such "Dreams, even doubted, drive us," but the actual experience of being put to use by some power beyond us would be enough to break the pattern of life as a series of purely materialist transactions — to "change this circular exchange." Quite seriously, now, the poet, taking into account George Herbert's testimony, considers whether man by "daring to gambol" (i.e., to take himself less seriously as well as to risk) might yet call forth "an immense answering/of human skies?/ a new expectant largeness?"

Actual experiences, some vicarious, tend to confirm the expectation of impending transformation. In the half-allegorical poem "Our Working Day may be Menaced" an acquaintance, Madeleine, is observed to undergo a remarkable spiritual experience:

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; then spurned
 Back to the pebbles of the path.

(The passage suggests one of the "timeless" moments in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.) All who know Madeleine are sceptical, but the speaker muses: "A calling from our calling? . . . Can they have appointed/A locus elsewhere for us?" and goes on to ponder a possible

universal
 Swallowing-up
 (Proceedings against Madeleine alone
 Clearly being absurd).

Despite the secular language (which in fact registers engagement) the increasing impetus toward a new and perhaps Christian outlook is evident.

An experience which seems more than vicarious is described in one passage of the long poem which concludes *Winter Sun*, "The Agnes Cleves Papers":

One evening, just a year or two ago,
 The simple penetrating force of love
 Redeemed me, for the last perhaps. I've
 seldom dared, since,
 To approach that; not that it would go out,
 But it might prove as centre of all
 Revolutions, and, defined,
 Limn with false human clarity
 A solar system with its verge
 Lost, perhaps, but illumined in
 A mathematical certainty
 And for my secret I would have a universe. (p. 83)

The experience seems real enough, but there is still a holding back — for fear, apparently, that this illumination or discovery might prove to be a “false human clarity”, as ultimately disappointing as that of Archimedes or that inspired by Tycho Brahe, but on a more sweeping scale. It is only much later in the poem, after “Telling it in plain words”, that she realizes that she had “feared the wrong thing”:

The other centre, the known enigma —
 All eyes I do not own, contours
 That force familiarity where I would
 Tumult and spurn like Pan — were the mountain
 passes
 Pure out of thought . . .

God's way, though demanding self-renunciation, is the true way to freedom. What she *should* fear and give up is the world she has loved till now, since it is “scarfed in dreadful mist” where “no sun comes”. In the remainder of the poem there is a new recognition of the world around as an “arena”, one in which there is to be no “glancing back” but instead a forward movement to the “other side” where the “wild smell” for which her heart yearns will replace the presently necessary “athlete's incense”. The landscape seems to be taking on an increasingly Christian configuration. Perhaps the sway of the winter sun has already ended and been superseded by the “Light that blinded Saul” (*The Dumbfounding*).⁷

THE DUMBFOUNDING contains further poems of inner search and debate, but they may be retrospective, and in any case they give the impression that the period of spiritual gestation has come to a close. “The Two Selves”

pictures two opposing aspects of the poet discussing the "birds in the sky," which somehow stand for spiritual realities:

And you *wait* for them here?

Oh no. It is more
like knowing the sound of the sea
when you
live under the sea.

The response to the sceptical self reveals a maturing confidence. The "Two Mayday Selves" (D., p. 11) are more mutually in harmony, yet the more hesitating one is urged to respond wholly to the new experience:

The power of the blue and gold breadth
of day is poured out, flooding, all
over all.
Come out. Crawl out of it. Feel
it. You
too.

It is the voice of a true finder speaking, one who can call for an end to talk and self-centred questioning, and in the simplest, most forthright language invite to participation in a new joy, a release. In "Many As Two," reminiscent of Christina Rossetti's "Uphill" or of Marvell's dialogue poems, the objections are now external to the new Christian, serving both to challenge and to define his life of discovery:

"Where there is the green thing
life springs clean."

*Yes. There is blessed life, in
bywaters; and in pondslime
but not for your drinking.*

"Where the heart's room
deepens, and the thrum
of the touched heartstrings reverberates — *Vroom* —
there I am home."

*Yes. And the flesh's doom
is — a finally welcome going out on a limb?
(No thing abiding.)*

*No sign, no magic, no roadmap, no
pre-tested foothold. "Only that you know
there is the way, plain,
and the home-going."*

*Outside the heartbreak home I know, I can own
no other.*

"The brokenness. I know.

Alone."

(Go with us, then?)

This is a remarkably subtle poem, in which the shifting indentation marks the development of the attitude of each speaker as the encounter proceeds. For our purposes it is significant that though the finder, having known "brokenness", can fully sympathize with that feeling, the two viewpoints expressed in the poem are really worlds apart — giving us a measure of the radical nature of the change that has occurred. The greenness of the new life means to the one the stagnation of "pondslime", to the other a fresh and pure vitality. The "way," clearly involving risk, may seem either a final madness or a "plain" way home, depending on whether one is a seeker or a finder. Since one viewpoint includes and transcends the other, only a finder could write such a poem.

Having become fully taken up in the new life, Miss Avison can look back at the first moment of discovery, and attempt to picture the miracle of transformation. One such portrayal is given in "Ps. 19", a personal interpretation of the statement, "The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever." That fear (which in Proverbs 1 is called the "beginning" of knowledge) is here defined as

to love high
and know longing for clear
sunlight, to the last ribcorner
and capillary — and wonder
if, so known, a sighing-
over-the-marshlands me
might all evaporate, wisp away.

This is obviously the state of the searcher. The hyphenated epithet gives this fresh non-theological definition a personal touch, one which clearly recalls the seeking poet's fears that an encounter with ultimate reality might cramp the imaginative self. But this "fear" paradoxically does include seeking as well as shrinking, and when "sunward love" conquers, discovery comes: the love-fear proves to be

— not boulderstone,
baldness, slowly in fire consuming — but green
with life, moss, cup-rock-water, cliff riven
for a springing pine.

The whole poem hinges on the sun-metaphor for God, an image which does not

change but is radically re-interpreted as the seeker becomes a finder, as the “fire”, being “trusted”, is revealed to be the life-giving “enduring sun”. It is interesting to see that the now-understood seeking is defined in the early part of the poem with lucid precision, but that the language and syntax must be strained to express the greater reality of the finding.

Other poems describing the first discovery are “For Tinkers Who Travel on Foot” and “The Earth That Falls Away”. But an important question must now be raised. Having “found”, is one doomed to an inhuman fixity of position, perhaps a continual looking back to that first great experience, or, even worse, a pretence of sainthood in an attempt to live up to one’s past light? The answer is that “In the mathematics of God/there are percentages beyond one hundred” — the new creation is both “whole” and a “beginning”. In a poem of “Marginalia” bringing out commonly unsuspected implications in Christ’s teachings about the child and the kingdom of heaven, Miss Avison vividly describes the rhythm of vigour and weariness, the round of hopes, fears, and joys that makes each new day for the child (and for the Christian) a “new life time”. The exciting, fresh details in this poem and in more than a score of others on “secular” subjects (objects, people, scenes) show that the first “finding” has made possible a multiplicity of further explorations and brought new light to their aid. As Malcolm Ross puts it, for the Christian, existence becomes a “drama” in which no detail is without its “wholly unique reality. No thing is insignificant.”⁸

Appropriately, then, in his review of *The Dumbfounding*, Smith comments on the “purity” of Miss Avison’s “response to experience (*all experience*)”.⁹ Yet for him it is the explicitly Christian poems that climax her achievement; and some of these, such as “Person”, are indeed stunning in their power. Authenticity is the keynote of these specifically Christian poems. They have the ring of truth that comes, in part, from the genuine search experience that preceded them, which in Amos Wilder’s terms might be called the poet’s “baptism in the secular”, her coming “face to face with the reality of the first Adam”.¹⁰ But there is also a “recurrent” baptism, as the realism of the opening lines of “Branches” indicates:

The diseased elms are lashing
in hollowing vaults of air.
In movie-washroom-mirrors
wan selves, echoing, stare.

O Light that blinded Saul,
 blacked out Damascus noon,
 Toronto's whistling sunset has
 a pale, disheartened shine.

And the concluding stanzas of the poem deal directly with the problem of communicating a momentous "finding". Concerned to avoid the "fly-by-night" approach of the superficially religious, the poet comes to a realization that genuine Christianity will spread when "branches" of the Vine "scatter to tell what the root/and where life is made." It is only the human in touch with the divine that can "show him [i.e., Christ] visible". The gospel, as Wilder puts it, prevails "by revelation, by bodying forth".¹¹

In surveying the contemporary scene, Kenneth Hamilton makes some relevant comments on religious search and discovery:

It is not surprising that concentration upon the human condition should lead some artists to find religion a live option as they explore the landscape of the human self. The religious vision is one answer to the riddle of human existence; and it is an answer that declares itself right at the centre of man's descent into himself, when the resources of self-analysis are exhausted. Then comes the decision to accept — or not to accept — an understanding of the self and the world going beyond the bounds of the available and the verifiable. The religious believer says that not to believe would be a denial of the truth that has flashed upon his life, a truth establishing itself beyond his experience, yet confirming all other truths that he has discovered in his experience. The sceptic, choosing the opposite road, says that to believe is to take the easy way out The debate continues, and no impartial arbitration is possible. Yet, on whichever side he happens to stand, and wherever he has found his final loyalty, the artist helps us to see what is involved in making a decision.¹²

This able summary of an important "religious" function of every serious modern artist also serves as a valuable commentary on the poems of Margaret Avison, who has seen things from both viewpoints, that of the seeker and that of the discoverer. Her poems trace the progression from one to the other, and make her final position clear.

But despite that conclusion, Miss Avison's poems, whether of search or of discovery, cannot be dismissed as "propaganda". Their rich sensitivity to all aspects of life, amounting to a wholesome "secularity", their deep and incisive engagement in the world of thought and meaning, their full exploitation of all the modern resources of language and technique — all these mark them with the vitality which is the essence of true poetry. The poems of Christian discovery

are fully contemporary and dynamic, deeply rooted in the experiential. By a union in the truly human, they manage to avoid the seeming dichotomy of Christianity and art that perturbed Auden.¹³ In and through their value as poetry they have another value, a religious one which might well be appreciated by believers and others alike: they “body forth” an answer to man’s searchings that one may accept or reject, but not dismiss.

NOTES

- ¹ Margaret Avison, *Winter Sun* (London, 1960).
- ² A. J. M. Smith, “Margaret Avison’s New Book,” *Canadian Forum*, 46 (1966), p. 133.
- ³ One must not, of course, read the poems as pure biography, but rather as what Blackmur calls “life at the remove of form”—form implying a deliberate selectivity as well as the inevitable discrepancy between the poet’s original intent and the finished poem, only the latter of which is available for inspection. Throughout my paper I take this distinction for granted, and simply refer to “the poet” or “Miss Avison” for the sake of convenience.
- ⁴ Paul Claudel, *Poetic Art*, tr. Renee Spodheim (New York, 1948), p. 27.
- ⁵ This type of verbal paradox, amounting to virtual self-contradiction, recurs in both Miss Avison and the later T. S. Eliot, and thus appears to be one of a number of marks of that poet’s influence on her work. Other indications may be found in her allusiveness and use of symphonic “movement” patterns (in the longer poems), and in her line rhythms and other metrical forms, including lyrical quatrains reminiscent, say, of those in the *Quartets*.
- ⁶ It would be of biographical and perhaps of some interpretive interest to discover the relative date of composition of this poem. It might be taken as simply a hymn to spring, but its concluding images are remarkable anticipations of those in such poems of clearly Christian discovery as “Ps. 19” (*D*, p. 24) and “For Tinkers Who Travel on Foot” (*D*., p. 36), the first of which is discussed later in this paper.
- ⁷ Another poem in *Winter Sun* that might be a poem of Christian discovery is “Birth Day” (p. 73), whose title could be taken as an allusion to rebirth.
- ⁸ Malcolm Ross, “The Writer as Christian,” in Nathan A. Scott, Jr., ed., *The New Orpheus: Essays Toward a Christian Poetic* (New York, 1964), p. 86.
- ⁹ Smith, p. 134.
- ¹⁰ Amos N. Wilder, “Art and Theological Meaning,” in Scott, p. 410.
- ¹¹ Wilder, p. 419.
- ¹² Kenneth Hamilton, *In Search of Contemporary Man* (Grand Rapids, 1967), p. 21.
- ¹³ W. H. Auden, “Postscript: Christianity and Art,” in Scott, pp. 74-77.