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The dissolving jail-break in Margaret Avison

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The Dissolving Jail-Break in Avison

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Margaret Avison's most concise statement on the faculty of imaginative vision appears in the early and darker stages of her mature career, in her most controversial poem; the thought embodied by this statement, however, flows through most of her poetry in various channels, undergoing various transformations.

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.
The optic heart must venture: a jail-break
and re-creation.[1]

The central principles here — the equation of *seeing* with *being*; the bursting of generally-accepted boundaries of perception; and "the imagination's re-creation of the world of experience"[2] — are fairly general and underlie equally the intellectual twists and questions of some poems and the celebratory imagism of others. More particularly, however, the venture/jail-break/re-creation pattern repeats itself through Avison's work, changing significantly as it does so: venture and jail-break dominate the earlier poems, often in a pattern of challenge and questioning; in the later poetry, however, altered perception is not overtly proclaimed or examined so much as it is enacted and celebrated. In the imaginative and religious re-creation taking place, the venture and jail-break themselves are radically transformed, dissolving together into an "opening-out" ("The Bible to be Believed," *sunblue*, p. 57).

It is difficult to generalize about movements in Margaret Avison's poetry: elements of the celebration and conviction of later poems enlighten some of her early work, and "voices" of earlier scepticism and self-examination speak in her later poems.[3] Moreover, as Avison herself whimsically reminds students in "Strong Yellow, for Reading Aloud" (*sunblue*, pp. 40-41), it is presumptuous to relate any such movement to stages in her personal religious development. This essay, then, following Avison's own principles, will not trace larger patterns of development, but rather will look carefully at four poems which embody rather different ways of understanding the jail-break, and which suggest something of its transformation. To achieve such an understanding the reader must accept the challenge presented by Avison's precise and unsettling language, recalling that she demanded "creative readers" as well as "creative writers,"[4] and look *through* the poems as through another eye.

Before approaching the poems directly, I shall review more fully some of the implications of the perceptive process as described in "Snow," implications which should be familiar to Avison students but which establish the terms of the change this discussion is intended to document. The optic heart unites sense (eye) and inner being (heart) in a multi dimensional, imaginative vision that breaks through conventional structures of perception; it includes both the "inner eye" (of "Apex Animal") and the outer, both physical and non-physical experience. 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; throughout her work *seeing* is metaphorically equated with *being*. "Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes" — only you can do your seeing; paradoxically, however, in order to see for yourself you must venture both *out* of a self-centred point of view[5] and out of the framework of things as seen "for" you by conventional boundaries and angles of perception, space-time coordination, categories of visual objects, and the like. This is the jail-break suggested in such early poems as "Geometaphysical" and "Perspective," and borne out in the surrealism of *Winter Sun* poems like "Snow" and "Jonathan, O Jonathan" (pp. 27, 30); in the later poems this self-conscious challenge to perceptual limitations gives way to a larger sense of being and life, in which the limitations have fallen away and the jail-break itself has turned inside-out.

Jail-break is a risky process, however, for it always entails a kind of death; yet that death is ultimately essential to life and being — "must venture" connotes both danger and necessity. The fear inherent in the jail-break takes two forms: the fear of dissolution in leaving the security, however confining, of a self-defined world; and the paradoxical fear of being shut up in the self, unable either to absorb or to communicate the changed vision — this apprehension appears in the whirlpool of "The Swimmers Moment" and in the poet of "Chronic," sequestered in her house made of old newspapers, "failing . . . In credence of reality as others/Must know it" (*WS/D*, p. 18). Necessity can also be understood two ways: both as an unavoidable circumstance or "moment" in life to which all must come, or as a continuing demand of human existence. All must approach the perceptive precipice, and, if the leap is taken, the resulting Gopernican shift in perception pulls the flat world out from under the feet, leaving a breathless sense of insecurity; one must either abandon oneself to the flux or be destroyed by it, be flung with the sungold wheels of "Jonathan" or be crushed by them. From another angle, the imaginative act can be seen as necessary to being, fulfilling some innate demand — hence the thread of "yearning," "longing," and "hunger" which runs through Avison's work.

In the larger pattern of Avison's poetry, the fear of dissolution blends paradoxically into an affirmation of re-creation. The jail-break presents Avison's version of the Gospel paradox that one must lose one's life in order to find it, and that he who tries to save his life shall lose it: clinging to conventional definitions, categories, and space-time notions — or to intellectual games and compensating fantasies — leads only to the empty shell or dead-end of despair described in "The Mirrored Man." In order to see meaning and clarity and life under the grey outlines and blur of postlapsarian existence, the seer must burst out of self-centred vision and move into other dimensions; the eye which can see the snowstorm as astonished cinders quaking with rhizomes will ultimately be able to comprehend the God who is like an uncircumferenced circle. In order to be re-created, the seer must abandon self-definition and self-enclosure to be drawn out of the self, both into the world she perceives and into the source of that world's light (as in "Ps. 19"). Frequently in Avison's later poetry perception becomes an encounter, in which seer and thing seen may change places; most often the eye participates in what it sees (William Aide says this participation exonerates Avison from the charge of "mere description"!)[7] and all the being is involved in the act:

My heart branches,
swells into bud and spray:
heart break.

("March Morning," *sunblue*, p. 25)

Here is the jail-break without walls: not a jail-break, a conscious struggle to escape, but rather heart-break, a living openness, or a process of life-from-death.

Avison's de-structuring of conventional vision does not lead to existential nausea and dead-ends, nor to pathological post-modern isolation, because it ends thus in re-creation, both of the world as imaginatively perceived and of the self that so perceives the world. This principle is most immediately demonstrated in Avison's poetic language, in the stylistic oddities of her poems, which have generally been recognized as challenging the reader's own structures of perception: she forces the imagination to work, and demands that the attentive reader accomplish the jail-break him/ herself. Time-space point of view moves through history and around the world; personal pronouns shift from first to third, the reference ambiguous; metaphor and reference blur and unite; the seer and the thing seen inter-penetrate, particularly in the later poems. Ambiguities and interruptions in syntax and diction re-create the ambiguities of experience or point to experiences beyond words: concentrated, cryptic utterances or piled-up hyphenated clusters give the impression of language being stretched over something rather too big for it, or of an attempt to convey a multiplicity of meaning and experience in which all levels are equally present and important. The surrealism of some poems, showing the world without the structure of generally-accepted categories, expectations, and physical limitations, can be terrifying and vertiginous: roofs slope and flash actively beneath sungold wheels; the poet is flung into bright air on the end of something rather like God's fishing line; the sun reflected on the ocean can explode the eyeballs, as an object of vision too powerful for ordinary seeing. (In opposition to subjectivism, Avison postulates a reality outside the self, big enough and powerful enough to overload the individual vision.) Although Avison most certainly uses convention against itself, both in her language and in the perception it embodies and promotes, her language and vision do not empty themselves of meaning but rather are "cryptic" (a key word in Avison's lexicon), packing meaning in; in another form of the dissolving jail-break, her work breaks construction open, moving beyond the deconstructive spiral into an unimaginable dimension of meaning and reference — the uncircumferenced circle of "First."[8]

Of the four poems I am considering, the first two embody very clearly in themselves the venture/jail-break/re-creation pattern, but do so in different ways anticipating later transformations. "The Swimmer's Moment" centres on the active venture and concomitant dangers. William New thought this poem too "obvious" to be good,[9] but evidently Avison thought enough of it to include it in both *Winter Sun* (1960) and *The Dumbfounding* (1966), possibly indicating that the darkness and fear inherent in such a venture are themselves a part of the affirmation celebrated in *The Dumbfounding*. In "Prelude," on the other hand, the change of perception occurs not in a willed leap into darkness but in an epiphanic "turning-point," a touch of re-creative light in a moment that gathers up time and space; the seer is accepting and passive, rather than active.[10] The two later poems I am considering seem to take place inside a re-created perception, *after* the jail break; they celebrate the break and re-creation rather than questioning or documenting the nature of the experience. "Ps. 19" sees the poet drawn. upwards into the source of the transforming light in "Prelude," drawn out of herself into re-creation; yet it centres mainly on the word *fear* — the fear of "The Swimmer's Moment" is re-directed and resolved, and the act of perception is both a willed venture and a passive "annunciation." From the much later

collection *sunblue*, "From Age to Age: Found Poem" presents the re-creative process not through the poet's eyes alone but through her witness of a child re-living the perceptive moment of Genesis. In Avison's later work generally the emblem of creative perception is the child, who is absorbed in what he sees, and who *is* in the act of seeing; perception and language come together in the eternal moment of Genesis, "when Adam names the animals" (*sunblue, p 102*), in an ongoing act of re-creation. Both Adam and the child are at the heart of this poem; which also depicts the re creation more serenely and simply than earlier poems, declaring it avail able to all: the poet and the child "find" the poem in — and through — a Toronto streetcar.

Of the four poems, "The Swimmer's Moment" captures the paradox of the venture most concisely, in suggesting the potential dangers of deeper imprisonment. Its pivotal metaphor equates the swimmer's plunge with immersion in the world exposed by the freed imagination; in the moment of leaving the shore each swimmer abandons the conventional definitions and boundaries of experience, both physical and non-physical. Ernest Redekop classifies the image of the whirlpool with those of the inner cell and the secret mirror in "The Mirrored Man," calling them "the magical and sometimes fatal loci of the imagination" (p. 45). And, like "Perspective," this poem emphasizes fear, the dangers inherent in the venturing of the optic heart: the fear, however, is qualitatively different from the vertiginous fear of "an unroofed universe" where "the wrenched miles swing and course" ("Jonathan, O Jonathan," *WS/D*, p. 30); it is rather a much darker fear of being lost, sealed up even, in the world beneath the surface of conscious structures, or in a prison of subjectivity, in the darkness of the self cut off from the world outside it.

The poem indicates that everyone actually enters the water on the edge of the pool — the imaginative leap is taken by all, knowingly or unknowingly. Such a venture, then, is a condition of human existence — a moment of judgment all must face, followed by salvation or damnation; it is in itself but a beginning, which can lead either to deeper imprisonment or to re-creation. For some, the moment of entry passes unrecognized. Their willed refusal to acknowledge the existence of the whirlpool saves such persons from "the black" (concrete darkness, the erasing of the world as they know it) but saves them only through "bland-blank" eyelessness and anonymity; and they are of course not saved but damned, locked into a whirlpool of their own banality:

And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn
Pale and forever on the rim of suction
They will not recognize . . . .

(Note in passing that the use of "forever" as both adjective and adverb is a characteristic syntactical ambiguity emphasizing that *being* is *active*, even in the state of banality.) The average grasp on conventionally-understood reality is eternally precarious, ever in danger of being sucked into a whirlpool of unstructured subjectivity; yet it goes nowhere, neither growing nor dying.

Paradoxically, the seer who would escape the rim of suction must plunge deeper into the whirlpool; in recognizing the moment of entry she is swept into it. In doing so she risks deeper imprisonment.[11]

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.

Instead of re-creation there is an eternal boon of privacy, an ironic gift, possibly of isolation arising from the altered vision and an inability to communicate it, as in "The Valiant Vacationist" and "Chronic," but containing also a darker element, the kind of limbo pictured in "The Mirrored Man":

So each of us conceals within himself
A cell where one man stares into the glass
And sees, now featureless the meadow mists,
And now himself, a pistol at his temple,
Gray, separate, wearily waiting.

Here is a vision that turns inward rather than looking outward, in a self-involvement that carries with it the potentiality for self-destruction and a loss of identity rather than a discovery of it ("now *featureless* the meadow mists" [my italics]). One could postulate, then, that the eternal boon of privacy entails a personal perception achieved at the expense of a broader, more ample vision; even further, that the dissolution of the self here results from withdrawal into the self, even solipsism. Conversely, in the redemptive self-dissolution which dominates Avison's later poetry, the seer is drawn out of herself through active perception, in order to be re-created, or even re-defined. It cannot be over-emphasized that in Avison re-creative seeing does not look inward so much as outward; the "inner eye" perceives and re-creates the world outside the self, and re-creates the self in so doing. The risk in freeing the spirit from the conscious limitations of vision is to be overwhelmed by one's own darker consciousness; the risk in letting go of agreed-upon standards of perception is to be sucked into a prison of subjectivity.

Although it involves both the risk of eternal banality and the risk of sealed-in subjectivism, the whirlpool is a necessary part of the process of freeing perception and possible re-creation; the poem moves quickly from the darkness and danger of the black pit and the deadly rapids to the mysterious further waters, an image for a broader, "more ample" perception which suggests the mysterious nature of the light in "Prelude" and anticipates (at some distance) the "visual amplitude" of the *sunblue* sketches (p 17). The most striking note of this poem lies in Avison's identification of herself, not as one who has achieved new vision, but as one for whom the decisive moment has not yet come. "We" — she and the ordinary reader — turn away in despair from the deaths of those who dared the jail-break and were swallowed up, while we cannot even begin to comprehend the larger and brighter world suggested by the "more ample, further waters" and "the silver reaches of the estuary." The possibility that the poet has not yet herself achieved the jail-break helps explain the undercurrent of fear and struggle in this picture of the venturing of the optic heart. The final achievement of re-creation, then, appears at an unguessable distance:

Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
Where one or two have won:
(The silver reaches of the estuary) . . . .

The "silver reaches" and suggestion of the sea beyond the estuary (itself a topographical opening-out) provide the first glimmer of light and of a broader world achieved by those who have struggled through the darkness "and won." The sea, with its traditional associations of rebirth and limitless vision, exists objectively, but here is invisible to the poet, distanced by parentheses and a verb used both intransitively and transitively, syntactical ambiguities that leave open the question of *what* actually has been won.

If in "The Swimmer's Moment" Avison stands aside and looks at the venture of the optic heart, apparently seeing it as a decisive moment at which she and many ordinary readers have not yet arrived, "Prelude" deals with the experience of the jail-break itself, and it is very different from the plunge of the swimmer: the action of plunging into darkness gives way to that of accepting a "day-change" as light replaces darkness. "The turning-point is morning": this poem begins with a statement of re-creation in a traditional image, rather than pointing to a mere glimmer of "Possibility not God" (*sunblue*, p. 41); the faint gleam of silver reaches grows into the numinous, complex image of light which dominates much of Avison's poetry. Morning happens independent of human effort: in "Prelude" the change in perception appears more as part of the growth process than as a deliberate action; the turning-point is as decisive as the swimmer's moment, but it seems to come upon the poet from an outside source and she is relatively passive — the fruitful passivity of "annunciation," as sug gested by the poem's motto, in which perception is actually a process of incarnation.[12] As in both "The Swimmer's Moment" and "From Age to Age," the change is potential in everyone: the possibility of re-creation extends even to "the invisible neighbour . . . who does not bother glancing up to see."

The turning-point, like the swimmer's moment itself, is "for everyone" worldwide, moving from Budapest to Scandinavia to the unexplored regions of the sky in a shifting point of view that, as elsewhere in Avison, emphasizes freedom from a customary space-time structure. Budapest — a specific human geographical and historical location, full of associations (Avison's Hungarian translations spring to mind), is linked with the "feathery fields" of (apparently) clouds, themselves implicitly compared to the white, unexplored areas of sixteenth-century maps, which suggest once again the venturing of the optic heart into worlds undelineated by human boundaries. Budapest, Avison implies, is equally unexplored. The turning point does not need a particularly large and inspiring location; it can take place both in the framework of a doorway or on the horizonless expanse of the sea. It is not limited to one or two sweating achievers: it can belong to one individual — "a crippled crofter" — or to an entire race of people — "the Scandinavians" (the possessives here are those of quality or experience).

Avison follows this sweeping opening statement by moving into the personal world of her childhood memories, a world which is mainly one of purely sensual perception. Here, however, her point of view differs vastly from that of "The Swimmer's Moment": instead of looking ahead to the moment of change, she has undergone it and is looking back on her childhood with changed eyes. Although her childhood was experienced without this awareness, she liberates those remembered senses by her description, demonstrating the working of the optic heart:

I smell bare knees again and summer's clouds
. . .
He stood, and gnarled
silently. . . .

These lines seem to indicate that childish perception is more free — more re-creative — than adult vision; perception creates language "as in the morning day/when Adam names the animals" (*sunblue*, p. 102):

. . . rooting the word
"trunk", for a child, as right
for man or tree.

With reference to these lines, J.M. Kertzer quotes appositely from Avison's statement that "all poetry gives words multiple meaning; 'discipline[ing] into clarity' ":[13] puns and syntactical ambiguities re-create the richness and multiplicity of experience, the simultaneous levels of meaning perceived by the optic heart. Here the interplay of "gnarled," "root," and "trunk" demonstrate the "feeling" insight of the heart; "rooting" for example, carries both the multiple sense of etymological root or tree root, and the image of growing upwards and outwards while staying in the same place.

Childish perception is not an end in itself however; although freer than that of an adult, it carries its own inherent limitations and potential jail; these limitations can be seen in the child's reaction to the grandfather — both a physical limitation ("over our heads") and the psychological limitation of passivity — "we did not bother glancing up to see." Because of this passivity, the sensuality of the child becomes all the more easily locked into certain organized ways of perceiving the world, or "cities of sense." This idea is expressed precisely in the image of the "honeycombing sun." On one level this image could refer to the physical process of vision and thus to the development of the human eye; yet the word "honeycombing" also suggests the categorizing of perception that occurs through infancy, early education and approaching adulthood. Here is the irony behind the phrase "opened and sealed us in": with the opening or maturing of the eye (both inner and outer), perception itself becomes more and more locked into the cells of the organized, divided world of adult perception — "chambers and courts and crooked butteries,/cities of sense."

Focussing on "Tomes," the poem moves fully into the world of adult hood, education and intellect: the light of human knowledge and perception is locked into unopened books on dusty library shelves; conventionally-dictated perceptions and intellectual constructs pile up through the years in the mind. These are the books that must be opened (in a jail-break) to unlock and share the light. Nevertheless, both the image of locked-in light and the suggestion of internal light in the honeycombing sun also contain a kernel of hope: a sense that this light is an inner part of the person, a potential to be realized — this view of perception (the eye as a "sun" in itself) points to some of Avison's later poetry, where the seer both reflects and participates in what she sees. Here then the theme of active perception differs qualitatively from that expressed in "The Swimmer's Moment": the silver reaches of re-creation are a potential within the person, not a near-impossible goal.

The lines which follow move away from the tomes into a world of direct experience:

Most men would rather take it straight
Nothing can contrive
accepting. Sparrows in the curbs
and ditch litter at the
service-station crossroads
alike instruct, distract.

As New suggests, "most men would rather experience the world directly than read about it" (p. 239); the "accepting" and lack of contrivance reflect the openness that for the poet leads to "annunciation," the climax of the poem. These lines embody the contrast between the experience of I/eye and externally-dictated experience which lies at the centre of Avison's early poetry: "Perspective" 's implied contrast between the actual experience of parallel lines and art's linear perspective is reflected here in the contrast between uncontrived, "accepting" experience of the natural world and the intellectual constructs suggested by the tomes. This dual view of education continues with the sparrows and ditch-litter: the optic heart can transform them to something meaningful that can "instruct," but, in the eyes of civilized adulthood intent on higher matters, they are a distraction.

The resolution of the duality follows, in the poet's experience of "the stone lip of a flower" (an image uniting the natural world of childhood with the stone city of adulthood) though a "day change": literally, the sun coming out on a downtown government building complex; metaphorically, a turning point, an irrevocable change in perception which re-creates both the seer and the physical world she perceives. The particularity of location and description here, as *always* in Avison, is not simply a descriptive addition giving weight to the moment: Avison's poetic vision is firmly rooted in physical minutiae; the intensity of physical experience itself bespeaks spiritual power. The rather anarchic period after "government building," which apparently separates the subject "stone lip" from the very "stares," in rupturing the syntax forces the reader to pause, take stock, change his/her point of view; and it is not too far-fetched to suppose that the period itself represents a breathless pause before or in the moment itself ("in the moment of held breath the light takes shape"): the poet sees the flower simply *being* (and remember that in Avison being is active); then comes a moment indefinable by words, after which it "stares through a different sun." An ambiguous phrase here, to re-create the mystery of the experience: the flower itself, the thing perceived, "stares," either at the seer through the changed lens of her own "sun" eye, or through another mysterious source of light akin to the "enduring sun" which dominates Avison's later poetry.

At the very moment of change, the poet sees, through new eyes, the conditions under which one is ripe for jail-break, the "must" of the optic heart's venture:

Yet, touched to pallor, she
knows day, abruptly,
as I, and the stone flower, abruptly,
suffer the cryptic change.

"Knows day" implies a far deeper change in being, of course: the light, as it traditionally does, gives understanding and wisdom; it penetrates the eye to change the being "to the last ribcorner/and capillary" ("Ps. 19," *WS/D*, p. 118). In Avison's later poems, the two-way working of perception appears frequently in terms of I Corinthians 13:12 — "then I shall know even as I am known"; one knows the light in being known by it (Him)[14]. Here she describes the change as "cryptic" because it is both mysterious and concen trated, involving multiple meanings and levels of experience coming together — even drawing all times and places together into one moment. It is something to be "suffered," not an act of the poet but rather something that happens to her, as to the things she perceives; the seer and the thing perceived are drawn together by the same re-creative light.

The lines immediately following assert the timeless nature of this day-change, returning to the earlier world of childhood as one that is itself timeless: the "unmerging child" is not swallowed up by the encroaching structures of adulthood. In Avison's later poetry, the child becomes an emblem of perception freed from those limitations, and here she is almost identified with the optic heart itself. At the same time, these lines create a strong tension between mortality and immortality, the unmerging child and necessary growth and change. The sadness of the summer trees, for example, arises from their closeness to autumn and death; yet this image reflects the natural rhythms of death and rebirth, even returning to the poem's motto — "the spirit launched on its seasons" — which suggests that an ongoing pattern of death and rebirth may follow the annunciation. It is out of the very shift of the day-change that the "changelessness" of the poetic vision is asserted and indeed confirmed; the imaginative re-creation, the realization of the light, takes place *after* the jail-break, in adulthood rather than in childhood itself.

This paradox of change through changelessness can help us under stand Avison's use of literary convention (for example, traditional images such as 'light' and 'sun') as well as her use of grammatical and semantic convention. She does not obliterate such structures but rather transforms them; her poetry is engaged in investing words, syntactical structures, and conventional images with new meanings, not in emptying them of meaning. Similarly, in the dissolving jail-break, the adult's structured perception is drawn up and outward into a more comprehensive vision; it is erased, to be re-created in a dimension, not of infinitely receding possibilities, but rather of uncircumferenced immediacy.

The rich and complex image of light dominates the final sections of the poem, showing the full implications and extent of the re-creation, and particularly the equation of seeing with being. The light is both a penetrating and a creative force: it is "discovering light," an active, exploring aid to perception, and a womb-like "beginning/where many stillnesses yearn," rather like the primeval void, or pre-Creation beings in the mind of God. The "stillnesses" — passive potentialities in each person — yearn for fuller being, for their re-creation through the freeing of the optic heart and through its opening to the transforming power of light; this image might be fruitfully compared (and contrasted) to the "pre-creation density" with which man's being is crammed in "Intra-political" (*WS/D*, p. 56). The moment of perception becomes the moment of creation itself, timeless in time, ever-occurring, shaping those potentialities into being:

In the moment of held breath
the light takes shape.

This re-creation is not limited to the one or two who have struggled and won, but is potential in everyone — "those we had long thought dead/or our mere selves"; the ambiguous syntax here can equate our "mere" humdrum, everyday selves with those "long thought dead," just as it equates immediate present with mythical past. Here the light unites the universal with the personal, the mythical timelessness of Osiris with the relative banality of the present moment — "the chrome, the celanese, the rough-cast plaster" and "my fingers resting on it."

Not only does intensity of physical perception endow the present moment with eternal significance, it also works the other way, as the precise sensual details surrounding Osiris ("stepping/along the reedy shore of sunset") endow that myth with present-tense immediacy; indeed, physical perception re-creates the myth. This linking of mythical largeness with physical minutiae, divinity with ordinary sense-perception, is central to the poem's statement about the nature of imagination. Here is a useful quotation from Mia Anderson's rather fanciful, but frequently insightful, essay on Avison: ". . . one of the most endearing things . . . in the poetry of Margaret Avison is her utter love of the world as it is, not as it should be, her utter commitment to it and so to a route *through* matter to the light, not around it . . . if ever anybody bore the collision of the real and the ideal head-on, it's Avison."[15] Margaret Avison would probably consider this statement somewhat blasphemously exaggerated, since in her belief there is only One who bore that collision head-on; but it digs up an important truth — Avison's poetry is *incarnational*, not idealistic, and that incarnation is what "Prelude" and its "annunciation" are about. Here, it is the imaginative vision that takes the world as it is and redeems it; later, she will centre that act in the redeeming of the world through Christ's incarnation, the subject of *The Dumbfounding*'s title poem.

In the final statement of "Prelude" the apprehension of "The Swimmer's Moment," which cannot even guess at the silver reaches of the estuary, has been replaced by a statement of faith in the existence and universality of light, as a power whose very being is active:

In each of those at least light finds
one of its forms
and is. . . .

A new tone of acceptance is heard in the fact that this light exists

even in the invisible neighbour,
periwigged, black, in hunting pinks,
or rinsing clouts beside the holy river,
who does not bother glancing up to see.

Here are timeless examples of man in his blindness or passivity, expressed in rather startling conjunctions: the "periwigged" eighteenth-century gentleman[16] merges into the primitive woman rinsing swaddling clouts by the holy river, itself an act that vividly conjoins physical drudgery and numinous reality. This ironic conjunction suggests both her blindness to what is divine and meaningful and at the same time a potential transformation. The blindness is set up in contrast to the artistic vision which realizes Osiris and transforms plaster; yet, through the echo in the final

line ("does not bother looking up to see"), the "invisible neighbour" changes place with the childish poet, and thus contains in herself the potential for the same development of vision.

"The Swimmer's Moment" and "Prelude" engage the idea of perception from two very different stances: "Prelude" describes the jail-break as a timeless moment, passive rather than active, while "The Swimmer's Moment" contemplates the venturing of the optic heart, with some apprehension, as a personal struggle. "Ps. 19," however, seems to be an even stronger statement of hope than is "Prelude": here the dual nature of perception, of the dark and light sides of the imagination, are resolved in Christian faith. The light has become more specifically identified as an enduring source with which the soul seeks unity and fulfillment. And the plunge into the whirlpool has been replaced with a flight towards an "enduring sun," a flight which can be seen as the ultimate venture of the optic heart.

Although "Ps. 19" does not treat the theme of perception as specifically as "Prelude" does, the poem itself may be seen as an example of that perception at work; indeed all three elements of the injunction in "Snow" — fearful venture, jail-break, re-creation — are present. The poem itself allusively re-creates the original Psalm 19, in particular, verse nine — "The fear of the Lord is clean, and endureth forever" — which provides the structure; the first part defines that fear and shows how it cleanses; the second part celebrates the fact that this fear brings not barrenness and death but rather freshness of life springing from an enduring source. The words "fear," "clean," and "enduring" themselves (as Avison uses them) imply a progression that helps to unite the theme of perception and the Christian statement. "Fear," equated syntactically with "lov[ing] high," can be seen as the venture of the optic heart upwards and outwards, into larger dimensions; "clean" as a certain achievement of those heights and liberation from limiting sinful dross (a jail-break and re-creation); and "enduring" as the immortality of the re-creation.

Like "The Swimmer's Moment," "Ps. 19" is essentially *about* a venture and the accompanying fear, but now the fear has been re-directed and transformed, and is indeed an important part of the re-creation itself. "To love high" is the imagistic opposite of the swimmer's plunge; this upward aspiration does not long so much for changed vision as for a more complete, consuming, almost invasive experience: *to be known by* the light "to the last ribcorner/and capillary." Here perception works two ways, as the light enters in through the venturing optic heart, and transforms the seer. *Ribs* (ribcage, diaphragm, bones) in Avison usually seem to refer to structured being and perception (see for example "Butterfly Bones" and "Two Mayday Selves", *WS/D*, pp. 29, 103); but here even that structure is filled with light.

As elsewhere, the venture brings with it the fear of dissolution:

> — and wonder
> if, so known, a sighing —
> over-the-marshlands me
> might all evaporate, wisp away.

But this kind of death differs radically from the sealed-in doom of "privacy" in the whirlpool; the fear of being scattered by the wind or evaporated by the sun's strength implies a far different encounter, and a more complete jail-break. The image of an evaporating mist for the ephemeral

self (compare the "featureless . . . meadow mists" of "The Mirrored Man") is threaded into this passage with the mists drawn up by the sun from both the sweet springs and the stagnant pools of the soul. Paradoxically, this dissolution (and even the fear of it) is essential to the jail-break and resolution: in Christian repentance and re-birth, one must venture "openly to own" both the light and dark sides of one's being; if in the process one is "drawn" up like the mists it is "towards an enduring sun." The jail-break here is an opening-out, even a turning inside-out, of the whole being seeking to know and be known by the light.

"To love high" resolves both the active and passive sides of the optic heart's venture: it is an *active* openness and accepting, even an achievement. Indeed, in the final lines of the poem the "fear" itself of "sunward love" is a thing to be "won" (not "conquered," as we might expect): achieving it requires the same courage as does the winning of the silver reaches in "The Swimmer's Moment." (Note that, as in the opening statement, the fear is identified with sunward love; the preposition of is one of quality as well as possession.) Once achieved, the fear of sunward love has a re-creating power in itself: it "proves," or tests, the one who fears as silver is proved in the fire, and it proves itself to be green with life. In this ultimate jail-break, the feared dissolution of "all evaporate" itself seems to become a fulfillment of the longing; in the final line there is no subject for the participle *drawn* (unless it is "fear" itself in the previous change) —"I" (and "eye") disappears from this part of the poem, absorbed in what it sees and loves. The self is not erased, however: the imagery of the new life affirms the re-creation of the self's own "stone-cold lake-still sun-sweetened places," as the quality of sunward love proves "green with life, moss, cup-rock-water, cliff riven/for a springing pine."

The "enduring sun" is Avison's ultimate realization of the light which glimmered in the silver reaches and took its shape in Osiris and the stone flower, and it will be the unifying image of *sunblue*. Now the optic heart has been given a direction in which to venture, in an act which requires both the courage of "The Swimmer's Moment" and the acceptance of "Prelude" — it is "trusted to fire." The darkness and sealing-in boundaries of the two earlier poems disappear almost entirely here, as the jail-break becomes actual dissolving of all self-definition and defensiveness (for a theological and human opposite to this poem, one could read "The Mirrored Man"). In the process of openly owning onself to the light, fear, longing, venture and jail-break meld into one another as part of one act of re-creation.

Although the three parts of the injunction in "Snow" appear in each of these poems, the relation between the poems themselves seems to parallel those three stages. "The Swimmer's Moment" pictures the question of the venturing of the optic heart, which is still a fearful mystery. In "Prelude," the fear is dispelled by the actual experience of jail-break: re-creation becomes a universal reality and not a mere possibility. And "Ps. 19" becomes entirely a statement of faith in that re-creation. From the poet's own viewpoint, in "The Swimmer's Moment" she is on the outside, doubting her own ability to venture; in "Prelude," the vision seems to have come to her almost without that effort, broadening her understanding. "Ps. 19" is the first of these poems in which the "I" of the poet is almost absent, indicating that internal tensions and limitations have been resolved; here, however, Avison deals most fully both with her own regeneration and with the recreation achieved through her own changed vision.[17]

As a kind of epilogue, I should like to consider "From Age to Age: Found Poem," which appears in Avison's not readily available collection *sunblue* (p 102). If "Ps. 19" could be read with "The Swimmer's Moment," then this poem could be read with "Prelude," as it centres on an epiphanic moment of perception through the eyes of a child, follows the process of maturing perception, and, by the end, shows the potential or availability of such vision to all adults. The "poem" is "found" both by the child through the streetcar window and by the observer in the streetcar watching him and it: the finding itself re-enacts, from age to age, the moment of Adam's perception of creation in all its freshness. Like much of *sunbiue*, the poem is "threaded through" with the elemental images of light and water — the original elements of Creation, which permeate the physical creation still, and which for Avison symbolize — even literally embody — God's transforming life in the world, there for the optic heart to see. (It is difficult to speak of "imagery" in Avison's poetry, as in the act of the optic heart metaphor and "reality" blur and unite; sign becomes one with the thing signified.) The streetcar journey structures the poem as a maturing process, the maturing day from bright morning to storm-clouds and the reflective calm of evening, and the journey of life itself, from the child to the adults sealed in their cars. In one sense, the shades of the prison house close in, as the child "ground[s]" his "elation and surprise," as "storm clouds . . . eclipse" the sunlit waters, and as the "flashing, flowering . . . fountains" give way to "reflective low waters." But the voice of the poem is ambiguous, even more positive here: the question "is it all past?" leaves the matter open; and the "grounding" of wonder is not necessarily forgetting or de-valuing it so much as internalizing it, absorbing it into the being, where such experience will be available to the adult. Windows appear throughout this poem, from Avison's earliest work an important symbol for perception, simply meaning what we look through: here they are present not only in "the steady streetcar windows" through which the child (and the poet) looks on the stages of his journey, but also in the "windowed cars" linked by water and light — even in the "window squares/of the department stores" which look back at the streetcar, child, and poet (comparable to the "ranged windows" of "Prelude," but less threatening).

To follow the stages of perception more precisely, I will begin with the moment of perception and recognition, which re-enacts the wonder of the day when the morning stars sang for joy — "the voice of the morning" sings again in the back of a Toronto streetcar. Yet the moment of perception is also the moment of naming; more generally, it can be said that perception and poetic language unite in the same act of re-creation — "as in the morning day/when Adam names the animals." There is a duality here, or change, in Avison's view of language and poetic form, well worth further study. In the early sonnet "Butterfly Bones," "Adam's lexicon," equated syntactically with the "sheened and rigid trophies" of poetic form, is an act of naming which commits violence, capturing and fixating meaning; the morning voice in "Found Poem," however, shows the act of naming to be celebratory and re-creative, both receiving and giving meaning. As Adam's lexicon opens out into "the morning day/when Adam names the animals," the eternal present tense shows naming to be an ongoing and living process, not a fixed act of definition. The morning language does not pin down experience like a dead butterfly, but rather celebrates experience, opens up new experience, and enables the sharing of experience. This poem thus rejects the feminist view of language as a construct aggressively imposed upon experience, to replace it with a view of language as a *means* of experience: the child is not asserting his power over the fountain or inscribing himself upon it; rather, he is responding to the

fountain, recognizing its being and celebrating that being through a name, and, through the name, sharing the wonder of that recognition.

As the child's perception matures and becomes more precise ("the light sharpens"), he attempts to communicate the experience, "Shaman di/datic" like the poet, who both teaches, sharing knowledge, and works magic, initiating into mysteries. Time flows by ("stop succeeds stop") and the day matures still further, "flows over him"; yet this phrase can also describe the power of light in which the child's being is absorbed. Here is one of Avison's most precise descriptions of the full experience of re-creative perception:

The day flows over him.
He communes here, absorbing, confiding,
at one. . . .

Perception works two ways, both taking in the light, "absorbing" it, and giving out, "confiding" oneself to it (as "openly to own" in "Ps. 19"); the perceiver is "at one" with what is perceived. Far from one committing an act against the other, both seer and thing seen *interact*; both are re-created by the light and by the word that shares in the creative power of the Word.[18]

"Is it all past?" (as the streetcar presumably leaves the fountains behind) is a question that echoes through time, addressed to us as well as to the poet herself; and the rest of the poem points, perhaps ambiguously, towards an answer. We live in a postlapsarian world, where the storm-clouds have eclipsed the blue and gold (emblematic colours in *sunblue* for the freshness of God's life in creation, in the air we breathe), but the clouds are dove-grey, not threatening, suggesting Noah's messenger of peace and the brooding creative dove of the Holy Spirit. The child "ground[s]" his "elation and surprise," muting them perhaps, but also internalizing that initial response, possibly even confirming and firmly rooting it. "West farther still" we look beyond the streetcar journey, to a distance in both space and time (note the shift to the future tense here), and a broader view of "every windowed car". The car here is reminiscent of the plane in other *sunblue* poems (for example, "Light (II)" and "Light (III)"): a small, enclosed technological cell from which we peer out at the creation through small windows. Yet even these sealed-in cells *have* windows, and are themselves "threaded through" by light and water. The "far lake light" and "reflective low waters" may be muted versions of the fountains, but the experience and re-creative power are still there, in memory and potential in the adult mind, and available to everyone — every windowed car is threaded through by the same elements that played in the fountain of morning wonder. The same wonder is there to be re-discovered and to re-create the discoverer, "from age to age".

The larger movement of the injunction in "Snow" — the freeing of eye/I from self-centred vision to a larger dimension of seeing and being — is evident in these four poems, in both their overt statement and their form; the same movement can also be traced (though not tidily) through the larger body of Avison's poetry. She herself found her early poems too "withdrawn" and strove for greater "immediacy" in later work;[19] in more directly religious terms, she declared that she "grievously" obstructed the way of Christ in her early work by "honouring the artist."[20] These comments substantiate the general tension and shift in her work from linguistic virtuosity, self-questioning, and intellectual exploring, haunted by the knowledge that limitations

must somehow be transcended, to a sense of walls falling away, limits dissolving, language stretched to fullness. The twists, turnings, grotesqueries, and dead-ends seen through "sport[ing]" and yet "still-ice-splintered/eyes"[21] give way to an "opening-out" of vision and self, as the perceiving poet becomes absorbed in what she sees, and as seeing becomes a creative act participating in the eternal moment of Creation. The act of *knowing* through the poetic imagination turns inside out, and becomes rather an act of *being known* by the Light, "who is free, and of all opening-out the Lord".

Notes

1. "Snow," *Winter Sun/The Dumbfounding* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983), p. 27. Rpt of editions of 1960 and 1966. All quotations are taken from this edition, abbreviated as *WS/D*. All quotation from *sunblue* are taken from the 1978 edition (Hantsport, N.S.: Lancelot Press). [back]

2. Ernest Redekop, *Margaret Avison* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1970), p. 3. [back]

3. See Daniel W. Doerksen's discussion of "The Two Selves" and "The Two Mayday Selves" in "Search and Discovery: Margaret Avison's Poetry," printed in George Woodcock, ed., *Poets and Critics: Essays from Canadian Literature 1966-1974* (Toronto: Oxford, 1974), p. 132. [back]

4. Margaret Avison in interview with Peggy Murray of the Toronto *Telegram* (27 February, 1961), p. 25, cited by Francis Manbridge in "Margaret Avison: An Annotated Bibliography," Robert Lecker and Jack David, ed., *The Annotated Bibliography of Canada's Major Authors*, vol. 6 (Toronto: ECW Press, 1985), p. 56. [back]

5. George Bowering points out how in Avison's view our notions of time and space place self at the centre and reduce things distant, in "Avison's Imitation of Christ the Artist," *Canadian Literature*, 54 (Autumn, 1972), p 59. [back]

6. *Poetry*, 70 (Chicago, September 1947), pp. 318-21.

7. "An Immense Answering of Human Skies: The Poetry of Margaret Avison," in David Helwig, ed., *The Human Elements*, series 2 (Ottawa: Oberon, 1981), p. 72. [back]

8. For a stimulating discussion of Avison, deconstruction, and the power of language, see J.M. Kertzer, "Margaret Avison and the Place of Meaning," in David Kent, ed., *"Lighting up the terrain": The Poetry of Margaret Avison* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1987), pp. 7-26. [back]

9. W.H. New, *Articulating West: Essays on Purpose and Form in Modern Canadian Literature* (Toronto: new press, 1972), p. 253. [back]

10. It should be noted that Avison herself eschewed any overt ordering principle of arranging poems in a collection, preferring to allow the poems to choose their own relationships in the experience of the reader. (Cited in New, p. 242, from the dust-jacket of the first edition of *Winter Sun* [1960]). [back]

11. Francis Zichy observes this ironical jail-break-to-confinement pattern in Avison in his essay "'Each in His Prison/Thinking of the Key': Images of Confinement and Liberation in Margaret Avison," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 3 (Summer 1978), pp. 232-43. Zichy, however, exaggerates the importance of confinement as sub-text, at the expense of more positive consequences of the jail-break imaged even in the earlier poems. [back]

12. See Redekop (p. 33) for a useful exposition of this "annunciation."[back]

13. Avison reviewing A.M. Klein in *Canadian Forum*, 28 (November 1948), p. 191, quoted in Kertzer, "Margaret Avison: Power, Knowledge, and the Language of Poetry," *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents Reviews*, 4 (Spring/Summer, 1979), p. 37. [back]

14. In the complex and powerful image of light Avison draws on a deep well of traditional and mythical associations (knowledge, wisdom, life, poetry, Phoebus, Christ, God the Father) but "opens out" the tradition to make it a vital principle in most of her poetry, as indeed she opens out language itself. Her "light," for example, is both masculine and feminine, both active and generative, both revealing and life-giving; it embodies God's power in the creation and ultimately is given Personhood as Christ. [back]

15. Mia Anderson, "'Conversation with the Star Messenger': An Enquiry into Margaret Avison's *Winter Sun*," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 6 (1981), p. 105. [back]

16. In Avison eighteenth-century cultural images such as periwigs and porticos seem to represent socially agreed-upon constructs of thought and perception; see for example "Chronic," *WS/D*, p. 18. [back]

17. Although I think his judgment of the earlier poem rather harsh, David Jeffrey makes a valuable distinction between the experience of "light" in Avison's "Prelude" and in her later work: ". . . the experience of light worth having is the one that cannot be achieved by mastery or merit, because it shines beyond (an in spite of) poetic inspiration or boot-strap ambitions for a self-induced epiphany" ("Light, Stillness, and the Shaping Word: Conversion and the Poetic of Margaret Avison" [Kent, p. 69]). [back]

18. In "Sun/Son light/Light: Avison's elemental *sunblue*," Redekop explores this relation of the poetic word to God's creating word (*Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, 7 [Fall/Winter, 1980], pp. 21-37). [back]

19. "A Conversation with Margaret Avison," interview with John Bolette, Claudette Jones, and Mike Caroline, directed by Bert Laale, Prod. Instructional Media Centre, hosted by John Margeson (Scarborough: Scarborough College, University of Toronto,

001085,1971). Cited in Lecker and David, p. 56. [back]

20. Unpublished essay sent to Lawrence M. Jones, cited in his review article "A Core of Brilliance: Margaret Avison's Achievement," Canadian Literature, 38 (Autumn, 1968), pp. 50-51. Also quoted from Bowering (p. 56) and Aide (p. 69). [back]

21. "Perspective," *Poetry*, 70 (September, 1947), pp. 320-21; and "Once," *WS/D*, p. 170. [back]