

# A CORE OF BRILLIANCE

## *Margaret Avison's Achievement*

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MARGARET AVISON's experimental poetry has come of age; we may now place her in the front rank of Canadian poets. This is obvious to those who have read her latest volume, *The Dumbfounding*, and more especially to those who had seen the merits of her early work, both in anthologies (such as A. J. M. Smith's of 1943) and magazines, and in her first book, *Winter Sun*. It seems clear that the elements of pattern, style and content used superbly, but often sporadically in the early poetry, have finally been fused and formed into pearls of great lyrical vitality and depth.

The key to the change in Avison's poetry may not be obvious to the casual reader. A poem such as "The Butterfly" in the 1943 anthology reveals her acute sense of vision and the verbal facility with which it is expressed; describing the insect, she says:

I remember it, glued to the grit of that rain-strewn beach  
that glowered around it, swallowed its startled design  
in the larger iridescence of unstrung dark.

Poems such as "To Professor X, Year Y" and "Thaw" in *Winter Sun* are framed in that historical perspective Avison often adds to the visual one; and the well-constructed "Apocalyptic?" is an exercise in metaphysical speculation about the purpose of life, re-echoed in other poems such as "The Mirrored Man" and "From a Provincial". Avison's use of all these perspectives — the visual, the historical, the metaphysical — may easily be recognized, but they still do not provide the clue to what A. J. M. Smith calls in his review of *The Dumbfounding* "an immense step forward". What is that clue?

In an article she was kind enough to send me before its publication, entitled "I wish I had known . . .", Miss Avison makes some statements which shed light

on this question. The article concerns the progress of her personal beliefs from the “will to be good” of her early days as a minister’s daughter to the present “getting to be where Christ’s suffering goes, terribly on” of the mature religious poet. She tells how the period between these points — that of church-joining and Christian service — had given her a “blurry but adequate” portrait of God and a concept of Jesus as “about the best person who ever lived”, and how the Bible became increasingly “opaque” to her as she substituted her invented Christ for the scriptural Person.

She then describes the single most important event in this progress of belief, the occasion of January fourth, 1963, when the “Jesus of resurrection power” revealed Himself to her when she was supposedly alone; says the poet:

I would not want to have missed what he gave then: the astounding delight of his making himself known at last, sovereign, forgiving, forceful of life.

Under the influence of the refocusing caused by this experience, she looks back upon her previous life and work and notes “how grievously I cut off his way by honouring the artist” and sees her past as a “long wilful detour into darkness”.

In the light of these revealing statements, much of *The Dumbfounding* is immediately illuminated. Take, for example, the poem entitled “Person”. This seems to me to be the poetic record of the liberation experience of 1963; the experience is given as a kind of “flashback”, for the initial position is one of freedom:

Sheepfold and hill lie  
under the open sky.

from which we are taken back in time to discover what the original captivity, perhaps to her misconception of God, was really like:

This door that is “I AM”  
seemed to seal my tomb  
my ceilinged cell  
(not enclosed earth, or hill)  
there was no knob or hinge.

. . . Beneath  
steel tiers, all walled, I lay  
barred, every way.

This realization that “I lay barred, every way” is in reality the first stage of the

experience; the concept of the “I AM”, with its overtones of sovereignty and unapproachability, had kept her from a personal relationship with God.

The second stanza outlines the second stage in the liberation — the moment of realization that the door to freedom is actually a Person:

“I am.” The door  
was flesh; was there.

No hinges swing, no latch  
lifts. Nothing moves. But such  
is love, the captive may  
in blindness find the way:

In all his heaviness, he passes *through*.

Obviously, this is no forceful, door-swinging operation, but rather the acceptance of, the love-response to the one who says “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7).

The final stage in the experience is that of the new freedom of the sheepfold:

So drenched with Being and created new  
the flock is folded close, and free  
to feed — His cropping clay, His earth —

from which the glories of the Morning Star (Revelation 22:16: “I am the bright and morning star”) may be seen:

and to the wooly, willing bunt-head, forth  
shining, unseen, draws near  
the Morning Star.

“Person” is unquestionably central to *The Dumbfounding* in that without the experience it contains, the rest of what Smith calls in his review the “act of worship and submission” could not have been written.

The title poem falls into the category of an “act of worship” of the Christ who deigned to become human on man’s account. The first stanzas speak of the rejection of such a Christ by men:

When you walked here,  
took skin, muscle, hair,  
eyes, larynx, we  
withheld all honour: “His house is clay,  
how can he tell us of his far country?”

Your not familiar pace  
 in flesh, across the waves,  
 woke only our distrust.  
 Twice-torn we cried "A ghost"  
 and only on our planks counted you fast.

Dust wet with your spittle  
 cleared mortal trouble.  
 We called you a blasphemer,  
 a devil-tamer.

What strikes me most forcibly in this presentation is the aptness and terseness of Avison's phraseology; men trying to dismiss God-in-flesh "withheld all honour", and in such Christ "awoke only our distrust", and juxtaposed with these phrases those describing Christ's *real* actions: "in flesh, across the waves", "cleared mortal trouble" and the ultimate and poignant "You died". The last four stanzas extend the mystery and outline Christ's reception of men, that he is "all-men's-way", that when a man turns to him he makes "new flesh" and leads constantly to Calvary where he has fathomed "dark's uttermost".

The "dumbfounding", then, is the person of Christ himself, and Avison has painted the same portrait as the prophet Isaiah of the man who was "despised and rejected of men" yet "bare the sins of many" (Isaiah 53:3, 12). The other religious lyrics which are central to *The Dumbfounding* examine other facets of the poet's newfound relationship with Christ. "The Word" deals with the problem of disciplinship, specifically as it is the subject of the statement in Luke 14:33: "whosoever he be of you that forsakest not all that he hath, cannot be my disciple". The essential comparison, skilfully used by the poet, is of the measure of our "forsaking" with that of Christ's "being forsaken", and comes to the conclusion that his death explodes preconceived notions about the image of Jesus, destroys the picture of the intellectual, physical or even spiritual benefactor — for he has crossed the line from "benefactor" to "saviour":

The line we drew, you crossed,  
 and cross out, wholly forget,  
 at the faintest stirring of what  
 you know is love, is One  
 whose name has been, and is  
 and will be, the  
 I AM.

“... Person, or A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost” discovers a pattern for prayer whereby the poet’s self is “released from facelessness” and given spiritual power:

so that where you  
(unseen, unguessed, liable  
to grievous hurt) would go  
I may show him visible.

Yet perhaps the most complicated and effective of the poems in the volume is the one entitled “Branches”. It is almost a poetic thesis on the confrontation of Christianity and the modern world; it is remarkable for the various uses to which its central ideas are put, and for the way in which the poet ties them together. Contemporary men are first compared to the branches of a dying tree:

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

In the context of “Toronto’s whistling sunset”, asks the poet, “who would hear wholeheartedness/ and make the world come true?”; this inability to apprehend the Light causes us to seek some pseudo-solace in darkness:

The cinnamon carnation  
blows funeral incense here.  
In darkness is a narcotic,  
a last rite, silenced care.

the value of which the poet questions:

Can *this* kind of blanking  
bring us to our knees?

Again, in contrast to man’s ignorance, we see the knowledge of Christ, what he accomplished for man:

But he died once only  
and lives bright, holy, now  
hanging the cherried heart of love  
on this world’s charring bough.

In tasting this fruit of love, we can come into the joy of the knowledge of life in Christ, which in turn gives a reason for fellowship and discipleship:

Wonderingly, one by one:  
 "Gather. Be glad."  
 We scatter to tell what the root  
 and where life is made.

It seems to me that the two symbols in this poem are cunningly interwoven, so that each imparts some meaning to the other. The overworked poetic motif of light and darkness is given a new vitality: the light of the world ("Toronto's whistling sunset") is contrasted to the "Light that blinded Saul"; the four different meanings given to the word "light" in the ninth stanza do not, because of the seriousness of what precedes and follows it, become merely an experiment with words, but the accurate summing-up of a modern attitude:

Stray selves, crowding for light  
 make light of the heart's gall  
 and, fly-by-night, would light on  
 the Light that blinded Saul.

The tree-symbol is also put to striking use — as the tree of humanity, with its diseased roots and lashing branches, as the evidence (in a symbolically tangible form) of the fruition of David's knowledge of wholeheartedness (the lush date-palms), and as the handiwork of the Gardener who causes love to blossom on the skeletal boughs of humanity's tree.

Finally, the word "root", left for emphasis to the last stanza, is the organic connection between the two symbols — for without the action of the light to create the necessary life-energy there can be no root, and without the root there can be no tree. The action of the Light parallels this: it is only in the spiritual "photosynthesis" which Christ makes possible that "life is made".

It may be contested that the visual perspective of which I have spoken earlier as characterizing Margaret Avison's early poetry has become, in *The Dumbfounding*, a blatantly Christian one; admittedly, the "Jesus of resurrection power" has had a shaping effect upon her imagination, for he is as forceful in her work as he has become "forceful for life". But one who contests that Avison's vision has been twisted to fit her new faith must still contend with the other four-fifths of *The Dumbfounding* that is not overtly religious. Acclimatized as it has become to the city and its rushing life, Avison's vision often penetrates keenly into some feature of urban existence, as it does in "July Man":

Old, rain-wrinkled, time-soiled, city-wise, morning man . . .

In the sound of the fountain  
you rest, at the cinder-rim, on your bench.

The rushing river of cars  
makes you a stillness, a pivot, a heart-stopping  
blurt, in the sorrow  
of the last rubbydub swig, the searing, and  
stone-jar solitude lost, and yet,  
and still — wonder (for good now) and  
trembling:

The too much none of us knows  
is weight, sudden sunlight, falling  
on your hands and arms, in your lap,  
all, all, in time.

Here the effect of “time-soiled” at the beginning and “all, all, in time” at the end of the poem indicate its theme: the burden (“too much”) of temporality weighing down upon humanity. This penetrative power may well be a by-product of Avison’s spiritual experience, as may the increased interest in meta-physical connections rather than historical ones. “Natural/Unnatural”, for another example, gives us an insight into the nature of human hope and despair:

Hope is a dark place  
that does not refuse  
fear?

True, the natural light is a pressure on my ribs:  
despair — to draw that in, to  
deflate the skin-pouch, crunch out the  
structure in one  
luxuriant deep-breathed zero —  
dreamed already, this is  
corruption.

I fear *that*.  
I refuse, fearing; in hope.

As might be expected, though, the core or pivot for which the early poetry sought, has been found in the “strange heart’s force”, the very conscious presence of a living Christ in the poet’s experience. This is what gives power to the basically simple poem “Christmas: Anticipation” where the spirit of Zacharias of the first Christmas is contrasted with the shopping-and-vacation spirit of its modern counterpart:

The patient years in the appointed place  
brought Zacharias, dumb with unbelieving,  
flame-touched, to front  
the new sky . . .

The buyers wedge in doorways  
waiting for lights, lifts, taxes,  
The boy lonely in love moves with the wind  
through electric bright, through fading, light.  
The old man with his censer, dazed down the  
centuries, rays his  
dry-socketed eyes, dimming  
still, till he could believe, towards,  
with, joy.

This is a very different treatment of a Christian celebration than that seen in "Easter" of *Winter Sun*; there Avison approached her subject in terms of a season, here it is in terms of a Person.

Whatever else may be said about Margaret Avison's poetry, it seems to me that her "conversion" has given it a hard core of brilliance from which her meditations upon life radiate; and this of course connects her with a poet like Gerard Manley Hopkins (whose influence she has acknowledged in a letter to me) in the tradition of what T. S. Eliot liked to call "meditative verse". But their poetry is much more than that term implies; there is a keenly-felt and powerfully-expressed view in it of the relation between Christianity and modern society, between the resurrected Christ and the contemporary individual, that cannot be dismissed as pious versifying. What has been said of Hopkins in this connection (by Louis Martz in *The Poetry of Meditation*, 1954), can also be said of Margaret Avison:

. . . the self created in this poetry is one that tries to speak with full awareness of a supernatural presence, one that feels the hand of the supernatural upon himself, and upon all created things. Thus the learning, the logic, the philosophy that help to form this individual self are easily joined with perceptions of a bird, or a broom, or a love-ballad; for all these things are viewed as issuing, though sometimes once removed, from an omnipresent source of creative power. Such meditative poems, then, are composed in "current language heightened", moulded, to express the unique being of an individual who is seeking to learn, through intense mental discipline, *how to live his life in the presence of divinity*.