MAN AND MANDALA:
THE POETRY OF MARGARET AVISON

by

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Avison, whose poetry presents a large number of personae in the process of the search for self, rightly may be thought of as being a writer whose work develops organically to form a poetic myth. In her earliest poems, her collective personnae conceive the world in its fallen state; the apparent acceptance of a decadent status quo initiates a first point of orientation. In the existentialist tradition, Avison then moves from this phase of orientation towards a more active phase characterized by a desire to transcend the human condition by means of a "turn off." Those poems preoccupied by this theme all exhibit personae who, in Avison's own words, with "dainty stepping unbox" themselves. To become unboxed beings as opposed to incarcerated citizens constitutes transfiguration. In the third and final phase of Becoming, her personae increasingly tend to proclaim rather than defame a God, who, throughout her poetry, gains triunity. These three primary sections, culminating in a critical myth or mandala, form the movement from "Gatineau," her first published poem, to "He Couldn't be Safe," one of her last.

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I hereby give special thanks to Sandra Djwa, my senior supervisor, for the help and encouragement she has given me during the writing of this thesis.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all those who subscribe in essence to the poetic and idea contained in Margaret Avison's poem "First":

> Excessive gladness can drag
> the 3-dimensional uncircumferenced circle
> out of its sublime true
> unless contrition also past all bound
> extend it.
>
> In the mathematics of God
> there are percentages beyond one hundred.
>
> His new creation is
> One, whole, and a
> beginning.

INTRODUCTION

The principle of cognition, especially understood as a process or phase of psychological and spiritual awareness, has long been hailed as a primary concept in many diversified circles and disciplines. In the last few decades, the cognizant man is rapidly gaining territorial advances over his older pragmatist counterpart in life's fields. The most obvious symptoms of this phenomenon are found in the accelerating interests exhibited by the public at large in Eastern as well as Western mysticism, elements in the newly emerged counter-culture and its professed preference of mind over body, and, on the other hand, in the relatively recent writings of existential psychologists and philosophers who stress the value of subjective reality and thereby aim, once more, to harbour man's psyche and anchor his soul in the elusive but real fortress of the unknown.

Generally speaking, (the poet among men has made man's physical and mental reality the artistic mosaic of the cognitive Life.) Malory's Holy Grail, for instance, continues to be sought and lost by many whose quest is the delivery of the self to a higher state or being. John Donne too, in spite of his oft this-worldly stance, adopts a traditional but nevertheless other-worldly position when he says

In what torn ship soever I embark
That ship shall be my emblem of Thy Ark;
What sea soever swallow me, that flood
Shall be to me an emblem of Thy blood;

Equally inclined to see himself moving toward ultimate union with the Godhead is Tennyson in his final affirmation from "In Memoriam A.H.H."

That God which ever lives and loves
One God, one law, one element,
And one far off divine event
To which the whole creation moves.

(Removed in time and space, Canadian poet Margaret Avison also embarks upon a journey in a ship of metaphors which betrays her alliance with the God of Donne's past but also with the gods within ourselves)from Lawrence's presence as is revealed in her two volumes of poetry, Winter Sun, and The Dumbfounding, published in 1960 and 1966 respectively. A substantial number of poems published in literary magazines and anthologies remain uncollected.[1] A.J.M. Smith, one of her most devoted critics, made the remark that her diction is "as modern as it is archaic;"[2] her mythology, one may add, may warrant a similar categorization. (However, although one may speak of Avison's poetic visions in terms of a mythology,)she is not a feminine Faulknerian. Her "Yoknapatawpha County" is not nearly as explicit as the sketch appearing in the appendix of a Faulkner critical text. On the contrary, her critics have, generally speaking, not conceived

of thematic continuity in her work, as is exemplified, for instance, by William H. New's observation that "Even with all the intelligence that hindsight allows, it is hard to see in Margaret Avison's earliest poems the poet she was later to become."[3]

(More apparent than a cohering thematic scenario is Avison's religious concern, as is evident from a general consideration of her as a "devotional" or "christian" poet.) The critical evaluations of her, pertaining to this aspect of her poetry, vary greatly however. A.J.M. Smith reads her devotional poems in The Dumbfounding "with the grave pleasure that one reads Herbert,"[4] whereas John Robert Colombo, with Smith, sees (Avison as a poet "who writes like a Christian",) but nevertheless is prepared to view this fact as being detrimental to the quality of her work. Her failure he says, "is the peculiar and feminine diffidence she brings to her writing. (She is aware of writing a poem first and a religious poem second."[5]) (He goes on to say that although the poet assumes a "prayerful attitude" in her poetry, she does not "really come to terms with spiritual reality.")

Milton Wilson in a review article demonstrates a third point of view when he maintains that Avison as a "metaphysical" poet "has only a little to be said for itself."[6] Seeing Avison as needing "few footnotes,"[7] he considers her to be a "voluptuary of the mind" rather than an "intellectual."

On the other hand, Lawrence M. Jones, Miss Avison's most outspoken advocate and champion, sees her not only as a christian and a successful poet, but also he acknowledges the relationship between Winter Sun and The Dumbfounding. His major thesis in his review article "A Core of Brilliance: Margaret Avison's Achievement" is that ((("the core or pivot for which the early poetry sought has been found in ... the conscious presence of a living Christ in the poet's experience"[9]))) (as manifested in The Dumbfounding). ((Jones sees Avison's conversion (which supposedly occurred on January fourth, 1963), as "the key to change" which has given her poetry "a hard core of brilliance from which her meditations upon life radiate.")) Other minor "defenders of the faith" who have helped place Avison are David Helwig and Keith Harrison, the former finding in The Dumbfounding a "feeling of words" suggestive of John Donne, Hopkins, and Dylan Thomas, "driven to express the soul's passionate abandon before the divine."[10] Much in the same vein, Harrison sees ((Avison (a "Mozart among the heavies") as writing a poetry which is a "celebration of God's world."[11])) A recent study by Janet E. Ade, however, almost completely ignores Avison's Christianity. In her thesis The Poetry of Margaret Avison: Technique and Theme,[12] only two pages are devoted to "the Christian poems."

Clearly the need for a re-examination of Avison's poetry is warranted in order to shed new light on this apparently many faceted poet. A comprehensive analysis of Avison's major metaphors through an impressionistic critical method will be adopted in order to reveal the poetic constructs of her world. Just as the psychedelic drug-user hopes to experience a totality of vision in the conceptual as well as perceptual world, so we seek clairvoyance in her two worlds. "Man" and "Mandala," the former as the poet's subject and the latter as a critical diagram, comprise the title of this study which has adopted "not the naming but the celebration" for its maxim.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FALLEN, FALLEN WORLD

> To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude.
> The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks.
> The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words.
> The one primary word is the combination I-Thou.
> The other primary word is the combination I-It; wherein, without a change inthe primary word, one of the words He or She can replace It.
> Hence the I of man is also twofold.
> For the I of the primary word I-Thou is a different I from that of the primary word I-It.
>
> Martin Buber

Although the phrase "the search for self" has been overworked in literary criticism and popular philosophy, it may be applied to the poetry of Margaret Avison as a term denoting beginning and end, direction and purpose, examination and uncovering. Through the parade of exhibiting narrators and characters in her poetry, she provides many examples of the individual consciousness trying to come to terms with the objective world of things and the subjective world of experience. That process which we call "the search for self" becomes in Avison's own words, the search for a "habitable" world. Basically, Avison in her poetry attempts to transcend the chaotic face of the world, the world of Appearance, in order to attain the heart of the world, the world of Being. We may describe this journey or search as the process of Becoming.

((In a mode akin to the existentialist tradition, Avison begins her articulation of the world in terms of anxiety, guilt and despair.)) A large portion of poems collected either in Winter Sun or uncollected poems published before the appearance of The Dumbfounding are ostensibly concerned with the negative side of existence. ((However, the negative side of the human condition is examined with positive zeal as is shown in the opening lines from her poem "Snow":[13]))

> Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.
> The optic heart must venture: a jail-break
> And re-creation. . . .

The mood conveyed through the key words "optic", "venture", "jail-break", and "re-creation" is one of self-willed awareness. ((Time and again in her poetry, Avison proves herself to be an adherent of that philosophy which allows one to break out of the circle of inanity into the realm of meaning.)) "Gatineau",[14] her first published poem, provides the infant perspective for a "two-fold" world. It may be read as a self-diagnosis of the individual consciousness in connection with his particular environment. One may consider the poem in its entirety:

> There is a rock at the river-edge
> Girt by the chain of a boom;
> The yellow wind trickles among the sedge
> And the air is raw with gloom.
>
> The long black river is uncoiled
> Among the stolid hills,
> And day is like a curtain soiled
> Against night's windowsills.

The desolation like a churl
Knows only empty-eyed
The bleak unconscience of a world
Intent on suicide.

Although the imagery may seem to form the major substance of the poem, for instance, in so far as the black uncoiling river suggests evil, that which is abstract provides the primary framework for the symbolic contents. "Empty-eyed" desolation and a "bleak unconscience of a world" simultaneously suggest the nature and cause of man's disease. But Avison does not clearly state in this poem whether man himself or his world is the culprit for the human condition.

Generally speaking, "Gatineau" is not a very forceful poem. The quatrains' regular rhyme and rhythm seem somewhat stilted and weak, especially in comparison with forms employed later. But "Gatineau" is important in so far as it announces a major theme. The adverbial phrase "empty-eyed" forms part of the basic "seeing" motif so prominent in much of her later writing. "Seeing" as it is prohibited in this poem by 'soiled curtains' is a manifestation of Avison's underlying concern with physical, mental, and spiritual awareness.

The same sense of permeating gloom and desolation found in "Gatineau" is present in "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball".[15] Like early Adam, her world is her garden, but unlike Eden, the vegetation is less prolific:

Myrrh, bitter myrrh, diagonal,
Divides my gardenless gardens
Incredibly as far as the eye reaches
In this falling terrain.

The paradox contained in "gardenless gardens" hints at the absurdity of the human condition. The paradox implies, if not a future, then at least a past meaning of garden. Furthermore, the present participle "falling" interpreted as a continual process of decline, suggests, at an early point in the poem, future descent and collapse.

Through negative images and symbols Avison expounds the gardenless aspect of garden. The persona, almost as if "gardens" had disappeared in the antipodes of the mind, sees only the negative side of presumably a former state. The landscape which "unscrolls," as in a revelation, is bereft of the fecundity usually associated with a garden:

> No beetles move. No birds pass over.
> The stone house is cold.
> The cement has crumbled from the steps.
> The gardens here, or fields,
> Are weedless, not from cultivation but from
> Sour unfructifying November gutters,
> From winds that bore no fennel seeds,
> Finally, from a sun purifying, harsh, like
> Sea-salt.

In the next part of the stanza she gains recollection of the past landscape.

> The stubbled grass, dragonfly-green,
> Between the stones, was not so tended.
> Mild animals with round unsmiling heads
> Cropped unprotested, unprotesting
> (After the rind of ice
> Wore off the collarbones of shallow shelving rock)
> And went their ways.

In the first, and mainly descriptive part of the poem, the

emphasis is with the symptoms of a condition; in the latter half, causes as well as results are discussed.

Neither "Gatineau" nor "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball" allow the identification of a definite culpable agent or force. In the latter especially, the poet mainly hints at man's guilt in having forfeited his former world. The second stanza begins with the observation that the "bitter myrrh/ Cannot revive a house abandoned":

> Time has bleached out the final characters
> Of a too-open Scripture.
> Under the staring day
> This rabbinical gloss rustles its
> Leaves of living darkness.

The personification of "day" lends added significance and further clarification to our initial paradox, as does, to a lesser extent, the phrase "leaves of living darkness." Both strengthen the opposition which exists between states of "falling" and being "motionless."

The unnatural quiet of the terrain (leaves are the only audibles), helps to suggest that Avison's world in this poem is sinking back into a pre-historic void. With a whimper that Eliot might have conceived, the day, tranced or death like, sees a world silently slipping away. Already, it resembles a lost continent unfiled and unnamed:

> With the maps lost, the voyages
> Cancelled by legislation years ago,
> This is become a territory without name.
> No householder survives
> To marvel on the threshold

> Even when the evening myrrh raises
> An aromatic incense for
> Far ivory nostrils
> Set in the vertical plane of ancient pride.

In "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball," the sacrificial lamb has become obsolete, and the apocalypse never conceived. "Ancient pride", Adam's hubris, marks the end of a territory and epoch. Thematically, "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball" is a second installment to "Gatineau." The prophesy contained in "a world intent on suicide" becomes fulfilled in the poem under discussion. However, the awareness expressed as to the extent of man's alienation from the Good Earth, and the unimplicated stance which the narrator adopts, suggests room for spectators. In other words, visions of humanity can be and are in Avison's poems sometimes divorced from evaluation of self.

The narrator of "Chronic"[16] is as concerned with the world of Appearance, (in more than one sense), and the world of Being, but this example of an individual consciousness, a chain in the poet's total Persona, <u>is</u> implicated. Rather than being a detached observer, she is the object-cum-subject.

"My house" says the narrator of "Chronic", "is made of old newspapers."

> Not very old ones, always about a week's
> Accumulation. And don't pretend you recognize it.
> You don't. Because it doesn't look like a house,
> Either square or tepee-shaped, and <u>I</u> wouldn't know
> Except it's where I live.

Several critics have responded to this poem in print. A.J.M. Smith, for instance, feels that Avison in "Chronic" makes a "fetish of sincerity."[17] Avison does, of course. "I become accustomed", she says

> To failing more and more
> In credence of reality as others
> Must know it, in a context, with a coming
> And going marshalled among porticos,
> And peacock-parks for hours of morning leisure.

But "Chronic" is more than a poet's attempted undress, it says less about her naked eyes and more about her clothed vision. When her narrator says that we do not recognize her house, she seems to imply that our inability derives ultimately from our own limited and subjective vision. This would appear to be logical and inevitable; she tells us where she lives, hence we know, but by the same token we cannot pretend to recognize it. We only know and understand because we live in similar newspaper houses. Then, rather than recognize the shape of someone else's existence ("it doesn't look like a house"), we identify with one another's place of habitation. That Avison seems so brusque, cannot be attributed to her wish to be sincere, but rather to her desire to broaden our vision. If we recognize and admit our own tepee-shaped or squared imprisonment, then, she seems to say, "the constant shifting of the contour" (or the infinitely changing and shifting world, as is reflected in our daily news), can be dealt with. Then private and somewhat trivial murmurings such as

> What with the winter solstice
> There is not chance of a strawberry festival
> For months. I cannot think...
> Quinces, for instance: will I need
> A pocket-knife for that? I never see, these days
> Even that chap in a peak cap
> (Spoke like a Cockney and) surprised us once at
> Brewster's.

can be dispensed with. A.J.M. Smith has difficulties with these last private allusions of which he says "we must assume the relevance." Smith of course, missed the point. The relevance lies in the very nature of its privacy and irrelevance. Avison does not often use such a poetic device, but when she does, as in "Chronic," it is an effective method of communicating the uncommunicable.

Like "Gatineau" and "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball," "Chronic" is a poem which embodies a warning and a lament. Their respective narrators acknowledge defeat and despair caused by apparent purposelessness. Not one of these poems, however, fails to look at man with a humane eye. Nevertheless, Avison does cast her mankind in a negative light. If, however, this negative portrayal is taken one step further, positive alternatives suggest themselves for the alleviation of the human predicament. In "The Fallen, Fallen World,"[18] she comes close to suggesting alternatives to newspaper houses.

In this poem Avison divides mankind in three groups: "revolutionaries," "idealists," and "the learned." The prelude to the examined modes of living comes in the form of a stanza. It is philosophical in tone:

> When, breathing murk and apprehension of
> Slow sure estrangement from the sun,
> Night and the withering Arctic wind explore
> The vacant corridors that are allowed
> Us for our enforced passage
> We are, in snow and sleep's despite,
> Straitly sustained.

The relevance of this stanza and the title of the work in which it is contained is obvious. "Slow sure estrangement from the sun" at once suggests that man is unable to remove himself from the rhythmical movements of the cyclical world as well as, on a more symbolic level, his inability to escape those periods in life which are spent away from that which is life-giving. Thus, if and when, and Avison in this poem does not suggest that he has a choice in the matter, man moves into the day of the winter solstice he becomes to some extent a prisoner, that is, "straitly sustained." Consider the revolutionaries. They maintain an ironic position:

> Some that the sun in happier days burnished
> Gather an odd intensity
> As they had learned, ungalaxied, to centre
> Fuel and fume, and in fair arrogance
> To, unconsumed but self-consuming, burn,
> Till see them! wayside smithies for the metals
> Of a waste warlike time.

Whereas the revolutionaries learn and "burn," in so far as they, rather than affect their environment only deplete themselves ("unconsumed but self-consuming"), the "idealists" "stray" and "strive." They in "Moan and Misery"

> stray desolate along the steely river.

The river pictured in this stanza resembles in effect, the black uncoiling river of "Gatineau." In the latter, however, Avison describes only a setting whereas she, in this stanza, pictures man as well:

> And among ice and yellow floes and dense
> Sealed barren thorns and thickets, these lament,
> And intheir sinewed penance strive
> To win belief in a new burgeoning.

The contrast between the revolutionaries and the idealists, in so far as both groups attempt to bypass the "enforced passage," lies in their respective attitudes: "arrogance" marks the former, and "sinewed penance" the latter. The tone of voice used by the narrator leaves little doubt as to which stance she finds more admirable.

The third category of mankind, "the learned," are those who

> ... from the summit see
> The seasons' sure resolve, and having sounded
> Dayspring in the Magnificat, and sensed
> The three-day darkness on the eternal's doorstep
> Not once, but more than once, now are but weary
> Because the hope is certain, and the sound
> And sense are for them qualities of time
> Where meaning mocks itself in many echoes
> Till it is meaningless;
> They, stubborn, on the frozen mountain cling
> Dreaming of some alternative to spring.

Like the rebel and the martyr, the intellectual is ridiculed. Deftly Avison sketches his ivory tower retreat as a frozen mountain top-magnet where height and distance

lend perspective but at the same time cause mental vertigo. Lucidity of perception in this instance is not desirable, as is implied by the intellectual's awareness and fear of the "three day darkness" which is to come. It would seem that Avison in this stanza acknowledges that responsibility and courage must coincide with knowledge. Almost as if historical determinism did not exist "the learned" dream of "some alternative to spring," that is, they seek to avoid and ignore the inevitable as well as pervert that which is and eschew that which was.

In the last stanza, Avison groups revolutionaries, idealists, and intellectuals alike under "the mutinous," thereby giving the title of the poem and its inhabitants added cohesion. As a whole, the stanza emits optimism. As a symbolic connective, its emphasis is on the sun:

> Yet where the junco flits the sun comes still
> Remote and chilly, but as gold,
> And all the mutinous in their dungeons stir,
> And sense the tropics, and unwitting wait.
> Since Lucifer, waiting is all
> A rebel can. And slow the south returns.

Especially worthy of note is the stance of passivity struck by the narrator. The line "waiting is all a rebel can" is paradoxical, unless one reconsiders the title of the poem in conjunction with hand-tied rebels. This last observation suggests that in Avison, titles of poems as often as not, are as important as the contents. In this particular instance, the

title reminds one throughout that the poet has one very definite perspective and category for her subject "man."

In "Identity"[19] Margaret Avison again discusses that segment of the human population which waits until "the south returns". In this poem, however, she adds another dimension. The first and second stanza identifies the imprisoned man:

> Half-sleeping, unbewildered, one accepts
> The countless footsteps, the unsounding thud,
> Not even asking in what company
> One seeks the charnel houses of the blood
>
> Some mornings when the naked courtyard dwells
> With listless sun, or when a darkening sigh
> Stirs the old air along the quarried halls
> One is aware of many passing by.

Again the poet stresses the passivity of those who have succumbed to the stale and deadening atmosphere of their place of confinement and non-identity. This, then, is contrasted with the place of unlimited freedom:

> But on this sheet of beryl, this high sea,
> Scalded by the white unremembering glare,
> No wisps disperse. This is the icy pole.
> The presence here is single, worse than soul,
> Pried loose forever out of nights and days
> And birth and death
> And all the covering wings.

The contrast between confinement and freedom is one not wholly anticipated, or rather, one where the boundaries between these two cannot be clearly equated with unwanted and wanted states of mind respectively. When this poem was first published in Arts Review in 1943, it was titled"The Past and

the Break" which, in conjunction with "Identity" adds considerably to a more exact reading. The "past" in "Identity" takes on an almost dream-like state where man's questioning faculties have become dulled and his sense of self is nearly indistinguishable from his surroundings. Just as the "unsounding thud" is acknowledged but nevertheless remains paradoxically unheard, so man acknowledges his existence although it resembles a mere acceptance. The "break" on the other hand is a state of intense awareness such as perhaps may occur under the influence of mind-altering drugs, or, the spontaneous occurence which may be called a peak-experience. The description which Avison gives in this passage nevertheless gives, as does Aldous Huxley's account of a mescaline trip, the heaven and hell parts of such an experience. If the "past" may be associated with slumber, the "break" is suggestive at once of the nightmare and the divine vision. Those entries which come under "covering wings," that is, birth, death and time, when removed from man's existence make, as the narrator says, the presence "single, worse than soul." Here Avison strips man of his body so that his mind <u>is</u> alone. <u>Is</u> because existence has become timeless and without matter so that nothing remains; hence "this high sea" is "scalded" by "white <u>unremembering</u> glare." But

> So pressed, aloft, the errant angel sings
> Should any listen, he would stop his breath.

As if breaks are considered, envisioned, mentally experienced but not undertaken, so the persona abruptly breaks off. The total abandon necessary for obtaining a true identity, that which Martin Buber would call the entering into an I-Thou relationship, is at present only a tentative possibility. The "covering wings" which in "Chronic" for instance, come in the form of newspaper houses and in "The Fallen, Fallen World" in the form of pseudo-revolutionary endeavours, are also in "Identity" hailed and wrapped about like an infant's swaddling clothes. As yet, the status quo maintained in old and quarried halls is favoured above green waters. "Rondeau Redoublé,"[20] a poem published in Winter Sun, concerns itself also with the problem of identity, or in other words with the individual versus the crowd.

In the first stanza of this poem, the framework for the "crowd" is delineated:

> Along the endless avenue stand poles.
> Divorced from origin, their end's obscure
> There are doors lined up all along these walls
> Some open by the clock, and some immure

In the third stanza, the inhabitants of the "Rondeau Redoublé" world are described in the same terms as the poles in the first stanza:

> Under the negro sun the full tide rolls.
> Crowds straggle gradually. There are fewer
> By 3 p.m. (with these a pigeon strolls).
> Divorced from origin, their end's obscure.

Man, pigeon and pole alike seem to have been uprooted, and transplanted. Notice, however, that in their new environment, man "straggles" whereas the bird "strolls" and the poles "stand." Other animate objects such as furniture "gazes" out to the animate but "lost country men." This latter juxtaposition again reaffirms man's deplorable position in the age of urbanization. The blood imagery in the fourth stanza further underlines the extent of man's sickness. As in "Identity", we find that the description of the outer world by the poet is a reflection of man's inner state:

> Dark brings the estuary, no vein pure
> Enough to bleed freely. Horizon's holes
> Fill slowly. Lights. Night's for the amateur.
> There are doors lined up all along these walls.

The first line of the fifth stanza "Neons blaze lonlier," adds significantly to the contrast created in the fourth stanza between the natural dark and the artificial light to offset night. The "mantle of darkness" which has been used by countless numbers of writers and poets in the past to suggest oblivion and solitude has become damaged beyond repair in this poem. Just as night is being replaced by neon day so in the final stanza, twentieth-century man is being replaced by the product of his own invention, the machine, as is suggested by "Taxis are knowledgeable now, and sure."

The topsy-turvy world which Avison creates in this poem, true to her repetitive "divorced from origin, their end's ob-

scure," does however, affor elief: "The wary one eyes EXIT." But "It appals" ("Some open by the clock and some immure/ Along the endless avenue"). Man's apparent innate passivity prevents him from becoming, in the words of "Identity," "pried loose forever out of nights and day." Ironically enough, in "Rondeau Redouble," the differences between night and day have been somewhat obliterated without, of course, transcendental results for man. Rather than transcending time, man in this poem, has become enslaved by it. The "immure doors" for instance testify to this latter observation. The circular form of the poem itself also suggests the endless treadmill which is called modern living. In addition, the fairly regular rhyme and rhythm of the quatrains are suggestive of the monotonous machine-regulated ("some open by the clock") industrial age.

Whereas "Rondeau Redoublé" only hints at the reasons for man's inability to leave his treadmill, or with a slightly different perspective, to dissassociate and relieve himself from his mental status quo, "The Mirrored Man"[21] more clearly elaborates on these reasons. The premise for the primal reason is Man's apparent inane perversity, or in the words of the poem:

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

The curse which Adam heaped upon himself and his descendants comes in this poem, in the shape of a cell wherein man

> .... stares into the glass
> And sees, now featureless the meadow mists,
> And now himself, a pistol at his temple,
> Gray, separate, wearily waiting.

Like the "mutinous" of the "The Fallen, Fallen World" this rebel waits, but unlike the former he has an alternative. Consider the fifth stanza:

> We, comic creatures of our piebald day,
> Either ignore this burden, nonchalantly
> (Dragging a dull repudiated house
> At heel, through all our trivial ramblings)
> Or gravely set ourselves the rigorous task
> Of fashioning the key that fits that cell
> (As if it hid the timeless Garden).
> I interviewed one gentleman so engaged,
> And he looked up and said:
> "Despair is a denial and a sin
> But to deny despair, intolerable."
> The next week, so I heard, he used this key,
> Walked over to the mirror, forced the hand
> Of the young man, and left him
> Drooping, the idle door of an idle cell
> Mirrored at last. Such men are left possessed
> Of ready access to no further incident.

If the reason for confrontation with one's self wholly exits as a last resort measure to combat mental and spiritual agony, then man kills the spirit which formerly sustained him. "No further incident" marks his death. In the following stanza, the poet contrasts the suicidal with the amorous mode of living. Rather than face himself in his mirrored cell, he blacks out the reflecting surface of his "lovenest":

By fond report, the mirror there is crammed
With monkey faces, ruby ear-rings, branches
Of purple grapes, and ornamental feathers.
Whatever winter ravages his gardens
No banging shutters desolate his guests
Who entertain illusion as he wills it,
And grant him the inviolate privacy
His hospitable favour purchases.

The facetious mode of narrating in these stanzas lends weight to Avison's portrayal of man as a "comic," but also a satiric figure, but, as happens frequently in her poems, her final stance is not deriding; instead her humanity is embracing:

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?

Her humane attitude nevertheless is inconclusive. As if "pistols" rather than "meadows" are man's ultimate fate, she furtively raises the last question. In "The Mirrored Man," the narrator along with other "mortals" is more conversant with the flight from Eden than with the entrance into the citadel. The accent is subsequently on his "ramblings" rather than his homecoming. Like original sin, the "murky parabola" (symbolic of man's anonymity), is a given condition, and the passage through which he can escape the melting-pot is not clearly lit. As a companion piece to "Rondeau Redoublé," "The Mirrored Man" il-

uminates the exits for man's escape, but it does not, as in so many later poems, explore the anterooms of the temple.

"Span"[22] may be thought of as a poem which takes up some of the more clearly implied themes of "The Mirrored Man." Again Avison takes for her subject Biblical figures; in this particular instance Eli and his sons. These sons did enjoy the Land. They

> Feasted on festival meats before the altars
> The bullock sons
> And those whose cheekbones yellowed with winesweat
> Knew moister pleasures, under the temple gates.
> . . . . . .
> All these and their sons. . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . . would Death smite
> Cheating the house of Eli of chapless age, and
> the ephod.

In "Span", those who possess the land of milk and honey have, in correspondence with the Biblical story, used it for their own ends, (as does the man who built the lovenest in "The Mirrored Man"). The degenerate house of Eli has perverted the promise as well as the Land.

The title of this poem as well as the reference to "sons" whose sinews have "toughened since Egypt," further supports this idea. Between God's promise to Moses in Egypt and the present occupation of the Promised Land, man has lost sight of his Deliverer. Within this timespan (as the "Bearded ones" know), "sullied vistas"have dwindled. Margaret Avison qualifies the older generation's awareness however, as is

implied by the word "sullied" and the phrases "bearded ones felt envy with remorse." Hence that vistas have dwindled may not wholly be attributed to "bullock sons" and "fat boys." Mortal man, the poet seems to say, seeks the pleasures of the flesh, but at the same time, he bewails this part of his nature. "Span" provides one more instance of Avison's ability to pinpoint man's inherent characteristics: her point being that perverted and perverse mankind always plucks the apple of his rainbows and so brings down the roof around his throat.

In "Span" Eli, like an unsuccessful Elijah, fails to pass on the ephod to his successor; in "To Professor X, Year Y"[23] a narrator equally unsuccessful, tries to pass on a generation of "statics" to a future historian. The "statics" in this poem are those gathered in the civic square who apparently "do not know" what they are "waiting for." "Nobody gapes skyward," says the narrator, and continues rather facetiously, "although the notion of/ Commerce by air is utterly/ familiar."

Aptly applied in these lines is the word "gapes." It stresses that, as in "Span," "vistas" have become "sullied" to such an extent that man is not capable of even a dumb awareness. The narrator, after having divulged the scene at the square, directs himself to Professor X in Year Y. Her tone is apologetic:

> Do you think I'm not trying to be helpful
> If I fabricated cause-and-effect
> You'd listen? ...

It is as if in her address she does not dare furnish a reason for the apathetic and aimless masses' condition. Speaking to the historian, she says:

> Ignore us, hunched in these dark streets
> If in a minute now the explosive
> Meaning fails to disperse us and provide resonance
> Appropriate to your chronicle.

The poem however, does not divulge a happening and the reader as well as the unknown historian must provide their own cause-and-effect theory. In "To Professor X, Year Y," the "resonance" necessary for a meaningful dispersement is missing, or, using a Kierkegaardian concept, the individual does not detach himself from the crowd.

The problem of identity is again the major concern in this poem. Because the masses have a blurred vision, "few can see anything" and "downtown buildings block all view," they cannot separate and become "clear". Avison clearly hints at prerequisite dispersement or disassociation for a future "clear" existence. The narrator sees the possibility for such a recovered mankind when she scans the skyline of the city: amidst the blocking buildings and narrow passages, she finds "One clear towards open water." But this discovery (exclaimed by "and ah") is missed by those gathered; again "Nobody gapes skyward." Just as in "Span", Eli's sons perverted a promise and a vision, in the poem under discussion, static crowds pervert and prevent Being. "To Professor X, Year Y," invites man

to be "pried loose," so that he may claim an identity. For the record however, Year Y will not see Professor X commenting on "what happened on a mean November day." Like the taxis in "Rondeau Redouble," cement-ledge walking winter pigeons in this poem are ahead of mankind. "Urbane" and "discriminating" are the words used in reference to the birds, which, in contrast with the "disgusting uniformity of stature" of the masses, is highly ironic.

But there is a note of optimism in the poem. The "few thousand inexplicably" gathered

> Generate funny currents, zigzag
> Across the leaden miles, and all suburbia
> Suffers, uneasily.

These lines imply that the power necessary for breaking up the masses exists but that as yet, the currents are weak and fail to ignite the individual consciousness.

Those poems by Margaret Avison which A.J.M. Smith has chosen for his anthology, thematically belong within our "fallen terrain" category. One of the most interesting poems in this group which includes "Perspective," "Maria Minor," and "The Butterfly," is "[The Simple Horizontal]."[24] The eye, and more precisely the "dull" eye, is the major offender in this poem. It creates in "a glut of grief" the earth as being "prostrate," rather than, as seems to be implied, spheric. What we <u>see</u> or what we appear to see in this poem is contrasted with what we <u>know</u>: "Vivid but pearl-deep jewel/ This life of days we know."

An analogy is implied between the hidden jewel and the "heart;" both are "essential, prisoned in a circumference." In "[The Simple Horizontal]" the shallow and most superficial existence, as is perceived through the eye, is contrasted with the inner life that we "know." That the narrator rejects an exclusively "real" world is obvious from the title of the poem as well as the contents: "simple" horizontals are deceptive and must be viewed with considerable amounts of reservation. From the square brackets contained in the title (implying information which we ourselves have inserted into the text), one may deduce that simple horizontals are man-made givens and not natural or divine laws. By the same token, the poem suggests that man can choose to either remove or accept those limitations of his own invention.

Just as in "[The Simple Horizontal]" it is difficult to obtain empirical evidence for things we "know" (in the poem "I see not cruciform but just/ One bead of blood from thence") so in "The Butterfly,"[25] "meaning" is difficult to apprehend. Ostensible "meaning" is elusive when the narrator contemplates the fate of the moth "flung against the battering bone wind... glued to the grit of that rain-strewn beach." Says the narrator in the last stanza:

> The meaning of the moth, even the smashed moth,
> the meaning of the moth -
> can't we stab that one angle into the curve of
> space
> that sweeps so unrelenting, far above,
> towards the subhuman swamp of under-dark?

But her concern lies not with the death of the butterfly, but with the framework wherein this tragedy occurs. The setting provides the physical reality for the moral design, that is, the suddenly threatening storm which causes an insect's death, finds a parallel with the equally threatening atmosphere of the earth ("when all enveloping space/ is a thin glass globe, swirling with storm"). The latter however can be made peaceful and subdued by Christ. Although the persona does refer to this classical Prince of Peace as "the Voice that stilled the sea of Galilee," neither peace nor meaning is obtained. Characteristically, Avison's poem submits its question mark. Just as a death observed does not insure a death accepted, so a Prince of Peace alluded to does not secure tranquility. The "angle" in this poem, which refers to that geographical area wherein the action occurs, cannot be stabbed into the "curve of space" because the curve does not bend, as is suggested by the word "unrelenting." In other words, unless the microscopic world of "uproar" is brought into contact with the macroscopic world of God, essential links between experience and cognition will be wanting.

"Maria Minor"[26] is perhaps the most interesting of the poems in this section. The simple lyrical quality, the uncomplicated language and the straight forward symbolism are a refreshing change from the frequently more awkward and difficult poems. For these reasons it may be quoted in full:

I conceived. And Sorrow
Stirred within the womb.
My loins were pushed asunder
To make Adam room.

We met on the blonde uplands
That overlook the sea
And swift did Adam's navel
Blot out my agony.

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

The narrator in this poem differs considerably from the usual human and psychologically sound persona of other poems. The "I" of "Maria Minor" takes on the properties of the universal mother, who conceives and gives birth to the father of man, Adam. The human properties of joy and pain as experienced by the mother suggest, in addition to the mythical aspect, her human nature. The human and mythical proportions of the first person narrator then are united and form integral parts of each other, just as pain and joy are integral sensations experienced by man. The accent, however, is on the former rather than the latter. Adam conceived, harboured and expelled makes the Mother redundant, or, as a possible reading of this many-faceted poem, earth's alphas become man's omegas. Also present in the poem is the concept that the earth replenishes itself in so far as the loss of the first son out of the earth's lap is won back with the mother's return. "Maria Minor," as a variation on the theme, "dust to dust" is especially applicable; conception and suicide form part of a linear movement in the

poem, but it also suggests the cyclical movement of the earth itself and its inhabitants.

Explicitly the diction and implicitly the tone and theme of "Maria Minor" classify it as belonging to Avison's early period in so far as only the negative aspects of existence are illuminated and emphasized. As yet the poet seems to "see" the world as being prostrate, rather than "know its full dimensions."

"Mutable Hearts"[23] published in Canadian Forum, takes for its subject "the children of men" who "tackle the windswirled slope." The sea, river, and current imagery which Avison uses in this poem is brought into juxtaposition with Garden of Eden and East of Eden symbolism. The mother figure, she who sits "motionless, in the seamurmurous room," represents the guardian of the Garden, as is suggested by "so long she beat away the leaden angels." The son, however, for "whom so long" she undertook this action, has "gone forth" to an undetermined destination, but to return. Upon his home-coming, the son is shown to be aware of the illusionary world ("her dream") which his mother has fabricated. Within the narrative part of the poem, it is implied that the myth of Eden, as is invented by man and representative of the mother's dream, is nothing but just that.

Avison, who began "Mutable Hearts" on a philosophical note, concludes likewise:

What is the drag against the current?
Why does the look of god shine still
above the rushy pool
while cold swords wait beyond the sweeping curve
of the dark river?
On the blown ridge now tilt the children of men
borne in the breathy brown frost-foaming air."

The language used within the last part of this stanza unmistakably echoes "The Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken." (Gen. 3:23) That Avison seeks to justify such a God who ordered this curse is obvious. The positive quality of words such as "blown", "ridge", "borne", "breathy", and "frost-foaming air." seems to imply a partial acceptance of man's fate. Those who cannot suffer their own "ridicule," like the Mother, remain "cheated in their pride," (that is, they intensify the misery which comes after the initial Adam's pride), whereas those who "tackle the windswirled slope," that is, determine a course of positive action, "meet the autumn," or in other Avison words "dare the rapids." Still, "Mutable Hearts" only raises, in a very tentative and almost unconscious fashion, these possibilities for an unfallen life. As yet, the narrator arms herself with a question mark.

In "Atlantis and the Department Store"[28] another question is raised. The first stanza of the two-stanza poem is the question. Consider its structure:

If I were a rebel would I find myself
At the March sounding of crows,
Dwelling a scurfy, hectic
In filial piety frail, but ox-boned
Prince

East beyond Muscovy, cribbed in an endlessness
Smokey, reeking with damp,
Except one day, at crow-call,
Blaze of pure light in archetonics mounted
To the last circle
Of the fat saints, haloed in gold, milleniums
Lost in pale blue?

It comes not as a surprise that the answer is as difficult to obtain for the narrator as the question is difficult to comprehend for the reader. In order to understand the problem with which the narrator struggles, we may consider certain aspects of her query. The most obvious device the poet uses is the somewhat mocking tone of the narrator. As if she can hardly believe in "milleniums," though lost in "pale blue" she asks "would I find myself at the March sounding of crows." "March" here may be seen as a pun. Not as a month, "march" in this context suggests a mocking reference to "When the saints go marching in" (as is further suggested by "fat saints," "haloed in gold," and "milleniums lost in pale blue").

This second coming, however, is called by the birds, notably crows. Because the narrator can see herself at this mock-rite only as a "rebel," that is as one who rejects authority, Avison may be implying that, especially in light of the second stanza as well as the tone of the first stanza, she does not advocate acts of resistance:

Indeed I did not hate
The tedious forenoon hallways
Afghans, and carpets where the tiny table-legs
Pricked for depth and threads entangled them

This statement made by the narrator in the second stanza proposes to provide an answer to the first. One may be aware of the shift between the future projection of the first stanza and the past evaluation of the second. That which lies between a natural life, as is suggested by the line "east beyond Muscovy, cribbed in an endlessness/ Smoking, reeking with damp," and the cluttered, imprisoned, claustrophobic existence, is suggested in the last stanza. The latter world she can accept: "these I bear." Ironically enough, she can "bear" being imprisoned because

> Knowing them all to despair, long since
> Washed me up over the knuckles of time
> To the carpets of cinema foyers. . .

That the narrator prefers to be a passive prisoner is especially and beautifully emphasized in the last line of the poem: "Stunned on their escalators/ Within" she is. Like the mythical Atlantians, the narrator has vanished beneath the surface. Because the poem ends at this point, the reader as well as the narrator, are provided with an answer to the initial question. Like the rebels in "The Fallen, Fallen World," this narrator has stirred within her dungeon, but, like the "half-sleeping unbewildered" ones in "Identity," she succumbs among the "charnal houses of the blood."

As has been stated earlier in this chapter, Avison begins her articulation of the world in terms of anxiety, guilt and despair. In light of our analysis however, one becomes increasingly aware of the fact that Avison as a poet does not assume the voice of doom, but rather that through her narrators she probes, voices and projects the human condition. There is much evidence to suggest that man, as personified by a collective persona, in many of her earlier poems is one who has fallen from a state of grace. The continual exhortation for a transcendence of a stagnant status quo, as in "Identity" and "To Professor X, Year Y" and other poems, testifies to this. In the next chapter, this process of observation and orientation is subsumed by a more active and animate phase of Becoming.

CHAPTER TWO

"TURN OFF"

Reaching
with Light that is perfect, needed no
    kernels to swell nor juices to syrup nor
    no further making-all newness -
    all being
that the remotest fishrib,
the hairiest pink-thing there
might as one fragment
make towards the fullness you
put off, there, on the
ravening short I view, from
my gull-blanched cliffs,
and shiver.
GATHER my fragments towards
the radium, the
all-swallowing moment
once more.

- from "Searching and Sounding"

Whereas those poems selected for analysis in our first chapter were thought of as being diagnostic in nature, insofar as they collectively identified man's position in a "falling terrain," a large number of poems either collected in Winter Sun, or uncollected before the appearance of The Dumbfounding, thematically differ considerably from these. The main philosophical motif in the latter is characterized by an underlying desire for change. "The Road,"[29] a poem published in Contemporary Verse in the fall of 1948, may be thought of as being a key-poem for this selection of Avison's work. In order to gain greater comprehension of the differences between this poem and those discussed in the previous chapter, we may

quote the poem in its entirety:

Turn off the road Mister
That's all oiled down the carleak
And ornamented up with nagging billboards
And find out how you see to drive along;
    The golden sun is never off the full,
And pouring out and pouring out and pouring
    Out till its second circle fills, and you
    Inside it in a golden contemplation.
I'll show you a long ridge of scarless earth
That leans so lonely in the full immense
It melts your heart to infancy to see it;
    And then the evening waters,
Brown, and so full of peace the orbed peace
Of seeing leaves the chalky headbones warm
And wakes the hollow ear to ancient tunes
    Of shepherds far from fold, in pearly June,
Claimless among invisible stars. O Mister,
    I know you think you want to slam along
At fifty per, and make your reservation
Where neon ridicules the night, all night,
And that you can't be sure it isn't true
That if you leave the road you'll never find it
Again. And yet, before the bat-wing fans
The hotel dark, I've got to whisper it:
    So little earth, so precious little earth
Is not mealy with cold and damp and monumental
Beyond your scope, with mere immaculate roots.

The last three lines directly tie "The Road" to those poems which for the sake of expediency may be called the "Gatineau" poems through their characteristic use of imagery and diction. The "mealy", "cold" and "damp" earth belongs properly to "Chronic," for instance, where the winter solstice does not allow a strawberry festival, or to "Mutable Hearts" where the "children of men" tilt in "brown frost foaming air." It is this mean, stagnant world of " gardenless gardens" that the narrator of "The Road" urges us to abandon. Simultaneously commenting on twentieth-century living, the poet makes use of

colloquial language in order to enhance and emphasize man's unexalted present condition. "Mister" for "man" in this instance is a most effective address because it aims to include the common denominator of Everyman. However, the imagery, rather than the language, classifies this poem in a new category. The desolate landscape from "Gatineau" forms a complete contrast with the abundant life as is described in "The golden sun is never off the full,/ And pouring out and pouring out and pouring/ Out till its second circle fills,/ and you inside it in a golden contemplation." In conjunction with the sun-circle imagery, the description of the "scarless earth" is felicitous. Both emphasize the perfect existence. Particularly apt is the idea that he whose heart becomes exposed, or rather he who exposes his heart to this "scarless earth," will melt to "infancy" again.

In addition to announcing a major theme, "The Road" is one of Avison's earlier poems dealing with Christian ideas and imagery. Unobtrusively, she fuses Christianity and her poetic vision. Deftly she refers to the virgin birth as the points of orientation for a new beginning. Forward into the past, she points to "ancient tunes/ Of Shepherds far from fold, in pearly June,/ Claimless among invisible stars." But the poet does not, either in tone or word, pursue us with her suggestion. Her narrator, testifying to this, has to "whisper it." In harmony with its subject matter and diction, the poem may be read as a billboard with a difference: hers is a soft-sell for Life.

Whereas "The Road" invites us to become partakers of the good earth, "Intra-Political"[30] invites us to become partakers of the good feast. The latter poem, collected in Winter Sun, is one of the more ambitious and difficult poems that Avison has published. According to the subtitle, it is "An Exercise in Political Astronomy." The poem consists of a number of questions of which some are answers. Consider the first stanza:

> Who are we here?
> boxed, bottled, barrelled
> in rows?
> Comestibles with the trick
> of turning grocer, shoplifter
> or warehouse trucker, or sometimes,
> in faery-false springtime
> the lion-hearted four-foot haggler
> with a hot dime?

The following stanza outlines the prisoner: "These packaged us-es", she says, "are to the gamboling of real nourishment/ as mudcake to transmuted sun." The parallel which is drawn here is rather difficult to grasp. The modifier of "sun" in this particular structure is the major obstacle. If we read "transmuted sun" as pertaining to the process of photosynthesis, then the mudcake, exposed to a sun which performs this function, does not, unlike a plant or tree, benefit from this exposure. (Hence the juxtaposition of transmuted sun and mudcake is ironic, because, as seems to be the underlying meaning, the sun, rather than the mudcake has been "transmuted".) If this particular reading is correct, then the relationship between "these packaged us-es" and "the gamboling of real

nourishment" is also ironic. Later on in the poem, the narrator describes man's position in terms of "This self-consuming endless squirm and squander": this, it would seem, provides an additional clue to the difficult metaphor under discussion. Like the revolutionaries in "The Fallen, Fallen World" who unconsumed but self-consuming burn, so man in this poem, being a "comestible" consumes himself. As such, "packaged us-es" provide no "real" nourishment. Like a snake who continually provides his sustenance by eating his own tail, man, the poem seems to imply, remains unconsumed but self-consuming. In the sixth stanza, the lines,

> But being bought and eaten
> is, experienced, enough
> to change this circular exchange.

may further support this analogy.

Avison's self-consuming man, however, cannot be seen simply in terms of individual consumption. The last line of the sixth stanza suggests that this process belongs to a collective mankind. We can "turn grocer or shoplifter or warehouse trucker" but

> ... cringeing from such courses
> compounds confusion:
> a new numerical excess
> of us-es.

Thus edible and eating mankind "eats and drinks unto himself a judgment." The word "us-es" in this context may also be read

as "uses" which then in turn, will provide us with a portrayal of mankind in this poem as "users of self." The plural of "us", brought in juxtaposition with the concept of utility, then suggests that should we want to curtail this birth-explosion of us-es, we may consider "set[ting] up shop after" and

> poach as we might, nothing else much remained
> but tufts of fur and insect skeletons?
> And energy hasn't minded
> phoenixing for us in our nonce?

The facetious tone used in these lines underscores the narrator's position in relation to the self-consuming man. She does not, however, leave us without suggesting alternatives to bartering or poaching for counteracting numerical excesses. We could, she says, with "dainty stepping",

> ... unbox ourselves
> while still Explosion slumbers,
> putting aside mudcakes,
> the buying, selling, trucking, packaging
> of mudcakes,

Then, if and when man gives up his business,

> sun-stormed, daring to gambol,
> might there not be an immense answering
> of human skies?
> a new expectant largeness?

This question is answered with a reference to a historical man:

> (George Herbert - and he makes it plain -
> Guest at this same transfiguring board
> Did sit and eat.)

The transfiguration of man which Avison speaks about in these lines is the same as for the traveller, the "old Adam" of "The Road" who by leaving the trodden path, will be moved to "infancy" again. To become unboxed Beings, as opposed to boxed citizens, constitutes that transfiguration, and subsequently, a participation. The reference to George Herbert's poem "Love (III)" is especially fitting. In this seventeenth-century poem, a narrator undergoes a divine transfiguration when, in spite of being "guilty of dust and sin", he accepts God's invitation to partake of the Great Supper. The implications for "Intra-political" are that if man is able to overcome, in Christian terms, his "old nature," he subsequently will gain access to a "new Genesis," and simultaneously, a new self.

Just as the poet in "Intra-political" and "The Road" refrains from being obtrusively dogmatic insofar as Christian tenets are referred to, so "Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes (In Prospect)"[31] refuses to become, in the words of "The Road," a "nagging billboard." This poem, read as a variation on the theme of regeneration, sees the possibilities for man's "turn off" as being remote:

> Seldom encounter at the Judgment Seat
> Those who are flung off...

But those who

.... toss head,
Taste the bitter morning, and have at it -
Thresh, knead, dam, weld,
Wave baton, force
Marches through squirming bogs,
Not from contempt, but
From thrust, unslakeably thirsty,
Amorous of every tower and twig, and
Yet like railroad engines with
Longings for their landscapes (pistons pounding)
Rock fulminating through
Wrecked love, unslakeably loving -

may arrive. In the opening stanza, the poet stresses the qualities and the tasks involved which alone will bring man to the place of the "Curious encounter." The stance is one of determination: "Toss head" and "have at it;" the motivating forces are 'unslakeable thirst' and "love"; the duties involved threshing, kneading, damning, welding, waving, and marching. Obviously, Avison's pilgrims are not armchair dropouts, but loving laborers.

Once the flung-offs have arrived "the place is an astonishment":

Runways shudder with little planes
Practising folk-dance steps or
Playing hornet,

and then the

Sky makes it ample ruling
Clear as a primary child's exercise-book
In somebody else's language,
And the rivers under the earth
Foam without whiteness, domed down,
As they foam indifferently every
Day and night (if you'd call that day and night)
Not knowing how they wait, at the node, the
Curious encounter.

One may see how Avison perceives man after he has made a break with his former self. Suddenly he has transcended time: day and night are obliterated; suddenly he doesn't know "how" | he waits because, as seems to be implied, time cannot be measured any more by the cyclical movements of the planets. The whole mood of this last stanza, suggests a new earth: again "the place is an astonishment." The language barriers are also broken, suggesting the universality of the Great Encounter.

"Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes (In Prospect)" may be compared with "Extra Political."[32] In the latter also, the persona in the words of Whitman "celebrates and sings himself." The subtitle of the poem, "The Thorned Speaks (While Day Horses Afar)," gives an extra clue to this beautiful lyric. In the second stanza, after the narrator has announced that

> The sickness has passed from me
> of thinking that the flinching leaves
> are frozen of all motion because my eye
> falls on them....

she says: "deep in my days and feeling, I am healed." Healing in this instance is comprised of the absence of fear. The "green pasture" motif of the last three stanzas presents the essence of this experience:

> not harking.
> lest the leaves smite me, their ways. Breaking
> our mutual trance is not the vow
> the shining knight, this large-breathed Day, will
> go

heralding, deeding for, and seeking out
in grassy place, by vigil stone.
We strangely pierced together twine - a plait
over his lonely lady's shoulder thrown.

Tree, I, all other tresses, caught
in the cloistering metal of her thought.
She wakes, alone, for him, this
mirrored dimness,
as we for her
are.

The tapered form of the last stanza, in harmony with its contents, completes the celebration. A synthesis of thought, as is reflected in the imagery ("tree, I, all other tresses caught/ in the cloistering metal of her thought") occurs when an actively willed state of homeostasis is induced. Just as George Herbert frames his altar of sacrifice in words of man, so Avison frames her V of victory in words of joy. The "mutual trance" affected between speaker and "Day", the latter which may be equated with time in this particular poem, becomes consumated when the speaker announces "we strangely pierced together twine." Again Avison in "Extra-Political" delineates an encounter between an abstract universal phenomenon and an individual consciousness trying to grasp its significance. The personification of "Day" as a segment of time, makes the poet's attempt at describing this phenomenon in itself, meaningful and aesthetically pleasing.

A third poem which may be considered as a song of celebration is "Easter."[33] Unlike the two previously discussed poems, "Easter" is more descriptive and lends itself less to

a philosophical analysis. Words and phrases such as "delicacy of light," "pink," "queer as a chemist's liquid," "cloudless," "filmed" and "wind fomented" in the first stanza suggest a delicacy of mood, which is sustained in the following stanzas:

> After the blur of doves the milky air
> Lulls, and listens, and there
> Is the sorrow of all fullness.
> But on the hillside the frail tremulo
> Of a new dayspring, eggshell and lilac, wanders
> through the drenched quiet branches.
>
> A bird sings, forceful, glorious as a pipeorgan,
> And the huge bustling girth of the whole world
> Turns in an everywhere of sunwardness.
> Among the cloudcarved sundering of its oceans.

The theme of "turn-off" is especially obvious in the sun metaphor. (The whole of nature, as it were, contributes toward a cosmic assimilation with the sun at the vortex. As a companion piece to "Extra-Political", this poem presents us with the "heralding, deeding for and seeking out in grassy place" - Day, and the narrator's joyous proclamation of it.)

(Other poems which exhibit narrators who have turned in "of sunwardness" are "Another Christmas," "Christmas," "June as Christmas" and "Birthday.") "Sunwardness" in these four poems must be seen basically in Christian terms. In "Another Christmas,"[34] the narrator, who initially finds that

> Yet in the winter solstice is discovered
> The sun perennial, pure penetrant of galaxies

implies the relationship between that same heavenly body with

Christ:

> "That Infancy, in brightness clear,
> Belying his slow swerve through solar time,
> The crutched chronology of centuries.

In the last stanza, the narrator suggests that those ("few") who

> .... have known beyond the stillness there
> (Bird-skeletons, scoured in the sheerest light
> Till gladness)
> .... have heard
> The singing of its far-borne, aching echoes.

In "Another Christmas," the dawn of a new era and the movement beyond, is as clearly perceived and as actively anticipated as the sun's post-solstice swerve. Just as voices in the stillness are far-borne and bring far-echoes, so Christ, as the poet seems to imply, though far-borne, resounds in the present quiet.

Although less explicit in her Christian terminology, Avison in "Christmas,"[35] expects to find the same "singing" gladness as she did in "Another Christmas." It is in nature, and specifically "at daybreak in the wood" that she anticipates hearing "the merry organ." Interestingly enough, in both poems obvious allusions to Christ are shunned. It is almost as if the narrator desires to capture the mood of a new annunciation without direct references to the One announced.

"June as Christmas,"[36] a third poem in this group, reveals these same qualities in the narrator. As in "Another

Christmas" and "Christmas," "June as Christmas" places the narrator outside of the city locale. The re-titling of "June as Christmas" in Winter Sun, as "Far off from University" emphasizes the new locale. Again, it is at daybreak ("through limp whites") that the narrator is able to perceive the birth of a dawn. The last two stanzas of the poem attempt an elucidation of mood found in and around a "derelict caboose;"

> The fragrance of cool tar,
> smoked coffee, wet
> machine parts, seagulls, dawn
> jolted a hobo torpor. After the sour
> senility of night, suddenly,
> a more than animal joy, a sanity
> of holy appetite awoke,
> breast bared for its blind suckling
> a more than mother leaned, drew breath, tendering
>
> Cement and weeds, sky, all night diner, flesh
> gathered as being; fumbling fed.

As in "Intra-Political," a transfiguration has occurred. The narrator sees the hobo's stagnant existence becoming animated with new life. The madonna imagery supports this new vivacity. As in "The Road" and "Another Christmas," the concept of infancy is emphasized; in the poem under discussion, the words "fumbling" and "fed" denote the qualities of the receiver as well as the wealth of the giver. The gathering "as being" also provides a final synthesis of thought in the poem. It seems as if the poet has been able to draw together objects of the physical world, and infested it with the spirit of the corporeal world. Just as June becomes Christmas, so a train yard becomes the scene of a metamorphoses.

"Birth Day,"[37] the last poem in this group, may also be discussed in terms of turning in "of sunwardness." Instead of meeting a narrator as in "Christmas" who wishes to "somersault in the snow," the "Birth Day" narrator runs to Mitilene, and instead of daybreak experiences, her journey commences on Saturday. The symbolic significance of these specific details in all of these poems suggest a new epoch; in "Birth Day", Saturday denotes the prelude to a Sabbath. The entire poem vibrates with the annunciation of

> ... a unique estate, held wrapt
> Away from all men else, which to embrace
> Our world would have to stretch and swell
> with strangeness

Not only, however, does this poem announce "the hour of Genesis", it simultaneously is, for the narrator, the initial movement into the Genesis. The bird, lamb, root, sun, and water imagery which the poet uses in order to describe the narrator's flight to Mitilene supports this idea of regeneration.

In "Birth Day" then, we have a narrator, who, through the process of turning sunward becomes herself part of the transfigured world which she wishes to announce. Those to whom she speeds her "news" also become characters in the framework of the New Dawn; upon beholding (in this instance the acceptance of) the "unique estate" they "smile and laugh at last." Then,

> .... There was
> Rejoicing all night long in Mitilene.

The four poems under discussion all expound, to a greater or lesser extent, the theme of a Christian annunciation. As yet, one may emphasize that each individual poem may warrant a less explicit "Christian" reading. (Such poems as "Stray Dog, near Ecully," "Voluptuaries and Others," "Rigor Viris," "New year's Poem" and "Prelude" can be read with either secular or religious references. Rather than being engraved invitations to Good Feasts, these poems may be seen as extended shares to parcels of Good Earth, or, in other words, these poems expound themes pertaining to the process of becoming "un-boxed.")
"Stray Dog, near Ecully,"[38] for instance, takes for its subject "the dog called Sesame" who "slewed out" from

> Under the Norman arch, open
> For the gardener's walked bicycle. No doubt
> On some wild leash still, in three-legged loping.

The opening stanza establishes the cunning facilities of the dog and his impaired movements after his escape. Apparently the narrator conceives of the escapee (he is "stray" not free), and of those he escaped from ("Deployed, they search, shouting, 'Sey-sahm, Sey-sahm'"), in terms of abortive attempts at removing want. The impaired dog in the "limited landscapes" is as unable to be free, as his shouting owners are amid the resounding hills. Avison seems to suggest in this poem that becoming "unboxed" cannot be obtained through ingenuity and wit, and simultaneously, that imprisonment cannot be effected by or through walls, strategy, or force. As such, of course,

"Stray Dog, near Ecully" is a negative example of a turn off, but at the same time, suggests positive alternatives to "quit ting the guide, the stopped sun, the melange/ Of Rome's new coin-conducted legions."

"Rigor viris,"[39] on the other hand, embodies a narrator who appeals to a force which will enable her to see "beyond the gunnysack" more than one "bland elipse in cornflower blue:"

> 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 no man can entomb.

One may contrast this prayer in "Rigor viris" with the answer to the prayer in "Birth Day;" that unentombable vista in the former is found in the "unique estate" which "to embrace our world would have to stretch and swell with strangeness" of the latter. One "bland elipse in cornflower blue" in "Rigor viris" becomes "frangible robin's blue/ Teethed right around to sun" in "Birth Day." In the latter, the heaven found is not provided by a Greek Goddess, but rather through a Jewish Man.

"New Year's Poem"[40] and "Prelude" both reveal narrators who do not so much battle the world in which they live, but rather who have "won from space... a habitable interior" (from "New Year's Poem"). In the former a recollection of Christmas ("... when these rooms were brimmed/ With perfumes,

furs, and black-and-silver/ Crisscross of seasonal conversation"), and the memory of some one dead ("Anne's rose-sweet gravity, and the stiff grave/ Where cold so little can contain"), leads to, upon reflection, a new inland.))

In "Prelude,"[41] on the other hand, a "habitable interior" is achieved only after extensive "searching and sounding Within the poem, several perspectives and modes of narration are used as well as a number of tenses, before the statement can be made:

> Light, the discovering light, is a beginning
> where many stillnesses
> yearn, those we had long thought long dead
> of our mere selves

and

> In the moment of held breath
> the light takes shape:

and

> In each at least light finds
> one of its forms
> and is:
>
> even in the invisible neighbour
> Periwigged, black, in hunting pinks,
> or rinsing clouts beside the holy river,
> who does not bother glancing up to see.

In "Prelude," the narrator acknowledges a "turning-point" which is "morning": "now Budapest, now feathery fields," she says, " where explorers' maps showed nothing -/ now a crip-

pled crofter's in his doorway or/ the Scandinavians' by the sea." Especially, the reference to explorers' maps recalls "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball" where the house remained abandoned and turning points seemed remote. But in "Prelude," the turning point is morning and the possibilities for a Budapest (perhaps suggesting violence, bloodshed, revolt and oppression) and "feathery fields" (suggesting peace and growth) are probable. In "Prelude", there is a rhythm between alternative negative and positive turn offs. The narrator, for instance sees

> The honeycombing sun [which]
> opened and sealed us in
> chambers and courts and crooked butteries,

In "Prelude" she walks a tightrope and successfully maintains her precarious balance. Avison, in techniques used in this poem, reinforces her narrator's position. "I lean on the warm stone" the latter tells "and sense its coldness" and

> The turning-point of morning, and the
> unmerging child,
> like the sadness of the summer trees,
> assert their changelessness
> out of this day-change.

The world of paradox moves the narrator toward an ultimate realization. To use our metaphor again, the narrator as tightrope walker discovers that

> In the moment of held breath
> the light takes shape:

Then "habitable interiors" as we may see in the next chapter, become permanent dwelling places.

CHAPTER THREE

OLD / YOUNG

Very good

> "In the book of Hidden Things it is written: "I stand at the door and knock and wait ... thou needst not seek Him here and there: He is no further off than the door of the heart. There He stands and waits and waits until He finds thee ready to open and let Him in ... Thy opening and His entering are but one moment." "

Meister Eckhart

In the previous chapter we have seen that Margaret Avison in Winter Sun and other uncollected poems created a large number of personae who begin to explore routes leading toward a "strawberry festival." The arrival, however, belongs properly in The Dumbfounding. The poem "Birth Day," contained in Winter Sun may be seen as announcing the festival. "Birth Day"'s narrator is the herald; Mitilene's inhabitants and the narrator subsequently become the major celebrants at the feast. But, like the virgins in Christ's parable, one has to make necessary preparations in order to attend. "Waiting is all a rebel can" from "The Fallen, Fallen World" becomes "choosing is all a rebel can" in a number of other poems. In "The Swimmer's Moment," "The Word," "Person," "Ps. 19," and "Watershed," Avison expounds the concept of choice, and in this particular instance, that

choice whereby man indicates his preference for or against a "strawberry festival" where he can meet himself.

((The first few lines of "The Swimmer's Moment"[42] provide the working symbol for the other four poems:

> For everyone
> The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes,
> But many at that moment will not say
> "This is the whirlpool, then."
> By their refusal they are saved
> From the black pit, and also from contesting
> The deadly rapids, and emerging in
> The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.

One may observe that Avison in these poems is concerned with man's ultimate choices in life. Man at the whirlpool is one of the symbolic manifestations of this theme.))

((The Swimmer's Moment" embodies a paradox which may be partly resolved in the greater context of Avison's work, and is partly resolved in the poem itself. The paradox lies herein that those who are "saved" from the "black pit" and those who are defeated by the black pit, are the lost and the found respectively. In Biblical terms, to become truly saved in this poem is to let oneself be defeated, whereas to be utterly damned is to struggle oneself to be saved. Those who refuse to acknowledge the whirlpool's existence are ironically saved from the "mysterious and more ample further waters" (which, as seems to be suggested, border green pastures). Again, ironically, those who refuse will "turn and turn pale and forever on the rim of suction." Thus, two eternities for

man are postulated here. It is appropriate in this context that those who do not dare venture into the unknown will forever be on public display while those who approach the "ominous center" enjoy eternal privacy.

The focus of "The Swimmer's Moment" lies not primarily with those who accept, but rather with those who reject the whirlpool. Those "selves" who watched others disappear from the surface existence

> "... turn away from their defeat
> With a despair, not for their deaths, but for
> Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret
> Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
> Where one or two have won:
> (the silver reaches of the estuary).

The despair here is of a two-fold nature: we can never penetrate the secret of those who venture forth, hence we cannot make our choices depend on the experience of others. It is as if man in this poem cannot appeal to reason and knowledge in order to determine his direction; rather an implicit faith is demanded for those who wish to arrive at "the silver reaches of the estuary." The underlying Christian paradox is that those who seek to save themselves shall be lost, and those who seek to lose themselves shall be saved. This is also the theme of "The Word."

In "The Word,"[43] the narrator contemplates the concept of "Forsaking all":

"Forsaking all" - You mean
head over heels, for good,
for ever, call of the depths
of the All - the heart of one
who creates all, at every
moment, newly - for
you do so - and
to me, far fallen in the
ashheaps of my
false-making, burnt-out self and in the
hosed-down rubble of what my furors
gutted, or sooted all
around me - you implore
me to so fall
in Love, and fall anew in
every-new depths of skywashed Love till every
capillary of your universe
throbs with your rivering fire?

One may see that this concept "forsaking all" is formed through the phrases "head over heels," "call of the depths," "fall in love," and "throbbing with rivering fire." The underlying sexual connotations enhance this idea of "forsaking all;" it becomes a giving all to a Lover, Christ, who already forsook all.

Not only does the narrator of "The Word" suggest Christ as lover, but she also wishes to emulate this Christ. The reference to "Why has Thou forsaken...?" supports this suggestion. Here then, we have a narrator who simultaneously raises the question of the necessity of the complete negation of the self, and, implicitly, also answers that question in the affirmative.

It is not made explicit in the poem whether or not the narrator makes an ultimate choice. The speaker, in the third stanza, implicitly fits herself into that category of people

("we, humanly") who accepted Christ as "teacher," "popular spokesman," "doctor," and as a "simple source of sanity" but not as a Lover. But, says the narrator, this "line we drew" has been "crossed, and cross [sic] out" by Christ's love. The multiple associations of "cross" in this context as, to cancel out, or pass from one side to the other, and, in the symbolic sense, the forsaking all, death on the cross, redemption, and Life everlasting, gives the phrase in which it occurs special meaning. Christ was more than a doctor for the blind, a teacher for the masses, or a friend to the publican; he "crossed" our love with His and in doing so, transcended all human categories. This, the narrator feels, is the ultimate "Forsaking all."

It seems, nevertheless, that the narrator does not move much beyond her desire to emulate Christ. "far fallen in the ashheaps of falsemaking," she may, rather unconsciously, emulate T.S. Eliot's Hollow **man** instead, who, "Between the conception/ And the creation/ Between the emotion/ And the response" finds a shadow. In "the Word," the whirlpool has been rejected. But the narrator, has gone a step beyond those "pale and forever turning" in so far as she acknowledges the existence of an ultimate choice.

As has been discovered earlier, titles of poems as often as not are as important to an understanding of the poem as the contents. "The Word" is a good case in point. In refer-

ence to the preceding analysis, "Love" may be considered the key word. Then, the word which is love is also "I Am". Hence in "The Word" we have the God of Genesis ("In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God and the Word was God"); the Christ sent through Love ("For God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten Son") and the Holy Spirit who through the word ("Your voice never falters") moves man toward an ultimate surrender.

Whereas in "The Swimmer's Moment" two eternities are delineated, and in "The Word" two falls are brought into view, "Person"[44] considers primarily the bridge between these two separate modes of living. Precisely because this poem gives a detailed account of Avison's vision of faith, we may quote the poem in its entirety:

> Sheepfold and hill lie
> under open sky.
>
> 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.
> A skied stonehenge
> unroofed the prison?
> and lo its walls uprising,
> very stone drawing breath?
>
> They closed again. Beneath
> steel tiers, all walled, I lay
> barred, every way.
>
> "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:

So drenched with Being and created new
the flock is folded close, and free
to feed - His cropping clay, His earth -
and to the woolly, willing bunt-head, forth
shining, unseen, draws near
The Morning Star.

Whereas in "The Word," "I Am" explicitly is referred to as "love" and "the word," in the poem under discussion, it becomes at once as abstract and also more concrete, that is "I Am" in "Person" is "this door that seemed to seal my tomb, my ceilinged cell." The word "seemed" here is of great significance; the suggestion made is that not God dooms man to imprisonment, but rather, man himself. Through his failure to recognize the means by which he may obtain freedom, man is imprisoned. "Person," as a poem, is a blueprint for an escape route. As in the previously discussed poems, "choice" is the key concept.

The suggestion in "Person" is that through love man may pass through the door leading into the sheepfold. The absence of a knob and hinges on the door denotes that man does not labour in order to enter, and also that his passing is not determined by mechanical forces. Thirdly, it implies that only a miracle will permit the door to open. In the fifth stanza, this miracle has been accomplished. "The door was

flesh" in addition leads one to believe that Christ is symbolized by the door. Although the image of Christ as the shepherd protecting his flock, is of course the Sunday school symbol of God's love, the subtle way in which this metaphor is used here makes it acceptable, and new.

The sixth stanza is narrated in the present tense for greater emphasis. The first two sentences describe the miracle; the last one sums up its lesson. That "such is Love the captive may in blindness find the way" is reminiscent of the venture into the unknown in "The Swimmer's Moment." Also, the moving forth blindly, in this context, characterizes the essence of faith in Avison. The leap of faith does not depend on prior knowledge of future existence, but rather on reciprocal love between man and God. It also indicates that the Christian as pilgrim does not rely on his local travel bureau, but rather on his traveller's instinct, in order to arrive at Jerusalem's gates. "In all his heaviness, he passes through" who travels thus.

The last stanza of "Person" describes the bliss of the sheep fold. "Drenched with Being" is the consequence of having entered. The word "drenched" may have a number of relevant associations: "drenched" as a new-born child or "drenched" in the sense of an ultimate baptism may perhaps be thought of as being relevant. God's prevailing covenant grace, and man's willingness to accept this for himself, as a person, is the subject of this poem.

The dominant metaphor is the door, the dominant experience is rebirth, the dominant action: to choose. Again, in "Ps. 19,"[45] Avison presents a variation on this theme.

"Ps. 19" contains one dominant symbol: the pine-tree. The conflict in the poem arises from the tree's ambiguous attitude towards the sun. Attraction and repulsion are key concepts; in the poem they are signified by the words "clean," "fear," "love" and "enduring". One may see how the narrator of "Ps. 19" brings these two concepts into a proper perspective, so that, through the dynamic process of contemplation and self-analysis, the "longing for clear sunlight" becomes the dominant force.

Man, as personified by the tree in this poem wishes to become completely filled by the sun "to the last ribcorner and capillary" but fears that "if, so known, a sighing-over-the-marshlands me might all evaporate, wisp away." These two opposing impulses are part of the attraction-repulsion theme. This theme is further developed through a reference to the mists. Two mists, one which smokes from "pure stone-cold lake-still sun-sweetened places"and one rising from "sour pools hid[den] even from the storm's sluices," are presented. A subsequent development appears in a third set of opposites: "Not boulderstone, baldness, slowly in fire consuming - but green/ with life, moss, cup-rock-water, cliff riven." Thus we have a sun to whom the tree aspires, yet is curbed in this aspiration for fear of being burned.

In order to become "clean" man must overcome his fear of the sun's heat. If man endures (which is "the word with clean"), then he will not become lifeless (a condition suggested by the words "boulderstone," "baldness," and consumed), but rather full of life (as is suggested by the words "green," "moss," and "cup-rock-water"). The word "trusted" towards the end of the poem suggests the essential pre-requisite for the state "clean." Again the verb "to trust" recalls the captive of "Person" who, in blindness could find the way, and the swimmer in "The Swimmer's Moment" who must trust himself to the unknown of the whirlpool's ominous center. Man's decision to venture forth toward God is characterized by an implicit trust and prevailing faith, in the ultimate and positive consequences of his actions. Again the paradox of trusting oneself to the fire in order to become sprouting with life, is a characteristic of Avison's Christian poems. Among other things, this particular kind of paradox consistently points to Christ's death and subsequently, man's Life.

As in "Person," Avison in "Watershed"[46] uses past and present tenses in order to achieve a proper time perspective. The first stanza of "Watershed" sets up a dichotomy between illusion and reality. The narrator examines throughout the poem the thesis proposed in the opening lines:

> The world doesn't crumble apart.
> The general, and rewarding illusion
> Prevents it ... .

The illusion alluded to is sustained by "clocks in the wrists and the temples, and up in the towers that you see as you walk." Clocks, in this context denote natural time, or man's physical mortality, and imposed time, or, man's order, respectively. Those who are guided, (or restricted) by these clocks, who assume the earth their "floor," know in their hearts "... that the foothold really is gone," or, in other words, that mortal man's artificially ordered existence is an illusion, based on his false measures.

The counterpart of the proposed thesis is that man may, instead of walking the clocked-pavement route, direct his steps toward the "acres of stained quicksand." Instructions leading into this direction, however, are not available, except what comes by means of the heart:

> ... You know what you know in your heart
> But there is no traffic in that direction,

Here Avison has set up, in a new way, the classical Christian metaphor of the wide, well-travelled highway leading to destruction and the narrow, sparsely trodden path leading to eternal life. The paradox of man who must venture into the deadly quicksand in order to gain a sure foothold, again is an elaboration on the life-through-death theme. Forsaking all, endurance and love are necessary ingredients for man's survival of (and in) Life's quicksands and whirlpools.

In the second stanza of "Watershed," the narrator describes a painting. This description elucidates and emphasizes the phenomenon of the powers of illusion. The buck, described as against a background of a "painted grove hung stiffly with cold wax and fading pigments," appears to emerge from the woods. The illusion of the painted buck, as a living animal, is further sustained by the light and shadows, depth and perspective effects of the painting. "It was bright and spacious and neat with everything moving," says the narrator. The possessive pronoun "my" preceeding "buck" further sustains the idea of man's tendency to assume as real that which is only an imitation.

In the last stanza, the narrator implies that man may be able to distinguish between reality and illusion. First of all, Avison utilizes an instant of her narrator's perspective powers. "Squared from the window" she sees the rain, the darkness and the trees in "pewter fresco." The verb "squared" suggestive in this context of "frame" and of a canvas, and the term "pewter fresco" contributes to the idea that man may perceive that which is real, as a work of art (an imitation of the real). "But," says the narrator

> ... you know
> In your heart what chill winds blow
> And the clocks in the temples, in all the
> towers, sound on
> (Quarter and half), and the gutters flow, and
> the sour
> Rain pastes the leather-black streets with large
> pale leaves.

What Avison is saying may readily be perceived: man, who relies on his senses (in this instance, visual perception) may create an aesthetic world which is essentially false, whereas man who listens to his heart knows a world which is true. The contrast which Avison sets up between the static, immutable painting, though perceived as living by man, and the ever mutable dynamic natural world of changing seasons, flowing gutters, revolving clocks and falling leaves, though perceived sometimes as static, is indicative of her view of mankind as being perverse. The "world doesn't crumble apart" because man is able, through his perverse sensibilities, to sustain his worldly visions. Avison implicitly proposes a crumbling of the world, which, in the poems under discussion, begins with a crumbling of the self through a symbolic drowning, or a forsaking all, or walking on Life's quicksands. The complete disintegration of the self, and subsequently of the world, will result in a new world where footholds are sure or where "Rock of Ages" cleave for me .

Although "Watershed," unlike "The Swimmer's Moment," is not re-published in The Dumbfounding, it belongs essentially to the category of "choice" poems found in this volume. Just as "Birth Day" may be grouped with poems contained in The Dumbfounding, so "Watershed" may also be transferred. Both poems, however, in conjunction with those discussed in the previous chapter, suggest the transition between Winter Sun and The Dumbfounding. The "immense step forward" which

A.J.M. Smith has observed between the two publications and L.M. Jone's "pivot for which the early poetry sought" does not, as we may have seen, come unannounced.

Although neither Winter Sun nor The Dumbfounding contain a consistent thematic structure, the first poem in the latter book draws together both volumes. "Old...Young..."[47] may be seen as the cord between the placenta sun and the dumbfounded child. It is a perfect transition lyric. In it

> The antlers of the ancient
> members of the orchard lie
> bleaching where the young grass
> shines, breathing light;
>
> the candles are carried
> to seek out those in the cellars
> granular in their lees:
>
> because cobwebs are forked away
> and the wind rises
> and from the new pastures long after longstemmed
> sunset,
> even this springtime, the last
> light is mahogany-rich
> a "furnishing".

"Old...Young..." is not primarily a furnishing of a new world, but a furnishing of new eyes. Not a second coming has intervened between Winter Sun and The Dumbfounding, but a second self emerged. This second self, conceived in Winter Sun, becomes initiated into the ranks of partakers in The Dumbfounding. The step backward and the sought from belong to the Gatineau world; where the wind "trickles" as opposed to the voluptuous rising wind in "Old...Young...". In the for-

mer world, we have a black river whereas in the new world, "shining grass" and "breathing light." In the former life, "cobwebs" came and were formed by "empty-eyed" desolation and a "bleak unconscience," whereas in "Old...Young...", they give way to seeking candles and "long-stemmed sunsets." By implication, that which intervenes between either "Old" or "Young" is the process set out in the first five poems discussed previously. With the crumbling of a former self, new selves emerge: through emersions in "black pits", new grounds have been established.

Just as relationships between children and parents can never be wholly severed, so the relationship between old and new selves cannot be dissolved. The narrator in "Old... Young..." acknowledges that relationship as do the narrators of "The Two Selves"[48] and "Two Mayday Selves." In these poems, Avison emphasizes implicitly that new planes of being are intricately related to preceding planes. Birthdays, she seems to say, do not happen without conceptions, nor do conceptions realize themselves fully without birth pains. In Avison's early poems, the seeds are sown for an ultimate germination. In the Sweet Cicely gardens lie the kernels which will in time sprout "Black-White under Green" traces; in other words awareness of sterile conditions can lead to fecund days.

The first stanza of "The Two Selves" provides the reminder of the past for the narrator, and a reminder of earlier themes

for the reader:

> All the cages are empty and crusted dry.
> Why do they hang from your lintel and ceiling?

That the cages are left while the escaped Philip Sparrow "scribbles his tracks/ in the water-front soot at/ a warehouse door," suggests that the second (and "new") self wants to remain aware of the "before and after" sparrow's existence. That the second self identifies with the birds in such a way as to become also unbound may be deduced from the last few lines of the poem: "And you wait for them bare?" asks the first self and the second self replies:

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

The essence of the latter's reply lies herein that rather than wait for the birds to come back, she is with the birds though away. Just as one cannot see the sea while living under it, as one cannot see the released birds at the warehouse, one is aware and knows the sound of the waters, like the sounds of the birds. What Avison, among other things, once more seems to emphasize indirectly, is the difference between seeing and knowing. Empty cages in "The Two Selves" only serve as reminders of captured seeing. New selves prefer freed knowing. Then knowing becomes conceptual whereas seeing is merely perceptual.

In "Two Mayday Selves,"[4] out of Winter comes Spring. As in "The Two Selves," there is a continuity between the past and present season. Is the Winter, the narrator asks "past"

> any convulsive gulp, any least
> whistling whisker-work
> on the lush park
> green, on the princely
> bird and his glossiness
> (reminiscent of flies) and the rice-
> perfuming light sifting
> between that pointing distance
> and this?

Indirectly, the narrator answers her own question. "Listen," she says to her "Old ghoul, leather-tough diaphram,"

> ... I am
> holding my breath

It seems as if she, at this point, wishes to make a contrast between the winter and her own respiratory function. Just as she is holding her breath, that is willfully inhibiting a natural physical phenomenon, so she implicitly asks the winter to hold his breath. One may say that, in Gideon-fashion, she wishes to stop cyclical time. Subsequently, in partial rectification of her own impertinence, she invites the winter to become caressed by the spring. First of all she describes the day:

> The power of the blue and gold breadth
> of day is poured out, flooding, all
> over all.

Then she beckons:

> Come out. Crawl out of it. Feel
> it. You,
> too.

That she invites herself as well as the season of the solstice is made clear.

In "Two Mayday Selves," both man and future-time, or man as part of future-time, are invited to become captives of a golden present. As in "Old...Young...," Avison in this poem, strives to create a momentary "furnishing." One may compare this "furnishing" with the old newspaper house from "Chronic." That the "dumbfounding" places of habitation compare favourably with the "Winter Sun" house, is readily observed. "Constant shifting of the contour" in the earlier lyric gives way, in this poem, to an "orchid-mile of shadows," and "the imperfect of too day-bald day" gives way to "that marvel, those

> meadows of peace (between the bird
> and the curved curb
> of the city-center clover-leaf).

As in "Old...Young...," "The Two Selves" and "Two Mayday Selves," "Micro-Metro" provides a "furnishing" for a narrator. In the latter, those aspects of the city which the wandering poet observes "Barber's; 'Guitar Lessons'; used/ rain-coats on outdoor racks,/ a many-money-Place..."), become part of her. "Our walls fall away," she says,

... recoil
or pile up, a-gape
when the park greens unfurl
grass rug, tree drape,

Especially the word "a-gape" suggests an attitude of wonder and eagerness, and supports the falling away walls. One may contrast this attitude with that of the topcoated people from "To Professor X. Year Y" who did not "gape skyward." Again, it becomes increasingly apparent that the poet's pen has sketched in new eyes for her latest narrators in her second volume; "Micro-Metro" is a "dumbfounding" poem: "Tea and mutton smells of our kind" (italics mine) prevail in the city of sense. However, that which is "ours" is not always exclusively ours, as observed in the second half of the poem.

In part twok, the speaker envisions under "the sun's spots," roving "bandsman:"

They are told what to play
and are dressed, almost ready
to line out the way:
people ... walls ... city.

The same note of despair and uniformity that prevailed and is dominant in "Rondeau Redouble" may be observed here. The walls of self in "Micro-Metro" have come down, but not the walls of society. As yet, the behaviour of the beautiful people ("peach satin, white spots") smacks of conformity. Then "Micro-Metro" becomes an advanced "Rondeau Redouble;"

exits may be found by the individual, but have not been discovered by "the people." As yet, as seems to be suggested, "route-rallying drums" advance to the "slicked-up" (from "the Road") circuit.

In "Branches,"[50] one may also observe elements of "old" and "young". The opening stanzas of this poem recall a "Winter Sun" mood literally, as well as thematically. Consider the note of despair in stanza one and two and the change of mood in the last stanza:

> The diseased elms are lashing
> the 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.
>
> Wondering, one by one:
> "Gather. Be glad."
> We scatter to tell what the root
> And where life is made.

Those who have replaced the "hollowing vaults of air" by "hearts of love" become messengers to Mitilene, announcing the day of genesis when "wan selves" die and "stray selves crowding for light" live.

The same blinding phenomenon which paradoxically leads to seeing in "Branches," may also be found in "The Earth That Falls Away." In the latter, physical blindness coincides with spiritual seeing. The once blind man, the subject of this poem, who has regained his eyesight, observes "everywhere emptiness." This emptiness is contrasted by the

"nomansland" of the blind man where one must "clutch notions till you trust sense." The essence of the poem lies herein; that a visible awareness of "person, color, thing" is rejected for an "uncluttered", "sealed-off dayshine" vision. As in "Branches," Christ may be perceived in un-seeing:

> Your beauty and holiness
> Your fair-seeing, scald.

As in "Person," Avison in "The Earth That Falls Away," expounds the concept of Christian faith. To become un-Thomas-like and retract our mortal eyes from nail-borne hands, she advocates, and, as she sets out in "Watershed," to adhere to that which we know through our heart, rather than that which we can perceive through our senses. Here she celebrates the man who turns in "of sunwardness;" whose "fingers and fists blunder for blindfolds" in order to shut out the material world so that a spiritual world may be maintained and regenerated. In "The Earth That Falls Away", the movement from old to young comes about through an appropriate exposure: in this particular instance, double exposure. Using Christian terminology, we may say that when man exposes his nakedness, he becomes "uncluttered;" then the shadow from God's eyelids ("His eyes behold," the psalmist said, "His eyelids try..."), dresses him or in secular terms, when man abandons his public self, he discovers his private self. That Avison does work within a Christian framework in this poem is obvious; Christ-found and Self-found coincide.

A number of poems which directly and explicitly are concerned with "seeing" and belong properly in that category which one may designate as being "Christian" are "In Truth," "A Story," "...Person, or a Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost," "The Dumbfounding," "A Prayer," and "The Christian's Year in Miniature." In these poems, the "cherried heart of love" is exposed to man and treasured by poet and spokesman. At this point, if one may at one's own discretion create a point of culmination through selection, earlier "two selves" are merging into one self.

"In Truth"[51] is a "prayer for Messiah." It attempts to revive not the "... fact of a dead/ face will never fade/ into any beauty-bathed/ grove of imagined shadow" but rather "Another's eyes" who

> look how, and say,
> one stone-dead face
> lived, is, will be:
>
> Saw those in prison first,
> Rose, spoke with his
> lost friends,
> ate honeycombs and fish.

The narrator in this poem rejects the dead historical Christ who may be conjured up in an aesthetic vision. Instead, she searches for a living Christ of flesh and bones (who "saw", "rose," "spoke," and "ate") who "is." As in "Watershed," Avison in this poem, advocates that world which one knows rather than that world which sees. In "In Truth" knowing,

which is based on trust, is seeing. He who trusts him, says the narrator

> learns all, past time: a voice
> no deafness drowns, at last
> Love, a face.

Just as the blind man in "The Earth That Falls Away," saw while blind, so by the same principle, the deaf man can hear, the present can be past, and the dead can be alive in "In Truth." Phenomenal knowing and seeing occur within the realm of ultimate truths. The narrator who says, "My being would listen/ to Him" subjects herself to that truth which in this particular instance is Christ. As has been suggested previously, Avison at this point is not engaged in the process of "searching and sounding" but directly proceeds to the heart of the matter which, and one may repeat, is the "cherried heart of love" amidst the branches of unknowing.

As in "In Truth," "A Story"[52] exhibits Christ as the central figure. In the former, a historical dead Christ is revived through faith in a present living Christ: in the latter, Avison uses a story-within-a-dialogue to bring Him into a twentieth-century perspective. In this poem, Christ is portrayed by the daughter, as a teller of stories; the main figure of the story, the gardener, is Christ. Avison seems to imply the double nature of Christ and subsequently Christianity. The storyteller ("The one/ out on the water,

telling/ something"), represents Christ as a historical figure whose existence cannot be questioned, (as is supported by the story of the daughter: "We all just stood there/ about an hour. Nobody/ shoving. I couldn't see/ very clearly, but I listened/ the same as the rest.").

The gardener ("He was casting seed,/ only everywhere"); the storyteller's subject is representative of Christ as Savior, a Life Power to whom men aspire, as does the daughter. The description by the daughter of the gardener recalls the parable of the sower, and simultaneously establishes Christ, within the context of the poem, as Him who provides the flower of life that sheds its "strange heart's force in that wondering wilderness" which is man's East of Eden: "His fingers", the daughter says

> shed, like the gold
> of blowing autumnal
> woods in the wild./
> He carried no wallet
> of pouch or sack,
> but clouds of birds followed
> to buffet and peck
> on the road. And the rock
> sprouted new blades
> and thistle and stalk
> matted in, and the birds
> ran threading the tall grasses
> lush and fine
> in the pockets of deep earth-

The magic elements surrounding the gardener ("He carried no pouch" and "the rock sprouted" and "thistle and stalk matted in"), place Christ as the miracle worker. As he walks

he makes "green and rock-grey and brown His floorway," and the sky He makes "a brightness."

But it is made clear in the last part of the poem that man must be active and willing in order to perceive such a miracle worker. "Where is he now," asks the mother, and the daughter answers: "The Gardener?" Whereupon, the mother specifies: "No. The Storyteller/ out on the water?" "He is alone." says the daughter. "Perhaps a few/ who beached the boat and/ stayed, would know." These last few lines of the dialogue establish that the mother has completely missed the point of her daughter's story, as it pertains to the identity of the gardener and the story-teller. Avison seems to say that we often differentiate between Christ as a historical figure and Christ as a transformer of human horizons. Secondly, that only those few who beached their boat would know where he is, implies that man himself must choose whether or not to anchor near his Life Force. As in "The Swimmer's Moment," man in "A Story" must make a choice. Those who wish to see must open their eyes, or, as in "Person," those who wish to reside in the sheepfold, must gain entry through the door. Then seeing becomes a reality, and in Avison, reality is within the extremes of the Morning Star's universe.

In "... Person, or a Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost,"[53] "seeing" paradoxically occurs when man "effaced in the known Light," becomes in "him released from facelessness."

As in "The Swimmer's Moment," man who strives to lose himself shall be found, and man who wished to save himself shall be lost, so in this poem through an abandoning of Self, the Self lives. But, man lives in a triune God, as is clearly stated in the third stanza:

> Let the one you show me
> ask you, for me,
> you, all but lost in
> the one in three,

Not only is "...Person" a poem which sets out the paradox pertaining to the Christian concept of redemption, it is also a declaration of discipleship. Released from facelessness, the narrator declares, "I may show him visible." Just as "A Story" goes beyond a "searching and sounding" and moves into that category which is purely affirmative (it may be read as "an Avison sermon in miniature"), so "...Person" is purely affirmative. At this point, the road to Damascus is flooded with lights, and Avison's narrators all become messengers to Mitilene, spreading the news of the Great Birth.

"The Dumbfounding"[54] also attempts to create a relevant Christ. The narrator is the spokesman for Christ, as well as for our contemporaries. In the first stanza, she examines the former's response to His presence:

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

As a mortal, or, perhaps as a Christ who appears as a mortal human being, man cannot accept him. But ironically enough, neither can man accept a Christ who transcends the limits of human possibilities. "Your not familiar pace," says the narrator-spokesman

> in flesh, across the waves,
> woke only our distrust.
> Twice-torn we cried "A ghost"
> and only on our planks counted you fast.

Thus, neither a clay nor a winged Christ can be accepted. The seventh stanza leads into the final part of the poem wherein the narrator becomes <u>our</u> spokesman. It also provides a new perspective for a relevant Christ.

> Now you have sought
> and seek, in all our ways, all thoughts,
> streets, musics - and we make of these a din
> trying to lock you out, or in,
> to be intent. And dying.

At this point, Avison suggests that man cannot, at his own discretion and according to his own ability to perceive the divine, lock "in" or "but" or reject or accept Christ. Instead, as is implied by the remaining stanzas, one aspires without categorization, to "the all-lovely, all-men's way/ to that far country." Avison makes Christ powerful and man weak. It is this "strangely light-brimming" terrain which guides our journey. "Seeing" in this poem, is believing that "through the garden to trash, rubble, hill" lies Eden where

"the weak in nature" will be restored and the "sufferer" stays until "time be full."

In "A Prayer Answered by Prayer,"[55] Avison again stresses that it is not necessarily man who finds Christ ("trying to lock you out or in"), but He who finds man. "Where you have found me," says the narrator in the address to the "All-creating Son," "burn me, your beacon fire." "Seeing," in this poem, as is suggested by these lines, becomes a two-fold happening. Like the narrator in "...Person", this narrator pledges to become an agent for her master. "That I may show him visible," from the former, and "burn me, your beacon fire" from the latter, constitute that same vow, which is also at once a prayer. Narrators in both poems desire to be living examples of Christ, reflecting in them that light which He extended first.

Just as "A Story" may be read as a sermon and "...Person" as a hymn, so "The Christian's Year in Miniature"[56] may be read as a psalm. Consider the first few stanzas:

i

Beside the still waters,
infant-pure
God is, in flesh.
Now the skies soar

with song. Heaven utters.
In a white blur
lost, in a rush
caught up, we hear

ii

To the hills we lifted
our eyes, and you
sat on the pasture ridge
strongly in view,

and taught us. The breeze wafted
your voice through and through
our hearts. From the timeless verge
you moved, to our <u>now</u>.

Once more Avison brings her Messiah with the aid of the Songs of David, out of history to our present. Because we lift our eyes, that is man's willingness to perceive Him, He sits "in view;" he responds to our faith. Throughout the poem, Avison seems to suggest that man who can perceive of this world as being part of "God's unspeaking" may find Christ "set apart." Or, as is implied by the eighth stanza, that man in

The garden, awakening
to a terrible day-swell
knows the rock-sweet, the pulse set
of Emmanuel.

In other words, one may say that he whose eyes are steeped in faith, can find in this world Emmanuel, or "God with us." Then gardens of Sweet Cicely are transformed into resurrected pastures, and Jordan is "infant-pure". Then seeing is Being and Being resides in God.

Not as explicitly Christian in content as the six poems discussed previously, but drawing from the same well-spring of Being are "Many as Two," "Five Breaks," "For Dr. and Mrs. Dresser," and "Unspeakable."

"Many as Two,"[57] a poem in the form of a dialogue between two selves, may be quoted in full for greater comprehension:

> "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 the limb?
> or a terror you who love dare not name?
> (No thing abiding.)
> No sign, no magic, no roadmap, no
> pretested 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?)

"Many as Two" may be considered as a key poem in Avison's work because it brings together motifs and underlying themes from other poems. The green pasture motif is perhaps the most obvious feature, where the "No sign, no magic, no roadman, no pre-tested foothold" is the major theme. Once more, Avison in "Many as Two," emphasizes the abstract world of the divine imagination, as opposed to the empirical world of facts and

verification. Once more, "knowning" and "seeing" operate from within the fortress of the heart, rather than the bastion of the mind. A positive response to "(Go with us, then?)" is set in motion through the "Vroom" of the heart-strings reverberations! Pretested footholds are not rungs in the ladder towards the well-springs of Being.

In "Five Breaks,"[58] the "vroom"of the"heartstrings" is made more explicit. God is the puller of strings in this poem as is suggested in the first stanza:

> Top-spun, swiftly
> paid out,
> you flung me, dancing, humming:
> "Joy it is
> to ride the day,
> lest that one toy with
> God's play."
> The stranger motif here
> stunned my now dizzying ear,
> and stilled, I lay
> toppled and listening.

In "Five Breaks," the narrator subjects herself to God's fancies. As in "The Word," the abandon of self, the "forsaking all, head over heels" process, is the guiding principle in this poem. Man who gives himself to such a God stands "speed-blind" among his "synchronizing glories." That, ironically enough, man, although "speed-blind", should be aware of the glories around him, suggests again the paradoxical nature of seeing in her work. Once more, temporal eyes give way to divine sight.

Just as "Many as Two" re-echoes passages from Ps. 23, so "For Dr. and Mrs. Dresser"[59] resounds David's harp. In this poem, Avison draws a distinction between ordinary and heavenly food. Just as in "Intra-Political," we have two kinds of feasting, so in this poem we have two kinds of Life-sustaining substances. Those who partake of "His plain table" and have as a prerequisite offered "Him their all" will become flooded with His radiance. Like Herbert who "did sit and eat" man in this poem may be a guest at this "same transfiguring board" if he obeys the sacramental "take, eat - live." That God's love made manifest can only exist as a reciprocal love is made plain in the poem. It is man's willingness to partake which provokes God's table of mercy.

"Unspeakable"[60] concerns itself with the "beauty of the unused" (i.e. "the wheatear among birds, or/ stonechat" or "a portion of low roof swept by/ the buttery leaves of a pear tree/ where a manx cat is/ discovered - just now - blinking his/ sunned Arctic sea-eyes in the/ sun-play"). The beauty of the unused, the narrator states

> Should be
> confidently, as it is
> copious and new into morning,
> celebrated.

One may read this poem, the last one in The Dumbfounding, as an epilogue to her works. It may also be read as a philosophy of life. That which is unused (and being unused is equated

with being beautiful), is by implication, all of existence. Future time, as well as past time, which is constantly in the process of being re-created and translated, is, in so far as the process is always at a present point, unused. A total comprehension of the concept of the "unused," either as it pertains to time or space or experience, is not within the grasp of the human mind.

Appropriately enough, the poem is entitled "Unspeakable". But, that "portion" of the unused, which in Avison may be symbolized by the totality of the sun, is "copious and new in to morning celebrated."

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

I knew how to live
by hearing and touch
and sense of place. I could pre-judge
obstacles too: at first the couch,
lamp, table; you have to have
them mapped in your mind - you clutch
notions, till you trust sense. Then I could move
out among trees and traffic, a march
in Nomansland to risk it, a dive
into invisible interdependence, no crutch
needed, for all the dread. I knew how to live.
Please. Leave me alone.
Bandage my eyes again.
The dream of seeing
I want, as it has been, open
daybreak blue, with the sting
of the far-off; not this urging
of person, color, thing.
Unclutter me. Relieve
me of this visible. Give
back my sealed-off dayshine....

- from "The Earth That Falls Away"

Although it may be apparent to even a casual reader of Avison that especially The Dumbfounding exhibits a poet whose love is generated by Christ's being, a number of her critics have failed to see this. John Robert Colombo, for instance, makes it clear in the following quotation that he is rather puzzled by the object of Avison's sight. "She eschews,"[61] he says,

> the power and panache of the Catholic liturgy and accepts instead a somewhat bleak view of the "suffering servant" always faced with the pain of perception and not always certain even

> of the hope of salvation. Avison believes and affirms, but exactly what she affirms, I find it impossible to decide in the light of her poems.

Unwittingly and ironically, Colombo admits that in the light of her poems, he fails to see. Fortunately however, Miss Avison has published a number of poems which clearly "affirm" a definite object, in this particular instance, the object being a triune God. "Having,"[62] for instance, published in Credo, a small journal of Christian writings, uses for its main figure the Biblical woman at the well. The poem, quoted in full, begins with her address to Christ:

> Sir, you have nothing,
> the woman said.
> Nothing to dip into water
> or carry water in.
>
> On the empty-handed earth
> the snow stars blot and fur and dwell
> roughening eyelashes of winter grass
> and on the open gaze touching, muffling.
>
> On the snow the slow, rich sun, in time:
> seed, roots, coolness
> through a new sundeep season...
>
> The heart listens
>
> You have a cup
> When I have nothing.
> Both must be
> for still refreshing, overflowing, new-day
> joy, to be.

"Having" as a method of obtaining faith, once more proposes the listening of the heart; it re-affirms the heart's

accurate ears. The seed, sun and water imagery further stresses the regenerative power of Christ, the foundation of Life.

"He couldn't be Safe,"[63] appearing in His, a magazine of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, "affirms" the same Christ as does "Having." The former is an interesting poem in so far as the poet employs simple and regular rhythm and, as opposed to many of her other poems, simple syntax and diction. Again, the poem may be quoted in its entirety:

> He chose a street
> where he wouldn't be safe
> and nobody there would save him.
>
> He went to the parties
> that were not safe
> not saying who, but they knew him.
>
> He went down the road
> to the Place of the Skull.
> The soldier was there, and the criminal,
> and the ones who thought if he didn't have pull
> they wouldn't be safe to know him.
>
> He couldn't be safe
> and come where we
> go, and hide,
> and storm, and agree
> on everything else if only he
> wouldn't show up our artful way
> with the light of his simplicity.
>
> No. He couldn't be safe and be
> our Saviour.
>
> Jesus said to them, "My time has
> not yet come, but your time is always here.
> The world cannot hate you,
> but it hates me because I testify of it
> that its works are evil." John 7:6,7.

A third poem in this group, "Slow Advent and Christmas: TIME"[64] is perhaps the most redeeming in its affirmation. Unlike the other two poems, the imagery is more dense and thought-provoking. The first two stanzas consist of a movement from shortbread-trimmings to the "realness and richesse" of the "all enabling Infant." The speaker, who is walking along the Christmas-streets, finds herself, in spite of the bankruptcy of the commercial-machine, filled with joy - "yet (my heart sings)." The last two stanzas sum up her love:

> All try and fail.
> And my whole
> being swells to cry out; I too
> must desecrate
> the holy hush to trumpet
> joy. A newborn
> new Being-in
> my keeping? so
> far, His
> coming. so
> tiny to all
> my anticipating sense of
> majesty. yet
> through the long patience, slowly the
> marvel, the
> indomitable coming:
> a steel-bright-faced
> ready-for-gallows One
> one. on. into glory. and His
> place of my being to be
> His as will every
> place.

The infant Christ, in earlier stanzas "set amidst stagehands' hay and incense," becomes set in the heart, soul and tongue of her who comes into Being at advent. Basically, "Slow Advent and Christmas:TIME" and "Having" can be contained in

the basic metaphor of the latter. Just as the cup of the woman must act as the receptacle of the water, so the individual in both poems must become the cup of Christ's love. The Christian tenet of the body as the temple of God has received new treatment in these two poems. "He Couldn't Be Safe," on the other hand, suggests the love of Christ so that he could be "our Saviour." All three poems are vignettes dealing with the reciprocal love between man and Messiah.

Three other poems, published in two different issues of Ganglia, are experimental in nature in so far as they differ considerably from her other forms. "A Medical Psychological Decision. (Anagoge?),"[65] in spite of its sophisticated title, is based on the nursery-rhyme principle, as is apparent, for instance, in the first stanza:

> Farm it out
> let her go
> eeny meany was my baby was born was
> twisted in the
> ankles.

In its entirety, and faithful to the last part of the title, the poem interprets simultaneously the words of God and the songs of the child. Healing, in this case, the healing of the robin's "ankle twist," is the central issue as is apparent from the following:

Bind her up and press her bone
and let her walk along alone?
Walk-all-over in her goldie far-offs and
never-till walk lay low alongside?

In the remainder of the poem, the narrator is concerned with the guilt of omission in case she should not adhere to a sound medical and psychological decision:

Can I farm it out or let her go and
fool momma (see, what momma doesn't see can't
hurt her). (But I
know what hurting is.
I have to let her know.

"Will you one day walk in summer
scream-hating out of momma
of the robin crib twisting?

"or one day love your walking
enough to bear
the jawbone grinding pillar of terror who
am here?"

The ever characteristic question mark once more controls decision. However, the arguments for a straightening of the bone seem in favour, and a verdict for splints inevitable. Just as we have seen in many other poems, spiritual fortitude is necessary in order to attain the sheepfold of God, so it requires mental fortitude to obtain a future for the injured bird. In both cases, the agent-narrator is called upon to choose. As an act of considerable consequences, Avison never fails to illuminate the issue in such a way that the reader can feel its importance.

"HIALOG (any number can play)*"[66] and "In Eporphyrial Harness:-"[67] may both be quoted; the former for its obscure but playful use of language and the latter for its imagery.

"A het hilip,"
he hed.

"Hockem?" a hed.

"Hiliping hood
hep," he
hed.

"haden ō," a hed.

(Horry, hallus horc
a ō.)

* except number seven

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

This last poem is perhaps the most interesting because the poet describes once more the metaphorical "furnishing of new eyes" which we have observed so often in the previous chapter. Of special interest is the closing pun. In conjunction with "eyes" (formerly and also in this poem, associated with non-empirical "knowing"), "ice" is reminiscent of "Identity," where the "icy pole" is the locale for man's encounter with his stripped self. This particular pun, as the economic conveyor of

meaning, brings together the major literary symbol of the sun; the eyes which choose the sun as its centre, as well as its being (also Being) and, paradoxically, ice as providing the "white unremembering glare" of total revelation.

Aesthetician Richard Wollheim once remarked very aptly how the "conditions in which an element of a work of art gives rise to meaning are the same as those in which information is carried, i.e. the conditions increase in favourability as redundancy approaches zero."[68] Applied to Avison, such a dictum is at once true and false. To the extent that her syntax and diction are mostly fresh and imagination, thus decreasing anticipatory patterns, her ideas recur time and again. Not detrimentally, however. Like a fountain, Avison is overflowing in her abundance, but her excess is mostly absorbed by her metaphoric schemata which we have conceived of as a mandala. Between "Gatineau," her first published poem, and "Unspeakable," the last poem appearing in The Dumbfounding, lies her cognitive world of Becoming. From "Gatineau," the trickling wind, unable to provoke unsoiled vistas, takes on, in "Unspeakable," phenomenal proportions: swept clean by the far reaching winds of spiritual seeing, the world becomes "unused" and "new." Instead of having an initial world bereft of a "conscience," we have a later state where

not only a direction is suggested pertaining to a moral code, but where also expanded consciousness has been acquired. But the world itself has not changed; curtain-soiled mornings in Avison are man-made conditions, as are unentomable vistas and Easter mornings, and, as has been previously suggested by "Unspeakable," are continually happening.

The movement from "Gatineau" to "Unspeakable," our mandala schemata, consists of the tracing of the gyration towards the heart of the sun-world; the latter, which as has been previously set out, may be equated with a Christian "sheepfold" or a secular "Being." That through pain and suffering, accepting and rejecting, "searching and sounding," joy, peace and internal harmony can be achieved, we have seen. Outside worlds of rivers and rooms, cement ledges and strolling pigeons, becomé internalized through the processes of transforming empirical facts into philosophical truths. The "palaces of senses" which were found to be wanting in "Prelude" (they are "patchy after years of hopeless upkeep") are replaced in later poems by moments "of held breath" where some chose to "beach the boat" and stay and others pushed out the sagged in tomes on the "begrimed shelves" and still others have lifted their eyes "towards the hills." In the Garden of Sweet Cicely, a house abandoned cannot be revived because of a "too-open Scripture," but in the garden of Arimathea, the "rock-sweet, the pulse-set" ("heart"-knowledge) announces

"Emmanuel."[69] "God with us" is alive in Avison; "God with us" pinpoints "home;" "God with us" refuses "fearing, in hope;" "God with us" bids us "take, eat - live." But "nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes;" "the optic heart must venture."

Several critics, notably Brewster Ghiselin, Munro Beattie, Hugh MacCallum, and A.J.M. Smith, have noted in Avison's work a fusion between the intellectual and the sensuous; that which Beattie refers to as the "interplay of cerebration and feeling"[70] and that which Smith sees as a (successful) fusion between conceit and imagery. It would seem appropriate to suggest that rather than conceive of a fusion between these two basic elements of poetry, one may think of the latter as being the vehicle of the former. Then rather than a fusion, two inseparable entities exist. Just as a sensuous awareness of one's beloved does not constitute love, so the aesthetics of words do not necessarily culminate in a metaphysical conceit. But just as one cannot separate the physical attributes of one loved from the mental state induced, so one cannot separate that which the poet has put together: form and content.

Apart from the sensuous aspect of Avison's poetry, one may conceive of her poetry as form always conforming to content; irregular metre and broken syntax as well as the use of unusual diction and stanza form suggest a "technical jail-breaking" and a concrete observable "venture" as well as a

first reality "re-creation." The second and ultimate reality is sustained by the former in so far as "one or two" have "won from space a habitable interior" and others have found the "silver reaches of the estuary."

One may see how Avison in and through her poetry juggles her and our reality ("our reality" if we adhere to Colombo's observation that Avison assumes our mind to be a tabula rasa).[71] Initial reality in this case corresponds with word and page reality in so far as it delineates a locale. Just as individual words, phrases, sentences, titles, and stanzas provide a framework or basis for the larger meaning it contains, so the locale provides a relevant framework for experience related. The primary set of realities which corresponds with the former may be found in the thematic structure of her works. The first and most obvious reality is obtained, as has been stated previously, through empirical verification, for instance, "This is the day of the leafing-out" (from "Black-White Under Green: May 18, 1965).[72] It refers to the observable coming of Spring. The second reality is obtained when the meaning of the Spring's dawn has been established; in this case: "This day of the leafing-out/ speaks with blue power-/ among the buttery grassblades" (italics mine). The first reality then is objective whereas the second is subjective. In Avison it is the latter to which she, and we with her, subscribe. The extent of her subjectivity, of course, is in part a result of Avison's Christianity. Em-

pirical footholds in her works are rejected for blind seeing. "The Earth That Falls Away,"[73] as we have seen, contains statements which form the essence of Avison's dictum for obtaining sight. The title itself hints at the paradox which is inherent between the natural world of things and the phenomenal world of experience, or, between Appearance and Being. Avison seems to maintain that a planet Earth mapped out by objects and things, must fall away before a "habitable" world can be found or, to refer once more to "Watershed," man who assumes "the earth to be his floor" ("that you see as you walk"), sustains his "general and rewarding illusion." Then that objective reality (in "Watershed" upheld by "clocks in the wrists and the temples and up in the towers") accepted by man as being of a primary nature, is rejected as an illusion, whereas subjective reality (the "Pried loose forever out of nights and days/ And birth and death/ And all the covering wings"[74] existence) is hailed.

Avison then is a poet who is not primarily concerned with the conveyance of a sensuous and aesthetically pleasing world, but instead with the abstraction, as well as extraction from the natural world in order to obtain meaning. Then, whether or not we would call hers to be a poetry of "cerebration" or "feeling" is somewhat incidental. Hers is a poetry of ideas conveyed through feeling, and rather than see these two elements as "successful fusions," we see them as comple-

mentary and as stated before, inseparable entities. Through an internalization of the objective world, Avison, in her poetry, combats "slow sure estrangement from the sun" and wins "belief in a new burgeoning." Not only then, has she distributed the dictum that "Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes," and that the "optic heart must venture," she also, as a poet, adhered to that principle. "He does not resist you"[75] says Avison with James, who

> looking to
> Him ... in his hour
> comes.))

FOOTNOTES

1. A list of uncollected poems appears under "Primary Sources" in the Bibliography.

2. "Critical Improvisations on Margaret Avison's Winter Sun," Tamarack Review, 18, Winter 1961, p. 81.

3. "The Mind's Eyes (I's) (Ice): the poetry of Margaret Avison,

4. "Margaret Avison's New Book," The Canadian Forum, 46, September 1966.

5. "Avison and Nevill," Canadian Literature, 34, Autumn 1967, p. 75.

6. "The Poetry of Margaret Avison," Canadian Literature, 2, Autumn 1959, p. 50.

7. Loc. cit.

8. "Poetry," University of Toronto Quarterly, 30, p. 380.

9. Canadian Literature, 38, Autumn 1968, p. 56.

10. "Seven Recent Books," Queen's Quarterly, 74, Winter 1967, p. 760.

11. "Poetry Chronicle," Tamarack Review, 42, Winter 1967, p. 76.

12. University of Toronto, 1966.

13. Winter Sun, University of Toronto Press, 1960, p. 17.

14. Canadian Poetry Magazine, 4, December 1939, p. 19.

15. Winter Sun, University of Toronto Press, 1960, p. 12.

16. Ibid., p. 8.

17. "Critical Improvisations on Margaret Avison's Winter Sun," Tamarack Review, 18, Winter 1961, p. 86.

18. Winter Sun, p. 23.

19. Ibid., p. 61.

20. Ibid., p. 63.

21. Ibid., p. 71.

22. Ibid., p. 68.

23. Ibid., p. 34.

24. The Book of Canadian Poetry, Toronto, W.J. Gage and Company Ltd., 1948, p. 443.

25. Ibid., p. 444.

26. Loc. cit.

27. Canadian Forum, 23, October 1943, p. 155.

28. Winter Sun, p. 26.

29. Contemporary Verse, 26, Fall 1948, p. 4.

30. Winter Sun, p. 44.

31. Ibid., p. 21.

32. Ibid., p. 43.

33. Ibid., p. 42.

34. Contemporary Verse, 26, Fall 1948, p. 5.

35. Ibid., p. 3.

36. Winter Sun, p. 76.

37. Ibid., p. 73.

38. Ibid., p. 60.

39. The Book of Canadian Poetry, Ed. A.J.M. Smith, Toronto, W.J. Gage and Company Ltd., 1948, p. 444.

40. Winter Sun, p. 29.

41. Ibid., p. 9.

42. Ibid., p. 36.

43. The Dumbfounding, New York, W.W. Morton and Company Inc., 1966, p. 56.

44. Ibid., p. 52.

45. Ibid., p. 24.

46. Winter Sun, p. 48.

47. The Dumbfounding, p. 9.

48. Ibid., p. 10.

49. Ibid., p. 11.

50. Ibid., p. 46.

51. Ibid., p. 49.

52. Ibid., p. 26.

53. Ibid., p. 53.

54. Ibid., p. 58.

55. Ibid., p. 63.

56. Ibid., p. 65.

57. Ibid., p. 21.

58. Ibid., p. 54.

59. Ibid., p. 54.

60. Ibid., p. 99.

61. "Avison and Wevill," Canadian Literature, 34, Autumn 1967, p. 75.

62. Credo, 5, April 1968, p. 6.

63. His, December 1968, p. 42.

64. Christianity Today, 13, December 1968, p. 9.

65. Ganglia, 5.

66. Ganglia, 1.

67. Ibid.,

68. Art and its Objects, New York, Harper and Row, 1968, p. 116.

69. from "The Christian's Year in Miniature."

70. C.F. Klinck, ed., "Poetry 1950-1960," Literary History of Canada, University of Toronto Press, 1965, p. 808.

71. "Avison and Wevill," Canadian Literature, 34, Autumn 1967, p. 73.

72. The Dumbfounding, p. 14.

73. Ibid., p. 38.

74. from "Identity."

75. from "The Earth that Falls Away."

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