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Davey, Elizabeth Ann. "A Kind of Perseverance": Margaret Avison's Poetry as Christian Witness." PhD., University of Wales, 2010.

**'A Kind of Perseverance':
Margaret Avison's Poetry as Christian Witness**

by

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In the University of Wales

April 2010

Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

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April 2010

ABSTRACT

The twentieth-century Canadian poet Margaret Avison is known both for her complex and difficult ‘metaphysical’ poetry and her deep commitment to her Christian faith. The call to spiritual attention implicit in her lyrics is anchored in her interpretation of the mandate in scripture to be Christ’s witnesses. She invokes the same biblical texts as traditional apologists with their language of defence, but she gives less emphasis to the juridical metaphor typically framing the discussion and offers an alternative model of Christian witness, albeit indirectly, in her dual roles as witness and poet. In chapter two, connections are established between the two independent activities of witness and poetry. Then the authoritative precedent for witness in the scripture is considered, particularly in Second Isaiah 40-55, Luke’s Gospel and Acts, and The Gospel of John. Two Johannine metaphors—‘Come and see’ (Jn. 1.39) and ‘Go and tell’ (Jn. 20.17)—provide the basis for the paradigm of invitation that defines Avison’s body of poems. The poet invites her readers to look deeply and from odd angles with her into the books of nature and human nature, the subjects of chapters three and four, and the book of the scriptures, the subject of chapter five. She seeks and finds and points to the hidden God paradoxically revealed and concealed, particularly in the person of the risen Christ. Chapter six is the corresponding response of telling—revealing what she calls the ‘mix of the resurrection life and marred everyday living’ in yet more necessary ambiguity and complexity. Readers who respond with understanding recognize both the distinctive mystery of poetic witness and the inherent mystery in Christ’s saving work to which it points. Her poetry is ultimately a training ground for a thoughtful, reflective and persevering Christian faith. In turn, it is a model to the missionary church in its invitational presentation of the good news of Christ.

Acknowledgements

In her Collected Poems, Margaret Avison has a lyric ‘To Joan’ which calls attention to the peculiar nature of acknowledgements:

The pulpit led a prayer:
“Thank God who brought us here”.

I prayed, “We couldn’t come unless
Joan came by car for us ...”

The closing stanza of her tribute begins, ‘The act of God is found / lovely for being through my friend ...’ (*AN* 2.242). I echo Avison’s sentiments as I think of the many people who contributed to these studies and my life during the years of working on this dissertation. Truly ‘the act of God is found / lovely for being through my friends’.

I thank my deans of Tyndale University College for their generous support. My friend President Brian Stiller is largely responsible for setting me on the course of doctoral studies after years of teaching. He frequently reminded me of his confidence in the worth of my project and matched his words with invaluable financial assistance.

‘The act of God is found lovely’ through my family and friends who entrusted me with their gifts of money. Among them are Earl and Marion Davey, Grace and James Davey, Elaine and Yung Gul Kim, Kristi and Tony Kong, Alvin and Sherrill Kroon, Paul and Helen Kroon, Tom and Karen McCullough, John Maury, Beverley and Lance Muir, Rob and Bonnie Parsons, and Mary Ellen and Steve Rowley. Their support signaled a belief in and underlying commitment to me that gave me impetus to complete what seemed at times an overwhelming project. I also acknowledge my appreciation to those connected with the T. Glendenning Hamilton Research Grant Program of The University of Manitoba who awarded a grant for archival research at The Elizabeth Dafoe Library.

For years my students have kept me inspired. Their enthusiasm and interest in my subject made some of the learning fun. We were students together in the stresses and joys of university life. Many people at Weston Park Baptist Church in Toronto, my

church community, where my husband is senior minister, were kindly supportive throughout this process. Week by week in these several years I have often been cheered by overtures of interest and questions about progress. The faculty and staff at The Oxford Centre for Mission Studies provided guidance, direction and assistance in navigating the British educational system. They introduced me to English hospitality with gestures of kindness, helping me feel at home in Oxford every summer for seven years.

Three scholars in particular were gifts to me in their unique approach to clarity and insight. Bernard Farr was a master of indirection with stimulating ideas and questions. His comments in seminars and general discussion at OCMS were often the unexpected word that untangled a knot for me in my thinking. My Canadian advisor David Kent was a model of thorough and careful scholarship, and his expertise on Avison was particularly helpful at various points throughout the process. My supervisor Haddon Willmer gave me much more than competent and insightful direction throughout the process. His rigorous questioning and gentle prodding taught me how to think and write about theology and poetry in ways I did not know I could. As he himself entered into and celebrated Avison's poetry, he helped me refine my intuitions about the merits of her work. I will always be grateful for this intense period of my life, in large degree to his coming along side me with his wisdom on my journey.

My family have been bright lights for me in their good humour, stimulating conversations, passion, and shared love of learning. My adult children Natalie, Rebecca and Simon each left their distinct mark on my reflections on Avison. I owe a particularly big debt to my parents-in-law, Grace and James Davey, who sacrificed in manifold ways to keep me on this path. Finally, my husband Alan consistently offered his support and steady love. In our long times apart each summer, while I was studying in Oxford, thinking about a poet's witness, my husband traveled to Bolivia, living out

the very passion that Avison's poetry embodies. With Avison, I say, '[H]elp me tell truth in this [who brought me here] / while praying thus' (*AN* 2.242).

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Notes About the Text

To reference the poems and lines from the poems throughout the thesis the following abbreviations will be used: *AN* will refer to the *Collected Poems: Always Now* with the appropriate volume number: 1, 2, or 3. *Always Now*, Vol. 1 contains the poems of *Winter Sun* and *The Dumbfounding*; Vol. 2 contains the poems of *sunblue* and *No Time*; Vol. 3 contains the poems of *Not Yet But Still* and *Concrete and Wild Carrot*. *MD* will refer to *Momentary Dark* and *L* will stand in for *Listening*. Hence, the first poem referenced ‘Rising Dust’ from *Concrete and Wild Carrot* will appear in the text as from *AN* 3.163-64 (*Always Now*, Vol. 3, pages 163-64). If the original edition is referenced for a particular reason, the following abbreviations will be employed: *WS* for *Winter Sun*, *D* for *The Dumbfounding*, *sb* for *sunblue*, *NT* for *No Time*, *SP* for *Selected Poems*, *NYBS* for *Not Yet But Still*, *CWC* for *Concrete and Wild Carrot*.

OED stands in for *Oxford English Dictionary*, on-line, 2008.

I am using the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, Anglicized edition, unless indicated in the text. Sometimes it is obvious Avison is using *The Authorized Version* of the Bible in a given poem; in which case, I follow suit and reference it as such.

As expected, there are a limited number of complete poems in the text proper of the thesis. I have only included ones that are either analyzed in detail or are very short. Since Margaret Avison’s poetry is not well known, this limitation can be problematic. To assist in familiarity I have placed in the Appendix additional poems particularly relevant to the discussion. They are arranged in the order they are discussed in sections of chapters in the document.

Occasionally I reference other Christian writers, particularly C. S. Lewis, who have similar sympathies with Avison's commitment to Christian witness. While I do not consider these comments tangential to the argument, I also do not want to distract from the focus on Avison's work. Hence, these references are placed in the text as footnotes to signal the parallels in Christian thinking.

Every attempt has been made to use British spelling, punctuation and capitalization except in the quoting of the actual poems and quotations using North American spelling. Furthermore, I have not altered capitalization in quotations. I am using gender-inclusive language; however, where the generic 'man' is used in a quotation, including Avison's poems, I retain the author's language.

To distinguish ellipses in Avison's poems, I bracket [] my own omissions from the text and leave Avison's ellipses unmarked. In all other prose references, including Avison's, the ellipses indicate my variations from the complete text unless indicated.

Introduction

My first exposure to the lyrics of the Christian poet Margaret Avison was in the 1970s when I moved to Canada from the United States. One of my early teaching assignments at Tyndale University College was a course in Canadian literature, a field with a large body of texts about which I knew very little. I read a small selection of Avison's strange and difficult poems in *The Oxford Anthology of Canadian Verse* and admired her immediately for her sophisticated and intellectual verse, applauding her as a defender and promoter of the Christian faith in the highly secularized world of the Canadian academy. At the same time, I set her work aside for the same reason I admired it—that is, its complexity and difficulty.

There is another connection of which I was unaware. That first year in Toronto, my husband and I attended Knox Presbyterian Church, the large university church on Spadina Avenue. Unbeknownst to me, this was Avison's church as well, illustrative of her invisibility in that context as a prominent published poet. While enjoying the quiet recognition of select sensitive and thoughtful readers who recognized her worth as a writer, she was appreciated more as a vital force in the church community for her passion for evangelism and outreach, not my focus at the time. This curious irony probably delayed our acquaintance.

Years later, I intended to study her poetry from the angle of a woman's voice speaking from the margins—of both society and Church. Why, for instance, I wondered, was she so invisible in the Church with her intelligence, giftedness and spiritual sensitivity? However, the topic and the person did not fit. Gender was not the driving force of her poetry, and I decided I was making a mistake to go down that track. More fundamental was her deep sense of calling as a witness to Jesus Christ. Therefore, I embarked on this project to explore how this passion is realized in her poetry. My understanding was relatively circumscribed as I saw Christian witness as a process of

introducing and defending Jesus Christ to those who have not embraced the good news.

I anticipated cheering from the sidelines this modern and unusual champion of the faith who ably defends the claims of the gospel in my sphere of activity and interest. This understanding, in part, remains true. But in the slow process of unpacking the meaning of complex and dense lyrics, I learned and now know her witness to Christ and for Christ to be much larger. The poetry has been, in fact, a profound witness to me, a Christian reader, as well. Margaret Avison has become a spiritual mentor, calling me to a corresponding life of witness and service, much more mysterious and reflective than I have known before, the outlines of which emerge in the pages that follow.

In the posthumous collection *Listening*, the poem ‘Witnesses’ (L 36-37) introduces the poet’s complex method of accessing Christian witness, starting the process of re-directing assumptions about the most basic of attitudes and action.

Witnesses

How could the runners-after the crowds running ahead, how could any of them have known they'd find themselves there? I.e., at the hangman's side? No, *on* it? One by one in the exhausted afterwards, fidgeting, miserable, at home, each had to find himself immured with the undeservedly dead, for good.

What's "good"?
Springtime? The cat just
brought me a chewed
fledgling, his love-token.
the afterward
is a forever never knowing how
the cords of who and what we are
entwined and twisted so. I am

implicit in a levigating of the inconvenient scree, grinding it down with the promise diversely given all of us.

Giver, I know now, anyone's
survival is to be on
Your side. If it is
not too late, may the many
be there, not to be eased, but to learn how

losing is not
negation. Oh it *is* that, but
inside-out, under the
merciful down-side-up of,
for example, sky. (L 36-37)

From the outset of the poem Avison establishes the focus of the witness on another—in this case, ‘the undeservedly dead’, identified more clearly in the last stanza as ‘Giver’. The event of Christ’s crucifixion is suggested in the details of the opening stanza. At the same time, the witnesses are named as ‘crowds running ahead’ and ‘runners-after the crowds’—people unclear in both motive and action. They think they are ‘at the hangman’s side’ but the preposition necessarily shifts to ‘on’ [the hangman’s side]. When they leave the scene they are no longer part of the crowd, but individuals, carrying their own consequences: ‘One by / one in the exhausted / afterwards, fidgeting, miserable’—unsurprising reactions to the profound experience. The surprise is in the closing lines, as each witness

had to find him-
self immured with the
undeservedly dead, for good.

The connection with the event and the person is permanent, it seems.

The next stanza introduces familiar wordplay and double-meaning, requiring the reader to revisit the first stanza. ‘What’s “good”?’ Furthermore, in the puzzling images of the second and third stanzas there is a parallel word with ‘immured’—‘implicit’. Avison suggests two pictures of inadvertent destruction—of the ‘undeservedly dead’—the dead bird killed by the cat. The bird was ‘[the cat’s] love-token’; the cat by his nature has been on the side of the hangman. The next stanza suggests ‘I am / implicit’ in the grinding down to powder of the ‘inconvenient scree’¹ of a mountainside. The reason is unclear but ‘the promise di- / versely given all of us’ could be the creation mandate to ‘subdue the earth and have dominion’ over its creatures (Ge. 1.28). This ‘dominion’ has

¹ ‘Levigate’ means ‘to reduce to a fine powder; to rub down’ (OED); A ‘scree’ is ‘material composing a slope’ ... the ‘mass of detritus forming a precipitous stony slope upon a mountain side’ (OED).

in reality meant in many ways ‘destruction’, not unlike the cat’s killing of the bird.

People are on the hangman’s side just by being who they are:

the afterward
is a forever never knowing how
the cords of who and what we are
entwined and twisted so.

The closing stanza transforms the witness who looks to the cross and the crucified One with repentance and hope:

Giver, I know now, anyone’s
survival is to be on
Your side.

Being ‘immured with the / undeservedly dead’ now seems ‘good’—in its several meanings of mixed blessing. Furthermore, the witness wants others to join in the seeing. ‘May the many’, ‘the crowds’, turn and look, ‘not to be eased’, but to learn the spiritual principle of not saving one’s life to lose it but losing one’s life to save it (Mk. 8.35).²

This is ‘the inside-out’ paradoxical way the gospel works. When Avison explores what it means to be witnesses in her poetry she invites the reader to read the ‘script of the text’³ with her—to share in the experience of ‘the most intimate of poetic forms’.⁴ The invitation cannot be taken lightly, because she deals with painful matters of the heart that take a lifetime of perseverance to work out. ‘Losing is not / negation’, she muses, and then backtracks,

... Oh it *is* that, but
inside-out, under the
merciful down-side-up of,
for example, sky. (L 36-37)

The music of the poetry combines with the puzzling language reversal ‘down-side-up’, softening any sense of awkwardness in the enjambment of the closing lines and offering a startling picture of grace.

² The principle is in all three of the Synoptic gospels (Mt. 16.25, Mk. 8.35 and Lk. 9.24), but Mark particularly reinforces the theme as it has to do with witness: ‘For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it’ (8.35).

³ This is Helen Vendler’s particular phrasing, providing a distinct perspective on lyric poetry: ‘A lyric poem is a script for a performance by its reader. It is, then, the most intimate of genres, constructing a twinship between writer and reader’ (Vendler, 2010a:xl).

⁴ Vendler, 2010a:xl.

This project is an exploration of what the poet calls ‘a kind of perseverance’—her obedient and deliberate response to the biblical mandate of Christ’s disciples to be his witnesses as particularly evidenced in the poems she has published. While I see her anchored in the Western literary tradition, my engagement with both her poetry and her avowed witness does not attempt to situate her in the literary corpus of English poetry. Earlier critics and literary historians whom I cite in chapter one have already established her contribution to modern English Canadian letters. While I make frequent mention of Christian poets, such as George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins and T. S. Eliot, whose influence on her seems obvious, my focus is not an extended comparison with any of them. Though I frequently refer to earlier and later poems in her collection and suggest shifts in her thinking, this exploration is not particularly a study of her development as a poet. I take seriously her context in my discussion; at the same time, I am not taking either a psychological or developmental or historical approach to her poetry. I am not ‘doing’ philosophy or theology in any formal systematic way though I refer to both in the construction of my argument. Rather, I am offering a close reading of her difficult lyrics to call attention to her singular accomplishment of providing a particular space where different kinds of thinking can take place—where the theological and biblical merge with the poetic, producing a compelling witness to the Christian faith. In that process of reading, however, I inevitably call attention to the reader’s participation in completing the meaning of the text.

As such, this exploration can be identified as an exercise in critical poetics rather than hermeneutics, a distinction Jonathan Culler articulates in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. ‘Poetics’, Culler explains, ‘starts with attested meanings or effects and asks how they are achieved ... Hermeneutics, on the other hand, starts with texts and asks what they mean, seeking to discover new and better interpretations’ (1997:58).⁵

⁵ Culler intimates his preference for the modern tradition of criticism which ‘has overwhelmingly taken the second [i.e. the hermeneutic approach], making the interpretation of individual works the payoff of

Importantly, he qualifies the method of critics in actual practice. In spite of fundamental differences in purpose of analysis,

works of literary criticism often combine poetics and hermeneutics, asking how a particular effect is achieved or why an ending seems right (both matters of poetics), but also asking what a particular line means and what a poem tells us about the human condition (hermeneutics). (1997:58)

This combination can be fluid and almost invisible in a close reading.

My approach to Avison's work initially hearkens back to the formalist criticism of the American New Critics,⁶ literary analysis that specializes in the lyric poem. As a practitioner in a literature classroom, I echo Leland Ryken's assertion that '[n]o matter what else teachers of literature do, they interact with literary texts in terms of the categories bequeathed by formalist criticism' (1991:1). The clarity of focus on a close reading of the work itself, sometimes designated as 'the decontextualised approach to literature' (Barry, 2002:30), assists in initial interpretation of difficult poems. Tools of analysis foreground an emphasis on the distinctiveness of poetic language. The familiar contrasts of 'concrete rather than abstract language, image rather than concept, imagination rather than intellect' as vehicles for knowledge emphasized in practical criticism provide direction for my argument (Ryken, 1991:3).⁷ When Ryken speaks of 'care lavish[ed] on written texts' with a concomitant response of humility (1991:18), this interpretive strategy seems particularly apropos for the lyrics of a poet who demonstrates her own meticulous and humble preoccupation with her craft. Furthermore, as Ryken emphasizes, 'this reverence before a literary text' is particularly congruent with a poet such as Avison

who accept[s] the Bible as an authoritative repository of truth and are therefore committed to the principle that language can be trusted to convey understandable meaning. Christianity is a religion in which the word has a special sanctity. Openness to receive what the Bible has to

⁶ literary study' (1997:58). Theorists and writers about theory such as Culler and Terry Eagleton (*Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 1983) are persuasive and colourful in their skeptical articulations. Valentine Cunningham's *Reading After Theory* (2002) and *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, edited by Clarence Walhout and Leland Ryken (1991), offer alternative readings.

⁷ New Criticism, the ascendant theory in the 1940s-1960s in the States, is parallel to 'practical criticism', the norm in Britain 'from the 1930s to the 1970s' (Barry, 2002:30), included under the broad umbrella of 'liberal humanism'. Barry denotes it as 'theory before "theory"' in his *Beginning Theory* (2002:ch.1).

⁷ I am aware of but not convinced by current theory that challenges this distinction.

say instead of imposing one's own meanings on it has been at least the theoretic aim of many segments of Christianity through the centuries. (Ryken, 1991:18)

Her commitment to the scriptural text invites a similar perspective from a sympathetic reader and critic.

While the close reading of the text is my primary method, it does not preclude other interpretive perspectives. There are limitations to New Critical readings of the text that, for one, ignores contextual contributions to the poem. Second, an exclusive insistence on the autonomous text limits understanding of the poem. It becomes merely a 'well wrought urn'⁸—a piece of art, creating a disconnection with my central theme of witness. Witness by its nature involves more than aesthetics. Therefore, I part company with formalist critics when I acknowledge assumptions embedded in my research question. I am finally not viewing Avison's poems as 'isolated aesthetic product[s]' (Vander Weele 1991:141), but as texts involved in communication. Throughout the thesis the question regarding Avison's poetry as Christian witness directing the close reading is one more akin to rhetoric and communication. As a result, as Culler suggests earlier, I combine poetics and hermeneutics.

The interpretive language that reader-response or reader-reception theorists employ, such as 'literary transaction', 'horizon of expectations' and 'gaps' in the text, naturally emerge when a poet suggests that one 'come and see', part of the proposed model present in Avison's writing.⁹ M. H. Abrams explains one possible paradigm that fits this reading of her poems: 'The experience of reading is an evolving process of anticipation, frustration, retrospection, reconstruction, and satisfaction' (Abrams,

⁸ The phrase comes from the book *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947) by Cleanth Brooks, whose title, in turn, derives from both Donne's poem 'The Canonization' and Keats's poem 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. It is a seminal work for New Criticism.

⁹ Theorists such as Jauss, Iser and Rosenblatt lend their support to my interest in the 'literary transaction', as Rosenblatt speaks of the reading process, between text and reader (Vander Weele, 1991:140). Perhaps Rosenblatt is correct to view a poem as 'what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text' (Murfin and Ray, 1998:322). In contrast to the formalist's spatial view of a text, Stanley Fish emphasizes reading as a temporal process (Abrams, 1999:258-59). Iser's observation of gaps in a text that need to be filled (Vander Weele, 1991: 137) seems particularly apt in interpreting poetry, prone as it is to blank space on a page. It is work to be performed by readers.

1999:257). Focusing on the act of reading—the mental and emotional activity engaged in receiving the poetic text—can lead to the answer to my question about witness. Further, an engagement with reader-response criticism and texts re-opens the gate to both the context of the work and the context of the reader. Assumptions can be freely acknowledged. Roger Lundin refers to Paul Ricoeur's work when he concludes:

The Cartesian claim of a radical new beginning is belied by the fact that all of our thinking is rooted in language which is saturated with the history of human shame and glory. When we pick up a word in order to use it to express our individual meaning, that word is already charged with a history of significance ... [Quoting Ricoeur] "There is no philosophy without presuppositions". (Lundin, 1991:160)

A false sense of detachment and unbiased and objective reading is named for what it is, allowing for more integrity in the proposed interpretations.

The close reading of the text of individual poems is integrated throughout this study with a view toward the collection as a whole. I identify the assumptions implicit in the text and in the larger body of Avison's work and the context of her recorded life experiences shaping her view of the world. Then I explore the assumptions of her implied and real readers as I interact with secondary critical material throughout the project. As Lundin interprets Gadamer, '[U]nderstanding is a form of dialogue in which the horizon of our prejudices is fused with that of the text we are reading ... as we both attend to the object or truth in question' (Lundin, 1991:162). Hence, I explore the question of Avison's poetry as witness of or to what (or the assumption, Whom) to whom through what means—and giving, in sum, a rhetorical rather than aesthetic emphasis to this project, modifying the close readings.

In chapter one, I introduce Margaret Avison as a recognized national poet in Canada with multiple volumes of lyrics to her credit and as a Christian who self-identifies another vocation as Christian witness. I begin near the end of her life with one of the poems read for the Griffin Poetry Prize which reveals both her poetic skill and her religious faith embedded in her lyrics. Following is an overview of her poetry publications and a selection of critics' commendations, including their recognition of

her distinctive Christian voice. Her biographical data is framed in terms of her twin vocations as witness and poet, detailing her developing understanding of their intersection. This entangled nature of witness and poetry raises a double-pronged problem for the reader, challenging assumptions about both: On one hand, how can her difficult poetry be witness in the effort required to understand it? On the other, might its Christian witness diminish its appeal as poetry to modern readers? To start the process of addressing these questions, the chapter concludes by reiterating the poet's particular and compelling call to spiritual attention in her complex lyrics already suggested in the discussion of 'Rising Dust' with which the chapter begins.

The call to spiritual and theological attention implicit in Avison's poetry suggested in chapter one is anchored in her interpretation of the mandate in scripture to be Christ's witnesses. She invokes the same biblical texts as traditional apologists do with their language of defence, but she gives less emphasis to the juridical metaphor framing the discussion. In her declaration of her dual vocations she offers an alternative model of Christian witness, albeit indirectly. Her poetry is invitational rather than defensive in its witness—i.e., 'without weapons' (Hauerwas, 2002:150),¹⁰ a model I am exploring in this thesis. In chapter two I look at connections that can be established between the two independent activities of witness and poetry, especially as the poet intertwines the two. Then I turn to the scriptures to locate the witness in authoritative precedent—the witness in the activities of the Lukan narrative of his Gospel and Acts of the Apostles and the witness declared about and to Second Isaiah's exiles. Finally, I turn to two Johannine metaphors which provide a paradigm for understanding Avison's poetry as witness.

¹⁰ In his chapter 'The Witness That Was Karl Barth', Hauerwas explains the influence of 'the theological teacher of [Barth's] student years', Wilhelm Herrmann, on Karl Barth. Tucked in a footnote, Hauerwas draws on Barth's comments on Hermann's view 'that apologetics is a subordinate and temporary activity destined to vanish' (2002:150). "Knowledge of God is the expression of religious experience wholly without weapons" is Hermann's observation that Barth incorporates into his own thinking (Barth, *Theology and Church* 248).

The poet's lyrics are simultaneously clarifying and concealing in their complexity, ambiguity and riddling playfulness. They are fraught with challenge both for the reader inclined to Christian belief and to the one opposed. The 'method' of witness in her poems is redolent of Jesus's words in the opening scenes of John's Gospel, 'Come and see' (Jn. 1.39), inviting her readers to look deeply and meticulously and from odd angles with her as she looks into the book of nature and human nature, my theme in chapters three and four, and the book of the scriptures, the subject of chapter five. Avison seeks and finds the hidden God paradoxically revealed and concealed, particularly in the person of the risen Christ.

Her poetry, reflecting her own persevering faith experience, is an obedient response to the risen Christ's directive to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb, 'Go and tell' ('Go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father ..."' (Jn. 20.17). In chapter six, I speak of the accompaniment of seeing with an unabashed telling, no matter how veiled the language appears to be. In her own words, 'The poet writes as a mix of the resurrection life and marred everyday living' (Letter, 5 Oct. 2001).

Chapter 1: ‘With or Against the Grain?’: Avison’s Poetry as Christian Witness

Unclasp my heart
from my own cramped story
to new, in-threading light, a start
towards searching out your glory.
(‘The Freeing’ *AN* 2.227)

In the summer of 2003, in Toronto, the Canadian poet Margaret Avison shared the stage with the Irish poet Paul Muldoon in winning the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize, the richest poetry prize in the world for a single volume of poetry. The Canadian selection was a slender collection of poems *Concrete and Wild Carrot*, then her most recent volume. Since that event, the three volumes of her *Collected Poems: Always Now* (2003, 2004, 2005), *Momentary Dark* (2006), and an unanticipated posthumous collection *Listening* (2009) have been released. The title of *Concrete and Wild Carrot* suggests a kind of comfortable familiarity with the subject matter—a book about the city and its citizens, the weather, the seasons and nature’s particulars as observed in the urban setting. The publisher’s jacket blurb exudes enthusiasm for poems ‘startlingly youthful’ and ‘words leap[ing] with life’ (*CWC*). Sprinkled throughout the collection of a mere 35 poems are several overt, unabashed Christian poems (‘surprising probes of the Bible’ *CWC*)—natural expressions of one who had committed her adult life to regular Bible study, church attendance, and deliberate, reflective Christian living. The poet speaks here in this volume of poetry as she has consistently written—as a ‘wise old woman’, with unusual spiritual insight. In the words of David Jeffrey, ‘Despite the centrality of her religious vision, she seems less a mystic than a sage, and her poetry less lyric than gnomic’ (1987:59).

Accolades that accompanied her award include the judges’ citation that ‘Avison’s *Concrete and Wild Carrot* is an occasion of beauty’.¹ They go on to say:

¹ The comments are specifically explained in the context of Alfred North Whitehead’s definition of beauty as “‘a quality which finds its exemplification in actual occasions,’” and ‘more completely exemplified in “imperfection and discord” than in the “perfection of harmony”’ (Judges’ Citation, http://www.griffinpoetryprize.com/shortlist_2003), perhaps revealing as much about the judges as the poems, and illustrating a facet of witness that calls for response.

Avison's poetry is also alive in its sublimity and its humility: "wonder, readiness, simplicity"—the gifts of perception Avison attributes to her Christian faith—imbue every poem in this book with a rare spirit of disorderly love. Margaret Avison is a national treasure. For many decades she has forged a way to write, against the grain, some of the most humane, sweet and profound poetry of our time. (Judges' Citation)

These commendations are obviously deliberate and thoughtful, reflecting a commitment to craft and vision inherent in the making of a poem. Sharon Thesen, one of the judges and editor of *The Griffin Poetry Prize Anthology*, including the poetry of each of the short-listed poets for 2003, explains some of the criteria for excellence in her introduction to the anthology, speaking of 'the range and flexibility of poetic voice—diction that prefers, despite many temptations, the sovereignty of language to anything else, and which, at its best, evinces the uncanny ability to show reality to itself' (*Anthology 2003*). In her enthusiasm, Thesen is overstating any poet's achievements to 'prefer ... the sovereignty of language'; Avison more modestly suggests the 'whole-hearted use of language' (1968b:35). However, what is clear, in selecting her as the recipient of the Griffin prize, the judges have noted her consummate facility with words and perceptive understanding of 'reality'.

At the same time, Avison's 'humane, sweet and profound poetry' accomplishes something more mysterious and hidden with that familiar metaphor 'writing against the grain' employed by the judges of her verse. In a cultural and literary environment wary of religious sentiment and expression, she is a peculiar figure, garnering acknowledgement and respect—sometimes in spite of her profession of Christian faith, but more often in quiet and bemused recognition of the power of her distinctive words of witness. In the critics' words of praise there are echoes, albeit faint and barely audible, of King Agrippa's exclamation to St. Paul: 'Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?' (Acts 26.28).

The night before the award was presented Avison participated with the short-listed finalists in a poetry reading at Toronto's Harbourfront. There she read several poems from *Concrete and Wild Carrot* before a crowd of more than 500 people. Two of

her selections were ‘Christian’ in content. The more veiled of the two, ‘Rising Dust’ (*AN* 3.163-64), was preserved on podcast, available for viewing and listening on the internet.²

Rising Dust

The physiologist says I am well over
half water.
I feel, look, solid; am
though leaky firm.
Yet I am composed
largely of water.
How the composer turned us out
this way, even the learned few do not
explain. That’s life.

And we’re in need of
more water, over and over, repeatedly
thirsty, and unclean.

The body of this earth
has water under it and
over, from
where the long winds sough
tirelessly over water, or shriek around
curved distances of ice.

Sky and earth invisibly
breathe skyfuls of
water, visible when it
finds its own level.

Even in me?
Kin to waterfalls
and glacial lakes and sloughs
and all that flows and surges,
yet I go steadily,
or without distillation climb at will
(until a dissolution
nobody anticipates).

I’m something else besides.
The biochemist does not
concern himself with this.
It too seems substance,
a vital bond threaded on an
as-if loom out there.
The strand within
thrums and shudders and twists.
It cleaves to this
colour or texture and
singles out to a rhythm
almost its own, again,
anticipating design.

But never any of us
physiologist or fisherman

²http://www.griffinpoetryprize.com/shortlist_2003

or I

quite makes sense of it. We
find our own level

as prairie, auburn or
snow-streaming, sounds forever
the almost limitless.

The poem presents vintage Avison, providing a good starting point for understanding both the poet and the witness of her lyrics as she engages the reader/listener in an intellectual and spiritual quest. This journey on which she takes her audience is not at all easy. As one critic remarks, her lyrics are ‘famously tangled, knotted and textured—so much so that one experiences the thrill of revelation each time the code of a poem is cracked’ (Heft, 2003:41).³ His insight is crucial to emphasize. The brooding and reflective exercise of thinking long and hard about words, of reading and re-reading, of circling back and forth around a poem with that resulting ‘thrill of revelation’ holds a key to apprehending Avison’s particularly engaging Christian witness.

To begin, the title and opening lines of the poem are shrouded in ambiguity and uncertainty with the obvious disconnect between the title, ‘Rising Dust’, and its apparent subject, water. The initial factual proposition, ‘The physiologist says I am well over / half water’, is humorously challenged by some contradictory experience: ‘I feel, look, solid; am / though leaky firm’. What the speaker ‘sees’ is not all that she sees. Avison’s poetic use of enjambment, with ‘am’ left dangling at the end of a line, vaguely echoes Descartes’ famous philosophical declaration *cogito, ergo sum*, ‘I think, therefore I am’. The witness posture is announced in these opening lines, as well, since the poet’s use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ is not particularly personal. This is not a confessional poem; it is not self-reflexive. It is the observer ‘I’ seeing and pointing. ‘I am composed / largely of water’ soon points to a ‘composer [who] turned us out / this way’,⁴ but the

³ ‘and the truth of the thing, like the meat of the proverbial tough nut, may finally be enjoyed’ (Heft, 2003:41).

⁴ C. S. Lewis develops a similar same argument in *Mere Christianity*: The idea of a moral law assumes a law-giver. See particularly the chapter ‘We Have Cause to Be Uneasy’ (2001:28-32).

careful word choice disarms challenge of premature religious implication. The word ‘compose’ is richly ambiguous, allowing for broader interpretation in the creative process; further, ‘compose’ invites connection with music and artistry in the making. Nevertheless, the poet ends the stanza with the assertion ‘[E]ven the learned few’—the physiologists?—cannot explain how this came to be; she is in a realm beyond physical science.

The next short stanza suggests two functions of water—satisfying thirst and repairing uncleanness, both basic physical needs with potential metaphorical significance. The following two stanzas enlarge the discussion by replacing the personal ‘body’ as subject with ‘the body of this earth’. Sometimes water and world mix in highly visible and dramatic form, the poet muses:

from
where the long winds sough
tirelessly over water, or shriek around
curved distances of ice.

Other times ‘[s]ky and earth invisibly / breathe skyfuls of water’ similar to human bodies until ‘it [water] / finds its own level’.

At mid point in the first line of the fifth stanza, Avison visually signals her method of reading text—whether verbal or visual—with a question mark: ‘Even in me?’ She connects the idea of the persona’s body and the body of sky and earth, but also the repeated phrase ‘finds its own level’. Persons and their world are related. More and more threads are untangling in this stanza as the flowing and surging waters of the earth are compared to the speaker’s observation of herself. She too, ‘well over / half water’ is ‘[k]in to waterfalls / and glacial lakes and sloughs’. ‘I go steadily’, ‘climb[ing] at will’, she recognizes. Those alliterative words ‘distillation’ (‘the action of falling or flowing down drop by drop’ OED) and ‘dissolution’ (‘the action of dissolving, disintegration, decomposition’ OED) start creating links between water and dust. Further, ‘go steadily’ and ‘climb’ connect with the title’s first word ‘rising’. The parentheses around ‘a

dissolution / nobody anticipates' signal an important event that could have been overlooked.

The mood changes again in the sixth stanza, suggesting a shift in the argument.

I'm something else besides.
The biochemist does not
concern himself with this,

the speaker muses. 'It too seems substance'. This 'something else' is harder to explain because it cannot be named, but only be identified by analogy and metaphor: It *seems* substance—'a strand, a vital bond; threaded on / an *as-if* loom'. Activities such as 'thrumming' and 'shuddering' and 'twisting' and 'cleaving' and 'singles out to a rhythm' ensure its reality. 'The something else' is vaguely reminiscent of George Herbert's more familiar poem 'The Pulley', where personal restlessness functions like a connective chain, an instrument of drawing the created upwards to the Creator.

The last two short stanzas circle back to the beginning of the poem pointing to some possible allusions. Initially the poet's sense of alliteration may have suggested the juxtaposition of 'fisherman' with 'physiologist', drawing attention to the common but distinct interest in water between observer and participant. But the phrase may be taken further as it evokes association with Jesus's first disciples, the early witnesses, called from their vocation of fishing and becoming 'fishers of people' (Lk. 5.10), pointing to the biblical text. In light of the scriptures, other phrases take on new connotations. There is a parallel observation, 'We / find our own level', with the earlier reference to the 'skyfuls of water, visible when it / finds its own level'. 'Rising dust' of the title could be referring to the second account of Creation recorded in Genesis: 'Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being' (Ge. 2.7). Preceding these words in the Bible is a relatively detailed account of God's interest in the matter of watering the earth: 'For the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth ... but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground' (Ge. 2.5-6). There is also the

corresponding sad sequence after the Fall when God announces the judgement on Adam: ‘... until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return’ (Ge. 3.19).

Once in the biblical text echoes of water and dust expand. The

need of
more water, over and over, repeatedly
thirsty, and unclean

has resonances of Isaiah’s invitation: ‘Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters’ (Isa. 55.1), echoed by Jesus’s declaration, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink’ (Jn. 7.37) and Jesus’s promise to the woman of Samaria that ‘those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty’ (Jn. 4.14). The word ‘unclean’ suggests David’s plea for God’s mercy in his psalm of penitence: ‘Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity ... wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow’ (Ps. 51.2, 7). The ‘something else’ of that sixth stanza could be ‘that breath of life’ that God breathed into Adam’s nostrils, making him a living being (Ge. 2.7)—the miracle unaccounted for by the explanations of natural science. It seems that Avison’s ‘vital bond / threaded on an / as-if loom’ and ‘the strand within / thrum[ming]’ and ‘shudder[ing] and twist[ing]’ could be the invisible means of raising a person to new life out of dust.

While the extent to which allusions can be attached to specific references in the larger text of the scriptures remains tentative, as I hypothesize above, her suggestive pointing to the Bible’s words is the essential issue. Avison is not demanding assent to Christian belief; she is inviting exploration and opening dialogue in her subtle and imaginative formulations. They are not rhetorical postures to persuade; they are poems to experience with her. In writing lyrics she is taking what she knows is a risk.

In her essay ‘Muse of Danger’ on the subject of Christian witness, she asserts, ‘The practice of poetry is as dangerous as this next hour of life, whoever you are. Yet its advantages are great’ (1968b:35). Here in ‘Rising Dust’ (*AN* 3.163-64) she declares the

result of inevitable choices: ‘We / find our own level’, as if she has the definitive statement on human decision; at the same time she dismantles her confident assertion with no end-stop punctuation. There is still another three-line stanza. The stanza break delays the completion of the idea with ‘as prairie [...] sounds forever / the almost limitless’. Or putting it another way, ‘How can we catch the illimitable in our little bottles?’ she queries in her Pascal Lectures (1994b:64-65). Here is one danger of the muse for both poet and audience with the inevitable surprise in revelation. God is both hidden and larger than the poet’s explanation, and she knows this.

There are inherent beauties –
crystalline structures under microscopes –
hidden in cliffs and canyons from our glance who
pick our way along there,

she observes in one of her meditations on Christ’s passion, ‘Thoughts on Maundy Thursday’ (AN 2.213-14). The analogy deepens as she meditates further on Christ’s actions:

more intricate structures
are hidden still till the magnification
comes, in glory.

The Composer of physical and spiritual life—both the world and the humans who inhabit it—outstrips the composer of poems, but her task is to keep pointing towards the One who inhabits her words.

The audience at the Harbourfront Reading chuckled lightly as the poet read the opening lines of the poem; then they grew quiet and thoughtful as they strained to absorb the subtle observation of finding one’s ‘own level’. Undoubtedly any allusive complexity and even the basic argument was probably not absorbed on first hearing, but the music of the phrases, the curious blend of sound and sense, the provocative mixture of idea and image of the poetry sustained the attention and certainly invited a later reading and reflection. Earlier readers of the poem (including the judges) had already found themselves gently judged by the text when they recognized her ‘writing against the grain’.

Margaret Avison (1918-2007) has been in and out of the literary public eye throughout the years of her writing career, earning her reputation as an outstanding poet with a relatively small body of published poems. Individual poems and clusters of poems have appeared in a variety of journals, beginning in the 1930s: among them, *The University of Toronto's student publication Acta Victoriana; Contemporary Verse; The Canadian Forum; Poetry* [Chicago]; and *Kenyon Review*. Besides A. J. M. Smith's seminal *The Book of Canadian Poetry: A Critical and Historical Anthology* (1943), other major anthologies have published Avison's poems, including *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse* (1958); *Poetry of Mid-Century 1940-1960* (1964); *20th Century Poetry & Poetics* (Geddes, 1969); *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (1973); *The Oxford Anthology of Canadian Literature* (1973); *The Harper Anthology of Poetry* (1981); *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse: In English* (1983); *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (2002).

Her first published volume of poems *Winter Sun* won the Canada General Governor's Award for poetry in 1960. Her second volume *The Dumbfounding* was published in 1966; *sunblue* in 1978; in 1982, *Winter Sun/The Dumbfounding: Poems, 1940-66*. In 1989, she again won the Canada General Governor's Award for poetry for *No Time*. In 1991, *Selected Poems* was published; in 1997, *Not Yet But Still*, and in 2002, *Concrete and Wild Carrot* for which she received *The Griffin Poetry Prize* in 2003. Her *Collected Poems: Always Now*, released in three volumes in 2003, 2004 and 2005, include the poems of the earlier volumes, a significant number of poems that appeared elsewhere in miscellaneous journals and anthologies and 'Two Towards Tomorrow: New Poems' (AN 3.183-209). *Momentary Dark* in 2006, her final volume before her death, came as a bit of a surprise when it seemed she had concluded her

writing with the *Collected Poems*.⁵ Yet again in 2009, *Listening*, a posthumous collection, prepared for publication by Stan Dragland and Joan Eichner, was released.

It is difficult to give an accurate count of her poems since there has been some shifting of poems between collections and eliminating of some that were previously published but now pulled from her *Collected Poems*. Nevertheless, one can establish some idea of her productivity: In the three volumes of *Always Now* and *Momentary Dark* and *Listening* there are 678 poems plus three translations of Hungarian poems. Furthermore, she has been a more prolific poet than her published work indicates. For one, individual occasional poems sent to admirers and friends continue to surface. Second, the Avison Collection at the University of Manitoba contains many hundreds of unpublished poems—not of publishable quality according to her own exacting standards and with stringent publishing restrictions specified—nevertheless, still a record of significant achievement in the world of letters. The publishing of her poetry has been perhaps peculiarly spaced out—almost decades apart and calling attention to her advancing age. David Kent observed in 2008 that Avison had published four new collections of poetry, a book of lectures, a selected edition and a three-volume collected edition of poems—all after the age of seventy (2008:16). Her friends added to that number with the posthumous *Listening*.

A. J. M. Smith (1902-1980), poet and critic, ‘one of the founders of the modernist literary movement in Canada’ (Bennett & Brown, 2002:366) and an anthologist who helped shape the Canadian literary canon, beginning with his 1943 anthology *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, gave Margaret Avison a jump start in her career as a poet. In his essay ‘The Confessions of a Compulsive Anthologist’, reflecting on a ‘fruitful’ visit to Toronto in 1942, he tells how he was introduced

⁵ In the Foreword to *Collected Poems* she writes: ‘*Collected Poems* sounds like a “closing of the books”, of my books, after a lifetime of writing, although nobody holds me to that’ (*AN* 1.13). She coyly positions herself to either continue publishing poems or to close up shop. Obviously, to the benefit of her readership, more poems kept coming.

to a young woman named Margaret Avison who was working for Gage and living penuriously, chiefly on coffee. She showed me her poems in manuscript, and the fact that I was able to bring the anthology to a close with a selection of her poetry, almost the first to be published, I consider one of the real forward-looking achievements of the book. (1976:110)

‘For nearly thirty years, [Smith] was her critical champion in the Canadian academic community’, David Kent notes in his brief monograph *Margaret Avison and Her Works* (1989:10). Beyond Smith, Avison has gained a small, but significant, following of admirers among poets and other writers and academics who have recognized her achievement. For example, *The National Post* obituary notice reads: ‘She was a “titan” in modern Canadian poetry, as great as Irving Layton and Al Purdy, Toronto poet Dennis Lee said in a telephone interview’ (Kubacki, 2007). In *The Toronto Globe and Mail* Avison obituary on line, the writer reports: ““Her contribution to Canadian literature was incalculable”, said Joseph Zezulka, an English professor at the University of Western Ontario who met Avison in the early 1970s while she was a writer-in-residence at the university’ (obituary 2007). After the announcement of the Griffin Prize, the poet and critic Ken Babstock is more specific in *The Globe and Mail* book review of *Concrete and Wild Carrot*:

her work—its moral depth, humanity, transcendent intelligence and sheer power shrinks prize, applause and ego down to their deserving littleness. Magnanimity is unquantifiable. Reading Margaret Avison is like being in the presence of a heart and mind quite simply bigger and more open than our own. (Babstock, 2003:D13)

He goes on to speak of her poems in ‘their unflagging verbal precision, notional complexity and exuberance’ (2003:D13).

Embedded in the recognition Avison has received is the inevitable confrontation with her avowed Christian witness. Babstock demonstrates sensitivity to her passion as he acknowledges that ‘[*Concrete and Wild Carrot*] is informed by an earned Faith ... indeed Avison’s entire body of work, amounts to a beautiful argument for Ongoingness and open-heartedness’ (2003:D13). He goes on to point out: ‘The resurrection (to some a pivotal hinge in history, to others an allegory) is re-envisioned at the end of each lived moment, and again after the next, and the next ... [Babstock’s own ellipses]’

(2003:D13). In his *Toronto Globe and Mail* review of *Always Now: The Collected Poems*, Vol. 2, the Montreal poet and critic Carmine Starnino suggests that ‘Canadian poetry learned to argue its way around Avison’s innovations, namely by misreading her interest in Christian ideas as anti-experimental’ (2005:D5). He then proceeds to show how the experimental and religious are intricately connected in her poems:

most striking and more risky—and virtually unique in Canadian poetry—is that Avison’s sense of the religious is wrapped up entirely in syntactic difficulties ... She has spiritualized syntax; reading her poems always leaves one’s relationship with language somewhat re-angled. (2005:D5)

Another critical response to the religious and spiritual quality of her poetry comes from David Jeffrey’s comments in ‘Light, Stillness, and the Shaping Word: Conversion and the Poetic of Margaret Avison’:

The critic of Margaret Avison ought probably to be drawn, in apprehension, through a slow measuring of words to quietness. Indeed, if it could remain articulate, this would be of all responses the most just, since it would faithfully mirror the transformation of her own perception, through language, towards the quiet understanding that is her strength ... Her work as a whole rests securely as testimony to a philosophical and spiritual progress: it is a *chef d’œuvre* on our slim national shelf of true ‘wisdom literature. (1987:58-59)

Jeffrey goes on to speak of ‘a perceptible and peculiar stillness’ ‘descend[ing] almost immediately in the reading’ of her work (1987:59), drawing on Avison’s own awareness of beckoning silence in ‘The Effortless Point’ (*AN* 2.69):

Moving into sky
or stilled under it
we are in the becoming
moved: let wisdom learn
unnoticing in this.

Each of these thoughtful comments points in the direction of her distinct contribution to Christian witness. Both the ‘stillness’ that attracts Jeffrey (1987:59) and the ‘religious wrapped up in syntactic difficulties’ that fascinates Starnino (2005:D5) are rightly focused in Babstock’s observation of the ‘re-envisioned’ resurrection ‘at the end of each lived moment’ (2003:D13), specified and particularized in Avison’s writing.

1.1 Avison's Pilgrimage as Poet, Christian and Christian Witness

Avison was born in Galt, Ontario, on 23 April 1918, into the home of a Methodist minister. The family moved to Western Canada shortly after, and she lived her childhood years on the prairies of Saskatchewan and Alberta. Though her poetry is dominated by the urban environment of Toronto where she spent most of her life, her early recollections of the prairies have proven a significant well-spring of imaginative reflection as well. Her childhood also reveals the influences of both Christian upbringing and classical reading. An early poem in the Manitoba archives, undated, handwritten, in rhymed lines of iambic pentameter, ‘The Trojan Princess’s Defiance’, reveals both a precocious grasp of the stories of Homer’s Troy and a familiarity with varied verse stanzas. The closing lines give a glimpse of the emerging poet:

Her velvet cheeks were burned with angry red
“Go back unto your cowards and your slaves
Go back unto the lands which make your graves
Go tell the craven fool who sent you here
That not while I have head and thinking clear
Shall ever any Greeks,” her words were bold,
“Bribe me with offers of their paltry gold
No, not until—good Zeus suspend the day—
The very earth beneath be swept away”.

(Avison Collection, The University of Manitoba)

Further, there is a dated and published poem from *The Toronto Globe and Mail* (7 May 1932) by the 13-year old Avison about the mythical figure Charon, boatman in the underworld. An excerpt from the poem again reveals her familiarity with the great ancient myths. Perhaps she was introduced to Virgil or Dante in some form:

I must enter. He awaits me.
Charon, Charon, tarry longer.
Pluto seated in grim splendor
Waits with scale and balance ready.
Those Elysian Fields await me,
But that fiery Tartarus
Stretches, greedy for my body
Mangled, hurt, by Furies’ lashings.

(Avison Collection, The University of Manitoba)

At the same time she grew up in a Methodist parsonage, with two biblically literate parents who ‘taught us to read the Bible, to pray, to love, to enjoy’ (1968:88). In a pseudonymous, autobiographical essay, written for Scripture Union in 1968, ‘I Couldn’t

'Have My Cake and Eat It', she mentions that she was dutifully religious as a child—connected to the Christian faith by her participation in family life and by a strong will to exemplify behaviour of 'being good'. 'I wish I had known', she writes, 'that *I* was not somehow peculiarly close to all good simply by virtue of having grown up a much-loved youngster in a relatively protected world' (1968:88). As she explains, 'I was glad to "see God everywhere" but with comparative and comforting indistinctness' (1968:88). She describes her gradual drifting away from this religious experience: 'I wish I had known that there was a reason why the Bible became to me more and more opaque ... I was increasingly substituting an invented person of my own designing for Jesus, the Word made flesh, the life of the Word of God (1968:88-89).

The family returned to Toronto where Avison completed high school. She credits a grade-nine teacher who led the school poetry club with valuable and encouraging counsel in her poetic endeavours: 'For the next ten years do not use the first person in any poem you write' (Foreword, *AN* 1.14), she distinctly remembers. This advice received in her adolescent and formative period of intellectual and emotional development was essential insight, surely affecting more than her poetry. The focus on looking outwards rather than inwards in her writing of poetry carried over into her later understanding of Christian witness.

She attended Victoria College, University of Toronto, studying under such professors as E. J. Pratt and Northrop Frye. After she earned her B.A. in English in 1940, she began her working life as a file clerk at North American Life Insurance Company where she was employed for two years.⁶ During that time she also spent a few

⁶ My sources include a basic chronology available in the Avison Collection of The University of Manitoba archives, an interview with Harry der Nederlanden in *Calvinist Contact*, 19 Oct. 1979, Avison's chapter 'I Couldn't Have My Cake and Eat it' in *I Wish I Had Known ...* [Angela Martin, pseudo.] (1968), an interview with Rose Simone in *The Second Mile* (1994) and a fuller account from David Kent who wrote *Margaret Avison and Her Works* in 1989 as part of the *Canadian Writers and their Works*, Poetry Series edited by Robert Lecker. He explains that the details he includes 'were kindly supplied by Margaret Avison' (1989:41, fn). In addition, a posthumous autobiography, *I Am Here and Not Not-There* (2009), prepared for publication by Stan Dragland and Joan Eichner, provides additional nuances to some of the named events, places and people.

months at Gage Publishing Company where she learned proof-reading and editing. (It was during this time that A. J. M. Smith ‘discovered’ her). Kent comments that ‘[h]er working life since has been characterized by frequent dislocations and reorientations, in marked contrast to her continuing, though unostentatious, dedication to poetry’ (1989:2). She worked two years at the Canadian Institute of International Affairs followed by a year in the Registrar’s Office at the University of Toronto. One of her longest periods of employment in one place was in the Order Department of the Library at the University of Toronto, where she worked for eight years. ‘On Saturday mornings she taught servicemen who had returned to university for a degree’ (Kent, 1989:2) and did freelance editing on the side. In the Archival Chronology detailing her employment, 1957 is noted as the first of six years of freelance work (Chronology, Archives). Kent points out, in fact, that she did editing work and wrote book reviews all during the 1940s and 1950s (1989:2). She also wrote an elementary textbook, *History of Ontario*, published in 1951. When she left the University Library Order Department she worked as a ‘nursemaid and homehelp’ (Chronology, Archives) for two years to a family with four children, taking her to France for part of that time. She did not see these many varied experiences of employment as her vocation, but as a means of earning a living; from early on she saw herself primarily a poet.

Important events and experiences for her regarding her vocation in poetry include her significant acquaintance with Cid Corman, American poet and editor of *Origin*, in 1953, and subsequent correspondence with him. ‘At about the same time’ she took two summer courses at Indiana University, ‘one in linguistics and the other with John Crowe Ransom on Thomas Hardy’s poetry’ (Kent 1989:3), increasing her exposure to the American writing culture. The prestigious *Kenyon Review* published several of her poems. When she won a Guggenheim fellowship in 1956-57, she spent eight months in Chicago. Her first published volume *Winter Sun* is a product of this

time. As well, she established important literary friendships during these years, including Frederick Bock, associate editor of *Poetry*, whose correspondence with Avison is in the Avison Collection in the University of Manitoba. Among her many writing projects, she translated Hungarian poetry; she was ghostwriter for *A Doctor's Memoirs*, the autobiography of A. J. Willinsky; she wrote abstracts of dissertations in social work at the University of Toronto. She was invited to a writer's workshop at the University of British Columbia in 1964, the Canadian representative among such American poets as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov. In spite of the importance of the event for her and her connection with these poets, Kent cautions against assuming any strong link between her and the Black Mountain poets (or any other poets) because of her 'independent posture and self-imposed isolation' (Kent, 1989:9).

While she was making strides in her poetry, she was also making important decisions concerning her religious faith. In an often quoted letter to Cid Corman, published with her poems in *Origin*, in 1962, she commented: 'There is some corner I have to turn yet, some confronting I have to do,' revealing an on-going crisis of spiritual reflection (Letter, 1962:11). Her journey to faith came about as she was encouraged by the minister of Knox to read John's Gospel—'instead of Ezekiel, at the time'! she recounts to Rose Simone (Avison & Simone 1994c:5-6). She is precise in dating what she calls her conversion to Christianity: 4 January 1963, truly the pivotal experience in her life. She emphasizes the demarcation of her changed life in both her prose and poetry. She describes her conversion to Simone:

She was reading John 14, which starts with "Do not let your hearts be troubled: you believe in God, believe also in me ..." Suddenly, she felt the overwhelming presence of Jesus Christ in the room. Avison said she felt she couldn't breathe—as if all the air had been sucked from the room. She felt "the Jesus of resurrection power" making Himself known to her. She threw the Bible that she was reading down on the floor. (Avison & Simone, 1994c:6)

Avison goes on to tell of her fear of having to give up her poetry to prove her new faith commitment: 'When I said, "OK, take the poetry", then everything was different'

(Avison & Simone, 1994c:6).⁷ Instead of having to give up her writing, however, her poetic output flourished. Two months of compulsive writing followed, in which she wrote most of the poems that later appeared in *The Dumbfounding* (1966) (Avison & Simone, 1994c:6-7), published with the encouragement and assistance of the poet Denise Levertov. ‘During her short period as poetry editor for Norton, not only did Levertov solicit this collection from Avison but she also played a crucial part in preparing it for publication’, explains Kent in a later biographical essay (2006:40).⁸

Several poems clustered in the middle of *The Dumbfounding* articulate the same experience, but with particular lyrical poignancy. She begins ‘The Word’ (*AN* 1.195-96)⁹ in language of the marriage service, ““Forsaking all””, revitalizing a lover’s metaphor ‘head over heels’ with more intense and extended language of primal fire’s aftermath and potential renewal:

“Forsaking all” – You mean
head over heels, for good,
for ever, call of the depths
of the All.

Embracing the ‘All’ and forsaking ‘all’ seem welcome when the exchange is offered to the one ‘far fallen in the / ashheaps’ of a ‘false-making, burnt-out self’:

to me, far fallen in the
ashheaps of my
false-making, burnt-out self and in the
hosed-down rubble of what my furores
gutted, or sooted all
around me – you implore
me to so fall
in Love, and fall anew in
ever-new depths of skywashed Love till every

⁷ In her later autobiography *I Am Here and Not Not-There* she elaborates how she perceived ‘this strange visitation’ from God as a contest of wills: ‘An ancient poet describes the confrontation: “Put me in remembrance; let us contend together. State your case” (Isaiah 43.26). It infuriated me to feel that my “case” was weakened and about to crumble. Finally I hurled the Bible across the room and said, “Okay, take the poetry too” (2009:142).

⁸ He further elaborates: ‘What we may surmise is that Levertov’s role in selecting and arranging the poems in *The Dumbfounding* was formative and that she seems to have been largely responsible for the book in the form and shape we have come to know’ (2006:43). See David Kent, ‘Composing a Book: Denise Levertov, Margaret Avison, and *The Dumbfounding*’ in *Canadian Poetry* 59: Fall/Winter 2006:40-52, for a detailed discussion of the two poets’ connection.

⁹ This is the first of two poems with the same title. Here the word is emphasizing Jesus, the Word, while never named, as Love. The later miniature four-line poem (*AN* 2.220) leaves the correspondence unspecified, instead focusing on the intense experience of the receiver of the Word. See Appendix 1.1 for the complete text of this poem.

capillary of your universe
throbs with your rivering fire?

Love's 'rivering fire', with its revitalizing intensity is an invitation she cannot refuse.

The punning wordplay of 'falling' and 'fallen' coupled with 'All' and 'all', interwoven with multiple alliterative combinations of 'forsaking', 'false-making', 'furors' and 'fire' along with the internal repetitions of 'Love's All', 'falling anew' and 'every throbbing capillary' draw listener and speaker alike into the enchantment of transformation. Furthermore, the sobering cost for the One 'unsealing day out of a / darkness none ever knew / in full but you' of the next stanza both intensifies the value of the wooing of the Lover and diminishes the sacrifice of the submitting beloved. The last pun embedded in the picture of the Cross in the final stanza seals the contract:

But to make it head over heels
yielding, all the way,
you had to die for us.
The line we drew, you crossed
and cross out [...].

Avison refuses sentimentality in speaking of 'what / you know is love'. She ends the poem with a reminder of the identity of the Word. 'I AM' occupies and fills the space of the poem's last line, emphasizing her emerging awareness of the One to whom she witnesses.

'The Dumbfounding' (*AN* 1.197-98), the poem providing the title of the collection, changes the picture with a more ambiguous image, suggestive of both silencing and astonishing. Avison anchors the story in the biblical narrative,

When you walked here,
took skin, muscle, hair,
eyes, larynx, we
withheld all honour [...],

connecting the twentieth century convert with the early disciples:

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.

The same struggle with resistance calls for another kind of intervention. Again dream-like, the poet combines the past of Christ's life and death on earth with her current world. Mixing of the senses and using words with their double meanings such as 'sound dark's uttermost' all under the title 'The Dumbfounding' deepen the profundity of conversion.

Lead through the garden to
trash, rubble, hill,
where, the outcast's outcast, you
sound dark's uttermost, strangely light-brimming, until
time be full.

At the same time, the speaker's prayer, 'Lead [...] to trash, rubble, hill' is a brave gesture of submission.

The third poem in this cluster, 'Searching and Sounding' (*AN* 1.199-202),¹⁰ picks up again on the uncertain and exploratory verb 'sounding', anticipating the painful perseverance required of the new convert and witness. Her connection to Christ means an active sharing in his suffering.

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

I run from you to
the blinding blue of the
loveliness of this wasting
morning, and know
it is only with you
I can find the fields of brilliance
to burn out the sockets of the eyes that want no
weeping.

A few stanzas later she refers to herself as a burnt out star, 'Dwarf that I am, and spent', accepting a new role of both 'mirroring' the light and submitting to one whose name she earlier recognized as Love:

Lord, the light deepens as the
summer day goes down
in lakes of stillness.
Dwarf that I am, and spent,
touch my wet face with
the little light I can bear now, to mirror,
and keep me

¹⁰ See chapter 6.1 for further commentary on 'Searching and Sounding'.

close, into sleeping.

In retrospect, the poet's surrender of her poetry becomes her greatest gift of witness.

That same year she returned to graduate school, writing a master's thesis on Byron's *Don Juan* ('The Style of Byron's *Don Juan* in Relation to the Newspapers of His Day'). She continued in doctoral work, completing all but her dissertation.¹¹ In *A Kind of Perseverance*,¹² she discusses the struggle she had in living in the two worlds of her new found Christian life and what she saw as the 'counter-Christian assumptions and standards of the [secular] university' (North, 1994:11). Her nomadic career path continued with two years as a lecturer at the University of Toronto's Scarborough Campus 1967-68. Then she worked as a social worker for the Presbyterian Church Mission at Evangel Hall in downtown Toronto for five years. She taught poetry to patients at Queen Street Mental Hospital for a time. During this period she continued publishing poems and did more translations from the Hungarian (Kent, 1989:4). She was Writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario in 1972-73. She also worked for a time in the Radio Archives of the Canadian Broadcasting Company. Her second longer stint of employment was as an office worker at the Mustard Seed Mission's Canadian office from 1978 to 1986.

In 1985, she was made an Officer of the Order of Canada and awarded an honorary D.Litt. by York University, Toronto. As she continued to publish poems in her years of retirement, she won a second Governor General's Poetry award for *No Time* in 1989, and as has been noted, the Griffin Prize in 2003, for *Concrete and Wild Carrot*. *Momentary Dark* was published a year before she died at age 89, in July 2007. Her friends Stan Dragland and Joan Eichner published a posthumous collection *Listening*:

¹¹ The North American system includes course work and comprehensive examinations before a candidate begins writing a thesis.

¹² The title of the book for Avison's Pascal lectures, 'On Christianity and the University', given at the University of Waterloo in 1993, is the inspiration for the focus of this project. I discuss the lectures in greater detail in chapter 5.

Last Poems, and yet again, her unfinished memoirs *I Am Here and Not Not-There: An Autobiography*, in 2009.

Avison was already attending Knox Presbyterian Church in downtown Toronto, close to the University, when she embraced wholeheartedly the Christian faith, and most of the years since her Christian conversion she was a vigorous and active member there. Friends and acquaintances at the church recall and letters and notes in her personal papers point to her particular interest in projects of evangelism and outreach.¹³ In her last years she attended the services at Evangel Hall, the outreach mission connected to Knox.

The theological thought world informing her poetry, I suggest, derives primarily from Knox's teaching and practice. Knox Church is clearly the place where she 'moved and had her being' and which played a dominant role in her spiritual formation and social interactions for many years. In his 1971 book *Knox Church, Toronto: Avant garde, evangelical, advancing*, William Fitch, Avison's minister until 1972,¹⁴ articulates in detail the theological premises of the church. He describes Knox as standing firm through stormy years of rising secularism and liberalism (1971:97-102). 'All across the wider church she has been known as an evangelical church. This has meant that oftentimes she has been treated as obscurantist and dogmatic', he explains. The primary issue for Fitch and his church is defending the central position of scripture:

The Presbyterian Church in Canada holds to the Westminster Confession of Faith as her subordinate standard, and the statement in the first chapter concerning the Scriptures is the best possible statement of Knox's Biblical position. "Sola scriptura"—that is the ultimate statement of our theological stance; and this is so because it is through Scripture alone that we know of Jesus Christ, the full and final revelation of God the Father. (1971:102)

¹³ In a conversation with me in 2004, Daniel Scott, academic dean at Toronto's Tyndale University College, recalls her fervency for outreach in a team visit when he was initially attending Knox Church. In a letter to her friend Anne Corkett (17 December 1981), she speaks of her involvement in the '3-by-3' pattern of visitation in her church' which she muses may be 'an instance of conformity or of obedience', but nevertheless, something in which she regularly participates (Avison Collection, University of Manitoba).

¹⁴ Dr. Fitch was Senior Minister from 1955 to 1972.

When the minister outlines ‘the seven cardinal points on which Knox has taken its stand from the beginning’, and which ‘summarize what an evangelical church is’, *sola scriptura* is a natural place to begin (1971:130). Knox Church prides itself in giving priority to ‘expository preaching’ and study of scripture, as reflected in Fitch’s declarations.

‘It must be biblical’, writes William Aide, Professor of Piano and Chamber Music at the University of Toronto, in his personal memoirs, reflecting on his friendship with Aiston and his familiarity with Knox.

Knox Church had only one ritual (save Communion). Before the service began, the Bible was brought in, opened on a cushion, by the church-caretaker in black gown. It was placed on the lectern with some ceremony, as a signal. Knox was a Bible-centred church; its Sunday service was sermon-centred and its ministers felt called to search the scriptures and illuminate them through expository preaching. Knox was dignified, intelligent, strict.¹⁵ (Aide, 1996:58)

Aide’s description of this Book-centred ritual invites comparison with Aiston’s favourite poet in the English tradition, the seventeenth century divine George Herbert. There is much in common between the two religious poets to confirm a decided influence of Herbert’s style and content on Aiston’s poetry—‘his metaphysical love of wit and paradox, of wordplay and minor drama’ (Kent, 1989:7) appearing in Aiston’s twentieth-century verse.¹⁶ I suggest there is also an element not attributable to distance of time and style which both separates them and calls attention to her unique contribution to the English literary tradition. While the rituals and symbols of the Anglican Church shape George Herbert’s devotional poetry in his single volume *The Temple*, the plainer symbolic ritual re-enacted week after week in Knox Church directs

¹⁵ Aide is basically critical of what he calls the Knox critique and how he sees its expectations shaping Aiston’s poetic output: ‘I believe “The Bible to be Believed” to be the central poem in *sunblue*, Margaret’s third book. In that book and *No Time* a new kind of poem appears—the biblical gloss. Precision in understanding the Bible presses poems from Aiston. They are often intricately rimed, always linguistically felicitous. They do not move me ... Margaret, like C. S. Lewis before her, is a defender of the faith. She will continue to write poems clarifying doctrine. Knox will edit them in her mind’ (Aide 58-59). His comments about clarifying doctrine with its opposing editing are suggesting two contradictory impulses in Aiston. Furthermore, clarifying is not the same as defending, so is he meaning the Knox edits turn mystery into rhetorical persuasion? If so, he misses much of her delicate handling of text. See chapters four and five for further comment on her working with the shape of the biblical text.

¹⁶ I will signal this influence in later sections.

Avison's imagination towards a text-only based religious experience. As a result, 'biblical glosses' and a preoccupation with scriptural texts are not surprising. Furthermore, the seeming limitation becomes a strength, a point I develop in chapter five.

Avison's firm embrace of the Knox tradition can be seen in a peculiar collaboration with Fitch in his book about Knox Church. He outlines his seven cardinal points beginning with 'The Divine Inspiration, Integrity and Authority of the Bible'. 'The Scriptures themselves', Fitch explains, 'are not the result of some unusual cross-fertilization of gifted and creative minds. No! They are God's revelation and gift, a unique part of the divine creation' (Fitch, 1971:133).¹⁷ He goes on to emphasize the Bible's integrity: 'It is impossible to be led astray by the Bible' (1971:133); 'it can be utterly trusted' (1971:134). In his passionate prose there is the insertion of three short poems for support—whether fragments or complete, it is not clear—that are introduced anonymously, almost implying his own authorship. Their style gives them away. Reinforcing his explanation of integrity (1971:134), one poem asserts:

Nothing I do or know or speak or feel
or ever shall
but this One puts into my hands
and fully comprehends.

Entering wholly in
heard to the end, and known,
it brings me on to silence,
and into listening presence.

Words become the Word, the choice
offered one, a Voice.

He goes on to celebrate the diversity and unity of 'this divine library'. Again, he quotes what he calls 'four lines of exquisite poetry' (1971:135):

He breathed on the dust in His hand,

¹⁷ Fitch's rhetoric earlier in the explanation gives some indication of his persuasive enthusiasm: "Holy men of God spoke as they were carried forward as on a wave of the sea by the Holy Spirit," writes Peter. This means that they wrote with divine authority and candour. Absolute honesty shrouded them. Truth enveloped them. They were transported into a realm of consciousness in which they wrote what God meant them to write and yet not one of their faculties was in limbo. The Scriptures were no accident of history. This was the divine genius God showed when he chose the book method of transmitting His message to all men' (1971:133).

He stooped and wrote in the sand,
He cleared blind eyes with His clay:
Who shall open that book, on that day.

To strengthen the discussion on authority he calls on the Muse again (1971:137):

In time the author of being, with authority
lived out in all the dimensions of flesh and dailiness
the spoken word of God
even unto the silence.

And now—O, listen!—out of the stillness He
speaks, to us, our utter hurt and healing.

The minister's Acknowledgements page confirms my suspicions: 'The author wishes to express sincere appreciation to the following colleagues, and acknowledges [sic] their contributions': 'Miss Margaret Avison', followed by the first lines of the poems as titles as well as 'Mr. J. Samuel Thompson' for another poem in the book (1971: Acknowledgements).¹⁸

Even a cursory reading of the poetry suggests the poet exceeds the didactic intentions of the preacher chronicling the history and outlining the orthodox teaching and purposes of Knox Church. Integrity is too small a concept for what Avison is talking about when she speaks of being brought 'on to silence / and into listening presence'. Her multiple meanings of 'the spoken word of God / even unto the silence' harkening back to 'the author of being' intimates an authority far beyond the assurance of the reliable nature of the words of scripture. This blending of two different discourses in the book provides a powerful metaphor for understanding her Christian witness. She has planted herself in a narrowly prescribed and described orthodoxy to which she vigorously adheres, as many of her prose statements confirm, but her poems transcend the simple faith declarations. (The preacher in the pulpit may do so as well, but he is not demonstrating that enlarged and mysterious sense of the Gospel in his articulation of doctrine here in his book *Knox Church*).

¹⁸ Fitch uses other poems in his book but identifies the authors in the context of inserting their poems.

In Avison's Christian poems there is more than the obvious. Perhaps it is just the inevitable outworking of the nature of poetry which emphasizes the metaphorical nature of language, immediately opening up multiple levels of complexity, and highlighting ambivalence and paradox. She is clearly a self-conscious and deliberate poet and she naturally employs the poet's ways of making sense of the world in her religious context. When Aide says, 'She will continue to write poems declarifying doctrine. Knox will edit them in her mind' (1996:59), perhaps he has it backwards. It is Avison who is editing Knox. She is constantly editing and reshaping what she has read, heard and seen; then in turn, she paradoxically both 'declarifies' and clarifies what she is taught from pulpit and lectern in an imaginative and reframed response. When writing about the Catholic novelist and short story writer Morley Callaghan, Avison commends him for his transparency and undistracted and honest perceptions:

"Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be a substitute for seeing," said Flannery O'Connor. Callaghan's struggle, in the telling, is to make convincing to others remote from his beliefs the light by which he sees; and he does not provide himself, or us, with any comfortable substitutes for seeing. (Avison, 1992:206)

What she says about Callaghan, she embodies in her own lyrics. Her friend Aide recognizes her complexity of thought, but perhaps misses the profound import of transformations emerging in her witness to the Truth.

Fitch continues in his book to identify the cardinal points of the 'evangelical' position of the Christian faith. The second, 'the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ', follows from the reverence for scripture. Quoting Griffith Thomas, he writes, "Christianity is inextricably bound up with Christ. Our view of the person of Christ determines and involves our view of Christianity". He reiterates the point, '[The doctrine] is absolutely fundamental to all true Christian faith' (Fitch, 1971:139-140). Third is 'The Need and Efficiency of the Sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ for the Redemption of the World' (1971:146). 'Public enemy number one is SIN,' he exclaims (1971:147). 'And it is this that Knox has been declaring through all its ministry. Preacher after preacher has

pointed sinners away from themselves to Calvary' (1971:149). Answering A. W. Tozer's assertion that “In most Christian churches the Spirit is quite entirely overlooked”, Fitch assures his readers that the fourth of the ‘seven guiding principles on which [Knox] has taken her stand’, ‘The Presence and Power of the Holy Spirit in the Work of Redemption’, means that ‘the ministry of the Holy Spirit is marked as fundamental and all-embracing’ (1971:152). When Fitch explains the fifth commitment to ‘The Divine Institution and Mission of the Church’ (1971:157), he points out the obligation so central to Avison’s understanding of herself as will be elaborated further in this paper: ‘The Church has a “mission to fulfil.” The Church is sent out “into all the world” … This is why every Christian is intended to be a witness to Jesus Christ’ (1971:160). Sixth, ‘The Broad and Binding Obligation Resting Upon the Church for the Evangelization of the World’ follows from the fifth principle (1971:163). Finally, there is ‘an unconquerable hope’ in the second coming of Christ: ‘The Consummation of the Kingdom in the Appearing of the Great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ’ (1971:169).

I have intentionally articulated these ‘evangelical’ views in Fitch’s voice to reinforce the same language and tenor of theological persuasion the poet would have imbibed in her formative experience of her adult conversion. How these doctrines inform her view of God, humankind and the created world around her is reflected, of course, in the poems she has written. It is to the fifth cardinal point, the expectation of Christian witness—surrounded by and organically connected to the other theological assertions—that I turn with particular interest.

Avison has noted in various interviews the inevitable question concerning the interface between her poetry and her Christian faith. In an article written for Christian college students in 1968, ‘Muse of Danger’, she places a clear priority on the side of what she then calls ‘witness’: ‘But in His strange and marvelous mercy, God nonetheless lets the believer take a necessary place as a living witness, in behaviour

with family and classmate and stranger, in conversation, or in a poem' (1968b:33). She recognizes and embraces the multi-faceted nature of witness in actions and behaviour and in words of conversation and direct discourse. It is that last phrase 'in a poem' that gives some cause for pause, for as has been mentioned earlier, she concludes in 'Muse of Danger', 'The practice of poetry is as dangerous as this next hour of life, whoever you are' (1968b:35). What are the implications of this assertion, as Fitch articulates and she echoes and refracts? How does this missional obligation shape her art? How does her poetry succeed as poetry with its religious agenda or ethos? What do her religious sympathies mean to critics and lovers of poetry alike?

On the other hand, how does her poetry determine the witness? What does Christian witness look like in poetic form? What can be accomplished in a poem? How effective is the poem as a vehicle of communication? Is a poem's witness authentic or contrived and forced? The readers' questions are hers as well, and they do not recede for the poet in succeeding years. The issues for a Christian poet can become muddled and complex, she admits in one interview a decade after the article 'Muse of Danger'. Harry der Nederlanden, writing for the Christian magazine *Calvinist Contact*, asks a pointed question about the Christian aim of all her poetry, whether or not it had explicit Christian content: 'All my poetry writing has an evangelical anxiety', she responds:

Am I faithful? I would love to say that when I move outside explicitly Christian subject matter I am still writing Christianly. In my person, however, an expression of the two person [the old and the new man] is present. Pride or self-hate, the vanity cycle, the competitive drive play a role in any art. And you can very easily rationalize what people will accept and praise. Or you can also very easily run to the other extreme and do what they vilify and say that you are being persecuted because you are a Christian. So it is very tricky. (Nederlanden, 1979:4)

Here she is offering a kind of artist statement for the press, as she points to the inevitably haunted poet lurking in the shadows of her poems. The attention is on the writer's struggle to be a faithful and true witness—one who composes poems with integrity and sincerity.

Sixteen years later, in a letter to Denise Levertov in 1995, Avison reveals her ongoing ‘evangelical anxiety’ as she reflects on the differences of their individual approach to their vocation as writer, but the emphasis has been refined and refocused on the poetry, perhaps partially because it is a shared confidence with a sister poet. She comments on what she calls the ‘opened world’ for Levertov from her experience—[Levertov’s pull from Europe, her Jewish past, the American cultural community]—‘even as it took away rootedness’. In contrast, Avison notes, ‘[I]n almost every respect it has been opposite for [me]’, and concludes her letter:

I love the inexplicit witness to your faith in the poems and in [Levertov’s volume *Tesserae*], the ample evidence, those attitudes of the heart that confess their source without your design or maybe awareness. I who speak explicitly feel often an identity with Mr. Sludge the Medium and it shows, as every-mortal thing must, thank God. God help us both. (1995:Letter)

The allusion to Mr. Sludge, the Medium, Robert Browning’s dramatic persona (in *Dramatic Personae* 1864) confessing his dishonesty to his benefactor, invites the readers of her letter to Levertov into multiple levels of complexity. ‘I [who] speak explicitly’, she confesses and feels Mr. Sludge’s convoluted admissions.

Preachers and teachers try another tack,
Come near the truth this time: they put aside
thunder and lightning,

he proposes (Browning, 1896:‘Mr. Sludge’ ll. 1128-29), whereas ‘[M]y fault is that I tell too plain a truth’ (l. 1196). The word ‘explicit’ is confusing, or at least ironic, in the context of a Browning dramatic monologue, and particularly with the notorious Mr. Sludge who explains his ‘taste of truth’ and ‘touch of falsehood’ (l. 1279). When Avison suggests that she ‘feel[s] often an identity with Mr. Sludge The Medium’, who in reality is merely a sham medium, to what dimension of his character, his feelings, his words is she confessing? Does she feel duplicitous in her direct and explicit witness? Certainly, the play on the word ‘medium’ is not far from her self-assessment. Mr. Sludge rounds out his defence of his role as medium:

Why he’s at worst your poet who sings how Greeks
That never were, in Troy which never was,
Did this or the other impossible great thing! (ll. 1434-46)

He elucidates, in fact, the poet’s medium of verse involving a masking, a putting on of a persona in spite of explicit language. As one writer establishes the connection between ‘séance-medium’ and poet, ‘What [the medium] conveys is of greater significance than itself. Ideally, the medium aspires to a state of transparency in order to deflect attention away from itself’ (Shastri, 2001:29).¹⁹ Furthermore, the published poems are a step removed from the poet, taking on a life of their own. The potential for misinterpretation and misunderstanding is a given when the poet surrenders her lyrics to the public eye without recourse to defence. Explicit witness in poetry then makes her particularly vulnerable.

Avison’s awareness of the tension in the Christian who is a poet and the poet who is a Christian spills over to readers of that poet’s work. One can struggle to ‘place’ her poems, even as Aide has earlier. Who is her audience? In what particular reading community does the reader position herself? Her books of poetry are not typically found on the shelves of Christian bookstores; instead, they are side by side with other poets’ works in libraries and bookstores with a specialized section in Canadian literature. There is an expectation of muted and subtle exploration of religious themes—if mentioned at all. As a result, Avison, from the very outset, disturbs, disorients and surprises, for she is sometimes muted and subtle, but sometimes uncomfortably direct.

While her poems reflect on varied subjects, many are overtly Christian, some, ‘mere biblical glosses’, as her friend and informal critic laments, all the while missing the artistic possibility in the delicate intertextual mingling.²⁰ In their bold declarations

¹⁹ In fact, the dramatic monologue is even more complicated. As Isobel Armstrong explains, ‘The extreme textual sophistication of the monologue or the dramatic lyric, a poem proposing itself as the immediacy of a speaking voice in dialogue with a silent listener, but which is in reality a text, a written artifact, raises immediately the problem of its own and the reader’s status by confusing speaking, which assumes a listener’s presence with writing, which assumes an addressee’s absence’ (Armstrong, 1993:288). Avison herself provides a working example of this complexity in ‘The Agnes Cleves Papers’ (*AN* 1.132-43).

²⁰ William Aide reveals as much about his view of art and witness as he does about Avison in his use of ‘mere’ (qtd. earlier).

she reveals an unapologetic interest in scripture, her primary literary source, and she openly wrestles with faith issues—not in every poem—but often enough to anchor her oeuvre in her deep commitment to her life vocation of Christian witness. The overtly Christian lyrics in the three volumes of *Always Now* and in *Momentary Dark* tempt her readers to see religious, and even Christian, overtones in other poems in their often ambiguous phrases and syntax. She is obviously an intense and passionate poet. She is equally emphatic about the central focus of her Christian beliefs. These two vocations, entangled as they are in her work, create a curious tension in readers who approach and slowly learn to appreciate her poetry. At a basic level there is a double-pronged problem. On the one hand, if the assumption is accepted that witness should be plain and clear, her difficult poetry can complicate her professed commitment to Christian witness. The search for verification, explanation, and vivid appeal to commitment can be disappointed. On the other hand, her often unapologetic and open Christian witness challenges modern reader-listeners of her poetry who are not necessarily sympathetic to her faith tradition. As a result, there is a waning interest for some. In the bibliographies of interested reviews of her works, some have abandoned writing on her poetry, in spite of its sophistication and artistic appeal. David Kent mentions in his tribute after her death:

In 1988 Northrop Frye told me that around 1950 he and A. J. M. Smith believed that Margaret Avison would some day have the kind of profile that Margaret Atwood has since come to enjoy. That did not happen. Frye noted: Atwood “knows what the public wants, whereas Margaret Avison says to hell with them”. (2008:59)

This blunt assertion highlights what Kent sees as her rebel spirit. Perhaps it is also part of the cost in taking on what could be termed the prophet’s voice in an alien culture.

1.2 Avison’s Poetry as A Call to Spiritual and Theological Attention

The starting point for Avison’s witness has already been suggested in the opening poem of this chapter, ‘Rising Dust’. It is her particular and compelling call to attention in her quiet, but complex lyrics. In our highly verbal and wordy world with all its clutter (a

word appearing in Avison's later poetry),²¹ the modernist lyric in its particularly lean form calls attention to the white space on a page. While observing the words, the reader is vaguely aware of the context—the seemingly empty space around the words. It can be seen as ‘intimidating margins of silence’, as Jonathan Culler, comments (1997:23), drawing the reader to think negatively about what is not said; but more positively, it can beckon to silence or set the stage for silence—a prelude for a particular kind of attention, noted in Scripture: ‘Be still and know that I am God’ (Ps 46.10). In the silence the concentrated form of the poem beckons attention. This out of the ordinary discourse, language compressed and arranged to call attention to itself, can be a kind of burning bush which compels a reflective person to step aside.²²

Spiritual writers and theologians alike commend the discipline of ‘attention’. Simone Weil insists: ‘Never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of the attention wasted. It always has its effect on the spiritual plane … for all spiritual light lightens the mind’ (1951:106). Austin Farrer observes in his essay ‘Poetic Truth’:

And the chief impediment to religion in this age, I often think, is that no-one ever looks at anything at all: not so as to contemplate it, to apprehend what it is to be that thing, and plumb, if he can, the deep fact of its individual existence. (1974:37-38)

Farrer goes on to suggest an antidote to this lack of attention:

The mind rises from the knowledge of creatures to the knowledge of their creator, but this does not happen through the sort of knowledge which can analyze things into factors or manipulate them with technical skill or classify them into groups. It comes from the appreciation of things which we have when we love them and fill our minds and senses with them, and feel something of the silent force and great mystery of their existence. (1974:37-38)

This appreciation of things to which he is referring calls to mind that unique function of the poetic voice that calls attention to and mediates that special ‘knowledge of creatures’ for a receptive reader-listener, beginning, as has been said, with the silence

²¹

If you approach through
a clutter, nothing need
hinder you, who gave
the deaf hearing [...] (*'Prayer of Anticipation'* MD 58);

‘Men craft their clutter, keep / adjusting, shifting tolerances’ (*'A Hearing'* MD 69).

²² ‘Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!”’ (Ex. 3.3-4).

around the words, but naturally directing the reader to the words. Take for instance, Avison's early sonnet 'Snow' (*AN* 1.69), introducing her particular understanding of a call to attention.

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.
The optic heart must venture: a jail-break
And re-creation. Sedges and wild rice
Chase rivery pewter. The astonished cinders quake
With rhizomes. All ways through the electric air
Trundle candy-bright discs; they are desolate
Toys if the soul's gates seal, and cannot bear,
Must shudder under, creation's freight.
But soft, there is snow's legend: colour of mourning
Along the yellow Yangtze where the wheel
Spins an indifferent stasis that's death's warning.
Asters of tumbled quietness reveal
Their petals. Suffering this starry blur
The rest may ring your change, sad listener.

She calls attention to a highly alert and imaginative response to the experiencing of falling snow, perhaps, as one writer suggests, with city lights in the background. Donald Hair team teaching a course on Canadian literature and culture in the 1970s remembers colleague James Reaney's comment on the difficult lines of 'All ways through the electric air / Trundle candy-bright discs': '[H]e said that's what neon lights look like when you observe them through snow flakes or raindrops on your eyelashes' (Hair, 2006:55).

No poem of Avison's has received more attention than this sonnet.²³ With its complexity and multiple puzzling images, readers have argued and exchanged opinions on its purported meaning ever since it first appeared. Hair, quoted above, is one admiring reader who keeps the image of snow at the centre of his discussion; at the same time, he intuits Avison's distinct and deeper call to attention:

What snow does to the landscape—and we all, as Canadians, ought to know this—is blot out everything that clutters the eye, revealing the essential pattern of things. So the tumble and the blur are revelatory and change-inducing. (Hair, 2006:55)

²³ To name a few, some of the discussions include Michael Taylor, 'Snow Blindness' (1978:288-90); Robert Lecker, 'Exegetical Blizzard'(1979:177-79); Zailig Pollock, 'A Response to Michael Taylor's "Snow Blindness"' (1979: 177-79); Francis Zichy, 'A Response to Robert Lecker's "Exegetical Blizzard"' and Michael Taylor's "Snow Blindness"' (1979:147-54); David Jeffrey, 'Margaret Avison: Sonnets and Sunlight' (1979:3,4); Katherine Quinsey, 'The Dissolving Jail-Break in Avison' (1990:21-37); Donald Hair, 'Avison at Western: Writing at the Limits of Vision' (2006:53-58).

While the sonnet as a whole mirrors the experience of snow, both disorienting and exhilarating in its changing moods and pictures, its opening lines promise some clarity: ‘Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes. / The optic heart must venture’. Here is the basic formula of her poetics—not requiring a religious interpretation, but lending itself to one as her Christian experience unfolds.

In her earlier essay ‘The Dissolving Jail-Break in Avison’, Katherine Quinsey suggests that the poet is proposing a highly conscious and self-conscious activity for one embracing her particular vision: ‘The optic heart unites sense (eye) and inner being (heart) in a multi dimensional, imaginative vision that breaks through conventional structures of perception’ (1990:22). Quinsey continues, ‘Such seeing is a willed activity, done by the ‘I’ behind the eye, ‘I/eye’ being one of Avison’s unlocking puns, identifying the optic heart with the self, the person who looks out from those eyes ... ’ (Quinsey, 1990:22), implying she is pushing her readers outward, away from ‘a self-centred point of view’ and involving a kind of death (1990:22). This movement is the jailbreak the poet advocates. Quinsey’s painstaking and detailed elaboration of the poem in its provocative and condensed call to attention leaves the image of snow far behind. In doing so, the critic shows the poet’s capacity to generate in her readers intense metaphysical reflection emerging from the puzzling and complex images juxtaposed in the sonnet.

A later poem, ‘Old Woman at a Winter Window’ (*AN* 3.15), is a simpler, less convoluted picture of one who is still ‘venturing’ ‘with ‘the optic heart’ (*AN* 1.69) but much quieter and even more intense. No longer out in the whirling kaleidoscope of snow, the meditating woman is silent and still, as her age and situation suggest, focused on fewer images:

I stare into the glittering
quartz of the air, marbled with
tiny streamers from
valiant chimneys down along the valley.

It is as if we pit ourselves
against a congealing It. (*AN* 3.15)

The woman broods on ‘the encroaching ice’ but concludes that it signifies something however mysterious and fearful, also wonderful:

the ice that somehow
signals another space, a fearful,
glorious amplitude.

Here she is the psalmist’s picture of one who has ‘calmed and quieted [her] soul, like a weaned child with its mother’ (Ps. 130.2).

This call to attention and reflection achieves intensity, in the poet’s own words, with ‘the whole-hearted use of language’ (1968b:35) required in any effective poem. ‘When he is writing poetry a person is at his most intense, his most clear sighted’, she insists. Poetry should reflect ‘that pressure point of crystallization’ (June 1944:67). That pressure point emerges in both the deceptively simple images of her ‘selved’ and ‘thinged’ and ‘earthed’ people of ‘People Who Endure’ (*AN* 2.191)²⁴ and the more complicated transformations of snow in the mind’s ‘re-creation’—‘astonished cinders quake / With rhizomes’ or ‘Asters of tumbled quietness reveal / Their petals’—in the elusive ‘Snow’ sonnet (*AN* 1.69).

Avison is often a very short distance from religious considerations in her trio of ‘venture, jail-break and re-creation’. In fact, these themes emerge in explicit and undisguised form throughout the lyrics of her several volumes of poems. There is, for instance, the transformation of the initially unbelieving father of John the Baptist in *The Dumbfounding*’s ‘Christmas: Anticipation’ (*AN* 1.221-22):

The old man with his censer, dazed down the
centuries, rays his
dry-socketed eyes, dimming
still, till he could believe, towards,
with, joy.

The evocation of

Zacharias²⁵ dumb with unbelieving,

²⁴ See Section 2.1 for a fuller discussion of this poem.

²⁵ or Zechariah. Avison is using the Authorized Version’s variant spelling of the name.

flame-touched, to front
the new sky

is in the context of ‘the street-lot’s unlit needles of wet trees / waiting for Christmas buyers’ and ‘hoar stone / cliff of an unfamiliar church’, with its ‘pigeons flap[ping] and chuckl[ing] invisibly’ and ‘tire-slop and motor-hum’ and ‘buyers wedge[d] in doorways / waiting for lights, lifts, taxis’. The poem’s call to attention occurs in its opening lines: ‘For Christmas week the freezing rain / stings and whispers another presence’. In all the activity of the city’s pre-Christmas preparations, only the attuned and stilled listener—like the priest Zechariah forced into silence—catches the sound in nature that points to something larger and of ultimate importance.

Both sympathetic critics and editors anticipate that this call to spiritual awareness may and does draw resistance. The editors of the third volume of *Always Now: The Collected Poems* frame her poetry on the back cover in terms of Elizabeth Hay’s musings:

how is an unbeliever to approach not just parts of the work but all of the work of a poet who believes, through and through, in a personal God? ... I listen to her infinite sympathy for the natural world, her sensitivity to the physical weather of the soul, her razor-sharp vision which moves like a hawk’s and a sighted mole’s, her wry debates with herself, her ornery, unfashionable courage, her poetic genius for placing words in such a way that I feel as if I’m meeting them for the first time. (2005:back book cover)

To begin, Hay enthuses, her poetry is significant poetry, no matter what the topic and deserves a hearing. For the sake of the intriguing poetry—with its singularity of vision and voice—readers can approach the collected poems with some sense of anticipation. If Christian witness shines forth, so be it. Readers can focus on Avison’s ‘infinite sympathy’ and ‘razor-sharp vision’ if they choose and sidestep the religious themes. The editors of a recent anthology, *Canadian Literature in English: Texts and Contexts*, suggest something similar when they point out that her poems ‘reflect the reverence and wonder of Christian beliefs’ but her poetry ‘does not proselytize’ (Moss & Sugars, 2009:200, 201). Starnino, however, embraces the essential spirit of her concerns in his review of Volume Two of *The Collected Poems*. He takes his interest in her work

further as he appreciates her ‘profoundly unconservative’ innovations (2005:D5) flowing out of—not in spite of—the religious vision. ‘Many of Avison’s poems are extreme acts’, he avers. His review ends with a perceptive summation of her Christian witness:

But God—the “light / shining from beyond farthestness” [Avison’s words]—is the true creative direction in her work. Avison clearly takes her ideas on journeys many of us no longer travel, so that encountering these poems means encountering down to the micro level—a lost world of devotional thinking. (2005:D5)

It is possible that this creative direction—this ‘journey many of us no longer travel’ and ‘lost world’—is worth re-exploring and re-interpreting. The poet thinks so and resolutely and openly announces in ‘Other Oceans’ (*AN* 3.146-54),

How different it would be, today, to
“take up your cross and follow Me”, to
“take My yoke upon you, learn....”

Her innovations may extend far beyond syntax and diction as she imaginatively creates space for God. Speaking out of our culture’s silence about the idea of a personal God involved in the world’s creation and redemption, she addresses that silence. The contemporary theologian Rachel Muers in *Keeping God’s Silence*, drawing on the work of Gemma Fiumara, explains the linguistic philosopher’s concept of ‘the problem of benumbment’. Muers writes, ‘Benumbment is the condition of defensiveness produced by exposure to warring discourses. It is a refusal to listen or be listened to, as a means of defending one’s own discursive space against the predatory invasion of other discourses’ (2004:56).

Avison disarms, breaking the spell of modern enchantment and this particular ‘benumbment’. She opens a window—or even a door—on the possibility of renewing dialogue between traditions of faith and unfaith. Across the years of her writing and across the separate volumes published sometimes decades apart are poems that explore an alternative vision to modernity’s secularity. The poet returned to traditional Christian beliefs, having taken a lengthy hiatus in ‘the far country’ (Lk. 15.13), and with confidence offers a fresh and unique perspective on the faith she embraces. On topics

sometimes directly religious, sometimes not, she offers a peculiar and strikingly honest vision that indicates a particular directional pull God-ward. The poems in the chapters that follow are representative of her distinctive and singular Christian witness, articulating directly or obliquely that Christian vision. Memorable phrases excerpted from her lyrics are gentle invitations to see with her against the grain of our expectations but in harmony with the grain of the universe: ‘Part of the strangeness is / Knowing the landscape,’ she suggests (‘From a Provincial’ *AN* 2.85); ‘For everyone / The swimmer’s moment at the whirlpool comes,’ she muses (‘The Swimmer’s Moment’, *AN* 1.89). That vision may be ‘A calling from our calling?’ (‘Our Working Day May Be Menaced’, *AN* 1.110-12) or ‘The kind of lighting up the terrain / That leaves aside the whole terrain, really’ (‘Voluptuaries and Others’, *AN* 1.117). She calls attention to that perennial ‘seek[ing] out some pivot for significance’ (‘The Mirrored Man’, *AN* 1.125-26) or ‘merely persever[ing] / along the borders of / the always unthinkable!’ (‘Other Oceans’, *AN* 3. 146-54), spurring her readers on to spiritual attention.

In *A Kind of Perseverance*, the poet speaks of what she calls an authentic act or utterance: ‘Rarely is an act or utterance so authentic that one is stilled by it—far past the ugly stage of “understanding” that reacts to goodness with guilt, i.e. with vanity’ (1994b:60). In the context of her lecture she is speaking of a kind of receptiveness nurtured in the self that results in hope. The thread that joins the disparate poems in the chapters that follow, selected to reveal Avison’s carefully articulated Christian vision, is the sense of wonder she evokes as she points to something—Someone—out of the self.
I sense rare and authentic utterances.

Chapter 2: ‘Towards an Understanding of Christian Witness’

But when someone tells it, something,
a Presence, may briefly shine
showing heaven again,
and open.
(‘When We Hear A Witness Give Evidence’ *AN* 2.168)

To begin exploring this alternative model of Margaret Avison’s particular Christian witness in poetry (and conversely, the effect of that witness on the poetry), it is helpful to first reflect on expectations of the testimony of a witness and then on what it is about the poetic form, especially as it is shaped in the modernist tradition, that makes the connection possible. The terms of reference ‘witness’ and ‘poetry’, familiar as they are, need clarification, leaving aside for a moment the critical and fundamental descriptor ‘Christian’.

2.1 Connecting Witness with Poetry

One obvious way to think about witness is to consider its etymology—its root meanings, one of Avison’s own favourite exploratory methods. At a basic level, the word ‘witness’ has to do with knowledge—a kind of seeing and hearing before one reports. A witness is one who ‘knows’ (its etymological root in Old English is *witan* = to know) and who is ‘mindful of’ (from the Indo-European root *smer*). Strathman, in Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, in his lengthy entry on the even earlier Greek word grouping observes that ‘μάρτυς [witness] would seem to come from the root *smer* “to bear in mind”, “to remember”, “to be careful”’ (1967:475), establishing the importance of the concept with each of these nuances.¹ This connection

¹Gathering the accretions of meaning from related language groupings—‘that which demands much care or deliberation; he who considers or deliberates much ... to be anxiously concerned’, he concludes, ‘Hence μάρτυς was probably one who remembers, who has knowledge of something by recollection, and who can thus tell about it’ (475). When he speaks of the verb μαρτυρέιν to witness he recalls its characteristic as ‘a state or habitual activity’ but which ‘can often take on trans. significance. μαρτυρέιν thus means “to be a witness”, “to come forward as a witness”, “to bear witness to something”’ (475). In sum, the primary cognates in the word grouping are (1) μάρτυς one who remembers, μαρτυρέω to be a witness, μαρτυρία the bearing of witness, μαρτύριον proof of something.

Coenen, in his dictionary entry of ‘witness, testimony’ in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, explains the Greek word’s origin in a similar fashion to the OED and Strathman in Kittel: ‘[T]he noun *martyria* means making an active appearance and statements as a

with knowledge filters into many sundry experiences of life and everyday parlance: ‘I witnessed the strangest thing today’ or ‘God is my witness’ or ‘Would any witness to the accident please let the police know’ or ‘Her interest in the subject is a witness (or bears witness) to its importance’.

Depending on how the word is used, *The Oxford English Dictionary* explains, witness is ‘(a) knowledge, understanding or wisdom’; ‘(b) attestation of a fact, event or statement; testimony, evidence’; or ‘(c) a person who gives evidence concerning matters of fact under investigation’. These descriptions of witness suggest an increasing participation and activity. The first sense of the word corroborates the etymological root of knowing, of seeing, suggesting a two-part process. Here the focus is on intake, on reception. A witness may be intimately involved in an ‘event’ or merely a disinterested and involuntary bystander. Perception may be clear or confused; understanding may be full or partial. The action of witness may be aborted if the one seeing chooses not to disclose what was seen and remains silent.

Witness in the second sense, as ‘attestation of a fact, event or statement’, implies the expected complementary report of the ‘event’. This attestation can be automatic and involve no speech. A room bears witness to its owner in its arrangement and contents; a building is testimony to the builder and architect; the plant gives testimony to soil, sun, and water; a bark announces the dog’s arrival; lingering perfume suggests a woman’s presence near by. Each sensory experience shares in this silent witness.

Attend. Attend.
In pool and sand and riffled waters, here is
significant witness of an event,

Avison points out in ‘The Ecologist’s Song’ (*AN* 2.266).

This attestation may also be verbal manifestation or revelation, drawing attention away from a reporting self to something outside the self.

witness (*martyos*), the earliest form of the basic noun being *martyros* in Homer, attested from Hom. *Od.* 11.325 onwards, and cognate with *mermeros*, that which requires many minds, going back with this word to the common Indo-European root *smer*’ (1038).

I love to see birds walk.
Oh yes of course, their singing,
their soaring, their
flocking in autumn branches [...]

the poet exclaims in a whimsical mood in ‘Resting on a Dry Log, Park Bench, Boulder’ (*AN* 3.97). Giving testimony or attesting to a fact involves interpretation both by a speaker and listener who may or may not understand each other, as Avison observes in ‘Cultures Far and Here’ (*AN* 3.50-51):

We cluster
telling each other
stories that build the vault of a
shelter from the wholly
unknown, comforted by what
is recognizable in our overlapping
awareness.

But sky and weather
have a way of disregarding our
walls, sweeping us on to
not being an “us”.

In the process, the multivalence of language complicates, enriching or hindering the transaction between witness and hearer. The witness event, in all its parts, is not necessarily a clean and unambiguous exchange of ‘facts’. Again, the poet articulates the difficulty:

Learning, I more and more
long for that simplicity,
clarity, that willingness
to speak (from anonymity ...)
all those impenetrables, when words
are more like bluebell petals under
an absorbed heaven. (‘Concert’ *AN* 3.65)

The latter description in the OED, the third sense of the word, a person who gives evidence, is perhaps the default understanding of the word, and not without justification. Courtrooms, lawyers and judges come to mind when the subject of witnesses is raised. The popularity of courtroom dramas on television reflects the culture’s fascination with the expectations on witnesses and their narratives. Many famous novels and plays are constructed around trial scenes. For example, the dramatic testimony of the witnesses in

the Russian novelist Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* plays a central role in the story.²

Other more formal reasons come to mind. For one, its etymology encourages this emphasis. Biblical scholars interested in the topic of witness often point out that the knowing and seeing and telling of a witness has mostly to do with disputation and disagreement, covenants and legal proceedings in the Old Testament setting. Strathman again, in his seminal article on 'witness' in Kittel's dictionary, begins his discussion by explaining:

[t]he proper sphere of μάρτυς is the legal, where it denotes one who can and does speak from personal experience and actions in which he took part and which happened to him, or about persons and relations known to him. He may be a witness at a trial, or in legal transactions of different kinds, a solemn witness in the most varied connection. (1967:476)

Other scholars follow suit.³ The word's 'native habitat' (Lewis, 1960:2) is in the legal sphere of ancient Greece and other ancient communities such as Israel. There are examples in Homer, for instance, on the shield of Achilles in Book 11 of *The Iliad*. The opening of *The Odyssey* suggests the form as Odysseus's son attempts to re-gain control of his father's house from the suitors and calls fellow noblemen to witness his predicament. These public dealings are similar to the Old Testament pattern described by the writer of the book of Ruth, explaining how Boaz arranges for the legality of his marriage to Ruth. Boaz brings ten elders to the gate of his city to register a legal transaction (Ruth 4.1-2). The writer of Ruth comments,

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel ... Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses". (Ruth 4.7-9)

² This particular work is noted here because Avison herself singles out the novelist in a footnote about a friend and subject of a poem. See *Always Now* 3.125. Her comments that he was one of two writers central to her (along with Jacques Ellul) suggest her interest in witness could easily be coloured by her reading of Dostoyevsky.

³ Among others are J. M. Boice, *Witness and Revelation in the Gospel of John* (1970); A. E. Harvey, *Jesus On Trial: A study in the fourth Gospel* (1976); J. Stott, *Some New Testament Word Studies* (1961); R. V. Moss, Jr.; J. H. Bavinck and R. P. Casey as quoted in Trites (1977); A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (1977); L. Coenen in Brown *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1971:1038-51.

Strathman moves on in his discussion, suggesting a ‘very general use [of the *martyria* word group] outside the legal sphere’ (1967:477), and opening a different avenue of nuance to the concept of witness: ‘The [word] group now refers not merely to the establishment of events or actual relations or facts of experience on the basis of direct personal knowledge. It signifies also the proclamation of views or truths of which the speaker is convinced’ (1967:478). This description, while not directly evoking a juridical environment, nevertheless, still seems to suggest a defensive posture.

Allison Trites, in his book *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, remains convinced of the importance of the legal context, and he expands the theme of anchoring ‘witness’ in what he insists is an environment of controversy and disputation.⁴ He develops his influential argument for witness as legal defence from Second Isaiah’s metaphor of two ‘controversies’ or ‘lawsuits’ between Yahweh and the world, and Yahweh and Israel in Isaiah 40-55,⁵ particularly focused in chapter 43:

Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes,
who are deaf, yet have ears!
Let all the nations gather together and let the peoples assemble.
Who among them declared this, and foretold to us the former things?
Let them bring their witnesses to justify them,
and let them hear and say, “It is true”.
You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.
Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.
(Isa. 43.8ff)

For Trites the prophet’s metaphor becomes a working model for the witness of the New Testament, particularly as John’s Gospel, Luke’s Acts of the Apostles and the Apocalypse unfold.⁶ In his concluding argument, he speaks of communicating the

⁴ Trites goes on to detail the legal proceedings in Israel, setting up his argument for the metaphorical application: ‘There the accuser summoned his witnesses and the accused with his witnesses, together with the elders of the place who would consider the case. There was no public prosecutor; as in Greek courts, the injured party must bring the action’ (1977:20).

⁵ Other biblical scholars share his view. For instance, from the outset of his discussion, Watts, in his commentary *Isaiah 34-66*, as well, insists that ‘the Book of Isaiah, especially chaps. 40-66, is clearly controversial in tone and purpose’ and that ‘[t]he basic apologetic character of the Book of Isaiah is particularly clear in the so-called disputation speeches’ (Watts, 1987b:xxiii).

⁶ Trites emphasizes throughout his explanation of the Old Testament legal assembly several points that affect what he sees as the legal metaphor found in New Testament writings: For one, proof rested with witnesses and their testimony. Second, the same man was both witness and advocate; at the same time, the same man could serve as both judge and witness. Third, the testimony of a single witness was not

gospel ‘to a sceptical, questioning age’ (1977:225), and in Christian apologetic language he emphasizes that ‘the frequent use of the witness theme stresses the importance of the historical foundations of the Christian religion’ (1977:224). One must learn how to argue persuasively for the validity of the Christian faith.

Obviously, Trites is viewing biblical witness through a very particular lens which could be argued is compatible to a litigious and nervous culture. The language of courtroom can resonate with people as apologetic works with titles such as Josh McDowell’s *Evidence Demands a Verdict* and C. S. Lewis’s *God in the Dock* demonstrate. It cannot be denied that there is a juridical metaphor in the Isaiah passage, but it seems reductive to overwork the metaphor, closing rather than opening up the text. Security in a specific kind of certainty can bring its own blindness.⁷ For one, the metaphor is situated in a poetic form, thus providing a natural linguistic resistance to the structure of the witness metaphor. Legal suits by their nature require specific control and limitations of meaning. Poetry, on the other hand, exerts its energy and power through nuance and multiple meanings, evocation and suggestion. Consequently, the metaphor in action, so to speak, outstrips its legal derivation. Second, witness, by definition is pointing outward—towards another. The driving force of Second Isaiah’s poetic treatise is the ‘new thing’ that Yahweh is performing in front of and for the witnesses (but which they cannot see, for it is hidden).

adequate to condemn a person (1977:21-22). Further, the legal connotations attached to the concept of witness are found throughout the literature of the Old Testament and are brought into the realm of poetry. For example, he explains the story of Job in terms of legal proceedings. The theme of controversy is illustrated in the dialogues between Job and his ‘comforting’ friends with speech and counter-speech, a pattern which explains the lack of real progress in persuasion between the parties (1977:26). Job’s friends, while not named ‘witnesses’ per se, function in what they perceive as the role of witnesses to vindicate God’s behaviour. It is significant that his formulation of his position has generated so much interest and commentary from subsequent New Testament scholars interested in the topic.

⁷ Martin Walton takes a similar view. In his review of the conversation among biblical scholars, *Witness in Biblical Scholarship: A Survey of Recent Studies 1956-1980*, he posits, ‘The general legal connotation of the witness terminology is undisputed. Disputed is to what extent the legal element plays a role in the NT’ (1986:25). Further, the question is also whether the content of the testimony is not of more concern for the NT writers than the witness setting’ (1986:26).

Another reason one might emphasize the legal connotations of witness comes from philosophical enquiry, as Paul Ricoeur details in his essay ‘The Hermeneutics of Testimony’ (1985). The cognate of ‘witness’, ‘testimony’, seems to derive much of its attention and energy from a juridical context. He narrows the discussion by insisting that ‘testimony is not perception itself but the report, that is, the story, the narration of the event. It consequently transfers things seen to the level of things said’ (1985:123). An important implication follows:

The witness has seen, but the one who receives his testimony has not seen but hears. It is only by hearing the testimony that he can believe or not believe in the reality of the facts that the witness reports. Testimony as story is thus found in an intermediary position between a statement made by a person and a belief assumed by another on the faith of the testimony of the first. (1985:123)

Therefore, Ricoeur implies, the character of the witness becomes important. Is the person reliable, sincere and with honest intentions? Is the witness willing to testify and prepared to speak truth about a situation or person? Does the person have the requisite skill to interpret and articulate what has been perceived? Is there competence for naming and identifying relevant information and constructing a coherent narrative from the garnered data? What natural biases and motives affect the reporting?⁸ As a result, he observes, ‘[T]estimony is at the service of judgment’ (1980:123), suggesting that the context of listening to testimony from a witness is a trial (1980:124), whether literal or figurative—‘all situations in which a judgment or a decision can be made only at the end of a debate or confrontation between adverse opinions and conflicting points of view’ (1980:125).

What Ricoeur has noted about witness is not a new idea, of course. Avison confronts the same concern in her lecture ‘Misunderstanding is Damaging’, as she spells out the perils for both the one reporting and the one receiving the report of an event, reminding her audience of the similarities between old formulations of an idea with modern discussions of the same. Boethius’s observation in the sixth century in his

⁸ This latter question is what is behind Avison’s ‘evangelical anxiety’ over the integrity communicated in her poetry. See Chapter 1.1.

Consolation of Philosophy—‘As we have shown, every object of knowledge is known not as a result of its own nature, but of the nature of those who comprehend it’—she remarks, sounds very much the same as the Heisenberg Principle from the twentieth century—‘willing to doubt the veracity of the observed because the observer’s presence is an inevitable part of the process and may screen or skew what is seen’ (1994b:36). As a result, the role of the witness cannot be minimized; the reality embodied in the narration includes the narrator.

At the same time, there are related implications in the juridical situation. Drawing on the difference between descriptive and what is termed ‘ascriptive’ discourse, Ricoeur points out that juridical statements can be contested, (1980:126).⁹ He speaks of the character of legal judgement as ‘defeasible’—‘susceptible of being invalidated, abrogated’. This characteristic ‘is not secondary’ but ‘the touchstone of legal reasoning and judgment itself’ (1980:126). Meaning and interpretation are assigned to juridical statements and these statements are capable of differing interpretations on the part of both witness, judge and jury. Further on in his discussion, Ricoeur observes that testimony is ‘caught in the network of proof and persuasion’ (1980:127), placing a particular burden on both the speaking witness and the listening witness. Ascriptive and defeasible discourse, the language of witness, can be tested and contested at various points of exchange, but the ‘truth’ of the situation may remain elusive. Jacques Ellul explains it this way: ‘One person’s word against another’s is the only possible fragile pointer to truth, like a compass quivering in its case’ (1985:41). But there is no other alternative, as he goes on to suggest: ‘In order to live, we need truth to be expressed by the most fragile agent, so that the listener remains free’ (1985:41). Straining to achieve certainty with deliberate rhetoric of persuasion may or may not achieve the goal.

⁹ He explains he is drawing on the work of H. L. A. Hart, ‘The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights’ (1948).

What does this mean for the poet? Or better still, what can the poet bring to the juridical setting of witness? To begin, the poet recognizes, accepts, embraces and reveals human limitation. In the theological realm, for example, as Jasper observes, '[P]oetry disturbs theological certainty, making its signs dangerous, indirect and provisional, reminding us that God is always greater than what is revealed to us, and that the *truth* of Christian believing is more important than its definition as uniquely *Christian*' (1989:33). At the same time, the inherent limitation is also a source of rich artistic tension to be mined for the poet who declares a commitment to both witness and the 'wholehearted use of words' noted in 'Muse of Danger'. Avison explains,

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 ... Consequently, his words have potential effect at every level—not only the intentional or logical levels. (1968b:35)

Meaning will be larger—will range farther—than the small context of the literal or figurative trial. Meaning is already fluid in poetic discourse. While the poet labours for clarity and precision, she embraces the radiating echoes of ambiguity and allusion and the multi-leveled movement of metaphor.

Avison has one poem where she uses the word 'witness' in the juridical sense in its title, providing a vivid example of poetry's capacity to enlarge and transform experience—in this case, the enactment of witness itself. But though there is a suggestion of a metaphorical trial in its title, the situation in the poem belies the juridical emphasis. It is not a poem of apologetics with a 'controversy' of warring discourses. Instead, the poem intimates a situation where 'God' shows up and the heavens open in some miraculous unexplained way.

When We Hear a Witness Give Evidence

Who heard the angels' song?
Those on the night-shift. Maybe
the animals. Not mother and baby,
not Joseph, innkeeper, wise men,
not the soldiers or Herod. Not Elizabeth's John.

The glory (that *once*) was clear
of those in waiting on him who now

was clothed with only our here.
Heaven knew this was the hour.
The Father gave Himself over.
A few heard the angels shine, stricken with wonder.

Joblessness now, or night-shift,
nine-to-five or in Chronic
Care waiting it out:
we like to quibble, we hear
and are faintly afraid, are sore.
No, there's no angel-song
tonight. But when someone tells it, something,
a Presence, may briefly shine
showing heaven again,

and open. (*AN* 2.168)

Avison takes a familiar scene of the Christmas story as told by the historian and defamiliarizes it. She does not mention the shepherds, only implying them by their night-shift obligations. The central actors in the nativity do not hear the witness of the glorious choir, the list indicating it has nothing to do with merit: Mary and Joseph in their submission to the will of God, Jesus himself who has left the glory of heaven, the oblivious innkeeper who does not know whom he is turning away, the wise men who are so diligent and intent on worship, the soldiers and Herod who will cause such mourning with their massacre; not Elizabeth's John, either—the man, like the angels, sent from God to herald Christ's coming. Who gets to hear then?—and by extension, to see?

The second stanza slows the pace of reading with the difficult syntax and familiar diction, but strange in this context. What is meant by ‘glory’, a very Johannine word? Two other familiar words feel strange: ‘once’ and ‘clear’. Is ‘once’ referring to a specific time—a date, or only one time? Is ‘clear’ suggesting understandable, the human veil removed temporarily, or removed from, or distanced from? The riddling language continues, describing ‘him who now / was clothed with only our here’. The present human reality is all the ‘clothing’ the human Christ will wear. ‘Heaven knew this was the hour’ and hence, the song: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours’ (Lk 2:14). The supreme moment of witness has occurred; in turn, the response to the verbal witness is again provocative: ‘A few heard

the angels shine'. Shine, of course, is a visual word. But then to those who heard the angels' song, stricken with wonder, perhaps hearing and seeing were all of one piece.

The last stanza connects to the present mundane and painful realities of current existence—even at its most hopeless and desolate: 'in Chronic / Care waiting it out'. 'We like to quibble'—evade the truth. 'We hear'—hear what? Instead of being 'sore afraid'—stricken with wonder, we are merely 'faintly afraid' and 'sore'—in pain, irritated. There is no miraculous intervention tonight—no peace, no favour. 'But when someone tells it'. What meaning fills that little pronoun? When a person hears a witness give evidence of God's redemptive presence in his or her—'our'—confined and night-shift world, what might that witness look like? Would she or he recognize it as witness?

something,
a Presence, may briefly shine
showing heaven again,
and open.

Avison has taken the witness language of the courtroom and transcended the basic understanding of 'defeasible' evidence. She has pointed to a numinous reality that is apprehended only occasionally in the darkness of humankind's existence. The playful ambiguities throughout the poem set the table for the climaxing mystery of the glory of 'The Father['s] giv[ing] Himself over' to those now who 'are faintly afraid, and sore'.

Poetic discourse, as Avison has shown above, is both a form which calls attention to itself and a particular language which already suggests witness. The poet perceives; the poet apprehends; the poet 'knows'. The poet names an experience, bearing witness to what has been seen or heard or felt or imagined. The poet may shape a particular work of art with distinctive lineation, syntax, rhythms and diction that call attention to what has been seen or imagined. At the same time, the poem is not merely description (or only description). Rowan Williams speaks of a poetic text 'offering a frame of linguistic reference other than the normal descriptive/referential function of language' (2000:133), echoing Ricoeur's assertion that '[p]oetic discourse suspends this

descriptive function.¹⁰ It does not directly augment our knowledge of objects' (1980:100-101). Earlier Ricoeur has suggested that witness is ascriptive discourse in contrast to descriptive discourse, implying the possibility of the familiar Wordsworthian combination '[o]f eye, and ear,—both what they half create, / And what perceive' ('Tintern Abbey').¹¹ From both directions, then, witness has a distinctive character in poetic form.

The poets and critics themselves have their own ways of explaining their particular discourse. Avison herself reminds her listeners in 'Understanding is Costly':

"The poet's job," according to Megroz, is "to prove that we are wiser than we know ... Philosophy, science and morality are essentially empirical; poetry ... and religion necessarily transcend and anticipate demonstrable experience and therefore cannot be *fully* expressed or understood rationally" (The italics are mine, Avison explains). Our wisdom waits, in the wings! (1994b:52)

She intimates a freedom from the need to control, to fix meaning, as she suggests in her sonnet 'Butterfly Bones: Sonnet against Sonnets' (AN 1.71):

The cyanide jar seals life, as sonnets move
towards final stiffness [...]
Insect – or poem – waits for the fix, the frill
precision can effect, brilliant with danger.

In the theories of an earlier century, the Romantic poet Wordsworth delineates the poet as 'a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness ... and a more comprehensive soul ...' ('Preface, Lyrical Ballads').¹² In his poetic manifesto, the poet goes on to identify poetry as the language of passion:¹³

¹⁰ That is, 'at least if we identify [the referential function] with the capacity to describe familiar objects of perception or the objects which science alone determines by means of its standards of measurement' (Ricoeur, 1980:100).

¹¹ See Wordsworth in Perkins, 1967:210.

¹² See Wordsworth in Perkins, 1967:324.

¹³ See Stephen Prickett for an extended discussion of the connection between the religious and the poetic in *Words and the Word: Language, poetics and biblical interpretation* (1986b). In his historical account of the connection between religious language and what evolved into Romantic aesthetics, he discusses the work of John Dennis, who concluded in his essay *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) that 'Poetry is the natural Language of Religion' ... 'Poetry ... is an Art, by which a Poet excites Passion' (qtd by Prickett, 1986b:42). Prickett points out that '[f]or Dennis, the link between poetry and religion was that both relied on passion and supernatural persuasion to restore the inner harmony disrupted by the Fall' (Prickett, 1986b:43). Avison, as will be pointed out, is more interested in perception than passion even while she evokes great feeling in particular lyrics.

Aristotle, I have been told, has said, that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives competence and confidence to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal.¹⁴ ('Preface, Lyrical Ballads')

There is a curious emphasis on witness language—‘not standing upon external testimony’, ‘truth which is its own testimony’, ‘tribunal to which it appeals’—as Wordsworth articulates Romantic poetics of the ‘truth of the human heart’. Echoing her great predecessor in the opening lines of her early sonnet ‘Snow’, Avison speaks of the venturing ‘optic heart’ making ‘a jail-break / And re-creation’ (*AN* 1.69). In his essay, ‘Stevens, Wordsworth, Jesus: Avison and the Romantic Imagination’, Lawrence Mathews calls attention to her initial ‘indebted[ness] to the English Romantic tradition’ when he draws the parallel between her ‘optic heart’ and Coleridge’s ‘famous definition of the secondary imagination, which “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create”’ (1987:36). However, Avison early on shows herself wary of ‘[this] tendency begun by Wordsworth, to see poetry through the state of mind of the poet’ (Prickett, 1986b:46), and clearly reacts against her ‘Romantic ancestry,’ as Mathews notes.¹⁵ In an anecdote about her friendship with Avison, the poet Gail Fox notes that she

has greatly curbed my tendency to write confessional poetry and poetry that is a cry from the heart. Characteristic of her response to such is an exchange I had with her recently which wasn’t about poetry: “Well, I’ve given up smoking.” “Yes, and the rain on the street is *violet*”. (Fox, 1987:56)

Avison insists in her poem ‘Is Intense Sincere?’ (*MD* 26), published in her last collection before she died,

Neither passion nor
prophecy is
poetry. They come before, or are
premonished.

She suggests instead,

Prophecy and passion become
poetry after,
after long bearing-with.

¹⁴ See Wordsworth in Perkins, 1967:325.

¹⁵ Mathews offers a comparative reading of Avison’s post-conversion poem ‘Searching and Sounding’ with Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’, suggesting that her poetry is also ‘post-Romantic’. See Mathews in Kent, 1987:46-50.

Example follows assertion in a kind of reminiscence of ‘sea-wideness, the sure / promise of sungold towers’:

Yes, the sixteenth century
poets were light on prophecy.
Singing does that to poets – remembering
that Shakespeare always is the
exception. Desdemona’s
presence remains private to herself,
Only to Miranda, calm
and undemanding, came the
sea-wideness, the sure
promise of sungold towers
with Ferdinand, exalting, at her side.

That comes of exile.

In invoking Shakespeare’s supreme example, Avison discreetly shifts the focus from the poet’s inner awareness of ‘after long bearing-with’ to the ‘exile’ of the persona in the poet’s play. *The Tempest*’s Miranda and Ferdinand compel the audience’s interest, not the playwright’s emotional state.

Her poem ‘Is Intense Sincere?’ also points to Avison’s affinity with the modernism of Eliot and Stevens in its preoccupation with language as art. She does not go as far as Wallace Stevens in his familiar words in ‘A High-Toned Old Christian Woman that ‘[p]oetry is the supreme fiction’ (1954:59),¹⁶ but she is sympathetic to his focus on the poet’s capacity to engage the imagination in his or her observations of reality. Avison, in her modern outlook and emphasis on her craft, also echoes W. H. Auden when he suggests ‘[a] poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language’ (Geddes, 2006:156). She resonates with Ezra Pound’s formulation of ‘an intellectual and emotional complex’ (Geddes, 2006:1042) as she reviews the art of other poets. Speaking of the poet Pablo Neruda, she comments, ‘[his] words are an incident in the mind, a low murmur on the nebulous shore of that sea all men know in common’ (Avison, 1947: 21). Of a particular work of Edith Sitwell, she exclaims that

¹⁶ I am indebted to Mathews for pointing me to several parallels between Stevens and Avison.

there is a fascination here, like watching in slow motion while the winged horse gathers his muscles for the triumphal leap; and because that ultimate moment comes, again and again, this is great poetry, in spite of the wracked times that have framed its creation. (Avison, 1950:263)

She celebrates in these colourful responses to the lyrics of other poets, poetry's capacity to 'give words multiple meaning: literal, associative, mimetic, musical' (Avison, 1948:191).

Language as art shifts the discussion from speaking of the poet as witness to focusing on the text as testimony or witness. W. H. Auden asserts:

Poetry can do a hundred and one things, delight, sadden, disturb, amuse, instruct—it may express every possible shade of emotion, and describe every conceivable kind of event, but there is only one thing that all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being as for happening. (Geddes, 2006:157)

This peculiar comment 'it must praise all it can for being as for happening' points to several implications of this particular form of discourse. For one, in its naming of a reality poetry also alters it, and not unlike witness, interprets that reality. Owen Barfield speaks of '*fresh meaning*' when he describes the poetic: 'It operates essentially *within* the individual term which it creates and recreates by the magic of new combinations' (1973:151). As Michael Edwards suggests, drawing on insights of Mallarmé, 'A line of verse—constituting a "new world" alters the thing that it connotes, so that the reminiscence of the named object bathes in a new atmosphere' (1986:152). In the same essay he refers to a phenomenon of sound affording Wordsworth's 'visionary power', therefore 'induced by another sense'—another poetic alteration (1986:149-50).

Avison playfully demonstrates a particular crossing over into another in moving one preposition 'in' in 'Poetry Is' (MD 27-8),¹⁷ a deceptively simple poem ostensibly explaining how poetry works.

Poetry Is

Poetry is always in
unfamiliar territory.

At a ballgame when
the hit most matters
and the crowd is half-standing

¹⁷ See Appendix 2.1 for the complete, uninterrupted text of the poem.

already hoarse, then poetry's
eye is astray to a
quiet area to find out
who picks up the bat the runner
flung out of his runway.

Little stuff like that
poetry tucks away in
the little basket of other
scraps [...]

[...]

Scraps. Who carries the basket?
What will the scraps be used for?
Poetry does not care
what things are for but is
willing to listen to
any, if not everyone's
questions.

It can happen that poetry
basket and all *is*
the unfamiliar territory
that poetry is in.

The poem is doing far more than playing with prepositions, however. It is both talking about and embodying what Williams calls ‘revelation’ in his *On Christian Theology*: ‘Revelation … is essentially to do with what is *generative* in our experience—events or transactions in our language that break existing frames of reference and initiate new possibilities of life’ (2000:134). That ‘generative’ experience may not be easily named with simple referential correspondence; rather, there is a kind of mystery about the way the poetic works. The idea of liminal intuition may help clarify. As Edwards points out,

Verse is also described as a veil; and Wordsworth is surely right to imply that words veil rather than show, their role being not to describe a world merely given but, since it is a world excluded from Eden in expectation of Paradise, to conceal it in such a way as to change its appearance. “Transparent veil” is in fact formidably precise: almost an oxymoron, it suggests both our no-longer quite seeing the object when poetry has intervened, and our seeing yet not seeing the object as transformed in the poem. As we look, not “through a glass, darkly” but through a transparency, veiled, we catch, by flashes, a kind of other radiance. (1986:153)

Hence, some poets and critics will argue that poetry ‘is the language of the body-self and of dreaming’ or ‘the language of the unconscious and of dreaming’ (Geddes, 2006:xix).¹⁸

¹⁸ Geddes is drawing on the work of the Australian poet and psychiatrist Craig Powell who goes on to suggest that poetry ‘has its roots in primary process experience and is closer to the primordial union with the mother than the secondary process language of prose … Poetry, by the very regressive nature of its

Using religious language instead of psychological, David Jasper suggests something similar about poetic language (in its broadest sense):

[Good or great literature] works on us not only by what it *means*, but also because of what it *is*—its shape, its devices (irony, metaphor, allusion). Its power to affect and persuade is, it seems to me, mysterious and ultimately beyond the grasp of author or reader fully to understand ... the autonomous activity of the text [is like] the mysterious workings of divine grace. (1989:63)

‘Is’ seems awkwardly placed as an intransitive verb in the disorienting title of Avison’s poem, but it signals a kind of ontological reality and hints at yet another implication of the earlier observation of Auden. Poetry exists, the poem asserts; therefore one has to reckon with its presence. In this sense, poetry witnesses—or is a witness. It is calling attention to the thing itself. In less simple language Paul Ricoeur explains what he sees is the process operating in a poetic text, not limiting himself to ‘something opposed to prose’ (i.e. verse), but certainly including it: ‘[It] restores to us that participation-in or belonging-to an order of things which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject’ (1980:101).¹⁹ Williams interprets Ricoeur as saying, ‘The truth with which the poetic text is concerned is not verification, but manifestation. (Ricoeur 102)’ (Williams, 2000:133). Williams continues:

That is to say that the text displays or even embodies the reality with which it is concerned simply by witness or ‘testimony’ (to use Ricoeur’s favoured word). It displays a ‘possible world’, a reality in which my human reality can also find itself: and in inviting me into its world, the text breaks open and extends my own possibilities. All this, Ricoeur suggests, points to poetry as exercising a *revelatory* function ... it manifests an initiative that is not ours in inviting us to a world we did not make. (2000:133)

Again, Avison is suggesting something similar in her poem about poetry.

The first line of her poem promises some clarity, at least temporarily with its comforting addition of the preposition ‘in’, returning ‘is’ to its familiar capacity as

language, has the potential to evoke tears even when the manifest content of the poem has nothing to do with loss’ (Geddes, 2006:xix). Both writers are attempting to account for the deep emotion felt in the encounter with poetic language.

¹⁹ Ricoeur goes to great lengths to explain his understanding of poetic discourse: ‘this function is in no way to be identified with poetry understood as something opposed to prose and defined by a certain affinity of sense, rhythm, image, and sound ... to speak like Aristotle in his *Poetics*, the *mythos* is the way to true *mimesis*, ... a transposition or metamorphosis—or, as I suggest, a redescription. This conjunction of fiction and redescription, of *mythos* and *mimesis*, constitutes the referential function by means of which I would define the poetic dimension of language’ (1980:101-102). I am following the lead of others like Rowan Williams who do not seem to make this distinction, but instead, use Ricoeur’s definition to interpret how poetry as verse can function.

linking verb: ‘Poetry is always in / unfamiliar territory’. Unfamiliarity calls for close attention, as the poet describes the unusual details coming into her focus and gathered up into a ‘little basket of other scraps’ of details she has collected. The central metaphor of the poem—the basket and the scraps—shifts place in the subtle re-arrangement of little words in the closing stanza:

It can happen that poetry
basket and all *is*
the unfamiliar territory
that poetry is in.

Now readers must attend to more than the original data, the scraps, to understand the unfamiliar territory. Somehow words have swapped places and now poetry—basket and all—*is* the unfamiliar territory. Now her audience must ‘see’ the unfamiliar poetry—to clarify the original sightings. She shows what she means in any one of the three ‘scraps’ she has selected from the ‘basket’. For example:

There’s the

cradling undergrowth in
the scrub beside a
wild raspberry bush where
a bear lay feet up feeding
but still three rubied berries
glow in the green.
He had had enough.

In the earlier stanza ‘poetry’s / eye is astray’ to see what others are not noting. Now ‘poetry’s eye’ is peering in ‘the / cradling undergrowth in / the scrub’ to juxtapose two unequal images—‘a bear lay feet up feeding’ and ‘three rubied berries’ the bear apparently missed. And then there is the poem’s speaker’s deduction, ‘He had had enough’. The witness of the poem (that is, this part of the poem) is the whole generative ‘event’ of the multi-level unfamiliar territory—literally, the cradling undergrowth with its bear in the vulnerable pose, the uneaten berries, and the commentator—but also metaphorically, the words selected and arranged by the poet both for sound and meaning, inviting the reader’s participation in the experience. For example, the delay and disruption—‘There’s the’—at the end of one stanza before the new stanza and the

strange image. Or again, the naming of the raspberries as ‘rubied’—treasures the bear somehow left. Or the strange fact that one can even see the berries at all in the bear’s presence. ‘Poetry Is’, Avison insists. It is its own witness to the world that it is. ‘It must praise all it can for being as for happening’, Auden agrees (Geddes, 2006:157). David Jasper affirms, ‘Enactment is all’ (1989:130).²⁰ In response, readers may accept poetry’s invitation to come and ‘see’.

In ‘People Who Endure’ from the collection *No Time* (AN 2.191), readers are invited to ‘participate-in’ or ‘belong-to’ a very particular world of suffering, a reality all too close to twentieth and twenty-first century people saturated with images of multiple survivors of unspeakable disasters. The poet dares to name the reality and readers respond with some corresponding picture of some people who have ‘endure[d] terrible things’.

Some people who endure terrible things
become terrible, are
selved, yes
then thinged, lumped together, then
earthed.
Earth goes slowly
down (as Noah remembered but said water).

Raining and levelling, clear
eyes only, the unlidded only.²¹

There is for Noah who
trusted, a rainbow:
who built, who dared the lonely deeps,
who woke,
a sun again, and sons.

At the outset the seeming simplicity of the language and the sparse use of descriptive words call attention to the theme. Enduring and suffering have that stripped down quality. There are only three adjectives in the poem and all of them are key: terrible, unlidded, and lonely. The pace of the reading is abruptly halted on that awkward verbal ‘selved’—only to be followed by a neologism ‘thinged’. The familiar phrase ‘lumped

²⁰ The context of Jasper’s statement is a discussion of ‘proper theodical discourse and ‘true perception’: ‘The poet is one who sees and contemplates most profoundly ... creative in the perception of things in abandoned love even to the point of their created mystery. Enactment is all’ (1989:130-31).

²¹ The poem ‘Rising Dust’ discussed at the beginning of the chapter has curiously re-visited this theme. The two poems are published decades apart so the duplication is striking.

together' and the less familiar 'earthed' ('plunged or hidden in the earth; covered with earth' OED) complete the quartet of verbals describing what the people who endure terrible things become. The tragedy of the existence for some is accentuated by Avison's experimentation with unfamiliar forms of familiar words with their attendant metaphorical significance. The stanza ends with a new sentence connecting the one 'earthed' to a strange fate: 'Earth goes slowly / down', implying a vivid sense of burial. The sentence is interrupted by the parenthetical '(as Noah remembered but said water)'. Naming a specific person in the poem has altered the emotional and intellectual response. The allusion is puzzling because in the story of Noah (Ge. 6-9) the water did recede and the focus is customarily on his preservation. Avison seems to be beckoning to the context—the survivor's memory of the rising waters and the destruction of the earth around him.

The two-line middle stanza calls attention to itself with its images of raining and levelling. There is awkwardness in the line with the comma after levelling, but the awkwardness provides a radical turn in the poem: 'The raining and levelling, clear'. Clear what? With the break in the line, the focus is on 'eyes only, the unlidded only'. The poem opens up into something unexpectedly redemptive and healing. For the one who has eyes to see—as Noah, 'who trusted' in the last stanza—there is a new aggregation of images paralleling the first stanza: the verbs 'trusted', 'built', 'dared', and 'woke' are now answered by 'a rainbow', 'lonely deeps', 'sun', and 'sons'. While the complete Noah story moderates and complicates the hope—the sons of Noah are a mixed blessing²²—nevertheless, the isolation and darkness of the one who has been earthened in the first stanza ('having dared the lonely deeps') have been replaced with the revitalization and hope of the rainbow, sun and sons. In this initial exploration of witness Avison provides a 'manifested' or 'enacted' truth that disarms and invites

²² See Ge. 9.20-27.

readers to join her. At the same time, the poem opens up the possibility of a more pointed witness. Evoking Noah's story has awakened religious consciousness in the responsive reader, and leads naturally to Avison's specific witness to Jesus Christ in her poetry.

2.2 Christian Witness Suggested in Scripture

As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, Avison's poetic witness draws on the familiar biblical texts that speak of the same, but her practice in her lyrics suggests a minimizing of the juridical metaphor. Instead, she shifts attention to 'the mystery, hesitation and hiddenness of religious experience' (Jasper, 1989:32) inevitably connected to the transcendent and ineffable God of the scriptures. In the Margaret Avison Collection in the archives at the University of Manitoba there are several boxes filled with handwritten Bible study notes, reflecting a systematic and disciplined approach to familiarity of the text.²³ This capable scholar submits herself to a basic rigour as a lay reader of questions from the Scripture Union Study method of reading the Bible through in five years, an exercise obviously repeated more than once. She interprets her method in a 2005 interview for *Image*:

Poetry has helped me to know that in reading the Word, scripture, it's important to read every word. I don't know Greek and Hebrew, but I've got lots of translations to help me. Similarly I think in poetry it's always true that every word matters. You revise by cutting out and boiling down. Words are a good training for realizing the unchangeableness of the Word. (Avison & Martin, 2005:66)

Typically, as in that last sentence, she extends the meaning beyond technique. Her notes are, for the most part, recorded observations of data, liberally sprinkled with question marks that sometimes make their way into the text of a poem. She explains in that same interview: 'One reason I do it [i.e., slip a question mark onto a statement, or a single word] is in order to get under the text. I particularly like to ask these questions of something familiar in scripture, to try to read it in a new way' (Avison & Martin,

²³ They consist of single random sheets which are often obviously scrap paper and are written in a tiny and almost undecipherable hand.

2005:70). A poem that emerges from that text of the scriptures demonstrates that a transformation has taken place filtered through her particular sensitivity to the power of the multi-faceted ‘Word’.

This particular ‘seeing’ she visualizes in the ‘weeping eyes’ ‘stung’ with the ‘spray’ in the landscape of the ‘The Word’ (*AN* 2.220), one of her shortest lyrics. The startling image of ‘huge waterfalls’, normally anchored in the physical landscape, now pours from the heavens:

Huge waterfalls in ever-travelling skies
sting us with their spray
in weeping eyes
even in our present shadow-form of day.

There is something in the book—the Word—that makes the speaker in the poem weep. Perhaps it is too much reality for ‘our present shadow-form of day’.²⁴ The heartfelt emotion of the speaker creates uncertainty. Perhaps ‘The Word’ is not the book Avison so delights in, but the Logos of John 1, and the weeping eyes are those of Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb (Jn. 20.11-18). Or the indeterminate Word is perhaps a curious blending of both—the poet apprehending the Logos/Word/Christ in The Word/scriptures. Here is Avison’s method in miniature. The striking image attracts the reader first to the poem, and then to the text that inspired and generated the poem, and then in turn to the One both concealed and revealed in both texts. The direction is clear enough, but the ambiguities along the way linger and do not allow for clean closure. In this peculiar combination of clarity and lack of the same, her poems have become a mediating presence for the often puzzled but strangely yearning reader.

Helen Vendler, in *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats*, speaks of processes going on for the poet and reader:

To counter the common practice of separating the idea of lyric from the idea of responsible thinking, I want to illuminate, if possible, the way thinking goes on in the poet’s mind during

²⁴ Connections with other twentieth-century witnesses can be inferred: C. S. Lewis in his fantasy story *The Great Divorce* contrasts the physical reality of heaven with the newly arrived ‘man-shaped stains’ on the bright air who find the grass painful to walk on: ‘Reality is harsh to the feet of shadows’, one of the Bright People explains to one of the Ghosts from Hell (Lewis, 2001:20, 39).

the process of creation, and how the evolution of that thinking can be deduced from the surface of the poem—that printed arrangement of language that John Ashbery has brilliantly called a poem’s “visible core”. (2004:6)

Watching Avison think is one of the keys to understanding her poems as effective Christian witness. There is a power, perhaps hidden, in the aesthetic pleasure she affords in the perfect image of an idea combined with sounds that match the rhythms of the beats of the heart. The poet speaks of ‘writing with my ear in our good language’ (Avison & Martin, 2005:76) with ‘Adam’s lexicon’ (‘Butterfly Bones: Sonnet against Sonnets’, *AN* 1.71) and by now, the familiar venturing ‘optic heart’ (‘Snow’ *AN* 1.69). Her readers have the same tools at their disposal. Further, the rigours involved in participating in her thought processes stimulate perceptions of the text of the scriptures as well as the One to whom they point. In other words, her witness beckons the reader to join her in the witness.

Looking at two poems in *Not Yet But Still* on the same biblical text yields some significant understanding of both her method and perceptions. The title of the first of the two poems is unusually long, containing the entire text, which cleverly imitates its meaning. ‘Tell them everything that I command you; do not omit a word’ (Jer. 26:2b) (*AN* 3.35)²⁵ is an excerpt out of one of the prophet Jeremiah’s warnings of impending doom to the king of Judah in a context of the people’s scepticism and persecution of Jeremiah for his dire warnings. A few chapters earlier in Jeremiah’s writing, the prophet has lamented the false prophets of hope who have not called God’s people to repentance for grievous sins: ‘Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord’, exclaims the prophet (Jer. 23.1).

They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They keep saying to those who despise the word of the Lord, “It shall be well with you” ... For who has stood in the council of the Lord so as to see and to hear his word? Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it? (Jer. 23.17, 18)

The poem deals with the aftermath of those who reject the word of God. The lyric recreates the ‘eerie quiet’ and the ‘crack and rustle of fear’ with the impending

²⁵ See Appendix 2.2 for complete text.

‘storm/doom’ of a people who have been defeated by invading armies of another nation.

The poem concludes,

Yes, they had heard
his long-range forecasts.
But now, they knew, believing now
had them closed in with seeing.

The few survivors knew now how to read the signs of their times and knew which prophet had spoken truth. The poem allows for an allegorical reading, extending the impending doom to one who does not respond to the words of Christ and the Word/Logos, but it still has profound import in its original context with its dominant image of people who have had their eyes opened to truth they have been denying.

Tucked in this prophecy of doom, however, are words that stretch beyond the situation and change the meaning of ‘long-range forecasts’. In the third stanza the poet writes:

with force and immediacy, heard
by every child, woman and man,
came the word, spoken
through Jeremiah who
moved past darkness.

The ‘long-range forecasts’ ‘mov[ing] past darkness’ suggest the restoration promised for Israel and Judah and the return of the exiles. Further, Jeremiah sees in the future even greater hope: ‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant’. The prophet clarifies, ‘I will put my law within them … I will forgive their iniquity’ (Jer. 31.31ff). Avison, in her poet’s proclivity towards multiple meanings and figural thinking, is anticipating the ‘better covenant’ mediated by Jesus Christ (Heb. 8) announced to the disciples in the Last Supper.²⁶

Strangely, she is not done with this short text. In a second poem, she revisits the excerpted phrase from ‘the word of the Lord to Jeremiah’. Does she sense an incompleteness of a thought or is the new theme just a variation of the theme? This time, the title is condensed to a single word ‘Proving’. An ironic accompanying subtitle, ‘...

²⁶ Mt. 26.28; Mk. 14.24; Lk. 22.20.

do not omit a word', condenses the sentence and calls attention to the process with ellipses. Even more, she herself omits the first clause of the sentence, 'Tell them everything that I command you', embodying the poet's process of crystallization of meaning. In this poem 'Proving' (*AN* 3.79),²⁷ she intertwines the abstract concepts of truth and word, placing Jeremiah's voice in the background in its opening words:

Truth speaks
all things into being.
No word more, but
not one left unspoken.

In these two concise poetic statements she draws the reader to another writer in the scriptures who opens a New Testament letter with 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets' (Heb. 1:1). These poets include Jeremiah, for one, who must not omit a word. The writer to the Hebrews continues,

[B]ut in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, who he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word (Heb. 1:1-3).

In a fascinating move of concision, the creating and sustaining of 'all things' 'by his powerful word', including 'the worlds', of the scripture has been stripped down in Avison's language to '[n]o word more, but not one left unspoken'. She has clearly moved away—in fact, beyond—the original context of the command.

Launched in the book of Hebrews, she continues to blend the two senses of 'word':

Truth carves, incises,
to the bone,
and between bone and marrow,

echoing the biblical writer's assertion of the power of the words of scripture and/or the Son: Indeed,

the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword ... it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart ... And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. (Heb. 4:12-13)

²⁷ See Appendix 2.2 for complete text.

‘No wonder / we want none of him’, the poet comments on the inevitable, contemporary and past responses of rejection of that word. One wonder generates another wonder, in poetic simplicity, as the words spill out:

The wonder is
truth loves;
died of it, once.

In these epigrammatic sentences, one after the other, the reader sees the poet Avison thinking, to use Vendler’s phrase, meditating on a phrase in the Old Testament, drawn to one in the New Testament, circling in large concepts to land in the middle of her poem at the central image of the gospel, the cross. In her process, she is also inviting the reader to enact that same circle. The last stanza of the poem distils further the complete work of Christ, as the poet returns to the words given to the prophet:

Truth lives.
Acting on what is spoken,
not a syllable extra,
nothing omitted,
brings into being
just what is prophesied.
That is the test –
not of what has been spoken
but for the hearer,
his act.

In her complex and compressed logic, she recalls the familiar test that a prophet’s word is verified in the prophecy’s fulfillment.²⁸ ‘Truth lives’ (*AN* 3.79). The sentence cannot be reduced to fewer words, as the poet again enacts the words of the Old Testament prophet. Christ’s resurrection, ‘his act’, verifies his role as the greater prophet of Hebrews. His words of completion at the cross, ‘It is finished’ (Jn. 19.30), are fulfilled and the witnesses see the risen Christ. Words are spoken for hearers, but not words alone. Words and act have fused. Now the truth, the test of his prophetic effectiveness (for the one who has ‘incised to the bone’ the hearts of the hearers), is in the redemptive

²⁸ Moses speaks the Law of God to the Israelite people: ‘You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?” If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken’ (Dt. 18:21, 22). Even more connected to the text Avison is dealing with is Jeremiah’s own struggle with prophets prophesying peace when he is prophesying doom to Judah: He speaks against Hananiah in chapter 28: ‘As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet’ (Jer. 28:9).

act. The hearers of the prophet's complete word have the proof; now they can participate in the proving.

The rigours involved in participating in Avison's thought processes of looking into scripture apply to the book of nature, as well, and yield the same stirrings that may point to Christ. It is not a matter of persuasion, but of intense looking and reflection with receptivity to the witnessing lyric. The reader, in the completion of the poetic process, is invited to join in Williams's 'revelation'—'the generative in our experience' (2000:133-34). The focus of chapter three is a closer look at nature with Avison through her particular off-angled seeing and invitational language transactions.

In the meantime, the question still lingers whether these difficult lyrics function as witness in the biblical sense. Their subject matter may be texts of or allusions to scripture; they may speak to the heart of a persevering reader. But do they reflect the energy, passion, urgency and action of the initial witnesses, articulated in the four Gospel accounts and *The Acts of the Apostles*? Words such as 'profession', 'confession', 'proclamation' and 'preaching' dominate this new mode of witness discourse as the four evangelists announce the gospel message—the good news of Jesus Christ. Are these words articulations of Avison's particular poetic language? All four Gospels centre on the 'testimony par excellence', the 'confessional kernel' (Ricoeur, 1980:134) 'that Jesus is the Christ', particularly by Simon Peter.²⁹ All four Gospels emphasize the pivotal historical event of Christ's passion and resurrection. Is this the poet's emphasis?

2.2.1 Witness in Luke's Gospel and *Acts of the Apostles*

Luke is the only one who explains himself in his two-part account. In the dedication to Theophilus prefacing Luke's Gospel, the writer presents himself as 'a plain honest man, concerned with plain truth' (Willmer, July 2005). Twice he uses the phrase 'orderly

²⁹ See Mt. 16.13-16; Mk. 8.27-29; Lk. 9.18-20; Jn. 1.41, 49; Jn. 6.67-69.

account' and assures his intended audience that he has investigated everything carefully from the first, gleaning his information from 'eyewitnesses and servants of the word' (Lk. 1.2). In Willmer's words, 'Luke-Acts is a text narrated as witness literature, appropriate for the law court, emphasizing what is clear and not clear' (July 2005). The singularity of the Christian message—Christ crucified and risen—speaks through the voices of its many eye witnesses. Sermons of the apostles include a variation of the familiar declaration, without subtlety and nuance: 'This man ... you crucified and killed ... This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses' (Acts 2.23).³⁰ In the Lukan record the proof is initially in the eyewitness account, making the question of the legitimacy of an eyewitness paramount.³¹

From the outset of Luke's narrative he presents witnesses who demonstrate an emerging faith and who need illumination.³² For example, the Zechariah who sings the prophet Isaiah's words 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us' (Lk. 1.78), falters in the first steps of his journey. At the outset of the Lukan account one sees a transformed witness in this soon-to-be-father of John the Baptist. When Zechariah's son, the great John the Baptist, languishing in prison has his doubts about the One he has represented, Jesus sends John's disciples back to his key witness with the cryptic message:

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me. (Lk. 7.22-23)

³⁰ See also Acts 32; 3.15; 5.30-32; 10.39-41; 13.28-31.

³¹ For example, early in Acts, a replacement for Judas Iscariot needs to be someone who has accompanied the disciples so he can 'become a witness with us to his resurrection' (Acts 1.22).

³² He is not unique among the Gospel writers in this emphasis. The importance of the parable of the Sower recounted in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Mt. 13, Mk. 4 and Lk. 8) suggests a common concern with spiritual apprehension. Mark's warning to 'beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod' emphasizes the connection between hardened hearts and lack of seeing and hearing (Mk. 8.14-21). John, of course, has his own unique understanding of 'seeing'.

Embedded in Jesus's words are the blind and deaf witnesses of Isaiah (42.6-7),³³ suggesting a prophetic fulfilment of restored sight and hearing and healing. Here Luke is bringing together two prophets in this evocation—one who has seen and one who is faltering and needs a fresh seeing.

Again, the transfiguration is about seeing (Lk. 9.28-36)³⁴—a dramatic revelation, uniting the prophets Moses and Elijah of the Old Testament with three particular eye-witnesses. Jesus tells his disciples, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see’ (Lk. 10.23). He tells his disciples that he speaks in parables, ‘so that [others] looking may not perceive, and listening they may not understand’ (Lk. 8.10).³⁵ Jesus tells the Pharisees, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed ... For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you’ (Lk. 17.21). After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he weeps over the city, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace ... you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God’ (Lk. 19.42, 44). In contrast, the witnessing disciples—albeit, with their limited awareness—participate in Christ’s triumphal ride into Jerusalem, praising God in language that remarkably echoes the angels’ chorus on the Bethlehem hillside, ‘Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’ (Lk. 19.38). The intensity of the ‘burning heart’ (Lk. 24.32) of the famous recognition of the two disciples on the Emmaus road is the impetus that propels the early church forward in the larger story of Acts. That story is followed by another dramatic recognition scene. Saul/Paul’s Damascus Road experience is described in terms of a light and voice from heaven speaking to him, first blinding, and then enabling him to ‘see’—to recognize the living

³³ Jesus's words are reminiscent of other passages, among them Isaiah 35.5, in his appropriation of Isaiah's words in announcing the beginning of his ministry in Luke 4.18.

³⁴ It is noted that this event is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels, but not John's Gospel. See also Mt. 17.1-9; Mk. 9.2-10.

³⁵ Again, Luke shares Matthew's and Mark's explanation of the parabolic form. See Mt. 13.10-17; Mk. 10.10-12.

Christ for who he is.³⁶ The blunt language used in the sermons in Acts suggests Luke's passionate insistence that the evidence offered is clear; refusal to believe in and respond to the risen Christ reflects blindness based on resistance. Peter addresses the crowd on the day of Pentecost with language of indictment:

You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed ... But God raised him up. (Acts 2.22-24)

Peter is unequivocal in his address to the people amazed at the lame man's healing: 'But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One', he exclaims. 'You killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses' (Acts 3.14-15). In his speech to the Council, Stephen calls his listeners 'stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do' (Acts 7.51). Luke revisits this theme of seeing and not seeing in the closing chapter of his second book where Paul is under house arrest in Rome and receiving many questioning visitors. He observes a not uncommon polarization throughout the record of the early Church's witness: 'Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe' (Acts 28.24). This last time, however, Paul makes his own particular note of judgement, offering his concluding witness to those who reject his message, and echoing Isaiah's critique of unbelieving hearers:

The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,
Go to this people and say,
You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes. (Acts 28.26-27)

These unbelievers are ironic witnesses to the truth of the story of Jesus in their failure to 'understand' and 'perceive' as they enact what the prophet proclaimed centuries earlier.

³⁶ See Acts 9.3-7; 22.6-9; 26.13-16 for the varied tellings of the story.

In contrast to those who ‘refused to believe’ (Acts. 28.24), however, the Lukan narrative is an account of witnesses like Paul who are ‘proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness’ (Ac 28.31). Eyewitness accounts of emerging faith merge into emboldened preaching and empowered declarations of confident and enabled witnesses. The three direct statements that Jesus makes to his disciples about witness, signalling the importance of this assigned and assumed role, explain the source of empowerment. In each of these there are implications for both the immediate eye-witnesses and future witnesses to and for Jesus.

The first statement occurs late in Luke’s Gospel in the context of sobering prophecies of fearful times, including the destruction of the Temple (Lk. 21.5-11):

But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed ... and they will put some of you to death. (21.12-17)

The promise of ‘words and a wisdom ... that cannot be withheld or contradicted’ give confidence in the veracity of the message the witness must proclaim and the supernatural assistance from the one whose witness it is. Luke gives living proof in Acts to its fulfilment in speaking of Stephen’s effective testimony: ‘But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke’ (Acts 6.10).

The second direct announcement of witness has a different emphasis. It comes right at the end of Luke’s Gospel during Jesus’s post-resurrection appearance to his disciples. Jesus summarizes the meaning of his teachings and his life, death and resurrection, and the implication ‘that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem’ (Lk. 24.47). The disciples’ witness is directed at Jesus. In their role as observer, the attention to their own necessary activity to follow is muted but still implied. Jesus’s hearers are like Boaz’s elders, participating in a solemn declaration, when Jesus concludes, ‘You are witnesses

of these things' (Lk. 24.48)—the whole complex of fulfilled Old Testament scriptures, his completed ministry, his death, and now his resurrection. Karl Barth, in his extensive discussion on witness in his multi-volume *Church Dogmatics*, repeatedly insists, '[A]s he lives, Jesus Christ speaks for Himself, that He is His own authentic Witness, that of Himself He grounds and summons and creates knowledge of Himself and His life, making it actual and therefore possible'. Jesus Christ makes Himself known: 'He introduces Himself' (1975:IVa 69.2:46). That 'introduction' here at the end of Luke's Gospel is that of the now resurrected Christ. In turn, this resurrected Christ requires an active response. In Barth's words again, these witnesses are

not idle spectators merely watching and considering; not for the enjoyment of spectacle granted to them; not for the vain increase of their knowledge of men, the world and history by this or that which they now come to know of God; not inquisitive reporters; but witnesses who can and must declare what they have seen and heard like witnesses in a law-suit. (1975:IVb 71.4:576)

The historian's voicing of Luke lends authority to a clear missional agenda, and he writes his account as a document to persuade and affirm belief.

The third of the three witness declarations in the opening of Acts, recorded as Jesus's last words before he ascended into heaven—words co-opted by every serious follower of Jesus early on in her or his faith journey—emphasizes the divine assistance and power the Holy Spirit provides: 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1.8). The disciples are told to wait for the Spirit to descend on them, who will, when he comes, empower the fledgling witnesses on that special day of Pentecost with all its drama (Acts 2). In the face of persecution and attack, Peter explains to his questioners the source of the apostles' courage and power: 'And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him' (Acts 5.32). Stephen, 'full of faith and the Holy Spirit' (Acts 6.5), is emboldened to speak to the Jewish Council who he challenges as 'forever opposing the Holy Spirit' (Acts 7.51). The Holy Spirit orchestrates the movement of the

witness and witnesses: for example, Philip—to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8.29); Ananias—to Saul/Paul (Acts 9.17); Paul redirected from Asia to go to Macedonia (Acts 16.6-9). In one of his most poignant conversations, Paul tells the Ephesian elders that he heads to Jerusalem ‘as a captive to the Spirit’ (Acts 20.22).

There is a boldness in Avison that echoes Luke. Her passion, her sense of obligation, her awareness that she is a ‘sent one’ is evident in some of her private correspondence. One set of letters passes between Avison and Stephen Scobie, a poet and critic,³⁷ who requested her endorsement of his book *Gospel*, ‘a presentation, in the form of a documentary poem, of the life of Jesus’ (Scobie, 1993a: Letter). Her guarded but uncompromising reading of his poem is revealing:

I am still struggling to get clear of me in order to read your poem with the “literarily” requisite openness ...³⁸

It was a joy to see the apostolic data – miracles, foreknowledge and resolution – in such lively lucid words.

The apocryphal data unnerve me, return me to the struggle. Here is a poem about the one who is, alone and always, one in whose (to use a metaphor) imagination, vividly now always, we exist—an imagination whose least flicker would be my obliteration, yours, everything’s and everybody’s ... a piece purportedly imagined, (this one purportedly speaking, for him making this one obliterateable,) by one of us who are instantaneously, faithfully sustained! And the entangling rude unmanageable harsh parts of the apostolic are not here to trouble me, which troubles me who have to struggle. (Avison, 1993: Letter to Scobie)

Scobie’s subsequent response helps to clarify her concern and suggests he well understands her position: ‘I thought that your letter does indeed strike to the heart of the paradox implied by the choice of narrative position in that book: to “create,” as it were, one’s own creator’ (Scobie, 1993[sic]b: Letter).³⁹ He explains to her that he is not a believing Christian and that he wrote the entire draft without consulting the biblical account, an admission she would not admire. Any mistakes would be his ‘personal signature’ (Scobie, 1993[sic]a: Letter)!

³⁷ This is the same Stephen Scobie who reviewed Avison’s *sunblue* in *Queens Quarterly* in 1980, remarking on his disappointment with the collection: ‘There are the same intricate patterns of thought, the same packed, unusual language, and the same proclamation of an unequivocal Christian faith. Yet ... the poems seem more diffuse, they lack the tension and the fine edge of complexity of Avison’s best work. Some of the urgency seems to have gone out of her voice’ (1980a:158).

³⁸ These enigmatic ellipses throughout the exchange are Avison’s own.

³⁹ The sequence of the letters indicate an error in dating.

In response, she concludes her correspondence with Scobie in another lengthy letter with a probing challenge, ‘Are you reading the Gospels again now that the book is out?’ Then she tells him her own story of coming to Christian faith, concluding,

God knows none of us know much, after Jesus, resurrected and ascended in Renaissance beauty, becomes Jesus living, inexorably, present at every moment, vulnerable stil [sic] to hurt, betrayal, but putting up with that and quickening possibilities all the time that one never knew existed. It is still so. (Avison, 1994a: Letter to Scobie)

On the back of an envelope attached to the letters is a scribbled sketch of a poem revealing her troubled musings. In part,⁴⁰ she writes:

It is the builders, those
whose towers have filled
the skies with their
significant bulk – they cannot
, so, have missed the
cornerstone.

We have that idiom
“beside yourself”
and there you stood, and wrote? ...

(undated and untitled poem, Avison Collection Manitoba)

Another such exchange in correspondence is between the then *Toronto Star* Religion editor Michael Higgins and Avison. Higgins had sent Avison a copy of his book about Thomas Merton entitled *Heretic Blood*. A paragraph out of her lengthy reply is cryptic and pointed: ‘As I felt my way through the baffling new landscape of new ideas, I kept yearning to see on the page the stark lowly name that shrivels earth and sky like lightning: Jesus’ (2000:Letter to Higgins).⁴¹

These two excerpts from letters reveal the willingness and capacity of this difficult poet to speak plainly amidst her characteristic complexity. She embraces the divine calling to be a witness to and for Christ with utter commitment and earnestness.

As she declares in her Pascal lectures,

⁴⁰ One of the conditions of access to her unfinished poems in the Avison Collection at The University of Manitoba is limiting the quoting of unpublished (and not publishable by her standards) material to fragments. I respect her wishes in this partial reflection.

⁴¹ The paragraph bears completing: ‘In your March 13th letter you spoke of your keen interest in ‘the interfacing of religious sensibility with the literary imagination’. Indeed I understand why you knew that I know the edginess, the sometimes grating against each other, of the imperious demands of poetry and the absolute demand of my Lord. Oddly, the oftener I deny the first, the more gently does He indulge me with unearned freedom to write. For me, it so often comes down to a choice between ego/vanity, and submission—that struggle which Merton records in many ways’ (Avison, 2000:Letter to Higgins).

[W]e are in the miasma of this violent, headlong, desperate, fragmenting world. The salt that checks corruption has to be rubbed against the corruptible. And the salt is not ourselves, except as Jesus Christ presences himself, in mercy, even in us, even here and now. We may not know when this happens. It is certainly not in our power to make it happen. We are all, alike, in His hands, in or of the world though we be. (1994b:35)

At the same time, while Avison is forthright and occasionally direct in her faith declarations, the poet inserts her habitual questioning and multiple meanings, even in the plain speech of prose statements. For sure, she is not straightforward and direct in her poems. The ‘confessional kernel’ of the gospel message is there but it is often like the parabolic treasure, buried in the complex field of her poetry (see Mt. 13.44). Even her various prose accounts of her own Damascus experience are transformed in her poems with hesitations and expressions of doubt and mystery. Consequently, though the poet appropriates and embraces the Lukan expression of witness it is not the dominant model for her poetry.

2.2.2 Witness with Second Isaiah’s Exiles

The witness theme emphasized in Second Isaiah’s vivid rhetoric of Isaiah 40-55 may be a model closer to Avison’s indirect witness in her poetry than the narrative of Luke. Isaiah’s words of comfort and admonition written in poetic form, suggest a parallel in complexity and multivalence, evocation and suggestion rather than plain speech. It is true that the poet-prophet inserts in his poetic argument the genre of trial speech and employs the metaphor of witnesses, calling on them to ‘justify’ other gods or Yahweh.⁴² At one juncture Yahweh calls on his people, ‘Accuse me, let us go to trial’ (Is. 43.26). However, disputation does not stand alone; rather it is juxtaposed with another rhetorical strategy in the text—the salvation oracles.

These twin modes of *speech of disputation* and *oracle of salvation* are quite distinct and move in opposite directions. But they need to be seen in relation to each other, for together they permit the exilic community to “see Yahweh” (40:9), who makes a decisive difference in its life. (Brueggemann, 1980:29)

⁴² See Is. 41.1-20; 43.8-13, 22-28; 44.7-8; 45.20-21; 48.14-16; 50.1-2a, 7-9 for direct juridical references.

The two literary forms together are used effectively to call attention to Yahweh's larger message of comfort—that he is working on behalf of the exiles in Babylon. The prophet is countering hopelessness, scepticism and doubt with an exhortation to hope and belief. The juridical metaphor is a powerful rhetorical device but it neither subsumes the larger meaning of the text nor is it the only metaphor or organizing structure driving the argument.⁴³ Furthermore, part of the rich complexity of the text is its multiplicity of suggested witnesses, not just the ones instructed to assume the role. There is the prophet speaking: 'Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God' (Is. 40.1). The 'Voice' of God—Yahweh himself as witness—asserts his presence (Is. 40.3, 6). The nations and their gods are called to be witnesses (Is. 41.1).⁴⁴ The fearful and despairing exiled people are the nations' counterparts (Is. 43.10).⁴⁵ The ambiguous and shifting 'Servant' (42.1-4)⁴⁶ assumes varied witness roles. The text itself is witness as it blends and blurs 'seeing' and 'telling'.

What is not ambiguous in the text is its dominant theme and the focus of its witnesses, articulated repeatedly in the extended poem: 'Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God"' (Is. 40.9b). The initial dialogue in chapter 40 suggests a feeble witness of a defeated people who have become accustomed to their 'settled despair' and intimidated by the arrogance and power of their conquerors.⁴⁷ Consequently, the listeners in Yahweh's Council can only faintly hear the words of Yahweh's representative:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings ...
Lift up your voice with strength ...
Lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God". (40.9)

⁴³ See, for instance, the kinsman-redeemer motif in Is. 41.14.

⁴⁴ Again, in Is. 41.21-24; 43.9; 51.16.

⁴⁵ Again, in Is. 44.8; 50.4.

⁴⁶ Again, in Is. 49.2-6.

⁴⁷ Brueggemann emphasizes throughout his commentary *Isaiah 40-66* (1998) the contrasting moods of the Babylonian arrogance and the exiles' despair.

The response to their inability to imagine any alternative is the confident assertion from Yahweh's spokesperson, intimating the unique power of the witnessing God: '[B]ut the word of our God will stand forever' (Is. 40.8). The declaration expands as the prophet continues, finally climaxing in chapter 55 with the joyful assurance of its final effectiveness. Yahweh's word is also his work: 'So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty' (Is. 55.11).

There is irony in this announcement of good news for the initial hearers of the prophet's words. As Brueggemann points out, '... the *announcement* of the gospel is a lyrical, poetic, imaginative one ... But the actual *substance of the news* ... is an "event" to which exiles have no access' (1998:12). The testimony of the poem is a story, a narration of Yahweh's creative power and intervention on Israel's behalf, which the exiles must believe based on the words they hear, not on what they have seen. To begin, and in the context of the developing dialogue between Yahweh and his witnesses, Yahweh poses key questions: 'Who has measured the waters'? (Is. 40.12); 'Who has directed the spirit of the Lord'? (Is. 40.13); 'Who taught him the path of justice ... of knowledge' (Is. 40.14)? The questions build towards implied accusations: 'To whom will you liken God? An idol' (Is. 40.18, 19)? 'Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood' (Is. 40.21)? The questions direct these exiled people who do not see God working on their behalf toward a vivid picture of a God much larger and more grand than their own limited imagination could conceive; in fact, reaching out, 'toward that which can never be witnessed in the observational sense of the word. Somehow they are being opened up to what God is doing, which is radically surprising' (Willmer, June 2007).⁴⁸

The prophet begins with a picture of the Creator-Sustainer of the world. Nestled in each of the questions of the prophet are the beginning elaborations of Second Isaiah's

⁴⁸ This is one of several comments Haddon Willmer inserted in an early draft of this chapter as dialogue to open conversation. In our exchange he challenged my thinking and subsequently stimulated connections to Avison's poetry that I had initially overlooked.

understanding of the rare articulation of the word for ‘create’ in scripture, only really found in the Genesis account, a few psalms and here in Isaiah 40-66 (Watts, 1987:94). In Isaiah, the Creator’s distinctive present and future activity extends the Genesis past tense account. The answer to the objections of the sense of abandonment the Babylonian exiles feel, ‘Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord”’ (Is. 40.27), is the admonition to look at the witness of creation: ‘The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth’ (Is. 40.28).

In Brueggemann’s words again,

It is an act of remarkable courage to utter such a doxological claim [i.e. Isa. 40:27-31] that always includes a polemic against alternative claims. It is also an act of boldness, then or now or any time, to engage in reimagining and reconstruing life in terms of Yahweh, the creator who brings to nought both the wonders of creation and the pretenders of politics. (1998:28)

The description of creation begins with the stars. ‘Who created these?’ Yahweh’s exiles are asked. In personal terms the question is answered by a description of the stars related to very human situations: ‘He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing’ (Is. 40.26).⁴⁹ These brave and bold declarations of Second Isaiah are made apart from eyewitnesses—with evidence appropriate for juridical defence. The process can only be imagined, even as the prophet models for future poets.

In the stars we see not the creator in action, but something in our environment which requires us to imagine creator, and then to trust this creator with our being totally, even though this imagination and trust never rest on evidence of the sort that stands in court. (Willmer, June 2007).

The Bible’s story begins with a similar pronouncement in the same situation of hiddenness: the announcement of the work of God in his creation of the world and his

⁴⁹No wonder the great medieval poet Dante is fascinated with the stars and ends each of his ‘visions’ with his pilgrim stepping out to look up to the stars:

I came back from that most sacred of streams,
Made afresh, as new trees are renewed
With their new foliage, and so I was
Clear and ready to go up to the stars (*Purgatorio* 33.142-145).

Even better,

At this point high imagination failed;
But already my desire and my will
Were being turned like a wheel, all at one speed,
By the love which moves the sun and the other stars (*Paradiso* 33.142-145).

own declarative witness of satisfaction in Genesis chapter one. ‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good’ (Ge. 1.31). The narrator of the story is not reporting an observation; he is imagining it. ‘The ineffability and hiddenness of God’ mean ‘God can only be spoken of by acts of imagination which stretch language beyond what it can hold down’ (Willmer, June 2007). The poet-narrator, without defence or explanation, presents God as acting subject and the first witness of scripture, setting the tone for the response of declarative praise as witness; ‘It [his created work] was very good’.

Here in Second Isaiah’s text, Yahweh’s hiddenness extends to his present and future acts of creation—his on-going presence and ‘salvation’. In chapter 42 of Isaiah, the evocative image of the ‘servant’, already introduced in chapter 41 (vv. 8-10), with its multiple meanings and references—later referring to the political Persian conqueror Cyrus, and allusively suggesting perhaps the suffering Servant Christ of the Isaiah Servant Songs—adds its significant but highly elusive layer of meaning to the role of witness. At this point in the text, this servant seems to be connected to the listening exiles, with a particularly perplexing role. ‘I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness’ (Is. 42.6-7). Yahweh, in his power and strength, is accomplishing his purposes, the prophet writes in rich poetic lines: ‘The Lord goes forth like a soldier, like a warrior he stirs up his fury; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes’ (Is. 42.13). Those purposes involve ‘lead[ing] the blind by a road they do not know ... turn[ing] darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground’ (Is. 42.16). The poetry contains words of hope but it is shadowy, and not clearly referential to the darkness of their immediate situation.

While Yahweh is working his as yet hidden salvation, the people, as his servant, have their witness role to play. He recognizes their fragility as witnesses in the context and registers impatience with their predicament:

Listen, you that are deaf;
and you that are blind, look up and see!
Who is blind but my servant,
or deaf like my messenger whom I send?
Who is blind like my dedicated one
or blind like the servant of the Lord?
He sees many things, but does not observe them;
His ears are open, but he does not hear. (Is. 42.18-20)

These are the witnesses God announces in the climactic chapter 43 in what could be seen as a law suit and disputation with ‘all the nations’ and with Israel herself. Between two salvation oracles, ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine’ (Is. 43.1) and ‘Do not remember the former things … I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it’ (Is. 43.18-19), Yahweh calls two sets of witnesses: ‘the nations’ (Is. 43.9), and by implication, their false gods, and Israel, ‘my servant whom I have chosen’ (Is. 43.10).

In the familiar text is an obvious and fundamental tension: How can the listeners witness or even be expected to witness when they are blind and deaf? As commentators and critics confront Yahweh’s strange injunction, their resolution of the dilemma signals their own understanding of the nature of biblical witness. Strathmann, in his lengthy dictionary entry on witness, particularly focuses on the prophet’s own witness, positing an ‘evangelistic confession’ (Walton, 1986:21) or a witness to beliefs about God as the dominant emphasis for witness here:

For the prophets the deity of God is a fact … which is certain only to faith, which only the man who is not blind and deaf can see and attest, 43:8. The content of the witness is thus a religious truth of which the witness is convinced on the basis of his experience … grounded, then, on the prophetic experience of revelation which is original, and which by nature is not subject to rational control. This is certainty to the prophet. (Strathmann, 1967:484)

For Brueggemann, on the other hand, the essential point in the context involves the concrete existential implications for the called witnesses whose lives and futures are at stake. He explains:

The trial is not only god versus god; it is also witness versus witness and truth versus truth. Israel is placed by the poet in a context of contested truth, where it is not known ahead of time which truth will be vindicated and accepted by the court. The dispute about truth concerns theological claim about God, but it also concerns historical possibility. (1998:56)

Ricoeur extends Brueggemann's suggestion by insisting that 'a theology of testimony' is only appropriately identified as such if there is 'a certain narrative kernel'. He insists, 'It is not possible to testify *for* a meaning without testifying *that* something has happened which signifies this meaning' (Ricoeur, 1980:133). The fundamental example, he explains, is '[t]he conjunction of the prophetic moment, "I am the Lord," and the historical moment, 'It is I, the Lord your God, who has led you out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20.2) ...' (1980:133). Willmer suggests,

This modern distinction of fact and belief may not be true to scripture or to life, where the more crucial distinction is between observable [and] manageable and what must be hoped and ventured, where we are thrown not onto beliefs but on to faith, into the arms of God. (June 2007)

In short, Willmer is pointing to the world of both poets—the writer of Second Isaiah and Avison. The biblical text presents a 'hoped and ventured' witness in poems of exploration, which lead sometimes simultaneously to seeing and telling. In some mysterious way the process of witnessing itself is the healing of the blindness and the deafness, as Avison intimates in her poems which articulate the challenge of faith in what is not readily apparent.

Avison understands well the hidden character of God's activity. For instance, in her late collection *Not Yet But Still* and in one of her many poems about the central events of the Christian faith—the death and resurrection of Christ—she muses on what cannot be seen:

That Friday – Good?

At least the twentieth century is ending.

Wretched insignificant
hurt-all-over all-through
is all there is.
Alone in the universe

and even then (feebley) the "Why?"

Someone, if present,
would make it go back to before

or at least make it better?

That's not true.

Abandoned.

What if the someone
were to be, every sinking moment,
were to have been,
present, all along?

You mean – that's true? (*AN* 3.84)

Not a word in the actual poem refers to Good Friday and the salvation achieved on the cross, but the shadow of its title affects every questioning line of the poem's summary of the twentieth century's record of human suffering. The anguish of the twentieth century doubter parallels the exiles' dirge, 'By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion' (Ps. 137.1). The prophet's call and the poet's admission are similar—requiring some revelation to blind and deaf witnesses. On the adjacent page of *Not Yet But Still* is 'Interim' (*AN* 3.85), a reflection on what follows from the 'Easter trumpets, lilies, clamouring / in a blare of sun'. She painfully observes,

Our troubled faces clear to see Him, being
radiantly here, somehow between
familiar days and what's beyond imagining.
We cannot take it in.

Our severed lives are blundering
about in what's been done,
appalled, exultant, sensing
freedom, we seem alone,

but doggedly set out, against a sting
of rain, moved by His plan,
through night and shale-blue dawn, remembering
at least to follow on. (*AN* 3.85)

Here in the companion poem the witness can 'doggedly set out', 'remembering / at least to follow on'; she also can write about it, making the witness even more plain.

Besides highlighting the fundamental tension 'between confession of faith and narration of things seen' (Ricoeur 1980:133), this climactic text of Isaiah 43 points to the supreme significance of witness in the biblical sense: its source is God himself. He takes the initiative. The ensuing result is an inevitable crisis of response. In Yahweh's

announcement one sees a new meaning of testimony, what Ricoeur enthusiastically identifies as the ‘irruption’ of ‘the religious meaning of testimony’, with four distinctions: (1) The witness is selected and ‘sent’. (2) ‘It is Yahweh himself who is witnessed to in the testimony’. (3) The testimony ‘is oriented toward proclamation, divulging, propagation’. (4) It implies ‘a total engagement not only of words but of acts, and, in the extreme, in the sacrifice of a life’ (Ricoeur, 1980:131). Sounding very much like Barth, Ricoeur goes on to explain: ‘What separates this new meaning of testimony from all its uses in ordinary language is that the testimony does not belong to the witness’ (1980:131). At the same time Ricoeur affirms the juridical aspect of witness: ‘The declaration is at the same time a call for decision … The trial begun by Yahweh with the people and their idols calls for a decision which settles things once and for all’ (1980:132). The poetry is doing its invitational work with the attention on its juridical metaphor.

Second Isaiah introduces another metaphor to explain the success of the message of the witness. This time it is in terms of the practical every-day miracle of harvest—an organic process that begins out of sight. As the rain waters the earth and helps the seed to sprout which, in turn, furnishes bread from its harvest, ‘[my word] shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it’ (Is. 55.10-11). The poet-prophet has come full circle—back to the power of the divine witness now strangely hidden in the individual and collective witness of all involved in the seeing and telling. If Avison’s poetry is even a miniature echo of these great texts, her lyrics carry these same profound implications.

Isaiah 40-55 contains a drama with high stakes where the truth of God’s dealings with his covenant people and the nations prevails over his accusers’ challenge and scepticism and the world’s oblivious indifference. The text emphasizes Yahweh’s triumph. But that verification has not sufficiently explained the power of the Isaiah text.

Somewhere in the performance, one becomes subtly aware, in Avison's faith-filled and faithful words, that

a Presence may briefly shine
showing heaven again,
and open. (*AN* 2.168)

The nuanced meanings, the evocations and suggestions, the repetition of images, the metaphors and symbols sprinkled throughout the dramatic poem work their own miracle wherever the text is recited. Second Isaiah gives passionate and eloquent demonstration of a poet-seer communicating his own testimony. While the prophet presents Yahweh pleading for the exiled people to claim their right and responsibility as His witnesses, the prophet himself is fulfilling that servant role. Like the psalmist mediating nature's witness in Psalm 19,⁵⁰ the prophet is modelling the process for every subsequent person who picks up his text to read. The Ethiopian eunuch puzzling over Isaiah's text and Philip carrying on the witness as 'he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus' (Acts 8.35) in Luke's story of Acts provide the Bible's own internal verification.

2.2.3 The Johannine Understanding of Witness

It makes sense to focus on the Johannine account in a discussion of Avison's poetry as witness for several reasons. For one, she herself came to Christian faith by reading and responding to that Gospel's testimony, as mentioned in chapter one, suggesting its importance in her own spiritual journey. Second, witness is a dominant theme in the Fourth Gospel; the word *martyria* (witness) and its cognates are found in

⁵⁰ The psalmist explains creation's witness in extravagant metaphor:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
And the firmament proclaims his handiwork,
Day to day pours forth speech,
And night to night declares knowledge
There is no speech, nor are there words;
Their voice is not heard;
Yet their voice goes out through all the earth
And their words to the end of the world (Ps. 19.1-4).

John's text more often than any other section of the New Testament.⁵¹ The language of controversy and trial in Jesus's discussion with sceptical and resistant religious leaders in chapters five and eight are filled with juridical dialogue. But third, and perhaps most relevant, John's Gospel is not like the Lukan 'plain man's' 'orderly account' (Lk. 1.1, 3) of detail as evidence in this courtroom of contested belief. A new kind of witness takes the stand and offers a 'biography'⁵² or portrait of Jesus, but one more akin to lyric poetry with its aim of 'utter centripetal coherence' (Vendler 2010b:3).⁵³ Hence, the Gospel writer offers Avison a model of perception and expression that can illumine and confirm her own understanding of spiritual truth.

The whole Gospel is a 'seeing and telling' of Jesus as Messiah, the Son of God. As Bultmann suggests, 'The Gospel of John fundamentally contains but a single theme: the Person of Jesus. The entire Gospel is concerned with the fact of his presence, the nature of his claim, whence he comes and whither he goes, and how men relate themselves to him' (1971:5). Its witnesses arrive on the scene without any explanation of context. Its narration is spare in events and details, with only seven 'signs' in contrast to the many anecdotes of Jesus's teaching and miracles in the Synoptic Gospels. The account is strangely clear and elusive at the same time as the evangelist, like a poet, weaves incidents in and around each other with curious fluidity. Like a poem, its strange words and silences prevent closure. At an obvious level, any of the metaphors Jesus

⁵¹ For instance, L. Coenen in *The Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. Brown) explains that of the 76 instances of the verb *martyreο* in the New Testament, 43 are in John and the Johannine Epistles (a further 4 in Revelation, 11 in Acts and 8 in Hebrews, 6 in Pauline writings and only 2 times in the Synoptic Gospels (1971:1042-43). Strathman's statistics in Kittel are slightly different but still making a similar point: 'A striking feature is that we find [*martyreο*—to bear witness] 47 times in the Johannine writings, [*martyria*—testimony, testifying] 30 times, and [*martyς*—a witness] and [*martyrion*—evidence, proof] not at all in the Gospel' (1942, 1967:489).

⁵² There has been an increase in recent scholarship in the literary characteristics of the biblical text. I use the term 'biography' cautiously as I survey the various attempts to classify Gospels as genres. Alan Culpepper has shown an interesting progression in his thinking—starting in *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (1983) and relying heavily on Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1979), he has analyzed the Gospel as a novel in structure; in his later work *The Gospel and Letters of John* (1998) he is relying more on ancient drama and in particular, ancient biography. He is much more convincing in the latter work.

⁵³ Vendler makes this cogent observation that 'it is this centripetal force that most distinguishes lyric from the linear forms of writing that also have literary aims. Lyric tends to be like the systole and diastole of the heart: it has a center of concern around which it beats' (2010b:3).

uses to reveal his identity—whether shepherd, bread, light or vine—illustrates both clarity and uncertainty. For sure, their meaning is multivalent. The silences in the text show themselves early in the narrative: Jesus's mother tells him at the wedding of Cana, ‘They have no wine’, and Jesus answers abruptly, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come’. And his mother says to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you’ (Jn. 2.3-5). There is much poetic silence in that brief exchange, even to the opening line, ‘They have no wine’, suggesting the writer is meaning much more and metaphor has already taken over.

As a consequence, the witness to the mysterious hiddenness of God in Isaiah finds its counterpart in the mysterious witness of the revelation of God in Christ in John’s Gospel and the paired phrases of Jesus’s words to the first enquiring disciples in John’s account, ‘Come and see’ (Jn. 1.39) and the risen Christ’s directive to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb, ‘Go and tell’ (Jn. 20.17). Avison’s poem ‘When a Witness Gives Evidence’ is essentially as much about Word becoming flesh, water turning to wine, a large crowd feeding on one small lunch, and a dead man walking out of a tomb, as it is about hearing the angels’ Christmas song during the night watches. It is strangely all about the witness—the apprehension of the Son of God and the resulting declaration, but it is cloaked in wonder and paradoxical hiddenness. The Gospel begins with a word—The Word—and ends with the expressed satisfaction that a witness has given evidence: ‘A Presence has briefly shined’ (*AN* 2.168).

The Gospel begins with a witness, John the Baptist, sent from God, who suddenly appears, ‘testifying to the light’ (Jn. 1.7). John is the archetypal witness with his pointing hand and preparing ‘voice crying in the wilderness’ (Jn. 1.23). When he is questioned about his identity, he emphatically insists he is not the Messiah; he is merely a witness. In fact, he explains, he initially witnessed to one he did not know (Jn. 1.31). His encounter with Jesus takes place in the middle of obedient service when ‘the one

who sent me to baptize' revealed Jesus's identity to John, giving him a sign of 'the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove' (Jn. 1.32-33).

Like Second Isaiah's herald who was to announce, 'Here is your God' (Isa. 40.9), John presents Jesus, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (Jn. 1.29). His declaration is freighted with several layers of significance to his Jewish audience. His listeners recognize the images of the passover lamb and the submissive Servant 'lamb led to the slaughter' of Isaiah (53.7), and they respond to the import of this Lamb of God. John's witness is the catalyst that stimulates the initial faith of the disciples. In poetic fashion the event is paralleled by the climaxing 'glorification' of Christ on the cross. Here in the Gospel narrative the Beloved Disciple⁵⁴ witnesses in tandem with John the Baptist. As Raymond Brown observes,

The public appearances of Jesus open with the witness of John the Baptist to the paschal Lamb of God; his public appearances will close with the witness of the unnamed beloved disciple, as the paschal Lamb is dying on the cross on Passover eve. John gives us a triptych: the Lamb in the center and the two witnesses on either side. (R. Brown, 1988:24)

It is noteworthy, at this point of the Johannine narrative that Jesus takes over the witness role after John the Baptist's presentation. Jesus is the one who beckons his first disciples to 'come and see' (Jn. 1.39), invoking the formula for starting the process of faith. When Jesus soon shows his disciples 'his glory' in turning the water to wine at the wedding in Cana (Jn. 2.11), he sets in motion a very specific set of 'signs' according to John to affirm their decision to follow and 'see'.

John presents 'seeing' and believing Jesus as a mysterious process. Why do some witnesses⁵⁵ of Jesus 'see' and others do not? The same data is presented to two audiences; some respond with loving faith, others with deep hostility. Throughout the Gospel there is an ongoing struggle to make connection between the world 'above' and

⁵⁴ I am aware of the ongoing debate of scholars over authorship of the Fourth Gospel. For the purposes of my paper I do not want to make this a major issue. However, I see the 'Beloved Disciple', who does not have to be specifically identified, as the one responsible for the witness—for the basic writing of the text. This conclusion does not mean there could not have been further editing and amendments to the text; on the other hand, I am not assuming that there were.

⁵⁵ I am using the word here merely in the sense of those who are there and who are observing.

the world ‘below’. Jesus defines the conflict, ‘You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world’ (Jn. 8.23). ‘Seeing’ is crossing that great divide. The Son, ‘in the bosom of the Father, close to the Father’s heart’ (Jn. 1.18), reveals himself to the Beloved Disciple who reclines ‘on Jesus’ bosom’, close to Jesus’s heart (Jn. 13.25); that disciple, in turn, has written his testimony ‘so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (Jn. 20.31). To read the Gospel of John with perception and understanding means to receive John’s witness as from the Father, true and full of light and life. ‘By the passage of the old remembered words and deeds through the experience, thought and adoring love of the disciple’, writes William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury in his *Readings in St John’s Gospel*, ‘we are helped to a knowledge of Christ which is not ‘after the flesh’ but ‘after the spirit’ (II Corinthians v, 16)’ (1968:xxii).

The Gospel writer says, I wrote all this to help you believe. Here is my witness. Faith begets faith in his telling. Seeing produces more seeing. It is no accident that one of the major ‘signs’ is the healing of the man blind from birth recorded in chapter nine. The miraculous healing of this person’s great physical affliction produces amazement and awe. But the miracle is also symbolic, as John demonstrates, using poetry’s language of metaphor. To heal people of spiritual blindness from birth—is it possible? While context guides the reading of Jesus’s great declaration, ‘I am the light of the World’ (Jn. 8.12), prompted perhaps, as Stibbes suggests, by his looking out on the ceremony of lighting the golden candlesticks in the Court of the Women in the Temple grounds at the Feast of the Tabernacles (Stibbe, 1994:96-97), the meaning expands beyond the narrative. The declaration is framed by the continuing and growing controversy between the unbelieving religious leaders who are spiritually and perversely

blind. The truth of Jesus's identity remains opaque for the blind who ironically insist they can see (Jn. 9.41).

Unbelief is centred on the religious authorities, representatives of 'the world' for the writer. In chapters five through twelve, leading up to the end of Jesus's public ministry, Jesus initiates important dialogue with these religious leaders. He provokes attention with his works—healing on the Sabbath the crippled man by the pool (Jn. 5.1-18) and the man blind from birth (Jn. 9.1-34)—and his dramatic declarations—'I am the bread that came down from heaven' (Jn. 6.41) and 'I am the light of the world' (Jn. 8.12). These events and word-events are signs to promote belief, or if not belief, in Barth's words again, 'direct confrontation with and at the very heart of [their] own reality' (*Dogmatics IVa* 70.1:416). They are grace-events if his audience chooses to 'come and see'. Unfortunately, they respond as a hostile audience to his claims to divine authority, and hence, contribute to a confrontational atmosphere. In the setting typical of early Christian discourse they argue, putting each other on trial. With the frequent use of the terms 'witness' and 'testimony' and 'judgement' a number of interpreters of the text have identified these scenes specifically as the 'controversy' or 'trial' scenes referred to earlier in the chapter.⁵⁶

In the first controversy over his healing of the paralytic, Jesus openly speaks of sharing in God's activities—God's work (on the Sabbath), God's power over death, God's right to judge the world. In his defense of his authority and identity, there is

⁵⁶ Again, one way to read witness in the text of John's Gospel is to focus on the controversy metaphor paralleled with the literature in Isaiah 40-55, as Allison Trites has outlined in *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (1977). See the beginning of this section for an earlier discussion of Trites. A. E. Harvey in *Jesus on Trial: A Study in the Fourth Gospel* (1976) develops a similar thesis. As already noted, Strathman in Kittel (1942, 1967) and Coenen in Brown (1971) in their word studies on witness (*martyria*) emphasize the strong etymological root for witness in ancient legal and forensic settings. Raymond Brown insists that [t]he whole of John is a trial of Jesus by the leaders of his people, and the Baptist is the first trial witness (1988:24). Mark Stibbe comments that 'throughout John's story, an ironic trial is in progress, a trial in which Jesus is in the dock. So strong is the forensic imagery in the Gospel ... that many have thought of the whole story as an extended trial narrative' (1994:76-77). Ruth Edwards in *Discovering John* (2003), using work by Asiedu-Peprah (2001), Motyer (1997) and Lincoln (2000), suggests 'John apparently imitates a Jewish literary motif, known as the *rib*, "case at law" or "juridical controversy"' (Edwards, 2003:119).

supreme irony. As he places himself in the dock of this law court of unbelief, Jesus also reveals to the listeners (and John to the readers) that he is also finally the judge: ‘I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge’, Jesus declares (Jn. 5.30). He garners his witnesses to represent him and confirm his testimony (Jn. 5.31-40). Jesus compares John the Baptist, his first witness, to a burning and shining lamp in whose light his opponents were willing to rejoice for a while (Jn. 5.35). The implication, of course, is their failure to see the light, the source of that lamp. His works ‘that the Father has given me to complete’ (Jn. 5.36)—the miracles, the signs—are the second witness which his listeners have rejected with open hostility. The third witness, the Father himself, while the most important, is ironically the one least able to speak to them, Jesus suggests, because ‘you have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you’ (Jn. 5.37-38); he circles back to his own testimony ‘because you do not believe him whom he has sent’ (Jn. 5.38). Failing to see the presence of Jesus in their own Hebrew Scriptures means they reject his fourth witness (Jn. 5.39-40). As a result, ‘your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope’ (Jn. 5.35). In essence, their own scriptures are one day going to condemn them.

While the logic is clear to the reader of John from its beginning prologue, it is obviously not to Jesus’s interlocutors. Revelation—the knowledge of the Father—does not come easily. They have not learned how to attend to signs, whether in words or works. Perhaps it is a particular predisposition to openness to the unfamiliar that they are missing. When an unusual and miraculous event occurs—the restored sight of a man blind from birth, or later a man walking out of a tomb—these religious people, versed in scriptures which speak of a God of the miraculous, should be particularly sensitive to this God once again in their midst. Instead they are resistant to truth that will challenge their own familiar paradigms. Bultmann is insightful here: ‘The world’s resistance to God is based on its imagined security, which reaches its highest and most subversive

form in religion and thus, for the Jews in their pattern of life based on Scripture' (1971:268). In 'Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel' (*AN* 2.148), Avison's voice calls out:

Even in this baffling darkness
Light has kept shining?
(where? where? then are we blind?)

There is practically a repeat performance of the earlier dispute when Jesus announces: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life' (Jn. 8.12). Bultmann's observation about this 'brightness in which existence itself is illumined and comes to itself, comes to life' (1971:342) emphasizes the surprise at its rejection. In this exchange, the validity of Jesus's witness is challenged by the religious leaders (Jn. 8.9). His answer reveals several levels of challenge. He insists that his testimony is valid 'because I know where I have come from and where I am going' [from and back to the Father]—knowledge they obviously do not have (Jn. 8.14); furthermore, he insists that there are two legal witnesses: 'I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf' (Jn. 8.18). Again, if his challengers are unable to 'see', neither witness makes sense to them. Jesus goes on to explain why they are at an impasse in this conflict: 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world' (Jn. 8.23). Jesus dismisses their counter-appeal to be children of Abraham. 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did' (Jn. 8.39)—believing in him rather than seeking to kill him. 'There is no place in you for my word' (Jn. 8.37, 43). In Avison's words, 'A Presence' has briefly shone, 'showing heaven again, / and open', but they are 'afraid, and sore' (*AN* 2.168).

The religious leaders' rejection of Jesus is both fearsome and instructive. The poet understands their rebel spirit, and several of her key poems in *Winter Sun* play out their ancient unbelief, particularly 'The Fallen, Fallen World' with its 'learned' rebels who 'stubborn, on the frozen mountain cling / Dreaming of some alternative to spring'

(AN 1.75-76).⁵⁷ The religious leaders and their modern counterparts refuse to ‘see’; instead they provoke controversy. But they are doing worse as they align themselves on ‘the hangman’s side’, which Avison notes will mean later

each had to find him-
self immured with the
undeservedly dead, for good.⁵⁸ (L 36-37)

The blind man, the focal point of the second discussion, in contrast, receives his physical sight. He also gradually receives his spiritual sight when Jesus shows him he is not yet seeing what he sees! ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ Jesus asks him. ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him’. Jesus says to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he’ (Jn. 9.35-37). Here, in literary terms, is one of a series of the Gospel’s *anagnorises*, or ‘recognition scenes’,⁵⁹ a motif used throughout John’s Gospel narrative to demonstrate the progress of Jesus’s revelation of himself.⁶⁰

Earlier there are the contrasting stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. Retrospectively—after the meaning about blindness is clarified—the theme of spiritual perception in these pericopes comes into sharp focus. The religious teacher comes by night and reveals, by his literalist response to Jesus’s metaphor of ‘birth from above’ (Jn. 3.7), that he does not have the imagination and will to work with Jesus’s symbolic language.⁶¹ The end of the dialogue is as puzzling as Nicodemus’s silence. In the text it is difficult to tell for certain when Jesus ends the conversation and the narrator takes up his commentary, perhaps demonstrating Nicodemus’s own unwillingness to step into the light at this point and choosing to remain in the shadows. The Samaritan woman, on

⁵⁷ See Chapter 4.1 for a fuller discussion of this poem.

⁵⁸ See Introduction for a fuller discussion.

⁵⁹ Aristotle explains this literary device in his *Poetics*. It is frequently found in both Hebrew literature and Greek drama such as Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King*. Luke has his recognition scenes as well, as seen earlier with the disciples on the Emmaus Road (Lk. 8.31).

⁶⁰ See Alan Culpepper’s discussion of this thread running through John’s Gospel in *The Gospel and Letters of John* (1998:71-86).

⁶¹ Culpepper points out that John’s record of Jesus’s conversations take a typical pattern: Jesus frequently does not respond directly to what a person says to him. He responds metaphorically, and ‘the responses seldom really connect with what has just been said’. (Culpepper, 1998:135). This conversational device certainly contributes to the mystery of the text and provides an obvious connection with Avison’s stylistic indirections.

the other hand, approaches the well and Jesus in open daylight, gradually making the leap from the literal to the symbolic in her reaching out for the ‘living water’ Jesus offers. Her response to her encounter is spontaneous as she leaves her water pot and runs to the city: ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done’ (Jn. 4.29). This silence in the text is poignant, for the content of her testimony is not the actual recorded comments of Jesus. It can be assumed that this *anagnorisis* culminates in a new and transforming relationship for the woman,⁶² but the priority of the text is that it records a revelation of Jesus’s identity.

It is not a matter of clever intellectual capacity to understand signs that John is suggesting in these contrasts. The prologue in its measured and poetic phrases has already established the polarization between light and dark that Jesus elicits in his encounters with people: ‘The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it’ (Jn. 1:5). Avison muses on these opening words of the Gospel in her lyric ‘Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel’ (*AN* 2.148):

Even in this baffling darkness
Light has kept shining
(where? where? then are we blind?)
But Truth is radiantly here.⁶³

When Truth arrives, a person is forced to face his or her own reality, just as the frail Samaritan woman acknowledges her multiple marriages. There is clearly a personal dimension intended in the evangelist’s portrayal of the Roman ruler Pilate’s much less happy ending (Jn. 18.28-19.38). His witness—assigning the title ‘The King of the Jews’ to Jesus’s cross—does not exonerate him of responsibility for his own personal unbelief. Barth, like Avison, speaking of that final confrontation of the crucified Jesus, makes the Gospel encounters vivid and real for his readers:

But let us imagine ... we are ready to receive instruction—this instruction—from Him and therefore from God Himself concerning God ... It means that we must be ready to be told by Him that we shall find Him precisely where we do not think we should look for Him, namely, in direct confrontation with and at the very heart of our own reality, which whether we like it or

⁶² See Chapter 6.2.1 for one of Avison’s important and distinctive readings of this particular story.

⁶³ See Chapter 5.1 for a detailed discussion of ‘Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel’.

not, reduces itself with the crumbling and tottering of all our previous genuine or illusory possibilities and achievements to the one painful point where each of us is stripped and naked, where each is suffering and perishing, where each is engaged in futile complaint and accusation, where each is alone.⁶⁴ (*Dogmatics IVa* 70.1:416)

The prologue puts it simply, powerfully and quietly: ‘He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him’ (Jn. 1.11). The Gospel is about ‘seeing’—about recognition. ‘But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God’ (Jn. 1.12). Fortunately, while Jesus sees the truth about everyone and ‘needs no one to testify about anyone’ (Jn. 1.25), his ‘glory’ is also ‘full of grace and truth’ (Jn. 1.14). His witness in words and signs is also his offering of grace, whether to the Samaritan woman, Pilate, the paralytic, or the man blind from birth. In sum, Jesus’s presence becomes a two-pronged witness—to those who ‘see’ and in turn become witnesses, and to those who resist the words and works of Jesus and eventually push him to the cross where they ironically accelerate and bring to a climax his own witness and triumph.

John’s Gospel is unique in its portrayal of the crucifixion—the final ‘lifting up of the Son of Man’ (Jn. 8.28). The horror and agony of Jesus’s death is not emphasized in John’s account. Instead Jesus’s accomplishment, ‘his glorification (his ascent to heaven by way of the cross)’ (R. Brown, 1988:47) and triumphant return to the Father, is foregrounded. ‘It is finished’ (Jn. 19.30) are the words from the cross that echo in the Beloved Disciple’s heart. When he sees the soldier pierce Jesus’s side and blood and water come out, he sees the fulfilment of the scriptures: ‘They will look on the one whom they have pierced (Jn. 19.37). Perhaps Nicodemus who helps bury Jesus recalls the words spoken that night he conversed with Jesus: ‘And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up’ (Jn. 3.14). Perhaps there are stray followers who remember Jesus’s words, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of

⁶⁴ Barth’s eloquence is matched by the words of Lewis’s *Orual* in his novel *Till We Have Faces*: ‘When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center of your soul for years ... you’ll not talk about joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces’ (Lewis:1956:294)?

Man, then you will realize that I am he' (Jn. 8.28), as they look at the man on the cross.

Barth surely understands what it means to look when he exclaims, 'To miss the Word of the cross is not to hear him' (Dogmatics 4a.70.1: 391). Yet again, 'the only way in which He can and will present His cause is by means of the sigh on the cross which comes down through the centuries. What a Prophet this is, what a Witness, what a Word' (4a70.1:408).

Soon after Jesus's public ministry is concluded, a new witness is introduced in the text. In those intimate last words with 'his own', the disciples, Jesus explains how the witness will continue after He has returned to the Father: 'When the Paraclete comes,⁶⁵ whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf' (Jn. 15.26a). Here in the person of the Holy Spirit is the first part of the equation of witness. The second involves the disciples themselves, the eyewitnesses of Jesus's works and words: 'You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning' (15.26b). The disciples' witness will cost them: 'They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God (Jn. 16:2). Here in Jesus's prophecy is the same hint of the acquired English meaning of *martyria* ('martyr') for 'witness' suggested in Luke's Gospel. (See Lk. 21.5-11). Nevertheless, the focus is on the Spirit's advocacy and help:

And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement ... When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (Jn. 16.8, 13)

Once again, it is an invisible witness—one who will only be recognized by Aiston's 'optic heart' (AN 1.69). Again, as Jesus said to Thomas after his resurrection appearance, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'

⁶⁵ How *paraclete* translates into English—whether Advocate, Comforter, Helper, Intercessor, or Mediator—shapes the modern reader's apprehension of him.

(20.29). The readers of John's Gospel are those who must receive the Spirit's witness and John's witness that Jesus is truly the Son of God and be drawn into the light and life that such faith entails. Part of the mystery is the form that witness takes—what it looks like in the shape of each person's individual story.

The resurrection events described in John's Gospel are the beginning of the rest of the disciples' lives as 'sent ones': 'Go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"', Jesus says to Mary Magdalene beside the empty tomb (Jn. 20.17). He later commissions the disciples, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' (Jn. 20.21). There is the same hiddenness and mystery involved in the telling as in the seeing. Sometimes 'the night shift', 'the nine-to-five', 'the joblessness', and 'waiting it out in Chronic Care' seem all there is—'until a witness gives evidence' (*AN* 2. 168).

In the closing stanzas of another of Avison's poems 'Branches' (*AN* 1.185-86), she talks of the motif of 'come and see' and 'go and tell' in an organic image of newly splitting seeds from dying and diseased elms. Her picture of the cross is strangely Johannine in its delicate presentation of Christ's triumph.

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

There is life on the 'charring' (burned out) branch of both one's personal world and the larger world in a sweet red fruit interpreting Christ's heart of love. The Evangelist says it plainly: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son' (Jn. 3.16). The poet continues:

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

'Come and see' in John's Gospel is the story of 'wondering, one by one', gathering and gladness as Jesus's disciples have listened and learned. 'I have made your name known

to those whom you gave me from the world', Jesus prays for his disciples on the eve of his glorification and death (Jn. 17.6). And then comes the scattering of the seed: 'As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world ... I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (Jn. 17.18, 26). Ironically, of course, as Jesus well knows and warns them, they will first scatter in fear: 'The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home' (Jn. 16:32). But the regathering after the resurrection and the receiving of the Holy Spirit ensures the new life in the seeds of their fledgling faith will be scattered. Avison explains in 'Branches' that it continues to be, each generation telling 'what the root / and where life is made'.

So what do these scriptural models of witness mean for her? She recognizes the inevitable controversy inherent in the polarization of belief and unbelief. Hence, she says emphatically in 'Witnesses' (L 36-37),

Giver, I know now, anyone's
survival is to be on
Your side.

'Seeing' the Unseen is urgent—is essential. This seeing is in the context of the 'momentary dark' of one's existence which may make the signs more difficult to recognize. Equally imperative is the compulsion to share what she sees and to help others to see for themselves:

If it is
not too late, may the many
be there [on the Giver's side].

Jesus's invitation to 'come and see' contains its inevitable counterpart of obedience to 'go and tell'. This kind of witness Avison pursues with relentless perseverance.

Chapter 3 ‘Come and See’: ‘All Lookings Forth at the Implicit Touch’

Sparrows in the curbs
and ditch-litter at the
service-station crossroads
alike instruct, distract.

(‘Prelude’ *AN* 1.62)

Attend, Attend.
In pool and sand and riffled waters, here is
significant witness of an event.

(‘The Ecologist’s Song’ *AN* 2.266)

To contemplate is an
indulgence, distancing
a self, an object.

(‘Neighbours’ *AN* 2.80)

3.1 Learning to See

Jesus’s words ‘Come and see’ (*Jn.* 1.39) to those early disciples in John’s Gospel can be an invitation to accompany a skilled traveller on her own journey to ‘see’ the living Christ. The logic of ‘How can you love God whom you have not seen if you do not love those whom you do see?’ (a loose paraphrase of *1 Jn.* 4.20) suggests a parallel challenge concerning perceptions and understanding: How can a man ‘see’ Jesus (whom he has not seen), if his perceptions of the world around are dull? How can a woman recognize spiritual reality if she is unaware of the physical world? Again, in the poet’s words, ‘Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes’ (‘Snow’ *AN* 1.69). There must be some seed of desire to see—some motivation to move in the direction of awareness. That motivation may need to be awakened.

Avison writes in her poem ‘The Promise of Particulars’ (*AN* 2.210), that ‘all, everywhere / burns with minutiae and risk and wonder’. Whether it is the ‘shore of remote foaming sea’ for the foreign traveler or the ‘doorway at home’ for ‘the first-stepping child’ there is this promise:

For the spirit released,
too, all is
vivid, nothing
routine or lost to awareness,
and yet in that one-eyed
heart-whole wonder
tiny particulars will be
known within wholeness.

The gift of seeing—of risking, of stepping out to see—is a kind of miracle. It is a matter of spirit released, the jail-break she has pictured in ‘Snow’ explained in metaphysical or religious language. It is like foreign travel; it is like the first-stepping child in her or his early experiences of seeing. But it is more. The objects of perception are all vivid, nothing routine or lost to awareness. When she speaks of ‘that one-eyed / heart-whole wonder’, the poet is referring to a particular kind of acuity. She has transformed the senses’ ‘everyday eyework’, as she calls it later in ‘The Fixed in a Flux’ (*AN* 3.185), to the eye of the heart. Emotions, feelings, imagination are all employed now. What accompanies the miracle is more seeing, in vivid specificity, and then the ‘tiny particulars will be known within wholeness’, which the poet interprets in the last lines of ‘The Promise of Particulars’ (*AN* 2.20):

The moment winks, is gone.
But everything is shaped in prospect of the
glory.

The Johannine word ‘glory’ does not go unnoticed.

Avison is distilling in few words what Annie Dillard, the Pulitzer Prize winning essayist, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, details is the reward of the attuned observer of the natural world:

Unfortunately, nature is very much a now-you-see-it, now you-don’t affair. A fish flashes, then dissolves in the water before my eyes like so much salt. Deer apparently ascend bodily into heaven; the brightest oriole fades into leaves. These disappearances stun me into stillness and concentration; they say of nature that it conceals with a grand nonchalance, and they say of vision that it is a deliberate gift, the revelation of a dancer who for my eyes only flings away her seven veils. For nature does reveal as well as conceal: now you don’t see it, now you do. (1974:16)

Nature’s playful elusiveness described in Dillard’s ebullient prose refracts the strangely hidden and revealed nature of the spiritual world. The poet’s ‘prospect of glory’ (*AN* 2.210) has its own hidden mystery about it, cloaked in religious language that hints at access to the mystery of seeing the one whom no one has seen, mediated through ‘the Word become flesh’ (‘the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth’, Jn 1.14).

Avison has led the way with a lifetime preoccupation with perception and apprehension—particular and peculiar, off-angled seeing. ‘Poetry is always in / unfamiliar territory’, she writes near the end of her life (‘Poetry Is’ *MD* 27),¹ and what she achieves in her varied verse over and over is ‘a particular instance of / The kind of lighting up of the terrain’ (‘Voluptuaries and Others’ *AN* 1.117). Donald Hair notes the demand placed on the reader of an Avison poem to respond to its particularities: ‘The struggle with the text startles the reader out of the torpor of ordinary perception and effects a revolution in our ways of seeing’ (2006:53). He recalls hearing her lecture at The University of Western Ontario, pointing out the ‘opaque world, a world up against your eyeballs’. Her advice to aspiring writers, ‘Write at the limits of vision—when you’ve got it, you can see farther’ (Hair, 2006:53), is the measure of the gift she offers the readers of her difficult poetry.

The world is a little less opaque with awareness of some nature’s oddities: Avison’s ‘winter pigeons walk the cement ledges / Urbane, discriminating’ (‘To Professor X, Year Y’ *AN* 1.87); her trees have ‘tremulous-aching fingers / shaping the quiet airflow’ (‘April’ *AN* 2.157); her ‘Milky Way / end over end like a football / lobs’ (‘The Hid, Here’ *AN* 2.139). In ‘Natural/Unnatural’ (*AN* 1.217), her

Evening tilt makes a
Pencil box of our
Street.
The lake, in largeness, grapy blueness,
Casts back the biscuit-coloured pencil-box, boxes, toys, the
Steeple-people,² all of it, in one of those
Little mirrory shrugs.

The striking strangeness in the examples above comes, of course, from the poet’s transformations of her ordinary sightings in nature. Dillard, equally preoccupied with nature’s revelations, suggests,

¹ This poem is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.1.

² ‘Steeple-people’ condenses a childhood limerick: The adult demonstrates to the child with entwined fingers closed: ‘Here is the church’; index fingers raised, ‘Here is the steeple’; opening the hands and twisting them outward, ‘open the doors and see all the people’.

Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it. It is, as Ruskin says, "not merely unnoticed, but in the full, clear sense of the word, unseen". (1974:30)

At the same time, while the poet puts expression to what is experienced, and hence, shapes what is seen, Dillard posits

another kind of seeing that involves a letting go. When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied ... the difference between walking with and without a camera ... When I walk without a camera, my own shutter opens, and the moment's light prints on my own silver gut. (1974:31)

She is echoing Avison's assurance that 'for the spirit released, / too, all is vivid' (*AN* 2.210). Both essayist and poet are sensitively tuned to what passes before their eyes, and the gift that emerges in the text extends the 'lighting up of the terrain' (*AN* 1.117).

Further, noting particular phenomena is often only the beginning of Avison's seeing: 'Move your tongue along a slat / Of a raspberry box from last year's crate', she writes in 'Thaw' (*AN* 1.92); 'Smell a saucepan tilt of water / On the coal-ash in your grate'. The poet juxtaposes that peculiar sensory data with an even further reach of the imagination as the poem moves on:

Think how the Black Death made men dance,
And from the silt of centuries
The proof is now scraped bare that once
Troy fell and Pompey scorched and froze.

The reader is expected to make connections between these extreme, disparate particulars. Yet again, in 'From a Provincial' (*AN* 1.85):

On evening tables
Midges survey their planes of brief discovery
At a half-run. In Milton's candle's light
They so employed themselves.
Some die before the light is out.

The poem abruptly shifts its subject:

In Caesar's camp was order,
The locus of their lives for some centurions
Encircled by forests of somber France.

Midges and centurions have little in common—except the central metaphor of the poem: 'Part of the strangeness is / Knowing the landscape'.

One literal and metaphorical landscape that Avison knows well is a Toronto street in winter's constraints. In 'Dark Afternoon' (*AN* 2.141), an unassuming (and

enigmatic) lyric, she precisely visualizes the details of a common scene. She defamiliarizes it with off-angled syntax and strange diction such as the neologisms ‘snowblear’ and ‘unfurnitured’ and noun-become-verb ‘parlours’ and the compound epithet ‘one-day day’:

The sun is white,
snowblear all stained, and
radiostore music
parlours this grimy salt-besplattered
sidewalk.

The ‘radiostore music’ is the only part of the scene that makes it habitable—that ‘parlours’ the space. She continues,

The time is furtive, seeming late,
unfurnitured, fit for hunched
non-householders, and for ghosts of a
pre-city, one-day day.

Robert Merrett, in his essay ‘Faithful Unpredictability: Syntax and Theology in Margaret Avison’s Poetry’, offers one helpful window into the poet’s distinctive formulations of what and how she sees—her interpretation of the world. Merrett suggests that ‘syntax … reveal[s] how our minds work and how we react to the world’ (1987:83). Therefore, to see with her lenses, the reader needs to embrace her ‘unpredictability’ and work with her imaginative and often jarring rearrangement of sentence structure. Merrett explains:

her world is not limited to the phenomenal. She realizes speech can point to things that do not factually exist: she trusts that language refers to the ineffable and to elements of reality not normally envisaged. Using syntax oddly, Avison offers us a challenge; breaking conventional relations between concept and referent, she invites us to mend these fractures. We respond only if we reconceive the relation of language to creation imaginatively. (1987:83)

In the poem above, she is beckoning readers to ‘come and see’—see deeper into the visible reality of the ‘salt-besplattered’ sidewalk paired with the invisible ‘furtive and ‘unfurnitured’ time ‘fit for hunched / non-householders’. Place and time are merging in the imagination and calling up another ephemeral scene—a strange transformation of ‘ghosts of a / pre-city, one-day day’. The suggestion is indeterminate, but it hints at the other-worldly. In offering his particular interpretive key to Avison’s poetry, Merrett is

also intimating a possible connection between ‘seeing’ the natural world mediated and aided by the poet, and ‘seeing’ in the religious sense.³

The poet explains the guiding principle of her poetry in the foreword to her *Collected Poems: Always Now*, drawing on a hitherto unpublished poem ‘City of April’ (*AN* 1.14-16), ‘written shortly before the ten years had elapsed [of following her teacher’s advice to avoid using the first person in any poem]’.⁴ Calling it a poetic manifesto (*AN* 1.14), she is playful in the poem’s candour and vulnerability in the opening stanza:

This is about me, and you must listen
You who sit naked on the bed, folding your hands about your
 toes
 Knowing how foolish it is to do so
 but alone, so safe and free to be foolish.

The speaker leads her readers down a Prufrock-like street of ambiguity, where even the ‘you and me’ are blurred and indeterminate. The articulated manifesto of the mature poet emerges in later lines:

This is about me, and you must listen
Because tonight *I have been staring*
At the shadow of chairlegs on this attic floor
Seeing them as they are. [italics mine]

She proceeds to expand that particular shadow of chairlegs to other particular images of place and people, each with their accompanying vistas of feeling and thought. She blends the seeing with her other senses: ‘the spring night breathes through my window’; ‘I feel nights on the foothills desolate dark’; ‘And hylas loud in the sloughs’; ‘the train-whistle far and far’. The young poet draws from Eliot and Wordsworth in their understanding of poetic memory:⁵

³ There are hints of Ricoeur’s thinking here: ‘... we too often and too quickly think of a will that submits and not enough of an imagination that opens itself ... the imagination is that part of ourselves that responds to the text as a Poem’ (1980:117).

⁴ This idea is introduced in Chapter 1.1.

⁵ Eliot’s lines of ‘Burnt Norton’ sound similar:

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind. (1943:13)

And I know that there are no hydas now
And the footprints down in the area pavement
Are indistinguishable from a million others

This being city, and long years passed.
At the same time knowing it is a train [...]

The narrator proceeds to draw a picture of that train and its imagined occupants, including an

old woman, bunchy skirted
alert and placid and chatting endlessly
to the young stranger who submits.

Carrying on in literary tradition, Avison hints at Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', drawing first the stranger listening to the old woman and then the 'you' of the poem into the position of wedding guest.

The poem is a paradigm for interpreting Avison's poetics. Her focus is not on the emerging woman but on the emerging woman who sees. The seeing involves all the senses and the heart and soul of a sensitive, intelligent and intuitive artist. The narrator repeats for a third time in the poem, 'This is about me, and you must listen / For I make no claim on you else'. Avison explains through the voice of the speaker what she expects and desires in an empathetic reader:

So bear with me and look
At that shadow of chairlegs on the floor
Till your throat is swollen with tears and exultation.

The response she wants from her reader sounds very much like Barfield's 'felt change of consciousness' (1973:48).⁶

Avison's passionate admonition to 'come and see' in this late-released, but early poem is important to note for several reasons. For one, it highlights her paradoxical

Intimations of Wordsworth's familiar words

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
of five long winters! [...]
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet

in 'Tintern Abbey' (Perkins, 1967:209-210) are suggested as well. It makes sense that a developing poet, as Avison was in this very early poem, would have the masters she has absorbed ringing in her ears.

⁶ In explaining his phrase 'aesthetic imagination' Barfield goes on to say, 'By "felt" I mean to signify that the change itself is noticed, or attended to' (1973:48).

stance expressed in the monologue: ‘This is about me / this is not about me ... This is about what I see’. Ken Babstock, speaking as both a poet and critic, in his review of Avison’s later volume *Concrete and Wild Carrot*, comments on the ‘many labourings and movements of spirit that occurred—must have occurred—prior to each poem’s creation’ (2003:D13). While this observation rings true in the depth of feeling released in the varied lyrics, these labourings and movements of the spirit are not the focal point of her art. ‘City of April’ is suggesting that it has been ‘a kind of perseverance’, a deliberate fastidiousness in habit of pointing to something other than the self. Avison’s poetry beckons her readers on this journey of perception—to ‘come and see’ what she sees. In the process of absorbing the poems the poet emerges, but only as a witness, not the key player in the drama. Furthermore, and most important, it is finally the witness of the poems, not the poet, that compels attention.

Avison’s posture is one of watching from a window or sitting on a park bench—a looking out and observing—in a number of her poems. ‘Grammarians on a Lakefront Park Bench’ (*AN* 1.77), ‘Rich Boy’s Birthday Through a Window’ (*AN* 1.109), ‘Old Woman at a Window’ (*AN* 3.15), ‘Beyond Weather, or From a Train Window’ (*AN* 3.15) and ‘Resting On a Dry Log, Park Bench, Boulder’ (*AN* 3.97) are titles of some poems that emphasize the poet as a meditative, but alert observer with a pointing hand. Her vision is in sympathy with C. S. Lewis, another great twentieth century Christian witness who explains in his own manifesto, written near the end of his career and life, *An Experiment in Criticism*, his view of the receiving process of sightings and seeings of a writer:

The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandize himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness. In love, in virtue, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the reception of the arts we are doing this. (1961:138)

The role of the critic and reader of literature for Lewis is a participation in this specific seeing:

it is *connaitre* not *savoir*; it is *erleben*; we become these other selves. Not only nor chiefly in order to see what they are like but in order to see what they see, to occupy, for a while, their seat in the great theatre, to use their spectacles and be made free of whatever insights, joys, terrors, wonders or merriment those spectacles reveal.⁷ (1961:139)

If readers follows Lewis's suggestion with Avison's poetry—pausing with her at her window or park bench, putting on her spectacles, to see what and how she sees—they accept the risk and demand of attention, but also the promise of nothing ‘lost to awareness’ ‘in that one-eyed heart-whole wonder’ ‘known within wholeness’ (‘Promise of Particulars’ *AN* 2.210).

When the young woman of ‘City of April’ (*AN* 1.14-16) exclaims, ‘[L]ook / at that shadow of chairlegs on the floor / Till your throat is swollen with tears and exultation’, she obviously suggests something beyond a mere clinical recording of visible data. Looking at the shadow is different than focusing on the chairlegs. There is an element of seeing the unseen that elicits the strong emotion of ‘tears and exultation’.

D. G. Jones in ‘Cold Eye and Optic Heart: Marshall McLuhan and Some Canadian Poets’ corroborates the thinking of several contemporary poets when he suggests, ‘If there is a world [for the poet] to make articulate, it is a world that has been suppressed by the hegemony of the eye’ (1974:173). The implication is the overemphasis on images, particularly as the media has drawn one’s attention to the visual.⁸ Jones goes on to suggest,

For the writer it is not simply a question of naming what he sees; to name what people cannot see, what is not already in the language, he must go into the dark and somehow see what is there in the dark ... whatever world remains mute, invisible, requires a new language. (1974:174)

Obviously, this ‘nam[ing] what people cannot see’ is intangible and often elusive and often what makes Avison’s poetry so frequently puzzling and difficult to access. At the same time, the implication of ‘City of April’ is that the youthful poet has started on a journey toward the ineffable and spiritual and invites her readers to join her.

⁷ Lewis completes the idea with his assertion that ‘[h]ence it is irrelevant whether the mood expressed in a poem was truly and historically the poet’s own or one that he also had imagined. What matters is his power to make us live it’ (1961:139).

⁸ Jacques Ellul, so influential to Avison’s thinking, in *The Humiliation of the Word* (1981, 1985) has similar sentiments in his concern for the modern addiction to images but places different emphasis in his critique: ‘Anyone wishing to save humanity today must first of all save the word’ (1985:vii).

In ‘To Someone in That Boardroom’ (*AN* 2.188) the poet speaks to a person she imagines working late in a high rise office building:

so late?
Tired to your wool sox, sir?
Eyes gritty with paper encounters?
Listen, then:

Here is one of Avison’s many calls to attend to nature through the imaginative faculties.

There is a throb, outside,
a hyacinth-core, impacted, under
the rolling wind and night.

Her call is not unambiguous, of course, because the referents are multi-faceted; a tentative meaning can only be intuited. Nevertheless, the ‘inflooding, dark swirls over / tinkertoy town’ of ‘the rolling wind and night’ and the ‘throb, outside, / a hyacinth-core’ compel attention. The environment around and outside the confinement of the building is pulsing with some kind of living energy. What is this ‘hyacinth-core, impacted’?⁹ While precise signification is elusive, something similar to ‘the vital bond’ of ‘Rising Dust’,¹⁰ is suggested again. In ‘Rising Dust’ the connection is inward: ‘The strand within / thrums and shudders and twists’ (*AN* 3.164). Here it is ‘a throb, outside’ (*AN* 2.188), external, but functioning to point to something—to someone, out of the self and in the dark.

In ‘A Nameless One’ (*AN* 1.225), she watches an insect live out its day and die in the ‘lodgers’ bathroom’.¹¹ The attention to the time suggests a repeated and intentional seeing. The details she records sound like a scientist clinically gathering data, but the interpretation of the data reveals a particular point of connection more intimate. She watches and notes and in some inexplicable way, cares about its fate—its

⁹ She could be referring to a precious stone, the hyacinth gem of the ancients or the flower with its spikes of bell-shaped and fragrant flowers or the bulb of the flower. Or she could have in mind the mythological story behind the flower, ‘said to have sprung up from the blood of the slain youth Hyacinthus and the ancients thought they could decipher on the petals the letters AI, or AIAI, exclamation of grief’ (OED). (See Ovid, *Metamorphosis* 10.211 for one version of the myth.)

¹⁰ See Chapter 1.1.

¹¹ This poem from *The Dumbfounding* is one of several that has been frequently anthologized and has received considerable critical comment from earlier reviewers and critics: Jones (1968:55-56), Redekop (1970: 16-18); Neufeld (1976:39). See Appendix for the complete poem.

'insect-day'. Dillard suggests, 'The lover can see and the knowledgeable' (1974:18), and the detail Avison has recorded implies she herself is both. She moves to reflection:

now that it is
over, I
look with new eyes
upon this room
adequate for one to
be, in.

The bathroom has strangely become a sacred space, hallowed by a living 'nameless' creature. She views creation, not as a disinterested viewer, but as one connected, and participating. Something healing has occurred in the observer as she has shared the brief reality of the

narrow winged
long-elbowed-thread-legged
living insect,

mirroring her own, and transforming the experience of both:

Its insect-day
has threaded a needle
for me for my eyes dimming
over rips and tears and
thin places.

In *Momentary Dark* she suggests the same process, only this time it is God who is doing the watching and caring. 'Exposure' (*MD* 16-17) begins with a declaration—a faith-statement:

Every living thing
as a mass or a
morsel, or one who moves with
the speed of light, alike –
each, in His miracle of
particularity,
the Lord knows.

The object of attention in the poem is a lowly pear which she proceeds to imagine is on the mind of God. In this picture of particularity, the poet implicitly draws a link between the human and divine. 'The Lord' (her particular intimate language) sees. The poet describes, and hence, sees, in imitation of her Maker:

Even a pear on a
leafy July bough,
or a begrimed
pear on a downtown fruit stand,

or a pale piece of pear in a
hospital dish proffered
a toothless mouth,
blank now toward
sustenance, and breath:
even such pears also are
known.

At the same time, she uses her off-angled seeing to broaden the focus beyond the pear in a series of associations: The focus expands to other pears to the person with the ‘toothless mouth, / blank now toward sustenance, and breath’, and the familiar Avisionian turn in the poetic line has made even a pear profound.

Observing nature’s data is a short distance from noting the significance of fellow human beings. Only now the seeing has added complexity, as she details in ‘Neighbours?’ (*AN* 2.80):

At the carstop
in the tarpots’ fume
weltered, you walked
past, stranger, like a found
manganese nodule¹²—concentrate
of mortal meaning on the
seafloor of the city’s
daytime din.
The streetcar jolted on.

What does it mean to see—to know—another human being? There is a haunting mystery in this ‘concentrate / of mortal meaning’ which cannot be mined at will.¹³ Even awareness and contemplation and imagination are not sufficient tools.

“What speaks?” The stranger’s
face and walk compel
awareness still.

To contemplate is an
indulgence, distancing
a self, an object.

Avison is emphasizing creaturely limitation at this point, as she does in such poems as ‘Known’ (*AN* 2.179) and ‘Exposure’ (*MD* 16-17), where only One can see and know

¹² The OED clarifies that a manganese nodule is a geological term—‘a nodular concretion consisting primarily of manganese and iron oxides, such as occurs in large quantities on the floors of oceans and the Great Lakes’. Further, this natural phenomenon is very common. ‘An estimated 1,500,000,000,000 tons of manganese nodules are on the Pacific Ocean floor alone’ *Encycl. Brit.* (XXV. 172/2) (OED).

¹³ Redekop, writing in the 1980s, comments on the ‘considerable scientific inquiry which has not yet resolved itself about their origin’ (1980:35-36), making the manganese nodule a particularly apt simile. He is perhaps a little less helpful in his interpretation that ‘true discovery has to be a Samaritan act of involvement with one’s neighbour’ (1980:36).

perfectly. Only the One to whom she points can safely ‘mine the meaning of a found identity’ (*AN* 2.80).

To mine the meaning of
a found identity
will be given only to
recovered innocence.

“Then contain,
content to wait till Then”.

For the sensitive, caring and alert observer, that knowledge might come later—‘Then’, cryptically unexplained. In the meantime, the limitation does not prevent the poet from seeking that meaning in her July Man, ‘old, rain-wrinkled, time-soiled, city-wise’ (*AN* 1.160); Agnes Cleves with her ‘fuzzy and whitish’ thoughts, ‘much alone, as well as old’ (*AN* 1.132-43); the tinker, A Friend’s Friend, ‘proof against mountain-sickness’ (*AN* 1.129); Madeleine, ‘off the assembly line’ with her ‘certain clarity, a caritas, / But wood-wild’ (*AN* 1.110-112); and any of the other men, women and children who people her lyrics. Avison explores human nature, both the visible and ‘in the dark’, the same way she mines the meaning of the text of creation and the verbal texts of scripture and other literature.

Learning to see—to really see—takes courage and determination as a person confronts both light and darkness in events and ideas and things. Avison recognizes fear in the narrator, Madeleine’s co-worker, of ‘Our Working Day May Be Menaced’ (*AN* 1.110-112), when he reports on Madeleine’s ‘wood-wild....’ ‘nature’ and wonders about her ‘calling from our calling?’. He concludes, ‘Our mocha faces are too bland for trouble’. ‘For everyone / The swimmer’s moment at the whirlpool comes,’ Avison asserts in another of her popular poems, ‘The Swimmer’s Moment’ (*AN* 1.89).¹⁴ There are those who

By their refusal they are saved
From the black pit, and also from contesting

¹⁴ See Appendix 3.1 for an uninterrupted version of the poem. There are a number of interpretations about this poem—for instance, the swimmer’s moment is death or the swimmer’s moment is conversion to Christianity—that Avison says she did not have in mind when she wrote the poem. Part of its power, of course, is in its ambiguity.

The deadly rapids and emerging in
The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.

Like the earlier ‘mocha faces’ ‘too bland for trouble’, here the same undistinguishable ‘bland-blank faces’ of the ‘many’

turn and turn
Pale and forever on the rim of suction
They will not recognize.

The decision of the ‘many’ means they

cannot penetrate their secret
Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
Where one or two have won:
(The silver reaches of the estuary).

In *Winter Sun*’s ‘A Conversation’ (*AN* 1.123), it is a curious matter of dealing with the death of a fish. The man in the restaurant telling the story of his encounter to ‘no particular listener / For few can listen, on Saturday afternoon’ remarks on ‘the queer pocket of quiet’ ‘before the debacle’:

“Fish have a way of wavering through water.
They don’t beat with their fins. What is their death
To me? I can’t confront
A tree to really know it, and feel odd
To exchange glances with a squirrel,
And wish to keep my springs of life
Private from the Big Eye.
Well then. The fish had died. I’ll not intrude there”.

Yet in the poem, ironically, he is unable to release himself from the memory of the event, as he continues brooding on the details of the death of the fish.

The poet herself is not like her fictional characters. Her poems are all about ‘confront[ing] / a tree to really know it’ and ‘exchang[ing] glances with a squirrel’ (*AN* 1.123), even if it means extreme psychic pain. One of her earlier published poems ‘The Butterfly’ (*AN* 1.23) records the brief event of a trapped butterfly in a violent storm: ‘It clung between the ribs of the storm, wavering, / and flung against the battering bone-wind’. Its brief delicate life ended, ‘glued to the grit of that rain-strewn beach’. The storm has been

An uproar,
a spruce-green sky, bound in iron,
the murky sea running a sulphur scum,

originating it seems, in Milton's hell. The rain-strewn beach is anthropomorphized as it 'glowered' in helpless sympathy with the butterfly it 'swallowed' in its 'unstrung dark', again laden with human characteristics.

In memory, the event is even more sinister. Some looming malevolent force, wild and enveloping, in one violent gesture of entrapment deliberately destroyed the vulnerable and delicate life of one of its creatures:

That wild, sour air, those miles of crouching forest, that moth
when all enveloping space
is a thin glass globe, swirling with storm
tempt us to stare, and seize analogies.

The analogy is harsh and accusing and full of unanswered questions: What is the new 'fierce and subhuman peace'? Why is the 'east sky, blanched like Eternity'? The final stanza intones repetitively, 'The meaning of the moth, even the smashed moth, / the meaning of the moth', as the mourning continues. Furthermore, its meaning extends to the human situation. As David Jeffrey notes, speaking of Avison's other butterfly poem, 'Butterfly Bones' Sonnet against Sonnets' (*AN* 1.71), 'The butterfly is a fragile messenger: age-old symbol for the spirit (*psyche*) and for transformation (*metamorphoses*)'. (Jeffrey, 1979:4). Here its message is dark and foreboding:

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?

Again there is this word 'subhuman', now coupled with 'swamp'. It is a strange juxtaposition—this 'far above' with 'under-dark'.

The 1943 poem was revised in 1989, at which time Avison commented, 'This is a revision, because I have learned that "moth" and "butterfly" are not interchangeable terms (as I had written them in ignorance in the earlier version), and because the "angle" seems indicated in Rom. 8:21 and Eph. 1:10'.¹⁵ In this second version she simplifies the

¹⁵ See Avison, *Selected Poems* (SP 1). St. Paul writes to the Romans, 'the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Rom. 8:21);

second stanza: Rather than ‘tempts us to stare, and seize analogies’ (*AN* 1.23), the line merely reads, ‘tempts one to the abyss’ (*SP* 1). This rendering, of course, alters the meaning of the temptation, but also implies the speaker is coming from a different place. The biblical story of ‘The Voice that stilled the sea of Galilee’ (*AN* 1.23) has disappeared, and the closing stanza has taken on a much quieter and resigned acceptance of the suffering of the created order in light of the Christian hope of future restoration of Creation:

The butterfly’s meaning, even though smashed.
Imprisoned in endless cycle? No. The meaning!
Can’t we stab that one angle
into the curve of space that sweeps beyond
our farthest knowing, out into light’s
place of invisibility? (*SP* 1)

In the revised version the meaning of the moth/butterfly and its suffering is still unresolved, but there is no sense of alienation.¹⁶ ‘Light’s / place of invisibility’ (*SP* 1) has replaced ‘the subhuman swamp of under-dark’ (*AN* 1.23). That which cannot be seen is light rather than darkness—much more in keeping with Avison’s own faith journey into light. Nevertheless, in her recent publication of her *Collected Poems: Always Now*, she has reverted to the original poem for this final consideration and reconsideration of the poems she wishes to preserve,¹⁷ implying several possibilities: the original version is the better poetry; it is the more authentic confrontation with the darkness—the cry of the cross, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mk. 15.34); it better maintains the mystery of the ‘smashed moth’ as the speaker/poet experiences it.

Finally, learning to see the created world and its inhabitants means learning to read signs. Implicit in seeing carefully, looking closely, seeing the hidden, and seeing with courage is the understanding of reality’s mystery and ambiguity. In the poem

Again, he writes to the Ephesians, ‘in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth’ (Eph. 1.10).

¹⁶ Jon Kertzer suggests one of the ways we might interpret Avison’s early poetry is that ‘of alienation relieved by imaginative insight’ (1987:7).

¹⁷ Avison, *Always Now*, Vol. I, ‘A Note on the Text’ (2003:17).

above, the poet's litany, 'the meaning of the moth', already speaks of that reality, even in her despairing and questioning stance. When that reality and mystery connect and point to the ineffable and invisible God, the task becomes more urgent. Reading signs means first, assuming, and then, responding to that reality and mystery embodied in the incarnation, the presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

However, even on a basic level people are not naturally attuned to signs, a fact she laments.

Earth-dwellers tend to
amble about in spite of
being alerted,

the poet notes in 'Reconnaissance' (*MD* 24-25). The signs should be obvious, but people miss them or do not recognize what they see.

Signs and symptoms
speak out, but when
embossed on persons are
rarely discerned in
preventive time.

Nature's pointers are also not recognized:

Signs and runes
gleam out in the last
tapestry evening sky.
Symptoms, all spent, open on
silence.

One reason they may be missed is that they are not necessarily obvious. John Tinsley, in *Telling It Slant*, observes that indirection is fundamental to signs. 'Signs, to be signs, are necessarily ambiguous, mistakable, indirect' (1990:14), he asserts, suggesting the imaginative energy required of the sensitive witness. Furthermore, 'revelation is provisional. He who reveals is greater than what he reveals' (Tinsley, 1990:17). Therefore, humility, a sense of wonder and expectation seem necessary accompaniments to sign-watching. To 'see' nature—creation and its creatures—is both performance and rehearsal for the greater seeing. The process connects both the 'pear' and the 'toothless mouth' in 'His miracle of / particularity'; and the careful observer

gradually becomes aware of the ‘Knower’ who sees and ‘waits / our turn’ (‘Exposure’, *MD* 16-17).¹⁸

3.2 Nature’s Display

Avison’s overt Christian witness in her devotional poems or glosses on biblical passages invites expectation of similar emphases in the lyrics that call attention to nature’s revelations. For instance, how is one to interpret ‘News Item’ (*AN* 3.99) from *Not Yet But Still?*

Today, May 9th,
the chestnut trees
pagoda’d in full
seven-fold leaf
out of a blue sky

or ‘The Cloud’ (*AN* 2.234) from *No Time?*

The August storm
is tall as a wall.
How eerily the cosmos
unflutters like a feather
in this waiting stillness?

Does their context in collections with devotional lyrics influence a ‘Christian’ reading or are these lyrics about natural seasonal events in and of themselves poems of Christian witness? These questions mirror in an odd sort of way the same kinds of questions asked about the possibility of knowing God through nature and creation. The familiar biblical texts of Psalm 19, Romans 1.19-21, Acts 14.15-17 and Acts 17.24-29 imply some sort of ‘general revelation’, but theologians through the centuries have not been in agreement about the extent, nature or effectiveness of these inferences. Avison’s poetic witness inadvertently becomes tied into this larger question.

How she perceives and speaks of nature’s gifting in her beckoning to ‘come and see’, I propose, is a strong indicator of her unique creativity and independence of spirit. While she is anchored in one tradition, she seems willing to move in a larger stream of Christian thought, ultimately resulting in an extra measure of vitality in her Christian

¹⁸ See the discussion of ‘Exposure’ earlier in the chapter.

witness. Her theological formation is through Reformed Christianity with its tradition of deep scepticism regarding natural theology, part of which claims ‘that God actually has made himself known in nature … truth about God is actually present within the creation’ (Erickson, 1998:181).¹⁹ To use the language of this project, ‘[N]ature witnesses to God, reveal[ing] God in some way, which is intelligible to all persons as human beings with reason and good will’ (Willmer, July 2009). Her minister William Fitch is conspicuously silent about any witness of creation in his description of the beliefs of Knox Church; rather he affirms the commitment to ‘sola scriptura’ of the Westminster Confession of Faith, emphasizing that ‘it is through Scripture alone that we know of Jesus Christ, the full and final revelation of God the Father’ (Fitch, 1971:102).²⁰ As discussed earlier in chapter one, Avison embraces this commitment to ‘sola scriptura’, engaging herself in regular and rigorous Bible study. Consequently, it is not surprising that her poetry includes a significant number of poems based on specific passages of scripture.

On the other hand, it is curious that her conversion to Christianity signals a deeper shift in her poetry than just the obvious introduction of devotional poems. The inward transformation she chronicles in such poems as ‘The Word’ (*AN* 1.195-96), ‘Searching and Sounding’ (*AN* 1.199-202) and ‘A Prayer Answered by Prayer’ (*AN* 1.203) is accompanied by an increase in attention to creation. Details of the natural world woven throughout the poet’s earlier verse, often more context than subject, take centre stage in many post-conversion lyrics. *The Dumbfounding* begins with several striking images of nature’s varied display. ‘Old…Young...’²¹ (*AN* 1.147) speaks of

The antlers of the ancient
members of the orchard lie
bleaching where the young grass
shines, breathing light.

¹⁹ Erickson’s scepticism is implicit in his use of the word ‘actually’.

²⁰ See Chapter 1.1 for a fuller discussion.

²¹ Avison’s ellipses.

The poem's last stanza suggests a reason to take notice with its initial italicized conjunction, perhaps a veiled and metaphorical allusion to her own changed spiritual condition:

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".

The next poem to follow in the revised collection,²² 'Two Mayday Selves' (*AN* 1.148-49), continues the celebration of spring, this time in the heart of the city:

The grackle shining in long grass
this first day of green casts
an orchid-mile of shadow
into the sun-meld, that marvel, those
meadows of peace (between the bird
and the curved curb
of the city-centre clover-leaf).

Spring's arrival has its multiple observers, including the essential transcendent and immanent 'other beholder' – out there, here' – in

[t]he aloof
tiers of offices, apartments, hotels,
schools, park branches, opal
heaven-hidden stars, the other
beholder – out there, here.

The poet concludes in her invitation: 'Old ghoul, leather-tough diaphragm, / listen! – I am holding *my* breath'. With spread out and enjambed lines she beckons her other self,

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

Both early poems are invitations to joy anchored in a baptized perception of the natural world, beginning a pattern that increases in subsequent verse.

Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth century Puritan divine, writes in his 'Personal Narrative' of a parallel experience of religious import: 'I began to have a new kind of

²² In the original edition there is another conversational lyric, 'The Two Selves', facing and paralleling 'Two Mayday Selves', with a memorable simile from nature in its conclusion,

It is more

like knowing the sound of the sea when you
live under the sea. (*D* 10)

Avison removed it from *The Collected Poems*.

apprehensions and ideas of Christ, and the work of redemption, and the glorious way of salvation ...' (Baym, 2003:185). One of the outcomes was a vivid perception of God in nature:

The appearance of everything was altered: there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind ... in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things. (Baym, 1998:444)

This excerpt from Edwards' narrative is a possible accounting for the invitational impulse to 'come and see' creation in Avison's poems. Both writers—preacher and poet—are expressing a witness to and of creation in their playful joy. They may also be enacting Calvin's accommodation of special revelation to general revelation with his analogy of spectacles:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume ... yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. (Calvin, I.6.1, 1960:70)

The implication is a kind of 'limited natural theology available from creation' (Douglas, 1978:695). If a person has these 'spectacles of faith' of which Calvin speaks²³ to interpret correctly the created world, she or he may recognize God in his creation. Robert Newman clarifies in his brief summary of the various positions one view that has been compatible to 'conservative theologians':

a limited natural theology stemming from natural revelation, sufficient to reveal God but insufficient to redeem man, hence the need for special revelation—especially as depraved man has perverted this natural knowledge (cf. Rom. 1). (Douglas, 1978:695)

If Avison were to articulate her theological understanding of creation she may well endorse this position.²⁴ What is obvious in her poetic output is that her conversion, her

²³ Erickson extrapolates the phrase 'spectacles of faith' from Calvin's explanation (1998:195).

²⁴ C.D. Mazoff, in his monograph *Waiting for the Son: Poetics/Theology/Rhetoric in Margaret Avison's 'Sunblue'*, suggests Avison takes this perspective of a limited natural theology, using lines from 'Oughtiness Ousted' as verification:

God (being good) has let me know
no good apart from Him.
He, knowing me, yet promised too
all good in His good time.

spiritual awakening, has sparked an interest in the creation, and now she is particularly receptive to the psalmist's announcement: 'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge' (Ps. 19.1-2).

There is another influence on her nature poetry that needs to be factored in. Her long acquaintance with and participation in the English literary tradition has provided a natural link with the nineteenth century Catholic poet Gerard Manley Hopkins in his religious perspective on the created world. His influence on Avison is seen in a number of ways. It is seen in matters of style—syntax and diction. Kent observes, 'Both poets dare to stretch and twist language, to fashion compound epithets and fracture syntax, and to experiment with rhythms in order to recreate ... vitality' (1989:7).²⁵ But it is in Hopkins's reflections on nature that he could particularly impact her expression of witness in the created world. Hopkins himself has drawn on the Romantic poets' understanding of the significance of the natural world both in its particularity and in its emphasis on the poet's role in interpreting and re-interpreting nature through the imagination. He, in turn, draws the focus to what he sees as the incarnational witness of creation. He is explicit in his theological assertions, beginning with God as creator. 'The

This light, shone in, wakened a hope
that lives in here-and-now. (s 64) (Mazoff, 1989:16-17)

Since the poem's subject is not nature, this connection does not seem obvious, but his assessment makes sense given her general theological commitments. Mazoff takes a protective posture in his theological interpretations of Avison and shows a tendency to over-interpret symbols in the text, diminishing her subtlety. As a result, he has not helped readers understand her in spite of his obviously good intentions; rather, critics have ignored his opinions.

²⁵ Curiously, she semi-parodies Hopkins through the voice of her cranky 'Local' in her early poem, 'The Local and the Lakefront', in which the irritated lobbyist sees the 'barges and brazen freighters' with their imported goods damaging the landscape of the lakefront of Lake Ontario. He brings his grievance to the 'Committeeman':

At Sunnyside
(Toronto lakefront west,
with a bricked sooted railwaystation and
a blueglass busstation)

the sunset
blurses through rain and all
man tinfoil, man sheetlead
shines, angled all awry,
a hoaxing hallelujah.

One cannot miss the echoes of Hopkins from the poems 'God's Grandeur', 'Pied Beauty' and 'Hurrahing in Harvest' quoted above.

world is charged with the grandeur of God', he declares in the opening line of 'God's Grandeur' (1995:114). 'Glory be to God for dappled things—' opens the praise of 'Pied Beauty'; 'He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: / Praise him' is its benediction (1995:117-18). He introduces his sense of creation as sacrament when he exclaims, 'I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes, / Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour' in 'Hurrahing in Harvest' (1995:119).

Hopkins explains his understanding of a two-part witness in creation with his distinctive concept of 'inscape' and 'instress'. In his sonnet 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', he images the first part, 'inscape'—'the distinctive design that constitutes individual identity' (Abrams, 2001:2156)—in the enactment of that individual identity.

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.
I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places. (1995:115)

In this process of 'inscape' and 'selving', 'the stamp of divine creation' (Abrams, 2001:2156) is visible. Apprehension and appreciation start the process of the second part of the witness, 'instress', which he explains again in a poem—this time, stanza five of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' when he writes:

Since, tho' he is under the world's splendour and wonder,
His mystery must be instressed, stressed;
For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand. (1995:99)

In other words, 'In the act of instress ... the human being becomes a celebrant of the divine, at once recognizing God's creation and enacting his or own God-given identity within it' (Abrams, 2001:2156-57).

Admittedly, Hopkins's understanding of sacrament and mode of witness are not Avison's. While both poets would acknowledge the general Augustinian definition of sacrament as 'a holy sign (image, symbol, expression) through which we both perceive

and receive an invisible grace' (Loomis, 1988:17),²⁶ Hopkins takes the concept further, seeking 'Christ's sacramental Real Presence' 'in nature as much as in the Church' (Loomis, 1988:19). Further, he speaks openly of his intentions, speaking of 'Christ play[ing] in ten thousand places' (1995:115) and averring that Christ's 'mystery must be instressed, stressed' (1995:99). At the same time, in his discussion of Hopkins as a sacramental poet in *Dayspring in Darkness: Sacrament in Hopkins*, Jeffrey Loomis describes the difficulty in applying the term 'sacramental' even to Hopkins. I quote him at length because his comments are applicable to interpreting Avison as well.

Yet the term *sacramental* has surely not meant the same to each Hopkins scholar who has used it. The diversity of meanings they have attached to the term is only to be expected—and not merely because they no doubt each intuit and define sacrament from personal life-perspectives. It is also true because Hopkins—a far more multifaceted contemplative person than he often receives credit for being—saw the sacramental experience at various stages of his life (and sometimes simultaneously) from variant perspectives. For him, authentic contemplative openness superseded dogma. (Loomis, 1988:24)

An example of this diversity is the understanding Daniel Hardy and David Ford assign to the word 'sacrament' in their work *Jubilate: Theology and Praise*. They quote 'Pied Beauty' and 'God's Grandeur' to illustrate the sacramental in a 'wide sense'—'taking up any aspect of the material universe into being a sign or symbol of its Creator' (in contrast to the traditional 'narrower' sense of the rites of the church) (Hardy & Ford, 1984:17-18). They observe, 'The sacramental concern is to enter into God's way of using and enjoying his world ... In the sacramental, the media are both appreciated in themselves and also as pointers to God' (1984:17).

Avison herself does not use the word sacrament to speak about nature. She also does not announce discoveries of Christ in the creation. In fact, she explains in a letter to David Mazoff, '[A]sk me about my idea of Nature and I boggle. Ask me about this particular weed at this hour of this unique afternoon mix of light and weather and I know what you want and can answer' (4 January 1990). Nevertheless, critics sometimes

²⁶ Loomis's particular phrasing of the definition comes from Jared Wicks, S.J., 'The Sacraments: A Catechism for Today' in *The Sacraments: Readings in Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (New York:Alba House, 1981), 20.

employ the word to speak of her nature lyrics, probably intuiting the meaning from their own religious persuasion. Her letter of response to Mazoff about his book *Waiting for the Son* includes several specific ‘quibbles’ about his interpretations, but she passes over his analysis of her ‘sacramental view of nature’ (Mazoff, 1989:13), leaving at least a suggestion by inference that it is not a misreading to connect her poems to a sacramentalist outlook—at least in Hardy and Ford’s wider sense of pointers to God. Furthermore, it is obvious in her lyrics that she is sensitive to the particulars of creation in unusual ways; it is also evident that she carries a deep concern for the care of the environment, not always an emphasis accompanying the impulse of Christian witness.²⁷ In the relative vacuum of silence regarding nature’s witness in her own theological tradition—at least at Knox Church—it is not surprising if she sometimes draws on Hopkins for her meditations on the created world. His vision with his ‘authentic contemplative openness’ (Loomis, 1988:24) harmonizes with her sense of wonder for the created world. When Hopkins writes, ‘His mystery must be instressed, stressed’ (1995:99), she responds with equal intensity. Her record of nature’s peculiarities—both in its splendour and sometimes wonder and even terror—is one of expectancy and faith in the mystery of Christ’s presence in and power over (and, noting Hopkins’s enigmatic phrasing,) *under* the phenomena of what God has created. ‘His mystery must be instressed, stressed’, she too suggests in startling phrase after phrase and varied lyrical expression, but the witness is implicit and even hidden.

While both church and literary predecessor may influence Avison’s perspective regarding a witness of creation, she is too sophisticated and original to be controlled by either. Her nature poems do suggest an implicit Christian witness, but often only available to the reader who is looking for it and who resonates with her outlook and/or makes connections with the vision of her more explicit lyrics. She writes about the

²⁷ See Chapter 6.2 for a fuller discussion of her particular interest in the environment.

changing seasons with their contrasting weather and landscape (and accompanying weather and landscape of the human heart in response); the shifting hours of the day and night (and the corresponding moods to light and dark); the activity of the creatures of the earth, particularly the little ones—*insects and birds; the trees and flowers, the stars and the sun*. These lyrics speak of ‘confront[ing] / a tree to really know it’ and ‘exchanging glances with a squirrel’ (*AN* 1.123). In most of them there are no overt signals of theological or biblical import in the language of the poem. St. Paul in his letter to the Romans points out a particular witness in creation:

what can be known about God is plain [to those who have suppressed the truth], because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world *his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made*. So they are without excuse.²⁸ (Rom. 1.19-20) [italics mine]

Avison, with her ‘spectacles of faith’ discerns the witness, and in turn, points in a Godward direction towards ‘his eternal power and divine nature’ (Rom. 1.19-20). How she accomplishes this varies in subtlety and intensity.

I suggest several avenues of exploration, uneven in complexity and detail, but each highlighting a different aspect of the poet’s creative and challenging witness in her creation lyrics: To begin, Avison’s conversion to Christianity means she sees God’s world with a new sense of playfulness that is itself a witness. Second, nature provides a vehicle to communicate spiritual longing. Third, specific parts of creation attract her attention. In her interest in birds and trees, the poet sends strong signals of religious significance. Fourth, the dominance of the image of the sun in Avison’s poetry has been a marker of spiritual awareness throughout her years of writing. Finally, on occasion the poet explicitly announces connections between the natural world and the biblical text making the witness obvious.

²⁸ Supplementing the witness of creation, of course, is the witness of what St. Paul calls ‘conscience’: ‘They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness’ (Rom. 2.15).

3.2.1. Nature's Creative Playground

As mentioned earlier, Avison has grappled openly with the meaning of the 'smashed moth'/butterfly 'glued to the grit of that rain-strewn beach' in 'The Butterfly' (*AN* 1.23). Somehow, the observer in the early poem has a fearful recognition of 'somebody' as creator, far removed from personal relationship. C. S. Lewis explains at the beginning of his argument in *Mere Christianity*,

... I think we should have to conclude that He was a great artist (for the universe is a very beautiful place), but also that He is quite merciless and no friend to man (for the universe is a very dangerous and terrifying place). (1997:24)

In contrast, 'Scarfover' (*MD* 3), in her later collection *Momentary Dark*, presents a more comfortable and familiar stance between creator and observer of nature. Long acquaintance has mellowed the perspective. The spontaneous outburst of implicit praise in the opening phrase 'Glorious, rigorous, sun-flooded, / snow-iced morning', albeit addressing the morning, not the creator of the morning, sets the tone even while what follows suggests the challenge and difficulty latent in the extreme cold. The 'snow-iced morning' is also 'scoured by the north wind, marble-hard to today's / human designs'.

The weather's gift has inadvertently set in motion a small contest of wills:

we do not dare defy you but
still our defiance is
summoned up. We are
human creatures,
resolute. We'll go
our this day's way,
plunge into, become party to
the frieze of this iron and
brilliant, uncompromising
artwork,
its foil.

Putting a scarf over the face (and hence, the poem's title) is one 'resolute' way of submitting—of 'becom[ing] party to / the frieze' (a pun on the freezing temperature), of the 'uncompromising / artwork' of the winter scene; the person is now humbly nature's 'foil', not the lead role in this little drama of nature's making. The poet has transformed an old feeling

The sickness has passed from me

of thinking that the flinching leaves
are frozen of all motion because my eye
falls on them. ('Extra-Political: The Thorned Speaks (While Day Horses
Afar)', *AN* 1.96)

into one of active and participatory celebration, ironically when it physically takes more effort.

Avison's spiritual transformation has enabled her to approach nature with a curious sense of playfulness. This playfulness is rooted in what Lewis Smedes suggests is a cluster of characteristics: 'freedom, adventure, unproductivity, pleasure, and a sense of 'trans-seriousness—a dialectic between seriousness and non-seriousness' (1975:50ff). Smedes believes this sense of playfulness can be theologically supported in Calvinist theology, in spite of its reputed work ethic and emphasis on vocation. The key for the theologian is an awareness of grace: 'Play as the metaphor or myth that illuminates life *on its own* is escape from reality. But within grace play can be a parable of life's trans-serious meaning' (1975:60). He explains that

since the resurrection, the cross invites us to a trans-serious attitude about life. We are serious players; but, since Calvary, we know the game we play no longer has ultimately serious consequences. We can be "dialecticicians of play" because of God's one undialectical act. (1975:61)

It is this sense of playfulness of which Smedes has spoken that is released in the poet, particularly evident in her observations of the creation—notations that often seem like doxologies. A new light-heartedness and sense of whimsy assert themselves in her focus on nature.

Avison's poems call attention to creation in many ways, often focusing on phenomena so familiar, people no longer see them. In 'Grass Roots' (*AN* 2.25) she does double work: she defamiliarizes a commonplace metaphor and revitalizes the language while calling attention to the creative and active world underneath one's feet:

There is a grass-roots level:
small ears and weed-stems;
necklacing ant-feet; robins' toe-pronging and beak-thrust;
raindrops spotting in, or
cratered, sluicing, and wrenching
grass flat, gouging
earth, to enrich.

Summer is so.

Winters, that level
is ore, deep under snow.

In each of the details she is deepening the significance of the activity with her magnifying glass. She uses strong words—‘cratered’, ‘sluicing, and wrenching’, ‘grass flat, gouging’—in reference to miniature activity, but with intentionally good results—‘to enrich’. Summer’s rain produces ‘ore’ in winter, ‘deep under snow’.

A telescopic focus, in the other direction—though ‘I with the naked eye still standing see’ (*AN* 2.96)—turns to the sky, where she notes the infrequent appearance of a newly sighted comet, particularly visible in the winter of 1973-1974, in a poem taking on its name, ‘Kahoutek’ (*AN* 2.96).

The comet
among us sun and planets
I saw with naked eye, i.e.
nothing between my ice-
keening
tear-washed
seeing
from earth-mound (here) to
ocean-deep navy-blue out-there (there).

Her movement from the familiar ‘grass roots level’ (*AN* 2.25)—here simplified to ‘earth mound’ (*AN* 2.96)—to ‘ocean-deep navy-blue out-there’ is accompanied by deep unexplained emotion of ‘tear-washed / seeing’. She conveys understanding of its actuality in her comparison to earth:

In the traffic-flow
a frozen lump
from a jolting fender
spins meteor-black
towards the midwinter bus stop where I stand
under the tall curved night.

Its deep significance for the poet is in its strangeness, its location ‘veering weird-brightness / from somewhere else’:

we solar-system people flinch
as at a doom-sign,
and find you cryptic
from far unlanguaged precincts
soundlessly hollowing past us.

She, like others, does not take this unusual sighting casually.

In ‘Silent Night in Canada 1848’ (*AN* 2.153-54) the poet sees a natural event but only imaginatively, creating a picture of what observers might have experienced. What has piqued her interest is an unusual occurrence in March 1848 when the flow of water over Niagara Falls stopped—the only time this has known to have occurred. The details in her poem fit the various reports of the two-day phenomenon.²⁹ Accounts of the event emphasize the stunning silence which Avison captures in her opening lines:

The night, a winter moon’s was distinctively
still.
The farmers near the gorge
heard it emerge
large and unreal, and lit their lamps to pull
on boots and sheepskins and go look.
They saw Niagara-no-Falls moony rock
with here and there a slack
curbed puddle in the moonshine,
table-paving and threshold of cataract
as actual, still, stone.

The unusual silence of the falls in this relatively isolated section of the world in 1848 is contrasted with the human turmoil and bustle of political activity around the world. England’s unshakable solidity—in ‘tallow snowlight fingers / warmed branches on the hedge’—is far away. There are wars on the other side of the world, ‘Europe [is] in turmoil’ and ‘in Chile the intellectuals too / [are] infected with revolt’. Seen historically, these events bear more weight on human affairs. At the time, as well,

[Lake] Erie is wide and shallow and windswung
in a black-bushed stump-rough nowhere.
News is hard come by here
and who’s to care on the escarpment in March weather?

The same moon ‘floats around’ and ‘over’ Africa where the isolated explorer-missionary David Livingstone is making his discoveries, and ‘over / the cradle of—eyes buttoned shut in / sleep—one Paul Gauguin’, the famous post-impressionist painter. An ice jam stopping the water flow over Niagara Falls is merely one piece of news in a world filled with happenings.

²⁹ See http://www.niagarakids.com/Facts_about_Niagara_Falls.htm, accessed 3 June 2004; 17 April 2009.

Nevertheless, there is still the event and the silent night in Canada. While the world does not bear witness, those who hear reckon with its silence and interpret it in the light of the moon. The opening line suggests the night is ‘a winter moon’s’ night, ‘distinctively still’. When the farmers go to look at the silence they see ‘moony rock’ where usually there were torrents of water. Twice in the poem as this event of silence is juxtaposed with other events around the world, the phrase ‘[t]he moon floats round ...’ and ‘[t]he moon floats over ...’ is used. Before a kind of order has been restored, ‘[t]he farmers stare at the rock, rock at the moon’. They sense they are in the midst of an event charged with religious significance, and they are participating in primitive urges to turn to the heavens for explanation and comfort. The ending three lines, in contrast, suggest miracle enough for modern viewers of the falls:

Now while it snows we linger
stunned by the roar of the Falls
and the river unrolls, unrolls.

Most visitors to the falls do not even know that silent night of 1848 occurred.

‘Unspeakable’ (*AN* 1.226), the closing poem of *The Dumbfounding*, in contrast, includes nothing remarkable. Rather, the worth of each detail is in the noticing. The lyric is a single exuberant sentence, a witness to what the poet calls ‘excellent indolence’, calling attention to creation’s capacity to just be, and again, one of the characteristics of play. Associative thinking generates the connections between birds and roof and leaves and cat:

The beauty of the unused
(the wheatear among birds, or
stonechat)
the unused in houses (as 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 associations expand to the human with its curious phrase ‘excellent indolence’:

the beauty of the
unused in one I know, of

excellent indolence
from season into
skyward wintering
should be
confidently, as it is
copious and new into the morning,
celebrated.

James Merrett points out that ‘[t]his poem climaxes Avison’s attempt to sing of the world in a religious way [at the end of *The Dumbfounding*]; it expresses the poet’s sense that being is to be trusted’ (1976:14).³⁰ The appropriate response for poet and reader is to simply rejoice. Again, Smedes anchors the same idea in Avison’s own theological tradition in his reminder of ‘the chief end of man’ in the Westminster Confession ‘to glorify God and to enjoy him forever’: ‘One condition for glorifying the excellence of the Creator is that his excellence be manifest. Where is it to be seen? Why, says the sometimes anti-playful Calvin, *all around us*’ (1975:56). Smedes recalls Calvin’s insistence in his *Institutes*: “[E]ven the common folk and the most untutored cannot be unaware of the excellence of the divine art … they cannot open their eyes without being compelled to witness it” (Inst., 1.v.2)’ (Smedes, 1975:56).

The playfulness contains its own dialectic between seriousness and non-seriousness, in Smedes’s terms. As a result, all is not light and joy; celebration is muted. The title of one of the sketches in *sunblue*, ‘End of a Day or I as a Blurry’ (AN 2.23), emphasizes its provisional and evocative form and initially communicates a kind of intimacy and identification with the multi-layered detail of an autumn scene. ‘I as a blurry groundhog bundling home / find autumn storeyed’, the poet announces, seeing the outdoors with busy movement of eyes as well as feet, from sidewalk to clouds above her head:

underfoot is leafstain and gleam of wet;
at the curb, crisp weed
thistled and russeted;

³⁰ In his detailed discussion of the poem Merrett admires ‘the comfortable subversiveness which Margaret Avison is able to exert in order to share her confidence in the sacramental nature of reality … putting off … the usual formalities of utilitarian and anthropocentric ways of thinking’ (1976:16). Merrett’s reference to the ‘sacramental nature of reality’ is an example of a generic and non-Catholic use of the term.

then there's the streetlight level;
then window loftlights, yellower;
above these, barely, tiers
of gloaming branches,
a sheet of paraffin-pale wind,
then torn cloud-thatch and
the disappearing clear.

However, the particular sightings of this hasty twilight walk match the ‘blurry groundhog’s’ compulsion to get indoors. The distinctive naming of ‘leafstain’, ‘weed thistled’, ‘gloaming branches’, ‘torn cloud-thatch’ and ‘cold layered beauty’ do not invite the traveler to linger and suggest a particular distancing and separation from her surroundings. Only the yellow streetlights and ‘window loftlights’ signal the lights of home for the groundhog-person.

Indoors promises
such creatureliness as disinhabits
a cold layered beauty
flowing out there.

At the same time, there is a potency about nature’s disfigurements of ‘leafstain’, ‘gloaming branches’ and ‘torn cloud-thatch’—remnants of life and gestures toward death that both repel and attract simultaneously.

Frequently, Avison’s lyrics intimate an intentional hiddenness about natural phenomena and about one’s apprehension of its mystery. All the words in her sketch ‘CNR London to Toronto (II)’ (*AN* 2.20) point to the last italicized one ‘*invisibility*’. The rider in the train assigns an adjective to badger, sun, and frost (emphasized in the unfamiliar syntax), but she knows she is imagining because she cannot see them from her vantage point.

In the Christmas tree and
icing sugar country
they listen under banks
badger foreheads sleek
the sun uncaring, frost
squeaky, bright with
berries: *invisibility*.

Her senses are obviously not passive, but are ‘half-creating’, like Wordsworth, ‘see[ing] into the life of things’³¹ and ‘instressing’, to again borrow from Hopkins, the distinct design of each miracle of creation. At the same time, she seems to be emphasizing the hiddenness and the invisible that she has been able to penetrate.

In ‘The Hid, Here’ (*AN* 2.139), she plays with perspective from another window:

Big birds fly past the window
trailing string or vines
out in the big blue.

From this vantage point—up close—birds seem big. In fact, the next lines make no particular distinction in size:

Big trees become designs
of delicate floral tracery
in golden green.

Size and distance merge in her next sighting:

The Milky Way
end over end like a football
lobs, towards that still
unreachable elsewhere
that is hid within bud and nest-stuff and bright air
where the big birds flew
past the now waiting window.

The point of interest for the watcher is ‘that still unreachable elsewhere’ beyond the Milky Way ‘hid[den] within bud and nest-stuff and bright air’ but close—with reach of her ‘waiting window’.

Avison’s occasional poems about snow,³² both earlier and later, have to do with a person’s capacity to see and engage in observation of what often is hidden. The earlier snow sonnet of *Winter Sun* (*AN* 1.69) emphasizes an active imagination interacting with the snowflakes. A later snow poem ‘Not Quite Silently’ (*AN* 3.21), from *Not Yet But*

³¹

While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things [...]
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive. (‘Tintern Abbey’, ll. 46-48, 105-107)

³² See also ‘Christmas Approaches, Highway 401’ (*AN* 2.97); ‘Not Quite Silently’ (*AN* 3.21); ‘Making’ (*MD* 29-31); ‘3 A.M. By Snowlight’ (*MD* 36-37);

Still, implies a quieter passivity. Echoing the Cabby's words in Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew*, 'Watchin' and listenin's the thing at present; not talking',³³ the poet explains,

Though light is overshadowed, yet the far
Comes close, the unknowable
Near; the random usual 'here'
Is sifted down
Feathering eyelid, lashes, blank
Eyeball, as if with holy
Fear.

The snow flake is a miniature incarnation—of 'the far / comes close, the unknowable / near'. Again, 'Beyond Weather, or From a Train Window' (*AN* 3.15) is a meditation on all the '[s]nowflakes in starlight, obliterated into / weft and stippling' and what happens to them as they lie in layers—'buried under / combed sweep and depth, month upon month'. The 'mineral beauty' of these 'round little pools / bright with the lift of the sky they left last autumn' suggest an upward pull—the connection of earth/sky, creature/Creator, but the poet acknowledges, 'Most such is still / long, for long, hidden'. There is mystery that she cannot penetrate, even in the snowflake. Here, the imagination is inadequate to dislodge the secret. Sometimes seeing involves both the tranquil acceptance of creation's silence; at the same time, there is at least an intimation of something beyond the physical, however subtle.

In her lament 'Hid Life' (*AN* 2.28),

Red apples hang frozen
in a stick-dry, snow-dusty
network of branches,

the narrator mourns.

Heavily in my heart
the frost-bruised fruit, the somber tree,
this unvisited room off winter's endless corridors
weigh down.

She strains to see what she cannot see. Worrying about the seeds that are not in the ground, she struggles with a sense of hope. 'Botanist', she asks,

does the seed
so long up held
still somehow inform

³³ C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*, 1955:125.

petal and apple-spring-perfume
for sure, from so far?

And then the insight comes in the play on words in the ending query: ‘Is the weight only / a waiting?’ The weight on her heart of the seemingly abandoned fruit, exposed to the elements in ‘this unvisited room off winter’s endless corridors’, so reminiscent of the ‘smashed moth/butterfly’ of the earlier poem (‘Butterfly’, *AN* 1.23), carries a new sense of expectation. This desolate scene is really another one of those ‘ten thousand places’ in which ‘Christ plays’ (Hopkins, 1995:36) in Avison’s assertion of Christian hope.

3.2.2 Stirrings of Longing

Some of Avison’s nature poems, while still indirect, allusively offer an orientation towards the religious, and ultimately towards the God of scripture. Sometimes the placement of poems in the collections establishes connections. As well, repeated motifs and recurrent images suggest her deep faith commitment. Then there are internal cues, subtle allusions within the poems—at least for those initiated in the English literary tradition—to direct the spiritual eye God-ward. For those with basic acquaintance with Old and New Testament scriptures, these allusions and images coalesce even more obviously. The poems ‘Thirst’ (*AN* 2.35) and ‘Sounds Carry’ (*AN* 2.34) in *sunblue*, just after ‘Water and Worship: an Open-air Service on the Gatineau River’ (*AN* 2.33) and just a few pages from a block of poems directly on biblical texts, carry these allusive qualities. Both poems simultaneously register sensitivity to natural detail and spiritual longing.

Like an impressionistic painting, there is a surreal quality to the undefined and vague setting of ‘Thirst’ (*AN* 2.35):

In the steeped evening
deer stand, not yet
drinking
beyond the rim of here;

and crystal blur
clears to the jet
stream, pure, onflowing:
a not yet known —

beyond the grasses where the deer
stand, deep in evening
still.

Visually the poem is striking with its repeated phrases ‘beyond the rim’ and ‘beyond the grasses’ and its phrase ‘deer stand’ twice noted. ‘Steeped evening’ and ‘deep in evening / still’ direct the focus to the middle stanza’s ‘a not yet known’. The psalmist’s longing is called to mind: ‘As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God’ (Ps 42.1-2). The deer in Avison’s poem seem to be waiting for something in the ‘steeped’ evening, ‘beyond the grasses’. ‘Beyond the rim’ hints at a pool or pond, but there is no clear mention of water. It is also reminiscent of her ‘rim’ from ‘The Swimmer’s Moment’ (*AN* 1.89) and ‘Pace’ (*AN* 1.150).³⁴ The standing still (whether it means quiet or always or yet) is in contrast to the jet stream—the high-altitude winds moving east at high speed—‘pure, onflowing’ like the psalmist’s ‘flowing streams’. Here the ‘onflowing’ stream is only upward. The allusion to the deer of the psalm gives her poem about thirst new intensity. At the same time, her interpretation of longing as skyward takes the sense of personal thirst out of the self: ‘My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God’ (Ps. 42.2).

‘Sounds Carry’ (*AN* 2.34) might be another expression of spiritual longing suggesting both the mystery of God’s presence and the intense desire to experience that mystery. As the title suggests, the longing for presence may be indicated in sound: ‘Nimbus of summer’—the dark grey, rain bearing cloud—is creating a sound chamber that amplifies even breathing:

undefines place and
time imitates an immemorial dawn

³⁴

And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn
Pale and forever on the rim of suction
They will not recognize. (‘The Swimmer’s Moment’ *AN* 1.89)

and

Pedestrians linger
striped stippled sunfloating
at the rim of the
thin-wearing groves. (‘Pace’ *AN* 1.150)

– dogs at the white gates....
Breathing is palpable, and
breathes response to amplitude
and hidden tendril,
yearning for large and little.

‘Flies / and bird cheepings’ are muted sounds present in a sultry summer day under the ‘nimbus of summer’ but also part of ‘a clarity beyond the mist’. The poem is a delicate mood piece calling attention to the experience of ‘misty summer’, satisfying in a straightforward reading; but the potential is there to understand the lyric as suggesting more. In mythology nimbus also means a bright cloud surrounding gods or goddesses appearing on the earth or a halo or bright disk surrounding the head of a divinity or a saint. When these nuances are added to the word, the last four lines above with their ‘breathing’ ‘amplitude’ and ‘yearning’ take on deeper significance. It is not just a matter of the effort of breathing in humid pre-storm weather. Now it is deep spiritual longing. Under the dark rain cloud cover/halo, the summer sounds of a present divinity have been carried to the sensitive listener/participant.

In the sketch ‘Overcast Monday’ (*AN* 2.18) there is a reversal of expectations:

In this earth-soakt air
we engage with
undearthful technicalities,
hurt that they click.

An oil of gladness, in
the seafloor Light
quicken, secretly.

The ‘earth-soakt air’ (rather than air-soaked earth) imitates the strange action of the title ‘Overcast Monday’—cloudy, but also thrown over. The gloomy sky encourages the focus on ‘undearthful technicalities, / hurt that they click’—not a sickness unto death, so to speak. Avison reveals the secret of the reversal in an image reminiscent of Hopkins’s ‘ooze of oil’ in ‘God’s Grandeur’ (Hopkins, 1995:15): ‘An oil of gladness’ ‘quicken, secretly’, she suggests. The allusion is even closer to a direct reference to biblical lyrics of joy. The ode for a royal wedding of Psalm 45 has the psalmist exclaiming, ‘Your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions’ (Ps. 45.7). The

theme is picked up again in the poet-prophet Second Isaiah's good news of deliverance, where he uses the same phrase to suggest that those who are sad in Zion will be given 'the oil of gladness instead of mourning' (Is. 61.3). Jesus declares himself the fulfillment of these great Isaiah passages of 'good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of the blind' in Luke's Gospel (Lk. 4.18-19). The poet looks at the overcast sky of Monday and sees where oil is needed to stop the clicking; she also sees the oil in the 'seafloor Light' (*AN* 2.18) The poem invites the reader to 'come and see' as well.

Avison works with the familiar theme of life within a seed in her epigrammatic poem 'Potentiality' (*AN* 3.37). 'Humble is the intensity of / a seed' is the cryptic opening as she juxtaposes two attributes not immediately apparent—humble and intense. The poem's form matches the theme as the contrast is made in its simple two-line stanzas. The size of the seed compared to the one who made it is explained in terms of light and shadow: 'It lies there / too small to cast a shadow'. In contrast, 'the invisible is too large, compassing / light and shadow both'. The seed's humble properties are obvious then, but where is the intensity? The closing couplet, 'yet there is / a bond that makes them one',³⁵ is the witness's announcement of the human yearning for the invisible, drawing humankind homeward. Further, the allusive connection of the seed's 'potentiality' to familiar comments of Jesus in the Gospels adds poignancy. One time he compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed, but when it is sown in a field (put in the ground—in essence, dies), it grows 'into the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree' (Mt. 13:31-32). Another time, referring to his own impending death (and resurrection), Jesus again employs the seed as an essential analogy—'if it dies, it bears much fruit' (Jn. 12.24).

³⁵ The line is suggestive of Herbert's pulley of restlessness:

Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodnesse leade him not, yet weariness
May tosse him to my breast. ('The Pulley' 1974:166-167)

Trees in their rooted connection to the earth and their skyward direction are also powerful symbols of Avison's persevering hope and beckoning gestures.³⁶ Sometimes it is an 'urban tree'—

An orphan tree
forks for air
among the knees of
clanking panoplied buildings. ('Urban Tree', *AN* 1.226)

Sometimes it is a wintering tree without its show of leaves—

A tree its twigs up-ending
November had bared:
drenched in height, brisk with
constellar seed-springs, thrusting
its ancient ranginess towards
the cold, the burning, spared
of leaf, sealed in, unbending. ('And Around', *AN* 1.223)

'Trees wait their lifetimes / fragrantly forthright,' the poet describes admiringly in 'Enduring' (*AN* 2.219), as she endows them with personality.

Tangle
risks itself in space
for contour's mysteries,
self-disclosure,

she goes on to explain, as the trees make themselves vulnerable to mystery. When spring comes a different sense of the tree's organic connection skyward emerges. 'April' (*AN* 2.157) alerts the reader to a spring evening's sights and sounds—the clocks striking the night hour, 'a robin's song, silence unraveling', and the emotion attached to 'the trees with tremulous-aching fingers / shaping the quiet airflow'. All this beauty must mean something. The trees are the directors, pointing towards the poem's penultimate conclusion, '[s]ick-faint dark / limp in the arms of the infinite'. Further, in 'Knowing the New' (*AN* 3.28), when 'the detritus of winter' is 'washed clean away', spring's announcement is most visible in the trees as they create their own cathedral: 'Suddenly utterance is everywhere'.

³⁶ See also 'In Time' (*AN* 1.156); 'A Sad Song' (*AN* 1.209); 'City Park in July' (*AN* 2.78); 'Patience' (*AN* 2.140); 'In the Hour' (*AN* 2.180); 'The Fix' (*AN* 2.202); 'Pacing the Turn of the Year' (*AN* 3.119-21); 'Towards the Next Change' (*AN* 3.124); 'Ramsden' (*AN* 3.129); 'Responses' (*AN* 3.137); 'No Dread' (*MD* 66-67).

And the magnolia has
haloed high around itself a dome
of space,
an eloquent soundlessness
the birds can understand and
revoice for the wide world.

A similar theme emerges in ‘News Item’ with its ‘chestnut trees / pagoda’d in full / seven-fold leaf’ (*AN* 3.99). Demonstrated in ‘Knowing the New’, trees and birds go together in Avison’s poems as signs of spiritual longing which may eventually direct the seeking heart to the living Christ. Before they are signs, however, they have to be seen.

3.2.3 Bird Signs

One of the striking motifs in Homer is the multiple references to bird signs. Early in the story of *The Odyssey*, for example, ‘Zeus of the wide brows / sent forth two eagles’ (*Odyssey* 1.146) for the sake of Telemachos, the son of Odysseus struggling to regain control of his family house. The men of the town watched in fear, the bard sings, ‘astounded at the birds’ (1.155), needing someone to interpret the sign. Halitherses ‘was far beyond the men of his generation / in understanding the meaning of birds’ (1.158-59). Like the astute bird watchers in the ancient tales, Avison too knows how to read bird signs. To begin, she shows in her earlier volumes *Winter Sun* and *The Dumbfounding* her keen awareness of and attraction to birds as part of daily life. There are multiple references to sparrows, robins, and pigeons; seagulls and crows; geese and grackles, mostly with positive and whimsical designations, suggesting the pleasure they afford.³⁷ Her robin ‘trills’ with ‘flame tulip sound’ (‘Open Window’, *AN* 1.22); her pigeons ‘flap and chuckle’ (‘Christmas Anticipation’, *AN* 1.221-22); the ‘junco flits’ (‘The Fallen, Fallen World’, *AN* 1.75-76); the ‘grackle shin[e] in the grass’ (‘Two

³⁷ Even in private correspondence she enjoys punning on the subject of birds. In a handwritten Christmas card to her friend, the hymn writer Margaret Clarkson, she writes:

Christmas is for the birds
too,
we agree

And therefore
nuts to them
and love to thee!

Margaret (Margaret Clarkson Collection, York University
Archives)

'Mayday Selves', *AN* 1.148-49); 'the park pigeons are 'heavy with knowing / tame food' ('The Earth that Falls Away', *AN* 1.175-84); a 'gill' 'sloughs and slumps / in a spent sea' ('Grammian on a Lakefront Park Bench', *AN* 1.77). The unidentified clicking in 'Pace' (*AN* 1.150)

is perhaps the conversational side-effect
among the pigeons; behold
the path-dust is nutmeg powdered and
bird-foot embroidered.

She signals early that they mean something or point to something, reminiscent of another poet fond of birds, the nineteenth century American, Emily Dickinson.³⁸ Dickinson has alerted the modern writer and reader to the meditative gaze in her simple observations. Her bird poems are like still life paintings with all the attending details of activity removed. The birds tend toward the generic and enigmatic, as the earlier poet observes. Avison, on the other hand, sees her birds in the busy atmosphere of the city.

Their meaning is more directed and accessible in their varied movements:

The sparrows
in suet season, and through
carbon monoxide summer till
autumn's enlarged outdoors,
quick in their public middle age
keep hidden delicate and final things. ('Sparrows', *AN* 2.158)

Again,

Sparrows in the curbs
and ditch-litter at the
service-station crossroads
alike instruct, distract, ('Prelude', *AN* 1.61-63)

³⁸ A sampling of Dickinson's many bird references and poems suggest a striking contrast in theme from Avison:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all; (No. 32, Dickinson, 1924, 1993:19-20)

'The robin is the one / That interrupts the morn ...' (No. 6, Dickinson, 1924, 1993:78);

To hear an oriole sing
May be a common thing,
Or only a divine; (No. 12, Dickinson, 1924, 1993:83)

'I dreaded that first robin so, / But he is mastered now' (No. 348, Baym, 1998:2502);

A bird came down the walk:
He did not know I saw;
He bit an angle-worm in halves
And ate the fellow raw; (No. 328, Baym, 1998:2501)

she insists. Her emotionally and spiritually stunted character, Agnes Cleves, in the early dramatic monologue, however, does not know how to read bird signs and turns away from their messages. ‘In March you can see the geese from the highroad / They are very white’, she notes, and there is hope that she is going to intuit their significance. But her monologue dwindle into reasons for retreat into her own narrow focus:

The rim of the pond is muddy
And the keen blue of the sky and these voyaging clouds
Show from the round water
And a beat like echoes makes your eyelids flutter.
A red and white collie fusses around the geese
And it would be clumsy walking (after climbing
The new wire fence) to go down there
And why should courage be hailing you to go
Because it is muddy and March and there are a few
Sinewy snowy geese
Stretching their necks?
(‘The Agnes Cleves Papers’, *AN* 1.132-143)

Her lack of spiritual and mental curiosity is both enervating and disturbing. ‘Sinewy snowy geese / Stretching their necks’ are pointing to something that matters more than she knows.

In ‘Controversy’ (‘and if some sparrows / dropt by [...] your god keeps accounts of’ *AN* 1.163),³⁹ Avison gives an early clue to her connection to the biblical text in its many reference to birds, inviting readers to make similar links. There is Jesus’s admonition in his Sermon on the Mount: ‘Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they’ (Mt. 6.26)?⁴⁰ These instructions are preceded in scripture by other significant references to birds. In the initial Genesis account of creation, birds are singled out as they share their own creation day with the fish (Ge. 1.20-23). ‘Birds of the air and beasts of the earth’ is a repeated phrase in Scripture (Ge. 1.26-30; Ge. 2.19-20). The dove is Noah’s harbinger of hope when he returns to the ark with a freshly

³⁹ See Chapter 5.4. for a fuller discussion of this poem.

⁴⁰ Again, privately to his disciples Jesus says, ‘Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father ... So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows’ (Mt. 10.29, 31; Lk. 12.6-7).

plucked olive leaf (Ge. 8.11). The psalmist refers to God's special awareness of birds: 'I know all the birds of the air', Yahweh proclaims (Ps. 50.11). God's care of his people is expressed in similes referring to eagles (Dt. 32.11; 19.4), and Jesus speaks of his care as 'a hen gathering her brood' (Mt. 23.37; Lk. 13.34). Spiritual longing is connected to birds in Psalm 84:

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord ...
Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself
 where she may lay her young ...
Happy are those who live in your house,
 ever singing your praise. (Ps. 84.1-4)

Again, the psalmist writes, 'In the shadow of your wings, I sing for joy' (Ps. 63.7).

As a result, when the poet moves beyond the early mention of birds to entire poems in *sunblue*, *No Time* and *Not Yet But Still* devoted to birds,⁴¹ she implies an instruction, a signal, a sign of some religious import. For example,

Seven birds toss
skyward and glide
and ruffle down:

birds on the TV wires
eye-mirroring the light of the
 wild west,

in the sketch 'The Seven Birds (College Street at Bathurst)' (*AN* 2.22),⁴² are known and watched and cared for by the Creator. When they are called 'stormy sunlit evening children' 'under / the very shadow of / heaven', they are naturally connected to those who are worth more. Their gliding movement upwards suggests the same motion as 'Thirst's'

⁴¹ 'Sparrows' (*AN* 2.158)

Only whiskered cats and the
hidden lover see their stillness, and
the devotees of cats

and 'Seeing So Little' (*AN* 2.159)

why have I never seen you walk?
Toes yes, legs yes,
but knees?

on facing pages; and 'City Birds' ('Pigeons are pedestrians / chiefly, therefore becoming threatened', *AN* 2.169) in *No Time*—all reveal affectionate concern and soft humour.

⁴² Seven carries symbolic meaning in the Bible. Examples include the creation account with the seventh day devoted to rest and the 'seven churches of Revelation'. It is possible (but certainly not necessary), then, to extrapolate some special significance in Avison's very specific use of seven here.

jet
stream, pure, onflowing:
a not yet known –
beyond the grasses. (*AN* 2.35)

In the later volume *No Time* there are more direct bird signs to interpret. For one, the language in the opening stanza of ‘Seeing So Little’ (*AN* 2.159) echoes biblical language:⁴³

In the tents of day,
under night’s canopy so
long – why
do I still not know you,
sparrow?

Second, birds and their activities become powerful metaphors for human life events. In ‘Resting on a Dry Log, Park Bench, Boulder’ (*AN* 3.97-98), she calls attention to birds out of their element: ‘I love to see birds walk. / Oh yes of course, their singing, their soaring’. Associative reflection moves her into theological musing:

But that a bird
comes simply among us,
steps as we must (though some,
sandpipers, robins, etc.,
like children bob or run)
touches us.

She returns to her description of the birds’ activity,

com[ing] for seeds,
or crumbs perhaps, a comfortable
touching down we can well understand.

Again, the theological inserts itself:

although for us to
“consider the birds of the air” in this regard
can be uncomfortable.

Without further comment she returns to her whimsical observation, ‘I like to think birds walk / for fun’. She has only hinted at the incarnation, but nevertheless, the idea is incipient in the playful lyric.

Both ‘Migrant Impulses’ in *No Time* (*AN* 2.186-87) and ‘Making a Living’ in *Not Yet But Still* (*AN* 3.31) have similar themes of the anticipation of death. To leave the earth, she suggests is to

⁴³ See 2 Sa. 22.12; Ps. 18.11; Ps. 104.2-3; Is. 40.22.

[s]wim the updraught of air dotty
as birds, mysteriously
instructed migrants. (*AN* 2.186-87)

Like the birds,

We twitter and flip
but not in the thinning branches
who have left forms known as trees
forever. We are
left to the alonmg power
who gathers us now
(toss, tossing)
I sit in this tree.
We twitter and flip.
The gloaming draws near.

There is fear in the unknown as ‘[t]he sky-valve lets in a / pallor and chill’, but ‘[t]he flocking, the high homing / in jetstream’ points ‘to a new power, radiant, / fearsome, for flight, far coursing’. Migrant impulses lead to one’s rightful destination. ‘Making a Living’ (*AN* 3.31) is more hopeful in its subtlety. The poem sets up contrasting scenes of sandpipers and herons, representing two different seasons of life in its two stanzas:

The industrious young
as if as well carefree
run here at sandpiper gait,
with the weight of the earth or the
wavering line of the foam
from an alien element
sketching a scalloping path:
they veer and flee and come running
busily, as if carefree.

Twice she qualifies the status of the ‘industrious young’ with ‘as if carefree’. In reality, ‘making a living’ involves the ‘weight of the earth’ or avoidance of ‘an alien element’ for those running ‘at sandpiper gait’. In the end, it is hard and wearing to always be on a fast-paced move—to be making one’s own living. In contrast, the ‘old stand hunched, / motionless’. From all appearances the old are not making a living anymore; their activity has been suspended. They are merely ‘waiting’ while someone else is doing the work:

The old stand hunched,
motionless, like a morning
heron on mist-smoking water standing,
the way a lightning-crippled oak
mimicking lightning in its
old blasted branches
seems forever bereft of leafing.

Earth under water; sky over all,
waiting; though
there will be, abruptly, a
brief tussle: life, from death.
Another fast is broken.

The last four lines completely upend one's understanding of 'making a living' and point to the Christian hope of a new life—a new 'living' after an 'abrupt' and 'brief tussle'—an ambiguous phrase that could point to a person's death. The emphasis is reversed from the expectation of loss. Instead the 'fast' of the 'old' ('like a morning heron' and 'a lightning-crippled oak') will be rewarded in an upcoming new day.

Finally, Avison connects birds with herself as a poet in her lament for the Canadian writer Margaret Laurence, 'Just Left or The Night Margaret Laurence Died' (*AN* 2.149). She mourns in the opening stanza:

Bare branches studded once with jeweled birds
Someone inexorably plunders
One by one till an
Impoverished wintry sky from hill to
Darkening hill reveals
Untreasured tree-spikes, almost only
(One bunched bird left
His eye aglimmer there).

In the suggested aloneness of being the one remaining bird,

The perched, askew,
Will ruffle still as the day-ocean
Lips in and foams towards flood of
All emptiness exposed,

the poet will still carry on in double awareness. In many of the bird poems she has called to mind the one who 'sees the sparrow fall' (Mt. 10.29-31). At the same time, she shares the role of 'the songsparrows' 'improvising their immemorial singing' (*AN* 3.36) and the 'robins' trilling' (*AN* 1.22). She 'revoices for the wide world' 'the eloquent soundlessness' that the 'magnolia has / haloed high around itself' (*AN* 3.28). In other words, like Homer's Halitherses, Avison knows how to read her bird signs; and like the birds, she is a witness in her poetry.

3.2.4 Avison's Signature Sun Metaphor

In his introductory article on Avison for *Profiles in Canadian Literature*, Jon Kertzer notes what critics have long observed: ‘The image that has dominated her work for forty years is the sun’ (1980:34). That dominance has continued for almost another three decades right up to the closing pages of *Momentary Dark*,⁴⁴ where in a seniors’ residence,

A spinney of old women, thin-branched valley of old men – all find the sunlight dim.⁴⁵ (*‘Shelters’ MD* 80-88)

Her poems yield images such as these: ‘The men of Mytilene waited restive / Until the yellow melt of sun’ (*‘Birth Day’ AN* 1. 127-128). Or again, in ‘The Engineer and the Asparagus’ (*AN* 2.79),

Asparagus, once established, bustles
it grows so vehemently,
cone by cone nosing out towards

⁴⁴ The posthumously published collection *Listening* (2009) has very few poems alluding to the sun. It is hard to suggest whether this lack of emphasis is merely coincidental.

⁴⁵ Avison keeps good company in her preoccupation with the sun, and there is ample precedence in the long poetic tradition: Spenser’s

Phoebus fiery carre
In hast was climbing up the Easterne hill,
Full envious that night so long his roome did fill;
(‘The Faerie Queene’, 1.2.7-9)

Shakespeare’s ‘Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, / And often is his gold complexion dimmed’ (*‘Sonnet 18’*, 5-6);
Donne’s

Busy old fool, unruly sun
Why dost thou thus
Through windows and through curtains call on us? (*‘The Sun Rising’*, 1-3);

Herrick’s

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
The higher he’s a-getting,
The sooner will his race be run,
And nearer he’s to setting; (*‘To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time’*, 5-8)

Blake’s

Look on the rising sun: there God does live
And gives his light, and gives his heat away;
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning, joy in the noon day; (*‘The Little Black Boy’*, 9-12)

Wordsworth’s ‘All things that love the sun are out of doors; / The sky rejoices in the morning’s birth’ (*‘Resolution and Independence’*, 8-9);

Byron’s ‘Child Harold bask’d him in the noon-tide sun, / Disporting there like any other fly’ (*‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’* 4.28-29);

Shelley’s ‘I bind the Sun’s throne with a burning one / And the Moon’s with a girdle of pearl’ (*‘The Cloud’*, 59-60);

Yeats’s ‘A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun’ (*‘The Second Coming’*, 14-15)—all suggest the sun’s prominence. (All references quoted from Abrams, 2001.)

those (unseen) garbled acres and the sun's
tusks of flaming.

The picture shifts:

through the early murk
the sun, a tangerine ball,
bulged briefly. ('When the Bough Breaks' *AN* 3.27)

In familial language,

misty mid-
morning sun
flattens mere earth with the
girth of its far but
fatherly presence up there. ('High Overhead' *MD* 18-19)

Image merges naturally into metaphor in the many references to the sun with the implicit directive to 'come and see' by its light—to understand what it reveals, particularly as it illuminates divine presence and power in the universe.

Initially, Avison's sun is not identified with the creator, as Kertzer suggests in his overview of the poet's early works:

In her poetry, the sun represents the power of human apprehension at its most acute: the spark of genius, the "golden contemplation" of the brilliant thinker, the "sunbright gaze" of the visionary, the "inrushing floodlight of imagination of the poet. The sun permits vision and sustains life. It invigorates the earth in the spring. It dispels the shadows of ignorance, doubt and fear.⁴⁶ (1980:34)

He interprets what he sees as her developing aesthetic in his later essay, 'Margaret Avison and the Place of Meaning', which involves a refinement of the sun-metaphor's meaning. Without naming it as such, this explanation is one of witness—with a gesture outside the poet's self:

The sun shines (or is obscured) in all her poetry, and like Kahoutek, its brilliance comes "from somewhere else," from the depth of the cosmos, infinity, God, or the Son. Light illuminates and makes vision possible, but is not itself visible. Rather, it is the condition of seeing. (Kertzer, 1987: 23)

Within the broad range of references to the sun in her verse, there are some key poems, published both before and after her conversion, where the sun is central and the poet invites significant religious connection. This link evolves in the transition between early

⁴⁶ Then he demarcates a divison, one I am not making: 'In her religious poems, the sun is Jesus Christ: the son of God and the "Sun of righteousness" (Malachi 4:2)' (Kertzer 1980:34).

and later lyrics, but she employs biblical and Christian language even before she embraces the Christian faith. Her earlier poetry of ‘searching’ (Doerksen, 1974:7-20) and reflecting a ‘post-Christian or lost Christian’, darkened landscape in *Winter Sun* (Anderson 1981:89), in reality, points to the light and warmth of the sun. The metaphor emerges in succeeding poems.

In the wistful ‘Prelude’ in *Winter Sun* (AN 1.61-63) with its haunting head note,

The passive comes to flower, perhaps
a first annunciation for the spirit
launched on its seasons,

there are scenes of contrasting youthful pastoral memories and city weariness. Bridging the two scenes is ‘the honeycombing sun’ which strangely seems to have both

opened and sealed us in
chambers and courts and crooked butteries,
cities of sense.

The government building’s ‘stone lip of a flower’ ‘stares through a different sun’. She sees a person close by with hair ‘fixed like a corpse’s’ and who seems ‘closed like a bank’s vault’. Yet, when the sun touches the woman—as it touches the stone flower and the speaker in the poem—‘she knows day, abruptly’. This prelude is a signal of an awakening in the landscape, in the woman the speaker observes, in the speaker, and perhaps in the poet herself:

Light, the discovering light, is a beginning
Where many stillnesses
yearn, those we had long thought long dead
or our mere selves.

In the moment of held breath
the light takes shape.

The witness is slowly coming to flower and acknowledge light’s power, but the metaphor is still veiled.

It is surprising that in this early group of pre-conversion poems of *Winter Sun* the poet goes on to establish both the importance of the sun as metaphor and specifies its meaning in a Christian sense in the poem ‘The Fallen, Fallen World’ (AN 1.75-76). Here Avison pictures not passivity, but open resistance to the sun. ‘Since Lucifer’, the

poem reports, fallen creatures—whether revolutionaries, idealists or the learned—have apprehended their ‘slow sure estrangement from the sun’, and they are bearing the results of their rebellion.⁴⁷ For rebels, ‘the sun comes still / Remote and chilly’. Similarly, in the sad and enigmatic ‘Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball’ (*AN* 1.64-65), another poem with heavy scriptural suggestions, the sun is ‘purifying, harsh, like sea-salt’ to the ‘gardenless gardens’ of the ‘house abandoned’. For Agnes Cleves,

much alone, as well as old,
And fearful sometimes of the tedious fondness
Peculiar to my kind,

in the closing dramatic monologue of Avison’s first volume of poems (*AN* 1.132-143), it is not so much a matter of resistance, as fear: ‘Telling it in plain words / Makes me see how I feared the wrong thing’. Agnes’s dwindling thoughts eclipse the sun:

this iris bed
Is scarfed in dreadful mist
and no sun comes
Beyond the yellow stoneway.

It is in the early part of her narration—

Have you remarked
How few persist in penetrating farther
And all the rumour that subsides after them
Is of some outdoor chill—

that the mention of the winter sun signals the title of these pre-conversion poems.

And pomegranate seed spilled in the
Cleft where sand and winter sun
Drift to make small regular shadows?

The image is apt in its application to Agnes Cleves in her meandering memories of regret, nostalgia and inertia.

The language of these poems shows Avison’s familiarity with the tradition of the Christian faith, all the while offering a vague accounting for her own turning aside from its reality. The title of her first collection *Winter Sun* seems like code for a person struggling to live in the presence of a reality she cannot deny, must acknowledge, but

⁴⁷ I speak further to this poem in Chapter 4.2. I mention it here because of its clear announcement of the metaphorical application of sun representing the Son for Avison.

does not want to embrace. Mia Anderson, in her article “Conversation with the Star Messenger”: An Enquiry into Margaret Avison’s *Winter Sun*’, responds to the predicament the poet has outlined in naming her sun:

Winter sun is a weak implication of summer but it’s all we have, in this post-Christian or lost-Christian world where Dec. 25 and Jan. 6 mean a pale yellow sun over the winter solstice, and the new year waiting for spring, to a people who can only read one level, the blessed natural one, who have no parabolic depth in their scanning of the universe—and to a poet who knows what’s been lost but also knows why and is blocked, for now, from recourse to it, self-condemned to figure out salvation the natural route, as best a one she can. (1981:89)

If *Winter Sun* were the end of the poet’s expressed vision it would indeed be a melancholy conclusion.

In *Winter Sun*’s version of ‘Easter’ (AN 1.95), the poet writes in full awareness of the significance of the apex of the Christian story, but only allows a glimmer of its hope to shine through. The imagery veils the Christian Easter story in nature’s own resurrection of spring:

the eve of April brings
A delicacy of light at the day’s end
The bulge of earth seems again comic [...]

In the second stanza,

the milky air
Lulls, and listens, and there
Is the sorrow of all fullness,

available for hidden meaning of awareness of what preceded the resurrection. ‘But on the hillside the frail tremolo / Of a new dayspring, eggshell and lilac’ signals the arrival of the Easter event—the culmination of the Magnificat’s dayspring—but it is not spelled out. Instead, ‘an everywhere of sunwardness’ is the strong hint that generates hope.

A bird sings, forceful, glorious as a pipe-organ,
And the huge bustling girth of the whole world
Turns in an everywhere of sunwardness
Among the cloudcarved sundering of its oceans.

The poem’s climax is the earth’s response ‘sunward’—a rehearsal of creaturely gratitude.

There is a decided shift in mood and perspective towards the sun in the second volume of Avison’s poetry, *The Dumbfounding*. As mentioned earlier, the collection

opens with the poem ‘Old ... Young ...’ (*AN* 1.147) as ‘the young grass / shines, breathing light’ and ‘the last / light is mahogany-rich, / a “furnishing”’. ‘Two Mayday Selves’ (*AN* 1.148) speaks of ‘sun-meld’ and

the rice-
perfuming light sifting
between that pointing distance
and this?

and ‘[t]he power of the blue and gold breadth / of day’ ‘poured out, flooding, all / over all’. There is the ‘day-shine’ in ‘Black-white under Green: May 18, 1965 (*AN* 1.152-53). There is also the

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

in ‘July Man’ (*AN* 1.160). Again,

a Manx cat is
discovered—just now—blinking his
sunned Arctic sea-eyes in the
sun-play

in ‘Unspeakable’ (*AN* 1.227). There can still be a winter sun in these poems,

this winter sun glistens on
washed cottons, amid a branch-tangle
and morning quiet,

but the speaker in ‘Until Silenced: To I. A.’ (*AN* 1.157) sees it differently.

In this brighter atmosphere there are, again, some poems emphasizing the metaphor of the sun with more than a passing reference. One, in particular, in *The Dumbfounding* is illuminating. In the poem ‘Once’ (*AN* 1.210) the sun is at the centre in an account of the natural events of earth’s rotation and movements away from and toward the sun. In spite of the straightforward narrative, there is a sense of a living presence both in the sun and on the earth in its response or lack of response. When earth ‘turns its shoulder / on the ungrudging sun’, it is ‘pole-tilted’—its natural appropriate gesture. In this position, with its ‘fronting / the eyes of utter dark’, the poet creates a

sense of waiting in the pause between stanzas: ‘snow forms and falls’, as a living presence—

breathing
even by night of, as if,
eyelid pallor.

The ‘melting, coursing sun’ is in charge, however, and it counters the earth’s movement away with its own moves—‘(hurting and lilting, / dimming and flashing)’. Avison recalls the medieval universe alive with its cosmic dance in the relationship between sun and earth:

Earth is all pools and all the
waters speak, in the new
sky’s language.

In the melting of the snow there is a kind of end to an ice age, as ‘the myths of earth-ferment’ are recalled. Here is a miniature creation account, culminating in ‘spiking up swords of / green, bright under blueness’. There is a merriment and joy in the sun’s accomplishment and the concluding stanza should be a gesture of praise. Instead, the poet suggests,

the myths [...]

make shy our brutish,
averted, black-drinking, still-
ice-splintered
eyes.

Transformation—a ‘seed-nub in dissolution / spiking up swords of / green’—is surely needed to enable people to turn sunward. The poet again calls to mind Jesus’s observation about himself: ‘Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’ (Jn. 12.24).

The momentum of *The Dumbfounding* is maintained in *sunblue* with its season of spring dominating the early poems. Phrases like ‘swept of suncoursing sky’ (‘Thaws’, *AN* 2.17); ‘oils of sun’ (‘Cement Worker on a Hot Day’, *AN* 2.19); ‘sun’s butter fat’ (‘A Childhood Place’, *AN* 2.19); ‘strong sun’ (‘Water and Worship: An Open-air Service on the Gatineau River’, *AN* 2.33); ‘sweet with the sun’ (‘Sounds

Carry', *AN* 2.34); 'sunflooding sunfire' ('From a Public Library Window', *AN* 2.68); and 'look to the sunblue' ('Light' II, *AN* 2.66)—all call to mind the warmth and life-giving energy of the sun. In 'Released Flow' (*AN* 2.29) the poet speaks about the source of the flowing sap from the sugarbush:

In the sunward sugarbush
runnels shine and down-rush
through burning snow and thicket-slope.

Several lines down the poet observes that 'the motions of the light / close the flow as watertight'. Creatures of the woods respond: 'Squirrels flip and play / through sunsplash'. 'The extraordinary beyond the hill / breathes and is imperturbable'.

Across snowbush and sunstriped maples
Honeyed woodsmoke curls and scrolls.
Sunblue and bud and shoot wait to unlatch
All lookings-forth, at the implicit touch.

The hints are bolder now of the interchangeable word play of Son/sun that characterize this third volume of poetry,⁴⁸ and the sun metaphor seems to suggest more obviously the sacramental for Avison.

The two poems side by side, 'March Morning' and 'March', convey the joy of nature's response to the sun.

Peaking wafering snowbanks are
sun-buttery, stroked by the
rosy fingertips⁴⁹ of young
tree shadows
as if for music;
and all the eyes of God glow, listening,

exclaims the poet in 'March Morning' (*AN* 2.30). In 'March' (*AN* 2.31) the spring thaw takes on sacred significance with eucharistic intimations of 'earth-loaf, sky-wine':

Though all seems melt and rush,
earth-loaf, sky-wine,

swept to bright new horizons
with hill-runnel, and gash,
All soaked in sunwash.

⁴⁸ From different perspectives both Redekop and Mazoff emphasize this distinctive wordplay. See E. Redekop (1980) 'sun/Son light/Light: Avison's elemental *Sunblue*' and C. D. Mazoff (1989) *Waiting for the Son: Poetics/Theology/Rhetoric in Margaret Avison's 'Sunblue'*.

⁴⁹ She is unmistakeably echoing Homer's distinctive 'rosy fingers of the dawn'.

Avison maintains the sacramental hints of the sun in the subsequent volumes of her poetry, though not as frequently until *Momentary Dark*. In ‘The Promise of Particulars’ in *No Time*, for instance, she speaks of ‘[t]he late sun, spoking under storm / against prune-coloured stormclouds to the west’ (*AN* 2.210), bringing its gift of life as it ‘haloes and breathes’ to the receiving creation just by being what it is. In ‘The Ecologist’s Song’ (*AN* 2.266) she speaks of the interplay between water and sun:

Absorbing, glittering, the beach at noon
welters with silence. There a separate pool
has formed, plum-coloured, richer than water, cool,
shadowed by stillness in the naked sun.

Later in the poem she emphasizes the connection again: ‘Everywhere’s ocean of sun, late-flowing, knows / the dark tides too’. Her beckoning conclusion of the earth’s connection of sun and sea—and humanity’s responsibility for upsetting the delicate balance between the two—is a call for sharers in her poem to ‘come and see’.

In Avison’s last volume of poetry *Momentary Dark* there is a surge of references to the sun. ‘Glorious, rigorous, sun-flooded / snow-iced morning’ opens the poem ‘Scarfover’ (*MD* 3). ‘High Overhead’ (*MD* 18-19) speaks of

misty mid-
morning sun
flatten[ing] mere earth with the
girth of its far but
fatherly presence up there.

‘Making’ ends its cosmic reflections with ‘Just now a glint of / sunlight on glass alerts me’ (*MD* 29-31). ‘Palette’ (*MD* 68), with its closing lines,

The little new-drenched leaves
glow in the momentary dark,
dancing,

implies the glorious opposite shining through. In ‘Window Conversation: “Brightness falls from the air”’ (*MD* 57), the poet notes the shared good fortune with a tree, concluding ‘We are sun-gilded’:

The clouds, the morning
sun are such that
one lettuce-bright tree-tip
over the roofs, like me,
is singled out. We are

sun-gilded.

You smile away
out there.

You are I am
inexpert about timing.
How this instant was
hit upon is
beyond us. We in
passing can
only receive
this befalling, a
blissed one.

These sun pictures gently nudge toward any number of corresponding witness statements about the sun/Son in scripture and are a short distance from the less frequent witness in creation that Avison makes explicit.⁵⁰

3.2.5 Explicit Connections between the Natural World and the Biblical Text

Probably the most direct connection between nature and the person of Christ is seen in those poems that juxtapose and interweave two seemingly distinct topics, but in play on words they come together. By its title ‘Psalm 19’ (*AN* 1.162) appears to be one of her glosses on a piece of scripture, in this case, a psalm from the Hebrew psalter. But in fact, she is working with only one half of one verse (verse nine) of the psalm, part of a series of characteristic parallel statements having to do with ‘the law of the Lord’:

The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul:
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.
The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart:
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever.
The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.⁵¹ (Ps. 19.7-9 KJV)

The obvious theme in her poem is not ‘the law of the Lord’ (though silently present in the background), but the ‘enduring sun’ and its many variations mentioned throughout the lines of the lyric.

⁵⁰ ‘For the Lord God is a sun’ (Ps. 84.11); ‘But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings’ (Mal. 4.2); ‘The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light’ (Is. 9.2); ‘By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us’ (Lk. 1.78); ‘I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life’ (Jn. 8.12); ‘And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb’ (Rev. 21.22); ‘And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light’ (Rev. 22.5).

⁵¹ The first line of the poem using the word ‘clean’ identifies the version of text Avison is using for her source: The Authorized Version of the Bible (KJV).

Clean is the word with *fear*.
Fear is to love high
and know longing for clear
sunlight, to the last ribcorner
and capillary – and wonder
if, so known, a sighing-
over-the-marshlands me
might all evaporate, wisp away.
Yet to love high
is with this very fear
to shrink, *and* seek to be made plain,
openly to own
both the mists smoking from pure
stone-cold lake-still sun-sweetened places
and the dank mist that rises
from the long-unsunned, sour
pools, hid even from the storm's sluices.

Enduring is the word with *clean*.
The fear once won
of sunward love, it proves – not boulderstone,
baldness, slowly in fire consuming – but green
with life, moss, cup-rock-water, cliff riven
for a springing pine;
and thus, trusted to fire, drawn
towards an enduring sun.

Avison designs her own parallel structure. Stanza one of her short poem opens with the stark sentence, ‘*Clean* is the word with *fear*’, echoing the style of the Hebrew psalm; stanza two opens with a parallel sentence, ‘*Enduring* is the word with *clean*. The spokes of thought radiating out from both phrases have to do with the speaker’s relationship to the sun.

Fear is to love high
and know longing for clear
sunlight, to the last ribcorner
and capillary [...]

It is in this image of sunlight that the connection with the entire Psalm 19 becomes evident. Furthermore, as Daniel Doerksen observes the movement in the poet’s thinking from *Winter Sun* to the transformed vision of *The Dumbfounding*, this interpretation of the sun defines the poet’s emerging vision. He writes:

The whole poem hinges on the sun-metaphor for God, an image which does not change, but is radically re-interpreted as the seeker becomes a finder, as the “fire”, being “trusted”, is revealed to be the life-giving “enduring sun”. (1974:16-17)

Preceding those accumulating assertions of God’s presence in words in the psalm is the poetry of declaration of God’s glory in the skies: ‘The heavens declare the glory of God;

And the firmament sheweth his handy-work' (Ps. 19.1). The sun occupies the dominant position and place of honour and function in the psalmist's heavens:

In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun,
Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
And rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.
His going forth is from the end of the heaven,
And his circuit unto the ends of it:
And there is nothing hid from the heat thereof. (Ps. 19.4-6)

The poet has taken the ominous sense of 'the fear of the Lord' and transposed it into 'longing for clear sunlight'—longing so intense that it courses through a person's inner being the same way the psalmist's glory of God courses through the sky. She goes on to suggest ambiguously 'and wonder, if, so known'. Is it longing known? Or is it the sun known? Or the sun that knows the one with the longing?

... a sighing-
over-the-marshlands, me
might all evaporate, wisp away.

This anthropomorphized sun is sighing over what it sees 'to the last ribcorner and capillary', and might as well vaporize these marshlands of the soul with the sun's heat. Yet to fear—'to love high', she suggests, is to both 'shrink, *and* seek / to be made plain'. Now the word *clean* makes a connection: A person shrinks in fear at what the sun will reveal:

the dank mist that rises
from the long-unsunned, sour pools,
hid even from the storm's sluices

—obviously unclean places. At the same time there is a longing to own 'the mists smoking from pure / stone-cold lake-still sun-sweetened places'. These are two mists—one pure, the other not. The cleanliness comes from the sun which achieves full disclosure—the total abandonment of 'secret faults' and the 'presumptuous sins' (Ps. 19.12-13) the psalmist deplores. Further, there is a sense of sweet abandonment to the 'bridegroom coming out of his chamber' (Ps. 19.5). The phrase 'loving high' does not suggest some amorphous undefined looking to the skies, but implies a clearly defined object of desire in this context.

‘The fear once won / of sunward love’ in the second (and final) stanza does not spell barren rock of ‘boulderstone, / baldness, slowly in fire consuming’. This sunward love ensures fecundity and greenness:

but green
with life, moss, cup-rock-water, cliff riven
for a springing pine.

The God who provides water that is needed for the growth for the ‘springing pine’ also provides the essential light and heat. The final image of Avison’s poem, ‘trusted to fire, drawn / towards an enduring sun’, evokes an awareness that God has not been mentioned in this entire poem, and yet the universal ‘longing for clear / sunlight’ has drawn reader and poet alike into his sphere.

‘In Season and out of Season’ (*AN* 3.69-71) has at its centre the outlines of the significant events in the life of Moses. His narrative is framed in another story of nature’s changing seasons, the juxtaposition indicated by indenting the Moses sections. It opens with a blur of colour explaining the spring season and alerting one to playfulness in the language in the running together of ‘inbetween’.

Today the blueness burns
inbetween new greens and space’s
soundless blackness.
Yet we even now
discern more, cry:
No, lovely as May is
we would hear more.

Poignant in its urgency, ‘we would hear more’ is preparation for the next indented section introducing Moses who becomes the central figure of the poem:

Moses, you are the voice
the Voice spoke with.
Centuries have not, will not,
still that, therefore.

Avison goes on to tell his story from birth, ‘[t]he marvel of the pitched cradle of reeds’ on to ‘that unexceptional miracle / of years’, making way for hope,

hung on life’s
strange leaf-edge; trembling in the light
for years.

Wordplay with ‘strange leaf-edge’ and ‘light’ draw the two themes together as she moves back to talking about different seasons, (and hence, the title), contrasting the ‘blueness’ of May’s season in one zone with ‘Antarctica / in this same season’ which ‘snarls, pounces, gnaws’.

In the Moses-narrative, a brief but crucial reference to the transfiguration connects Moses with Christ, the one who can truly ‘make atonement for sins’ even as Moses offered to do on behalf of the people he was leading.⁵² There is a lengthy parenthetical phrase about Moses’s impatience with his ‘fractious, protesting people’ and his ‘moment of failure to / stand with the Voice’. The terse words ‘Once. Enough’ mute his great accomplishments and place him with the rest of humanity in the collective failure that needs redemption. Nevertheless, the poem does not diminish the fact that Moses, too, was transfigured.

The closing stanza returns to the theme of nature’s articulation of the seasons, but now transformed into a metaphor—another transfiguration:

Not in season, in the revolving solar system, in which we turn
changeably, always.
Not without the appalling
lightless depth. Not but as a way station
perhaps is the
unimaginable light where
all maybe is plain.

Now the reader can participate in the same miracle. True, there are the inevitable metaphorical winter seasons with ‘the appalling / lightless depth’. But Avison is also courageously witnessing to her Christian hope—seeing the ‘unimaginable light / where all maybe is plain’. She declares this hope with honesty, but without presumption, with that strong qualifier ‘maybe’. The Moses story is her verification.

⁵² ‘Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin”. So Moses returned to the Lord and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written”’ (Ex. 32.30-32).

In ‘What John Saw (Revelation 4)’ (*AN* 3.74-75),⁵³ juxtaposition is less obvious. Its title indicates a biblical theme,⁵⁴ but the poem proper suggests something else. It begins with an imagined scene much closer in proximity than the vision of Revelation 4. Avison speaks of ‘the black holes out there, of pure (physical force)’ in outer space,⁵⁵ based on what scientific discovery has revealed. As she muses on the mystery of the phenomena ‘out there’, the text seems to suggest these black holes are ‘what John saw’:

Those in-and-out plosions, focused,
remote, in a rhythm of
incomprehensible infrequency
but nonetheless in time,
speak the extremes absolute of a rhythm
we mortals know.

Her fascination with the black holes elicits the awareness of the shared rhythm ‘contained in / ‘creation’s “Let it be so”’ which she anchors in a ‘bronzing beech tree’ in stanza three. The second stanza implies trauma and instability—‘the uprooting / tremor of one event’—whether a person’s or a celestial body’s crisis, and calls her back to earth. She turns to the familiar and stable—

this bronzing beech tree, the
blackening myrtle at its foot
(event in all my seasons,
seasoned for this long before I was
born) [...]

The day in and day out ‘event’ of its being there for her seems to be hurtling away as well. As she recreates the disorienting experience of the visionary seeing compressed time and space moving towards she knows not what, she sees that the tree

exists in a mere
twitch, is rushing towards the node
millennia away [...]
Time curls on itself.

⁵³ See Appendix 3.2.5 for the text of the complete poem.

⁵⁴ In the original publication ‘Revelation 4’ is placed as a note, Avison’s interpretive clue for identifying the person John and the object of his seeing. In the *Collected Poems* the note has moved to the title giving the signal more weight.

⁵⁵ In astronomy, a black hole is ‘a region within which the gravitational field is so strong that no form of matter or radiation can escape from it except by quantum-mechanical tunnelling, and thought to result from the collapse of a massive star’ (OED).

In stanza four, the poet's and the apocalyptic writer's visions converge, and she clarifies that, in fact, John has seen much farther than the black holes of space.

Least moments given, though,
can open onto
John's comprehender.

Here, at mid-point of the poem she introduces her biblical text. It contains a dramatic vision of a particular scene outside earth's time and space. 'After this I looked', writes the Revelation's speaker, 'and there in heaven a door stood open' (Rev. 4.1). He continues,

And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this". At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne. (Rev. 4.1-2)

The description of this other-worldly scene is conveyed in a series of similes of surreal grandeur and beauty.⁵⁶ The activity culminates in a worship service with creatures and 'twenty four elders' singing antiphonally a chorus of praise to the one on the throne. What/who John saw on the heavenly throne is the One who sees—who comprehends—both John and the poet—and the uprooting tremors of events. This one, the poet asserts is

here,
there, then, always
now, because unchanging.

She echoes the words of the antiphonal heavenly refrain in her own idiom,

who
made light and ponderous rhythms, time, and all
pulsing particulars.

How does she know?

⁵⁶ 'And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian ... and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald ... and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal' (Rev. 4.3, 6). Later, 'the living creatures around the throne' are described as 'like a lion' or 'like an ox' or 'like a human face' or 'like a flying eagle' (Rev. 4.7). The concrete images seem to be the throne and 'the flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder' and 'seven flaming torches' in front of the throne (Rev. 4.5). In the midst of this teeming activity the living creatures 'each of them with six wings' and 'full of eyes all around and inside' sing continuously—'day and night without ceasing'—a great hymn of worship to the one on the throne: 'Holy, holy, holy, / the Lord God the Almighty, / who was and is and is to come' (Rev. 4:8). The antiphonal response in this heavenly worship service comes from twenty-four elders who are seated on thrones around the throne of God (Rev. 4.10): 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created' (Rev. 4.11).

John saw him rainbowed in glory –
compact of all our music, hearing the farthest
compositions, and the most intricately
present.

Packed in metaphor, it is not a clear and distinct picture, but one composed in shapes of jasper, carnelian, emerald and crystal, blending sight with sound. In her own burst of understanding the poet also imitates the vision:

Magnet. Intensifier. Agonizingly
rediscovering, in shards, the shapes
design is satisfied to see.

The black holes are replaced by wordplay of satisfactory shards—one-word explanations: ‘One. White. Whole’.

The poem ends back at the foot of the tree the same way the earlier poem reverted to the natural scene that is visible:

Secret within
all that John saw
is the bronzing beech tree
of this October twilight.

She remains firm in viewing nature’s gifts in terms of secret messages from heaven. She is also quick to acknowledge human limitation—

though I do not yet see,
even in mind, being
not yet out of time.

But she intimates a pointing gesture of faith. What John saw she is waiting expectantly to see, and the poem beckons the reader to join her.

These are three examples of explicit witness—combining biblical text and nature’s text. The latter two poems point directly to the living Christ. While she has named ‘the One’ in both poems, she does not release pictures indiscriminately. To see what she sees one has to look, and look deeply, ‘with a heart hungry / for meaning’ (*AN* 3.74-75). These reflections lead to the crown of God’s creation, humankind, applying to both male and female what Milton’s Adam ascribed to Eve,

fairest of Creation, last and best
of all God’s Works, Creature in whom excell’d
Whatever can to sight or thought be form’d. (*Paradise Lost* 9.896-98)

In light of the Genesis announcement that humankind reflects the divine image (Ge. 1.26), there is anticipation of a clearer picture of Christ in Avison's poems focusing on people and their activities and actions.

Chapter 4 ‘Come and See’: Creatureliness and Imaging God

Being human
what can we do
but bow, and believe
now, or when glory
leaves all he made
transformed, or stricken.

(‘Nothing Else For It’ *AN* 2.257)

In Hopkins’s understanding of ‘selving’, he alludes to ‘more’—a larger role for people than the rest of creation—as he speaks of humanity’s capacity to reflect God’s image:

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places. (1995:115)

This ability to ‘ac[t] in God’s eye what in God’s eye he [or she] is’ is Avison’s concern, as well, in her implicit witness, but she expresses her understanding of personhood and creatureliness in a different manner. I suggest three avenues of exploration loosely organized around a repeated motif of pivots in certain lyrics: the pivot of ‘Old Adam’ in ‘Neverness’ (*AN* 1.24-26), the pivot of the old man in ‘July Man’ (*AN* 1.160) and the pivot of the Creator-Redeemer in ‘On a Maundy Thursday Walk’ (*AN* 3.174-75). First, she recognizes the witness of *imago dei* is bound up in creatureliness with its inherent human limits. God’s image in people is unfortunately linked with fallenness. Second, an implicit witness is seen in humankind’s relational capacities. Shared humanity both as gift and need points to the creator. Third, the most effective witness to Christ ironically is occasioned by collective and personal failure. God’s provision of new creation becomes the visible gift.

4.1 The Mixed Reality of *Imago Dei* and Fallenness

As the poet draws on the literary tradition of Western literature and the words of scripture, she demonstrates an orthodox Christian understanding of the human person as a created being. In the middle of *Concrete and Wild Carrot* is its longest poem, the

mythic ‘Other Oceans’ (*AN* 3.146-54),¹ a symphonic performance in seven parts, each a meditation on a given preposition or adverb—on, within, under, when, where, out, after. The account of creation in this first section “ON” (*AN* 3.146) is spare in its anthropomorphized detail:

When the convulsive earth
arched under the sea
its craggy ribs were
blurted out where reefs had been
into the golden warmth for a
fraction of a second of the one
day that’s a thousand years.

There are readily recognizable allusions to both Milton and the Bible, but this accounting for existence is different. The seven days of the biblical account are condensed to ‘a fraction of a second’ and ‘in the same breath’. There is no mention of God in this creation myth—an oddity for a Christian poet. Instead, her economy of allusion evokes additional connection with the Creator—a response from the creature.

The ‘day that’s a thousand years’ could suggest one psalmist’s observation, ‘For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night’ (Ps. 90.4), or another’s, ‘a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere’ (Ps. 84.10). The miracle of ‘what had emerged to be / grasses of the field’ connects to the frequent reminders in Scripture of a person’s flourishing and fading mortality like grass (Ps. 90.5-6; Ps. 103.15). On the other hand, ‘grasses of the field’ also speaks of Jesus’s instruction in his famous Sermon on the Mount, not to worry, because ‘God clothes the grass of the field’ (Mt. 6.30), and by extension, will care for his human creation.

In the closing lines of this stanza, Avison uses the word ‘face’ three different ways. ‘On the face of the earth’ is yet again a phrase rooted in the Genesis account of

¹ Section 7 “AFTER” of ‘Other Oceans’ was briefly discussed in Chapter 2.1. See Appendix 4.1 for the complete text of “ON”.

humankind's beginnings—both of good and evil (Ge. 6.1; Ge. 7.4). She creates a puzzle with ‘trees and tiny Arctic flowers / alike fac[ing] upwards’²— while

animals
with velvet paws, or hoofs,
all seem to look away towards the
falling-away edge of the earth.

The mystery of the one ‘who sits above the circle of the earth’ (Is. 40.22) is recognizably observing upright creatures from any point. Yet the animals are ‘look[ing] away towards the / falling-away edge of the earth’. The poet may be hearkening back to Beddoes’ *Death’s Jest-Book*³ and including the fall and its consequent death sentence in this newly created earth. As a result, the opening lines of the stanza are seen in a new ominous light: earth’s ‘craggy ribs were blurted out’ ‘into the golden warmth’ for (only) ‘a fraction of a second of the one / day that’s a thousand years’.⁴ Avison’s third reference to face—

My face, among these others,
ours, are not as though
among these others.

—is strangely elusive. Perhaps she is merely acknowledging difference—voluntary and involuntary response to the Creator. On the other hand, there could be judgement inherent in the humans not looking face-upwards in creaturely acknowledgement and not alert to impending doom if they do not. To be ‘on the face of the earth’ is a serious matter.

Even in her earliest ‘detour into darkness’ with its pessimism and resistance to her Christian upbringing, Avison reveals assumptions of creatureliness in her poetic

² ‘Facing upwards’ is reminiscent of Milton’s Adam looking up towards the sky with his sudden awareness of his existence (*Paradise Lost* 8.257-58).

³ ‘Can a man die? Ay, as the sun doth set: / It is the earth that falls away from light’ from Beddoes, *Death’s Jest-Book* (2.2.39-40) is the epigraph opening Avison’s ‘The Earth That Falls Away’ (*AN* 1.175-84). This longer poem on blindness and sight in her volume *The Dumbfounding* is her first exploration of the theme.

⁴ It is interesting that C. S. Lewis does a similar thing with his Creation story in *The Magician’s Nephew* of the Chronicles of Narnia. Before Narnia is an hour old evil has been brought in, the velvet-pawed Aslan tells the children observing, and he insists they must play a part in Narnia’s protection and redemption.

world. In cryptic fashion, the poet announces in ‘Civility a Bogey or Two Centuries of Canadian Cities’ (*AN* 1.66-67):

To walk the earth
Is to be immersed,
Slung by the feet
In the universe,

and implies someone placed people on the earth, however unceremoniously. Her world is a created world as she evokes Adam’s name—whether intentionally historical or mythical (or both)—in her early poem ‘Neverness Or, The One Ship Beached On One Far Distant Shore’ (*AN* 1.24-26):

Old Adam, with his fistful of plump earth,
His sunbright gaze on his eternal hill
Is not historical:
His tale is never done.

Whether echoing the Genesis account of creation⁵ or Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,⁶ she intimates the glory and privilege of *imago dei*. The nuances of theology, however, contained in her understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God—whether substantive, relational, or functional⁷—are not obvious.

In ‘One Rule of Modesty and Soberness’ she contrasts the memories of humans to angels, drawing on ‘Calvin, on angels, *Institutes* I, xiv, 4’ (*AN* 3.86-89):

Our mortal memory structures
in us what matters – to
bury it, or
re-celebrate so as to
falsify it; we are
made less than the angels, said the ancient

⁵ ‘Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air” (*Ge. 1.26*).

⁶ where the Fiend
Saw undelighted all delight, all kind
Of living Creatures new to sight and strange:
Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native Honor clad
In naked Majesty seem’d Lord of all,
And worthy seem’d, for in thir looks Divine
The image of thir glorious maker shone,
Truth, Wisdom, Sanctitude severe and pure,
Severe, but in true filial freedom plac’t. (*Paradise Lost*, 4.285-294)

⁷ These are the categories Millard Erickson uses to delineate distinctions between positions of the theologians from Irenaeus to Aquinas to Luther and Calvin, and then to Brunner and Barth. See Erickson, 1998:510-536. David Cairns, in *The Image of God in Man*, 1973, elaborates more fully on each theological position.

poet, who knew.

In ‘Relating’ (*AN* 3.135), she addresses an ant, one of the smallest of creatures, playfully suggesting their common predicament:

The radii of power
are focused down and in
on you and me over our
warped little shadows; they
adjust, this midday instant, to
us, moving.

In ‘Rising Dust’ (*AN* 3.163-64), while discussing a person’s physical makeup of largely water,⁸ she alludes to ‘something else besides’—‘a vital bond threaded on an / as-if loom out there’. In ‘Leading Questions’ (*AN* 3.166), she comments,

Walking naked in Eden, they
lived always in the light
of the holy.

In “WITHIN” (*AN* 3.146-47), the second section of ‘Other Oceans’, the poet intimates humans’ efforts to interpret and act on their place in the world:

Studies by night. By day
blinks at the intricate
script of the world [...]
Intrudes
the throb of self selecting self
out of what was suggestive of a
singing part. Unravels
some syllables of the music, in
withdrawing again.
Waits [...]

The most detailed and overt of Avison’s poems articulating her understanding of creatureliness is the first part of her three-part poem, ‘Light’ (*AN* 2.65-67). The three parts together comprise one of several poems whose altered perspective brings particular insight. In this case, the speaker is looking down from the wing-window of a plane, observing and interpreting both what she sees and how—‘the source of light is high / above the plane’. The light—both the sun and its source—is the central theme of the poem. ‘The light has looked on Light’, she writes near the end of the first part; as a result, the Light has provided hope and blessing.

the Pure can bless

⁸ See the opening of Chapter one for an extensive discussion of this poem.

on earth *and* from on high
ineradicably

is the poem's ending declaration. In this context, looking down from the plane's window she observes people who look like 'stick-men' and 'plasticine-people' 'strewn' like children's play things:

The stuff of flesh and bone
is given, *datum*. Down
the stick-men, plasticine-
people, clay-lump children, are strewn,
each casting shadow in the eye of day.

Then her imagination takes over as she re-creates an experience of receiving the wonder of life in 'the breath of delighting'. The 'clay-lump children' become active and productive and 'delighted':

Then – listen! – I see
breath of delighting rise from
those stones the sun touches
and hear a snarl of breath
as a mouth sucks air. And with
shivery sighings – see: they stir
and turn and move, and power
to build, to undermine, is theirs,
is ours.

The poet seems to echo the psalmist's fundamental question, 'What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them' (Ps. 8.4) as she ponders these newly living creatures—'[t]he stuff, the breath, the power to move even thumbs / and with them, things: *data*'. What do humans do with what has been given?

What is
the harpsweep on the heart for?
What does the constructed power
of speculation reach for?
Each of us casts a shadow in the bewildering day,
an own-shaped shadow only.

The implication from the three parts of the complete poem is a grateful turning to the Light, 'look[ing] to the sunblue'.

In each of these excerpts Avison is in keeping with Calvin's understanding of the divine image. David Cairns interprets Calvin's thinking, 'that the image of God in

man consists in the acknowledgement of God's goodness and greatness' (Cairns, 1973:136). Cairns goes on to explain:

There is thus a close resemblance between the image of God in the world of nature, and the image in man. In both cases there is a reflection of God's glory back to himself through praise, but inanimate creatures and creatures without reason do this unconsciously, while men do it in gratitude and humility when they acknowledge their complete dependence on God and give him their obedience ... As Torrance has pointed out, the picture of a mirror is the governing one in Calvin's mind. (1973:137)

Avison uses the language of light and shadow to emphasize this 'reflection of God's glory back to himself'. In 'Relating' (*AN* 3.135), she speaks of 'our / warped little shadows' shared with the ants; in 'Leading Questions' (*AN* 3.166) she notes Adam and Eve 'lived always in the light'; and in 'Light' (*AN* 2.65-67) she observes 'clay-lump children', 'each casting shadow in the eye of day'. In "WITHIN" (*AN* 3.146-47) of 'Oceans' she speaks of humankind's complete dependence on God in terms of 'blink[ing] at the intricate / script of the world'—again, reflecting back what has been given.

In her understanding of creatureliness, Avison is only too aware of the Fall and its effect. In the lyrics above she has readily acknowledged the reality of sin, even while she is talking about the image of God. In 'One Rule of Modesty and Soberness' (*AN* 3.86-89), the mortal memory is 're-celebrat[ing] so as to falsify' 'what matters'. The poem 'Leading Questions' (*AN* 3.166) quickly moves to failure:

Drawn to disobey
they awoke to shame – and God –

like comprehension of pain,
of broken as well as good.

In 'Light' (*AN* 2. 65), after the 'stick-men' come alive, 'suck air', 'see', and 'turn and move', with their 'power to build' they also use their power 'to undermine'. Like Christian thinkers who have gone before her, she wrestles openly with what it means to be made in God's image, and yet, a sinner. She both understands and articulates the theme of St. Augustine's opening words to his *Confessions*:

"You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised (Ps. 47.2): great is your power and your wisdom is immeasurable" (Ps. 146.5). Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you, a human

being “bearing his mortality with him” (2 Cor. 4.10), carrying with him the witness of his sin and the witness that you “resist the proud” (1 Pet. 5.5). Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. (1992:3)

Initially, therefore, Avison’s witness is not an unspoiled celebration of imaging God.

Her witness to people’s sin and God’s resistance to pride and the accompanying restlessness of which St. Augustine speaks is what permeates the early collection, even as ‘Neverness’ (*AN* 1.24-26)⁹ suggests in its image of the pivot: ‘We millions hold old Adam in our thoughts / A pivot for the future-past’.¹⁰ Adam plays the significant and singular¹¹ role of pointing humanity to both glory and failure—both innocence and experience. Adam’s image is a reminder of short lived pleasure and purpose in Eden, followed by expulsion and loss. Avison speaks of this pivot in sombre realism as

a core
Of the one dream that never goads to action
But stains our entrails with nostalgia
And wrings the sweat of death in ancient eyes.

⁹ See Appendix 4.1 for the complete text of ‘Neverness’.

¹⁰ Northrop Frye recognized the importance of this poem early in Avison’s publishing career, when in 1957 he suggested that “[e]very good lyrical poet has a certain structure of imagery as typical of him as his handwriting, held together by certain recurring metaphors, and sooner or later he will produce one or more poems that seem to be at the centre of that structure. These poems are in the formal sense his mythical poems, and they are for the critic the imaginative keys to his work”. He went on to suggest that ‘Neverness’ is one such poem (1957:35).

¹¹ Avison is peculiarly single-focused in this portrayal of Adam, departing from Milton’s emphasis on Adam’s and Eve’s relationship shaping the pleasure of the Garden and their fall and subsequent expulsion. When her friend and colleague Al Purdy in his commemorative poem ‘On first looking into Avison’s Neverness’, pays tribute to Avison, he notes with his dry humor a peculiar absence in the poem: ‘lonesome Adam and no Eve’ (Purdy, 1987:30). His observation, albeit playful, calls attention to a pattern in Avison’s poetry. Most of the time her portraits of humans are truly ‘man’—i.e. men. Men and boys figure large in the people she notes. Key exceptions are the long poems ‘The Agnes Cleves Papers’ and ‘The Jo Poems’. One can only speculate. In a telephone interview, I queried her about her lack of interest in gender issues and she brushed the question aside. Her attitude toward the recognition of women in language or women’s opportunities and corresponding limitations in the marketplace partly reflects her times and its traditional stance of church and home. More important to her as a woman is the prime position of onlooker/observer, without pressures of career opportunities derailing her focus on writing poetry (Telephone interview, 6 April 2004). She begins ‘A Women’s Poem: Now’ (*AN* 3.55) with

Women are breadwinners perforce
when their pay is their sole resource.
Or when couples aspire to arrive
at a house—not a cell in a hive.

These are not comments about women’s aspirations of achievement or a challenge about roles of women. When it comes to her understanding of witness, gender is irrelevant.

However, with her keenly observant eye, it is still disconcerting that men dominate the landscape of her thinking. For instance, in the children’s textbook *History of Ontario* she wrote for Gage Publishers in 1951, there is virtually no mention of women in Ontario’s formation. Perhaps it is the instinctive ‘other’ that attracts her in her delineation of character. The reversed ‘other’ (the woman looking through a window at the man) helps her draw the sharp focus and enables her to understand the self better by exploring that ‘other’. Or perhaps it is a necessary distancing perspective, keeping the autobiographical at bay.

His fall is everyone's fall; '[h]is tale is never done', as people continue to repeat Adam's rebellious pattern. The accompanying nightmare-dream contains only regret and fear. Finally, in this dark and early poem, Avison speaks of a dream of a winding down of history into unending night where this image of Adam must be denied. When this happens, all will fall apart, imitating Yeats's circling gyres in 'The Second Coming' (1989:294-95). In her later poem in *Winter Sun*, 'The Mirrored Man' (AN 1.125-26), she revisits the theme of the pivoting Adam and Eden lost when she writes that

So now we flee the Garden
Of Eden, steadfastly.
And still in our flight are ardent
for lost eternity.

Like planets who have lost their orbit,

All of us, flung in one
Murky parabola,
Seek out some pivot for significance.

'The Mirrored Man' enacts the restless heart that has not turned to Christ.

In the meantime, 'Neverness' contains more than darkness in its pivot Adam. In the same poem she hurtles through the millennia to connect 'Old Adam' with 'Old Leeuwenhoek', sharing the same excitement of discovery. Adam may be content to hold a 'fistful of plump earth', but his progeny want to see and understand what particles make up that dirt. Anton van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723), pioneer in microbiology, was the first to observe single-celled organisms and 'opened up an entire world of microscopic life to the awareness of scientists' (Waggoner).¹² In describing the discoverer's excitement Avison imitates the process as she creates the word 'ribby' to frame the elation of discovery:

Old Leeuwenhoek must have had ribby thoughts
To hoop the hollow pounding of his heart
Those nights of spring in 1600-odd.

In later poems she continues this theme of discovery and advancement as she introduces other pioneers in science and thought, this time replacing microscope with telescope.

¹² Waggoner, B. 'Antony van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723)'.

Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) and Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), key contributors to the Copernican revolution in science—Brahe for revolutionizing astronomical instrumentation and Kepler for formulating his laws of planetary motion¹³—and Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983), designer of the Dymaxion map of the world and the geodesic dome,¹⁴ are all key figures in Avison’s poem ‘Dispersed Titles’ (*AN* 1.55-59).

In ‘The Iconoclasts’ (*AN* 1.30), she acknowledges various and peculiar kinds of ‘explorers’—‘[t]he cave-men, Lampman, Lief, the dancing dervish¹⁵ who

knew their doom to propagate, create,
Their wild salvation wrapt within that white
Burst of pure art whose only promise was
ferocity in them.

Here poet, explorer and religious figure join scientists in their human urges—their fierce need to propagate and create.

In one of the last poems of *sunblue* ‘Creative Hour’ (*AN* 2.104), published almost twenty years after ‘Dispersed Titles’ and ‘The Iconoclasts’, the mood is brighter but the irony is deeper as she relativizes these accomplishments of creativity and discovery with the image of a child at play:

The universe our colouring-book:
‘Child, fill it in?’—
or a waxy page to scribbling shade in, and make
streaky pictures come plain?

She speaks of the failed, or at least imperfect art of the child/person as

outlines vanish
the tentative image fails.
Chalks smear, all the paint spills,
creation crumples and curls.

¹³ Al Van Helden notes in *The Galileo Project* that Tycho Brahe ‘revolutionized astronomical instrumentation’ and ‘observational practice profoundly’. His ‘observations of the new star of 1572 and comet of 1577 ... were instrumental in establishing the fact that these bodies were above the Moon and that therefore the heavens were not immutable as Aristotle had argued’. Kepler, endorsing and supporting Galileo’s discoveries, discovered that planets move in elliptical orbits around the sun.

¹⁴ Among his accomplishments, he also introduced concepts into our language: ‘space ship earth’ and ‘synergy’ (from ‘Synergetics’—the ‘geometry of thinking’) (World Transformation).

¹⁵ ‘Dervish’ is ‘a Muslim friar, who has taken vows of poverty and austere life. Of these there are various orders, some of whom are known from their fantastic practices as dancing or whirling’ (OED). ‘Lief Ericson is the Viking/Icelandic explorer credited with landing on North American soil (ca.1001) before Christopher Columbus and creating a colony, Vinland, now Canada’s Newfoundland (Ryne). Archibald Lampman (1861-1899) is one of Canada’s earliest poets, one of the ‘Poets of Confederation’, known for his nature poetry.

As a result, the person gives up:

What is learned, I unlearn;
and hunt out an art school
that may require a model;
or contribute a membership as an art patron.

By the end of the poem she is stating baldly the misunderstanding of the creaturely role:

The evasive ‘maker’-metaphor,
thank God, under the power of our real common lot
leads stumbling back to what it promised to evade.

The idea that the ‘child’ has power over his or her elements by the ability to ‘make’ can be an evasion of the greater Creator. Her discovery leads to yet another admission of limitation—but also gift.

There is no one reviewed, no viewer,
no one of us not creature;
we’re apparently at work. But nothing is made
except by the only unpretentious, Jesus Christ, the Lord.

In the context of *sunblue* this discovery is good news. People are free to energetically embrace the role as ‘subcreators’,¹⁶ with the paradoxical freedom that comes with acknowledgement of creaturely limits.

But in *Winter Sun*, Avison is not yet ready for this admission; rather, she is preoccupied with critique. In ‘Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes (in Prospect)’ (*AN* 1.73-74) she piles strong verb on verb, echoing John Donne’s energy¹⁷ and capturing the intensity of ambition to achieve, to accomplish and to discover. The picture is strangely harsh:

Those who fling off, 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)

¹⁶ See J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-Stories’, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (1947:66ff) and C. S. Lewis, ‘On Three Ways of Writing for Children’, *Of Other Worlds* (1975b:27).

¹⁷ Batter my heart, three-personed God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new. (Donne, 2001:624)

Rock fulminating through
Wrecked love, unslakeably loving—.

Unsatisfied human desire for achievement keeps people endlessly striving, she concedes; but there are cautionary notes in the dominant metaphor of the ‘railroad engines’ with ‘pistons pounding’ and ‘rock fulminating’. The unfamiliar and coined constructions, ‘unslakeably thirsty’ and ‘unslakeably loving’, suggest the poet’s deep ambivalence towards the price of accomplishment. As a result, the poet presents a jaded picture of modern humanity coping with its own creations:

People, every one with a different world, from
Supernovae to amoeba in his soul,
Craving act, and harmony (shebang!).
Bewildered / Each broods in his own world,

she laments in ‘Apocalyptic’ (*AN* 1.107). ‘Old Leeuwenhoek’s “ribby thoughts”’ (*AN* 1.24-26) could suggest more than excitement. He is discoverer, not creator. The iconoclasts (*AN* 1.30)—‘cave-men, Lampman, Lief, the dancing dervish’ ‘knew their *doom* [emphasis mine] to propagate, create’

whose only promise was
Ferocity in them, thudding its dense
Distracting rhythms down their haunted years.

In ‘Dispersed Titles’ (*AN* 1.56-57),

The oak that cracked a quilted tumulus
and rustled, all through childhood’s
lacy candle-drip of winter

still ‘wounded with whispers’ the great Buckminster. In ‘Apocalyptic’ (*AN* 1.105-108), ‘[t]he city is a jungle gym’. In ‘Intra-Political’ (*AN* 1.97-100), people are reduced to ‘comestibles’—‘boxed, bottled, barreled in rows’.

Games are too earnest.
these packaged *us-es*
are to the gamboling of real nourishment
as mudcake to transmuted sun.¹⁸

¹⁸ This poem sounds very much like the early lines of C. S. Lewis’s well-known sermon ‘Weight of Glory’ where he speaks of people selling themselves short in their aspirations, ‘like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea’ (Lewis, 1975a:26).

These early poems all reveal the poet's deep uneasiness about accomplishments normally applauded.

The poet creates a more disturbing and pointed picture of modern thinking in 'The Fallen, Fallen World' (*AN* 1.75-76). In its allusive language, beginning with its title, the lyric becomes a dramatic enactment of the biblical account of the origin of evil. The poet writes as if she is preaching, like Jonathan Edwards, a sermon to herself, or reading Dante's *Inferno* as she pictures open resistance to the sun. 'Since Lucifer', the poem reports, fallen creatures—whether revolutionaries, idealists or the learned—have apprehended their 'slow sure estrangement from the sun'.

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.

For the revolutionaries, she speaks of a poor exchange between 'the sun in happier days burnished' and present time 'ungalaxed, to centre / Fuel and fume' and 'self-consuming, burn'. The idealists 'in moan and misery / Stray desolate along the steely river'. One such rebel

repent[s]
That under starlight, dissolute and lovely,
He to the angel's urgency gave way
And won a sunless summer for his soul.

The learned—those who share the poet's inclinations—are the most disturbing of all:

And, some, alas, who from the summit see
The season's 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 [...]

These intellectuals are particularly culpable with their knowledge of the truth of the sun and its favour. Here the metaphor is identified, connected with the Son in his incarnation in the 'Magnificat' and death and resurrection in 'the three-day darkness'. The alliterative trio of 'see', 'sound' and 'sense' emphasizes the study, experience and

insight afforded these privileged people. Mary's Song, 'The Magnificat', in Luke's Gospel speaks of the mercy available for those who fear God. The hungry are filled with good things; the lowly are lifted up. Conversely, 'he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones' and he has 'sent the rich away empty' (Lk 1.50-53). The learned have 'sounded / Dayspring', have probed the depths, and have seen all of the consequences connected with turning towards the sun/Son or away from Him. They have 'sensed' or intuited the meaning of 'the three-day darkness on the eternal's doorstep'. They have some idea what the cross meant to the Son and what its requirements are for them. But now the learned reveal their foolishness in their fallenness: '[N]ow are but weary / Because the hope is certain'. 'They, stubborn, on the frozen mountain cling / Dreaming of some alternative to spring'!

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.

The connection with Lucifer is sobering in his lowest icy circle of Dante's hell, but the closing lines also carry with them the glimmers of hope and rescue with the poet's sense of a slow return of the south and a sense of the tropics.

In delineating human limits, articulating rebellion and voicing her own sense of dissatisfaction with no clear 'pivot for significance' (*AN* 1.125-26), Avison achieves an emerging witness in pointing to the need for intervention and salvation. Even here, in *Winter Sun's* shadows, in the closing stanza of 'Intra-Political' (*AN* 1.97-100), the poet gives readers a glimpse of the vision that will be full blown in later poetry:

If with dainty stepping, we unbox ourselves
while still Explosion slumbers,
putting aside mudcakes,
the buying, selling, trucking, packaging
of mudcakes,
sun-stormed, daring to gambol,
might there not be an immense answering
of human skies?

She evokes George Herbert's 'transfiguring board / *Did sit and eat*' from his 'Love III',¹⁹ hinting at the ultimate expression of creatureliness. The poet implies a recognition of the requirement of humility in acknowledging sin and submission in accepting the Creator-Redeemer's act of hospitality—the simultaneous eucharist and cross.

4.2 The Witness in People's Relational Capacities

Avison returns to the image of the colouring book of *sunblue*'s 'Creative Hour' (*AN* 2.104) years later in 'Present from Ted' (*AN* 3.122-23). This time, however, there has been a shift in its meaning.

The pictures that emerged
were outlines? I remember
only the paper, and the wonder of it [...]
There were no colours, were there?

the poet muses. But her memory and imagination have transformed the 'no colours' to 'glorious colours', 'deepening colours, / patterns that keep emerging'. In fact,

Locked in the picture is
missing the quality of the analogy of
morning light
and the delighted holder of the paintbrush.

The morning light and her delight suggest humanity's shared position with the rest of creation. She is not finished remembering, however. 'Locked in the picture' and its analogy is also the poem's last line, which seems like an afterthought, but is actually its centre: 'and who gave him the book, and where he found it'. The relationship is what matters, as the title of the poem suggests.

In another poem in the same volume, 'Cycle of Community' (*AN* 3.156-57), Avison emphasizes the sense of shared community in

the hum
of a world going on,
untroubled by the silent witness, sky.

¹⁹

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back [...]
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat' (Herbert, 'Love III', 1975:192).

The poet explains the experience of walking on a city street in ‘[m]id-morning paraffin film over the / dayshine’, and becoming aware of city sounds—the ‘little clanks and whirrs / out there’. Her response to what she hears is one of tender identification with her fellow citizens and an acknowledgement that collectively they have a voice ‘to / open a bud of tremulous hearing’:

We here are silent. Yet being
drawn into, with, each
creature, each machine-work
thump, each step, faraway bark,
buzz, whine, rustle, etc.
goes to give our city
a voice, dampered by distance;
serves, through outer
windless openness of skywash, to
open a bud of tremulous hearing.

This connection with another person that Avison conveys is a more subtle and implicit witness. The poet both senses and embodies in her verse humankind’s relational capacities to image the triune God, an understanding that some modern theologians assert (in their own ways)—among them Brunner and Barth.²⁰ C. S. Lewis assumes this dynamic image in his distinction between what he calls gift- and need-love in his work *The Four Loves*. Lewis uses the language of contrasting ‘nearness by likeness’ and ‘nearness by approach’ to explain one’s participation in divine love:

Hence, as a better writer has said, our imitation of God in this life—that is, our willed imitation as distinct from any of the likenesses which He has impressed upon our natures or states—must be an imitation of God incarnate: our model is the Jesus, not only of Calvary, but of the workshop, the roads, the crowds, the clamorous demands and surly oppositions, the lack of all peace and privacy, the interruptions. For this, so strangely unlike anything we can attribute to the Divine life in itself, is apparently not only like, but is, the divine life operating under human conditions. (1960:11)

Avison reinforces the ‘Jesus … of the workshop, the roads, the crowds’ (Lewis 1960:11) in her empathetic sketches of ordinary people in their commonplace

²⁰ Erickson interprets Barth’s later thinking on the image of God as ‘consisting not only in the vertical relationship between human and God, but also in the horizontal relationship between humans. The image is not something a human is or does. Rather, the image is related to the fact that God willed into existence a being that, like himself, can be a partner’ (Erickson, 1998:525). Cairns speaks of Brunner’s ‘Human I-Thou relation’: ‘In his own being, the triune God is love; he is creator in his relation to the world. And man’s true being, when it corresponds to God’s own being, as God’s image on earth, is a being bound to his fellow men in love’ (Cairns, 1973:156).

interactions. In one poem, ‘[a] boy alone out in the court / Whacks with his hockey-stick’ (‘Thaw’ *AN* 1.92). In another,

After the surprising *coup* at a late luncheon meeting
the young man shifting for green concludes
the future makes his bitten thumb the fake. (‘September Street’ *AN* 1.131)

In yet another poem a jarring picture disturbs: ‘[s]carred—beyond what plastic surgery / could do’,

he prowls his life through
the street’s flow and wash
of others’ looks. (‘Scar-face’ *AN* 2.78)

Blunt critique inserts some soft humor:

The fellow in the library who said
he was “researching a
poem”: you just
feel he is likely no great shakes. (‘Edging Up on the Writing’ *AN* 2.205)

Here the observer reflects on common human feelings.

The divine image is more vivid as people express their desire for connection with one another. In the humorous observation, ‘Walking Behind, en Route, in Morning, in December’ (*AN* 1.215), the poet notes, ‘This man is not entirely / ,by himself, satisfactory’, calling attention to a seemingly out of place comma at the beginning of a line, nudging awkwardly the first word of the new line. She goes on to describe the limitations of clothes and shoes and hair. Somehow at the sight of ‘his topcoat spli[t] at the / unbuttoned slit and / in the wind’, she concludes,

I admit that this man, since he is
not by himself, is a
one, is satisfactory.

In her wordplay she is noting her connection with him. The man is satisfactory—is a ‘one’ in his particularity, but also not alone because she is walking behind, noticing his inherent inadequacies. She speaks in ‘The World Still Needs’ of that ‘communal cramp of understanding’ (*AN* 1.79-80). In ‘The Agnes Cleves Papers’ (*AN* 1.132-43), the narrator struggles to articulate the experience of love—or almost love:

One evening, just a year or two ago,
The simple penetrating force of love
Redeemed me, for the last perhaps. I’ve seldom dared, since

to approach that.

‘How for joy Mr. Jollyben cried’ in ‘Diminuendo’ (*AN* 1.36-37) is the story of loss and diminishment denied by the man obviously in pain, but compensation comes in the notation ‘(He said it was for joy.)’ by the sensitive listener. Then there is the poignant picture of the widow who sees her husband’s coat on an indigent man: ‘Still, he had his coat, / and she, the echoing years’ (‘Balancing Out’ *AN* 3.130).

In ‘To Counter Malthus’ (*AN* 3.72), Avison reacts to disturbing implications of the ideas of the theorist Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) in his ‘Essay on Population’ (1798).²¹ In her wordplay she constructs either a reply to the theoretical statistician, the ‘counter Malthus’, or a challenge, countering Malthus’s argument to anyone hearing it:

None of us in this so
burdened earth has known
how to live, let alone
who is too many.

This counting of persons and food supply is not a legitimate exercise, she protests. In the zeal to analyze and solve the practical questions of existence, Avison herself counters that human boundaries can be surpassed. In that over-reaching, the very Person who gives sustenance and meaning to each person’s unique life is missed:

Presence, each day
afresh, you give a
purifying signal to
sting us alive.

In the face of that reality—‘Presence’ implying the personhood of the Creator-Sustainer of persons—the proper life questions are not being asked. Her compassion moderates and alters Malthus’s calculations of the masses of humanity:

Vast territories and seashores
still bear these thronging
strangers,

²¹As Malthus seeks to establish the ‘perfectibility of society’, he theorizes that unchecked population growth always exceeds the means to feed that population. He suggests that the world’s disasters of disease and starvation are positive checks to overpopulation. There can also be more intentional ‘preventive’ checks of population control. The sophisticated nuances of his argument are not emphasized Avison appreciates. She is responding to the fundamental de-personalizing of humanity in the concept.

but she exclaims, ‘May none die / without somebody caring’. Like a postscript, she acknowledges, ‘To know even one other is / costly. And being known’. Again, the delayed thought in the new line introduces a surprise. ‘Being known’ throws the observation on the potentially self-serving theorist who has seemingly overlooked the fact that he is one of the ‘too many’ and someone needs to care for him too. Ironically and graciously, ‘Someone’ does, Avison gently asserts. While illustrating her earlier wry observation that ‘[t]he city is a jungle gym’, in ‘Apocalyptic’ (*AN* 1.105-108), she playfully describes the people climbing its bars, including those who penetrate the mysteries of earth’s workings:

Physicists have broken through; some are dismayed to find
The new air they inhabit
They share with poets.

If physicist and poet co-inhabit the same space, interrupting and disturbing one another with their reflections, the poets provide that essential reminder of humanity. She has played that role in countering Malthus.

In her appreciation of the human person Avison can recall Adam not only in his grandeur and strength, but in his potential frailty and latent fragility—in short, his creatureliness. The poet of the city experiences all the variety of the city’s people, not the least, the visibly indigent, and one of their representatives speaks for all. In *The Dumbfounding*’s ‘July Man’ (*AN* 1.160),²² she creates the memorable picture of

Old, rain-wrinkled, time-soiled, city-wise, morning man
whose weeping is for the dust of the elm-flowers
and the hurting motes of time.

Here he is—‘in this grass-patch, this city-gardener’s place’—a limited, exposed and exposing garden, resembling Eden not at all. ‘In the sound of the fountain / you rest, at the cinder-rim, on your bench’. As she notes both the person and his place of rest, Avison introduces the motif of pivots again:

The rushing river of cars
makes you a stillness, a pivot, a heart-stopping

²² See Appendix 4.2 for a complete and uninterrupted version of the poem.

blurt, in the sorrow
of the last rubbydub swig.

The man is a picture of humanity in all its creatureliness, a visible reminder of the outcome of one's many addictions that threaten to overcome any and all.

The old July man, like Adam initially, is alone. He is the 'heart-stopping' picture not only of addictions and failure, but isolation and loneliness: 'the searing, and / stone-jar solitude lost'. From the distance of the 'rushing river of cars' he is a 'stillness' and sorrow to the observer, but up close (literally, or in the imagination), he is also 'wonder (for good now) and / trembling'. There is a gentle and barely perceptible and surprising turn in the poem, however.

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

Avison sighs. The lines are predictably ambiguous. The one in the rushing traffic seeing 'the July man' as a pivot acknowledges there is 'too much none of us knows'. There is an invisible curtain of privacy concealing from the viewer the man's own personal history of human struggle that has brought him to this lonely place. The delay of the completion of the thought 'is weight' transferred to the next line is equally uncertain. In fact, the next line connects that 'weight' with 'sudden sunlight, falling' logically making no sense since light has no weight. However, there is witness to some hope, however faint, reminiscent of many of Avison's other poems evoking the sun. In the specificity of sunlight falling on hands and arms and lap, the 'pivot, a heart-stopping / blurt' has been particularized, and hence, cared for by both the One who sees and draws people into relationship and the observant poet with parallel compassion.

4.3 The Witness from Human Need

In their frailty and fallenness, Avison's pivots of 'Old Adam' and her 'July Man' seem to be sorry representative witnesses to God's presence in the world. It is difficult to reconcile theological descriptions of God's image in persons with the blatant disregard

for that reality in human conduct and practice. As part of his explanation of God's image in creation, Jurgen Moltmann suggests in his monograph *God in Creation*, 'God is present in human beings. "He appears wherever the human being appears".²³ The human being is God's indirect manifestation on earth. To be an image of something always means letting that something appear, and revealing it' (1993:219). Avison notes, in seeming contrast, humanity's weakness, limitation, and capacities to destroy.

In her poem 'Known' (*AN* 2.179), her contribution to the *festschrift* in honour of the American poet Denise Levertov, she presents two observers scanning passenger lists after an airplane crash:

eyes dart
along, down, till at last we can
relax: this horror was not to the heart.

The second observer has a different response:

Oh, but His eyes are on
the passenger list too;
every mourning child tonight's well known;
their dead He, nearest, knew.

She ends the stanza with its miniature theodicy, in subdued quietness: 'for Him this horror is real, and to the heart'. To be human means '[o]ur horizons stop at those we know / so we can bear it'. In contrast, the divine observer has unbounded capacity to absorb everyone's pain:

His [limits] not at what we know,
compassing our sheer-edge-of-nothing panic
and more; He though in peace and power, knows pain
for time and space, Whom these cannot contain.

At the fundamental level of human sympathy, then, people fail to image God in his capacity to love and care for all.

There is more than passive failure, Avison avers. 'We are despoilers' (*AN* 3.36); We leave 'detritus' (*AN* 3.23; *AN* 3.28) and 'ditch litter' (*AN* 1.62) everywhere. 'My

²³ Moltmann is quoting W. H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift*, 2nd ed., Neukirchen 1967.

kind out there sullies / it all' (*AN* 3.36). She names the obvious damage of pollution from our technological capabilities in 'The Ecologist's Song' (*AN* 2.266):

Sometimes, where once the sky bent brown
above a creased doeskin of new earth
pillars plunge upwards, and through the thinning air
the pelting hail sweeps down.

Human beings 'muddle, mangle, despoil, degrade' (*MD* 29-31). The urban landscape is particularly affected:

Sufferer of cities, hear me for
green pastures are
everywhere despoiled. (*MD* 77-78)

Human relationships at both micro and macro levels reveal strain, tension, and a tendency towards destruction. The conflicts start over minor dilemmas such as the predicament outlined in the ironic title 'Peace and War' (*AN* 2.253):

A sharp-chinned boy
in the automat
tried the ice-cream bars
but none came back
though his coin went in.
He asked at the counter.
Said the counter-man, No,
I've got bars in the freezer
but I'll not hand one over
till you pay me too.

Should the boy go away?
Who should say should?
What makes the counterman so mad?

The child's conflict with an adult moves to larger adult tensions. 'Tut-tuttry today / fits politics' ('In Our "Little Nests"' *AN* 3.176), the poet observes. Raising the ante, she comments,

Our own skills and
achievements are imprisoned by
managed relationships
no one can manage quite.
(‘Alternative to Riots But All Citizens Must Play’, *AN* 3.179-82)

Even songs celebrate humanity's disharmony and lack of mercy and kindliness. 'Inclemency', she calls it:

Why is the source of song when we
gather in the gloaming, or indoors
when winter snarls and hurls
rattling grains of snow against the shutters,

why is a peaceable company nourished on the
songs of railroad strikers, of
shipwrecks, disastrous cyclones, fires
engulfing whole communities

as the strumming storyteller
renders these? ('Songs' *MD* 32-33)

Nowhere is this attitude of pitilessness more obvious than in postures of war. In '*horror humani*' whether in today's Sudan or yesterday's 'quiet places across the / Channel' from Flanders' fields (*MD* 73-74),

the
private reader relishing his
book somewhere in
his window chair is
this very moment – O why? –
kaputt. The air-raid
“achieved its purpose”.

In another poem in *Momentary Dark*, 'Not Words. Alone' (*MD* 5), she changes perspective on human conflict and war diminishing in Lilliputian style the consequences of human suffering. In 'the dark of / outerness', the poet posits, our world's angry exchanges may be merely 'squeakings and dots'. With irony she laments,

may
all the myriad noises of our
everyday doings never,
may they never give us away
out there, tell to a
universe who we are.

There is perhaps no more vivid understatement in Avison's entire collection of poems then her dry conclusion to 'Not Words. Alone':

Or at least
let's tune these up together
a little, first.

While war and peace, framed as a child's conflict over an ice-cream bar (*AN* 2.253), have been reduced here in the 'dark of / outerness' to mere disharmonious sounds, the grave consequences, nevertheless, have not been negated.

Collective failure is painfully mirrored in the personal in *sunblue*'s 'Absolute' (*AN* 2.92). The poem images Lewis's observation 'that our whole being by its very nature is one vast need; incomplete, preparatory, empty yet cluttered, crying out for Him

who can untie things that are now knotted together and tie up things that are still dangling loose' (1960:9). Avison puts a face on the possibility of the 'worst there is / at the core of it' for any person to acknowledge:

Right here on earth
I've known One Person who would
see me in the worst there is

at the core of it – *see me*
e.g. the mocker making a frail rabbi
hop on the Warsaw pavement yes at the worst
would see me
lazing and lording it over him or e.g. nobody
making me do it
willing to hop on the pavement
fearful nobody really
making me
or e.g. would see me
turning away from both in
order
to be beautifully alone –.

All parties in the confrontation are individually guilty and individually seen by the 'One Person' who the poet understands

would
nevertheless care
enough to be past
tears [...]

That same Person is one

who means risking
tireless loss
in a real world e.g.

along the lake road with evening pale already
and nowhere to turn off:
right here on earth.

In this terrifying poem is a witness emerging from human sin. Failed creaturely response to other creatures and failed reflection of the Creator elicits the remedy in the Redeemer-creature relationship—a motif that is repeated numerous times in Avison's lyrics. On the one hand, 'My kind out there sullies / it all'; on the other, '[y]et we, providing an unlikely / context for miracle' (*AN* 3.36), point to humanity's rescue and the person who achieves it. As Cairns interprets Calvin's well-known antitheses from the *Institutes*:

It at once becomes clear how closely in his thought our knowledge of God is interwoven with our knowledge of ourselves ... the blessings which we owe to God, including the chief blessing of our very existence, should drive us in gratitude to think of him, while our very feeling of ignorance and depravity should remind us of our need of him. (Cairns, 1973:134)

People provide more than context for Christ's intervention. Awareness of failure becomes a peculiar but often effective form of witness, reminding a person to act on that knowledge.

This Redeemer-creature relationship is announced in another Creator-creature story in 'On a Maundy Thursday Walk' in *Concrete and Wild Carrot* (AN 3.174-75), published decades apart from 'Neverness' and 'Mirrored Man'. The poem contains the third reference to a pivot, this time connected to the new Adam.²⁴ The title suggests its connection with the Christ-story of the Gospels in its reference to Maundy Thursday, the familiar observance of the Christian church during Holy Week, involving preparatory rituals in anticipation of Good Friday. The connection between Creator and Redeemer is immediately established between the title of the poem and its opening statement:

The Creator was
walking by the sea, the
Holy Book says.

The witness of scripture is asserted, and still in the same line, the initial witness of Christ (without being named as such) is established.

Who can imagine it, sullied
as our scnses are? Faulty as are even our
most excellent makings?

the poet asks. Sullied imagination is contrasted with imagination that can and did create:

The perfection of
created Being, in the perfect
morning was born from the walker-by-the-sea's
imagination. At a word—
the hot smell of sunned rock, of
the sea, the sea, the sound of lapping, bird calls,
the sifting sponginess of sand
under the sandals, delicate
April light—all, at a word

²⁴ 'For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ ... Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit ... the first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven' (1 Cor. 15.21-22, 45, 47).

had become this almost-overwhelming loveliness.

It is at this point in the poem that Avison provides a vivid emotional connection between ‘the walker-by-the sea’, the Creator and Artist himself, and the sharers of the poem:

Surely the exultation—
The Artist
Himself immersed in
His work, finding it flawless—
intensified the so soon
leaving (lifted out of
mortal life for good
forever).

They experience the same particulars of the natural environment of sun and sea. More poignant, He must die; so will the readers and the writer of the poem. Theological challenge has been set aside for reflection on mortality.

That too eludes
us who disbelieve that we
also shall say goodbye to
trees and cherished friends and
sunsets and crunching snow
to travel off
into a solo death.

The common death fears

that mak[e] me sweat with vertigo
On this peculiar shelf /
Of being ('November 23' *AN* 1.86)

add to the understanding of the intensity of the experience for the Creator to subject ‘the perfection of / created Being’ to ‘go under / its Maker, and us all’ (*AN* 3.174-75). It is at this point Avison reintroduces the pivot-image—this time, her picture of Good Friday’s cross:

How much more, that
(suffering this
creation to go under
its Maker, and us all)
He, the Father of love, should stake it all
On a sufficient
Indeed on an essential pivot.

The connection of Creator and creature is taken to the extreme in the story of the cross.

It is not just the connection between the old and new Adam that brings awe to the

reader, but the insertion of the cross in all its brutal physicality—‘should stake it all’—as the necessary link for a rescue and restoration of ‘we millions’ immured in the ‘nostalgia’ and ‘sweat of death’ in the picture of ‘Neverness’ (*AN* 1.24-26). In its context of reflections on the goodness and loveliness of creation, the pleasure of the Artist and the wistful sadness of leaving, the pivot stands larger in its profound significance. As a result, the image is jarring as it transcends the surface of the poem. In a strange way, this irony heightens the demand for the reader to turn—as a pivot suggests—from the creation to its Redeemer.

4.4 A Necessary Coda for Creatures

Mortality, of course, is the ultimate in limitation and creatureliness and the ultimate consequence of sin. Avison does not evade its reality; in fact, the theme of death runs through the pages of the poet’s lyrics. Early on in *Winter Sun* she introduces the inevitable in the picture of the ‘little clay house’ in ‘Death’ (*AN* 1.81). The tight construction of the single-sentence lyric implies the swiftness of its arrival; at the same time, the multiple images of wet and wind, trains, bells, foghorn imply the busy environment that forestalls the event:

I ask you how can it be thought
That a little clay house
Could stop its door
And stuff its windows forevermore
With the wet and the wind and the wonderful grey
Blowing distracted in
Almost night
And trains leaving town
And nine o’clock bells
And the foghorn blowing far away
And the ghastly spring wind blowing
Through thin branches and
Thin houses and
Thin ribs
In a quick sift of
Precious terrible coldness?

‘Death has us glassed in’ she notes in a later poem, ‘A Lament’ (*AN* 2.38). Again,

When you crawled over the ice to the crest
and there was the deer the
wolves had torn
you had forbearance in the blast

and blank of fear,
she tropes in ‘To a Fact-facer’ (*AN* 2.231).

The intellectual and emotional acknowledgement takes on the clothing of acute personal mourning in *No Time* as she copes with the deaths of people close to her and of fellow poets and writers. These include the elegiac Jo Poems (*AN* 2.114-38); ‘Just Left or The Night Margaret Laurence Died’ (*AN* 2.149); ‘For Milton Acorn’ (*AN* 2.163); ‘My Mother’s Death’ (*AN* 2.170-78); ‘It Bothers Me to Date Things “June the 9th”’ (*AN* 2.225); ‘For bpn (circa 1965)’ (*AN* 2.240). In *Momentary Dark*’s ‘Never Alone’ (*MD* 79), she speaks of memories of Thanksgiving and Christmas ‘festivals’ ‘recollected through a haze of grave- / side standing’. Later, she writes, the flourishing trees / deep-bosomed’ are

like comforting cousins at a
mourner’s wake, that other
family festival.

The closing poem, ‘Shelters’ (*MD* 80-88), of this last collection echoes the same theme:

When it is dark although
the cemetery is in
our blindly self-obliterating
city, the trees
gather, encircle
benches and grassy places.

It is in the context of this particular kind of darkness—this ‘momentary darkness’—that the poet inserts a gentle and suggestive witness. In her oblique fashion she points away from humankind’s limitation and need to the promise of fulfillment and newness:

In here, looking up, the starry
night is barely
visible; yet its scent of *far*
breathes gently.

In ‘Bereavement and Postlude (Remembering Angela Bowering)’ (*MD* 21), she frames the hope in terms of sight instead of scent: ‘On the far shore, see? away over, *there*: / some little village twinkles down to bedtime’.

Vision in Avison’s poems undergoes many permutations, as her reflections on mortality suggest, but the end result points in the same direction—away from the self

and towards the light. For example, in the collection *Not Yet But Still*, published just before Avison turned 80, an altered perspective seems to be suggested. The epigraph from a poem of the Canadian poet Eli Mandel, ‘*The sun a cataract in a blinding sky...*’²⁵ signals, on the one hand, the familiar theme of the sun’s dominance in Avison’s poetry, but on the other, it suggests a subtle shift. The cataract could have several meanings for the poet: a downpour or a large waterfall; or an affliction of old age—opacity of the lens of the eye; or both. What does a person see when the seeing is difficult? What does she hear when hearing dwindles? What is present in the mind’s eye? In the diminution, there is also clarity—a second seeing, a looking again that brings new energy and hope.

In the opening poem of *Not Yet But Still*, ‘Old Woman at a Winter Window’ (*AN* 3.15), the speaker of the poem adopts the posture of one most vulnerable. Here is an aged woman confined indoors by icy winter weather to staring out through a mere ‘frosted pane’. From her limited and potentially distorted ‘winter window’, she reports what she sees, reflecting not limitation, but expansiveness:

I stare into the glittering
quartz of the air, marbled with
tiny streamers from
valiant chimneys down along the valley.

She, in her small space, looks out at the ‘immensity’. The image of ‘the glittering quartz of the air’ suggests both something to be attracted to and something to fear: ‘a congealing It’, she imagines, ‘encroaching ice’. Only the ‘tiny streamers from valiant chimneys down along the valley’ offer her temporary hope in her shared participation with others who do battle with nature:

We claim these square ceilings and walls
and floor from the immensity
as all that have, for us,
meaning, against the encroaching ice.

It is a bleak vision from that winter window. She is out of harmony with the world—‘as if we pit ourselves / against a congealing It’. Meaning and protection are derived from

²⁵ The epigraph is not included in the final Collected Poems, *Always Now*, Vol. III.

confinement indoors and perspective is thus limited ‘from squared-off quarters’. But the closing stanza transforms the vision and releases the speaker from her sense of vulnerability to an attitude of hope: ‘The encroaching ice’

somehow
signals another space, a fearful,
glorious amplitude.

The particulars of ‘square ceiling and walls and floor’ are not the only and final reality. This ‘fearful, glorious amplitude’—this capaciousness, completeness, plenitude, richness—is another space awaiting the watcher at the window. The religious dimension is subtly introduced, reversing the limited acceptance of the woman’s mortality and hinting instead at her anticipated immortality.²⁶ The closing two-word line ‘glorious amplitude’ (*AN* 3.15) functions as a delightful surprise. The event seems intimate, imminent and intuitive of a release from the confinement of inactivity and mere watching. It also signals an end to reading signs in the created world—both nature and human nature. The beckoning to ‘come and see’ has been finally realized.

²⁶ St. Paul’s comment on the resurrection body of the Christian believer is hovering in the background of this poem: ‘Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed ... For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory”’ (I Cor. 15.51-54).

Chapter 5: ‘Come and See’: ‘Truth Radiantly Here’

Today the blueness burns
Inbetween new greens and space’s
Soundless blackness.
Yet we even now
Discern more, cry:
No, lovely as May is
We would hear more.

(‘In Season and out of Season’ *AN* 3.69-71)

Near the end of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* the archangel Michael is sent to expel Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. First, however, he takes Adam up to a high hill where he offers his version of ‘come and see’, ‘set[ting] before him in vision what shall happ’n till the Flood’ (*Paradise Lost*, 11. The Argument). Then he pauses ‘[b]etwixt the world destroy’d and world restor’d’ (*Paradise Lost*, 12.3) and explains to Adam a shift in manner and method of his prophetic witness to the redemption of the now fallen creation:

Much thou hast yet to see, but I perceive
Thy mortal sight to fail; objects divine
Must needs impair and weary human sense:
Henceforth what is to come I will relate,
Thou therefore give due audience, and attend. (12.8-12)

Whatever dramatic, philosophical and theological reasons may be suggested in this narrative transition, for sure, an alternative form of witness is announced. ‘Thou therefore give due audience, and attend’ (12.12) echoes Jesus’s concern for active listening emphasized in all four Gospels. In the ‘Parable of the Sower’, recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Mk. 4.1-20; Mt. 13.3-23; Lk. 8.4-18), the two senses, hearing and sight, merge as Jesus explains why he speaks in parables: ‘The reason I speak to them in parables is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand”’ (Mt. 13.13). On the other hand, Jesus commends the disciples for the two senses working in tandem: ‘But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it’ (Mt. 13.16-17).

John's Gospel refers to hearing as much as seeing. The Samaritans 'believed in him because of the woman's testimony'; '[a]nd many more believed because of his word'; the towns people explain to the Samaritan woman, '[W]e have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world' (Jn. 4.39, 41, 42). Later Jesus answers the complaints of religious leaders, 'It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God". Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me' (Jn. 6.45). Again, 'Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own' (Jn. 7.17). In the Upper Room Discourse Jesus emphasizes word and speech: 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them ... Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me' (Jn. 14.23-24). In the same conversation, Jesus explains, 'I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father' (Jn. 16.25). Later he replies to Pilate's query, '[F]or this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice' (Jn. 18.37). When the resurrected Jesus reveals himself to the doubting Thomas, he implies the priority of the word in his words, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' (Jn. 20.29).

This emphasis on hearing and word corroborates Ricoeur's observation that 'testimony is not perception itself but the report, that is, the story', and 'is thus found in an intermediary position between a statement made by a person and a belief assumed by another on the faith of the testimony of the first' (1980:123). The observation is important for understanding Christian witness. In Jesus's words again, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' (Jn. 20.29). Margaret Avison can be said to 'see' and beckon her readers to 'come and see' with her in her poetry; but

she has also received the testimony of other witnesses, particularly the witnesses in and of scripture and has ‘believed’, and hence, speaks of what she has heard—what she has interpreted based on the testimony of the text. She suggests this blurring of terms in ‘When We Hear a Witness Give Evidence’.¹ ‘Who heard the angels’ song?’ she queries, calling attention to verbal content in the ‘evidence’ of the poem’s title (*AN* 2.168). But the aural and visual come together a few lines later: ‘A few heard the angels shine’. The closing lines,

But when someone tells it, something,
a Presence, may briefly shine
showing heaven again,
and open,

bring the biblical event into the present with the same mysterious blending.

Paradoxically, this witness dependent on language and text is more direct and specific about the One to whom it points than the witness of creation and human nature. On the one hand, the word is ‘the most fragile agent’ (Ellul, 1985:41) with its ‘blessed uncertainty’ (1985:18) and ‘thick haze of discourse’ (1985:19).² On the other, as Jacques Ellul insists, ‘Only the word can convey the Word of God, the sole means God used to reveal himself to us’ (1985:107). Ellul offers his explanation in *The Humiliation of the Word*, conceptualizing the central metaphor *Logos*, the ‘Word made flesh’, informing key poems in Avison’s collection. He writes:

When I say that language normally deals with Truth rather than Reality, I only mean that there are two orders of knowledge, two kinds of references we use as human beings. There are references to the concrete, experienced reality around us, and others that come from the spoken universe ... We derive meaning and understanding from language, and it permits us to go beyond the reality of our lives to enter another universe. (1985:22-23)

¹ See Chapter 2.1 for a fuller discussion of the poem.

² Ellul uses a vivid image from nature to explain the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in language: ‘[Language] takes its place in the center of an infinitely delicate spider’s web, whose central structure is fine, rigorous, and dense. As you move away from the center, the web becomes larger and distended, until it reaches incoherence, at its edge, where it sends off threads in every direction. Some of these threads go a great distance, until they arrive at the invisible spots where the web is anchored. This complex web is a marvel which is never the same, not for me at different points in time nor for another person’ (1985:18).

The hinting and hovering suggested in the poet's perceptions and interpretations of reality are given over to the signs pointing to God's presence and activity announced in the biblical text's fundamental declaration, 'God speaks'.

It makes sense, therefore, to take seriously Avison's interest in the text of the Bible. The boxes full of the poet's Bible study notes preserved in her archives suggest not only a consistent and frequent habit of systematic reading, but a decision to maintain a private record of that reading, not ultimately shielded from the public. At the same time, the poems that emerge from that base of reading are not study notes, but organic meditations that take on a life of their own. A list of the poems formed around biblical texts reveals an eclectic collection ranging from the beginning to the end of the scriptures.³ While this diverse choice of texts from the larger text of scripture seems random, the narrative core of the Bible's account of creation, fall, redemption and new creation emerges in often startling fashion, and hence, points to a dimension of Avison's unique contribution to Christian witness. While the poems demonstrate the poet's ease

³ 'A Thief in the Night' (AN 1.47; 1 Thess. 5.1-3);* 'Continued Story' (AN 1.48-49; Jn. 20.1-18); 'Jonathan, O Jonathan' (AN 1.72; 2 Sam. 1.19-27); 'Jael's Part' (AN 1.120-21; Judg. 4.11-5, 31); 'Span' (AN 1.122; 1 Sam. 2.12-4.22); 'Psalm 19' (AN 1.162); 'A Story' (AN 1.164-67; Mt. 13.1-18; Mk. 4.1-20); 'A Child: Marginalia on an Epigraph (Mt. 18.3; Lk. 9:48)' (AN 1. 169-71); 'Sestina (1964)' (AN 2.48-49; 1 Sam. 13-14); 'Embezzler (Luke 16)'(AN 2.50-53); 'For the Murderous: The Beginning of Time' (AN 2.54; Ge. 4.1-16); 'All Out or Oblation (as defined in 2 Sam. 23:13-17 and 1 Chron. 11:17-19)' (AN 2.55-56); 'Dryness and Scorch of Ahab's Evil Rule (Elijah said, this way comes no refreshing, only famine, drought. (1 Kings 17)' (AN 2.57-58); 'He Couldn't Be Safe (Isaiah 53:5)' (AN 2.58); 'To Emmaus' (AN 2.59; Lk. 24.13-24); 'As a Comment on Romans 1:10' (AN 2:60); 'The Circuit (Phil. 2:5-11)' (AN 2.61); 'Psalm 80:1 – "Thou that dwellest between the cherubim, shine forth!"' (AN 2.85); 'Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel' (AN 2. 148; Jn. 1.1-18); 'Paraphrase of Ephesians 2:1-6' (AN 2.200); 'The Unshackling' (AN 2.208; Jn. 20.19-23); "By the Waters of Babylon ..." (AN 2.218); "He himself suffered when he was tempted" (Heb. 2:18)' (AN 2.223); 'The Cursed Fig-Tree: The form not the purpose of the parable (Mark 11:12-14; 19-26)' (AN 2.243-44); "Tell them everything that I command you; do not omit a word" (Jer. 26:2b)' (AN 3.35); 'Seer, Seeing' (AN 3.60-62; Amos 4.1ff; 3.15; 9.11-15); 'In Season and out of Season' (AN 3.69-71; Ex. 2.ff.); 'And If No Ram Appear (Gen. 22:13)' (AN 3.73); 'What John Saw (Revelation 4)' (AN 3.74-75); 'Proving ("...do not omit a word" Jer. 26:2b)' (AN 3.79); 'Job: Word and Action' (AN 3.102-115); 'Dividing Goods' (AN 3.127-28; Lk. 15.11-32); 'Third Hand, First Hand' (AN 3. 141; Jn. 20.24-28); 'Notes from Dr Carson's Exposition of 1 John 5' (AN 3.142); 'Four Words: A Gloss on I Cor. 14:6' (AN 3.173-74); 'But One Recoiled (Ezekiel 9)' (AN 3.198); 'Betrayed into Glory (John 13:32)' (AN 3.205); 'Thy Kingdom Come' (MD 34-35; Mt. 6.9-13; Lk. 11.1-4); and 'Hot Noon' (MD 46-48; Jn. 4.1-42). *Note: some references are part of Avison's title; some have been interpreted from the text and listed as a source.

If one were to list all the allusions to biblical texts the list would be far longer. There is an appendix to Ernest Redekop's article 'The Word/word in Avison's Poetry' in Kent (1987): 'Quotations from, and references and allusions to, specific biblical texts in *Winter Sun*, *The Dumbfounding*, and *sunblue*' (1987:140-143) which demonstrates close interpretations of both the texts of the Bible and of Avison's poems and implies an exhaustive summary. My intention here is to identify poems whose key organizing principle is around a unit of Scripture.

in ranging across the scriptures, blurring distinctions between individual stories and their parts and inserting questions and allusions remotely suggested in individual texts, there is, nevertheless, a discernible logic in Avison's method of reading scripture. With a paradigm of witness in the divisions I propose, the poet demonstrates 'a reading of scripture that takes place in faith' (Williams, 2000:56): (1) She begins by announcing the witness of the Word, modeled after the Prologue to John's Gospel. (2) She connects Old and New Testaments with surprising typological links particularly focused on the Eucharist. (3) She reports the Christ story in varying literary forms of parable, vignette, Pauline analysis and fusion of literary traditions. (4) Her witness, like the New Testament witness, ultimately leads to Christ's resurrection.

5.1 Johannine Witness of the Word

I concur with Ernest Redekop that 'Avison's reading of the Bible really begins with the Gospel of John' (1987:125). Her poetry often probes the mystery of the multiple meanings of Word/words as has already been noted in her miniature poem 'The Word' (*AN* 2.220).⁴ The cryptic and hidden referent of the compact sentence

Huge waterfalls in ever-travelling skies
sting us with their spray
in weeping eyes
even in our present shadow-form
of day.

is less oblique in three other lyrics in Volume two of the Collected Poems referring to the Johannine motif of the incarnate Word: 'Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel' (*AN* 2.148), 'The Bible to Be Believed' (*AN* 2.62-63) and 'Listening' (*AN* 2.64). Though 'Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel' from *No Time* (*AN* 2.148)⁵ is the later poem of the trio, it is a good one to consider first in its reading of the rich and complex Prologue to John's Gospel (Jn. 1.1-18). Here the Evangelist sets forth the mystery of the incarnation in majestic sweep. His words echo the words of Genesis, but

⁴ See Chapter 2.2.

⁵ See Appendix 5.1 for complete text.

they prefigure creation: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God’ (Jn. 1.1-2). *Logos* or Word is the name, the concept, by which John’s readers are to understand ‘the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known’ (Jn. 1.18).⁶ William Temple, in *Readings in St John’s Gospel*, is helpful in his explanation of John’s purpose in using the term *Logos*:

He wants a term that carries thought nearer to the heart of all reality. He finds it in this word ‘Logos’, which alike for Jew and Gentile represents the ruling fact of the universe, and represents that fact as the self-expression of God ... Thus from the outset we are to understand that the Word has its whole being within Deity, but that it does not exhaust the being of Deity ... God is essentially self-revealing; but He is first of all a Self capable of being revealed. This same word, or Self-revelation, is then again said to exist in essential relationship to God. (1968:4-5)

‘Un-tense-able Being’, Avison exclaims, calling attention to the Word as act, as she begins her poem, ‘spoken / for our understanding’. The Gospel writer continues, ‘All things came into being through him ... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it’ (Jn. 1.3-5). Further down in the text of the Prologue, the writer announces in several ways this joining of heaven and earth with the arrival of ‘the true light’, ‘the Word’, the only Son: ‘The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world’, John points out in verse nine; ‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us’, he declares in verse 14. Avison responds confidently, pointing back to the text of the Evangelist,

speaking forth the “natural world” –
“that”, we (who are part of it)
say, “we can know”.⁷

⁶ Avison, as well, might be calling to mind Milton’s portrayal of God on his throne in Heaven as the chronological starting point in *Paradise Lost*: ‘God spoke’ (5.59ff.), announcing the authority of the Son (Milton, 1962:5.59ff). (Milton himself must be calling to mind John’s declaration).

⁷ Avison is simply stating here what Calvin explains in more detail: ‘[T]his is a reference to that part of life in which men surpass the other animate creatures. It is as if he were saying that the life given to men was not life in general but life united with the light of reason. Moreover, he separates men from the others, because we are more aware of God’s power by feeling it in us than by looking at it from a distance ... Furthermore, since God effectually illuminates their minds with His light, it follows that they were created to the end they might know that He is the author of such a unique blessing. And since this light streamed forth to us from the Word its source, it should be as a mirror in which we may see clearly the divine power of the Word’ (Calvin 1961:11).

At this point of her poem, there is a shift in her commentary. The questions start flooding in.⁸

Even in this baffling darkness
Light has kept shining?
(where? where? then are we blind?)

Even in her line spacing of ‘where? where?’ the poet depicts this strained searching—or refusal to search—for light/Light with all its many-layered implications. In these questions Avison has alluded to the major conflict in John’s Gospel, brought to a climax in the conversations surrounding the healing of the man born blind, of ones who could ‘see’ Jesus and those who refused to see. Jesus reminds his disciples before the healing, ‘As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world’ (Jn. 9.5). When the Pharisees challenge the no longer blind man, he exclaims,

One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see ... Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples? ... Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. (Jn. 9.25, 27, 30)

Jesus’s interpretation of the Pharisees’ response to the ‘sign’ with his disciples in private is similar to his interpretation of the parable of the Sower in the other Gospels:

“I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind”. Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains”. (Jn. 9.39-41)

He is characteristically oblique and ambiguous in his response to these teachers of the law.

Avison responds, in kind, with an ambiguous phrase ‘this baffling darkness’ and parenthetical and strained questions. She may be suggesting an anxious identification with those who cannot see, or an amazed incredulity at the patience of One who ‘has kept shining’. ‘But Truth is radiantly here’, she insists again, but only for those with spiritual perception, a reality echoed throughout the Gospels and embodied in a number of her poems. In ‘To Emmaus’ (*AN* 2.59) she refers to the disciples of the Lukan

⁸ Again, her technique of the question mark in her own study of the Bible inserts itself in the poem. See Avison & Martin (2005:65-76).

account (Lk. 24.13-35) who fail to recognize Jesus in his resurrection appearance as ‘beclouded’:

Their beclouding had not cleared
and did not lift even from
His word.

In ‘Third Hand, First Hand’ (*AN* 3.141), she presents the familiar story of doubting Thomas in his need for proof after the event, with his defensive assessment of his own motivations and that of the other disciples:

They saw because they wanted to?
They all half-doubted when
He asked for fish and honeycomb,
took it, and ate it too.

Thomas’s scepticism in John’s narrative (Jn. 20.24-29) rises out of a second-hand report—the witness of the disciples who told him the Lord appeared to them and ate in front of them for proof of his substantial body—as recorded in the Lukan account (Lk. 24.36-43). Now he is having his own first-hand experience with Jesus telling him, ‘Reach out your hand and put it in my side’ (Jn. 20.27). This reference to ‘third hand’ in Avison’s poem could be Thomas’s own hand. Or it could be the peculiar verification of the original disciples’ recitation to the physician Luke, the one so careful to establish the authenticity of the witnesses in his own story of Jesus: ‘It was the doctor later who / said it had been so’. Or it could be both at once. The poem retains the poignancy of both original stories even while the doctor certifies the live body (instead of a dead one), giving credence to the original eyewitnesses and to both post-resurrection accounts. These hesitant witnesses to the Light stand in stark contrast to Avison’s earlier ‘learned’ rebels in ‘The Fallen, Fallen World’ (*AN* 1.76)

alas, who from the summit see
The season’s 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.

and in the learned Pharisee fashion, ‘stubborn, on the frozen mountain cling / Dreaming of some alternative to spring’.

The poet links the radiant Truth, Eternal Being, Word, and Creator of John's Prologue with the familiar gospel invitation, 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children ['sons'] of God' (Jn. 1.11-12). Her response is one of awe: 'Being, giving us to Become: / a new unfathomable genesis' ('Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel' *AN* 2.148), leading to another cluster of questions:

Come? in flesh and blood?
Seen? as another part
of the 'natural world' his word
flung open, for the maybe imperiller,
in what to us was the
Beginning?

This stanza is dense with theological import and human pathos. 'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth', writes the Evangelist (Jn. 1:14). The *Logos*, the Light, the Son joins the splendid but fragile world he has made, becoming one of the parts of his creation. Avison calls attention to the 'natural world', with its multiple meanings of creation, physical reality, ordinary life, but also fallen world. '[H]is word / [is] flung open', vulnerable and exposed to 'the maybe imperiller', and suggestive of the darkness that has not overcome the light (Jn. 1.5). In the Gospel account Jesus names this imperiller in one of several challenges to the religious leaders opposing him: 'You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him' (Jn. 8.44). In the naming of the arch enemy of truth, John's particular perspective of the cross is anticipated—Christ's ultimate 'glory'. Here in the triumphant words of the Prologue, the means of becoming children of God is shadowed with Christ's suffering. Avison captures the sacrifice in the one puzzling word 'imperiller'.

The closing stanza of her meditation highlights the poet's veiled and indirect disclosures characteristic of her style, but also of the style of the writer of John's

Gospel. There are three cryptic sentences, each progressively shorter, beginning with the *Logos* and ending with the witness:

The unknown, the unrecognized, the
invisibly glorious
hid in our reality
till the truly real
lays all bare.
The unresisting,
then, most, speaks
love. We fear
that most.

Jesus remains unnamed—consistent with many of her poems about Christ. In ‘A Story’ (*AN* 1.164-67), he is identified only as ‘the one out on the water’ and ‘Gardener/Seed-Sower’ and ‘Storyteller’. In ‘The Dumbfounding’ (*AN* 1.98), he is directly addressed, titled as ‘the all-lovely, all-men’s way / to that far country’ and ‘outcast’s outcast’. ‘The Word’ is the only identifier in ‘The Bible to Be Believed’ (*AN* 2.62-63); no name is used in ‘Third Hand, First Hand’ (*AN* 3.141). The hiddenness here in ‘Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel’ (*AN* 2.148) is not surprising then.

The unknown, the unrecognized, the
invisibly glorious
hid in our reality

sums up both the book of John and its Prologue, but it has the witness’s beckoning ‘come and see’ encrypted in its lines.

The last two sentences introduce a surprise:

The unresisting
then, most, speaks
love. We fear
that most.

In this highly abstract poem with its limited images and story line it is a reasonable expectation for the emphasis to be on intellectual recognition and assent and believing. Instead, the meditation draws to a close with a picture of what ‘seeing’—unresisting—will look like. Why does one ‘fear / that most’? Again, the answer is ambiguous, but at least one possibility lies in the Johannine story itself. The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel points to its end where Jesus asks Peter three times, if he loves him. Jesus’s response to

Peter's affirmations is to outline the great cost of that love (Jn. 21.18-19),⁹ ending with a sobering implication of seeing: 'Follow me' (v. 19).

There are a variety of things going on in the second poem, 'The Bible to Be Believed' from *sunblue* (AN 2.62-63).¹⁰ For one, the text explains and defends the link between two understandings of 'Word'—the living Word and the scripture as Word. In this connection the poem demonstrates how Avison, the poet, reads the biblical text diachronically and figurally. She validates her own reading by using the 'Word's' reading as a model. The Word in the poem reads himself into the text of Old Testament scriptures, inviting the reader to do the same. In turn, then, the Word as scripture is validated—'the Bible to be believed'—because of the Word's 'reading'.

The poem begins with the same Johannine metaphor *Logos*, the Word, the 'Untense-able' Being' of 'Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel' (AN 2.148) and proceeds to announce a thesis in the shape of a riddle: 'The word read by the living Word / sculptured its shaper's form' (AN 2.62-63). The same mystery informs John Donne's 'Annunciation' in Gabriel's word to Mary:

Ere by the spheares time was created, thou
Wast in His minde, who is thy Sonne and Brother;
Whom thou conceivst, conceived; yea thou art now
Thy Makers maker, and thy Fathers mother. (1967:249-250)

In Avison's poem the paradox is focused on the living Word who existed prior to any written word, but now, as incarnate Word, reads the words of the Hebrew scriptures. In turn, he is affected, that is, 'sculptured' (a word filled with connotations of both beauty and pain) by his reading. The link between living Word and scriptural Word is immediately established. The second declaration in the poem, an implied implication, is more obscure: 'What happens, means. The meanings are not blurred / by Flood – or

⁹ "Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go". (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me".

¹⁰ See Appendix 5.1 for complete text.

fiery atom'. Redekop, in his reading of these lines, suggests 'a sacramental unified field, as it were':

Avison ... interprets John 1:1 as both act and word: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the relation of Old and New Testaments come under one heading ... in which Creation and Redemption are one act of will existing outside time—or, more exactly, at the intersection of time and eternity. Thus the Word, embedded in history and reading history, is independent of history, speaking with equal clarity through ancient or contemporary apocalypses. (1987:126)

The poem then proceeds to show how Avison reads scripture diachronically and figurally as she reveals the Word 'embedded in history and reading history' (Redekop, 1987:126). Rowan Williams explains a diachronic reading as a "“primary” or authoritative level of reading that is bound to history',

read[ing] a text in a more or less “dramatic” way, by following it through in a single time-continuum, reading it as a sequence of changes, a pattern of transformations ... a reading where the unity of what is read is worked out in time [rather than a reading worked out in something more like space]. (2000:45)

Here in Avison's poem there is an emerging picture of the God/man submitting to human limitations of a gradual unfolding of his self-understanding of purpose. It is a picture of the incarnate Word, never named in the poem as the Jewish boy Jesus, studying the Hebrew scriptures, learning about other young boys who grew into their God-appointed missions: Moses, 'a Jewish-Egyptian / firstborn, not three years old'; Isaiah, 'a coal-seared poet-statesman'; and Samuel, 'an anointed twelve-year-old'. The Word is learning indirectly about himself as the narrative of the Bible is unfolded.

The paradox of the Word reading the word is repeated in the poem, but the word 'sculpturing' is more ominous. 'The Word dwells on this word / honing His heart's sword'. A new layer of intensity not accessible to the Word's personal reading of the text, but suggesting Avison's own diachronic reading, is added with Simeon's solemn prophecy to the mother Mary: 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too' (Lk. 2.34-35). The writer to the Hebrews is close at hand as well: 'Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from

marrow' (Heb. 4.12). The Word's heart's sword is metaphorical but will also be literal before he is done with his life's work. In the meantime, Avison is using later New Testament material to interpret the Word's reading himself into the text of 'an anointed twelve-year old'.

Avison emphasizes a figural reading as well, which Christopher Seitz explains as the 'letter of scripture ... taken with utmost seriousness ... God is figured and accessible to the eyes of faith' (2001:3). In his recent work *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture*, he elaborates:

Figuration entails the trustworthy and truthful witness of the scriptures of Israel to the One Lord (YHWH, the "I am who I am in my disclosure of myself with Israel") toward which the New Testament's proclamation of Jesus as Lord is "in accordance" (I Cor. 15.3). (2001:3)

Avison enacts her sense of this unity of witness in scripture as the Word's Bible lessons continue. 'Ancient names, eon-brittled eyes, / within the word, open on mysteries.' (AN 2.62-63). Cain who killed his brother Abel, 'the estranged murderer, exiled, hears at last / his kinsman's voice': 'Listen, your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!' the Lord tells Cain (Ge. 4.10).¹¹ Isaac,

the child, confidingly questioning, so close
to the awful ritual knife,
is stilled by another

in the famous account of Abraham's submission to God to offer his son as a sacrifice and God providing a ram as substitution (Ge. 22). 'The Word alive' learns about doves (from Noah's ark, perhaps) and lambs (sacrifices and the exodus) and a whale (Jonah's rescuer). 'Grapes, bread, and fragrant oil: / all that means'—again, familiar symbols of exodus history—he needs to understand, because he will also embody and experience and act out those same symbols in his divine mission.

All this knowledge comes to a climax for Jesus in his temptations in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry:

¹¹ Redekop (1987:129) interestingly refers to 'For the Murderous: The Beginning of Time' (AN 2.54) to explicate the mystery of this line—a good example of intertextuality within a poet's works. I will discuss this poem later in the chapter.

Yes, he was tempted to wash out
in covenanting song
the brand on the dry bone;
he heard the tempter quote
the texts he meant and went embodying.

The stories and the symbols embedded in the history of God's people all point to Jesus's own story, particularly the cross and the empty tomb. He is 'Jewish-Egyptian firstborn' and 'coal-seared poet-statesman' and 'anointed twelve-year-old'. He is both the ritual sacrifice and the one preserved.

His final silencing endured has sealed the living word:
now therefore He is voiceful, to be heard,
free, and of all opening-out the Lord.

In these specific interpretive gestures Avison is echoing her close friend, theologian Victor Shepherd, when he explains Calvin's views on the doctrine of scripture to theology classes:

The Church acknowledges that Scripture, whose authority is as self-authenticating as are the colours and shapes and tastes of objects. (To say the same thing at greater length and more nearly in the spirit of Calvin's fullest theological logic: Scripture authenticates itself as through its people are brought to faith in the Lord of whom it speaks and *he* authenticates *himself*. I.e., as Jesus Christ authenticates himself in the power of the Holy Spirit, the book by which we heard of Jesus Christ is authenticated too. ('A Summary of Calvin's Doctrine of Scripture', n.d.)

In the poem Avison is providing intellectual ballast for trust in the source of knowledge about Jesus Christ. If the *Logos*, who 'in the beginning was' and 'was with God and is God' (Jn. 1.1), turned to 'the word'—the Old Testament scriptures with its ancient stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Moses and the Prophets—where '[t]he meanings are not blurred / by Flood – or fiery atom', then a seeking person can trust the source.

Where these older stories of the scriptures are types of Jesus Christ in his ministry and mission, the recorded stories of Jesus's life and death in the New Testament verify in their details what the earlier accounts prefigured. 'His final silencing endured'—the cross and the tomb—the poet proposes, 'has sealed the living word'. The source is now trustworthy, first, by the suffering Jesus endured. Then,

the Word was moved
too vitally to be entombed in time.

He has hewn out of it one crevice-gate,

pointing to the lesson of triumph he learned and then fulfilled in his resurrection. The one who was ‘sculptured’, ‘honing His heart’s sword’, now ‘has hewn out’ of the tomb his own exit. The poem and its creator seem untroubled by the paradox. Readers of the poem can trust the living Word because He trusted the word of the scriptures. Readers can trust the word of the scriptures because of what the living Word accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection—the account given in the word of the scriptures. The poem suggests no anxiety with the circularity of the argument.

The third poem in this Johannine sequence reads like a companion poem to ‘The Bible to Be Believed’. The latter ends with the declaration that ‘He is voiceful, to be heard, / free, and of all opening-out the Lord’. On the next page of *sunblue*, the lyric ‘Listening’ (*AN* 2.64) begins with a personal acknowledgement. As the Word reads himself into the Old Testament stories of the earlier poem, now the speaker in the poem, as a modern witness, reads herself into the sacred text, applying its most poignant injunctions and promises to her own experience:

Because I know
the voice of the Word
is to be heard
I know I do not know
even my own cast burden,
or oh, the costly load
of knowing undisturbed.
There is a sword
enters with hearing. Lord,
who chose being born to die
and died to bring alive
and live to judge
though all in mercy, hear
the word You utter
in me, because I know
the voice.

The poem divides into two units, with the first focused outward to an unspecified audience; the second is a prayer. In the first section the speaker identifies herself as both a follower of Christ and a reliable witness. She is like the sheep following the Good Shepherd in Jesus’s metaphor who ‘know his voice’ (Jn. 10.4), and she ‘belongs to the

Truth' (Jn. 18.37). The witness word 'know' is repeated five times in this short poem, emphasizing both 'knowing the voice' but also suggesting implications of cost. She knows two things she does not know: 'my own cast burden' of the psalmist's prayer, 'Cast your burden on the Lord ... He will hear my voice' (Ps. 55.16, 22; see also Mt. 11.28), and the 'costly load of knowing undisturbed'. Here the same 'sword' reappears from the last poem:

The Word dwells on this word
honing His heart's sword,
ready at knife-edge to declare
holiness, and come clear. (*AN* 2.62-63)

Simeon's words to Mary, 'A sword will pierce your own soul too' (Lk. 2.33), are reminiscent of the cross in the poet's reflection, 'There is a sword / enters with hearing' (*AN* 2.64). The second section of the poem suggests that other sword, 'the word of God living and active ... able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (Heb. 4.12). There is relief from one's burden in knowing the voice, but there is an accompanying purifying process that may bring its own pain. The witness turns upward in a prayer of contrition: 'Lord',

hear
the word You utter
in me, because I know
the voice.

In this compact lyric the poet has addressed hard questions of the Christian faith: What does it mean to believe? To hear? To obey? To 'know the voice'? To declare that one knows? There is a seal of authenticity about the kind of witness that reflects such a depth of feeling and personal involvement.

5.2 Connecting Old and New Testaments

The whole of scripture is the scope of Avison's Bible reading. Her poems probe the well known stories of biblical history revealing the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; she is also interested in the obscure and unusual stories. She follows the movement of the scripture figurally, pointing to the story of Christ crucified and risen and assuming one

overarching narrative guiding a typological interpretation that often shows itself in images of the Eucharist. Four very different Old Testament episodes point to Avison's distinctive understanding of the unity of scripture. Three of the four are in *sunblue*, the volume of poems most focused on these close textual readings. The stories stand on their own, carrying their own individual significance, but the poet takes each of them beyond their own environs and points to an anticipated work of Christ.

In 'For the Murderous: The Beginning of Time' (*AN* 2.54),¹² she reconstructs the limited details of the familiar story of Cain and Abel and their two sacrifices to God, one pleasing and the other not, as recounted but not explained in Genesis 4. 'Cain brought grain on his forearm / and a branch with grapes' begins the poem, more specific than the Genesis text of 'an offering of the fruit of the ground' (Ge. 4.3). A single adverb 'vaguely' is Avison's only interpretive comment of Cain's failure to specifically follow God's instructions (unidentified for the reader of the biblical account):

vaguely he offered
to the far-borne light
what the slow days had sweetened.

The second stanza predictably tells of Abel's more acceptable sacrifice: '[F]rom his flock / On the fire he made sacrifice', 'and blood / darkened the stone place'. The poem here echoes the Bible's early introduction of its central theme—the ritual of the slain animal representing the necessary atoning for sins. The third stanza briefly describes the murder, in turn, in sacrificial terms, with the word "kindled" triggering the connection: 'That this was "better" than that / kindled in Cain a murderer's heart'. Now there is a slain man instead of a slain animal. The concluding line of the stanza articulates God's way of calling Cain to accountability, the emphasis in Avison's line interestingly focusing on God's care: '[H]e was watched over, after; but he kept apart'. The line is also anticipating the typology expected in reflection on blood sacrifices, which the poet notes in the last stanza in her reference to 'the paschal lamb'.

¹² See Appendix 5.2 for complete text.

The closing lines, however, contain a surprise:

In time the paschal lamb
before the slaying did
what has made new the wine
and broken bread.

The reference to Christ's blessing the wine and bread as symbols of a 'new covenant', his blood and body at the Last Passover supper (Mt. 26.26-29),¹³ now strangely validates not just Abel's sacrifice, but Cain's as well. There is the obvious and beautiful irony Avison is bringing out in her poem of God's care for Cain. St. Paul reminds the Christian believers in Corinth, 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor. 11.26). Christ is the 'paschal lamb' who offers himself 'for the murderous'—both Abel who sacrifices a slain animal and Cain and all his progeny (those sharing in the Passover and Eucharist). The symbols to remind readers of His sacrifice, however, will be the grain and grapes, 'what the slow days had sweetened', the failed sacrifice introduced in 'the beginning of time'.

Two poems about King David reveal a similar process of reflection—of puzzling over New and Old Testament connections. There are appropriately no verbal puzzles in 'Aftermath of Rebellion' (*AN* 3.57-58),¹⁴ the account of King David's response to learning his son Absalom's rebellion has been quashed and Absalom is dead (2 Samuel 18). David's anguish is stark and unadorned, spoken in his own voice: "Would God that *I* had died for *him*". The voice of the poet reflects on this famous picture of grief:

The father's lament
has lingered on the ancient air of grief
at least till now.

The meaning of the lines seems filled with all the other suffering parents of the world who know the pain of a child who has

flung off
– forever now –
in his young man's euphoria,

¹³ See also Mk. 14.22-25; Lk. 22.14-20; 1 Cor. 11.23-26.

¹⁴ See Appendix 5.2 for complete text.

his father's hand.

The poem seems complete in its simple portrayal of both parties in their tragedy; the one is dead, and the other wishes he were. The closing lines can be read as an expression of awe—reminiscent of the noble Kent's statement or the new young king Edgar's, awed at King Lear's grief and death in Shakespeare's great play.

For such a delinquent
even, a sovereign, sick at heart,
learned what it is when
a father loves.

Shakespeare's beautiful reflections seem inadequate, however. Avison's last lines have transcended the grief of Lear and David, and point to the deep love of the Sovereign God who loves delinquent children with unfathomably greater intensity—and the love of the Son is lingering in the shadows (Jn. 3.16). For the love of one son, another will be sacrificed. Simply expressed poems such as this give poignant and powerful pause in the sweep of Avison's more often complex lyrics.

The import of Avison's complex thought processes are more disguised in 'All Out or Oblation (as defined in 2 Sam. 23:13-17 and I Chron. 11:17-19)' (*AN* 2.55-56).¹⁵ She again refers to the life of King David, but uses a more obscure pericope—a little event buried in the details of the records of the fighting men loyal to David in his various struggles to gain and maintain his power over Israel. Israel's familiar enemies, the Philistines, have control of David's city, Bethlehem, and David and his men are in the stronghold at the cave of Adullam. While no motive is suggested in the biblical accounts, David gets 'most likely, a sentimental longing for a drink of cool water' from a well of Bethlehem by the gate, '[his] own native place', one commentator notes (Anderson, 1989:276). Three of his mighty warriors demonstrate their profound loyalty to him, risking their lives to break through the Philistine lines to fulfill his wish and bring him water from the well of Bethlehem. The text in the account of 2 Samuel records David's appreciative response. 'But he would not drink of it; he poured it out to

¹⁵ See Appendix 5.2 for complete text.

the Lord, for he said, “The Lord forbid that I should do this. Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives” (2 Sam. 23.16-17)? There is no further comment in either 2 Samuel or 1 Chronicles to suggest the significance of the event. But out of Avison’s musings on the story, an intense and strange poem emerges.

There are a number of features in the poem that call attention to the nature of witness. In the retelling of the ancient story Avison has invited readers to interpret the event anagogically and even Christologically. Significance begins with the title’s key word ‘oblation’, which, as the OED reports, can mean ‘the action of offering or presenting the elements of bread and wine to God in the Eucharist … the Eucharist understood as offering or sacrifice’. ‘All out’ directs the reader to the central action in the poem—pouring water out on the ground. ‘Oblation’ interprets the action, signaling the reader to look for double meanings in her text.

The poet interprets (and re-interprets) the biblical account with her imaginative choice of details, emphasizing the setting as a desert ‘[w]here sandstorms blow / and sun blackens and withers’ and implies another metaphorical desert in the closing stanza. Avison uses the theme of the desert in an earlier poem, ‘Searching and Sounding’ (*AN* 1.199-202), where she speaks of the painful journey of both looking for and running from Christ:

[Y]ou have brought me to
sandstone, baldness, the place
of jackals, the sparrow’s skull.

In both poems she introduces the biblical motif of desert spirituality. Further, Avison significantly alters a crucial detail of the story here in ‘Oblation’: Instead of David pouring the water out, as the original accounts record, the emphasis is on the ‘little group of men’

They are crazy. They are
pouring it
out.

The sacrifice becomes a shared allusion with the Johannine account of Mary anointing Jesus's feet with costly perfume—a parallel pouring out (Jn. 12.1-8). Again, the repetitions of the central image of water throughout the poem give the sacrifice multi-layered significance, particularly in the singular phrase ‘living water’:¹⁶

Clean cold water
throat-laving
living
water.

Contrasted with the ‘clean, cold water’ poured out is the ‘saltwater’ ‘etched [on] their cheeks, their mouthcorners’, with no mention of David’s strong reaction.

The peculiar lineation and layout of the poem direct the eye to other particular emphases in the story. In the middle of the poem’s narration of the sacrifice and its accompanying emotion, repeated lines with the single referent ‘God’ take ascendant position as the poem’s centre.

Look! – a little group of men:
sun flashes
on the water poured from leather pouch
into a bowl, shining,
now uplifted.
God.
God.
Saltwater has etched
their cheeks, their mouthcorners (*AN* 2.55-56).

Then a new voice—a witness—is introduced in the upper case exclamation: ‘WHAT ARE THEY DOING’?

They are crazy. They are
pouring it
out.

The poem’s longest line, highlighting the action of David’s men, depicts in vivid terms what the water and the sand look like as one absorbs the other. The following lines merge two Old and New Testament gestures—that of the action of David’s loyal men and an intimation of the gesture of Christ’s death on the cross:

Sand coats the precious drops and darkens with the life-stain.

¹⁶ It is tempting to see Jesus’s declarations of ‘living water’ to the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4.14) and to the crowd on the last day of the festival (Jn. 7.37-38) embedded in this very specific detail.

Earth's
slow and unspasmodic swallowing is slowly, slowly
accomplished.

The closing lines admit the mystery of the event(s) that the witness cannot access: ‘No. I do not understand’. Nevertheless, there is compelling determination to

still gaze at them
to learn to expect to
pour it out

into desert – to find out what it is.

The ambiguity of the ‘it’ in the closing lines does not prevent the sense of expectation that when desert and water and God converge, the witness will herself be ready to pour it out.

‘Dryness and Scorch of Ahab’s Evil Rule’ (*AN* 2.57)¹⁷ is the fourth of this typological set with its veiled eucharistic suggestions and another poem with the desert motif. This story is set much later in Israel’s history when the ruler does not share King David’s deep commitment towards God. These are the days of the conflict between King Ahab of Israel and the prophet Elijah who has confronted him for all the evil he has done. Elijah conveys God’s will and word to the king, prophesying three years of drought to come (1 Kings 17.1). Unfortunately, the prophet will have to endure his own prophecy, fleeing the anger of the king and sustaining life in the drought. The story in 1 Kings records two distinct methods of God’s provision: ravens by Cherith Brook bringing ‘bread and meat’ (1 Kings 17.6), and after the brook dries up, the widow of Zarephath’s meagre supply of ‘a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug’ (1 Kings 17.12).

This peculiar poem from Avison’s *sunblue* is significant for a number of reasons. For one, the story it foregrounds is important on its own in its emphasis on the faithful witness of God’s word, ‘the unfailing meal and oil a sign / to last through centuries’. Avison calls attention to the widow’s response to Elijah, ‘I know … the word

¹⁷ See Appendix 5.2 for complete text.

of the Lord in your mouth is truth' (I Kings 17.24) and to the theme of God's provision for his witnessing servants. Second, and perhaps more important, the poet calls attention to Elijah's place in biblical history. The larger Elijah story is important to the writers of the New Testament and to Jesus himself. Avison's figural reading of this vignette is copying a pattern already established.

To begin, its title is potentially misleading, for the focus is on God's prophet Elijah, not the king with the evil rule. The 'dryness and scorch' of the title indicates a cause and context of the story, a dark background to highlight the light of 'the word of the Lord', emphasized in the biblical text to which Avison directs readers in her own interpretation of the situation suggested in the subtitle: 'Elijah said, this way comes no refreshing, only famine, drought' (I Kings 17). The poem recreates the hardship of famine and drought with images of 'a bird / of prey, a scavenger', 'bird / of doom', 'desert', 'son lay starving' and 'bony men and doom'. In this context, the original story emphasizes Elijah in his role as witness. He is directed in his words and his movements by 'the word of the Lord' (I Kings 17.2, 5, 8, 14, 16), a fact of the story Avison notes twice: in the first stanza, 'Elijah heard / it right' and in the third stanza, 'Then the word / came, and he could go on'. Being provisioned by 'a bird of prey, a scavenger', 'God's messenger' to the prophet seems a mixed blessing:

Elijah swallowed what the bird
of doom there dangled down
until the desert

—that is, the situation worsens. There is an element of sacrifice suggested in an imagined visceral response of the prophet:

His wafer from no holy fire:
'this grisly flesh – or die'.
Cherith Brook alone was pure
and Cherith too went dry.

Word choice 'wafer' and 'grisly flesh' reveal the poet's forward glance toward another provisioning.

The second part of the story moves from nature's care at Cherith—brook and bird—to a reliance on the sacrificial service of a fellow human. When the prophet begs the widow of Zarephath to take him in and feed him, her response in the poem highlights her perceived predicament: 'Well, all I have is / gone, if I risk serving'. Her risk is not that different from the sacrifice of David's men and the subsequent waste of water in the previous poem. What she does not anticipate as a sequel, Avison captures in a line: 'She did. The boy lived on', referring to a third scene of the story where Elijah revives the widow's son who has fallen ill and died (1 Kings 17.17)—an event that is echoed in Jesus's raising of the son of the widow of Nain (Lk. 7.11-17). The words of the widow of Zarepath are strangely prophetic and central to the poem's anagogical meaning.

The last two stanzas of the poem demonstrate Avison's diachronic and figural reading of the Old Testament text:

She did. The boy lived on;
the prophet still endures:
the unfailing meal and oil a sign
to last through centuries.

It consecrates a time
of bony men and doom
lit towards the bread and drink of Him
whose is the final kingdom.

First of all, there is a decisive shift in her verb tense in the lines, 'The boy lived on; / the prophet still endures'. 'The prophet still endures' suggests the ongoing significance of Elijah in the New Testament. From her reading of the Gospels, the poet knows Elijah's connection with John the Baptist and Jesus, even in their different emphases. In the opening of John's Gospel, for instance, the Baptist denies he is either the Messiah or Elijah (Jn. 1.21, 25). However, in the other Gospels, Jesus speaks of John as 'Elijah who is to come' (Mt. 11.14). Again, Jesus explains, 'Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come' (Mt. 10-13). Jesus himself is sometimes mistaken for Elijah during his ministry (Mt. 16.14; Mk. 6.15; 8.28).

However Elijah is interpreted, he is a significant link between the two Testaments, emphasized in his presence at the major event of the transfiguration of Jesus (Mt. 17.4; Mk. 9.5, Lk. 9.33). Furthermore, ‘the unfailing meal and oil a sign / to last through centuries’ is a sign, the poem suggests, to guarantee that connection with the forerunner of Christ and participant in Christ’s glorification. While its primary meaning is a word of comfort in the prophet’s example of the faithful word of God in his provision, it is also overlaid with suggestions of Jesus’s provision for those who respond in similar faith. He himself announces at the beginning of his ministry his own prophetic role: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me’ and then compares his reception to the widow of Zarephath receiving Elijah (Lk. 4.18, 26). Jesus offering the woman of Samaria living water as she offers him a drink (Jn. 4) has overtones of the same theme. ‘The unfailing meal and oil’ is demonstrated again in Jesus multiplying the loaves and fishes for the Five Thousand and the Four Thousand recorded in all four Gospels (Mt. 14.13-21).¹⁸ The enigmatic discourse of Jesus on the bread from heaven, in John 6 is subtly suggested in the poem.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven ... Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day'. (Jn. 6.51, 53-54)

The last stanza begins with a confusing ‘It’, its referent syntactically pointing back to ‘a sign / to last through centuries’:

It consecrates a time
of bony men and doom
lit towards the bread and drink of Him
whose is the final kingdom.

The last two lines clarify the typological reference to Christ, prefigured in Malachi’s prophecy, ‘Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes’ (which also has double signification) (Mal. 4.5). The ‘bread and drink of Him’ is the prophetic completion of Elijah’s ‘wafer’ and ‘grisly flesh’ and ‘unfailing

¹⁸ See also Mk. 6.30-44; Mk. 8.1-10; Lk. 9.10-17; Jn. 6.1-14.

meal and oil'. While it is not an easy eucharistic connection, the intimations of sharing in Christ's sufferings are surely present in Avison's reading of the Elijah story.

So far it has been shown how central biblical texts are to her poetry and to her thinking. As she uses many texts of the Old Testament scriptures, both obscure and familiar, to form the basis for her idiosyncratic meditations on life and faith, she shows how she reads text and how she thinks. These references are frequently Christological and typological, functioning as signposts for that greater sign: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor. 11.26).

5.3 Variations on the Christ Story in the New Testament

Poems drawing on New Testament accounts of the Christ story promise to be easier to access with the obvious referent to Jesus. There are a limited and significant set of such poems that indicate Avison's pointing hand of witness and parallel John the Baptist's pointing finger to the historical 'Word made flesh' of the Gospel. These poems, varied in style and form, point in the same direction. Again, four poems will be illustrative for these variations on the theme of witness to the person of Jesus: 'A Story' (*AN* 1.164-67), a parable framing the Parable of The Sower, recorded in the three Synoptic Gospels; 'The Dumbfounding' (*AN* 1.197-98), the signature poem of Avison's second volume of poetry; 'The Circuit' (*AN* 2.61), an emblematic interpretation of an early church hymn in Philippians; and 'Music Was in the Winds' (*AN* 3.42-43), a blending of Greek myth and Christian story.¹⁹

¹⁹ This is not an exhaustive list of her surprisingly short group of poems that could be said to present the Jesus of the Gospels. One might also include from *The Dumbfounding*, 'Person' (*AN* 1.191) and 'The Christian's Year in Miniature' (*AN* 2.206-07); from *sunblue*, 'He Couldn't Be Safe (Isaiah 53:5)' (*AN* 2.58), 'To Emmaus' (*AN* 2.59), 'The Bible to Be Believed' (*AN* 2.62-63) and 'Contest' (*AN* 2.72); from *No Time*, 'Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel' (*AN* 2.148) and 'The Unshackling' (*AN* 2.208), 'From Christmas through This Today' (*AN* 2.248); from *Not Yet But Still*, 'If No Ram Appear' (*AN* 3.73) and 'Third Hand, First Hand' (*AN* 3.141); and from *Concrete and Wild Carrot*, 'The Whole Story' (*AN* 3.155) and 'On a Maundy Thursday Walk' (*AN* 3.174-75). Other poems, as well, include references to Jesus, but again, I am looking here at core unifying images.

These poems, both in spite of and because of their complexity, introduce the theological premises underlying much of Avison's poetic work. While appearing to be overt Christian witness—that is, pointing to Jesus Christ in their topical subject matter and familiar text sources—they embody a familiar Avisonian ambiguity that complicates the picture. Perhaps the opposite also is true: they clarify the mystery of God in Jesus Christ and the good news that follows. Avison's poems about Jesus mirror the Gospels' renderings in their indirection and complexity. Embedded in her invitation to 'come and see' are Jesus's familiar provisos, 'if you have eyes to see and ears to hear'—seemingly a mysterious spiritual perception, available only to a select audience who have hearts open to apprehending his words and meaning. Hence, they are simultaneously both indirect and direct witness to Christ.

'A Story' (*AN* 1.164-67)²⁰ is the first in her collected poems that directly—and indirectly—introduces the figure of Jesus. The title is, once again, typically ambiguous, for the poet is telling a story to her readers of a youth telling a story to her mother²¹ of Jesus telling a story to a crowd of a gardener sowing seeds (which in the biblical parable is also a story of telling and listening). In the four-layered story all levels of listeners are struggling with perception and understanding, making Avison's story-poem a new parable about what it might mean to see Jesus.

The main story is a dialogue between the mother and her young adult daughter who has unexpectedly returned home early from being with friends at the beach. She has witnessed a moving event and now wants to be alone, but the parent presses for details. What happened? What did she see and hear that disturbed her so? As she tries to report what she experienced, her mother repeatedly interrupts with commentary

²⁰ See Appendix 5.3 for complete text.

²¹ In the poem, the gender of the youth telling the story is not clear. Avison, in a reading of the poem delivered at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C. in 1972, prefacing her reading with an explanation that the scene she imagines is of a daughter talking to her mother.

suggesting her limited and predictable understanding of her daughter, but hindering the articulation of the story.

You're not sick? Did you
get too much sun? a crowd,
I never have liked it, safety in numbers
indeed!

He was alone.
Who was alone?
The one
out on the water, telling
something.

The mother's comments provide the contemporary setting,

You all
standing there, getting up
out of the beach-towels and gathering
out of the cars.

The daughter explains the event and her reflective mood, originating in the attitude of the crowd intent on listening,

Because the ones
who started to crowd around were
so still. You couldn't
help wondering.

What was the man in the boat talking about?

It is a story. But
only one man comes.
Tall, sunburnt, coming
not hurried, but as though
there was so much power in reserve
that walking all day and night
would be lovelier than sleeping if
sleeping meant missing it, easy
and alive, and out there.

Then the daughter—the listener to the man telling the story—tries to explain how she heard Jesus's parable of the Sower of the Seeds (Mk 4.1-20).²² The above stanza already reveals a different perspective on the parable than a customary reading assigns. John Tinsley comments on this parable with attention to obvious but overlooked details that Avison particularly emphasizes. Jesus's interpretation of the parable to his disciples is, in reality,

²² See also Mt. 13.1-23, Lk. 8.4-15. Tinsley notes '[t]he probability that this parable was a master-parable which provided the key to all the others and bears the distinctive marks of Jesus' allegorical manner of alluding to himself on his mission' (1990:91).

no explanation at all, but the parable over again, presenting the allegorical character of the original all the more starkly by identifying some of the subsidiary details, but not significantly the main figure—the sower. But if the seed is the Word of God, and so on, who then is the sower? (1990:91)

The daughter is preoccupied with the singular ‘gardener’, as she titles him (‘but there was nothing / like garden, mother’). What the daughter sees in the seed-sower is ‘so much power in reserve’ that the only way she can describe it is to suggest what she would do—give up sleep and willingly walk all day and night rather than miss ‘it’. The power of the man? The story of the man? The man himself sowing the seed? The indeterminacy of the ‘it’ intensifies her response.

Only the queer
dark way he went
and the star-shine of
the seed he spent,

she continues. The mother is puzzled. ‘(Seed you could see that way –)’. The daughter hardly hears her mother:

In showers. His fingers
shed, like the gold
of blowing autumnal
woods in the wild.

The young woman falls into metaphor and enthusiastic description as she completes the story of the receptiveness of roadway, stone, waste and loam receiving the seed, ‘and the one who had walked’,

searching thirsty ones
for his garden
in all that place.

The girl ends her reverie with a peculiar observation:

But they flowered, and shed
their strange heart’s force
in that wondering wilderness –.

It is not clear whether the daughter heard this conclusion—‘they [the seeds] flowered’—as part of the original tale, or whether she is reflecting metaphorically on her own heart as a ‘wondering wilderness’. The mother’s question of clarification which misses the significance of the story, jars attention back to the framing story: ‘Where is he now?’

The gardener?

No, The storyteller
out on the water?
He is alone.

There is a wistful sadness in the last lines of the young witness. What she has seen and heard she cannot capture adequately in words; it is a mystery she has only intuited. The storyteller in the boat out on the water has merged with that ‘giant’ of a gardener and somehow the discovery is crucial to the young woman’s existence, but she is not there.

Perhaps a few
who beached the boat and
stayed, would know.

The daughter inadvertently recognizes what the Gospel writers note. ‘When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God”’ (Mk. 4.10-11). Here the young woman is home, wanting to be left alone, but wishing she were still under the spell of the storyteller.

This poem is Avison’s witness at the height of indirection, telling a story of Jesus without giving his name, using his own parabolic and ironic method of introducing himself, by pointing back to the listener/see-er, looking for a receptive heart. The fearful part of the story is the mother who remains on the surface of its details and fails to perceive anything—even the profound effect of the story and its teller on her own child. She is a parable herself: ‘The reason I speak to them in parables is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand”, Jesus reminds his disciples privately (Mt. 13.13).

Avison understands the dilemma of wanting literally to ‘see’ and speaks of her own struggle to come to the truth of Jesus. But she is uncompromising in her presentation of the truth of the gospel in all its mysterious and seeming elusiveness. She begins her witness to Christ in her poems much the same way she learns of Jesus in the Gospels—in parables and enigmatic ‘signs’. In his book *Telling It Slant*, Tinsley reminds his readers, ‘The Incarnation is not only a historical event but it is also a divine

manner of speaking, the disclosure of God's style in communication' (1990:i). He goes on to explain the difficulty:

The Incarnational and parabolic method of God is disturbing, puzzling, questioning and human beings have a natural momentum towards preferring a revelatory method which is reassuring, direct and "simple". The ambiguous "sign" has therefore to give way to the indubitable "miracle", the parable to the slogan. Christianity has constantly been threatened by moves to replace the personal, reticent, self-forgetting style of revelation by an assertive, over-powering, indisputable authoritarianism. (1990:i)

He goes on to suggest that the Bible is a story of teaching people 'an ability to discern God in the "sign" which, because it is always ambiguous, is inevitably a "stumbling-block"' (1990:ii).

In Avison's sophisticated, albeit simply told story, the gaze of the reader is constantly shifting first to the mother and daughter in dialogue, then the daughter watching the Teller of the story of the Sower of seeds, then the Teller of the story, then the Sower in the story, and back to the daughter and mother. It is through the response of stillness and yearning in the girl that Jesus becomes strangely visible. Again, Tinsley notes, 'It is significant that, whenever Jesus asked a question about himself or his mission, he never answered directly or explicitly. His usual manner is to return the question to the speaker' (1990:44). Avison's poem does the same. The introduction to Jesus is mediated by several layers of witness.

'The Dumbfounding' (*AN* 1.197-98), the title poem of her second volume of lyrics, continues the same indirect and subtle, elusive and ironic²³ witness to Jesus. The title suggests the silencing, the taking away of the ability to speak, the astonishing of an ambiguous witness, 'we', throughout the poem—of those who saw 'The Word become flesh' (Jn. 1.14) and who initially had the upper hand in silencing God. Avison amplifies the biblical text:

When you walked here,
took skin, muscle, hair,
eyes, larynx,

²³ Once again, Tinsley has added to my vocabulary, suggesting this additional word, ironic, to Jesus's own self-portrayal, and hence, the portrayal of witnesses to him.

including in her selective description of the human, the vocal organ, the larynx. The response of the indeterminate hostile witnesses was dismissal. In language reminiscent of her much earlier poem ‘Death’ (*AN* 1.81)

I ask you how can it be thought
That a little clay house
Could stop its door,

they expressed their scepticism: “His house is clay, / how can he tell us of his far country?”” (*AN* 1.197-98).

The second stanza of ‘The Dumbfounding’ suggests more tentative and fearful witnesses, the disciples, on their way to belief, who saw Christ walking on the water (Mk. 6.48-52; Jn. 6.19-21).²⁴ ‘Twice-torn we cried “A ghost” / and only on our planks counted you fast’. The third stanza conflates several events. ‘Dust wet with your spittle / cleared mortal trouble’, perhaps refers to Jesus curing a blind man at Bethsaida (Mk. 8.22-24), but the response, ‘We called you a blasphemer, / a devil-tamer’ takes a reader to Luke’s account of casting out a demon that was mute. Some in the crowds who saw the event complained, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons’ (Lk. 11.14-15). As these incidences indicate, the referent for the ‘we’ in Avison’s poem continues to shift, suggesting gradations of belief and unbelief not only in individual responses but in responses in time of those same witnesses, silencing the voice of God. ‘We’ also brings the confrontation into the present of the implied writer and readers of the poem.

The poem moves toward that ultimate silencing of the cross, and now the focus for two stanzas seems to be on the disciples, Christ’s chosen witnesses: ‘The evening you spoke of going away / we could not stay’. Those at the Last Supper could hardly

²⁴ It is worth noting here that in the Markan account, when Jesus ‘got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased’, the writer notes, ‘And they were utterly astounded [dumbfounded], for they did not understand about the loaves [the earlier incident of the feeding of the five thousand], but their hearts were hardened’ (Mk. 6.51-52).

speak of Christ's acts of service. They saw his washing of their feet and heading to the cross all of one gesture:

You had to wash, and rise,
alone, and face
out of the light, for us.

The stanza depicting the crucifixion is stark and plain:

You died.
We said,
“The worst is true, our bliss
has come to this”.

The next stanza is enigmatic. Who ‘hoped so despairingly for such report’ [that Christ was seen ‘in holy flesh again’] ‘we closed their windpipes for it’? This line could be referring to the martyrdom of the witnesses in Acts—of James, of Stephen, and others to follow. The revelation of Jesus is through the witnesses—who ultimately are not silenced. The closing three stanzas open out the poem to expand the ‘we’ to all those within sounding distance of the voice of the cross, climaxing in its ultimate expression, the longest line of the poem enacting the great accomplishment:

you
sound dark’s uttermost, strangely light-brimming, until
time be full.

While ‘sound’ can refer to measuring the depth of the sea, it can also mean summons or call. The resonances continue to expand, extending from the suffering of the cross to its glory.

Avison also considers the Apostle Paul’s interpretation and analysis of the incarnation, this time in the manner of the seventeenth century Metaphysical poets, with an elaborate conceit. In her poem ‘The Circuit’ (*AN* 2.61), she recreates the hymn of the early church that Paul uses in his argument for divine humility in his letter to the Church at Philippi (Phil. 2:5-11). While faithful to the text’s theme, she nevertheless defamiliarizes it and points back to the text with new intensity in her metaphor.

The Circuit (Phil. 2:5-11)

The circuit of the Son
in glory falling

not short
and without any clutching after
His Being-in-Light,
but stripping, putting on
the altar-animal form
and livery of Man
to serve men under orders
to, into, death,
trusting the silent Glory
(though at that instant out of touch) –
flesh marred, heart
deliberately benighted
till the spilt Blood on the criminals' hill
split earth and Temple veil
(then all was silent,
cloth-cased and closed in a stone hole) –
to prise, till touching with unflickering Breath
He prises even us free:

this circuit celebrates the Father of Lights
who glorifies this Son and all that He
in glory sows
of Light.

To begin, she depicts the completed electrical circuit in the 24-line poem as one long unbroken sentence, drawing the eye toward the period in the short concluding stanza, set apart in a blaze of light,

celebrat[ing] the Father of Lights
who glorifies this Son and all that he
in glory sows
of Light.

The poem announces the conceit in the opening line, '[t]he circuit of the Son' and then shows the downward pull:

in glory falling
not short
and without any clutching after
His being-in-Light.

The familiar phrasing brings to mind others' fall in St. Paul's writings: '[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3.23), highlighting the unique quality of this falling. However, here in the conceit the meaning of 'falling [not] short' takes on another meaning. The Son's falling is successful circuitry—not short-circuited and far enough to 'prise even us free'. This falling short is voluntary and intentional, and similar in mystery to John's Prologue with the curious mixture of Word and light and

flesh. '[W]ithout any clutching after / His Being-in Light', the Light of the World (Jn. 8.12) can trust the circuitry to be effective.

The image temporarily shifts, following St. Paul's line of thought: The Son 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness and being found in human form' (Phil. 2.7). Avison pictures the self-emptying as 'stripping, putting on the altar-animal form / and livery of Man'. 'Livery' is the distinctive dress worn by servants heightened here by 'altar-animal' form. The downward journey is not just taking the form of a human, but of an animal prepared for sacrifice on an altar, John the Baptist's 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (Jn. 1.29). The Son's service to and for humankind—unto death, death on the cross described in the Philippian servant song (Phil. 2.8)—is given intensity as the circuit metaphor is resumed, emphasized with new and increased indentation in the verse:

to serve men under orders
to, into, death,
trusting the silent Glory
(though at that instant out of touch) –
flesh marred, heart
deliberately benighted.

In his death the connection with the Father is broken and his heart is 'benighted'—in darkness. There is the double meaning of both flowing currents and flowing blood as the poem continues:

till the spilt Blood on the criminal's hill
split earth and Temple veil
(then all was silent,
cloth-cased and closed in a stone hole) –

Here the lights have gone out and silence accompanies the darkness. But his service to humankind is not over, and in his death and resurrection the circuit is not broken. Visually, in the indented lines, while the servant is 'putting on the altar-animal form / and livery of Man', the ones he has served are 'prised free'—extracted with difficulty—from their death sentence, and with the ease of 'touching with unflickering Breath', are drawn mysteriously into the circuit.

The hymn in the Philippian text emphasizes the exaltation of the Son by the Father who ‘gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend’ (Phil. 2.9-10). His exaltation after his humiliation is the primary point. In her circuit metaphor, Avison too ‘glorifies this Son’ in the closing stanza, reinforcing the purpose of the ‘falling’, ‘stripping’ and ‘serving’, but this time guiding the eye emblematically in the decreasing lines:

this circuit celebrates the Father of Lights
who glorifies this Son and all that He
in glory sows
of Light.

The poem ends in the singular announcement of Light, pointing directly to the circuit’s purpose and the person who is Light. At the same time, the poet extends the witness and calls attention to ‘all that He / in glory sows’, anticipating Paul’s encouragement for the Christian believers to ‘shine like stars in the world’ in the subsequent verse (Phil. 2.14).

In *sunblue* the same theme is enunciated, less heavily freighted with theological allusions, and with different emphases in ‘Hope’ (*AN* 2.71). The familiar human lament over loss of innocence opens the poem as the speaker notes the ‘clear bright world / from a shining source’ has been ‘spoiled, / gross-warted by the cheap and coarse’. The human solution is to obliterate, destroy, throw away what has been ruined:

I’d thunderbolt it down
to shred in withering smoke
if that way everything could drown
in all I’ve found of dark –.

In the third stanza a new voice enters the poem: ‘The shining one looked, and said “we”, / owning one source with us’. The response is emotion-laden:

That chokes the heart unbearably;
here, where we grope and fuss,
dully we hear, and dully wonder why
we did Him in for this.

The shining one corrects the mistaken theology. He was not done in. It was divine intention and initiative:

I chose to come
and knew the way was through

your flesh and blood and doom
of death. I, judge and lover, knew.²⁵

The speaker is given fresh hope with this new understanding: ‘Somehow a clear bright world / wakens at the voice’.

In ‘Music Was in the Wind’ (*AN* 3.42-43), Avison follows in the tradition of the earlier poets Dante and Milton in their fusion of two stories, the Greek myths and the Christian story. ‘It was Orpheus all along!’ are the striking opening words, inviting one into that imaginative ‘music of the spheres’ that so entranced the medieval mind and Avison’s as well. Mia Anderson, in her reading of Avison’s earlier poems, comments on the indication of something good happening in Avison’s poems with the mention of music. ‘Singing and music … are always touchstones of salvation in Avison’, Anderson suggests (1981:117-18). The names of Orpheus and Eurydice recall the haunting myth of the singer who loses his lover/wife to death and fails in the attempt to bring her back from the land of the dead. But the poem’s opening details signal that the story is being altered.

He carried Eurydice down, down
into the earth
in his arms, going himself with her
since this was the only way
out of her mortal maze now

is Avison’s recasting of the myth. The love story has been transposed into another love theme—still tender and awakening deep feelings akin to the love of lovers, but not the same. This new Orpheus risks all

except a love strong and steady enough
never to share her
relief in this fine-sifted silence, nor
her torn
loyalties to this private place
and to the devastated but remembered
home where she was known.

²⁵ In these simple lines Avison echoes the exchange between Adam and Eve in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* when in her despair Eve wants to prevent any further humans being born and Adam reminds her of the hope of ‘redemption’ coming through their yet unborn children. The style of the corrective voice of ‘the shining one’ is also reminiscent of George Herbert’s ‘Love (III)’.

The cost to procure this Eurydice's life does not mean relief for him; nor can he himself have divided loyalties to be successful.

First it had to be down.
He was no
stoic, no ascetic, moved to
goodness without experience
of all our billion moments.

Two stories begin to merge in this second stanza as the identity of this new Orpheus is identified. The intensity of love so moving in the Greek myth of Orpheus's sacrifice for Eurydice is overlaid with the one who has 'experience / of all our billion moments'. The conceit of Christ's sacrifice in the earlier lyric 'The Circuit' (*AN* 2.61) is repeated in the same downward movement but here in terms of the Singer's imagined experience of the music he hears about himself: 'Did he / hear what the shepherds overheard? / sweet singing in the choir?' (*AN* 3.42-43). Perhaps the 'sweet singing' sustains him in his downward journey. The tenderness of the love is haunting as '[h]e carried her he loved / the whole way down'; but even better,

The strange travail home
up into light
emptied his arms.

Unlike the defeated Orpheus who mistakenly looked back on Eurydice just at the point of arriving back in the land of the living, this new Orpheus, 'took [this Eurydice] by the hand, and she was walking'. The words in the closing lines hint at the alternate source of the tale. This could be the account from Mark's Gospel of Jairus's young daughter who Jesus brought back from the dead, taking her by the hand, and saying to her, "*Talitha koum!*": "Damsel, arise ..." (Mk. 6.40-42). The last stanza blends the experience of both this new Orpheus and Eurydice, implying their intimate long-term relationship of love, complicated by the merging of the immortal with the mortal:

And on the way they would be
sometimes sensitive to a loss as she
lived it out in a familiar
and yet altered world,
remembering a morning, in a song.

5.4 All Stories Lead Toward Resurrection

As the closing of ‘Music Was in the Wind’ suggests, Avison’s poems based on scripture reveal a witness who has internalized, experienced and appropriated the story she is telling over and over. She engages in what Rowan Williams has called ‘dramatic’ modes of reading:

We are invited to identify ourselves in the story being contemplated, to re-appropriate who we are now, and who we shall or can be, in terms of the story. *Its* movements, transactions, transformations become *ours* ... our appropriation of the story ... [is] an active working through of the story’s movement in our own time. (2000:50)

She has made the Christ story her own, melding the biblical story with her own life experience, providing a window for ‘an unbeliever to approach not just parts of the work but all of the work of a poet who believes, through and through, in a personal God’²⁶ (*AN* 3: back book cover). Hers is an orthodox theology, pointing to and emphasizing the resurrection with its promise of future glory, as has already been observed in a number of the poems: for example, ‘That Friday – Good?’ (*AN* 3.84), ‘Interim’ (*AN* 3.85), ‘The Dumbfounding’ (*AN* 1.197-98), ‘The Circuit’ (*AN* 2.61) and ‘Music Was in the Wind’ (*AN* 3.42-43). Williams articulates the common thread in Christianity when he writes: ‘The scriptural *history* has to be told, has to be followed diachronically or literally, *as it leads to* Christ and the cross of Christ’ (2000:56). To speak of the cross includes the climax of the resurrection: ‘the one focus of Christ crucified and risen that is the movement of Scripture’ (2000:57). As Avison tells and retells the biblical story of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, there is deep and varied emotion expressed in the frequent tellings, always carefully controlled and disciplined. Her difficult lyrics engage the reflecting intellect, discouraging sentimentality. Sometimes she is explicit; more often, however, she ‘tells it slant’, revealing as much as a receptive reader can receive in one telling.

²⁶ Elizabeth Hay, quoted earlier in chapter 1.6.

To start at the beginning, the poet's Advent poems are mostly clustered in *sunblue* where she works and reworks from various angles the experience of the incarnation.²⁷ As a result, the poems seem as much, or more, about the city and contemporary practice of remembering the Christmas event rather than meditations on the biblical text. Though she draws on the outlines of Luke's and Matthew's narratives, she emphasizes how the modern reader appropriates the event. Further, the theme recedes in her later poems, suggesting she has moved to a new focus on the Christ story. Three of the poems will serve here as representative of the poet's meditations: 'Christmas Approaches, Highway 401' (*AN* 2.97), 'Waking and Sleeping: Christmas' (*AN* 2.101-102) and 'Christmas: Becoming' (*AN* 2.99) in their different approaches will reveal a thematic coherence of the beginning of a story ending in resurrection and glory.

'Christmas Approaches, Highway 401' (*AN* 2.97)²⁸ is the first of the group of Christmas poems in the volume *sunblue*. Typical of Avison's oblique style in her incarnational creation poems, there is little in the poem to suggest an Advent theme and initially it seems out of place in this discussion of poems on biblical texts. Instead, there is a rendering of snow and light, curiously working together to signal an important event. Here the snow of a winter night witnesses to the light. In the structure of the poem three lines stand out flush with the margins as a poem in miniature.

Seed of snow
[...]
is particle
[...]
is sown tonight with the beauty

are the framing lines which determine the central meaning of the arrival of the Light of the world. Dense and indented lines, crowded by details of a busy winter Toronto highway, give no hint of the approach of Christmas, and in fact, can distract from the central image. The location suggests the speaker is probably in a vehicle speeding

²⁷ The organizational pattern of *sunblue* has a seasonal sense to it with the poems of Christmas all placed together near the end of the volume.

²⁸ See Appendix 5.4 for complete text.

across that highway, observing the snow and its surroundings, both what it affects, and what repels its effects.

The fast-paced blocks of text interspersed between the haunting and delicate lines are a patchwork of human creation—for good and ill—and natural landscape. The mere ‘seed of snow’, so small and graceful, [falls—or is fallen]

on cement, ditch-rut, rink-steel, salted where
grass straws thinly scrape against lowering
daydark [...]

The mix of highway salt and snow suggest the brevity of the beauty. The words rush by as the vehicle blurs the details. The speaker continues, ‘[the seed of snow] is particle’

unto earth’s thirsting,
spring rain,
well-spring

[but also]

Roadwork, earth work, pits in hillsides
[...]
unkilned pottery broken and strawed about,
minibrick people-palaces

The speaker reverses the usual order of seeing:

by day all lump and ache
is sown tonight with the beauty
of light and moving lights, light traveling, light
shining from beyond farthestness.

Here Wordsworth’s imagination transforming lonely city rooms into remembered pleasures of Tintern Abbey, can use the night’s limitations, fears and distortions of reality, to see differently with the lights from the moving cars on the busy highway, shining on the seed of snow. The imagination awakens the awareness of the ‘light / shining from beyond farthestness’. The title of the poem directs a transformation of the various combinations of light into the light that guided the Wise Men so many years ago. Even that suggestion is insufficient; the ‘light / shining from beyond farthestness’ must be the source of light—Light himself. ‘Light has come into the world’, the Gospel writer announces (Jn. 3.19). On the 401 Highway, an unexpected place, Christmas approaches.

Christmas in all its mystery is not for the dull, the faint-hearted, the unreflecting.

‘Waking and Sleeping: Christmas’ (*AN* 2.101-102) sets up a series of dramatic oppositions as the title indicates. There are both ‘childbirth and a dying bed’; Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac and ‘the branched ram’;

We carol as our earth
swings some to outer nightward
and sunfloods the Antipodes.

Intensity in the oppositions increases when ‘the newborn in his mortal fairness’ produced ‘helpless, awestruck jubilance’, but ‘hard on the manger vigil came Herod’s massacre’ ‘and Rachel’s / heart then broke’. The frontier woman and doctor who have not been shielded from the stark realities of both birth and death are the ones who are already familiar with the experience of awe and ‘tremblings that reach your heart’. In light of these contrasts, Christmas for the welcoming and aware world is a

welling
from past the horzoning why
a new light flows, is filling:

coming far down, away
from the enduring Father.

It is pure inexplicable light, ‘pure gift’, ‘waking’ for the world. For the ‘newborn in his mortal fairness’ Christmas means something else: ‘the Child, alone, sets out upon His way / to the cursed tree, His altar’ and no branched ram waits to take his place. The closing stanza is unclear:

People tremble and yearn;
our dark hearts thud
in case that light will burn
and wake the dead.

The trembling and yearning seem to come from an awareness of the implications of the incarnation—salvation and suffering in strange combination. These deep emotions may also suggest the opposite. There is no response in those who are spiritually in the dark.

The Christmas light may be finally about waking the dead.

‘Christmas: Becoming’ (*AN* 2.99)²⁹ is a gentler rendition of the larger story overtly begun in Advent. Its title surprises as the lyric tells the salvation narrative from creation to consummation, making a connection with the Christmas story but with no mention of any manger or baby. The story of the poem begins with a telling of the Genesis 2 account of creation: ‘[T]hen the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life’ (Ge. 2.7). The poet speaks of the perspective of both parties involved: ‘The Breath – flower-gentle, in, / is Word of power, out’, with the peculiar contrast of ‘flower-gentle’ and ‘power’ paired together. Once again, in these intense and packed lines, with the use of ‘Word of power’, Avison draws attention to the *Logos* of John’s Gospel who ‘became flesh and lived among us’ (Jn. 1.14). This all-creating ‘Breath’ was ‘Word’,

creating that invisible City, and
mountain, forest, sea,
tundra, ore-vein, light,

narrated in reverse in Avison’s telling, and emphasized in their grandeur by the open spacing of the line. Further, in her creation list is one mysterious reference to ‘that invisible City’. The second stanza introduces the Fall: ‘The world one day / cracked. Faces all went grey, / cords, slack’. The third stanza compresses the death and resurrection into a partial sentence:

A stranger flesh
of only son of man
torn and entombed, but raised
timeless, then,

to be continued in the fourth stanza:

is still the Christmas presence,
flower-frail, approachable:
the timeless Father does not leave
us broken, in our trouble.

The contrast between ‘flower-frail’ ‘Christmas presence’ and the creating ‘Word of power’ is startling, compelling engagement in the extended event.

²⁹ See Appendix 5.4 for complete text.

Between these stanzas are reflective comments of another speaking voice in the poem—one immersed in the story: ‘I knew it was forever, for I was young’ is the light-hearted response to the creation account. The second response introduces an inevitable pathos, dramatized in the lineation:

I lived towards the mortal Friday for-
ever till caught
in this

when ‘[t]he world one day / cracked’. The third reaction reflects the poignancy of a grateful receiver who has no words left for the accomplishment of ‘only son of man’, emphasized by the insertion of dashes into the commentary: ‘ – the eyes turning to look up blur before him – ’. In the Christmas poem on the adjacent page, ‘Slow Advent’ (*AN* 2.98), Avison offers the larger perspective of Christ’s eventual triumph:

...
indomitably coming:
in the flint-set-faced
ready-for-gallows One,
on, on, into glory, and His
place of my being to be
His as will every
place
be. (*AN* 2.98)

Here, however, in ‘Christmas: Becoming’ (*AN* 2.99) the focus is on what that triumph means to ‘broken’ city people ‘in our trouble’ now. The curious centred lines of the concluding stanza of ‘Christmas: Becoming’—

Even citied, at sea, shop-bound,
the *here* is veined
in light

—connect back to ‘that invisible City’ of the first stanza. As people participate in and receive ‘the Christmas presence, / flower-frail, approachable’, they also can anticipate the climactic new Jerusalem-city—invisible now—of John’s revelation:

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ... “See, the home of God is among mortals ... And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb”. (Rev. 21.2, 23)

‘The *here* is veined / in light’—a process for the one ‘becoming’—for the one with ‘eyes to see’ to receive the Christmas presence in its veiled present ‘cited, at sea, shop-bound’ form.

The dramatic oppositions of ‘Waking and Sleeping: Christmas’ (*AN* 2.101-102) and the

indomitably coming:
the flint-set-faced
ready-for-gallows One

of ‘Slow Advent’ (*AN* 2.98) point to the darker theme of judgement that she does not evade in her witness to the Christ. In fact, a series of poems in her *Winter Sun* ‘pre-conversion’ collection suggests a preoccupation with judgement, doom and alienation in her thinking. She speaks of ‘slow sure estrangement from the sun’ in ‘The Fallen, Fallen World’ (*AN* 1.75-76).³⁰ She mourns, ‘Myrrh, bitter myrrh, diagonal, / Divides my gardenless gardens’ in ‘Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball’ (*AN* 1.64-65).

‘Watershed’ (*AN* 1.101) begins with open cynicism:

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

In the last stanza the speaker notes ‘a change in the air’: ‘Yes, and you know / In your heart what chill winds blow’. ‘Apocalyptic?’ (*AN* 1.104) is equally pessimistic:

“We must accept the baptism of the gutter”
(Yeats). “We must love one another or die”
(some other poet). “We must eat and marry
And give our children college educations [...]”
Accept, yes. Choose what we accept. *And die.*

The poem’s ending suggests no resolution:

The old man reels.
Love in absurdity rocks even just men down
And doom is luminous today.

So concludes a litany of despair.

³⁰ See Chapter 4.3 for a fuller discussion of ‘The Fallen, Fallen World’.

Judgement is still present in later volumes but the tone has changed as Avison interacts with the biblical story of Jesus. In *The Dumbfounding's 'Controversy'* (AN 1.163) she outlines the self-imposed struggle against goodness:

They licked the salt at their lip-edge
and fixed how to feed, sleeping on it
and sweating, and went blind
into the flesh. And some god
you say is God says, "that lot's lost"
and rolls them loose
like water on silky dust
rolling away (and if some sparrows
dropt by and pecked at water globules –
your god keeps accounts of
them and their drinks there?)
... centuries gone ... neither here nor there ...
done for ... ("Shove off then").

Judgement? Not His. It's gaming
with loaded dice, and a god made like men
or men with power behind their couldn't-care-less,
and *not* the Truth with the
bite of final cold, and marveling in it
of bleeding, and waiting, and joy.

The speaker's misconception of God is made obvious with his declaration of an indifferent or vindictive god. A new image of sparrows 'dropt by and peck[ing] at water globules' intrudes and counters the argument. Words more famous than the speaker's overlay and transform his own angry denial as Jesus's declaration from the Sermon on the Mount is invoked: 'Yet not one of [the sparrows] will fall to the ground apart from your Father' (Mt. 10.29). Therefore, the poem's conclusion is not totally unexpected. The last lines signify a familiar Avisonian turn, reflecting her experience with the biblical counterpart of judgement—mercy, reminiscent of Lewis's 'Bleeding Charity' in *The Great Divorce*.³¹ Cross, grave and empty tomb settle the controversy.

Two important poems in *Concrete and Wild Carrot* suggest her sense of urgency regarding impending judgement. In 'Other Oceans' (AN 3.146-54) she laments those who do not embrace rescue: 'Behold the immured, the lost champion, / the dangerously young', and

³¹ 'I only want my rights. I'm not asking for anybody's bleeding charity', insists the ghost of the Big Man at the outskirts of Heaven in *The Great Divorce*. His would-be rescuer replies, 'Then do. At once. Ask for the Bleeding Charity. Everything is here for the asking and nothing can be bought' (2001:28).

us who merely persevere
along the borders of
the always unthinkable!

In particular her last section “AFTER” (*AN* 3.153-54) speaks of

Post-modern:

i.e. those who (he said)
in honesty of heart
deny any eternal verities;

The lines go on to describe them as searchers too:

being
searchers for plausible
truth, they humbly
substitute for the old symbols,
what they affirm as
“the logocentric”.

She commends them for their thoughtfulness and sense of responsibility and ‘shoulder[ing]’ ‘their part of the / burden of living’, but finally offers her judgement, echoing the Scriptures:

How different it would be, today, to
“take up your cross and follow Me”, to
“take My yoke upon you, learn ...”
Take both?

She is confident of the legitimacy of her witness of words:

It makes no sense today
to talk this way, nor did
in A.D, thereabouts.
No, but once heard it condenses
somehow. Cautions. Compels – can
flood a person, earth and sea and sky – all that
originated in a like
mystery (all who will die from
this reasonable lifetime we have known) –
with one
overwhelming focus.

The process of ‘condensing’, ‘cautioning’, ‘compelling’ and ‘flooding a person’ is reminiscent of her own conversion and subsequent cost of following Christ.

In ‘Alternative to Riots But all Citizens Must Play’ (*AN* 3.179-82), the poet speaks in more dramatic language.

To myself everywhere:
Cry out, “Break!” Break
all our securities, and break out!

she cries. This poem can be read as a critique of a bankrupt society that needs unspecified revitalizing at its very core; but one can also read it as a biblically prophetic warning of spiritual disaster:

Disrupt these
almond-eyed visions, spongy with
yearnings, for prophesied
pre-dawn light, this very day.

Nightfall is near.

Break in! Break up
all our so solid structures for the
glory of
nothing to hold on to
but untried air currents,
the crack and ricochet
of impact. Risk
survival!

Jesus's death, burial and resurrection have changed everything, as she delineates with particular poignancy in her poem 'Uncircular' from *Concrete and Wild Carrot* (AN 3.167-69),³² so it makes sense to 'risk survival'. In the opening two stanzas of 'Uncircular', she announces the profundity of both the death and resurrection of the Son of God, but she frames the two stanzas and the closing stanza of the poem with the word 'entombment':

The entombment of all that wrath
bespeaks the stench of a
fragmenting into
finality.
To me, this matters.
I anchor there as to a lifeline,

there where
what other self-bound persons
had wrapped and lovingly
laid, a total
loss for all, for all
was found in purity, among his friends
changed, but the same time opening
everything on earth to the
power that lifted him.

No wonder Paul cried out,
"I count all loss ..."—above all, loss.

³² See Appendix 5.4 for complete text.

The poem concludes with an awkward and terse announcement that connects with the opening lines but strangely inhibits closure of its large theme:

Entombment, however, is
new in all history.
What it is for.

Before those enigmatic closing lines Avison offers five detailed scenes from what she calls ‘the intractability of history’—that narrative of Yahweh’s stubborn and hard-to-cure people. Scene one is from the Davidic Kingdom but the description is one of weakness:

His are the evenings of a
king in a cave kept wakeful by
deftly deciphering the poems
he found written in his heart.

In scene two ‘He’ (Yahweh?—the antecedent is ambiguous) watches his people ‘brokenheartedly’ trying to

rouse them to the dread, in time,
that dragged them down
into sensibility.

Scene three is ‘the besieged city’ of a doomed people ‘among the panic-crazed’ and scene four is the later exiled ‘strangers far from home’ who ‘knew the wreckage to be / faced’. These vignettes out of Israel’s history show both the breaking of the covenant and the prophesied consequences. Scenes four and five blend together those exiles and the Jewish people of Palestine in Jesus’s day, and twice the poet explains Jesus’s activity, described as a kind of poem-making—a calling to account:

Among us, Jesus found
encrusted words and structures;
he washed and brushed them clean
and out of [that] intractability
of history.

Again, there is resistance,

when some who so cherished
the traditional that they urged
stains, gritty particles, dust
must be left, too, untouched.

Nevertheless,

His words flowed from a
clear wellspring always till now
a little tainted by the
hand that cupped to drink, or the
crafted ladle.

For his efforts Jesus was ‘dragged off and left abandoned to / indifferent cruelty once’.

The poem then circles back to its strange and puzzling conclusion. Death has been an inevitability since Eden’s loss, so entombment is not new. The closing line is a sentence fragment evoking the opening lines of the poem and clarifying its newness: ‘What it is for’. Mercy and grace are realized fully in ‘the entombment of all that wrath’ and the ‘fragmenting into / finality’ of all humanity’s ‘intractability’. Both St. Paul who ‘cried out, / “I count all loss ...”’ and the poet who ‘anchor[s] there as to a lifeline’ are buoyed up by this recognition.

When Avison speaks in her poems of Jesus’s resurrection, the core event of the Christian faith, she engages in the Christ story with increased intensity. The young woman in ‘A Story’³³ reluctantly admits that ‘[p]erhaps a few / who beached the boat and / stayed, would know’ where the ‘gardener-storyteller’ is (*AN* 1.164-67). In her resurrection poems³⁴ there are listeners who stayed close to Jesus and have news to tell. The witnesses in these poems who confront the mystery of the risen Christ are pulled directly into the story. ‘Come and see’ becomes ‘come and be transformed and participate in the cosmic event’.

Avison’s poems about Christ’s resurrection are not the intense puzzles of some of her other theological lyrics. She does not explain or defend the historicity of the empty tomb. She merely embraces the mystery of the risen Christ and by extension

³³ See earlier section (5.3).

³⁴ ‘Continued Story’ (*AN* 1.48-49), ‘To Emmaus’ (*AN* 2.59), ‘The Unshackling’ (*AN* 2.208), ‘Thoughts on a Maundy Thursday’ (*AN* 2.213), ‘Our Only Hour’ (*AN* 2.228-30), ‘That Friday Good?’ (*AN* 3.84), ‘Interim’ (*AN* 3.85), ‘Third Hand, First Hand’ (*AN* 3.141), ‘The Whole Story’ (*AN* 3.155), ‘Uncircular’ (*AN* 3.167-69), ‘On a Maundy Thursday Walk’ (*AN* 3.174-75) and ‘Early Easter Sunday Morning Radio’ (*AN* 3.195) are all devoted to retelling and musing on the climax of the biblical story—the empty tomb. Furthermore, these are not Avison’s only references to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Several other poems make mention or implicitly imply the theme: For example, ‘Person?’ (*AN* 1.191); ‘The Dumbfounding’ (*AN* 1.197-98); ‘The Christian’s Year in Miniature’ (*AN* 1.206); ‘The Circuit’ (*AN* 2.61); and ‘The Bible to Be Believed’ (*AN* 2.62-63) all have recognizable Easter lines.

invites her readers to do the same. As she recounts the grand conclusion to the fate of the ‘Christmas Light’ in ‘From Christmas through This Today’ (*AN* 2.248), she emphasizes the implication of resurrection for anyone who accepts or rejects the witness role:

Then from the tomb the terrible light
outburst
emptying all we’d gained and He
had lost.

The light that seeks us out
is as at first
but darkness now is different, only ours by choice.

She parallels David Jasper’s observation of the privacy of the actual moment of resurrection in his comments about George Herbert’s seventeenth century poem ‘Easter’:

The tomb, then, would be found empty at the break of day, so that, as in the Gospels themselves, the central event, the resurrection itself is missed and not described. Here scripture, poetry, and history are all silent ... At this central moment of the story, language dissolves, and history moves into eternity. (Jasper, 1989:40)

Instead, the event of resurrection must be accessed through its eye-witnesses. She, in turn, presents the resurrection refracted through their experience. She takes the simple vignettes of these biblical witnesses, each struggling with their incredulity with first devastation and then eucatastrophe³⁵ before their eyes, and imaginatively embraces the words of the Word.

In her identification with the early followers of Christ, the poet amplifies their struggle to come to terms with their new reality. In ‘To Emmaus’ (*AN* 2.59) she notes one experience of doubt turned to belief, as Luke has noted (Lk. 24.13-35):

The Risen One wandered their road with them.
Their beclouding had not cleared
and did not lift even from
His word
He simply came when asked at evening
and broke bread there, a third, with them.
And abruptly they were assured,
beyond all that seeing had suffered
joyful.

³⁵ a word coined by J. R. R. Tolkien. See ‘On Fairy Stories’ in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (1966).

She makes the event all about the witnesses' transformation—their new capacity to 'see'. His presence became visible, she suggests, when they asked. Their response was spontaneous. 'They hurried / to those who had not heard' (*AN* 2.59). She describes doubt, disbelief and guilt in 'The Unshackling' (*AN* 2.208), intimating unstated emotions in the Johannine record of Jesus's post-resurrection appearance to the disciples (Jn. 20.19-23):

Locked in in fear
that evening where
ten were huddled came
the eternal Lamb.

At the same time the poet is reminding her readers of the connection with John the Baptist's earlier announcement, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (Jn. 1.29). She condenses the Gospel writer's promise of peace, His presence, the Holy Spirit and ministry of forgiveness in spare stanzas. The simple language addresses their prison of fear without naming it:

"You, vulnerable (too),
with truth I breathe,
with My love, you can go
out (too). See, you are with

Me still.
Just as We will:
you will forgive,
receive". (*AN* 2.208)

Avison does not explain the disciples' response, "Then it's not *that* we feared", except to deepen their awareness of grateful responsibility: 'With their gladness and grief, / waiting, now, interfered'. 'Third Hand, First Hand', discussed earlier (*AN* 3.141),³⁶ singles out doubting Thomas with his defensive explanation for his need for proof: 'heartsick, tormented, not / open to silly words', '[b]lind in his mirrory grief'. The announcement of Christ's presence is understated:

And
they heard "Stretch out your hand ..."
Thomas abandoned proof.

³⁶ See earlier section (5.1).

The miracle of the event is filtered through his consciousness with a subtle model for belief for future witnesses.

‘Continued Story’ (*AN* 1.48) imagines the anguish of Mary Magdalene before the empty tomb in a daring comparison with a woman abandoned by her lover:

What woman would not know?
He was gone.
What woman would not try
blindly every device – vigil
by the night window, perfumes –
before facing it? No
lover beloved. Nobody.

The title of the poem guides the movement of Mary’s evolving anguish and bewilderment through the separate events of death and burial to empty tomb. The first stanza suggests she slowly faces the reality of death: What woman would not know? / He was gone’. ‘No lover beloved’. The second stanza has abruptly moved past the recorded journey to the tomb with spices to prepare a dead body for burial. In the biblical story the women wonder who will move the stone for them (Mk. 15.47-16.3; Lk. 23.53-24.2). The poem focuses on the solution—the stone is moved—which brings no comfort and raises a new dilemma:

Cut off by stone?
worse, cut off by
no visible barrier:
then all the more, her hope
lay dying in her.

Jesus is not only dead, but now even his body has disappeared. Mary’s pain is raw and immediate, without reflection.

What woman would not
scald her eye-sockets with those
painful slow tears, largely unshed?
to have lost even
loss in an
empty new day?

Her visceral reaction is framed in dramatic irony: ‘Whoever did this thing / is enemy: to me, now –’. The impulse to turn to this perceived enemy—the ‘authorities’, she believes—is out of a lover’s desperation. The delicate interaction between her and

Jesus, ‘supposing him to be the gardener’ recounted in John (Jn. 20.11-18), is curtained off by an abrupt shift in the poem and draws on the Lukan account (Lk. 24.6) as well: ‘(He had purposed no riddle – / “Did I not tell you?”)’. The question of ‘enemy’ has been laid aside. A marked new section of the poem reveals resurrection transformation in Mary’s experience and optic heart: ‘I don’t know. But I saw, / she cried. He told me to tell you’ Now the question of having her testimony believed emerges as the point of the story in the climactic last three lines of the poem:

What woman, what man
dared believe her
here in enemy country?

The ambiguous and again, ironic, last line lingers in the air. ‘Enemy country’, pointing to the resistance the good news encounters, is balanced by the assurance of presence and power of the ‘Enemy’ who emptied the tomb.

In another poem with a parallel title, ‘The Whole Story’, a similar transformation occurs. Avison presents a witness who has moved beyond that initial panic into the realization of essential meaning for her own person.

Behind that stone before
it was rolled away
a corpse lay.
There lay all I deplore:
fear, truculence – much more
that to any other I need not say.
But behind that stone I must be sure
of deadness.

‘Continued Story’ has been completed in the mind of the speaker in St. Paul’s theological explanation of identity with Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Echoes of St. Paul’s declaration, ‘But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him’ (Rom. 6.8), are obviously sounding in this particular rendition of the theme:

Once it is clear
it was a corpse that day,
then, then, we know the glory
of the clean place, the floor
of rock, those linens, know the hour
of His inexplicable “Peace”; the pour

- after He went away –
of wonder, readiness, simplicity,
given.

The pain of death—of death to self—must be enacted before one can know ‘the glory of the clean place’. Then follows ‘inexplicable “Peace”’ and ‘pour’—a peculiar noun reminiscent of both Joel’s fulfilled prophecy ‘I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh’ at Pentecost (Joel 2.28; Acts 2.17) and the English poet George Herbert’s ‘glass of blessing’ in ‘The Pulley’.³⁷

‘Our Only Hour’ from *No Time* (AN 2.228-30)³⁸ imaginatively connects the biblical witness and its witnesses with the ‘blessed … who have not seen and yet have come to believe’ (Jn. 20.29) via Avison’s familiar juxtaposition of a wonder of the created world with the narrative of the scriptures, in this case, a ‘sun-gilded’³⁹ shrub by an apartment wall. The poem’s opening lines explode with the poet’s dramatic vision, gaining in analogical significance as the poem progresses:

In the sunslick a shrub, its buds sealed in,
is skeleton’d in light. Sand clumps on
sand cast shadows.
Out of strange oceans day has unscrolled,
(low shining) has smoothed
a HERE from among
farness and blueness and more, more, mounting and melting
to indigo, and the centripetal
fires of gold.

Beginning with her familiar sun metaphor she announces, ‘[D]ay has unscrolled’ something to read: ‘a HERE from among / farness’. The connection with the Easter story is abrupt and intense, moving from sunlight to lightning: ‘*His look was lightning. / The extraordinary angel / stood [...] / the keepers were as dead men*’. In the unfolding of the poem’s story that follows (and drawing from Matthew’s singular account),⁴⁰ the emphasis is first on the ‘extraordinary angel’—a lesser being than the risen Christ—one

³⁷

“Let us” (said he) “pour on him all we can”
[...] So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure [...]
Rest in the bottom lay. (1967:220-221)

³⁸ See Appendix 5.4 for complete text.

³⁹ See also ‘Window Conversation’ in *Momentary Dark* (MD 57).

⁴⁰ Matthew 28.1-15.

sent to announce the event, in short, a witness, and then the guard of soldiers at the tomb, reluctant and unhappy secondary witnesses.

The keepers till the day they died
could not forget. Blindness still stabbing, from the
fierce glare of such a
countenance (in the undwindling moment
when they blacked out).

Not everybody sees
something like that in his time.
And then can never
distance it by
words ("I always remember
The morning ...")
Nobody could have heard.

The repeated and emphasized statement in the poem '*His look was lightning*' points to the essential moment, 'our only hour', for these keepers at the tomb. In another shorter lyric in the same collection 'Bolt from the Blue' (*AN* 2.232), the poet dramatizes the profound experience of a god or God as lightning,

[w]hen something ... split? – bright
terror, eardrum-crack,
conveyed, not the daylight
beyond sky's iodined mask

but the mask's volt,
discharge within the veil
(Zeus with his bolt
they used to envisage).

Here in 'Our Only Hour' (*AN* 2.228-30) the experience is, in retrospect, memory that will not recede:

It is a disappointment
to have seen
the singular brightness and be
only as dead men,
and then exist, later that day and on and on:
the point of it
searching you, idly now, somehow, in
a gathering silence, a history
compulsively reviewed.

Mid-point in the poem in a brief three-line stanza a subtle contrast is introduced. There is the keeper 'waiting it out in the hours of his darkness' and the agony of a 'gathering silence' of now not seeing or hearing. It is a far different moment for the women

receiving the angel's message at the tomb. Three stark sentences sum up their joy and suggest the same for future witnesses:

Three women were there.
God kept them from terror.
Truth shone, and shines.

The meaning of the story seems obvious at this point as the poem returns to interpreting the shrubbery transformed by the 'keen north sun' and broadening out to 'wide continents' and 'our multifarious kind':

we receive "all" easily but
glimpse something, once or twice,
which in our only hour will be
massively known.

It is vital, Avison seems to suggest, to join the women at the tomb, not the guards.

But there is a delicate surprise at the end of the poem that captures her own gentleness of witness, perhaps even offering hope to the keeper in the silence and darkness. The poem ends not with the angel with the look of lightning, but

the man, torn, stained,
left in mummy-wrappings,
stone under stone.

Once again, there is the blending of sight and sound, of seeing and hearing that fits with hearing and receiving the Word:

the man then seen
alive, known
powerful, heard
in the heart's ear?

He does not so stagger belief
as overwhelm our grieving.

Furthermore, the poem highlights the inclusivity of the invitation—both the women and the keepers—with the embracing pronoun 'our'.

One of Avison's very late poems in 'Too Toward Tomorrow: New Poems', 'Early Easter Sunday Morning Radio' (*AN* 3.195),⁴¹ is a muted Easter reflection of a long perseverance of faith in what she calls

the not yet except

⁴¹ See Appendix 5.4 for complete poem.

for a breath of, a
far-off heralding of,
sun.

In this poem she embodies the mystery of receiving the word/Word with ultimate clarity. Earlier in ‘Interim’ (*AN* 3.85),⁴² she has noted the difficult struggle to carry on when ‘He has come / to vanish – out of human reach’ and described the inevitable strain to see what is not yet to be seen. ‘Our troubled faces clear to see him’, she has explained. In the later poem, she listens on the radio to the youthful choir (reminiscent of shepherds on the hillside hearing the angel choir): ““Gloria!” they sing, / “Gloria!””. The poet simply responds, ‘Why weep, old eyes, when / so suffused with joy’ (*AN* 3.195)? Here is a moment of epiphany, when the veil is lifted temporarily.⁴³ Here is her unadorned testimony of settled hope. ‘Come and see’.

⁴² See Chapter 2.2.2 for additional discussion of this poem.

⁴³ These poems about spiritual sight transcending physical sight echo Milton’s apostrophe to ‘holy Light’ in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, climaxing in his appeal:

So much the rather thou Celestial Light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight (*PL* 3.51-55).

Chapter 6: ‘Go and Tell’: The Missionary Impulse in Avison’s Poetry

Learning, I more and more
long for that simplicity,
clarity, that willingness
to speak (from anonymity ...)
all those impenetrables.

(‘Concert’ *AN* 3.65)

And yet I see you [...]
torn inside too
by your own torrent of words,
all through, you resolutely breathed in
sun and rain’s sweetness
with simple joy.

(‘Seer, Seeing’ *AN* 3.60-62)

What woman, what man
dared believe her
here in enemy country?

(‘Continued Story’ *AN* 1.48-49)

In the same way Avison’s poetry is a beckoning to come and see, there is a corresponding energy suggesting an active impulse to go and tell. She embraces the imperative to ‘go [to my brothers] and tell’ that prompted Mary Magdalene to announce to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’ (*Jn.* 20.18). In her writing merge the dual roles of witness and poet. As she speaks of the poet writing ‘as a mix of the resurrection life and marred everyday living’ (Letter, 5 Oct. 2001), she provides an interpretive guide to the witness of her poetry as a persevering and unabashed ‘telling’, no matter how veiled the language.

6.1 The Missionary Impulse

‘The Apex Animal’ (*AN* 1.53), the opening poem of the poet’s first volume of poetry, *Winter Sun*, sets the tone and introduces the peculiar style of announcement characteristic of her witness. ‘A Horse, thin-coloured as oranges ripened in freight-cars’, or ‘rather, the narrow Head of the Horse’, begins a story-teller who assumes a reader’s assent to an imaginative and mysterious reality:

It is the One, in a patch of altitude
troubled only by clarity of weather,
Who sees, the ultimate Recipient
of what happens, the One who is aware
when, in the administrative wing

a clerk returns from noon-day, though
the ointment of mortality
for one strange hour, in all his lusterless life,
has touched his face.

Here is a mixture of fancy ('and from experience / commend the fancy to your inner eye') and concrete reality of an office worker whose inner life has been changed by some mysterious 'event' but whose exterior conceals the transformation. No explanation or defence is offered for the strange details of the story, but the atmosphere of essential imaginative hiddenness has been established for the many poems to follow, confirming Daniel Doerksen's early assessment that the first two volumes *Winter Sun* and *The Dumbfounding* represent two different faces of religious orientation—the earlier one 'searching' and the later 'discovery' (1974:7-20).

Again, in this first 'searching' volume of poetry, and before she has formally declared her conversion to Christianity, Avison dramatizes the activity and attitudes of a reporting witness in a particularly joyful poem, 'Birth Day' (*AN* 1.127-28), arguably the happiest in this austere and complex collection of poems. While the poem is highly allusive and dense, so characteristic of her earlier style, its narrative frame is straightforward and clear, embodying the essential elements of Christian witness: The speaker of the poem seems to be a messenger bearing important news—good news, in fact—that generates an appropriate response of joy from receptive hearers. The messenger is totally absorbed not in self, but in his message—that is, pointing to another. The compelling force of the poem is the actual news the messenger announces; his significance as a witness is dependent on the story he has to tell. The news, veiled and somewhat hidden, has an inherent darkness in its own obscurities and complexities.

The poem's narrative is as follows:

Saturday I ran to Mytilene.
Bushes and grass along the glass-still way
Were all dabbled with rain
And the road reeled with shattered skies.

Towards noon an inky, petulant wind

Ravelled the pools, and rinsed the black grass round them.

Gulls were up in the late afternoon
And the air gleamed and billowed
And broadcast flung astringent spray
 All swordy-silver.

I saw the hills lie brown and vast and passive.

The men of Mytilene waited restive
Until the yellow melt of sun.
I shouted out my news as I sped towards them
That all, rejoicing, could go down to dark.

All nests, with all moist downy young
Blinking and gulping daylight; and all lambs
Four-braced in straw, shivering and mild;
And the first blood-root up from the ravaged beaches
Of the old equinox; and frangible robins' blue
Teethed right around to sun:
These first we loudly hymned;
And then
The hour of genesis
When first the moody firmament
Swam out of Arctic chaos,
Orbed solidly as the huge frame for this
Cramped little swaddled creature's coming forth
To slowly, foolishly, marvelously
Discover a unique estate, held wrapt
Away from all men else, which to embrace
Our world would have to stretch and swell with strangeness.

This made us smile, and laugh at last. There was
Rejoicing all night long in Mytilene.

The title ‘Birth Day’ is unassuming, but it is not unambiguous, raising questions regarding its unnamed referent(s) and accompanying motivation for celebration for both messenger and waiting ‘men of Mytilene’. The setting of the story generates curiosity by the specificity suggested in the poem’s opening arresting sentence: ‘Saturday I ran to Mytilene’.¹ Possibly Mytilene refers to one of those places the apostle Paul visited on his missionary journeys (Acts 20.14).² In one of its several variant spellings, Mytilene (or Mitilene) fits the coastal descriptions of the opening stanzas and a messenger on foot suggests a mode of travel of the early century of biblical times. The running messenger

¹ In the original edition Avison spelled the place name ‘Mitilene’. The Canadian poet Gwendolyn MacEwan writes of the emotional impact of that line when she first read it as a young poet: ‘That single stark naked line grabbed me in a stranglehold ... Can you plunk a line like that down at the very beginning of a poem and get away with it? How daring, and how glorious’ (1987:32)! Her comment raises awareness of the role artistic appeal can play in witness. If creation can beckon one towards the Creator, the same appeal occurs with sub-creators.

² On the other hand, Mytilene is also the place where the poet Lord Byron died. (Avison’s M.A. thesis topic was ‘The style of Byron’s *Don Juan* in Relation to the Newspapers of His Day’).

in the poem intuits an urgency to his task as, in contrast to the passive hills, ‘[t]he men of Mytilene waited restive / Until the yellow melt of sun’. The allusive quality of the line suggests the prophet Isaiah’s haunting poetic words: ‘People who walked in darkness have seen a great light’ (Is. 9.2) and Zechariah’s song: ‘The dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness’ (Lk 1.73). Here the weather seems to be shifting from rain to ‘the yellow melt of sun’, verifying the prophetic words.

The messenger in the poem exclaims, ‘I shouted out my news as I sped towards them / That all, rejoicing, could go down to dark’, an assertion responding to the restive men but also to the poet Wallace Stevens’s dreaming ‘Sunday Morning’ woman (1954:70).³ Repetitions in the poem link the ‘all’ of the announcement with the next stanza: ‘All nests [...]’, ‘all lambs [...]’ ‘and the first blood-root’, introducing a disorienting and ambiguous conflation of even bigger events in the central stanza. There ‘the hour of genesis’ might speak of the world’s original beginnings, ‘orbed solidly as the huge frame for this / Cramped little swaddled creature’s coming forth’. Key words—‘firmament’, ‘chaos’, ‘swaddled creature’—signal allusions to distinctively recognizable stories of two birth days—the birth of the world in the book of Genesis and the birth of Christ in Luke’s Gospel, evoking both Eden and Bethlehem in this twinned creation account. The syntax is ambiguous in the last four lines and allows for at least two possible readings. Avison’s messenger perceives this ‘unique estate’ as one ‘which to embrace / Our world would have to stretch and swell with strangeness’. On the one hand, it could be the world that has to accommodate itself by some uncomfortable movement toward the unique estate of the Christ-child. On the other, the peculiar phrase ‘to stretch and swell with strangeness’ could intimate the suffering of

³ ‘Sunday Morning’s’ bleak vision ends with the lines:

At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
downward to darkness, on extended wings. (Stevens, 1954:70)

the cross, suggesting it is the Christ-child who is embracing the world. If so, there is an additional layer to the conflation of the major events, now including Christ's death.⁴

A third birth day is suggested in the potential birth of new Christians as the waiting men of Mytilene receive the message of hope. In Luke's Gospel 'rejoicing' occurs when the shepherds respond to the announcing angels' proclamation, 'Unto you is born this day, a Savior' (Lk. 2.11), and they go to the manger to worship the Christ-child. 'Rejoicing' also occurs when the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son are found (Lk. 15.1-32). In the context of the poems of *Winter Sun*, 'Birth Day' stands out, anticipatory of the witness Avison's later poems bring. She moves beyond Stevens's 'tomb in Palestine' in 'Sunday Morning', dispelling the gloom of his bird's flight 'downward to darkness' (1954:66-70), with a glimpse of Easter newness in the nests of 'all moist downy young / blinking and gulping daylight' and 'frangible robins' blue / Teethed right around to sun'. Even the image of 'the first blood-root up from the ravaged beaches / Of the old equinox' implies a miraculous transformation, with the toxic juice of its rootstalk producing a fragile wild white flower.

Here in this early poem of Christian witness is a glimpse perhaps, an imaginative experiment, of her 'lighting up of the terrain' ('Voluptuaries and Others' AN 1.117). The allusive and elusive quality to 'Birth Day' hints at the mystery and wonder involved in the sacred process of going and telling. Even the fact that this 'searching' poem could be a pointer, a significant telling of the Christian story, suggests the delicate process. As one theologian has mused, 'The witness is one who attempts the impossible: connecting

⁴ It is not at all unexpected that other Christian poets' conceptions of the Christ story are evoked as Avison anchors herself in the full range of the tradition of English poetry. Her 'moody firmament / Swam out of Arctic chaos' sounds more Miltonic than biblical. The lines

Cramped little swaddled creature's coming forth
To slowly, foolishly, marvelously
Discover a unique estate

trigger several connections: Herbert's tenant in 'Redemption' looking for a new affordable lease and finding the landlord has lately 'gone / about some land which he had dearly bought' and T. S. Eliot's wise men in 'Journey of the Magi' who look for the Christ-child, finding instead 'the three trees'. In these parallel moments there is a peculiar sympathy to see the full sweep of the redemption story. All four poets—Milton, Herbert, Eliot and Avison—play with time, making two events seem as one: the birth of Christ and the death of Christ meld into one salvation experience.

the Unseen and the unseeing' (Willmer, 5 June 2007); I would add, even when the witness herself is learning to see.

In practice, the energy to go and tell is mostly hidden in the actual accounts of transformation and response to the risen Christ. Particularly in the poems of *The Dumbfounding* Avison says very little about the process of witness as telling. There are no stories of messengers hurrying to convey good news. Instead, the witness is already on the witness stand recounting in vivid and personal terms what could be her own experience in such lyrics as 'Many as Two' and 'Searching and Sounding'.⁵ 'Many as Two' (AN 1.159) is conveyed as a dialogue reminiscent of Old Testament prophets arguing with Yahweh, sounding very much like an interrogation of a witness:

"Where there is the green thing
life springs clean."

*Yes. There is blessed life, in
bywathers; and in pondslyme
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 a limb?
or a terror you who love dare not name?
(No thing abiding.)*

*No sign, no magic, no roadmap, no
pre-tested 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)?

From the outset the two speakers can be identified with the contrasting italicized and despairing lines of the witness and the ordinary typeset of the beckoning Christ. Additionally, and connecting with Yahweh, are the quotation marks. These are mediated words—interpretations of scripture's declarations and intuitions of the faith required to embrace the Christian journey. In various statements throughout the Old and New

⁵ Other poems as well, such as 'The Word' (AN 1.195-96), read like narrative testimony. See Chapter 1.1 for commentary on the lyric.

Testaments these themes have been unfolded by the prophets, poets, apostles and Gospel writers. Here she distills these faith statements into curious word pictures: ‘[W]here there is the green thing’—so startlingly vague for a precise poet—hints at the psalmist’s images of tree and green pastures (Ps. 1.3; 23.2); ‘where the thrum of the touched heartstrings reverberates’ echoes the psalmists’ songs emerging from pain (such as Ps. 28.7; 30.11-12); ‘you know there is the way’ evokes Jesus’s words to the fearful disciples dreading his departure (Jn. 14.1-6). The two parenthetical phrases—‘(No thing abiding.)’ and ‘(Go with us, then?)’—extend the faith process as they are imagined, not condensed and reconfigured from the words of scripture. ‘*No sign, no magic, no roadmap, no / pre-tested foothold*’ exposes the witness’s experience of her deep fears. The response is only partially comforting: “[T]here is the way, plain, / and the home-going”. The poem’s ending, ‘*Outside the heartbreak home I know*’ matched by the ‘brokenness’ and ‘aloneness’ of the beckoning Lord and Saviour, never named, reveals the speaker’s intense vulnerability as reporting witness.

‘Searching and Sounding’ (*AN* 1.199-202),⁶ the most elaborate of explicit witness poems of *The Dumbfounding*, recounts the story of a restless searcher: ‘I look for you’ [...], ‘find you here’ [...], ‘run from you’ [...], ‘and as I run I cry’. In her search she ‘sounds’ the depths of human experience:

not in Gethsemane’s grass, perfumed with prayer,
but here,
seeking to cool the grey-stubbled cheek
 and the filth-choked throat
 and the scalding self-loathing heart, and
failing, for he is
sick,
for I [...]

It is in the difficult shared scenes of human pain, making her heart sore and making her weep, that she unhappily intuits the requirements of finding the One whom she seeks.

⁶ This poem is introduced briefly in chapter 1.1.

She identifies herself with those white dwarf stars that burn out, exhausting their nuclear fuel:⁷

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

Lord, the light deepens as the
summer day goes down
in lakes of stillness.
Dwarf that I am, and spent,
touch my wet face with
the little light I can bear now, to mirror
and keep me
close, into sleeping.

The dream that follows takes her from recognizable desolation—‘sandstone, baldness, the place / of jackals, the sparrow’s skull’ on further down ‘to the farthest reaches / where your Descent began, on the beach gravel’ of the sea. ‘To what strange fruits in / the ocean’s orchards?’ she wonders. Once again, the focus of her reflections shifts to the great sacrifice of the Light’s downward journey, making her own care of others seem not only possible, but essential:

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

This kind of telling, the poet suggests, originates in the mind and mystery of the invisible third person of the Trinity—the one Avison remarks is ‘all but lost in / the one in three’ (‘... Person, or A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost’ *AN* 1.192), ‘self-effacing’ and ‘loving / with him [Jesus], yourself unseen’. The pattern of narration is quietly transferred from the person’s story to the larger Christ story. She condenses the mystery of the shared roles of human and divine witness as she elaborates the Spirit’s miraculous freeing of one ‘from facelessness’ (*AN* 1.192). There is the expectation of declaring that story; there is also the promise of on-going power and presence in the witness:

Let the one you show me

⁷ See the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center’s discussion on its educational web site http://imagine.gsfc.nasa.gov/docs/science/know_12/dwarfs.html.

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

to lead *my* self, effaced
in the known Light,
to be in him released
from facelessness,

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

What is suggested for the life of a witness—‘so that where you’ ‘would go / I may show him visible’—applies to the poems as well.

St. Paul, as missionary and evangelist, embodies the passion and pattern of witness for her. Twice in ‘Branches’ (*AN* 1.185-86) she refers to that powerful event that kindled the missionary impulse in the apostle. Early in the lyric she speaks of the ‘Light that blinded Saul / blacked out Damascus noon’. Further down she compares the extremity of that Light, with its capital letter pointing to its metaphorical significance, with the specific locale, ‘Toronto’s whistling sunset [...] / a pale, disheartened shine’, bringing the two together. In her wordplay she establishes the power and appeal of that Light:

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

Later, the poet simplifies the witness motif and intensifies Paul’s single-minded vision in *sunblue*’s ‘As a Comment on Romans 1:10’ (*AN* 2.60). In three short stanzas she summarizes the dramatic story of Paul’s missionary journeys, originating in his Damascus encounter:

Paul petitioned to go
to Rome ‘by any means’
and was led by the centurion
to the Emperor’s death-row.

Yet he urged it. He was
glad these new Romans existed.
His wisdom was enlisted as
their ally, to find them his.

It did not save his neck
or probably theirs:
he knew beforehand that when light appears
it must night split and earth quake.

His Damascus ‘seeing’ (Acts 9.1-19), emphasized here by spacing in the line and splitting apart the final word (changing noun to verb), sets off a chain reaction of shared divine and human activity, illustrated by his journey to Philippi and his announcement of salvation to the jailor in the earthquake (Acts 16.16-34). The silent implication of the narrative is a possibility of another chapter about witness in its repeated action, ‘when light appears’ to other witnesses.

A third poem about St. Paul in the later collection *Not Yet But Still*, ‘A Basis’ (*AN* 3.40-41), complicates the witness. ‘Most threads are twisted. / They tend to knot’, she explains, by analogy,

I.e. the best
must be, on earth,
only the worst in course of
being transfigured.

In this case, she writes, ‘The missionary “call” / is part expulsiveness’. The word choice is distinctive in its particularity. The OED comments on two meanings of explosive, ‘driven out’ as rare and ‘repellant’ as obsolete (1989), allowing for accompanying ambivalent connotations. There is a quality about going and telling that disrupts and disturbs those around the witness, the official ‘senders’:⁸

In all, in Antioch,
stresses through Paul, the saint
(despite that gentle “encourager” on his team)
may have begun to fray a seam or two.

She wonders about this great missionary: ‘Was he / a venturesomeunsettler’? There is the larger picture of the apostle’s great accomplishments:

⁸ Avison is candid in a letter to her friend Anne Corkett about the human element of ‘witnessing’, being sent ones, going out to tell. She writes, ‘Your friend’s being drawn by Holy Ghost power through your own drawn-ness is also lovely in excelsis ... More & more I’m trying to ted [sic] out what is evangelical sub-culture (conformity, slavery to others’ ideals and notions of what is Right) and what is of the family of faith (slavery to Christ Jesus our Lord because in Him we are all children of one Father & stuck with each other for all the natural puzzlement & even distaste that may cause any one of us—and stuck with obedience absolute) ... Is ‘witnessing’ a “gift of the Spirit”? – is it ever a flow, joyfully, for any but the most mature Christian? ... if I go I have to go as I am, not according to anybody’s idea of how-to or ought-to-be, but on those terms going is scaredy [sic] but like you with your friend really?’ (17 Dec. 1981).

Where he went,
restlessly, on and on,
his stays established outposts of the
heavenly imperium which must
in turn disrupt all empires.

But back at home ('in Antioch') the process of sending Paul out has been similarly disruptive for the 'saints' who

experienced then the senders'
stresses, unsettlings, frayed seams;
but also they experienced
the saint's propulsive
fire in the bones.

Therefore, the energy and restlessness of the missionary impulse suggest an uncomfortable uneasiness about the motivation for mission: 'So an expulsive Paul / was after all the heartbeat of heaven's purposes?' she muses. Three options might account for the witness: 'Expelled? Sent? Summoned'? The poet links herself to the apostle in her frank head note to the poem:

*Preface. This is about
many of us. You deride
the stereotype of my peculiar
subculture? That would be good-
bye to something you might want understood.*

In her quasi-defense of her 'peculiar subculture' she does not identify the stereotype or its corrective; rather, she leaves the poem to speak for itself and also for her connection to St. Paul.

Disruptive change could not
be hindered.
Nor can it. Surrendered to
impulse some venturers may go
alien ways – were these galling at home?
Expelled? Sent? Summoned?

The outcome is the same,
there and even here. (*AN* 3.40-41)

She hints at her own *modus operandi* with her sometimes disturbing lyrics and a possible personal restlessness carried over into the poems.

6.2 Witness Faithful to Avison's Own Person

In explaining that ‘the poet writes as a mix of the resurrection life and marred everyday living’ (Letter, 5 Oct. 2001) and identifying with the Apostle Paul’s ‘propulsive / fire in the bones’ (*AN* 3.40-41), Avison reveals a complexity to her poetry’s witness. What does ‘the resurrection life’ look like for the poet? How does it mix with ‘marred everyday living’? How does she live? How does she speak? How does she write? While she is fully committed to taking her ‘necessary place as a living witness’ to the living Christ (Avison, 1968:33), she readily acknowledges limitations. ‘No fool-proof formula exists for using a poetic impulse to God’s glory’, she writes in ‘Muse of Danger’. ‘The child of God claims the victory of Christ, and yet lives embattled from moment to moment, falling often and constantly knowing no power except through forgiveness’ (1968:33). Human fallibility and limitation are recognized from another angle. Years later in her Pascal lectures the poet avers, ‘The truth given in the Holy Word is a disciplined, but not a manageable enterprise … Truth is final, but our mortal grasp of it never can be final’ (1994:70-71). In fact, the tables are turned, she goes on to suggest: ‘The word of truth is living and probes us continually as we live our days and nights’ (1994: 71). These observations are enacted over and over in individual lyrics, as she works out her own salvation and in turn formulates her witness.

Witness in poetry with her particular stamp and colouring has distinctive characteristics. I suggest three to consider: (1) She reveals an independence of spirit. She sees and experiences life in complexity, contradiction and hiddenness; consequently, her gospel telling reflects that same trio of characteristics. (2) Her social consciousness in her concern for the environment and love for the city’s most vulnerable inhabitants is an essential part of her telling-witness. (3) Words for the poet are pointers, not weapons.

6.2.1 Avison's Independence of Spirit

The first volume of poetry after her conversion, *The Dumbfounding*, establishes her compulsion to tell. Obviously, she takes on St. Paul's passion as her own. When he exclaims, 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (Rom. 1.16), she gives assent in these intense explorations of her new life in Christ. Almost half of the lyrics in that volume carry an explicit witness, most notably in the cluster of poems, including the already noted 'The Word' (*AN* 1.195-196), 'The Dumbfounding' (*AN* 1.197-198) and 'Searching and Sounding' (*AN* 1.199-202).⁹ However, it is *sunblue*, twelve years later in 1978 that seals her reputation, and to some degree, determines her divided audience.¹⁰ David Kent has noted, '*sunblue* reveals Avison fully emerged as a devotional poet in the English tradition and has confirmed her position as a major religious poet' (1984:4). Her Oxford University Press edition *Selected Poems* in 1991 is even more unequivocal: 'Her recent work records her conversion to Christianity, which now informs all of her poetry' (*SP* cover). Clearly, her Christian witness is not a secret. At the same time, it is not a direct telling, even in the pages of *sunblue*, which has generated the most discussion regarding her Christian orientation. She embraces the burden of telling but shapes it in her own distinctive style. She can be bold but correspondingly subtle and obscure. She is often candid but also coy. She can be playful and serious, hidden and open. Her 'whole tendency', described early on, is 'to inquire, to probe, to try out, and to test possibilities. She is a poet who does what she must—what the passion to discover truth drives her to do' (*DF* cover). Therefore, the exploring is integral to and shapes the telling. What she discovers and reports can be jarring sometimes, and even contradictory to the joy of the Christian message.

⁹ See Chapter 1.1 and the earlier section (6.1) for fuller discussion.

¹⁰ I will speak to the subject of this polarized audience in the concluding chapter.

The significant religious and biblical content in the volumes of her poetry is the primary indication of boldness. In her eclectic and varied range of material, both direct and indirect religious lyrics dominate the landscape of her poetry. Twenty-two of the 52 poems in *The Dumbfounding* are focused on a Christian topic; 32 of 82 poems in *sunblue* are clearly religious; *No Time* has 45 of its 115, *Not Yet But Still* has 20 out of its 63, *Concrete and Wild Carrot* has 12 of its 35 and *Momentary Dark* has 15 of its 50 poems speaking to the Christian faith. The essentials of the Christian life comprise a worthy poetic subject for Avison. Often titles of poems are strikingly bold and idiosyncratic. ‘... Person or A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost’ (*AN* 1.192) in *The Dumbfounding* openly invokes the Trinity. The volume *sunblue* begins with 18 poems, including a series of sketches that record observations of everyday living and subtle hints of incarnational life.¹¹ ‘Water and Worship: An Open-air Service / On the Gatineau River’ (*AN* 2.33), the next poem, is jarring in its introduction to a ritual, ‘an open-air service’ of what she later calls her ‘peculiar subculture’ (*AN* 3.4-41) and leaves no doubt of her missionary impulse. ‘The Bible to Be Believed’ (*AN* 2.62-63); ‘Psalm 80.1 – “Thou that dwellest between the cherubim ...”’ (*AN* 2.85-86); ‘Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel’ (*AN* 2.148); ‘The Cursed Fig-Tree: The form not the purpose of the parable’ (*AN* 2.243-44); ‘Notes from Dr Carson’s Exposition of I John 5’ (*AN* 3.142); ‘Four Words: A Gloss on I Cor. 14.6’ (*AN* 3.173); and ‘On a Maundy Thursday Walk’ (*AN* 3.174-75) all compel awareness of her interest in the Bible and Christian holy days. In effect, the poet is announcing the effect of the Christ story on her person—her activities, her reading, her thoughts.

At the same time and equally significant to her bold witness, religious and biblical content, while dominant, is not the sum total of her reflections. In fact, more of Avison’s published poems are not about Christian subjects at all. The poet is not always

¹¹ See Chapter 3.2 for an earlier and fuller discussion of this theme.

writing about Jesus. In *Momentary Dark*, for example, Jesus is not even named until ‘Prayer of Anticipation’ (*MD* 58), more than half way through the slender volume, and then only once more in ‘Two to One’ (*MD* 64-65). Any book of her poetry will yield a broad range of themes, embedded in the natural everyday events of an ordinary Christian living out her life. Her experiences parallel the lives of other ordinary people. She is awakened in the middle of the night when

Around 4 a.m.
the hermits come
and gun a jalopy
apiece down the empty
unseen car-track

in ‘Contemplatives or Internal Combustion’ (*AN* 2.42). ‘Lament for Byways’ (*AN* 3.161-62) evokes familiar nostalgia for a city that has changed:

Through spy-
holed fences, we inspect
the backs of streets we knew
before.

She calls women working in offices ‘Lemmings’ (*MD* 14):

In cruel office shoes
Five o’clock ladies pound
past, toward their release.

She reflects on the necessity of two-income families in ‘A Women’s Poem: Now’ (*AN* 3.55):

Women are breadwinners perforce
when their pay is their sole resource.
Or when couples aspire to arrive
at a house – not a cell in a hive.

She knows how to articulate the empty home in ‘Loss’ (*AN* 2.262):

Trees are long gone,
and the clutter of children gone
and the sun washes in to the bone.
Here pain hit home.

Parallel experience in ‘Meeknesses’ (*AN* 2.166)—

an examination room, to the examiner,
whether medical or academic,
whether with stretcher and gowned patient or
young scholars flushed intent submissive—

the poet avers, ‘presents pathos’. In ‘Technology Is Spreading’ (*AN* 2.43),

Two men hatless plodding
behind, in the rain
one to the other confiding

catch her attention with their familiar ‘strategem’:

“When using a
computer it is always desirable
to stick to one language”.

Avison can see and then articulate the unusual in the ordinary experience, giving heightened significance to what often goes unnoticed and unnoted. These lyrics with their common, but uncommonly noted, events, ideas and emotions produce a striking foil for the Christian poems that accompany them. The resonance in the one poem verifies the integrity of the religious experience in the other.

While she is, indeed, capable of bluntly speaking (and often does) about the joys and obligations of Christian witness, her poetic method is often more subtle and indirect. Frequently, she enacts Jesus’s parable about the kingdom of God as she beckons and then sends her readers looking for the treasure she found hidden in a field and then hides it herself.¹² The opening poems of *sunblue* again provide an example. They establish a reverent atmosphere of delicate detail, and even a sense of the holy, a quality in George MacDonald’s writing that attracted C. S. Lewis.¹³ She sets up memorable contrasts between ‘the yellow-helmeted men’, ‘a work gang on Sherbourne and Queen’, and ‘the hostel’s winter flies’ of destitute men across the street (*AN* 2.18); or again, the ‘cold layered beauty / flowing out there’ and ‘such creatureliness’ ‘indoors promises’ in ‘End of a Day or I as a Blurry’ (*AN* 2.23). She notes the ‘miles of beeswax mist’ from one train window (*AN* 2.21) and ‘grasses bronze and tassel-tawny’ (*AN* 2.20) from yet another; she observes ‘necklacing ant-feet; robins’ toe-pronging and beak-thrust’ at ‘grass-roots level’ (*AN* 2.25).

Behind the rainmurk
is, I persuade myself,
a mountain shouldering

¹² ‘The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all the he has and buys that field’ (Mt. 13.44).

¹³ See Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*.

near enough [...],

she thinks in ‘Let Be’ (*AN* 2.32). In each of these opening lyrics there is a kind of privacy and intimation of the holy Other rather than an obvious heralding of Christian good news.

One of these subtle early poems in *sunblue*, ‘Stone’s Secret’ (*AN* 2.26-27),¹⁴ attempts and achieves more in its strange revelations.

Otter-smooth boulder
lies under rolling
black river-water
stilled among frozen
hills

sets off an imaginative tour of outer space. The impenetrable stone under water here on earth is nothing compared to the secretive stones in space:

Out there – past trace
of eyes, past these
and those memorial skies
dotting back signals from
men’s made mathematics [...]

out there, inaccessible
to grammar’s language the
stones curve vastnesses,
cold or candescent [...]

Their privacy and mystery are sustained which neither mathematics nor language can access ‘out there’. The poem takes another turn, however, intimating a secret that supersedes any mystery nature affords. In its closing stanza creation has pointed to Creator and announces a dramatic movement in time and space:¹⁵

Word has arrived that
peace will brim up, will come
“like a river and the
glory ... like a flowing stream”.
So.
Some of all people will wondering wait
until this very stone
utters.

The words of both Second Isaiah and Luke are evoked, uniting the anticipated peace of Jerusalem (‘For thus says the Lord: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the

¹⁴ See Appendix 6.2.1 for complete text.

¹⁵ Avison’s dramatic surprise is similar to C. S. Lewis’s ‘invasion’: ‘Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage’ (*Mere Christianity* 1952, 1997:37).

wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream' Isa. 66.12) with Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem ('I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out' Lk. 19.40). The allusions establish the poem as a vehicle for announcing the good news of the gospel. Movement expands beyond the stones of earth and space. Now it is a matter of witnesses releasing the secret of the King's arrival.

The delicate and subtle can soften and even transform the obvious. The direct title, ‘Water and Worship: An Open-air Service / On the Gatineau River’ (*AN* 2.33), places her probably at the scene of a baptismal service. The poet’s attention, however, is drawn to the image of the sun on moving water:

Her musings on the ‘waters still acid, / metallic with old wrecks’ touched by the ‘cut-glass glory’ of Love (the sun/Son) become an epiphany and an unexpected metaphor of the painful process of a person’s transformation only partially realized, but nevertheless secure in its hope. The analogy provides the assurance.

But her subtlety does not preclude candour. In a number of poems the poet assumes the role of prophet, pointing a finger at human fallibility, sinfulness and evasion. In contrast to ‘Absolute’s’ framing of the terrible scene of the ‘mocker making a frail rabbi / hop on the Warsaw pavement’ and ‘see[ing] me in the worst there is’ (*AN* 2.92),¹⁶ ‘Almost All Bogged Down’ (*AN* 1.45-46) presents a picture of sinners who do not understand their desperate predicament. Four stanzas categorize different kinds of sinners by their self-presentations: stanza one speaks of the most obvious but least

¹⁶ See Chapter 4.3 for earlier discussion of this poem.

harmful: ‘Some scamps are visibly so; their smell / repels their fellows’. Stanza two raises the ante:

Some rogues are adequately clean
in clothes and under them, but have their tongues
cankered.

Stanza three contains the defensive ‘victims’ who are not as innocent as they assume:

A handful shuffle haplessly, prefer
to make the victimizers make their part
plain, for the gain of foreheads clear
and eyes that say, It’s not my fault I’m hurt.

Her fourth group of modern counterparts of Pharisees is readily familiar to any audience:

The rest? rascals as well, immersed in place
of power or public service; oh, acquainted
with others’ taint. Their own they can suppress
secure in the nice role of the anointed.

She does not allow sin any dignity or grandeur with her pointed titles ‘scamps’, ‘rogues’, and ‘rascals’ and she implicates one and all.

The gospel story is all the more startling in this context, introducing ‘once always one not one of us / choosing to be of us’ with an offer of transformation that only ‘some few may following find’:

Vagrant, in ambush, challenger, masked
or barefaced, everyone at risk
gambles his own way. And the one
of us not one of us is gone
a way some few may following find,
just, one by one.

The preacher in the poet has offered both a caution and challenge reminiscent of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount: ‘For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it’ (Mt. 7.14).¹⁷

Avison employs Amos’s memorable phrase ‘cows of Bashan’ twice, connecting the Old Testament prophet’s blistering critique of exploitation to her fear of the same. Amos ‘fulminates’ (*AN* 2.261), the poet observes. ‘Hear this word, you cows of Bashan

¹⁷ Or ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me’ (Lk. 9.23).

... who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, "Bring something to drink!"’ (Amos 4.1).¹⁸ She uses the image first in ‘Incentive’ (*AN* 2.261)¹⁹ to identify the unrecognized need of her generation:

(cows of Bashan
slaking our thirst, calling for more,
squashing poor people and not even noticing
and on the right days all in good order
sailing down aisles, heaping up
flowers on the altar etc.)

In turn, she trembles at the possibility of judgement:

we look to him for

?no bread
no rain
leaf-shrivelling and pests and
fevers and sores and
violence?

These calamities, she hopes, will be enough incentive to incite repentance—‘would but these bring us back to / [...] the waiting, the hope’. The second time she evokes the phrase is in the opening lines of ‘Seer, Seeing’ (*AN* 3.60-62), an intense dialogue with Amos where she agonizes over her identification with her culture:

I am no cow of Bashan, Amos.
No. I’m not poor, for all I’ve tried to end up
understanding that, by being it.
It didn’t work. I work.
My meals are
ordinary, and by no means
easily shared in
fact – though gestures can
make maybe some
trifling difference somewhere.

Even as she herself tries to resist oppressing the poor and crushing the needy, she recognizes her unwitting complicity with her society. Nevertheless, she voices her critique, casting judgement on deficiencies and error, her own included. As a result, she may elicit agreement on her diagnosis of the human condition, bringing her readers to a point of crisis in choosing her source of remedy. Indirection frequently softens the

¹⁸ The prophet’s words of judgement that follow are relevant to Avison’s borrowing of the phrase: ‘The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. Through breaches in the wall you shall leave, each one straight ahead; and you shall be flung out into Harmon, says the Lord’ (Amos 4.2-3).

¹⁹ See Appendix 6.2.1 for complete text.

appeal as she stops short of demanding assent. The closing lines of ‘Almost All Bogged Down’ (*AN* 1.45-46), discussed above,

And the one
of us not one of us is gone
a way some few may following find,
just, one by one,

articulate the instinctive pattern.

In suggesting this link between candour and witness, I am not implying a didacticism or agenda in her poetry. The witness is faithfully reporting what she has seen, heard and experienced. The poems do their own work. One enthusiastic critic, David Mazoff, in his monograph *Waiting for the Son: Poetics / Theology / Rhetoric in Margaret Avison’s sunblue*, suggests this pattern of witness is deliberate and intentional in ‘her use of rhetoric, those skills and strategies that she uses both to destabilize the text and to defamiliarize the reader’ (1989:19). In an exchange of correspondence between author and critic, Avison speaks of ‘a few quibbles’ she has with Mazoff’s observations:

I write by ear rather than from rhetorical “strategy” (perhaps the ear can apply tactics unbeknownst?), and some things you credit me with as strategies or “techniques” are just ear, sense, and insight “clicking”—it feels good after it happens but I can never plan to bring it off.²⁰ (Letter 4 January 1990).

At the same time, she exerts a clever coyness in some of her poems which resists closure. Her first volume of poems *Winter Sun* is filled with vivid and memorable lines that cannot be pinned down. What is ‘the ointment of mortality’ which ‘has touched [the] face’ of the clerk in ‘The Apex Animal’ (*AN* 1.53)? What is ‘the sweet surrender’ in ‘Dispersed Titles’ (*AN* 1.55-59) when she writes,

Something wrought by itself out of itself
must bear its own
ultimates of heat and cold
nakedly, refusing
the sweet surrender?

²⁰ Avison’s response to Mazoff sounds very much like C. S. Lewis’s correction of his assumed motivation for the Chronicles of Narnia: ‘Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument ... Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn’t even anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord’ (‘Sometimes Fairy stories may Say Best What’s to be Said’, 1966:36).

What or who is ‘the mongrel of God’ who ‘skitters and skids’ ‘outside on the jeweled ice’ or the ‘bird of God’ who waits and rides’ ‘on this empty sea outside’ in ‘Apocalyptics’ (*AN* 1.105-108)? What does she mean when she suggests ‘Things of the heart occur here. / Some wilt before sea-level’ in ‘Rich Boy’s Birthday through a Window’ (*AN* 1.109)? It is her signature style to hint and hover around an idea and elude tidy conclusions.

Agnes Cleves, in the dramatic monologue concluding *Winter Sun* (*AN* 1.132-43), speaks for a poet capable of holding a person at bay if she chooses:

What story do you want?
Tales of young love, or of that horse with wings
The pink-striped circus lady rode, standing?
Why should I tell such things
Except to force myself, your peer.
In the strange perfumed anterooms
Of the fastidious voluptuaries.
Have you remarked
How few persist in penetrating farther
And all of the rumour that subsides after them [...]

Go home, my dear. It is too late
And you are all abrim and pent
And the dark streets are tilted to a vacuum
Where things may happen [...]

One evening, just a year or two ago,
The simple penetrating force of love
Redeemed me, for the last perhaps. I’ve seldom dared, since
To approach that [...]
The need to tell you is exciting
And very bleak [...]

How is it that by now
The shaft of vision falling on obscurity
Illumines nothing, yet discovers
The way of the obscure? [...].

So it is not surprising that the poet will adopt a persona who can withhold a direct answer to a religious question, all the while revealing just enough to disturb the reader-listener. ‘Strong Yellow, for Reading Aloud’ (*AN* 2.44-46), the poet explains, is ‘written for and read to English 389’s class when asked to comment on my poem “The Apex Animal”, etc.’, and calls attention to her evasiveness and inventiveness. She creates a new horse for this new poem. This time it is a

[a] painted horse,

a horse-sized clay horse, really,
like blue riverclay, painted
with real mural eyes [...]
on the rainy Sunday diningroom wall.

Contrasting details between the painted blue horse ‘with / white hairs, the eyes / whitened too’ and the original ‘strong yellow’ one of ‘The Apex Animal’ (*AN* 1.53) dominate the poem and control the conversation, all the while she is aware of the essential question:

Q: “The Head of the Horse
‘sees’ you say in that poem.
Was that your vision of
God, at that period
in your development”?

The poet assesses the person asking the question.

But I think, reading the lines,
the person looking *up* like that
was squeezed solid, only a crowd-pressed
mass of herself at shoulder
level, as it were [...]

The person in the crowd seems incapable of empathy and understanding of the poet’s experience in creating the original picture of the Apex animal:

no heart, no surprises, no
people-scope, no utterances,
no strangeness, no nougat of delight
to touch, and worse,
no secret cherished in the
midriff then.
Whom you look up from that to
is Possibility not
God.

I’d think ... (*AN* 2.44-46)

Therefore, the poet withdraws and steers the discussion to talking about the colour of the horse and the playful role of the artist in her verbal creation of the two contrasting horses. The poem resists closure even as the speaker in the poem sidesteps the question. In its elusiveness the poem echoes Jesus’s parabolic method: ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand’ (Lk. 4.11-12).

‘A Work-Up’ (*AN* 2.41), a poem in close proximity to ‘Strong Yellow’, is a whimsical and strange sort of parable that achieves something similar—a testing of

spiritual acuity. Here Avison uses odd-angled humour to defamiliarize a common but serious condition. It is appropriately titled ‘A Work-Up’, suggesting ‘a diagnostic examination of a patient’ (OED). The poem is set up as a simple but surreal three-act play with an angel ‘examining’ the unresponsive patient:

THE ANGEL OBSERVES

lips, as if stone-carved
cold, the grit lying unfanned and
sand-dry – an engine-hood of a
cathedral, cabaret spotlights –
moving to speak....

THE ANGEL ENTERS.

(Mildly):
“What *are* you about?
You’re itting yourself”.

(The wind suspires.)

The astonished eyelids
fail even to blink.

THE ANGEL BEGINS TO LEAVE:

“Wind and light want to be bare
to your unringing ear,
beloved. Oh, beware”! (*AN* 2.41)

As the angel ‘(mildly)’ assesses the ‘lips’ ‘moving to speak’, he sees a kind of refusal of something—an unresponsiveness: ‘You’re itting yourself’; the patient is self-destructing. When ‘the wind suspires’ (‘longs for, yearns after’ OED)—set off in parentheses, as if a stage direction—the patient still does not respond. The angel might as well leave. The closing lines of the drama change the mood as they clarify the urgency. Heaven’s messenger is going to withdraw: ‘Wind and light’, powerful symbols of the Trinity, ‘want to be bare / to your unringing ear, / beloved. Oh, beware’. The serious implication, however missed by the patient, is clear to observers who now need themselves to respond.

A later poem, ‘Instrumentalists Rehearse’ (*AN* 3.100), demonstrates a softer playfulness, perhaps in its witness of the natural world.

Fishes off on cruises
dream, staring up to sky.

Maple keys let themselves be
sodden and mashed down
into the earth. Their biddable eyes
still towards the trusted
nurturer's, without
any idea what
“fruitful” may turn out to mean
(one papery inch from lofted leafiness!)
– or “multiply”.

While the brief lyric is part of a group of poems ‘For the Fun of It’ in *Not Yet But Still*, its closing stanza suggests a gentle humour informed by religious persuasion. Her allusion to the ‘planets and constellations / danc[ing] to like music’ calls attention to medieval cosmology with its music of the spheres. Here in this whimsical poem she seems to be imaginatively connecting with the pre-Copernican model of the cosmos, suggesting the fish and the maple keys are ‘instrumentalists rehears[ing]’! But the larger performance is in the heavens:²¹

Planets and constellations
dance to like music
not needing to know that
their lost millennia will
shine in a fledgling owl's
eyes in the dark forest deep
deep in the heart of
their fathomless night.

Yet the poem’s conclusion is fully rooted in earth and the eyes of the fledgling owl. William Butt draws the connection between planets and constellations and owls in terms of Avison’s comment in *A Kind of Perseverance* that ‘[w]e still speak of the *universe*, the whole, without losing in that wholeness one particle of life’s marvelous array of particulars’ (1994:64). He suggests these last lines of the poem reveal Avison’s understanding of ‘resonant plenitude’: ‘[L]ike Blake’s burning tiger in the night, a baby owl grows radiant with its context – with all the distant implications of the universe. In

²¹ C. S. Lewis explains this activity in *The Discarded Image*: ‘We are watching the activity of creatures whose experience we can only lamely compare to that of one in the act of drinking, his thirst delighted yet not quenched. For in them the highest of faculties is always exercised without impediment on the noblest object; without satiety, since they can never completely make His perfection their own, yet never frustrated, since at every moment they approximate to Him in the fullest measure of which their nature is capable ... Run your mind up heaven by heaven to Him who is really the centre, to your senses the circumference, of all; the quarry whom all these untiring huntsman pursue, the candle to whom all these moths move yet are not burned’ (1964:119).

its eyes shines light that eons ago left stars' (Butt, 2001:845). Obviously the humour and playfulness do not leave aside depth of insight.

At the opposite end of Avison's range of emotions is a profound seriousness which sounds the depths of human suffering. The resonance of harmony and light in the natural world in its 'array of particulars' has its counterpart in distance, darkness and polarization in turning away from the light. The poet explains her terrifying subject in the head note of 'The Familiar Friend, But by the Ottawa River' (*AN* 3.66-67): 'The person addressed is Judas Iscariot. The words centuries later reflect a possible train of thought in the human mind of his human-divine friend whom he would betray. And die of it'. The familiar theme is complicated by several things. Her note is typically ambiguous: To whom is she referring with the sentence fragment 'And die of it'? The poem's title also blurs time and place. The setting by the river is established in the first stanza—in twentieth century Canada:

River, enriched in the last light:
[...] the
stillness brimming, like those
muscular waters in the lingering light.

But she goes on to suggest this is 'a possible train of thought' from scenes centuries earlier.

The second longer stanza has the 'human-divine friend' revisiting the three years

when we were
at peace breathing companionability
together

and reinterpreting 'fleeting expressions, wordless mealtimes'—in short, engaging memory to explain a possible motive for such a terrible deed.

I knew I am the one
you one day, towards
evening, would
leave. You had prepared for
what had to happen.

When it did it burned
deeper than your mind.
Nothing will medicine the sore [...]

If the poem ends mid-stanza, it is understandable, for reliving betrayal has that particular inconsolable ache about it. But the poem has a startling Avisonian turn in the last two lines of the stanza: '[B]ut an abiding with the wordless glory - / mirroring waters flowing'. The poem returns the focus to 'by the Ottawa River' to the person speaking the thoughts of the one who was betrayed. This is another version of her '*universe, the whole, without losing in that wholeness*' a sense of the particular (Avison, 1994:64). Judas Iscariot's betrayal is the speaker's betrayal as well. The only comfort for the speaker is 'an abiding with the wordless glory' (in contrast or in keeping with the earlier 'wordless mealtimes'). There is 'medicine' to be appropriated, the poem suggests, not something Judas seemed to act upon in the biblical account (Mt. 27.3-8). The poem ends in its closing two-line stanza with a sobering realism not diminishing the horror of betrayal: 'If only memory were not / one function of mind'.

Similar to the other pairings reflected in Avison's distinctive style—bold and obscure, candid and coy, playful and serious—the poet moves between hidden and open in her witness of telling. There is a degree of hiddenness in most of the poet's lyrics, accounting for some of the difficulty in interpretation and immediate appreciation. Many of the poems already discussed have contained layers of hiddenness, often locked in a single word or phrase. One very short poem with its very long title 'Miniature Biography of One of My Father's Friends Who Died a Generation Ago' (*AN* 1.187) illustrates the withholding of interpretive keys:

You, sovereign, Lord, have let this be,
Love's gesture here on earth to me.

Your touch would prove all.
Shall I fear it, who want your approval?

My friend's sorrow
I cannot endure. Our
shrinking is your pain.

Let Love's word speak plain.

To begin, it is not clear who is addressing ‘You, sovereign, Lord’. Is it the father? Is it the father’s friend? Is it the daughter writing the poem? Then there is no antecedent for ‘this’ in the first line—presumably the key unnamed event that is central to the father’s friend. The best that can be reconstructed from these non-details is that some sorrowful event has happened either to the friend or to the father. Some thing—probably this experience—is interpreted as a hidden indication of ‘Love’s’ care, distilled in the phrase ‘Love’s gesture’. But something is needed to verify this ‘gesture’. ‘Your touch would prove all’, addressed to the sovereign Lord, seems essential to the speaker, but there is a holding back, which is recognized as causing the Addressee pain as well. The last line offers some resolution, summing up the person’s life: ‘Let Love’s word speak plain’.

Part of the hiddenness of the poem is the sense that this story has been told before. The distinctive use of ‘Love’ hearkens back to George Herbert’s famous ‘Love (III)’, with its eloquent dialogue between the unworthy guest and ‘Love’ who offers his costly hospitality.²² Here in Avison’s poem there are the same emphases—the gesture, the need for approval, the shrinking back, the final plain words of command and response of obedience. She builds on Herbert’s dialogue with the curious subject of her title, ‘Miniature Biography’. In its repeated pronouns of ‘you’ and ‘your’ the poem seems to be as much prayer as it is biography. Here might be the point: The story of ‘One of My Father’s Friends’ is a record of a life time of prayer and obedient

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Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, []
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lacked any thing.

“A guest,” I answered, “worthy to be here”:
 Love said, “You shall be he” [...]

“You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat”:
 So I did sit and eat. (Herbert, Love (III))

George Herbert, one of Avison’s favourite poets, has already been introduced directly in an earlier poem ‘Intra-Political’: an Exercise in Political Astronomy:

(George Herbert – and he makes it plain –
Guest at this same transfiguring board
Did sit and eat.) (AN 1.97-100)

See Chapter 4.1.

submission to the One who is called Love. Now the title of the poem is brought into question. Perhaps ‘My Father’ is not the poet’s earthly parent, but One whose Son taught his own friends to pray (Lk. 11.1ff).

This reticent and private poet can surprise readers with her sometimes transparency about facets of gospel living, effectually disarming those who may be open but reluctant to embrace the Christian faith. In ‘Beginnings’ (*AN* 2.224) she states the common position of believers—whether seasoned or neophyte.

Each of us has
some sense of God
and we’re all coping
with realities in our
life.
I have trouble getting the
two together.
You do too.
Everybody does.
Paul does.
In a sense he starts there.

In ‘Oh, None of That! – A Prayer’ (*AN* 2.251), she draws attention to the dangers of sentimentality in one’s religious experience in using her own variation of a peculiar term ‘namby pamby’ (‘weakly sentimental, insipidly pretty, affectedly or childishly simple’ OED), originating in eighteenth century literature.²³ She personalizes the tendency by naming it in a prayer with the first person pronoun—‘the cloaking faith I wear’.

From the namby-pams
of the cloaking faith I wear
deliver me [...]
oh, from the namby-pams that evade
the absolute scrutiny
and evade healing, oh, deliver me.
Whatever I read or hear or see
only declares what is in me,
an ominous freight

²³ The word’s etymology is particularly interesting as the OED explains. It is ‘a disparaging alteration ... in imitation of childish speech) of the name of Ambrose Philips (1675-1749), author of sentimental poems (especially concerning children)’ (OED) Major eighteenth century writers, the dictionary reports, ridiculed Philips in print. ‘Namby Pamby was used by [Henry] Carey as the title of his parody of Philips’s verse’ (OED). It is likely that Avison might have first read the word in Pope’s *Dunciad* (3.322): ““Beneath his reign, shall ... Namby Pamby be prefer’d for Wit!” (OED)’. A poet of Avison’s bent undoubtedly winces at this particular weakness.

hidden – and worse let out.

Neither does she avoid talking about the painful, dark experiences of life when God seems absent. She expresses fear and anguish and disappointment, particularly over the death of friends, most notably in the Jo Poems cycle (*AN* 2.115-37):

My Lord, in horrible need I
turn to the Book, and see
sin and death, life in thee
only, and can not see,
O living Word, I cannot see to see.

I love this friend we've lost.
And the two-dimensional good
that was all I knew
 apart so long from you,
I cannot now dishonour, or belie.

But the truth brooks no denying.
There is a word, are words,
that do not lie.

My friend is dead.

At the beginning of her prose poem ‘Job: Word and Action’ (*AN* 3.102-115), framed as ‘A Book Review’, she begins with a kind of apology: ‘Nothing will do / but to read the book’. She recognizes her own limitations in comparison with the book itself: ‘For one thing, it is immeasurably better, / and clearer, and probably more accessible’. But she admits a writer’s desire with a touching openness:

Why write about it then?
Because I want to,
to cope with it
in human company.

While Avison’s poetry causes dismay and dismissal at times for its obscurity and difficulty, those very qualities are also sources of power in the witness of her verse. As she probes ideas to discover truth, she draws her readers into exploration as well. Readers are her ‘human company’, not her adversaries to be felled or conquered by persuasion.

Her perception and experience of life’s complexity, contradiction and hiddenness affect how the Christ story is passed along. Even while there is evidence of divine presence and activity, she dares to voice what may be lurking underneath an

event or experience—unfairness, aloneness, human pain, struggling relationships. One such example is the opening poem of her late collection *Momentary Dark* with its strange title, ‘Milton’s Daughters: The Prototypes’ (*MD* 1-2). The ambitious goal of the great seventeenth century poet is silently present in Avison’s twentieth century address to his daughters. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton asserts,

What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the highth of this great Argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men. (1.23-26)

Now the poet is wondering how Milton’s ambitions were realized. She reflects on the high cost for everyone involved.

Imagine, in the deeps of night,
the blind man, haplessly resounding with a surge of
line upon line till he could
bear no burdening more.

The creative effort is demanding for the blind poet with such high expectations of himself. But a more painful reality falls to daughters—these ‘prototypes’—in a patriarchal environment, who were sometimes expected to be Milton’s amanuenses.

You heard, and wrote: a process
bypassing mind, or heart,
I’d guess,

this twentieth century poet sympathetically observes. She addresses Milton’s daughters at the beginning of the poem as ‘[c]hildren of celebrated / fathers’. At mid-point, their title has shifted:

Children of dust, summons can come at
difficult hours, disrupting
the sleep of nature.
The voice must be heeded, the incomprehensible
words forming at best
a promise that,
somehow, someday, everything will
come into clarity.

Besides the obvious comment on mortality in ‘Children of dust’, the poet must be implying some critique of the famous father who biographers suggested denied his

daughters the education to appreciate what they were recording.²⁴ The closing lines are haunting in their ambivalence:

Daughters, sleep well
while time runs on.
Rise, docile, dim
of spirit. Someday someone
will bless you for it.

The poem ends with unanswered questions: Of what are Milton's daughters the prototypes? What does Avison mean when she addresses them in the end, 'Rise, docile, dim / of spirit'? Is it a lyric celebrating or critiquing 'Eternal providence' and 'the ways of God'—to 'men'; that is, might she be ironic, implying God's ways have not been justified to women as well? Or is the poem meant to encourage women writers not to be 'dim of spirit'? The poem's placement at the beginning of a collection entitled *Momentary Dark* suggests a witness that is oblique and questioning.

A second poem in *Momentary Dark* is also about a woman, this time an unnamed witness from John's Gospel, the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn. 4.28-29). In the Johannine account there is a triumphant conclusion to her encounter with Jesus, but no record of the woman's experience afterwards: 'Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony' (Jn. 4.39). The poem 'Hot Noon'

²⁴ An earlier draft has the poet chiding Milton for his parental neglect: 'John, did you hear your / demands as they would sound / to bored, biddable children?' (Unpublished draft, Archives). The final poem maintains the consistent address to the daughters:

Warm-hearted Samuel
Johnson must have been
exasperated
on your behalf, saying that you
had been schooled only
in alphabets and sounds
of Greek, Arabic, Hebrew,
not in the words.

The poem with its multiple drafts and revisions in Avison's archives was initially in two parts: 'Milton's Daughters: I (Context)' and 'Milton's Daughters: II (The Prototypes)' and dated 'February 26, 2003'. The early version included details revealing a sensitivity, and even anger, partially concealed in the final poem. She muses,

Was it a meek sacrifice?
a Puritan, meticulous obeying of
the 5th commandment? (unpublished draft, Margaret Avison Collection,
University of Manitoba)

(*MD* 46-48) imaginatively picks up where the biblical text ends, probing the woman's particular circumstance. The poem opens with a puzzling aphorism:

The labourer
in a constructed wilderness
is sometimes desiccated,

possibly connected to Jesus's discussion with his disciples while the woman is in the city telling of her conversation with Jesus: 'I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour', Jesus says (Jn. 4.38). 'Wilderness' and 'hot noon', of course, carry metaphorical meaning particularly for this Samaritan woman with her sultry history. Avison's summary captures the woman's 'constructed wilderness' and 'desiccated' outcome:

"I'm weightless, rootless. There's not a breath
stirring, to move me. If
only I could have one last
sip of life! Then
let it be night. For good".

She was
human.

The theological discussion she has had with Jesus, not the focal point of the poet's attention, is assumed but not re-constructed in the poem. The woman's subsequent testimony, however, is charged with energy in its compression:

And then
she ran off.

(Who'd listen
to her?) But her shouts
caught many. Some
had heard about him and ran
with the others, reckless in that
punishing sun.

The woman's formal witness, her going and telling, is complete, but her life still goes on. Avison's familiar 'eye is astray' ('Poetry Is' *MD* 27-28). The poet is concerned with the aftermath of the woman's 'labour' and witness and what has happened in her complicated life. In contrast to the 'hot noon' of the title, the event is over and now

[i]n the cool of the evening, in twos and threes
they left, he with his friends.
She watched them fade from view,
sighed, headed her own

way, all but alone. Tomorrow,
or ever, would this day
have to be
remembered? As are
those surprises that
linger, faintly strange and
bright like yesterday's stars
and planets? (MD 46-48)

The poem continues to focus on the woman's awareness both of the unique connection with Jesus and her usual aloneness. She wonders how or if her struggle with relationship (her 'constructed wilderness') will change after her conversation with Jesus. 'What makes a human being co- / alesce with the other'? the poet speaks for the woman. The poem's closing stanza anchors the conversion of the woman in terms of everyday living.

The transformation is a work of art not without struggle:

How does the sequel go
after the story we've heard? Fidelity
tomorrow? or a naturally
unsupported, solitary,
gradually less and less
defensive life? with
reverence now for
anyone human,
even herself.

Visually, the decreasing lines places the emphasis on the gradual healing of the woman's own psyche. This re-telling of the story is the poet faithful to who she is and how she sees. Here again she expresses her own longing for authentic utterance.

6.2.2 Social Consciousness Integral to Witness

Strong indicators of witness faithful to Avison's own passions and commitments are poems that draw on a highly developed and sensitive social conscience. One of the many contradictions that characterize the poet is her seemingly elitist poetry in its difficulty and inaccessibility embracing the world of the city's poor and disenfranchised. This disparity is shown in an early poem 'Far Off from University'²⁵ (AN 1.130), in both the title which announces the polarization between the world of the

²⁵ The poem was originally titled 'June at Christmas'. The new title obviously nuances a different contrast.

educated and elite and the poor and the homeless, and in the colourful and eloquent language describing the ‘smouldering derelict caboose’:

the counter-confessional priest
at daybreak through limp whites
showed the sharp scapulae
turned from his greased grill to take cash
and at the doorway, with his spatula
pointed, past sheds and fluted morning pigeons,
across the shining steel of crisscross tracks, to
the villainous hovel still sodden in night,
in spite of wire-thrum and the sky’s empty clamshell.

There are startling religious overtones in the scene (and hence, its original title) that connect the poor with the One who was born among them and shows favour to them (Lk. 1.52-53):

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.

The tenderness in this strange lyric reveals a sensibility of one attuned to the city’s hidden poor, an awareness which emerged early in Avison’s life. In her anonymous article, ‘I Couldn’t Have My Cake and Eat It’, she reflects on the profound effect of two experiences of her adolescence, The Depression and illness (anorexia), when she explains how

I first knew people who knew real hunger, real want. Then I began to walk, for hours: city walks that bared the truly grim time this was for many. I saw solitary frayed bony men staring in bakeshop windows, standing out in the dirty snow. Everything was dirty snow at that time for me. I thought the answer was easy: give all we had away at once, and it would be all daffodils tomorrow ...
I stopped eating; I stopped enjoying. I wanted to be lost with the stunted frail creature with wrists like sticks out of raveled sweater-cuffs whom I walked and walked among on the dirty streets around the idle and empty mills and railroad tracks.²⁶ (1968a:90)

The poet’s awareness of the poor took on practical significance in the various stages of her nomadic career. Particularly in the decades following the publication of *Winter Sun*

²⁶ Avison sounds strikingly similar to Simone Weil. ‘At the age of five, she refused to eat sugar as long as the soldiers at the front were not able to get it. The war had brought the sense of human misery into her protected milieu for the first time, and her typical pattern of response was already set: to deny herself what the most unfortunate were unable to enjoy,’ writes Leslie Fiedler, in his Introduction to *Waiting for God* (1973: 14).

in 1960 and her conversion to Christianity in 1963 she engaged in employment that registered her solidarity with the underprivileged.²⁷ She spent a year writing abstracts for *The Research Compendium* of the University's School of Social Work, published in 1964. She first volunteered at Evangel Hall, an inner city mission run by Knox Presbyterian church on Spadina in Toronto, as a 'women's worker', and then worked full time there from 1968 to 1973. From 1978 to her retirement in 1986 she worked as a secretary to another outreach organization, Mustard Seed Mission. One co-worker at Evangel Hall writes about the poet:

Margaret loved and understood the characters at the Mission. She identified with their poverty, mental illness and aloneness. For one of the Mission's windows, Margaret wanted to write, You don't have to go it alone" ... Margaret Avison's life has been like a [sic] effulgent rainbow arching over brilliant and illiterate minds and the poorest of the poor. (McIlveen)

In her article '... at least we are together', Avison outlines the complexity of issues confronting the city's poor. To begin, she asserts, 'To have choices is the luxury out of reach of "the poor", isn't it?' (1970-71:15), and then proceeds to identify the maze of difficulties the 'poor' must navigate in their subsistence living. She muses on the difficult relationship between the 'helpers' and the ones who need 'help'. Her lyric 'Needy' (AN 2.83) articulates one of these painful specifics:

"The poor are always being
inspected: by the
Fire Department, for litter, oily rags, those
lamp-cords from the washing-machine to
the hall ceiling socket, etc.;
by the
'worker' with new forms
to be written on;
by the
mission visitor 'to invite
you to the children's pageant';
somebody even inspects
to check on whether it's true you keep chickens and goats"!

²⁷ David Kent reminded me that this was not a new emphasis for her. '[S]ome of her earlier empathy took the form of political activism (with the CCF, for example. The *Research Compendium* project was published in 1964, but the offer was made to her in June 1962 and a year later the work was "nearly done", according to letters I've seen' (remarks in response to an early draft of this chapter, 25 October 2009).

The irony of the poem is contained in the social worker's freedom 'to need yet never be / needy'. Yet, the inequalities do not excuse non-involvement. She continues in '... at least we are together':

our corporate sin is very great, as we demonstrate in society by inhibiting some people's social choices. This is the why of corporate social action by the church. Contrition is only the first step. The evils of oppression go on. And we must go on "working out our salvation", i.e. experimenting and exploring to find the Way here too to go and sin no more. (1970-71:15)

Her lyrics recognizing and giving dignity to the poor and honouring those who are of like mind are not many in her total collection, but they stand out in their candour and passion. When she grieves for her dead friend in the elegiac 'Jo Poems' (*AN* 2.115-37), she eulogizes one who did 'much good' in

tough-minded steps towards
protection for the most exposed,
e.g. the night-shift dishwashers etc.
 who come and go within a week
 too ill too far forgotten
 to care that "no work" is
 also "the worst", or maybe
 simply not able to recall
 which all night spot it was
 they should be turning up tonight.

The vivid picture of the exploited night worker is given a place of honour in her commemoration of her friend. In the sketch 'A Work Gang on Sherbourne and Queen, Across from a Free Hostel for Men' (*AN* 2.18), the poet offers a sympathetic picture of the destitute men reminiscent of Gloucester's despairing comment in *King Lear*: 'as flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods; / they kill us for their sport' (*Lear* 4.1.37-38).

Avison sees similarly:

The hostel's winter flies
where morning spills them out
fumble, undisturbed
by street or curb.

She is dignifying Mr. Jollyben's courageous suffering in 'Diminuendo' (*AN* 1.36-37), living in the highrise where

(there are no
windows in that seven-storey wall, none
at all),

and where he is unable

to tilt
a human face
as the earth's face is tilted early, early,
into the pineboard light.

'Simon: finis' (*AN* 1.220), '[b]one rick man on an iron cot [...] / laid out now in his tatters' at last receives acknowledgement in his final 'gradual smile'. Perhaps the most memorable portrait of the urban poor is her 'July Man' '[o]ld, rain-wrinkled, time-soiled, city-wise, morning man' (*AN* 1.160).²⁸

While needs are pressing, she does not sentimentalize the disenfranchised. For example, she acknowledges in her role as a social worker that sinners and rascals hide among the poor. Her lyric 'For a Con Artist, Who Had Given / the Worker a False Address' (*AN* 2.161-62) speaks of limited expectations as she makes a home visit:

and there
was nobody that name there
since, or before of course,

and the writer

contemplates the absurd [...]
and her not on this street but somewhere,
indulged, a little, at least
for now.

Furthermore, needs overlap and city issues are muddled. In 'Exchanges and Changes' (*MD* 77-78) there are many 'sufferer[s] of cities'.

[H]ear me for
green pastures are
everywhere despoiled.

While she is lamenting deep environmental concerns, the poor intrude:

"Change,
please", chants the street-corner fellow.
Doesn't he know the
verb is transitive? "Change
my lot with a quarter
of your huge holdings! Change
my role, make me a
giver who keeps back
only the minimal means for a
simple life. I'd like
to look employable again, in time to
work again".

And then change everything
with not a single despoiler's energies

²⁸ See Chapter 4.2, for an extended discussion of 'July Man' 'a stillness, a pivot'.

agglomerating, ever
again.

While the expression of her empathy with the poor is compelling, as noted above, it is not her last word on the subject. Avison's poems about the poor extend beyond human empathy and sympathy. Her Christian witness is more complex, as she suggests in the narrative of her own journey:

I wish I had known that Jesus really did become one with them, with me too. And that nobody else needs to do it, nobody can do it any more than we can be good. We can be with Him, beyond His Cross because we come to Him there to accept the exchanged lots, our death, His life. And then there is a way of getting to be where His suffering goes—but this I only begin to glimpse ... (1968a:90)

In spite of her deep commitment to serving the 'needy' and vulnerable poor, she recognizes the fundamental limitation of the will 'to be good' or the will to serve. Only the Saviour of the world can truly save.²⁹ She suggests in 'Psalm 80:1—"Thou that dwellest between the cherubim, shine forth!"' (*AN* 2.85)³⁰ who takes responsibility for the poor—whether literal or figurative:

You know, Lord, You know us
out in the dark and cold—
and never planned to leave us out
although shut out of old.

[.....]

We didn't know You, Jesus.
You came out in the night
and poked around the side streets
to bring us to Your light.

We waited where the wind blew
and knifed You in the rain.
Yet You still know who's scared and cold
and doesn't dare complain [...].

The same theme of divine partnership is delicately introduced mid-point in part six of the 'Jo Poems' (*AN* 2.115-37). She begins the section with another short eulogy mixed with critique of government and society who has failed the poor:

Daily and lifelong, Josephine,
you gave voice to the mute
hoping the deaf would hear, who all

²⁹ As George MacDonald tells his charge in Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, 'Only the greatest of all can make Himself small enough to enter Hell' (2001:139).

³⁰ See Appendix 6.2 for the complete poem.

too easily, in affluent times,
relegated the poor to a category
(the “residual poverty” of efficient,
ah, and political, theory).

With only a simple typographical marker to indicate a new theme, the poet seemingly changes the subject:

Having

Sir, you have nothing
the woman said
Nothing to dip into water
or carry water in [...]

As the next stanza talks about the cooperation of sky and earth in the changes of the seasons, the familiar story of the woman at the well of John 4 is evoked, allusively suggesting the One who gave the Samaritan woman’s life meaning and allowed her to serve him.

The heart listens.

“You have a cup
when I have nothing.
Both must be
for still refreshing overflowing new-day
joy to be”.

‘Giving voice to the mute’, in spite of obstacles, is a witness with its clear reward of companionship in shared purpose. The refrain ending the lyric, ‘Psalm 80:1—“Thou that dwellest between the cherubim, shine forth!”’ (*AN* 2.85-86), carries a confidence in the sense of solidarity both with the poor and with the ‘Lord of Heaven’ who watches over the lowly.

Some You have given food and warmth
now can go back out to
be with You in the darkness,
vagrants, focused on You –

[.....]

Bless us, Lord of Heaven,
Bless us, Mary’s child,
and keep our courage high with You
through steep and storm and wild.

The poet sees that sharing in Christ's suffering is an ongoing experience, a journey into and in 'the darkness', and it is somehow connected with His concern for those 'out in the dark and cold' (*AN* 2.85-86).

'Cross Cultural or Towards Burnout' (*AN* 3.48-49),³¹ a later poem, evokes a different situation altogether, raising a troubling spectre for Avison, friend of the poor. Instead of the knowledge of 'at least we are together', she is drawn into the critical divide between cultures—once a far off reality, now plainly visible in a city in multi-cultural flux. The dominant word in the poem is rage:

Your rage is bearable
[...] yet your rage hurts / [...]
We are outraged at your
raw grief
[...] Therefore your rage is the long held under
knowledge [...]

She is facing her unwitting involvement with social injustice:

A post-colonial white woman, I am
therefore a thing-hog,
easy taker-for-granted, helpless
to unmake the bed
others made for me, even before
grandpa (and even he was
simply another fellow working long hours,
kindly respectful, whether paid or not).
And I lie, tossing, in that
incontestably comfortable bed.

The witness in the poem is suggested in her confrontation with the biblical text, first through the prophet's announcement of judgement of one culture by another—a judgement ordained by a God who understands the slave's suffering and calls the exploiter(s) to account: 'Through Jeremiah I had / faced up to God's fierce anger'. Then the poet curiously submits herself to the other woman's rage—perhaps because she has already experienced the judgement of God in her knowledge of Christ.

Therefore your rage is the
long held under
knowledge of the holy child's
knowledge of
the spittle, the
flogged back, the suave

³¹ See Appendix 6.2 for complete text.

manipulator's deathly mockery,
present, every wracked
generation, as if helplessly.

In the meantime, two separate single-line stanzas frame the vision of a future judgement on her own culture ('Ours', she emphasizes) which has exploited another. Her admission, 'Your work is dark and bitter', is countered ambiguously with 'Our God endures'. The poem is a sombre one as its title suggests '... Towards Burnout' and as its closing lines reinforce, with only one word 'restoration' hinting at some possible hope:

The sentinel trees
on a far hilly ridge
remind us of perennial
destruction, restoration, on
wave lengths much too vast to ease
you and the child today
or us into tomorrow.

As usual, she speaks with frankness and troubled honesty, admitting no ready solution—only recognition of the divide between her and the one she wishes could be in solidarity with her.

It is a short distance in Avison's poetic vision between concerns for the marginalized and the poor and the world's careless treatment of the earth. In 'Transients' (*AN* 2.88), she dryly observes that

The affluent city shaves the turfs
(laid one sun-streamy March morning)
by tractor-mower, tenders them chlorinated
and fluoridated rain from
sunken spigots,

only to be later undone by 'a high-rise / enterprising developer' who

uproots
the lawnstuff, uncouples the subsurface
aqueduct system.

The city does its part as it

lays and trims and turfs up and
replenishes and hardens in vacant lots and
parking lots.

The comment carries with it an undertone of critique: ‘We are forever / doing, done-to’.

In ‘Exchanges and Changes’ (*MD* 77-78) years later, there is less patience with the obsessive activity:

Sufferer of cities, hear me for
green pastures are
everywhere despoiled. Cement and paving
seal off the hope of
loam for more than our
sons’ and daughters’ lifetimes.

She holds out hope in ‘We Are Not Desecrators’ (*AN* 3.36), observing that ‘[m]y kind
out there sullies / it all, as I do being here’. Yet, ‘[a]fter a noisy night of rain / sun comes
flooding’, suggests

Yet we, providing an unlikely
context for miracle, maybe, alone
are inwardly kindled.

Or again, in ‘The Implicit City’ (*MD* 39-40), by its comparison to the future city of
God:

Yet O my city, rich as
fistfuls of raisins, down here
already, are you not,
in spite of the
rancid smell, the milling of
every sprig that has
found its foothold through a
broken sidewalk,
are you not, in
some breathtakingly
scary or brilliant moment
momentarily touched by,
bathed in,
a far-breathed holiness?

Nevertheless, she accepts a prophet’s responsibility to speak out and call for change.
This speaking out is part of her role as witness. ‘Ecologist’s Song’ (*AN* 2.266) is perhaps her most overt announcement of and call for concern and acknowledgement of its witness. Her opening lines of the poem have a sense of nostalgia: ‘Sometimes, where the sky bent brown / above a creased doeskin of new earth’ is reminiscent of Hopkins’s reverence of an ever-revitalizing nature:

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. (Hopkins
1995:114)

But here there is not that hope as ‘pillars plunge upwards, and through the thinning air / the pelting hail sweeps down’. In the initial indications of trouble, the tension between the beauty of creation and its damage is almost indecipherable in the eloquent language describing the ‘[a]bsorbing, glittering’ ‘beach at noon / welter[ing] with silence’. Earth receives its wounds without complaint like the poor who have no voice. Someone has to speak for it:

There a separate pool
has formed, plum-coloured, richer than water, cool,
shadowed by stillness in the naked sun.
A sudden gust whisks a gold shower
of stinging sand on the dark sheen.

Who brings the petals, cupped and shyly white?
Why are they bruised?
Who glassblows dew shaking the droplets out
to burn in icy leaf-tip and grass-blade
clear of the clustering wood?

Avison warns of the interconnectedness of pollution in one part of the ‘lovely planet’ affecting the rest:

Everywhere’s ocean of sun, late-flowing, knows
the dark tides too, the netted shores
of land and air wrapping the lovely planet
round, and one knot of the net
loosed, one strand plucked in the net,
wake resonances through the hemispheres.

Therefore, she announces emphatically, ‘Attend. Attend’. ‘[H]ere is / significant witness of an event’. The damaged earth shows its wounds and she speaks for it.

In ‘Seer, Seeing’ (*AN* 3.60-62), the poet continues to wrestle with the fact of collective guilt—of unintentional responsibility, but this time she invokes biblical authority.

Institutions have all the words, but
there’s not an institution speaks for
you, or for me hearkening for you,

she tells the prophet Amos,

any more than for
her, left alive, with listening eyes

sitting amid a strew of
bodies where a passing gust
ruffles, idly.

She works her way through Amos's 'tides of holy anger' as he sees ancient Israel's complacency and self-indulgence. She distills the prophet's words of judgement, 'I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end, says the Lord' (Amos 3.15), to the terse announcement: 'Tear down / Tear down'. She applies his vision to her twentieth century world:

Din into my ears
your dirge, Amos. Set my last
gaze on
a whole people convulsed [...]

She is disgusted by an abused environment and damaged people and cannot contain herself:

I cannot yet
see, my vision blurred by vapour trails,
riot-torn cities' smoke,
hot breathings from cored mountains,
oh, by the too-late industries
puncturing pre-sunset smog
seeking too late to trans-
mogrify tropical and
other swarming nowheres to
spitefully replicate club men
and women and their
clubs and memories.

Amos, she recognizes, is a model in his role as prophet: He is a modest spokesperson seeking nothing for himself: 'I am no prophet ... I am a herdsman, ... and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel"' (Amos.7.14). He speaks confidently of the one he represents—'the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, reveals his thoughts to mortals' (Amos 4.13). The prophet employs dramatic and powerful language in his passion for justice. He condemns 'the cows of Bashan' who 'oppress the poor' (Amos 4.1). He speaks God's words, 'I hate, I despise your festivals ... Take away from me the noise of your songs ... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream' (Amos 6.21, 23, 24). His words of hope speak

of restoration for the land: ‘The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it … they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards … they shall make gardens and eat their fruit’ (Amos 9.13, 14). This range of language, both harsh and beautiful, establishes a pattern of witness to emulate in her own generation and place. But it is the mixture of pain and hope in the Old Testament prophet that speaks most to her and finally through her:

And yet I see you
banking on seed and
embers and all through
the world of bombast and
frozen-eyed bewilderment,
and torn inside too
by your own torrent of words,
all through, you resolutely breathed in
sun and rain’s sweetness
with simple joy [...]

This strange combination of ‘torn inside’ and ‘resolutely breathed in’ ‘with simple joy’ points to the familiar paradoxical way of thinking and experiencing life that so characterizes the colourful prophet.

6.2.3 Words as Pointers Rather than Weapons

As important as her independence of spirit and social conscience are in understanding Avison’s witness, it is in her view of language, ‘Adam’s lexicon’ (*AN* 1.71) and her ‘working tools’ (Avison & Martin, 2005:74), that her witness is most distinctive and individual. When an interviewer questions her about the ‘deeply provocative statement’ from ‘A Kept Secret’ (*AN* 3.96) —

Darkness is changed
once it is comprehended; it becomes
knowledge, beyond our reach—

she dodges the religious subtext in the question (Avison & Martin, 2005:74). She describes the process of arriving at that observation: ‘I vividly remember the superb moment which occasioned that poem: a large bird flew up into a tree, and the combined play of tree-shadow and sun, darkness and light, were part of the exhilaration of the event’. She goes on to explain,

Poetry can use concepts without taking them too seriously, as in this poem. I was writing poetically, not philosophically, even though “comprehended” might seem to refer to Isaiah’s statement [Isa. 9. 2 perhaps]?³² The poem merely tries to express the wonder of creation as seen in a flash. (Avison & Martin, 2005:74)

While the poem obviously explores different kinds of metaphorical darknesses—

The dark was not
Thomas Hardy’s not
the West’s gaunt watershed:
bedaubed everyman, ducking
from any horizon—

she insists the poem’s fundamental focus is not philosophical (or theological or apologetic) analysis. The arena of persuasion, argument and apologetics is not the domain of her lyrics. ‘Writing poetically’ is some other process. ‘It is a truism’, William Butt notes, ‘that poetry does not urge or require belief; that is the task of rhetoric’ (2001:839). Even if her poetry finally convinces a reader to take the claims of Christianity seriously and to respond to Jesus’s invitation, ‘Follow me’, the primary impulse of her lyrics cannot be said to be specifically rhetorical or persuasive. She writes as a poet and she is a witness as a poet. Consequently, in her witness, her words are not weapons,³³ but rather pointers. In fact, she is unhappy when she sees poetry put to other uses. In her poem ‘Songs’ (*MD* 32-33), she is troubled by poetry celebrating the triumph of warfare. As she wonders how the connection comes about, her attitude of mourning and disapproval over both the exploitation of language and the triumph of one people over another is unmistakable:

The source of song – by the brook Kishon, by
the waters of Megiddo – ancient records
gloat over, appropriating all
the conquered’s inclement cruelties.
[...]

Why is a peaceable company nourished on the
songs of railroad strikers, of
shipwrecks, disastrous cyclones, fires
engulfing whole communities [...]

Is the clemency

³² ‘The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined’ (Isa. 9.2).

³³ Again I am drawing on the comment of Wilhelm Hermann, ‘Knowledge of God is the expression of religious experience wholly without weapons’ extended by Barth to the understanding of the limitation of apologetics. I referred to this idea in the Introduction.

all in the singing narrative?
[...]

Too many long
(foolishly) for the
right-angled, upright, sovereign voice, the
singing celebrant, one foot up on
the prone subjected first.

In contrast to ‘Songs’, in her earlier poem from *The Dumbfounding*, ‘Words’ (*AN* 1.161), she demonstrates a happy coincidence of ‘heart-warmed lungs’ and ‘de-ciphering heart’. While the opposite seems to be suggested in the poem’s opening stanza with its metaphor of heraldry and its peculiar language of warfare, old and new, the first line hints at a different direction in its ‘breath-clouded brass’:

Heraldry is breath-clouded brass,
blood-rusted silks, gold-pricked even threadbare
memorials of honour
worn
a shield when napalm and germ-caps and fission are
eyeless towards colour, bars, quarterings.

The second stanza, in its change of the form of the word—‘heraldry’ to ‘herald’—totally alters the connotations accompanying it, as nature’s creatures and creation take on the role of voicing (and ‘revoicing’ in the later poem ‘Knowing the New’ *AN* 3.28) ‘daybreaking glory’:

A herald blares in a daybreaking
glory, or foolishly carols –
robin under a green sky – or, a
green earth-breaking tip, is still
but with bodily stillness, not the
enemy’s voicelessness.

‘The enemy’s voicelessness’ has been neutralized by speech, but with a sense of life-giving joy rather than triumphant defeat. This combination of ‘still / but with bodily stillness’ of ‘green earth-breaking tip’ with the ‘herald blaring’ of the ‘robin under a green sky’ is repeated over and over in Avison’s celebratory poems of trees and birds. See, for example, ‘Patience’ (*AN* 2.140), ‘April’ (*AN* 2.157) ‘Timing’ (*AN* 2.169) and ‘Knowing the New’ (*AN* 3.28). But it is in the human expression of words that ‘[t]he ancient, the new, / confused in speech, breathe on’ most vividly, even intimating

perhaps the connection between the ‘ancient scriptures’ and the new and modern witness:

involving
heart-warmed lungs, the reflexes
of uvula, shaping tongue, teeth, lips,
ink, eyes, and de-
ciphering heart.

At the same time, this distinction of poetic witness merely pointing toward Christ is not diminishing poetry’s impact of witness. In that much earlier and important statement—‘When he is writing poetry, a person is at his most intense, his most clear-sighted’ (1944:67)³⁴—Avison, speaking as both a poet and critic, insists on a distinct validity, even superiority, of poetry’s ‘pressure-point of crystallization’ (1944:67). Writing poetically may mean paradoxically both more and less than she suggests. It may ‘merely try to express’ one thing, as she qualifies her intention in ‘A Kept Secret’ (*AN* 3.96) for the interviewer quoted above; but it may do far more in the process.

Her major prose statements about her view of language—all statements well-mined by her critics and admirers—may clarify how her witness unfolds in her poetry. Both sound and sense are essential considerations and she speaks of both. When her university professor Northrop Frye speaks of ‘a concentration of sound and ambiguity of sense … full of puns and verbal echoes’ in ‘the oracular associative process that we identified as one of the initiatives of lyric’ in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (293-94),³⁵ Avison implies something similar in her description of her writing method as ‘writing with my ear’ (Avison & Ito, 2002b:170), repeating the same assertion she had made in her letter to Mazoff earlier (1990). Responding to one interviewer, the poet explains:

Sounds in poetry are musical, words are primarily tactile: to paraphrase some French writer, a writer’s words are primarily not the ones in the dictionary, but the ones he knows from the reverse side where he can feel their surfaces, texture, knobbiness, curves … Playing with sound and texture becomes instinctive. (Avison & Ito, 2002b:170)

³⁴ See Chapter 1.2 for an initial reference to this quotation.

³⁵ (quoted by Butt, 2001:843).

The poet Carmine Starnino, sensitive to Avison's aesthetic considerations, recognizes her commitment to writing with her ear. Starnino comments on her 'unremitting inventiveness' and 'encoding her devotion in distinctive and compelling language', insisting that 'Avison is a poet who, first and foremost, lets herself be led by sounds, so that her assertions, however theological, are always authenticated by her ear' (2006:143). In his admiration of her accomplishment, he suggests, 'No Canadian poet has pushed to such an extreme the relationship of form to content ... reading her poems always leaves our relationship with language somewhat re-angled' (2006:143). It is obvious Starnino's interest is in what her faith experiences does to her unusual poetry as he uses the language of 'spiritualized syntax' (2006:143)³⁶ in speaking of poetry revolutionized by her witness. He challenges the fundamental thematic emphasis (ironically, an approach I have taken throughout this essay in my focus on the witness of the poetry) in what he notes is in the 'ear of such a style' (2006:142).

[T]he "Christianity" of Avison's poems isn't seen to rest in any self-evidently formal trait. The poems are instead read backwards from her faith. That is, they are read thematically ... as quirky memorable, fiercely individualistic networks of image and syntax. Christianity, however, did more than just flavour Avison's poetry with unfashionable surmises; it revolutionized it. (2006:140)

If the music of her poetry—if indeed, that is part of 'writing with the ear'—is one outcome of her Christian faith experience, as Starnino seems to suggest, it is a possible corollary that her 'poetry's sharp, uncommon notes' and 'acoustic value' (2006:141) contribute in some intangible way towards her witness. The poet's love of language in its varied sounds may be a means of drawing readers to its intrinsically linked sense of 'Avison's veer towards God' (Starnino, 2006:140).

When Avison herself speaks of 'writing with my ear in our good language' (Avison & Martin, 2005:76), she is calling attention to her lifelong affection for words. One of her earlier prose statements announces her understanding of what a poet does:

³⁶ Robert Merritt in 'Faithful Unpredictability: Syntax and Theology in Margaret Avison's Poetry' in Kent (1987:82-110) suggests something similar as he discovers a 'theological strategy' in her grammar.

‘Any Canadian writer, for example, is aware of a scuffle to find his own words, his own idiom … In trying to find his language-level, then, a Canadian poet is trying to assert both an identity and an aesthetic’ (1959:182). Years later, speaking to a university audience in the Pascal lectures, she comments on her sensitivity to words: ‘In everyday, received languages, as one linguist put it, “all grammars leak”; they lack ultimate precision, much of the vocabulary being poetry, i.e. metaphor, stained with history and faraway cultures’ (1994b:37). Later in the lectures, she reiterates the observation: ‘What an awesome phenomenon language is, an echo chamber of ancestral insights³⁷ and of our human psyches’ (1994b:73). In the interview with Sally Ito, Avison speaks of ‘“lyric flow” as part of [her] poetry in youth’ (Avison & Ito, 2002b:160, 168) eventually followed by ‘a more deliberate style’ when ‘word, music, word sounds, images no longer simply cluster’ (2002b:169). ‘[L]ife experience and aging led to delight in words’ derivations and histories’ (2002b:160). In each of these observations and in either phase, ‘lyric’ or ‘deliberate’, the writer is not interested in using words as weapons.

Rather, the poet invests her energy, delighting in and scuffling with words, as Jon Kertzer writes, to identify ‘how she regards words: how they assert, convey, conduct, contain, create, direct, or reveal meaning’ (1987:10). In his essay ‘Margaret Avison and the Place of Meaning’, he demonstrates the shift he sees in her view of language that occurred with her Christian conversion:

Before, she looks inward for the place of meaning as well as outward at the world, coordinating the two by means of the “inrushing floodlight of imagination” [quoting from a letter to Cid Corman]. After, she continues to rely on the imagination, but directs it upward, subordinating it to the revelation of “the flower-light of Beyond” [‘Midsummer Christmas’ *AN* 2.100]. (1987:10)

Perhaps Kertzer has stopped too soon in tracing her ‘place of meaning’. ‘Upward’ replaced ‘inward’ in her imaginative focus; in her experience of life in Christ,

³⁷ Avison sounds very similar to Owen Barfield in his colourful image of ‘metaphor bending over the cradle of meaning’ (Barfield, 1973:88). Kertzer interprets Barfield as offering a theory of language where ‘words contain their past. They have a “soul” which is dormant, but which the poet can revive’ (1987:11-12).

‘downward’—to the city in which she lives—has followed ‘upward’. As the poet seeks to ‘go and tell’, passing on that discovery of meaning, she maintains a respectful and unmeasured openness to further discovery, dialogue and understanding.

Avison’s appreciation for language is an open window, allowing breezes to blow in, softening the human impulse to dogmatism and that ‘right-angled, upright, sovereign voice’ (*MD* 32-33). Several of her later poems, some whimsical, speak of this consummate commitment to respect for the ‘other’. She introduces the ‘artless art’ of children who

contrive
a secret language? – nobody “else” to know
the key, for ever. (*AN* 3.46)

In ‘Relating’ (*AN* 3.135-36) she observes an ant, reflecting on the limitation in communicating between two parties. Even more important, she recognizes she has only a partial understanding of the significance of living side by side in ‘unsegmented, unsmall / shared reality’:

Many speak languages
I’ve never learned.
Is your being one
pictograph, seed of a
word, the gateway to
a language nobody speaks?
So none can read this
unsegmented, unsmall
shared reality.

The radii of power
are focused down and in
on you and me over our
warped little shadows; they
adjust, this midday instant, to
us, moving [...]

She introduces her portrait-poem ‘To Wilfred Cantwell Smith’, author of such books as *Patterns of Faith Around the World* and *On Understanding Islam*, Professor of Comparative Religion, and new friend in her seniors residence, with an epigraph she says ‘records one comment he made in passing’:

When asked, What is an intellectual? he said: “An intellectual is a participant in his own society, listening to people. That kind of truth cannot be put anywhere by us, not in words, never put in its place. The human mind can apprehend, not comprehend”. (*AN* 3.171-72)

The mixture of humility and intellect he embodies attracts the poet's attention and clarifies afresh her self-understanding as a witness. Again, the three very different poems—‘Artless Art’ (*AN* 3.46), ‘Relating’ (*AN* 3.135-36) and ‘To Wilfred Cantwell Smith’ (*AN* 3.171-72)—affirm her attitude of openness and respectful dialogue. The language of both speaker and listener shapes the witnessing act. The telling presupposes first a listening which is an apprehension, not a comprehension. What is contrived in fun for the child—the secret language (*AN* 3.46)—is a limiting reality for the adult musing on ‘the warped little shadows’ of both person and ant (*AN* 3.135-36) who can only imaginatively communicate. Language both isolates and unites, hides and reveals, confuses and explains. ‘We say we “see”, at moments of understanding. But we do not see with the multi-faceted eyes an insect brings to the act’, Avison tells her intellectual audience in the Pascal lectures. ‘Our limitations, once we acknowledge them, liberate us to steady plodding, and occasional awe’ (1994b:68). Now in her portrait of one with his knowledge of multiple languages in ‘To Wilfred Cantwell Smith’ (*AN* 3.171-72), she can both identify those limitations and speak of one who has the ‘de-ciphering heart’ (*AN* 1.161) to transcend them:

Our native language shapes us, does it not
even as it shapes itself upon the page?
The languages you've learned, in life and college,
carve and emboss characters in your thought?

Hebrew's ornate iron, its quirks around the line
(vocal or consonant) in you have wrought
the odd intransigent openness – and untaught
much we grew up to mimic – or disdain.

Myopic, skeptical, sometimes distraught,
slowly your readers see ourselves as foreign,
trotting for safety through our little warren
of walled ways. Now, perilously, we're out

in a big world of foreigners, finding that they are not!
Ink on white paper keeps informing those
who learn, to listen long, until there glows
within the friendly signs of being understood [...]

Avison's celebration of this irenic and gentle scholar provides a description of characteristics and attitudes that make witnessing even possible: an 'odd intransigent openness', a re-learning (a process described as 'untaught') of much that reflects 'myopic, skeptical, sometimes distraught' behaviour, a reinterpretation of what is foreign, an absorption of learning and listening, 'until there glows / within the friendly signs of being understood' or 'what's been sought / within shines there'.

This sensitivity towards language enables the witness to know when to withhold words and be silent.

Come, quietness, to the man
love-wrung and turbulent
and alone.

Come, largeness [...]

she intones in 'In Truth' (*AN* 1.188-89). 'Words are too many. In this place / loss is torn'. Again, in 'There Are No Words For' (*AN* 3.25), she pictures a scene of pain where '[t]wo together / each quite alone' 'now frozen out by / that odd proscenium, privacy, respected'. The poem concludes,

Having no words is not
safe. It is
then the only good.

'When Their Little Girl Had Just Died' (*AN* 3.26) suggests a similar call for silence:

Does pain prise people apart?
It can.
[...]
None can give counsel re the split
to two, lopped so [...].

There is unspoken but acceptable irony in these calls for no words in delicately crafted word-filled lyrics, articulating obvious empathy by one who understands language—here, a peculiar language of silence.

One of her most provocative prose observations is tucked into an early review of another poet. '[E]verybody's speech is defective', she avers; and poets need to

'discipline speech into clarity' (1948:191).³⁸ There is irony again, of course, in Avison's perception of clarity, for her disciplined speech is filled with ambiguity and often indeterminate meaning, or at best, nuanced in puzzling ways that belie what is usually meant by 'clarity'. A stanza, a phrase, a line, even a word of her verse can evade confident interpretation. She comments on the writer's intentions of 'precision' as she compares sonnets to butterfly specimens in jars in 'Butterfly Bones: Sonnet against Sonnets' (AN 1.71):

The sweep-net skill,
the patience, learning, leave all living stranger.
Insect – or poem – wait for the fix, the frill
precision can effect, brilliant with danger.

Ambiguity rings in the multiple metaphors and uncertain syntax of 'leave all living stranger'; 'brilliant with danger' is equally puzzling in the odd connection of adjective and noun. The metaphor in the title of her essay 'Muse of Danger' inviting connection between poem and witness is the same sort of clarifying puzzle. David Kent suggests a motive in his 1989 overview of her published works:

Her own work only occasionally fulfils her Eliotesque definition of poetry given in 1948: "to discipline speech into clarity" ... that is because of her effort to make reading an act of imaginative and moral discrimination prompted by a poetry as fraught with ambiguity, multivalency, and motion as experience itself (1989:20).

This explanation can speak to Avison's religious experience as well. Clarity for her is the articulation of the radiating mystery of the God who can only be partially known and understood and expressed. 'How can we catch the illimitable in our little bottles?' she queries (1994b:64-65). Clarity is an opening out, an enlarging of vision even as she seeks 'precision with particulars' and 'spacious thinking across centuries' (1994b:65). Starnino admires her 'determination to compress the language into fierce oddities' in her 'tireless search for the form most fit to recall the passion of Christ' (2006:143). In a similar vein, she speaks to Sally Ito in her 2005 interview of her motivation to write her

³⁸ The context of the statement is a review of *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* by A. M. Klein. 'Like Demosthenes, Mr. Klein knows that everybody's speech is defective, and he has in his humility accepted Demosthenes' corrective pebbles ... that their whole purpose is to discipline speech into clarity' (Nov. 1948) p. 191.

‘Job: Word and Action’ poem (*AN* 3.102-115) where the search is for the subject to match her experience: ‘For this poem, my search was for God, THE Friend. Underlying it was a recurring incredulity about the Father’s love for me, I think’ (Avison & Ito, 2002b:169).³⁹

Another more elusive quest is implied in the lyric ‘Concert’ (*AN* 3.65),⁴⁰ summing up her desire for clarity and simplicity all the while engaging the reader in her perpetual maze of wondering and wandering enquiry:

Learning, I more and more
long for that simplicity,
clarity, that willingness
to speak (from anonymity...)
all those impenetrables, when words
are more like bluebell petals under
an absorbed heaven.

You fret because the underbrush
is dense, the way uncleared it seems
where you now find yourself?

In her longing, the poet-witness now raises as many questions as she answers. To whom is she speaking—the ‘you’ ‘fret[ting] because the underbrush is dense’ in the second stanza? What is she learning in that opening line? Why does she call attention to the desire for anonymity in her parentheses? What are ‘all those impenetrables’? The simile

when words
are more like bluebell petals under
an absorbed heaven

is puzzling in spite of its elegance. The poet may be thinking of a present experience of delicate, but ineffective words, separated from heaven’s intentions and attention. Or alternatively, the words may be part of ‘all those impenetrables’ in a future fulfillment, effectively blending with and being absorbed into heaven’s will. Either way, they compel a meditative response. The lack of simplicity and clarity in this paradoxically precise but ambiguous image is illustrative of her great longing.

³⁹ ‘Nobody has yet accepted my “Job” as a poem, so maybe it isn’t’, she wryly observes (Avison & Ito, 2002b:169). Nevertheless, the point still stands that this kind of search with its attendant result is what she may mean by ‘clarity’.

⁴⁰ See Appendix 6.2.3 for an uninterrupted version of the poem.

The third stanza, in contrast, is definitive and even majestic in its particulars. Here the speaker has provided creation's words—simple, clear, perfectly placed and completely productive.

Words have been given. Once.
Words that are storm and sun and rain.
Listening earth, where they have fallen,
finds seed casings begin
to split,
roots throb. As though
some unimaginable response is
implicit in that speaking.

The word merely has to be spoken and ‘seed casings begin / to split, / roots throb’. The poet has depicted the ‘implicit’ ‘unimaginable response’ in the arrangement of those lines, vividly isolating ‘to split’. The closing two-line stanza is her hopeful conclusion pointing to success.

Fulfilment is in promise
and still more resonant longing.

She is in ‘concert’ with that other Speaker in her ‘resonant longing’ and fulfilled promise. Consequently, her ‘language, as she stretches words to their very limits’, as her friend and publisher William Pope suggests in a letter to the poet, takes on a life and power ‘go[ing] beyond challenge to transformation’. He continues, ‘I have read “Concert” many times, but it will take me a lifetime and more to fully experience the blessings and glories of which it eloquently speaks’ (Letter, 1977). The poem seems to resist closure, not unlike many of Jesus’s parables. Nevertheless it speaks of—it announces, it witnesses to—the mystery of a God who communicates with His creation. It awakens a sense of wonder about the divine energy in language that produces ‘some unimaginable response’: ‘Words have been given. Once’. The poet’s longing produces ‘still more resonant longing’ in the poem’s reader. The exquisite subtlety of the poem does not negate clarity; it redefines it in terms of mystery.

In his 1957 commentary on Avison’s early pre-conversion poems, Northrop Frye speaks of ‘imaginative keys to a poet’s work’ contained in what he sees as ‘poems

that seem to be at the centre' of 'a certain structure of imagery' (1957:35). At that time Frye singles out the poet's bleak picture of 'Neverness Or, The One Ship Beached On One Far Distant Shore' (*AN* 1.24-26).⁴¹ Her vision alters and softens over the years, albeit still rich in ambiguity and complexity. 'Concert' may be the new centre climaxing her missionary impulse. 'Resonant longing' has replaced the nostalgia and despair of earlier days. The 'unfixed vision' of 'Neverness' has been superseded with 'some unimaginable response' to the 'words that have been given' (*AN* 3.65). Eager witness has replaced weary critic as the poet presses on in her commitment to 'go and tell'.

By now it should be apparent that the Johannine admonition to 'go and tell', modeled by the first witnesses of the Easter event, is a continuation of the invitation to 'come and see' with which the story recorded in John's Gospel begins. The poet announces the mystery of resurrection life in the context of 'marred everyday living' (Letter, 5 Oct. 2001) and in language which calls attention to that curious blending of the two. The missionary impulse in her verse is articulated as a sacred account of transformation and response to the risen Christ. There is latent energy and joy in the messenger who sets the tone in the earlier poem 'Birth Day' (*AN* 1.127-28), followed by deeply personal witness accounts of sharing in the suffering of the crucified One in her early Christian reflections. In her unfolding witness she identifies with the invisible third person of the Trinity, articulating the primary role to point to Christ to make him visible. Her hero and model is the apostle Paul in his energy and passion and capacity for both suffering and Christian hope.

Avison's witness in its often paradoxical specificity is faithful to her own person as she works with the complexity, contradictions and hiddenness of life's experiences. How she sees determines what she tells. Her poems reflect a willingness to absorb uncertainty and unanswered questions. Her witness is both rooted in concrete living in

⁴¹ See the beginning of Chapter 4, 'Creatureliness and Imaging God', for a discussion of this poem.

the city among the most vulnerable and poor of urban dwellers and in awareness of a threatened physical environment. These concerns are subsumed by a larger vision, echoing the prophet Amos with his mixture of judgement and hope, now given fresh voice for her time and place. Finally, her witness is ‘without weapons’ (Hauerwas, 2002:150), reflecting instead a natural love for language and a deep humility that favours listening and understanding over contention. While she creates lyrics of artistic beauty, the poet-witness embraces ambiguity, complexity and mystery. Hers is a commitment to words which signal the mysterious presence of the Word.

What characterizes the obedience of telling is already the hallmark of the invitational beckoning to ‘come and see’ what she sees implicit in creation and named in the scriptures, elaborated in the earlier chapters of this study. She seeks and finds the hidden God, mysterious and ineffable, paradoxically revealed and concealed, particularly in the person of the risen Christ. Then she attempts ‘to speak (from anonymity...) / all those impenetrables’ (*AN* 3.65).

CONCLUSION: A Kind of Perseverance

When Avison speaks of her conversion experience as “‘the Jesus of resurrection power’ making himself known to her’ (1994c:6), she echoes the disclosure of the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene in John’s Gospel with its injunction to ‘go and tell’ (Jn. 20.11-18). In language of the numinous she describes ‘the overwhelming presence of Jesus Christ in the room’ (1994c:6) initiating immediate transformation. At the same time, in her Pascal lectures, she implies an ongoing perseverance from that encounter: ‘The priority, Christ’s pervasive Presence, was primary and clear’ (1994b:25). Witness to the resurrection is both an instantaneous event and a continuous experience.

In *A Kind of Perseverance* she draws on the poem of the Irish poet W. R. Rodgers, ‘The Journey of the Magi’, ‘that traces a twelve-month journey … a course through promise and bewilderment to the darkest hour’ (Avison 1994b:72), to reminisce on her ‘watershed year’ when ‘the “all’s” of the Gospels were hitting [her]’ (1994b:21). One journey follows another: ‘Next came the painful part: that was the beginning of the *really* long journey!’ (1994b:72). She understands well the spirit of the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress* as she honours him in ‘For Tinkers Who Travel on Foot’ (*AN* 1.174):

What if it *was* a
verse in the
Epistle to the Hebrews that
kept Bunyan
at concert pitch through
deaf and dumb months?
He found
resonance.
He stuck it out till then, too:
not for one instant sure it
would come to anything, in all his
mute madness, nor ever
diverted for one instant.

Again Avison evokes the famous story of Bunyan’s Christian when she writes in ‘We Are Not Poor, Not Rich’ (*AN* 2.87):

And I can barely snatch
my foot free when the soppy sand

goes slack
and fills in my old track.
Yet looking up from this Despond, I note
a pilgrim firm of foot
and think he's on a better road
– and think then wrong.

When the poet speaks of ‘a person’s climate … with emotional seasons and variations within seasons’ (1994b:39), she calls to mind both the literal and the metaphorical in ‘In Sultry Weather’ (*AN* 2.189):

It is the going on (not
 storm and relief, or an escape
 to a wind-clean shore, or a warm sweetgrass knoll)
that surprises, daylong.

Her poem ‘Interim’ (*AN* 3.85), mentioned earlier,¹ speaks of this ‘*really* long journey’ after Easter when ‘[o]ur troubled faces clear to see Him’. Again, in language of weather, she describes her kind of perseverance:

but doggedly set out, against a sting
 of rain, moved by His plan,
 through night and shale-blue dawn, remembering
 at least to follow on.

The many poems across decades of writing I have explored in this study have provided a picture of this ‘going on’ or ‘following on’—the poet’s persevering witness. In her two lectures given in 1993, ‘Misunderstanding Is Damaging’ and ‘Understanding is Costly’,² Avison candidly gives her perspective on the life of the Christian in a specific intellectual context, validating Christianity for those who are already believers and challenging those who are sceptical. In the process, she indirectly offers an interpretation of the witness of her own poetry.

She begins her first lecture with a series of six propositions developing along the following line of thought:

No mortal person has perfect understanding.

A growing person keeps facing misunderstanding, and keeps breaking through. The old is damaged, but ahead is new understanding – of self or of another …

¹ See Chapter 2.3.2 ‘Witness with Second Isaiah’s Exiles’.

² Mentioned throughout the thesis, these lectures given at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada for the annual Pascal lectures on Christianity and the University, and published as *A Kind of Perseverance* in 1994, are major prose statements to understand Avison’s thinking.

Do all of us grow? Well. It takes some doing ... risking further damage, facing the danger, not ducking it ...

... the growing process is dangerous, and essential (1994b:20).

Speaking as one who has been on the road for a long time, she calls attention to the recognition of the life principle embedded in her propositions that apply to ‘Christian’ and ‘counter-Christian’³ alike. Painful breakthroughs in understanding are necessary for any growing person.

In the longest poem in *The Dumbfounding*, ‘The Earth That Falls Away’ (AN 1.175-84), Avison presents a complex interweaving of vignettes of people who experience blindness and various degrees of seeing. Their varied reactions register painful breakthroughs of growing persons and the ‘damage’ they endure in ‘facing misunderstanding’.⁴ One of the poem’s several contrasts involves children who are merely enacting the experience of unseeing. ‘There is screaming in blind man’s buff’, the speaker notes apprehensively. The blind man’s own child

tried
for real, being blind.
About two minutes. It bled
black like, all *at* me.
I couldn’t bear it
even two minutes.

Even imaginatively facing ‘misunderstanding’—role playing blindness—is dangerous.

In contrast, one of the central figures in the poem, a blinded soldier is puzzlingly uneasy about a possibility of recovery.

“It’s winter where I live.
I’ve had a northern summer, that
is more than some, let’s leave it
at that” – I said.

When the operation is successful, he is dismayed. His new experience of seeing involves discomfort and disorientation and the old way of interpreting life is damaged:

Please. Leave me alone.

³ Avison opens her second lecture with the observation: ‘Everyone has a counter-Christian bias or a Christian bias, at any given stage of life, in any given circumstance’ (1994b:47).

⁴ I run the risk of oversimplifying this rich and allusive poem in isolating this one dimension. See Ernest Redekop, *Margaret Avison* (1970:130-140), for example, for a more elaborate reading of the poem.

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, colour, thing.
Unclutter me. Relieve
me of this visible. Give
back my sealed-off dayshine

The scriptures and epigraph from Beddoes's 'Death's Jest Book' framing the poem⁵ point to its religious and metaphorical significance. The closing lines are simultaneously fearful and glorious in their obvious reference to the God of scripture:

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

In the intolerable hour
our fingers and fists
blunder for blindfolds
to have You in our power!

"He does not resist you",
said James
looking to
Him who, in his hour,
comes.

As Redekop notes, 'Man, like the blind soldier accustomed to a Nomansland of "illusory gleam-and-gone", cannot endure without great pain the face of God, the beholding eyes of the Lord, despite his hope for sight and his desire for light' (1970:139). Yet there is also hope for the ones who 'look to / Him who, in his hour, / comes'. The prose propositions of *A Kind of Perseverance* imply the same dilemma and its resolution.

Within the framework of the lectures, Avison announces a life of courageous confronting of mortal limitations in understanding, beginning with facing up to misunderstanding. The Christian witness is one who faithfully points to Another, but through partial understanding. This 'dangerous' and essential pattern of growth affects all parties—both the one who faces the witness and hears the witness's report, but also

⁵Ps. 27.9; Neh. 1.6; and James 3.6 and 'Can a man die? Ay, as the sun doth set: / It is the earth that falls away from light'.

the witness herself. In her poem ‘Dead Ends’ (*AN* 3.159) she suggests: ‘There’s no finality out here: a sphere / too vast, too growthful, too / mischievous’:

There’s too much
of us for us to know.
But closing heart, and ear
is a terminus I
fear, too.
We slam
into it, often, though knowing is a peril
almost as terrible as
never being sure
where
the dead end will
appear.

The speaker in her dramatic monologue ‘To a Seeking Stranger’ (*AN* 2.234-35) declares ‘to a man who wants life to the full, / wants absolutely. Wants. For God’s sake yes’, that it is a lifetime of adjustments, ‘turmoil’ and ‘battle’ engaging combatants of unequal strength. The speaker revives the familiar phrase ‘For God’s sake yes’ with a new inflection, implying that the person is missing the meaning of his own exclamation.

At some point, however—‘in time’—clarity will come:

In time, farnesses
open. The bright large place
we must all need who would
be, begins to be.

In the meantime, the last stanza speaks of that inevitable taking up of one’s cross daily: ‘[t]he terrible, blood-guttering wood / can be everyday, too. / Yes’.

Refusal to move out from places of misunderstanding is also dangerous, she suggests at the end of her first lecture with her ironic twist of phrase announcing its opposite: ‘The greatest danger is to stop evading [Jesus Christ]. Unless you consider it damaging not to grow’ (1994b:44). At the same time, understanding is costly:

Pain, loss, is defined as a beginning-point in the Gospels. You must spend all, i.e. lose all, to gain more than all, qualitatively speaking. Love defined himself (“God is love”) by total loss ... he wants us to share this loss, for love’s sake. (1994b:55)

Much of this cost has been articulated in the poems already discussed in this project. For example, “*Forsaking all*” – You mean / head over heels, for good,’ (‘The Word’ *AN*

1.195); or ‘There is a sword / enters with hearing’ (‘Listening’ *AN* 2.64); or ‘Keep our courage high with You / through steep and storm and wild’ (‘Psalm 80:1’).

The propositions propelling her second lecture specifically challenge the eager witness:

Objective: understanding without compromise.

Alien doctrine, i.e. someone else’s doctrine, grew in a different soil; something can be learned from anything or anybody who is alive and growing.

Conviction does not preclude listening.

Contention tends to defensiveness.

The true believer’s problem: how to say “I am here”, and not be saying “I am not not-there”. (1994b:48)

Here she calls all her hearers to practice receptiveness.⁶ Avison explains, ‘A Christian’s obligation to absorb the other is both bane and blessing, all entangled as it is with both compromise and compassion’ (1994b:66). The implication, as her propositions outline, is one of difficulty, restraint and compassion learned through a lifetime of careful awareness. In the lowly identification with fellow subway travelers, for example, she can speak of ‘Learning Love a Little’ (*AN* 2.267):

...therefore in the clattering
tunnel, in the subway car
hustled, borne, we are
strangers averted, and together.
Respect seeds the unbreathable air with
a certain dotted-Swiss, a
scent, and one dumbly welcomes
this, and them.

Many of her poems draw on a similar implied companionship of circumstance which calls for this unusual articulation of respect ‘seed[ing] the unbreathable air’ creating ‘a ascent’ (*AN* 2.267) and sense of welcome. It can be an intentional gift to another; it can also come unbidden, as one of her most poignant poems, ‘Balancing Out’ (*AN* 3.130), suggests. The poet voices the painful thoughts of a widow who recognizes her

⁶ She invokes Shakespeare’s vivid phrase from Sonnet 110, ‘my nature is subdued to what it works in, like the dyer’s hand’ (and already appropriated by W. H. Auden, applied to literary criticism), to apply it yet another way. In the lecture she suggests that ‘the supposedly bigoted Christian’ may be ahead of his or her ‘counter-Christian majority’ just by virtue of necessity. (1994b:65).

husband's coat on a 'ruined fellow' who had received it from a mission (*AN* 3.130).

Tangled emotions surge in the woman:

The giver of his topcoat eerily
watched, her widow's desolation clearly
inconsolable now
(a pang – like joy!),
to see what she had seen
on a fine and steady man
made come full circle on this ruined fellow.

Still, he had his coat,
and she, the echoing years.

The poet's picture of both widow and indigent man in their unplanned connection in the concluding stanza embodies the costly understanding of 'A Christian's obligation to absorb the other' of which she speaks in *A Kind of Perseverance* (1994b:66).

This costly understanding of which the poet speaks prevents both defensiveness and aggression and points to a humility learned from 'heartfelt sympathy' (1994b:49). 'One of our craftiest evasions is trying to manage [the truth given in the Holy Word] ... Truth is final, but our mortal grasp of it never can be final' (1994b:70-71). Therefore, there is no place for arrogance or triumph over another; and there is no need for defensiveness. Rather, the life and words of the witness will reflect their source and the one to whom they point. Her concluding words of *A Kind of Perseverance* characteristically deflect her own efforts: 'It will never be *our* understanding or intelligence that will rescue us. Oddly, that is the shining hope' (1994b:74).

What she articulates in her prose Avison works out in her poetry. A prayer-poem in her collection *The Dumbfounding*, when she was new on the journey, articulates her early intuition of the mystery of resurrection life and its attendant witness for the Christian believer. She begins 'A Prayer Answered by Prayer' (*AN* 1.203) boldly declaring her position on the witness stand as she reworks a common saying, 'My heart was on my sleeve, / I knew it, barely warm'. Words of testimony become a prayer: "This was what I believe, / How can I hold firm?" even while she senses the tenuous hold of her new found faith expressed in familiar optical disorientation:

On a flat earth, solid
I stand “upright” and stare
at sunset’s moon-globe pallid
in a skied nowhere.

Jesus’s words to Thomas, ‘Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe’ (Jn. 20.29), take on new meaning with the poet’s assertion:

What only Christ makes real
rests in astonishment
in one Uncommonweal.
Love is heart-rent.

Perseverance in faith and witness is a mysterious gift—‘What only Christ makes real’—and a costly one for both the Giver and the witness. She now offers a completely different kind of prayer from a new vantage point.

“All creating Son
whose badge I thought to wear,
where you have found me, burn
me, your beacon fire”.

This new prayer, with its expression of both costly submission and comfortable recognition of the prime witness with his ‘beacon fire’, characterizes the witness of her poetry published in ensuing decades. She continues to convey a sense of the triune God cloaked in mystery.

In the cold February sun
I sit, silent, with a presence
not known within. Yet, known?

begins a much later poem from *Momentary Dark* (‘Prayer’ MD 15). ‘Let the unknowing structure what is known’, she prays with familiar ambiguity. A peculiar receptivity follows from her awareness of the ‘human hearer who / proved He could be trusted / in death, in life, always’:

Let inner hearing
create listening, so that
the presence not here
(not yet?)
may speak.

She does not clarify the audience of the speaking ‘presence’, but presumably it involves the poet herself as the receiving witness. At the same time, this audience is also the poet

as sending witness, obeying the injunction to ‘go and tell’ in each lyric she crafts out of what she has heard.

These reflections from *A Kind of Perseverance* contain the essence of Avison’s understanding of and approach to Christian witness articulated in this project. Her first cluster of teasing propositions regarding the dangerous and essential growing process prod her audience to take seriously the person of Jesus ‘who is everywhere concerned, everywhere Sovereign’ (1994b:21). Her second cluster of propositions draws the focus to what she calls ‘the true believer’s problem: how to say “I am here”, and not be saying “I am not not-there” (1994b:48) and the role of the poet-witness. In her posthumous autobiography, the poet explains the origin of this phrase in her thinking. When she served on a panel at the Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963,⁷ she and her fellow poets were asked, ‘What makes a poet’s language distinctive?’ ‘We all fell silent, trying to pin it down, then attempted answers’, she writes:

Not just affection for words, which is common to all good writers; *not* necessarily a matter of cadence, formal structures, rhythm. The answer that came to me, forced out of minutes of dismissing options, was new to me too: “It is saying ‘I am here and not not-there’”. (2009:145)

It is an answer, she notes, that resonated with other poets. In her Pascal lectures, years later, she continued to brood on that formulation, then connecting it to witness.

In this enigmatic way of talking about poetry or witness and their possible connection—‘a modifying one learns from the experience of heartfelt sympathy’ (1994b:49)—the poet has offered one answer to the basic question of this project: How is Margaret Avison’s poetry Christian witness? A much longer answer threads its way through the chapters of this book. To read her complex and concentrated lyrics with sensitivity and understanding requires intense intellectual and spiritual effort, the theme of the first chapter. With two poems as models, I noted her ‘humane, sweet, and profound poetry’ (the commendation by the judges of the 2003 Griffin Prize). From the

⁷ Participants included such American poets as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov. Avison was the sole Canadian poet in the group.

outlines of her biography emerged the twin commitments to her Christian faith and to her poetry, which she herself identified as a ‘muse of danger’. Her particular poetry poses a difficulty in two directions. Because Avison has positioned herself in mainstream literature, the overt (and covert) Christian themes of her lyrics disturb those who prefer religion to remain in the private domain. On the other hand, the complexity and obscurity of her poetry limit her readership, and hence, access to her witness, in a culture already disinclined to the literary form. In the face of these challenges, nevertheless, I maintained that her poetry is ultimately a compelling and attractive call to spiritual attention, imaginatively inviting dialogue and creating space for God.

In Chapter 2, I established the witness of her poetry from two directions. First, I invited connections between two disparate spheres—witness and poetry—by de-emphasizing the power of the juridical metaphor attached to the word ‘witness’ that traditionally links witness with apologetics. Second, I proposed the witness in and of scripture is compatible with, and in fact, informs her own articulation of the Christian gospel. I recognized that the idea of witness contains strong legal connotations in its etymological origins, its references in scripture and in philosophical inquiry. At the same time, a defensive and contending posture and an expectation of rhetorical persuasion do not necessarily follow from acknowledging the juridical metaphor. Even the ascriptive and defeasible nature of testimony does not commit the witness to controversy and warring discourse; rather, it calls attention to the potentiality of truth’s elusiveness. As a result, poetic discourse can assist witness in the exploration and announcements of truth, because of its energy and power through nuance, ambiguity, multiple meanings, evocation and suggestion. Language’s limitations become its strength in the poetic world. Poetry frees what is generative in our experience, as Rowan Williams, explains. Instead of struggling to prove and verify, the Christian witness can

‘manifest’ (Williams, 2000:134). In short, poetry offers the witness freedom to acknowledge that ‘God is always greater than what is revealed to us’ (Jasper, 1989:33).

It followed, then, to look at biblical texts with strong witness motifs. The Lukan account in both his Gospel and Acts models a singular focus, energy and passion that Avison absorbs; however, it is in Second Isaiah’s argument in the mixed genres of trial speech and poetry that she resonates with a witness to what cannot be seen. The mysterious hiddenness of God that underlies his presence and activity, faithfully declared by the poet-prophet, is her paradigm. John’s Gospel, the seeing and telling of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, continues Isaiah’s emphasis with two potent metaphors—‘come and see’, ‘go and tell’—as the impetus for Avison’s witness. Like John the Baptist with his pointing hand, she points to the living Christ, in that same mysterious gesture towards the Unseen.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I developed the first metaphor, ‘come and see’ with the pointing hand focused on the physical world of nature and on human nature. I began by proposing that Avison’s lyrics teach her readers how to see. An awakened perception and imagination in the physical world is training ground, a ‘lighting up the terrain’ to see the unseen spiritual world. Nature’s display shown in her poems is implicit or indirect Christian witness. Albeit unclearly identified, two sources probably inform her perceptions: a conservative Protestant ‘limited natural theology’ and a sacramental view of nature shaped by the poetry of the Catholic Gerard Manley Hopkins. Through her own idiosyncratic lenses, a sense of playfulness, a ‘dialectic between seriousness and non-seriousness’ (Smedes, 1975:60), emerges in her nature lyrics. She identifies spiritual longing in its revelations. Her focus on the particulars of birds and trees suggest an attention to nature accessible in an urban setting. The image of the sun, merging into a clear symbol of the Son, is her most transparent declaration of witness in the created world.

I observed in Chapter 4 a muted acknowledgement of humanity's reflection of God's image in her poems. Creatureliness and personhood point to a limited and mixed reality in both accomplishment and relational capacities. While the poet communicates affection and empathy for the people who inhabit her poems, she does not hesitate to register her dismay at their fallenness. 'How privileged we are! and / how paltry' she concludes (*MD* 29-31). As a result, 'come and see' God in *imago dei* is best seen, ironically, in collective and personal failure. The human need for rescue and the offer of redemption direct the focus God-ward.

Implicit witness changes to explicit witness in Chapter 5, in a shift from seeing to hearing. I observed that for Avison, the Book of the scriptures supersedes the book of nature and human nature. Her interest moves to the received testimony of biblical witnesses as it points to the Word of God. She speaks to the witness of the text in many varied lyrics, articulating the narrative core of the Bible's account of creation, the fall, redemption. She anchors her understanding of this witness in John's Prologue; she connects Old Testament and New Testament with surprising typological links. Experimenting with a number of poetical forms, she tells the Christ story. Ultimately, the resurrection is her focus. I interpreted selected poems under each of these familiar headings to demonstrate her distinctive renderings of the biblical themes, often 'telling it slant', as Tinsley (1990:i-ii) appropriated the phrase from Emily Dickinson. Avison presents the gospel the way she sees it—in its magnificent but seemingly elusive mystery.

In the final chapter, I noted a corresponding energy in a missionary impulse to 'go and tell'. Her primary subject is the person of Jesus Christ; the dominant event is the resurrection; the telling is accompanied by a humility that compels attention. When she speaks of the poet writing 'as a mix of the resurrection life and marred everyday living' (Letter, 5 Oct. 2001), she truly means 'I am here but not not-there' and the poems in this

chapter reflect her engagement with all parties involved, both divine and human. I pointed out that Avison remains faithful to her own person in articulating complexity and contradiction. She dares to probe dark themes and express doubt. I noted contrary impulses of boldness and subtlety; candour and coyness; playfulness and pathos in a wide range of lyrics. I emphasized her missionary impulse embodying a sensitive social consciousness. As a poet of the city, she feels the pain of its poorest inhabitants and writes on their behalf; she gives voice to the spectre of the damaged earth. I concluded that it is in her view of language that her poetic witness is most distinctive. Rather than contention with people, she speaks of a delight in and scuffle with words. In sum, her witness is ‘without weapons’ (Hauerwas, 2002:150), as she speaks as one striving to be both ‘here and not not-there’. I began the chapter with her messenger running to Mytilene to shout out his news ‘[t]hat all, rejoicing could go down to dark’ (*Birth Day AN* 1.127-28). I ended with her gentle admission, in ‘Concert’ (*AN* 3.65), of a longing

for that simplicity,
clarity, that willingness
to speak (from anonymity ...) —

with an unexplained silence about herself as witness. Her topic is equally gentle and mysterious: ‘all those impenetrables’.

In light of this persevering and faithful witness, there is one issue yet to address: an audience for the witness. ‘I write to be read ... My readers are the completers of what the text began. I address them as co-creators, unknown but for sure out there, and exacting’, Avison tells her interviewer Sally Ito (Avison & Ito, 2002b:162). The poet describes her ‘scuffle to find [her] own words, [her] own idiom’ through the years ‘to assert both an identity and an aesthetic’ (Avison 1959:182), but as I have emphasized throughout this study, her ‘completers of what [her poems] began’ and ‘co-creators’ share in another ‘scuffle’, one of potentially much greater import. How might they—how do they—receive her witness and even contribute to it?

A. J. M. Smith, her early ‘critical champion’, prefaces his selections of her poetry in his 1943 anthology with the succinct description: ‘Her poetry is metaphysical poetry—passionate, intellectual, and essentially religious’ (1943:441). In his ‘Poetry’ entry for the *Literary History of Canada*, Laurie Ricou categorizes her among the select few Canadian ‘metaphysical poets’ in style and sympathies for her poems’ ‘sense of closure’ and ‘variations on the conceit’ (1976:20). He goes on to note, ‘Compounding and alliteration remind us first of Hopkins, an appropriate analogy given Avison’s eloquent Christian commitment to “the achieve of, the mastery of” God’s world’ (1976:24). In *Margaret Avison and Her Works*, David Kent emphasizes the poet’s location in the English literary tradition as a ‘devotional poet’, ‘anticipated by her debts to George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins’ (1989:7).

While she shares such stylistic similarities to these earlier poets with her love of wit and paradox and her concision and conceits, she may share more of a kinship with what Louis Martz, in his classic study of *The Poetry of Meditation*, describes as the ‘mastery of the art of [religious] meditation’ (1962:2). Better still, content and form are inextricably mixed in these ‘devotional poems’. The introduction to Martz’s book sounds like a gloss on Avison’s method of ‘seeing’, particularly her method of studying the Bible. He writes:

Such meditation is the subject of this study: intense, imaginative meditation that brings together the senses, the emotions, and the intellectual faculties of man; brings them together in a moment of dramatic, creative experience. One period when such meditation flourished coincides exactly with the flourishing of English religious poetry in the seventeenth century. (1962:1)

Martz clarifies the religious significance intended by spiritual writers of the seventeenth century drawing on such writers as St. François de Sales. In his *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616), the spiritual writer interprets meditative practice as ‘an attentive thought iterated, or voluntarily entertained in the mynd, to excitate the will to holy affections and

resolutions’⁸ (Martz, 1962:15). Again, St. François de Sales in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* explains: ‘Brieflie, devotion, is nothing els but a spirituall swiftnesse and nimbleness of love ...’⁹ (Martz, 1962:15). Clearly, while Avison’s primary source of light comes from scripture, her poetry resonates with the spirit of these earlier spiritual writers, both directly and indirectly. In fact, some poems allude to these writers. For instance, the poem ‘Prayer’ (*MD* 15), quoted above, takes as its theme the apophatic tradition or *via negativa* explained by the anonymous fourteenth century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in tandem with scripture. In the second stanza of ‘Prayer’ (*MD* 15), the obvious word play on the title of the classic emphasizes her connection:

For the cloud, of unknowing
(not of night or day
or time or place)
I yearn as David did for
springs in a dry land.

Margaret Avison, however, is not a devotional writer with a seventeenth century audience. She is writing in the twentieth and early twenty-first century, encountering some disinterest in her poetry. Several factors could account for the lack of attention: For one, her poetry is neither sensational nor easily accessible, garnering a large reading public. For another, poetry as an art form in general has a smaller coterie of followers in a world dominated by other print forms and media. Further, the Canadian scene is relatively small to attract interest in a poet not aggressively marketing her work. Probably the biggest factor, however, is her underlying religious emphasis. The initial excitement and admiration for her sophisticated poetry lessened after Christian content seemed more pronounced with the publication of *sunblue* in 1978.

In spite of continued recognition in terms of awards and honorary doctorates in the later years, the 1970s is the decade that produced the major surge of criticism and interest in her poems in academic circles. Since that time, appreciative articles have

⁸ St. François de Sales, *An Treatise of the Love of God*, [trans. Thomas Carre, i.e., Miles Pinkney], (Douay, 1630), 324-5.

⁹ St. François de Sales, *An Introduction to a Devoute Life*, [trans. John Yakesley], 3rd ed., Rouen, 1614, 29.

been more occasional, until her receiving the Griffin Prize in 2003 and then her death in 2007. Kent comments in his critical overview in 1989 on ‘the bifurcation of Avison’s audience’ (1989:12), particularly noting the critics Willmot, Scobie¹⁰ and Djwa for their critical stance. Rod Willmot, showing a familiarity with evangelical language, has particularly harsh words in one of his reviews of *sunblue*: ‘The wages of faith, one might say, are intellectual and linguistic diminution’ (1980:115). Later in the review, while he acknowledges a ‘formally and rhetorically perfect’ poem, he laments, ‘It is through cracks in the evangelical plaster that poetry pokes out again and flourishes’ (Willmot, 1980:116). On the other hand and more hopeful, Avison’s connections within the poetic tradition draw attention to her lyrics. Her poems still regularly appear in anthologies with sections of twentieth century poetry.¹¹ She is innovative enough to catch the attention of a discriminating critic. As a result, appreciation of her art can raise attention to the witness inherent in the poems. Furthermore, an increased interest in spirituality, Christian or otherwise, in recent years harkens back to the meditative tradition that has shaped religious poetry for centuries, creating appeal in a twentieth and turn-of-the century poet who has followed in the footsteps of Herbert and Hopkins and T. S. Eliot with her meticulous and incisive verse.

How effective, then, can Avison’s poetry be as witness to the secular world? I take encouragement from Simone Weil in her account of the influence of a poem and poet on her Christian conversion, in her ‘Spiritual Autobiography’ (Letter IV to Father Perrin) in *Waiting for God*:

In 1938 I spent ten days at Solesmes, from Palm Sunday to Easter Tuesday, following all the liturgical services. I was suffering from splitting headaches ... There was a young English Catholic there ... [who] told me of the existence of those English poets of the seventeenth

¹⁰ See Chapter 2.2.1 for a discussion of Scobie courting Avison’s endorsement for his work, with an accompanying footnote.

¹¹ See, for example, Lecker and David, *The New Canadian Anthology* (1988); Geddes, *15 Canadian Poets x 3* (2001); Bennett and Brown, *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (2002); Scholes et al., *Elements of Literature, Poetry/Fiction/Drama* (2004); Stamp, *Writing the Terrain: A poetry anthology* (2004); Prufer, *Dark Horses: Poets on Overlooked Poems* (2005); Rosengarten and Godrick-Hones, *The Broadview Anthology of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (2005); and Geddes, *20th-Century Poetry and Poetics*, 5th ed. (2006).

century who are named metaphysical. In reading them later on, I discovered the poem of which I read you what is unfortunately a very inadequate translation. It is called "Love". I learned it by heart. Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines. I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me. (1973:68-69)

Weil is a powerful and unusual model of a person responding to the witness of a poem, compelling in her account of transformation. Moreover, the very nature of her out-of-the-ordinary experience calls attention to the poem's witness. Weil is illustrative of Avison's observation of Christ and his potential followers in 'All Bogged Down' (*AN* 1.45-46) :

the one
of us not one of us is gone
a way some few may following find,
just, one by one.

The audience may be a select few, but any reader can be one who is the key in influencing many more. In her own brief essay 'Who Listens and How Come?' she clarifies the responsibility of the witness and neutralizes the concern regarding a limited audience:

True enough, Jesus forbade us to cast our pearls before swine lest they trample them and rend us – but He let us rend Him, and bade us preach the Gospel to every creature. Every way is, ultimately, a way to Him, when the Holy Spirit will. It's a wide open subject, and I expect it will take a moment more than a lifetime for me to know who listens and how come. (1969:5)

Furthermore, the co-creation of readers, 'unknown but for sure out there, and exacting' of which she speaks (Avison & Ito, 162), can aid her witness by calling attention to her excellent poems. There have been a small but faithful and articulate group of critics who have done what critics should do, in Harold Bloom's words, 'practice their art in order to make what is implicit in a book finely explicit' (2001:19). In this case they have played a dual role. Their occasional essays have both reminded the literary public of Avison's poetry and helped elucidate her difficult work. These include Kent, Mathews, Kertzer, Redekop, Merrett, Quinsey, and others, contributing to the miracle of which Avison delineates in 'Discovery on Reading a Poem' (*AN* 2.206):

One sail

opens the wideness to me of the waters,
the largeness of the sky.

Because she is more than an inspirational and skilled poet, these critics are potentially reenacting the same miracle in the same elusive ambiguity of witness with which I began this project reviewing ‘Rising Dust’ (*AN* 1.45-46):

But never any of us
physiologist or fisherman
or I
quite makes sense of it. We
find our own level

as prairie, auburn or
snow-streaming, sounds forever
the almost limitless.

As poets and critics share in this witness, they are achieving what Etty Hillesum longed to do in her ‘witness’ in a Nazi prison camp: ‘It is not enough simply to proclaim You, God, to commend You to the hearts of others. One must also clear the path toward You in them, God’ (2002:518). Part of that clearing of the path involves Avison’s ‘open[ing] the wideness … of the waters’ and ‘the largeness of the sky’ (*AN* 2.206). The metaphors are naturally unexplained, only suggesting the direction upward and outward to the One who is larger and higher.

The difficulty lies in the mystery of humankind’s connection with the ineffable Creator-Redeemer who is still just out of reach, still eluding ‘the fix, the frill / precision can effect, brilliant with danger’ (*AN* 1.71). The poet and her critics can only ‘tell it slant’ (Tinsley, 1990). The witness of poetry is, in Farrer’s words, ‘projected in images which cannot be decoded, but must be allowed to signify what they signify of the reality beyond them’ (Farrer, 1948:148). The readers who seem to best understand Avison’s necessary ambiguity and complexity recognize the distinctive mystery that poetic witness is. Jacques Ellul reminds readers that ‘in a trial, the witness furnishes the key fact that *changes* the certitudes or view of the reality held before his appearance’ (1985:110). He goes on to explain that

… the witness to the Word of God produces the greatest change, innovation, and rupture that can be imagined. He testifies to the Wholly Other, the Invisible, the imperceptible dimension

we call Eternity, Absolute, Ultimate, or some other name ... The witness introduces this Wholly Other into our visible, concrete, measurable, and analyzable reality. (Ellul, 1985:110)

He is speaking of truth which cannot be managed by the witness, a reality she intuits.

Ellul suggests, 'The Wholly Other takes this reality upon himself, limits it, measures it, and gives it another dimension' (1985:110). She explains in her inimitable way,

But when someone tells it, something,
a Presence, may briefly shine
showing heaven again,
and open. (*AN* 2.168)

Here too is an interpretation of her waters, sky and prairie, 'sound[ing] forever / the almost limitless' (*AN* 3.163-164), images which cannot quite be explained—only experienced.

Avison has, or should have, a second significant audience—another community of reception. I am speaking of the church, in its sometimes zealous witness—or lack thereof. The same factors that hinder a large secular reading public equally affect this second audience: her poetry is neither sensational nor easily accessible; poetry as an art form, in general, attracts a smaller number of readers; the Canadian scene is relatively small. Even, strangely, her religious emphasis with its counter-cultural vision can deter a Christian public from reading and appreciating her lyrics. Her prophetic voice speaks out against packaged, agenda-driven and unreflective presentations of the gospel. Christian ministries and activities that are imitations of the larger context in which they are placed often have workers impatient with the seemingly unproductive exercise of meditation that the poet espouses and embodies. As a result, there is a hidden danger for this more specific reading (or non-reading) community who claim to have the truth but are inadvertently missing the Truth. There is more urgency that her gift of poetry to the church be recognized and received.

C.S. Lewis, in his imaginative story, *The Great Divorce*, offers salvatory caution, reflecting on why souls from hell, given the opportunity to remain in heaven, choose not to stay. His guide on the journey has sobering words for the apologist Lewis:

There have been men before now who go so interested in proving the existence of God that they came to care nothing for God Himself ... as if the good Lord had nothing to do but *exist!* There have been some who were so occupied in spreading Christianity that they never gave a thought to Christ. Man! Ye see it in smaller matters. Did ye never know a lover of books that with all his first editions and signed copies had lost the power to read them? Or an organiser of charities that had lost all love for the poor? It is the subtlest of all the snares. (Lewis, 2001:73-74)

Avison's lyrics resonate with her recognition of this snare, but it is articulated less in caution than in invitation. Her 'come and see' and 'go and tell' approach to witness is a call for people to move away from the surface of an unreflective faith at its core, to go deeper in and with Christ. She sees things 'slant' and she beckons her readers to join her. In its puzzling riddles, her poetry prevents a too obvious or too literal articulation of gospel truth. She points to the crucified and risen Christ through her varied and unusual lyrics, but the complexity and paradox pervading the poems cause readers to brood on the inherent mystery in Christ's saving work. Looking translates into experience as her poetry invites solidarity with the One whose way is the cross. From beginning to end of her poetry, she 'tells it slant', but also sure. Her poetry is a model to the missionary church in its invitational presentation, without weapons, of the good news of Christ. At the same time, it is a training ground. The struggle to truly access her work produces a deep sense of humility before a wise intellect.

There are signs of hope that her poetry can and will affect the Christian public. Besides her continued exposure in university settings and peer-reviewed publications, there are a number of thoughtful Christians across Canada who respond to her poetry as evidenced in writing workshops and seminars. There are clergy and writers who have discovered her poetry and refer to them in public presentation. Individual faculty members of seminaries and Christian colleges in Canada—among them, Regent College, Trinity Western University, Redeemer University and Tyndale University College and Seminary—have promoted her poetry among friends and students. Both Professors Maxine Hancock of Regent College and Deborah Bowen of Redeemer College encouraged me in this project, hoping that she would receive a wider

readership. Finally, the encouragement I take from Simone Weil in responding to George Herbert I also apply to a potential Christian audience for Margaret Avison. There is someone who might read a poem by her, and as a result, ‘step out of the [Christian] world’s parade’ (Tozer, 1958:102), absorbing her lyrics in a transforming way. That experience, in turn, might change the way the church thinks about and fulfils its mission.

Avison’s long persevering witness is brought to a fitting close with two subtle markers of her dual vocations. Near the end of her life she invokes the names of two very early English poets, the Pearl Poet and Caedmon, suggesting some sort of affinity with both poets—in their craft and in their similar aspirations of witness. Her last collection before she died, *Momentary Dark*, contains a dedication ‘for the Pearl Poet’, drawing attention, in itself, since it had not been her custom until her last publications to dedicate her books to anyone.¹² The connection with the poet of many centuries earlier is another of her teasing riddles inviting speculation. The Pearl (or Gawain) Poet was anonymous and unknown for a long time. The fourteenth century poet was one whose poetry gained the world’s attention years after its writing. The Pearl Poet apparently placed deeply religious poetry and secular verse together for ‘publication’.¹³ In his or her anonymity the poet achieved recognition as innovative and highly sophisticated. All these characteristics might resonate with the Canadian poet at the late date of publication of *Momentary Dark*. An excerpt from her commemorative poem, ‘Thinking

¹² The volumes of The Collected Poems: *Always Now* are dedicated to her close friend Joan Eichner, variously identified as ‘sensitive editor’ (*AN* 1:254) and ‘primary sensitive reader’ (*MD*:91) and the one who has prepared typescripts in the latter years of her ‘cryptic handwriting’ (*MD*:91).

¹³ In the British library a single anonymous and untitled manuscript MS Cotton Nero A.x of four early Middle English alliterative poems (with names given to them by modern editors)—‘Pearl’, ‘Purity’ or ‘Cleanness’, ‘Patience’ and the better known ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’—are understood to be the work of one poet. A. S. G. Edwards reports that the history of the manuscript was unknown before the early seventeenth century (1997:198), and Borroff remarks that it is the one manuscript that ‘testifies to [the poems’] existence’ (2001:xi). Scholars acknowledge that ‘[n]othing is known about the author except what can be inferred from the works’ (Abrams et al. 2001:119). These general facts create interest in themselves.

Back' (1978:42), published in 1978 in University of Toronto's *Acta Victoriana*, suggests further significance:

We learned how far it can be to horizons
and how to mourn by the Pearl Poet's brook
in wind-wrecked January.
We all remember: voices, faces,
moments, across the years;
truths, and a glimmer that is light.

Light broken has its beauty.

Acquaintance with the medieval poem and its story directs the oblique references to Avison's subtle witness in *Momentary Dark*. While she makes less direct mention of Christ in this late collection, there is a peculiar veiled intensity about her drawing to a close both her witness and the writing of her poems. There is a kind of melancholy about 'Finished When Unfinished' (MD 23), when she remarks,

No one
is left, writer or some
incurious wanderer now
long gone

with the image

On a flat stone, in the
plain light, lies a
torn paper with something written
on it. All the wide shore, the
calm lake, the reeds
listen in the sun, in
silence, as do other flat stones.

In contrast, there is acceptance and responsiveness to 'the presence not here / (not yet?) in the yearning 'Prayer' (MD 15):

Let the unknowing
structure what
is known.

There is quiet expectation expressed in the Christological poem 'Diadem' (MD 41):

To the
awakened eye, although
sea-wrack green and bronze are un-
promising, fresh growth peers visible forth.

The dedication to the Pearl poet provides an interpretive key of hope to her 'momentary dark' in its varied forms. She does not minimize the darkness and pain of inevitable

diminshments, reminiscent of that great twentieth century witness Flannery O'Connor.¹⁴ But the Pearl poet calls to Avison's mind that '[l]ight broken has its beauty' (1978:42), as the narrator in the old poem tries to reach his lost 'Pearl' across the brook in the dream-garden, and accepts the instructions of the young maiden who assures him of some day being united with her again.

A friend who attended her private funeral expressed his disappointment to me that none of her poems was read at the service.¹⁵ Instead, the order of service she planned opens with a poem and tribute to the other much older poet, Caedmon,¹⁶ with her opening comment, 'I was impressed by the humility of this seventh century Anglo-Saxon poet and by his obedient response' (funeral program 2007). She quotes an excerpt from a biography of his humble and retiring life that emphasizes his poetic output as a reluctant response to a divine call, inviting comparison to her own aspirations:

"Caedmon, sing me something". But he answered, "I cannot sing and for that cause I left the banquet and returned hither, because I could not sing". "Nevertheless, thou must sing to me". "What must I sing?" he asked. "Sing the beginning of Creation", said the other.

Having received this answer, he straightway began to sing verses to the praise of God the Creator ...¹⁷ (funeral program)

From there the order of service directs her friends to multiple passages from Old and New Testaments and some familiar hymns of 'joyfulness', 'timelessness', and 'holiness', all pointing to some facet of the Eternal Father and Son. One brief prayer—in prose—is her only sustained composition, and with no mention of her poetic achievements or love of the same:

Prayer (In my words, at age 86, for me in old age:) O Lord my God, Your love has been like a salve preparing my skin for the stretches of bitter cold ...

¹⁴ O'Connor, in turn, borrows from Teilhard de Chardin from *The Divine Milieu* the phrase 'passive diminshments'. (Letter, 25 Feb. 1963) in *The Habit of Being* (1979:509).

¹⁵ My conversation was with Don MacLeod, August 2007, Toronto. Avison's poem 'Godspeed' (AN 2.215) is dedicated to Judy and Don MacLeod.

¹⁶ Perhaps the poem 'Caedmon' by her friend Denise Levertov was also called to mind in her selection. See '*Lighting up the terrain': The poetry of Margaret Avison* edited by David Kent, 1987:1-2.

¹⁷ The excerpt, she writes, is taken 'from *The Caedmon Poems*, tr. into English by Charles W. Kennedy (Gloucester, MA., Peter Smith, 1963)'.

How did you draw me and at last visit me? You were longsuffering through all my resisting and stalling. Such love hurts while it heals. Now I am launched, not into darkness, but into awesome Love that, step by step, You have proved is trustworthy. (funeral program)

She makes a final cryptic statement of witness in her gesture of silence. There are no more poems to be written. Nothing more needs to be said. Instead, she frames her closing comments on her life and poetry by first turning witness-like to the poet who early on established the model for poetry—‘to the praise of God’. Then she concludes with her final pointing to the One to whom she belongs and declares in her chosen scriptural benediction, Jude 24-25:

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,
And to present you faultless
Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,
To God our Saviour,
Who alone is wise,
Be glory and majesty,
Dominion and power,
Both now and forever.
Amen. (funeral program, Jude 24-25)

Margaret Avison’s last words of testimony are not her own but from the Book she called her own (1994b:44), pointing as always to the ‘Amen, the faithful and true Witness’ (Rev. 3.14).

Appendix

The Appendix is my concession to the difficulty of discussing poems that are new and unfamiliar and requiring a sense of the whole to understand isolated parts. It would be unwieldy and inappropriate to provide the text for all of Avison's poems I have quoted, but I have made a selection of lyrics that may help the reader to follow my argument more clearly. They are arranged according to the section in which they are considered in some detail and are varied enough to present a good sampling of what I consider the poet's witness through her writing. They do not necessarily represent her 'best' poems or my favourite ones.

1.1 Avison's Pilgrimage as Poet, Christian and Christian Witness

The Word

"*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
ever-new depths of skyward Love till every
capillary of your universe
throbs with your rivering fire?

"*Forsaking all*" – Your voice
never falters, and yet,
unsealing day out of a
darkness none ever knew
in full but you,
you spoke that word, closing on it forever:
"Why hast Thou forsaken. . .?"

This measure of your being all-out, and
meaning it, made you
put it all on the line
we, humanly, wanted to draw – at
having you teacher only, or
popular spokesman only, or
doctor or simply a source of sanity
for us, distracted, or only

the one who could wholeheartedly
rejoice with us, and know
our tears, our flickering time, and
stand with us.

But to make it head over heels
yielding, all the way,
you had to die for us.
The line we drew, you crossed,
and cross out, wholly forget,
at the faintest stirring of what
you know is love, is One
whose name has been, and is
and will be, the
I AM.

(AN 1.195-196)

2.1 Connecting Witness with Poetry

Poetry Is

Poetry is always in
unfamiliar territory.

At a ballgame when
the hit most matters
and the crowd is half-standing
already hoarse, then poetry's
eye is astray to a
quiet area to find out
who picks up the bat the runner
flung out of his runway.

Little stuff like that
poetry tucks away in
the little basket of other
scraps. There's the

cradling undergrowth in
the scrub beside a
wild raspberry bush where
a bear lay feet up feeding
but still three rubied berries
glow in the green.
He had had enough.

Then there's the way
a child's watering can
forgotten in the garden
no faucet, but the far
sky has filled. When sun
shines again it has
become a dragonfly's pretend
skating rink.

Scraps. Who carries the basket?
What will the scraps be used for?
Poetry does not care
what things are for but is
willing to listen to

any, if not everyone's
questions.
It can happen that poetry
basket and all *is*
the unfamiliar territory
that poetry is in.
(*MD* 27-28)

2.2 Christian Witness Suggested in Scripture

“Tell them everything that I command you; do not omit a word” (*Jer.26.2b*)

Night? barely past noon?
an eerie quiet, then
the crack and rustle of fear.

But in that hour
just before the storm/doom
crashed down,

with force and immediacy, heard
by every child, woman and man,
came the word, spoken
through Jeremiah who
moved past darkness.

Yes, they had heard
his long-range forecasts.
But now, they knew, believing now
had them closed in with seeing.

(*AN* 3.35)

Proving

“... do not omit a word” (*Jer. 26.2b*)

Truth speaks
all things into being.
No word more, but
not one left unspoken.
Truth carves, incises,
to the bone,
and between bone and marrow.
No wonder
we want none of him.
The wonder is
truth loves;
died of it, once.

Truth lives.
Acting on what is spoken,
not a syllable extra,
nothing omitted,
brings into being
just what is prophesied.
That is the test –
not of what has been spoken

but for the hearer,
his act.

(*AN* 3.79)

3.1 Learning to See

A Nameless One

Hot in June a narrow winged
long-elbowed-thread-legged
living insect lived
and died within
the lodgers' second-floor bathroom here.

At six a.m.
wafting ceilingward,
no breeze but what it living made there;

at noon standing
still as a constellation of spruce needles
before the moment of
making it, whirling;

at four a
wilted flotsam, cornsilk, on the linoleum:

now that it is
over, I
look with new eyes
upon this room
adequate for one to
be, in.

Its insect-day
has threaded a needle
for me for my eyes dimming
over rips and tears and
thin places.

(*AN* 1.225)

The Swimmer's Moment

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.
And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn
Pale and forever on the rim of suction
They will not recognize.
Of those who dare the knowledge
Many are whirled into the ominous centre

That, gaping vertical, seals up
For them an eternal boon of privacy,
So that we 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).

(*AN* 1.89)

3.2.5 Explicit Connection between the Natural World and the Biblical Text

What John Saw (Revelation 4)

The black holes out there, of pure (physical) force
in the heavens,
those in-and-out plosions, focused,
remote, in a rhythm of
incomprehensible infrequency
but nonetheless in time,
speak the extremes absolute of a rhythm
we mortals know.
They are like us contained in
creation's "Let it be so".

Who can comprehend, with a heart hungry
for meaning?
who does not feel the uprooting
tremor of one event –
one person's or, in the stupefying
astronomers' book of hours, one
pulse of the megalorhythm?

Yes yes I know
this bronzing beech tree, the
blackening myrtle at its foot
(event in all my seasons,
seasoned for this long before I was
born) exists in a mere
twitch, is rushing towards the node
millennia away, and that just one
of many, just one episode.
Time curls on itself.

Least moments given, though,
can open onto
John's comprehender: here,
there, then always
now, because unchanging, who
made light and ponderous rhythms, time, and all
pulsing particulars.
John saw him rainbowed in glory –
compact of all our music, hearing the farthest
compositions, and the most intricately
present. Magnet. Intensifier. Agonizingly
rediscovering, in shards, the shapes
design is satisfied to see.
One. White. Whole.

Secret within
all that John saw
is the bronzing beech tree
of this October twilight
though I do not yet see,
even in mind, being not yet out of time.
(*AN* 3.74-75)

4.1 The Mixed Reality of *Imago Dei* and Fallenness

Neverness, or, The One Ship Beached On One Far Distant Shore

Old Adam, with his fistful of plump earth,
His sunbright gaze on his eternal hill
Is not historical:
His tale is never done
For us who know a world no longer bathed
In the harsh splendour of economy.
We millions hold old Adam in our thoughts
A pivot for the future-past, a core
Of the one dream that never goads to action
But stains our entrails with nostalgia
And wrings the sweat of death in ancient eyes.

The one-celled plant is not historical.
Leeuwenhoek peered through his magic window
and in a puddle glimpsed the tiny grain
Of firmament that was before the Adam.

I'd like to pull that squinting Dutchman's sleeve
And ask what were his thoughts, lying at night,
And smelling the sad spring, and thinking out
Across the fullness of night air, smelling
The dark canal, and dusty oat-bag, cheese,
And wet straw-splintered wood, and rust-seamed leather
And pearly grass and silent deeps of sky
Honey-combed with its million years of light
And prune-sweet earth
Honey-combed with the silent worms of dark.
Old Leeuwenhoek must have had ribby thoughts
To hoop the hollow pounding of his heart
Those nights of spring in 1600-odd.
It would be done if he could tell it us.

The tissue of our metaphysic cells
No magic window yet has dared reveal.
Our bleared world welters on
Far past the one-cell instant. Points are spread
And privacy is unadmitted prison.
Why, now I know the lust of omnipresence!

You thousands merging lost,
I call to you
Down the stone corridors that wall me in.

I am inside these days, snug in a job
In one of many varnished offices
Bleak with the wash of daylight
And us, the human pencils wearing blunt.

Soon I'll be out with you,
Another in the lonely unshut world
Where sun blinks hard on yellow brick and glazed,
On ads in sticky posterpaint
And fuzzy
At midday intersections.
The milk is washed down corded throats at noon
Along a thousand counters, and the hands
That count the nickel from a greasy palm
Have never felt an udder.
The windy dark
That thrums high among towers and nightspun branches
whirs through our temples with a dry confusion.
We sprawl abandoned into disbelief
And feel the pivot-picture of old Adam
On the first hill that ever was, alone,
And see the hard earth seeded with sharp snow
And dream that history is done.

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

‘On’ from Other Oceans

When the convulsive earth
arched under the sea
its craggy ribs were
blurted out where reefs had been
into the golden warmth for a
fraction of a second of the one
day that's a thousand years.
In the same breath, on what was risen up
swarms of wee morsels mightier than
seafoam, rockface, under weather
brought what had emerged to be
grasses of the field
breathing that sun-washed sky.
On the face of the earth
trees and tiny Arctic flowers
face upwards; animals
with velvet paws, or hoofs,
all seem to look away towards the
falling-away edge of the earth.
My face, among these others,
ours, are not as though
among these others.

Concrete and Wild Carrot (AN 3.146)

4.2 The Witness in People's Relational Capacity

July Man

Old, rain-wrinkled, time-soiled, city-wise, morning man
whose weeping is for the dust of the elm-flowers
and the hurting motes of time,
rotted with rotting grape,
sweet with the fumes,
puzzled for good by fermented potato-peel out of the vat of the times,
turned out and left
in this grass-patch, this city-gardener's place
under the buzzing populace's
square shadows, and the green shadows
of elm and ginkgo and lime
(planted for Sunday strollers and summer evening
families, and for those
bird-cranks with bread-crumbs
and crumpled umbrellas who come
while the dew is wet on the park, and beauty
is fan-tailed, grey and dove grey, aslant, folding in
from the white fury of day).

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

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

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

The Dumbfounding (AN 1.160)

5.1 Johannine Witness of the Word

Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel

Un-tense-able Being: spoken
for our understanding,
speaking forth the 'natural world' –
'that', we (who are part of it)
say, 'we can know.'

Even in this baffling darkness
Light has kept shining?
(where? where? then are we blind?).
But Truth is radiantly here,

Being, giving us to Become;
a new unfathomable genesis.

Come? in flesh and blood?
seen? as another part
of the ‘natural world’ his word
flung open, for the maybe imperiller,
in what to us was the
Beginning?

The unknown, the unrecognized, the
invisibly glorious
hid in our reality
till the truly real
lays all bare.
The unresisting,
then, most, speaks
love. We fear
that most.

No Time (AN 2.148)

The Bible to Be Believed

The word read by the living Word
sculptured its shaper’s form.
What happens, means. The means are not blurred
by Flood – or fiery atom.

He reads: a Jewish-Egyptian
firstborn, not three years old;
a coal-seared poet-statesman;
an anointed twelve-year-old.

The Word dwells on this word
honing His heart’s sword,
ready at knife-edge to declare
holiness, and come clear.

Ancient names, eon-brittled eyes,
within the word, open on mysteries:
the estranged murderer, exiled, hears at last
his kinsman’s voice;
the child, confidingly question, so close
to the awful ritual knife,
is stilled by another, looking to His Father –
the saving one, not safe.

The Word alive cherishes all:
doves, lambs – or whale –
beyond old rites or emblem burial.
Grapes, bread, and fragrant oil:
all that means, is real
now, only as One wills.

Yes, he was tempted to wash out
in covenanting song
the brand on the dry bone;
he heard the tempter quote
the texts he meant and went embodying.

The Word was moved
too vitally to be entombed
in time. He has hewn out
of it one crevice-gate.

His final silencing endured
has sealed the living word:
now therefore He is voiceful, to be heard,
free, and of all opening-out the Lord.
sunblue (*AN* 2.62-63)

5.2 Connecting Old and New Testaments

For the Murderous: The Beginning of Time

Cain brought grain on his forearm
and a branch with grapes
to the plain earth
under the wide sky:
vaguely he offered to the far-borne light
what the slow days had sweetened.

Abel killed, from his flock.
On the fire he made sacrifice.
Fat-brisk rose smoke and sparks,
and blood darkened the stone place.

That this was ‘better’ than that
kindled in Cain a murderer’s heart—
he was watched over, after; but he kept apart.

In time the paschal lamb
before the slaying did
what has made new the wine
and broken bread.

sunblue (*AN* 2.54)

Aftermath of Rebellion

When runners came with news
after the Battle in the Forest
the King’s hopes stirred – here was
no rout, no loyal remnant
straggling home to defend
an indefensible throne.

Yes, the first praised the Lord his God
(the King’s), obviously glad in
the monarch and his kingdom
made secure. Yet
(and hope flickered):
‘What of Absalom?’

The second, the official slower
runner, with a word
stifled the air and
hope went out.

'Would God that I had died for him.'

The father's lament
has lingered on the ancient air of grief
at least till now.

a vain, muscular, risk-defying, fine-looking heir to prospects that one day would amaze the Queen of Sheba, a rebel, a contemptuous underminer, had flung off

— forever now —
in his young man's euphoria,
his father's hand.

For such a delinquent
even, a sovereign, sick at heart,
learned what it is when
a father loves.

Not Yet But Still (AN 3.57-58)

All Out or Oblation

(as defined in 2 Sam. 23:13-17 and 1 Chron. 11:17-19)

Where sandstorms blow
and sun blackens and withers, licks up
into empty bright glare
any straggler
 who is exposed
 being still alive,
there:
 clean cold water
 throat-laving
 living
 water

Look! – a little group of men:
sun flashes
on the water poured from leather pouch
into a bowl, shining,
now uplifted

God.

Saltwater has etched
their cheeks, their mouthcorners.

WHAT ARE THEY DOING?

They are crazy. They are
pouring it
out.

Sand coats the precious drops and darkens with the life-stain.
Earth's
slow and unspasmodic swallowing is slowly, slowly
accomplished.

No. I do not understand.

yet with the centuries still gaze at them
to learn to expect to
pour it out

into desert – to find out what it is.
sunblue (AN 2.55-56)

Dryness and Scorch of Ahab's Evil Rule

Elijah said, this way comes no refreshing, only famine, drought. (2 Kings 17)

Elijah's raven was a bird
of prey, a scavenger.
and yet he was – Elijah heard
it right – God's messenger.

His wafer from no holy fire:
'this grisly flesh – or die'.
Cherith Brook alone was pure
and Cherith too went dry.

Elijah swallowed what the bird
of doom there dangled down
until the desert, then the word
came, and he could go on.

A widow had not needed ravens.
Now her one son lay starving.
Elijah begged. 'Well, all I have is
gone, if I risk serving'

She did. The boy lived on;
the prophet still endures:
the unfailing meal and oil a sign
to last through centuries.

It consecrates a time
of bony men and doom
lit towards the bread and drink of Him
whose is the final kingdom.

sunblue (AN 2.57)

5.3 Variations on the Christ Story in the New Testament

A Story

Where *were* you then?
At the beach.
With your crowd again.
Trailing around, open
to whatever's going. Which one's
calling for you tonight?
Nobody.
I'm sorry I talk so. Young

is young. I ought to remember
and let you go and be glad.
No. It's all right.
I'd just sooner stay home.
You're not sick? did you
get too much sun? a crowd,
I never have liked it, safety in numbers
indeed!

He was alone.
Who was alone?
The one
out on the water, telling
something. He sat in the boat that
they shoved out for him, and told
us things. We all just stood there
about an hour. Nobody
shoving. I couldn't see
very clearly, but I listened
the same as the rest.

What was it about?
About a giant, sort of.
No. No baby-book giant.
But about a man. I think –
You are all right?
Of course.

Then tell me
so I can follow. You all
standing there, getting up
out of the beach-towels and gathering
out of the cars, and the ones
half-dressed, not even caring –
Yes. Because the ones
who started to crowd around were
so still. You couldn't
help wondering. And it spread.
And then when I would have felt out of it
he got the boat, and I could
see the white, a little, and
hear him, word by word.

What did he tell the lot of you
to make you stand? Politics?
Preaching? You can't believe everything
they tell you, remember –

No. More, well a
fable. Honestly, I –
I won't keep interrupting.
I'd really like you to tell.
Tell me. I won't say anything.
It is a story. But
only one man comes.
Tall, sunburnt, coming
not hurried, but as though
there was so much power in reserve
that walking all day and night
would be lovelier than sleeping if
sleeping meant missing it, easy
and alive, and out there.

Where was it?
On a kind of clamshell back.
I mean country, like round about here,
but his tallness, as he walked there
made green and rock-grey and brown
his floorway. And sky a brightness.

What was he doing? Just walking?
No. Now it sounds strange
but it wasn't to hear.
He was casting seed,
only everywhere.
On the roadway out
on the baldest stone,
on the tussocky waste
and in pockets of loam.

Seed? A farmer?
A gardener rather
but there was nothing
like garden, mother.
Only the queer
dark way he went
and the star-shine of
the seed he spent.

(Seed you could see that way -)

In showers. His fingers
shed, like the gold
of blowing autumnal
woods in the wild.
He carried no wallet
or 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 -

You mean, in time
he left, and you saw
this happen?

The hollow
air scalded with sun.
The first blades went sallow
and dried and the one
who had walked, had only
the choked-weed patches
and a few thin files
of windily, sunnily
searching thirsty ones
for his garden
in all that place.
But they flowered, and shed
their strange heart's force
in that wondering wilderness -

Where is he now?

The gardener?
No. The storyteller
out on the water?
He is alone.

Perhaps a few
who beached the boat and
stayed, would know.

The Dumbfounding (AN 1.164-67)

5.4 All Stories Lead Towards Resurrection

Christmas Approaches, Highway 401

Seed of snow
on cement, ditch-rut, rink-steel, salted where
grass straws thinly scrape against lowering
daydark in the rise of the earth-crust there
(and beyond, the scavenging birds
flitter and skim)

is particle
unto earth's thirsting,
spring rain,
wellspring.
roadwork, earthwork, pits in hillsides,
desolation, abandoned roadside shacks
and dwelt in,
unkilned pottery broken and strawed about,
minibrick people-palaces,
coming and going always
by day all lump and ache
is sown tonight with the beauty
of light and moving lights, light traveling, light
shining from beyond farthestness.

sunblue (AN 2.97)

Christmas: Becoming

The Breath – flower-gentle, in,
is Word of power, out:
creating that invisible City, and
mountain, forest, sea,
tundra, ore-vein, light.
I knew it was forever, for I was young.

The world one day
cracked.
Faces all went grey,
cords, slack.
I lived towards the mortal Friday for-
ever till caught
in this.

A stranger flesh
of only son of man
torn and entombed, but raised
timeless, then
– the eyes turning to look up blur before him –

is still the Christmas presence,
flower-frail, approachable:
the timeless Father does not leave
us broken, in our trouble.

Even citied, at sea, shop-bound,
the *here* is veined
in light.
sunblue (AN 2.99)

Uncircular

The entombment of all that wrath
bespeaks the stench of a
fragmenting into
finality.
To me, this matters.
I anchor there as to a lifeline,

there where
what other self-bound persons
had wrapped and lovingly
laid, a total
loss for all, for all
was found in purity, among his friends
changed, but the same time opening
everything on earth to the
power that lifted him.

No wonder Paul cried out,
'I count all loss ...' – above all, loss.

Among us, Jesus found
encrusted words and structures;
he washed and brushed them clean
and out of the intractability
of history learned by rote
stepped, in simplicity the exemplar,

into the prairies of
dutiful days, each with the taste
of moving slowly towards ... without
the horizon coming any closer.

His are the evenings of a
king in a cave kept wakeful by
deftly deciphering the poems
he found written in his heart.

When most of his people trailed
about in moulting plumage –
aping, through fear and envy,
those not themselves –
he brokenheartedly
tried to put heart in them
again, or rouse them to the dread, in time,
that dragged them down
into sensibility.

In the besieged city
he moved among the panic-crazed;
and where skin-and-bone
cannibals crept or
by the walls, rocked against the rock
like a cribbed infant.
Once for a time
all of them were
strangers far from home.

They knew the wreckage to be faced and put together somehow on their return some day.

Once again there, Jesus too found words twisted, rubble about and again he swept and tended them gently, almost smiling when some who so cherished the traditional that they urged stains, gritty particles, dust must be left, too, untouched. His words flowed from a clear wellspring always till now a little tainted by the hand that cupped to drink, or the crafted ladle.

Why was this one then
dragged off and left abandoned to
indifferent cruelty once, with no
home left, anywhere?

* * *

Entombment, however, is new in all history.
What it is for.

Concrete and Wild Carrot (AN 3.167-69)

Our Only Hour

His look was lightning.
The extraordinary angel
stood, where history cleft
BC – AD:
the keepers were as dead men.

The keepers till the day they died
could not forget. Blindness still stabbing, from the
fierce glare of such a
countenance (in the undwindling moment
when they blacked out).

Not everybody sees
something like that in his time.
And then can never
distance it by
words ('I always remember

The morning ...')
Nobody could have heard.

Often in the night
the old keeper would
but again at the wall
Of fact: the stone,
 the hurried debriefing to
 hide what was done
 and keep them each alone
 and dumb.

His look was lightning.

It is a disappointment
 to have seen
 the singular brightness and be
 only as dead men,
and then exist, later that day and on and on:
 the point of it
 searching you, idly now, somehow, in
 a gathering silence, a history
 compulsively reviewed.

Could those keepers have actually
stifled the world?
One of them wondered,
waiting it out in the hours of his darkness.

Three women were there.
God kept them from terror.
 Truth shone, and shines.

The shrubbery by an apartment wall is
wire-bright in the keen north sun
 (sky jet-stream-sundered)
 and I think
 how it is the angel
 staggers belief.

Wide continents, telescope-swathed marine sky, our
multifarious kind, spilling out, over, around:
we receive 'all' easily but
glimpse something, once or twice,
which in our only hour will be
massively known.

The angel, we
hardly expect,
can hardly credit.

But the man, torn, stained,
left in mummy-wrappings,
stone under stone?

the man then seen
alive, known
powerful, heard
in the heart's ear?

He does not so stagger belief
as overwhelm our grieving.

No Time (AN 2.228-230)

Early Easter Sunday Morning Radio

The young voices,
the students' choirs
stir wonder. It's

the sting of new day
clear chill delicately
touched on the damp
grey-cloth east by a
thin brush, watery colours
faint in: tints run
sidewise and dis-
solve upward in the not yet except
for a breath of, a
far-off heralding of,
sun.

'Gloria!' they sing,
'Gloria!'

Why weep, old eyes, when
so suffused with joy?

Too Towards Tomorrow: New Poems (AN 3.195)

6.2.1 Avison's Independence of Spirit

Stone's Secret

Otter-smooth boulder
lies under rolling
black river-water
stilled among frozen
hills and the still unbreathed
blizzards aloft;
silently, icily, is probed
stone's secret.

Out there – past trace
of eyes, past these
and those memorial skies
dotting black signals from
men's made mathematics (we
delineators of curves and time who are
subject to these) –
out there, inaccessible
to grammar's language the
stones curve vastnesses,
cold or candescent
in the perceived
processional of space.

The stones out there in the
violet-black are part of a
slow-motion fountain? or of a
fireworks pin-wheel?

i.e. breathed in and out
as in cosmic lungs? or
one-way as an eye looking?

what mathematicians must,
also the pert,
they will
as the dark river runs.

Word has arrived that
peace will brim up, will come
'like a river and the
glory ... like a flowing stream.'
So.
some of all people will
wondering wait
until this very stone utters.

(AN 2.26-27)

Incentive

One walked the roads, slept
on a boat-cushion, waited alone
in enemy country at blazing noon for
water even,
paced it out to the end
in such clear strength

that (cows of Bashan
slaking our thirst, calling for more,
squashing poor people and not even noticing
and on the right days all in good order
sailing down aisles, heaping up
flowers on the altar etc.)

we look to him for

?no bread
no rain
leaf-shrivel and pests and
fevers and sores and
violence?

would but these bring us back to
the footpaths and open
skies among night-breathing olive trees,
back to the waiting,
the hope.

(AN 2.261)

6.2.2 Social Consciousness Integral to Witness

Psalm 80:1—"Thou that dwellest between the cherubim, shine forth!"

In autumn dark comes early,
the wind goes to the bone,
the crowds are very busy
and a person feels alone.

You know, Lord, You know us
out in the dark and cold—
and never planned to leave us out
although shut out of old.

The windows of the glory
were open, and You knew
Your power was for outpouring
in time to make this new.

We didn't know You, Jesus.
You came out in the night
and poked around the side streets
to bring us to Your light.

We waited where the wind blew
and knifed You in the rain.
Yet You still know who's scared and cold
and doesn't dare complain.

Some You have given food and warmth
now can go back out to
be with You in the darkness,
vagrants, focused on You—

until all the windows
of the Kingdom shine
and we can all be very sure
You wanted every one.

Bless us, Lord of Heaven,
Bless us, Mary's child,
and keep our courage high with You
through steep and storm and wild.
(AN 2.85-86)

Cross-Cultural or Towards Burnout

Your rage is bearable as your
swallowed insults and the limp
collusion with us were not
to you, were to us echoes only of
our inauthentic guilt.

Yet your rage hurts.
A post-colonial white woman, I am
therefore a thing-hog,
easy taker-for-granted, helpless
to unmake the bed

others made for me, even before
grandpa (and even he was
simply another fellow working long hours,
kindly respectful, whether paid or not).
And I lie, tossing, in that
incontestably comfortable bed.

What has been crafted in behind
green hedges of ‘our heritage’
took centuries, took lives.
It formalized, in time, our
savage sorrow into this
chamber music. We need
a life half-lived-out, maybe more
to be constrained to music in
quiet fullness of sorrow.

We are outraged at your
raw grief, at
the bony barricades of
borne indignity:
your five-year-old coming in
defeated, facing still
another day of what
our five-year-old will say and do.

Through Jeremiah I had
faced up to God’s fierce anger.

Therefore your rage is the
long held under
knowledge of the holy child’s
knowledge of
the spittle, the
flogged back, the suave
manipulator’s deathly mockery,
present, every wracked
generation, as if helplessly.

Your work is dark and bitter.

Ours, rounded up at last from the
once fortress city, picking our way
out through its rubble, bound
for forced labour in remote Asian
cities, or
slavery in
others’ mansions and palaces.

Our God endures.

The sentinel trees
on a far hilly ridge
remind us of perennial
destruction, restoration, on
wave lengths much too vast to ease
you and the child today
or us into tomorrow

(AN 3.48-49).

6.2.3 Words as Pointers Rather than Weapons

Concert

Learning, I more and more
long for that simplicity,
clarity, that willingness
to speak (from anonymity ...)
all those impenetrables, when words
are more like bluebell petals under
an absorbed heaven.

You fret because the underbrush
is dense, the way uncleared it seems
where you now find yourself?

Words have been given. Once.
Words that are storm and sun and rain.
Listening earth, where they have fallen,
finds seed casings begin
to split,
roots throb. As though
some unimaginable response is
implicit in that speaking.

Fulfilment is in promise
and still more resonant longing.
Not Yet But Still (AN 3.65)

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