

The Wholehearted Poet: A Conversation about Margaret Avison

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Always Now

The Collected Poems: Volume One

Margaret Avison

The Porcupine's Quill

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Barbara Nickel: This is a tremendously important collection, and timely, coming out shortly after Margaret Avison won the 2003 Griffin Prize for *Concrete and Wild Carrot*. *Always Now* includes Avison's first two books, *Winter Sun* (1960) and *The Dumbfounding* (1966), with a few alterations and deletions. It also includes three translations from the Hungarian and a section called "From Elsewhere," comprised of uncollected and new work from her 1991 *Selected* along with a few other poems.

Elise Partridge: In the Foreword, Avison gives us her own list of "some potent influences" on this early work. It's fascinating to try to trace how she incorporated and departed from the poets she mentions. "Vivid . . . images" in D. H. Lawrence; T. S. Eliot's "jazzy rhythms"; Ezra Pound's "abrupt claims on a reader's attention"; William Carlos Williams's "informality amid poignant highlights" and the "precision" of Elizabeth Bishop – "all these," Avison writes, "with readings in literature from Langland's 'field full of folk' (the world) on, tuned my ear and forced me to find my own clarity of focus and language."

I never would have thought of D. H. Lawrence when I first began reading Avison, but once I immersed myself, I saw they shared something in terms of fervor and reverence. In poems like "A Sad Song" (about a dying catalpa tree) or "A Nameless One" (about an insect, "a wilted flotsam, cornsilk, on the linoleum") she shows a similar tenderness for the natural world. "The poets we read in public school were English, formal, a little rhetorical," she also recalls here; clearly she was attuned to some of the fresher possibilities she heard in Eliot, and created her own New World sound.

BN: "The Agnes Cleves Papers," the long poem that closes *Winter Sun*, reminds me of Eliot in its scope, tone, and range of images.

EP: I assume imagistic poems like Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" also struck her – one sees similar startling effects in hers. Or perhaps that influence is detectable in the inspired abruptness of so many of her endings in this volume (I don't think I know another writer who closes so many poems with one word, or two). And Langland – in the opening lines of *Piers Plowman*, the narrator describes how a miraculous experience overtook him: "Me bifel a ferly." Of course that poem's narrator sees the "field" – the landscape, the people – in Christian terms. I imagine the 1963 conversion to Christianity alluded to in Avison's poems as a kind of "ferly" that befell her. The word "new" keeps coming up in *The Dumbfounding* – twice she refers to a "new sky"; Pauline moments are evoked in "Branches" and "Five Breaks." You can hear the joy and wonderment, and sense some new serenity, in that book. And her "field full of folk" are the Torontonians one sees referred to in her cityscapes in this volume and elsewhere.

As for other influences on these early poems, I haven't found Avison referring to the work of Marianne Moore, but in Avison's unconventional poetic moves I am sometimes reminded of Moore – her habit of being elliptical; the unexpected Latinate word; the use of brackets and quotations; startling line breaks; innovative rhymes. Avison's poem "The Typographer's Ornate Symbol at the end of a Chapter or a Story" is I think about modesty – about anonymous craftsmanship without self-pity.

BN: She definitely values the small thing, and sometimes uses it to accomplish great leaps in scale. I love that move in "To Professor X, Year Y," when she observes a mass of people from what seems like a height ("Down in the silent crowd few can see anything"). It's all about large groupings and generalities – "someone climbed," "Nobody gapes skyward," "What everybody is waiting for" – and then, suddenly, we home in on the incredible specificity of "One girl who waits in a lit drugstore doorway/North forty-eight blocks for the next bus/Carries a history, an ethics, a Russian grammar,/And a pair of gym shoes." What Avison achieves here is not only an element of unpredictability, but a shift in perspective.

EP: Like Bishop, she can give us the zoom-lens precision of small details, but like Henry Vaughan's, her references to nature, especially in later poems, are sometimes quite broad – in poem after poem the physical world is represented by large, sometimes rather abstract entities that carry symbolic weight – "sky," "sun," "light."

BN: She not only gives us this range (although, I must admit, I become tired of all that light!), but a vast range of kinds of poems. She has dialogue poems (sometimes between two aspects of self) as well as regular metered/stanza forms, the sonnets, short prayers like "Miniature Biography of One of My Father's Friends Who Died A Generation Ago," imagistic poems recalling Williams and Pound, short reflections, long philosophical meditations, as well as lists and catalogues.

EP: Yes, you sense she's delighted in exploring different genres. And she's metrically so various – a worthy model. Clearly she worked hard to learn a great deal about prosody and used that knowledge well – kept challenging herself, kept finding the right form for the subject. In this way I think she and P. K. Page are very much alike.

BN: You never know what she'll pull together next – that's what makes the voice so utterly original, and partly what gives it that edgy energy.

EP: Yes – the poems have that uniqueness and surprise that poems do when their authors have mastered their craft and spoken their own truths. But Avison is also refreshing to read in my opinion because she avoided joining one of the major movements of the 20th century, one that still holds sway in North America: confessionalism. In the Foreword, Avison pays tribute to a grade nine teacher who gave her what Avison refers to as “this valuable counsel: ‘For the next ten years do not use the first person in any poem you write.’” One author said that when Avison examines her work, she allows her “no self-pity . . . Her most frequent comment to me is: ‘Forget the I’s.’”

BN: A voice that avoids the “I” can take on an authority it otherwise wouldn't. “The Swimmer's Moment,” for example, opens with the sweeping statement “For everyone/The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes,” and then goes on to divide people into those who will not recognize the whirlpool, and those who are “whirled into the ominous center.” Elsewhere, in another poem, that omniscient voice divides people between “Those who fling off, toss head,/Taste the bitter morning, and have at it” – and “Those who are flung off, sit/Dazed awhile, gather concentration . . .”

Part of the reason I'm convinced by the voice is because it's not trying to support these observations of humanity, this god-like sorting, with personal experiences, emotions, and anecdotes. One of the benefits of having so much of Avison's work brought together in one volume is that the distant, omniscient narrator can become a presence for the reader over a space of many poems. You come to simply accept that there is no poetic “I” here – and with that, after reading many poems, comes an acceptance of the authority of the all-knowing voice. Except of course in the religious poems in *The Dumbfounding*. With knowledge of Avison's conversion, it's hard to read the “I” in those poems as anyone but the poet. And, interestingly, the voice is less assured. Compare the voice in “The Swimmer's Moment” with the hesitant, searching quality of “Searching and Sounding” with its question (“To what strange fruits in/the ocean's orchards?”), supplications (“Dwarf that I am, and spent,/touch my wet face with/the little light I can bear now,”) and even an unfinished sentence (“ . . . for he is/sick,/for I . . .”).

EP: Avison dates her conversion to January 4, 1963; five weeks later, Sylvia Plath took her own life. If that [p. 35] wasn't a point in the twentieth century where an important poetic divergence occurred, I don't know what is. I think it's too bad a poet like Avison hasn't been a greater influence on young woman poets than Plath.

BN: Don't you think that has something to do with how difficult some of the poems are? That gnarled and tangled quality? Not to say young woman poets can't read difficult poems, but in terms of general popularity, I think Avison does require great commitment on the reader's part. So many of her poems are labyrinths. I think it's often the syntax that's baffling. It's hard to follow the logic of a sentence; you have to keep going back to

remind yourself what the subject was. Jon Kertzer sums it up well by calling her obliquity the “willful detour to truth.”

EP: Does she make a virtue of obliquity? I think most often yes. I have to admit there are poems I've sat down with numerous times, concordance on my lap, and still find elusive. But I look forward to the revelations I know those poems will yield, because I'm sure they've been labored over and have something significant to say.

And what a relief it is to be in her landscapes, with their constant references to sun, rather than in the dim reaches of lugubrious melodramas one finds writers so often creating post-Plath. Her work reminds me of what Auden suggested poets might do with their talents: “With your unconstraining voice/Still persuade us to rejoice.” Not that she hasn't had her encounters with terror and despair; not that she hasn't struggled, as one sees in “The Butterfly,” “Almost All Bugged Down,” “Death,” “November 23,” “Searching and Sounding,” “The Swimmer's Moment,” and other poems. But she refers to giving in to despair, in “Natural/Unnatural,” as “corruption./I fear that./I refuse, fearing; in hope.” The last word of the final original poem in this book, before we get to her translations, is “celebrated”; it has a line all its own.

BN: One of the consequences of being apparently free of personal angst is a speaker with extraordinarily keen powers of observation, as shown in some of her cityscape poems. I'm thinking of “September Street” and “Far off from University.” There is no “I” interacting with these locales; the poems are pure observation. Her catalogues juxtapose wildly contrasting details (“The fragrance of cool tar,/smoked coffee, wet/machine parts, seagulls, dawn”) to richly evoke a place, but the point isn't the place. There are no street names, no familiar landmarks. The reader who doesn't know Toronto, or that Avison lived in Toronto, would never know that these two poems are set there. The city could be American, European – there is nothing in these two poems to make them specifically Canadian.

EP: Well, with at least one cityscape, I would argue that you can determine you're in Canada. “Micro-Metro” refers to both “tea and mutton” and “popsicles.” The term “mutton” was, if I'm not mistaken, no longer in use in the United States when Avison wrote this; that meat is referred to there as “lamb.” Taking tea of course is not an American custom, but a British one, which apparently survived in places in Canada. And the word “popsicles” is North American – those frozen treats are called “ice lollies” in England. So these food monikers give us a clue that we're in the New World, but not New Jersey, for example. And in another cityscape, “All Fools' Eve,” Avison writes: “From gilded tiers,/Balconies, and sombre rows,/Women see gopher-hawks, and rolling flaxen hills” Ain't no gophers in the U. K.

BN: But even when specifics of place are used, for example “Bowles Lunch” in the last stanza of “Apocalyptic,” that detail only serves some larger metaphor or paradox. In this case, the old piano “in the passage to the washrooms and the alley exit” evokes the possibility of perhaps divine music in the grimy stench of urban reality, a melding of heaven and earth. In other poems, Avison gives us, it's true, Canadian images like a boy with a hockey stick (“Thaw”), a boy with an aluminum toboggan (“The Absorbed”),

Tunnel and Cascade Mountains in Banff, and a lot of snow. But they're used in the service of her metaphysical project, and are not *about* Canadian place or time in the way that Purdy writes about the Arctic in *North of Summer*.

EP: Yes. However, Auden in *The Dyer's Hand* makes cogent points about New World landscapes and literature that can be applied to Avison's work. North American poetry, in Auden's view, derives some of its individuality and eccentricity from encounters with a very different natural world than Europe's. "Until quite recently," he noted, "an English writer, like one of any European country, could presuppose . . . a nature which was mythologized, humanized, on the whole friendly But . . . [neither] the size nor the condition nor the climate of the [North American] continent encourages such intimacy." *Always Now* begins with a poem, "The Prairie," that suggests a vast and lonely landscape. Avison's last poem in this book, in a redemptive progression, refers to "the beauty of the unused." But I do wonder if some of her constant references to "sky" arise partly from living in a relatively flat landscape in Ontario – if feeling like a tiny being in a country with such an enormous land mass makes her more aware of the vastness of that sky. And does she represent God so often as light and sun partly because she lives in a cold northern climate?

BN: But that makes my point doesn't it? About the poems being in service to a project, not a place? You'll concur in any case that Avison chose a different direction than many of her Canadian contemporaries of the sixties in the area of meter and rhyme. Margaret Atwood's *The Circle Game* (1966) was certainly as far as you could go from anything metered. Same with Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies*, which appeared in 1968.

Much of the time Avison's meter feels seamlessly worked in; you'll be reading a poem – apparently free verse – like "The Earth That Falls Away," and suddenly in Section IV will appear slant- and full-rhyming couplets in iambic tetrameter. That seems to be her preferred meter. I love what she does with it – the way it's used so regularly and then broken down and rearranged mimetically in "Thaw." Yet in some poems – the trimeter in "A Prayer Answered by Prayer," the pentameter in "Hiatus" – there's a stiffness to the meter that lacks momentum, perhaps because of the heavy end-stopping.

EP: Barb, I think you have a terrific ear, but at the moment I don't agree that this is a flaw. I think Avison is trying for a comic effect in "Hiatus," and the couplets are deftly done. They do have a somewhat plodding quality compared to the darting effects she achieves elsewhere in her verse. But I think this is mimetic: what's slower, more boring, more cumbersome than moving house, a process that involves many clumsy maneuvers, stops and starts? And the enjambment in the last two lines of "Prayer" – "burn/me" – strikes me as a meaningful contrast to the more conventional line endings elsewhere.

BN: I suppose I so admire what she does with enjambment in poems like "Thaw" and the sonnets that I have too high expectations for these others. I am disappointed by the lulls I hear at the ends of lines in both "Hiatus" and "A Prayer Answered by Prayer." I also miss the subtlety and energy of slant rhyme, and find rhyming pairs like "sleeve" and "believe" without enjambment somewhat staid and predictable. Anyway, it seems that

Avison's characteristic brambles and tangled paradoxes are most successful when she's writing in meter.

EP: I see very meticulous construction in every poem in this book, though – I think she did make all her formal decisions carefully.

BN: Careful construction, yes, but let go of regular meter in, say, a poem like “Our Working Day Be Menaced” – still controlled but in a less formal way – and all the deeply intelligent, original thematic and imagistic content tends to spin off in too many directions at once. And so the work, although important and even filled with a dense music, becomes more of a slog than a satisfying whole to savour. One always has to dig in, again and again, in Avison's poems – but I'd rather do this with a paddle in a canoe, and feel I'm getting somewhere, than inch hopelessly through the mire. Then again, there are cryptic poems accomplished with astonishing technical virtuosity, like the cluster of sonnets in *Winter Sun!* Listen to the opening of “Butterfly Bones: Sonnet Against Sonnets”:

The cyanide jar seals life, as sonnets move
toward final stiffness. Cased in a white glare
these specimens stare for peering boys, to prove
strange certainties. Plane dogsled and safari
assure continuing range.

Syntactically interesting is the second sentence beginning with a verb, then arranged strangely so that “prove” is at the end of the line. I like the way she enjambes with strong verbs, to get us around the corner to the next line. You know, I hadn't noticed the innovative rhyme of “glare”/“safari” until just now.

EP: She seems to me to be a master of slant and internal rhymes. And in “Hiatus,” for example, she shows her skill with comic rhymes. She did her MA thesis on Byron and I see playful pairings there that remind me of some of his ingenuities, e.g. “see to” with “veto.” Her use of sound is so often tutelary. In “Prelude” she has a line about how sparrows “alike instruct, distract,” where the likeness and difference between the two words embody the paradoxically similar and [p. 36] disparate things the sparrows are doing.

BN: There's a wonderful rhyme in “Branches,” one of the religious poems from *The Dumbfounding*: “Hanging the cherried heart of love/on this world's charring bough.” In “cherried”/“charring,” she embodies the paradox of Christ's life in death in a rhyme that ties images of death (charring) to life (cherried) so closely that all is meshed but the vowels, giving a kind of friction to the sound.

EP: What a marvelous observation! In Christian iconography, apparently cherries are often called the “fruit of Paradise.”

BN: I love the passage in “A Story” when she drops rhyming words like a handful of seeds, reflecting the parable of the sower that the poem is based on. It’s that idea of the canoe I was talking about earlier – alliterative and consonantal clusters like “woods”/“wild”/“wallet” and “sack”/“peck”/“stalk” will carry you forward if you do the work of “listening and making,” as Robert Hass would say.

EP: The originality of Avison’s rhymes and diction helps give her, I think, an individuality as pungent as Dickinson’s.

BN: I’m struck too by this pungency, the wonderful economy in so many of the poems as a result of one good verb doing the work of a whole lot of adjectives, nouns, even simile or metaphor. For example, in “Rich Boy’s Birthday Through a Window,” “The peaks sawtooth the Alberta noon.” Or she’ll turn a common adjective into a verb, as in “Stales the blown sky” in “Rigor Viris,” or the expected noun into the unpredictable verb, as in “rays his dry-socketed eyes.” Sometimes she’ll even make up a new verb and use it at the beginning of a line, as in “the sunset/blurges through rain,” the verb perhaps a combination of “surges” and “blur.” In “Mordent for a Melody,” she also invents “singing-day” and uses it as the last word in the poem, tying together images of singing, burning, and end times.

EP: One description I particularly like that makes original use of a verb is “the grainy dirt trickled with ants,” from “Prelude.”

BN: She also turns nouns into adjectives. I was surprised by one in “Apocalypitics” – “On gravel level, in the late basketball sunlight.” How is sunlight like a basketball? The section begins with the metaphor of the city as jungle gym, so for me the adjective “basketball” called up that quality of light on concrete and wire fencing, a basketball court in the inner city in the late afternoon. But there could be myriad interpretations – I think that’s what Avison wants. Then there is the Hopkins-esque use of hyphenated adjectives, sometimes as many as three in a row, as in these from “Lonely Lover” – “There is a musty smell of dear old nail-clasped thong-buckled/saddle-rubbed beautiful/Renaissance albums.” When she ties nouns to verbs and uses them as adjectives, the words not only become fresh with new combinations and contrasts, but do triple work.

EP: Avison has an illuminating essay called “The Muse of Danger” which presents a kind of ars poetica. In the following excerpt, you can see how the vigor and scrupulousness you just mentioned entered her poetry. “. . . A poet chooses to accept the full halo of values in the words he uses. He accepts the personal identity they reveal. He develops his sense of their echoes across developing centuries, the double or triple meanings, the suggestiveness of vowel-sound and rhythm. No potential effect of any word is irrelevant to the poem where it occurs Poetry is the whole-hearted use of language.”

BN: That’s a lovely idea – poetry as “whole-hearted.”

EP: Yes, and then there's the idea of a "whole-hearted" poet, a poet who has the perseverance to be experimental, to stay true to her gifts and to what she knows of the world. "Poetry is a great boon in testing honesty," she writes in that essay, and I don't think there's an unfelt line, a worked-up emotion, a false note in this book. There's also nothing formulaic about her work; when she says "poems share something of the mysterious timing of organic processes of growth," you know that her own poetry wended its way into being naturally. I get the feeling Avison's poems are pressured into shape the way diamonds are; they couldn't have emerged any other way. She is not mindlessly "productive," either. When she discusses devotional writing, she says something admonitory about revision, how even words "that rise from the deeps and hold the promise of communicative loveliness – how often they need revising, later on, before they are ready for others' eyes." And she insists that the labor of devotional writing includes refusing to be cloistered: the Christian writer "should accept poetic impulse from every area of experience." I imagine her walking Toronto continually noticing.

BN: In poem after poem she seems to be getting at a certain way of seeing – a way of seeing outside of the box, you might say. This is the idea she raises in "Snow" with "The optic heart must venture: a jail-break/And re-creation" and then follows up on in poems where we get to see the kinds of people who "jail-break." For example – in "Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes (in Prospect)" – those who "play jongleur/With mathematic signs." Playing jongleur with mathematic signs! Now that's a good way to sum up Avison's genius, don't you think?