

# THE POETRY OF MARGARET AVISON

*Milton Wilson*

**F**OR MOST READERS of Canadian poetry, Margaret Avison seems to be less a poet than a kind of negative legend. One of the first critics to mention her in print simply regretted her absence from an anthology; one of the last wondered ironically if she had ever published anything but "The Butterfly". This negative emphasis can be misleading. Miss Avison has published about forty-five poems in the last twenty years, and over half of them have been in Canadian publications. Her total output may be scattered, but it is sizable enough, and certainly substantial.<sup>1</sup>

We hear her called a very intellectual poet, but she begins (and often ends) with the perceiving eye. That eye seems to have been educated on the prairies, even when it looks at the city or the East. Where so much space flows between object and object or between foreground and background, the nature of the picture depends on the focus (long-sighted or short-sighted). The eye may even refuse to separate near from far, and either flatten the grain-elevator against the sky or pull the horizon with all its infinity to the front of the stage. Miss Avison likes to stretch and contract and revise our vision, as we watch "the hill and the hoof-pocked dark between / evening star and mushroom". We are whirled into space, struck by distant boulders, cut by sharp buildings, and crushed under "leafless tons of sky". In "Perspective" she contrasts the idea of infinity as the point at the end of a diminishing vista with infinity as "sturdy everlasting foregrounds". Perhaps the first stanza of "Rigor Viris" gives

one the sense of Miss Avison's outdoor eye in operation as well as any other brief quotation:

One bland elipse in cornflower blue  
 Fans out beyond the gunneysack.  
 The profiles of Egyptian smiles  
 Confuse the clues these chimneystacks  
 Suggest of smoking miles,  
     Wed sun to smoke instead,  
     And blazon that parade  
     Of all intolerables in flowing frieze  
 Against a pink brick wall in a dun autumn.

These problems of focus or perspective are at their crudest in the early poems. In "I Saw One Walking" the speaker loses the proportion of the near by watching a man "as he made his way / Up the slow slope of evening". She returns to the safety of a closer dark, but the return is incomplete, "Turn where I may in dread of the wide air". No doubt the problem concerns more than the eye. But for the moment it is enough to notice in Miss Avison's poetry an interplay of fuzz and focus, of windy space and solid structure, of "startled design" against "the larger iridescence of unstrung dark".

In front of the foreground of Miss Avison's landscapes, on this side of the windowframe (so to speak), are her interiors: offices, warehouses, furnished rooms. The structure informing space becomes the room squared out of space. In "New Year's Poem" the centre of gravity is the repeated "windowledge", but the poem ends:

Gentle and just pleasure  
 It is, being human, to have won from space  
 This chill habitable interior.

She likes to dwell on the shape and furniture of rooms, their inner order or disorder, their outside pressed on glass. "Hiatus" is about the gap between room-no-longer-inhabited and room-not-yet-inhabitable: in short, about moving, or, better still, about the suspense of a "mover unmoved". But the interior may be oppressive and seemingly windowless. The eye may become trapped in its own foreground, as in the last stanza of "The Party":

80-watt stars in crystal cups  
 Keep all perspectives squat and square.  
 No alien unthought breath corrupts  
 This decorously airless air.

Pure foreground vision is a dead interior; the passive eye must break free and redesign in space. "The optic heart must venture: a jail-break / And re-creation." The square must seek the circle. And even the circle must spring free.

If the front of the foreground stifles us, the back of the background leaves us gasping. Just beyond Miss Avison's immediate horizon is the total perspective of the earth itself. In "The Agnes Cleves Papers" she keeps stretching space and time out to unimagined corners and then snapping them back to the West. The poem ends at nearly full stretch with the speaker equidistant from Moscow on one side and Lima on the other. In the last lines of "Rich Boy's Birthday Through a Window" the horizon suddenly loops (as on a high-frequency wave) from a tourist resort where "the peaks saw-tooth the Alberta noon" to the "Ionic shore, at Marathon". But Miss Avison's "optic heart" can be more venturesome and less earthbound than this. Whereas in "New Year's Poem" we follow

. . . the long loop of winter wind  
 Smoothing its arc from dark Arcturus down  
 To the bricked corner of the drifted courtyard,  
 And the still windowledge,

in many poems we find ourselves moving the other way, "swept / In some siderial curve", or plumbing "The skies and skies and skies beyond, the terrible / Layers of magnitude". The foreground is a kind of Pandora's box; when we open it out, we unsquare the circle or unfocus its contours. At the end of "Rigor Viris" Miss Avison tries to have the box somehow open and shut at the same time:

Now, Child Pandora, lift the lid again  
 And let the clamoring mysteries be dumb.  
 In this clear twilight contour must contain  
 Its source, and distances with contours come  
 Opening peacock vistas that can no man entomb.

A good many of her poems (however different in other respects) leave us at the end trying to grasp a visual structure of this geometric and paradoxical kind, like the "liquid Euclids in foolscaps of air" in the last line of "Tennis". This is obviously true of the desperate attempt to stab an angle into a curve which concludes "The Butterfly", but even a quite objective and undiscursive piece like "Stray Dog Near Ecully" exists in terms of similar patterns. Here a "dog called Sesame" escapes from a Roman amphitheatre when the gate is opened to let a bicycle in; he gazes beyond the "Rouault hoop" of the landscape, and, as they search for him in the courtyard, the poem dies away to the echo of his name. "The Agnes Cleves Papers" ends, not merely between Moscow and Lima, but also between the images of children playing hop-scotch and a ship sailing out beyond the gap. The far-off event towards which all this seems to be moving, Miss Avison's optical millennium of reconciled curves and straight lines, is "Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes: in Prospect".

SO FAR I have been anxious to keep prospects literally prospects. The idea of Miss Avison as a "metaphysical" poet, passionately concerned with contemporary science and theology and assimilating difficult chunks of them in her poems, has only a little to be said for it. She is sensitive to what is in the air and no doubt reads widely, but, compared to a Donne or even a Tennyson, she needs very few footnotes. One might call her a kind of Northern Wallace Stevens, but a less conceptualized kind. Yet the poems published from 1943 to 1947 do show some eagerness to move from perception to conception; and, if ever Miss Avison's speculations turn theoretical, it is here. "Perspective" is a success, perhaps because the theory builds directly on the eye, but "Geometaphysics" must have sounded like ancient science-fiction even in that pre-Sputnik time. A more interesting failure is "Neverness, or The One Ship Beached on One Far Distant Shore", where the equation of space and time begins with the heavy-handed title itself. The argument of the poem sees the historical process from Alpha to Omega as the endless surface of a sphere. What holds together this future-past is the pivot Adam, or the primordial cell, or the nascent thought, or the single outline, or whatever you want to

call the non-historical thing which the whole cycle spreads from and turns on. But Adam, being non-historical, is more than the pivot Adam, clasped by the serpent circumference; he is the core of the dream “that history is done”.

Then must the pivot Adam be denied  
 And the whole cycle ravelled and flung loose.  
 Is this the Epoch when the age-old Serpent  
 Must writhe and loosen, slacking out  
 To a new pool of Time's eternal sun?  
 O Adam, will your single outline blur  
 At this long last when slow mist wells  
 Fuming from all the valleys of the earth?  
 Or will our unfixed vision rather blind  
 Through agony to the last gelid stare  
 And none be left to witness the blank mist?

The passage is weakly phrased, but Miss Avison's dream is worth sharing. To begin with, now that the cycle has been flung loose, we can see beyond it to a multiple universe in which the odd apocalyptic explosion here and there seems just a matter of course. And, although one of the serpents of Time has been scotched, he'll close again elsewhere under “Time's eternal sun”. As for our denied and released Adam, his outline blurs and the contours of the hill on which he stands dissolve in mist. Or, to put it another way, the dreamer's eyes unfix and turn to ice. At the end of the poem, a blank eye faces a blank image.

What Miss Avison does with sight (and to some extent with sound, as in the supersonic conclusion of “The Valiant Vacationist”), we hardly expect her to do with taste and smell, which seem less capable of projection. But, although the eye dominates her poems, it does not exclude the more intimate senses. Even in “Neverness”, infinity is smelled as well as seen. And, as we return from “outer utter darkness” back to “the palaces of sense”, we find a good many scents and flavours lingering about the porches and gardens and courtyards, intensifying in the dark. Old houses are the structures of decaying sense, “patchy after years of hopeless upkeep”, and Miss Avison likes to explore these thresholds of memory and history. Indeed, her later poetry is much less concerned with tracing an orbit than with “the Sticks-&-Stones, this City”. A lot of space and time

may be just around the paradoxical corner, but, for all that, no Canadian poet is better able to depict the clutter and savour of the urban or semi-urban here and now, as in poems like "Factoring" or "All Fools' Eve".

Her most memorable houses are labyrinthine and in need of repair, ripe for inner dialogues between Youth and Age, South and North. Nobody who has read "The Agnes Cleves Papers" is likely to forget the "circular apartment" with "too many doors", or even the pale mother yearning for

A rocking-chair and her childhood by the stove  
The day the postman failed to come  
And chickens froze on the roosts.

In "Excerpt from Work in Progress . . ." a young girl remembers her dead grandmother's house and contrasts the out-of-door "spherical" world of her childhood with the glassed porch (like an anteroom to the palace of the dead owner), where Auntie Jean sat out the March afternoons

On the torn cotton swing  
Its rusty coils faintly complaining. . . ,  
Folded in her thin coat,  
Mute behind her mourning glasses,  
Deaf to the icewater day's mowing and mumming  
Beyond the paint-flaked window-frames. . . .

In Miss Avison's poetry you can't seem to escape those windowframes and windowledges, where "all but the lovers' ghostly windows close". Even her "valiant vacationist", climbing an endless spiral of steps and sending back fainter and fainter waves of communication, finds "a dirty windowpane" as well as an uncompanionable fly on "a half-way landing". The "Excerpt" itself ends: "Strangers moved into grandmother's house / And kept a stepladder in the porch. It broke one pane."

**M**ISS AVISON's literary sources (like her personal ones) are usually either concealed and transformed or (when obvious) insignificant. I leave it to others to speculate on such things as the doubtful relation of the last section of "Neverness" to "Sunday Morning", or "The Butterfly" to Emily Dickinson, or "The Agnes Cleves Papers" to

assorted Russians. She may never have cast her eye into Blake's *Milton* or traced the ragged margins of Marianne Moore. Miss Avison's poems originate in one another more clearly than in their predecessors. Some remarks on her internal stylistic development are at least possible, although we can never be sure if the order of publication comes very close to the order of composition.

Among the early poems, a fairly distinctive group is formed by the six in rhymed quatrains, which consist of "Gatineau", "Optional", "Maria Minor", "Old Adam", "Song But Oblique to '47" and "The Party", all published between 1939 and 1947. Miss Avison normally has little patience with rigid, recurrent stanza forms and her use of rhyme is spotty and eccentric. The fact that the only end-rhyme of "The Butterfly" is between "Eternity" and "Galilee" may be significant, but, if so, the technique is certainly not characteristic, as you can discover by trying to fix the scattered rhymes of "Perspective". Nor is there usually any neat arrangement about the sectional divisions of her poems. Their apparently designed, stanzaic shape on the page is often in striking contrast to their fluctuating movement in time. At first glance some of them manage to look like Herbert or Vaughan, but they act more like Cummings or Williams. The quatrain poems are exceptional and (outside of the remotely analogous "Stray Dog") 1947 sees the last of them.

Most of these six poems are ingrown; they end shut, rather than open; and in this lies the appropriateness of their form. "The Party" is a boxed interior; "Old Adam" leaves us with "the heart imprisoned in a circumference", like the more oblique "Song". "Maria Minor" is about the pre-Adamic Lilith giving birth to Adamic form. Her occupation gone, she recedes West to the flux and the forest.

The East is far and weary.  
The thrush's young are fed.  
I go down among the leaf mold  
To mash my head.

This may be the *rigor mortis* of the shadow, not of the shape, but the stanza gives it a similar finality, like the suicidal end of "Gatineau". That Miss Avison associates rhyme with reduced dimensions is clear in her only intricately rhymed piece, "Rigor Viris", and the off-rhyme with which the poem ends has just the balance that the argument requires. But even

in "Rigor Viris" the interweaving of rhymes is resolutely arbitrary and asymmetrical, and the stanzas pretend to no more than a kind of sketchy regularity, a tentative rigidity of form: ". . . distances with contours come / Opening peacock vistas that can no man entomb". Miss Avison's poems are likely to zig-zag pretty freely at the margins, as though the typewriter had a mind of its own, and her most characteristic endings are not shut, but open, or at least ajar: "It broke one pane," or "Past beaky statue-shadows. . . ."

If the later poems seem, on the whole, more tentative and fluctuating, it is partly because they are richer and more enterprising. Indeed, the period since 1956 is already the most brilliant and productive of her whole career. Some excellent poems may have appeared in the forties ("The Butterfly", "Perspective", "The Iconoclasts", perhaps "Maria Minor" and—to my taste at least—"The Valiant Vacationist"), but the decade ended with inferior contributions to *Contemporary Verse* and *Here and Now*. The period from 1949 to 1956 (the year in which Miss Avison was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship) was a kind of hiatus, with just one published poem, even if a good one. To many observers of the time, the early fifties seemed like rather grim days for Canadian poetry in general, with the decline of *Northern Review* only the most obvious symbol of the whole process. Miss Avison never contributed to John Sutherland's magazine, and the appearance of general decline turned out to be (in part at least) an illusion, but in 1955 it might have been tempting to see her as a remarkable talent which had petered out, another of Canada's prodigies without staying power. The temptation has by now ceased to exist.

One obvious virtue of the late poems is the increased variety and freshness of the stuff they are made on. In the lesser work of the first decade, one soon gets weary of the "far-borne aching echoes" or "this crude angle / Splayed through the dreamer's prairie": those predictable moments when Miss Avison yet again plumbs the infinite spaces with her *esprit de géométrie*. By the end of her twenties the vision has worn thin and its substance needs renewal. In a stanza of "Geometaphysics" (1947), space is pushed until it rolls over; up and down, water and air interchange; space explorers become deepsea divers. In "Civility a Bogey", or "Two Centuries of Canadian Cities" (1959), the same image is much more successfully developed in terms of the aquarium-like boardroom at the top of a skyscraper (presumably the Imperial Oil Building in Toron-



to). And here the image is only part of a subtle and detailed comedy of Canadian Space and Time, Superstition and Civilization. In "Factoring" (also 1959) the "Vision on the iris" is Sunday by a bakery. The poem ends with evening and the metaphorical rise of a new week:

And the bath  
of light goes tepid, the delicate froth  
of light scums down. An iron-hoofed  
evangelist howls two blocks south  
to idling drifters. . . .

The slow-working  
yeast of weariness has belched  
its gases in the social dough. The clock  
sparks ovens for the clank  
of a new week.

The prairie eye has come to terms not merely with the metropolitan skyline (that is an old story), but with the city's material refuse and richness as well. A. J. M. Smith speaks of Miss Avison's attempt "to interpret, as in 'Neverness', the mutations of time in terms of something significant in the lives of the human beings who throng Yonge Street at the noon rush hour". But in "Neverness" (1943) the apocalyptic world and the stenographic world just touch and no more. In a late poem like "Our Working Day May Be Menaced", the fantasy and the factory are one. This tropical factory is a futuristic "orange-pippery" where oranges are forced to disgorge their seed without losing their juice. The technique by which they are sterilized but not turned inside out "is of course secret". The management provides a perfect setting for the process, with walls of wattle and "parakeets on the p. a. system". The incident around which the poem revolves concerns Madeleine, a rather flighty worker on the assembly line, who decides to leave at the end of the day not by the usual elevator cage but along "the extension bridge (windy at sunset)". The speaker who observes and records the incident is a kind of reluctant apocalyptic voice, bearing uneasy witness to the first sign that their factory or universe has become obsolete.

A person has a nature.  
I note hers only that I may bear witness.  
Her silhouette high on the span  
Focused us then, for the quick—  
Occurrence? A hard designation. 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 siderial swerve,  
    Blotted sheer out of time; then spurned  
    Back to the pebbles of the path  
    (After the footbridge), where  
    Heartstain of sun  
    Still blurred the airfloor dark.

An evening delegation called; concluded  
She is not schooled to cope. . . .  
Some of us, privately piqued, privately speculate.

. . . A calling from our calling?  
In the œconomy of the clairvoyant,  
Or some high pillared parliament  
We gave election, in an elated moment  
Too rare for conscious purpose,  
Can it have come to light that  
The thirst for perfect fruit abroad  
Has now been superseded, or subsumed  
Under a new, more radical, craving?  
Can they have appointed  
A locus elsewhere for us?  
Our mocha faces are too bland for trouble.  
Yet may we, when the morning steam-cocks open  
For our new day aloft  
Find there is come about a universal  
Swallowing-up  
(proceedings against Madeleine alone  
clearly being absurd)  
with only the racks and vats,  
the lifts and cages left, uncrated and forgotten,  
and the pipes steaming thinly  
under a fading crescent?

Although such a poem is unmistakably by the author of "The Butterfly" or "Another Christmas", its implications (social, economic, political, religious) range farther afield. To become progressively less austere is something of an anomaly for a Canadian poet of Miss Avison's generation. She began to publish her poems during the war. On the pages of the *Canadian Forum* they appear side by side with those of P. K. Page, James Wreford and Patrick Anderson. If her poems had any social implications, they certainly remained unnoticed in that company. By now she seems to have passed her contemporaries going the other way.

But I do not wish to attribute to Miss Avison's poems any belated contemporaneity, which would be a dubious virtue at best. In any case, "Gatineau", which announces the beginning of her poetic career, is really no less a "sign" of the times than "Our Working Day May Be Menaced" or the recent "Voluptuaries and Others", one of the most brilliant and ironic of her prophecies. "Signs are taken for wonders," mutters the aged Gerontion, who ought to be one of Miss Avison's heroes. But her ultimate future never looks much like "fractured atoms". The awful truth is not the give and take of chaos, but total comprehension:

. . . the other kind of lighting-up  
That shows the terrain comprehended, as also its containing space,  
And wipes out adjectives, and all shadows  
(or perhaps, all but shadows).

<sup>1</sup> The following is a list of the poems I have seen: GATINEAU, *Canadian Poetry Magazine* (December, 1939); BREAK OF DAY, I SAW ONE WALKING, *Canadian Forum* (November, 1942); OPTIONAL, *Canadian Forum* (January, 1943); NEVERNESS, OR THE ONE SHIP BEACHED ON ONE FAR DISTANT SHORE, MARIA MINOR, OLD ADAM (later retitled THE SIMPLE HORIZONTAL), THE BUTTERFLY, *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, edited by A. J. M. Smith (1943); THE PAST AND THE BREAK, THIS IS THE SEASON, *Manitoba Arts Review* (Fall, 1943); MUTABLE HEARTS, *Canadian Forum* (October, 1943); THE VALIANT VACATIONIST, *Canadian Forum* (December, 1944); GEOMETAPHYSICS, THE ICONOCLASTS, PERSPECTIVE, SONG BUT OBLIQUE TO '47, THE PARTY, *Poetry* (September, 1947); CHRISTMAS, THE ROAD, ANOTHER CHRISTMAS, *Contemporary Verse* (Fall, 1948); OMEN, THE COWARD, *Here and Now* (January, 1949);

THE POETRY OF MARGARET AVISON

HIATUS, *Poetry* (April, 1952); FROM A PROVINCIAL, THE APEX ANIMAL, NEW YEAR'S POEM, KNOWLEDGE OF AGE, *Kenyon Review* (Spring, 1956); THE AGNES CLEVES PAPERS, *Origin* (Winter, 1957); RIGOR VIRIS, VOLUPTUARIES AND OTHERS, *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, edited by A. J. M. Smith (1957); ALL FOOLS' EVE, STRAY DOG, NEAR ECULLY, RICH BOY'S BIRTHDAY THROUGH A WINDOW, *Poetry* (December, 1957); EXCERPT FROM WORK IN PROGRESS . . . , OUR WORKING DAY MAY BE MENACED, TENNIS, NOT THE SWEET CICELY OF GERARDES HERBALL, *Folkways Records*, Album FL 9806 (1958); ODE TO BARTOK (from the Hungarian of Gyula Illyés) *The New Reasoner* (Summer, 1958); SNOW, MEETING TOGETHER OF POLES AND LATITUDES: IN PROSPECT, *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*, edited by Ralph Gustafson (1958); JUNE AS CHRISTMAS, *Combustion* (November, 1958); PRELUDE, *Poetry* (March, 1959); CIVILITY A BOGEY OR TWO CENTURIES OF CANADIAN CITIES, *Queen's Quarterly* (Summer, 1959); FACTORING, *Canadian Forum* (August, 1959). The list includes only the first place of publication.



LINO-CUT BY BEN LIM