AVISON'S IMITATION OF CHRIST THE ARTIST

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IN A REVIEW ARTICLE about *The Dumbfounding* (in *Canadian Literature* 38), Lawrence M. Jones makes reference to an unpublished essay that Margaret Avison composed about her relationship with Christ and its effect upon her work. Looking back on her early poetry, she announces "how grievously I cut off his way by honouring the artist" during her "long wilful detour into darkness". Readers of Miss Avison's work will know that such a confession does not lead to her abandoning poetic care and plunging into artless canticles of devotional verse. She is not compulsively looking for security, as Germaine Greer would put it. Of all our poets, Margaret Avison is the most artfully daring. In the same article she speaks of the progress of her personal belief from the "will to be good", to "getting to be where Christ's suffering goes, terribly on."

Like the "metaphysical" poets, Miss Avison plays on paradox, and theirs, her belief, religious or artistic, depends on the paradox not being that at all. She does not abandon the artist — she just does not any longer honour him. Honouring an artist is for non-reading people or poetry-commissars to do; or if the artist is Christ himself, for church ministers to do. Honouring a prophet in his own country is to kill prophecy. There is no honour in that.

Miss Avison says that her personal vision of Christ, which has been till now often enough referred to, made the New Testament story unclear. The New Testament story is fine, for people interested in stories. But its reading tends to set the main character in time and place, even if the place is imagined in the mind of the child who is suffered to read it. It becomes a part of the world stuffed in at your eyes. In her later poems written about and to Christ, Miss

Avison insists on an active reader. She makes lines that snap off all over the page and off it, threatening to destroy the poem in favour of something else. She wants no passive reader, for the poetry or for the worlds of the God she lives with. She knows the paradox known by John Donne and G. M. Hopkins: if the poem would lead your heart to God, it must evaporate on the trail to his language. That is impossible, but it is the ideal that the most serious poet must try to make real. Success must be foregone from the outset, but success would be the reward and source of pride.

In a poem called "First" (*The Dumbfounding*, 51), Miss Avison advises that "In the mathematics of God/ there are percentages beyond one hundred". It is left for the human, calculator or artist, to strive for a hundred per cent. Given that no one less than a saint can hope to achieve that, Hopkins tried to imitate the more-than-perfect by spilling over the normal low-percentage confines of the sonnet, an obviously earthly form. Margaret Avison is led to a similar striving.

Always swim in water that is over your head. Ski a slope that is frighteningly steep. Keep trying for excellence you think you do not have in you, and pay the most intense attention to all your movements. You will know that your limits (or the poem's) are expanding, and all the time you will be reminded of your mortality. There is no time for pride there, but what you will have done will speak of, hint of, perceptions not totally available to human knowledge. A short poem that shows this kind of striving is "In Eporphyrial Harness" (*TD*, 77):

> Hill-hoe
> till the liberal varnish, the
> daze-sun go
> down and the pin-
> flare-
> finish
> star-bright
> become alltoday, furnish
> us sun (eyes) (ice).

Here every moment of the poem, including those moments between words, is supercharged, made to do more work than the normal speaker or writer would ever demand. With all the simultaneities of pun, rime, juncture, and so on, we feel the poet trying to do more than words can accomplish, to tell of more than the perceptors can fix. The process is the opposite and enemy of explanation, which means taking a knowledgeable position to lay it out flat. Margaret Avison never settles for that dimension:

Excessive gladness can drag
the 3-dimensional uncircumferenced circle
out of its sublime true
unless contrition also past all bound
extend it.

(*TD*, 51)

So Christ, and his works, cannot be explained. The dogma of 2000 years ago and that of today are futile attempts to get control of history. Something like that futility is applicable in the consideration of poetry. Conventional minds always want to speak of the poet's "success" or "failure" in terms of how much control he has over his material. Margaret Avison says that the poet, reader, poem, should participate, not dominate, should be used by things even as we use them. In a poem called "Hot June" she shows how the acts of composition lead in a sharing way toward eternity, from where everything comes together in its own place:

People are pink-cheekt only
long enough to
ferret out what if we were man and wiser we
would let
be.

Give us the word and we worry
it out of its soil and run
off with it
(IN-FORM) between our teeth
and *have at it* and set up a
branch office to
do it for
people.

And o the zeal of thy cheek,
the tired plumes trailing
home!

Dust composes its late sunlight petals, ribbands, metals,
shorelessness.

(*TD*, 82)

When Christ composes himself before her eyes she does not ask him how he got there, as many people do when someone shows up unexpectedly. She is dumbfounded.

The silence of the dust motes landing, the silence of the dumbfounded — the place to begin composition, and the state of perfection for which to strive. The process begins when the discursive and orderly mind learns to shut up and the optic heart looks and feels. Ernest Redekop, in his book on Margaret Avison, has it right: "She makes it clear that perception forms and determines conception; that how we see determines what we are." The poems urge the eye to zoom back and forth, refusing to employ perspective (see "Perspective," in *Poetry of Mid-Century 1940-1960*, edited by Milton Wilson) because perspective places the self up close, in the centre, and everything growing smaller and less distinct in the distance. That is why her favourite word or combining word is "all," as in "alltoday" or "allgathering", or as it is suggested in such a word as "shorelessness". She holds a similar view of time, not seeing a distance of the past or of literature, especially regarding the presence of Christ. In "Dispersed Titles" (*Winter Sun*, 3), for instance, the sixteenth and twentieth centuries are sewn together. The poet wants to welcome and hopes to produce epiphanies, less-than-moments when there is light from eternity shining through a rent in the fabric of time.

MEN FABRICATE the perspectives of time and space in order to place themselves at the centre of phenomena. What is needed is a lesson in humility. The greatest lesson in humility is the sacrifice of Christ, who is either God or his son or both. His becoming the Christ depends on his epiphanic conversion from immortal visitor to pain-taking man, the prime moment when he suffers doubt and utters faith on the cross. That moment when he doubted his divinity opened his divine heart to a sharing of all men's condition. It was the moment when he was the farthest from being honoured, and in Margaret Avison's eyes the moment of greatest artistic inspiration. Christ gave himself up to Keats' negative capability, and thus lost all perspective, being no further from any one person than another, through all time and space.

There is the Christ that the artist should try to imitate. In a letter to Cid Corman (published in *Origin*, January 1962) Miss Avison said that her unrelenting care for the exactitudes of composition would have its value in reaching the optic heart of the amateur reader, not the priests of poetry:

> Poetry over against the world — if such could exist, I'd stay on the world's side. This is too vague a statement. Aaron Copland says: "When I speak of the gifted listener I am thinking of the nonmusician primarily, of the listener who intends

to retain his amateur status. *It is the thought of just such a listener that excites the composer in me....*"

[*The italicized words are Miss Avison's.*]

The poet is that way about her Christianity, too. Her life has embraced the work she does in the academic community, and social work, which has incidentally included writing for journals on the subject, and working among the down-and-out in Toronto. Both her life and her poetry are highly conscious responses to various figures of Christ, who was a scholar who worked among the outcast. Consider the place where Christ, after a search, is found, in the poem, "Searching and Sounding" (*TD*, 60-62):

> in the sour air
> of a morning-after rooming-house hall-bedroom;
> not in Gethsemane's grass, perfumed with prayer,
> but here,
> seeking to cool the gray-stubbled cheek
> and the filth-choked throat
> and the scalding self-loathing heart...

That poem is, among other things, Miss Avison's greatest statement about the artist and his making of art. She has written about the artist often during her more than three decades of poetry. "The Artist" (*WS*, 40; *TD*, 91) is a complicated story of a person pursuing a white cat around an indifferent city, becoming Hansel and Gretel, entering the deep forest of the imagination, but escaping from it undevoured and well-fed, and probably in possession of the cat. He had fallen in love with the witch, but he burned her to ashes and ate her house. One gets the impression that Miss Avison is far from honouring the artist here.

The image of the artist choosing self-interested success over being consumed by the dark witch in the forest of imagination is echoed in "The Agnes Cleves Papers". Garnet, the failed artist, failed because he accepted commercial reward and family praise and the urging to work for a living. He failed because he stayed with the familiar tangible world of himself rather than allowing his self to disappear into the care of the unknown. He was afraid of negative capability; it might steal his car if he didn't leave it locked under a street lamp. Miss Avison's poetry is filled with the message to let it go.

That is not a call for the artist-poet to give up craft in his making. In a letter to bp Nichol (tipped into Nichol's *Journeying and the Returns*) Miss Avison commends him for giving so much without giving it away. It is rather a call for

the artist to give up selfishness, or even to give up self. It is really no paradox to say that when the poet goes to the full extent of what his individual skill can accomplish, he will see his art become not his but not-his. The concerns are meta-physical. The artist, it is suggested, may become aware of all his (limited) faculties, and then do what the blind man does in section XIV of "The Earth that Falls Away":

> Then I could move
> out among the trees and traffic, a march
> in Nomansland to risk it, a dive
> into invisible interdependence, no crutch
> needed, for all the dread.
>
> (*TD*, 44)

In "The Swimmer's Moment" (*WS*, 36) the few people who acknowledge the whirlpool they are caught in give up the individual contest with nature and go beyond it (the meaning of the meta-physical) to "the mysterious, and more ample, further waters", to "the silver reaches of the estuary". But remember that if their skill, their art, be not practiced, they will simply drown. The metaphor is at once religious and artistic.

But why step into the water in the first place? (In one instance Miss Avison says that it is Heraclitus' stream without banks.) In a short poem called "Unspeakable" (beautiful title, as simple as a rose) it is heard that the reason for making art is to share in the beauty of creation, to make its less-seen parts seen. The artist is in a way an *assistant* to creation or Creation.

All men and women, all creatures, are joined because they have their rising from the same earth, the same sea. Hence order is a given, it is a beginning, there is a received order to be discovered and carried out, and creation keeps on going on. In people, who wonder most about that order, the discoverer is the imagination. Hence the act of making poetry is to find out where people may join in recognition, by means of the imagination. Thus poetry (or spiritual praise) cannot properly be served by the notion that the mind or the spirit may be liberated and separated from matter. Form is simply how the body of the matter is perceived. Reason cannot be removed except by sham from the seeming unreason it is born in. Like a blind man in a city, or a swimmer in fast water, the artist will participate, not dominate. He will be used by things even as he uses them. He will be of some use, and so will his art.

MUSIC IS PART of the received order the poet participates in. Music, as Carlyle said, is at the heart of all things and does not have to be applied to them. The depth of the artist's vision reveals music. It exposes form, never imposes it. Like Hopkins, and for similar reasons, Margaret Avison sings whenever she sees something of surpassing beauty. In fact the singing aids the eye. "Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes./ The optic heart must venture." (*WS*, 17). Thus the title of a great poem, "Searching and Sounding" (*TD*, 60-62). The title rimes with "The Dumbfounding," and each title's multiplicity of meanings is augmented by the association with the other.

Searching and sounding involve the eye and the ear by way of the voice. But they are involved not passively — the poet is not a witness merely. She believes with another great woman poet, H.D., that one's poetry should be involved with discovering the "other-half of the tree". The optic heart searches among the forest and sounds the depth of the sea, especially where Christ is nailed or where he walked.

So the poem begins by making the reader's eye do its share of work, involving the reader physically, as something like an artist if not that:

> In July this early sky is
> a slope-field, a tangled
> shining — blue-green, moist, in
> heaped up pea-vines, in milk-hidden
> tendrils . . .

Visual things are made to happen as the eye is moved back and forth (destroying evaluative perspective), a scene that another poet might leave to the interpreting mind, in what is called description.

Immediately the eye's work is seen to lead the observer to the edge of the margin between his theoretical 100% and heaven's uttermore:

> in light so strong
> it seems a shadow of
> further light, were the heart
> large enough to find its succulence
> and feed and not be glutted there.

The truly worshipful person or artist desires more than that intimation of immortality, and sets about seeking a way (at least) to make the intimation a

brighter aperture in heaven's cloak. For the Christian, the searching finds its source and objective:

> I look for you
> who only know the
> melding and the forming of such heart

— and so Christ appears as the meta-human artist, the *maker* who can observe or perhaps perform the creation of life, the model for the human artist.

But where does the poet find that artist? In the last stanza of "The Dumbfounding" (*TD*, 59), Miss Avison makes ingenious use of syntax simultaneously to ask that Christ

> lead through the garden to
> trash, rubble, hill

and to observe that he does. Here he is found (where part of Copland's audience might be found):

> in the sour air
> of a morning-after rooming-house hall-bedroom;
> not in Gethsemane's grass, perfumed with prayer,

that is, not locked in church, not locked in the safety of history or the approved literature, not locked in anywhere, not placed captive in niche or on pedestal, on mantel or in shrine. In an earlier poem decrying the fixity of sonnet or crypt ("Butterfly Bones; or Sonnet Against Sonnets," *WS*, 19), Miss Avison asks at last: "Might sheened and rigid trophies strike men blind/ like Adam's lexicon locked in the mind?"

Christ, or the image of Christ so far seen, is seen here doing his own "seeking", as in his recorded time,

> to cool the gray-stubbled cheek
> and the filth-choked throat
> and the scalding self-loathing heart, and
> failing . . .

Failing? How can the perfect artist fail? I feel that it must be because nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes, because art, even perfect art, is impossible without its connections. (Though I have a nagging feeling that the problem here is in the hint of the earlier syntax:

I look for you
who only know the
melding and the forming of such heart

— *i.e.*, that the search was for one who has the "only" there to modify the following predicate.) But if the question is difficult, the solution to it is likely to be found in the succeeding syntax:

failing, for he is
sick,
for I . . .

Attending the ambiguities discovered by a mind caught in its own lyric snags, we may receive the sense that we are to find our way through a Blakean sympathy or synthesis of persons, in this case of Christ-poet-other. Certainly the next section of the poem would suggest that. (When one says, for instance, "he is/ sick,/ for I," that "I" may equally refer in this case, to a number of versions of the self-awareness of persons.)

In long lush rhythms now the poet tells how she runs away from Christ to be captured by his presence everywhere, including her own space. She finds that she cannot wholly distinguish herself from the slumped man in the boarding house, or from a "mentally distracted" youth who needs the hand of nearby Christ to save him from slumping. His hand may be taught the use of axe or throttle-bar or grease gun, "any craft or art". What saves a person from loss is the artist in him, then, Christ as the artist in people. The poet hopes to know her craft or art as useful and connected with the divine as those others. We are somewhere short of God's 100+%, but because of his grace we are not at or below zero, even though we may try to run in that direction. Run the speaker of the poem does, away from Christ (always "him" with a small "h"), she thinks, toward "something human,/ somebody now, here, with me." But as Miss Avison says in the poem called "The Christian's Year in Miniature," (*TD*, 65), "From the timeless verge/ you moved, to our *now*." The searching and sounding of the title are the attributes of an artist in his action, but (as mentioned earlier) that action is shared, even when the artist is that perfect one. The mortal human being can try to be as elusive as the right word for a poem:

So now we flee the Garden
Of Eden, steadfastly.
And still in our flight are ardent
For lost eternity.
("The Mirrored Man," *WS*, 71)

"Steadfastly" means standing still, and we are standing "still in our flight". What kind of running is this? It is our moving in time, "till time be full", as seen from eternity, where all time can be caught in less than an instant, and you cannot run away from it, nor would.

The Christ of grace, though, makes gentle pursuit, appearing this time as musical artist:

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

The ambiguity here is the quickest and most sure figure of speech, drawing together as it does so much of what has been said by Miss Avison, and so much to come. For instance, the first line of the above quotation produces an image of a Christ far deeper, for an adult, than that in the biblical "story" of the Jesus who walks on the water.

Furthermore, that ambiguity intensifies the synthesis of Christ-artist-other, in the succeeding stanza:

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

Here, as usual, Miss Avison sees that compassion for another, getting out of the wanting self, are the attributes of the Christian, the human resemblance to Jesus, a Jesus not "sacrificed" but become the Christ. Further again, Miss Avison works the grammar as far as possible, so that the "we" of the stanza can include the addressed Christ.

So the light deepens, as dark is supposed to do, as the summer day, what Miss Avison calls the "daze-sun" elsewhere, goes down. The speaker of the poem is then as far from the garden as possible, led by Jesus to the mournful desert of bones and famine and "howling among the tombs", to his version of hangover rooming house, where he is needed and must go on his way back to paradise. They go, as Miss Avison's poems often do, to the shoreline, where the gravel is ground by the apocalypse horses, to where the artist must begin his work, from nothing; they proceed

> To what strange fruits in
> the ocean's orchards?

The imagination wonders about them. The perfect imagination creates *all* new, so that there is needed

> no further making — *all* newness —
> *all* being . . .

Yet, says the devout poet, if all possible to see is seen, it is seen as only a fragment of the fullness Christ put off to be with mortal creatures.

Seeing the perfect artist in action, the poet becomes part of the action in imitating him to her limits. The picture is far different from Eliot's shoring himself up with the fragments left of a broken past European civilization. Miss Avison wants with the help of Jesus to

> GATHER my fragments towards
> the radium, the
> all-swallowing moment
> once more.

Here is an artist who believes that the universe expands and contracts, not that it is wearing down. Jesus the artist is still doing his life studies; he is not locked inside the museum or nave of art history.

A FEW YEARS AGO, in hip circles, there was an invocation going around: May the baby Jesus shut your mouth and open your mind. In Margaret Avison's experience it is an artist Christ who does that job. "The Dumbfounding" is the central Christian poem in her work, and as usual her work there is saturated with meanings at all points. In the sense that the poem tells a story, it tells the usual story of the innovative artist from whom in his own country is

> withheld all honor: "His house is clay,
> how can he tell us of his far country?"

So he goes the normal route of ridicule, distrust, attempts by the critics to nail him down to their established dimensions, accusations of outlandishness and blasphemy, neglect and abandonment so that he must do his greatest work alone, and finally a gathering to the bosom (in this case, often in the form of gold) of the culture only after he is gone so that he may be spoken of as immortal and "ours".

As usual, the title of the poem combines several senses of the word found there. Often in her poems Miss Avison has mentioned the desperate failure of human chattering, and speaking of her own visitation by Jesus, she said that the telling of stories about him became nonsense for her afterwards. She was dumbfounded, made speechless by surprise. In this poem the reader is moved from an apostle's story of the life into an awareness that the framing of such story makes no sense if the main character is still among us, experiencing all stages of his life and our own at all moments. The present participle of the title is not lost in a noun. The founding has to continue while the eternal heat of the forge remains, while there are still those who remain lost, those prodigals.

To begin the poem the voice speaks for the people who were around during the specific four-gospels time:

> When you walked here,
> took skin, muscle, hair,
> eyes, larynx, we
> withheld all honor . . .

One notices that at first Christ is seen to take on the attributes of mortal man, and then (eyes, larynx) of the active social person, or the artist. We keep in mind my earlier remarks on the poet's synaptic relationship between sight and voice.

We are then reminded that God was the perfect artist, the perfect sculptor who gave body to all the arts; and we need that reminding, for "we" said of his son or self: "His house is clay,/ how can he tell us of his far country?" Then when he showed some of his extraordinary art, dancing on water, for instance, or riming the original creation by healing with clay, "we" tried to make him give up his bohemian ways, finally allowing him to be fastened to the planks, where artists would show him for centuries, inspiration.

Gradually a strategy of the poem becomes clear, as we are led to know that the real denial of Christ is to place him in time, to hang him up like a finished portrait. We see exactly half way through the poem that the "we" includes people of "our time", including ourselves. The first hint is in the stanza concerning the crucifixion. "All legions massed," we are told. We come to learn that they are not only the Roman legions in biblical Palestine, that the masses include those held in our churches wherein people again and again face up to the figure on the cross, and that the "all" is the familiar Avison all.

But for another two stanzas we hear the past-tense story of denial going on.

When reports come that the "dead" Jesus had been *seen* alive, goes the tale, the eye witnesses had their *windpipes* closed. "Eyes, larynx" are punished, and the artist Jesus in men is presumably to be found dumb.

The poet then uses her grammar fully again, to tell us Where we are, at. In the last line of the sixth stanza and the first two lines of the seventh, we are quickly moved from "past perfect" tense, through "past imperfect," to "present". Jesus is seen searching and sounding in the human world, now. He tries to hear our music, and we make a din (*passim* dumbfounding), trying to deny art as we deny him, closing the flaps of our tents as we tried to close the larynxes of the tellers. "And dying", the poet adds (to rime with the other poem's "and failing"), in no way attaching the phrase to *either* the spoken-to Jesus or the spoken-for us.

"Yet you are," says the next line, and then "Yet you are/ constant and sure," as the old master painter God was said to be, offering grace, in Hopkins' "God's Grandeur". And in the following stanza Miss Avison uses her notation to present Christ as God, as the artist who continues to create, who begins his work over and over, the story never sealed in the Book. Hear how the ends of the lines tell us of God's continuous art, work:

> Winning one, you again
> all ways would begin
> life: to make new
> flesh, to empower . . .

and how the accented words, after those pauses, *beginning* lines, tell us what the perfect "art objects" are. (Those readers who attend especially to Miss Avison's great usage of the word "all", and especially "all ways" in her religious verse, will be especially interested in the phrase "to make new". Ezra Pound took Confucius' advice, "make it new", to bring together the highest aspirations of art and social behaviour.)

In the last stanza, earlier referred to, Christ is said to (and asked to):

> lead through the garden to
> trash, rubble, hill,

where the garden is Gethsemane, but also Eden, so that the rubble beyond it is Golgotha, but also this world, where the follower would be taken, back from the flight, to the grubby rooming house, to try all arts, not to sanctify them in a gallery, caught in unnecessary limitations. Christ, the "outcast's outcast", is

once again said to "sound", that which rimes, "dark's uttermost", which shines with the Avison metaphysic, as Hopkins' plummeting falcon shines, till in the final collapse of the ticking second, "time be full".

That would be the perfect artist's masterwork, to lay his hands on the most trashed of temporal stuff and immortalize it, the impossible dream of every less-than-perfect creator. Imitating such an accomplishment as well as she does here proves Margaret Avison a more-than-merely human artist.

But always with Christian humility and humanness. A model for the poet may be found in "Psalm 19" (applied to Jesus in the Christmas Liturgy). Therein, David the poet addresses The Chief Musician, asking that "the words of my mouth/ and the meditation of my heart/ be acceptable in thy sight." The psalm announces that all of earth, rubble as well as sky, will show God's "handywork". In her poem called "Ps. 19" (*TD*, 24), Miss Avison declares her desire to "love high" and says that that calls for a searching and sounding of all that is to be found inward "to the last ribcorner/ and capillary," and around one:

> Yet to love high
> is with this very fear
> to shrink *and* seek to be made plain,
> openly to own
> both the mists smoking from pure
> stone-cold lake-still sun-sweetened places
> and the dank mist that rises
> from the long-unsunned, sour
> pools, hid even from the storm's sluices.

That is so far from honouring the artist — that any weekend gallery-goer may do. Look for his work and hers too, reader, on your way there, in the odd light that pulses from the unilluminated doorway where that pile of old clothes might contain the earth of a wretched man's body. There is no story there to which you can affix the words "The End" as you reach the end of the block.