

"EACH IN HIS PRISON / THINKING  
OF THE KEY":<sup>1</sup> IMAGES OF  
CONFINEMENT AND LIBERATION  
IN MARGARET AVISON

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My immediate subject is a group of poems by Margaret Avison<sup>2</sup> in which images of confinement and liberation are insistently present, and present in a special relation. In these poems confinement and liberation are related dialectically: a sense of confinement makes an effort at liberation essential; efforts at liberation enforce yet another confinement. The poet-protagonist feels compelled to strive to liberate herself from a conventional perspective ("The optic heart must venture: a jail-break / And re-creation" — "Snow"), but this act of liberation imposes yet another perspective that must again be broken out of. The perspective imposed by the protagonist's own efforts at liberation is more equivocal than a perspective imposed by convention, and to break out of a prison of one's own making is a more difficult, more uncertain venture. Some of Avison's best and most characteristic poems enact this dialectical struggle in which the individual works ironically against himself. The poet may be seen as working towards a vision in which this irony can be recognized; full recognition of the irony, that the individual is responsible for his own imprisonment, could make it possible to accept confinement as a necessary, salutary condition of self-definition. Avison's most explicit attempts at a poetic formulation for this acceptance are found in her latest volume of poems, *The Dumbfounding*, perhaps most notably in "Person" (the title itself emphasizes the challenging, inescapable fact of selfhood). Here the poet tells how "This door that is 'I AM' / seemed to seal my tomb. . . . The door / was flesh; was there."<sup>3</sup> By refusing to fret at this tomb sealed by the door of self the poet finds a paradoxical sort of freedom from the narrow confines of selfhood:

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<sup>1</sup>T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 413-14.

<sup>2</sup>The poems can be found in the following collections: "Snow," "Butterfly Bones," and "Voluptuaries and Others" in *Winter Sun* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1960). "The Valiant Vacationist" and "Perspective" are reprinted in *Poetry of Mid-Century*, ed. Milton Wilson (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), which also reprints the other poems. Recent critical attention to Avison has concentrated on the poetry of her latest volume, *The Dumbfounding* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966); the important earlier poems still merit attention and discussion.

<sup>3</sup>*The Dumbfounding*, p. 52.

No hinges swing, no latch  
 lifts. Nothing moves. But such  
 is love, the captive may  
 in blindness find the way:

In all his heaviness, he passes *through*.

But this is to begin at the end; my concern here is with several earlier poems that sharply present the struggle of the self to liberate itself and present that struggle as ironic and self-defeating. The struggle is reflected in Avison's style and choice of poetic forms: she is a poet of the large, free gesture ("Yet I declare, your seeing is diseased / That cripples space" — "Perspective"), but she is also a practitioner of the tightly bound sonnet. Her poetic structures are often expansive and loose (the lines, in the earlier poems especially, sometimes appear to run on as impulse leads her), but there is also a strong tendency towards poetic hermeticism, towards difficult and at times suffocatingly condensed expression. It is her tendency as a careful artist to fix and enclose, and so she is a formidable jailor of herself. Her poetry sometimes "moves / towards final stiffness," like the sonnets she speaks of in "Butterfly Bones; or Sonnet Against Sonnets." (The sub-title suggests the dialectical nature of the struggle for freedom, and translates it into terms taken from the poet's struggle with form.) Avison's human struggle has tragic implications, and her tragedy is of a particularly modern sort in which the individual's undoing is seen in an ironic, diminished perspective. This emphasis on the tenacity and also the ironic inadequacy of the self ("This door that is 'I AM' ") connects Avison to other modern poets. My title borrows a phrase from *The Waste Land*, and Milton Wilson has suggested that T. S. Eliot's Gerontion is a figure with important relations to Avison's protagonists.<sup>4</sup> When we consider the near despair about the efforts of the individual to which a poem like "Snow" brings Avison, it is not surprising that she follows the lead of an earlier modernist poet such as T. S. Eliot and turns in her latest volume, *The Dumbfounding*, to making poetic, human use of certainties derived not from the problematic struggle of the individual to shape his own freedom and perspective, but from the authority of received religion.<sup>5</sup> In the recourse to received certainties the struggle for liberation, the "jail-break and re-creation," finds its true goal, and the venturing individual recognizes and accepts the defeat of his personal attempt at freedom. In the earlier poems, this recognition of personal defeat comes hard and is often confusing, bitter, and despairing. (There is confusion in "The Valiant Vacationist," bitterness in "Perspective," and despair in

<sup>4</sup>See "The Poetry of Margaret Avison," *Canadian Literature*, No. 2 (Autumn 1959), p. 59.

<sup>5</sup>Perhaps the most incisive statement in Canadian writing on this recourse to religion is in A. M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," where the impulse to make poetic use of religious certainty is described with compassionate irony: "And some go mystical and some go mad. . . . Another courts / Angels for here he does not fear rebuff." (I owe this connection to a suggestion by Professor Zailig Pollock of Trent University).

"Snow.") In many of the poems from *The Dumbfounding* recognition of personal limitation appears to bring a new peace and a less problematic relation to the world.

One of Avison's most striking declarations of the need for a personal effort at liberation is in the opening lines of "Snow":

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

In this declaration the opening line is excessive in a way that makes the injunction in the following lines ambiguous. The first line is excessive because the poet says more than she needs to say to justify her call for venturing; perhaps, even, she says the opposite of what she needs to say. The poet is not content to say that the world will not come to us of its own accord and that we must therefore seek it out to make contact (the phrase, "optic heart," suggests that this contact is more than visual). She declares that the world will not come to us in a special way, by attacking us with what must appear to the reader, at least at this point, a rather gratuitous violence. It is this unexplained violence which makes the following injunction ambiguous, for we are not told whether in fact it is a good thing or not that, as the poet declares, "nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes." The verbal logic of the first three lines, pared of all emotional associations, tells us that it would be a good thing, for this stuffing in would establish, in its fashion, the contact which the optic heart is seeking. But the reader may find himself questioning and resisting the pull of this surface logic, because of something in the language itself: in fact the imagery and tone of the first line tell us that contact with the world is something to fear. The particular language used to evoke contact with the world is the language of intrusive violence. The poet has cannily raised a possibility which contradicts her surface statement, the possibility that the world may not only fail to remain passive and elusive, but may attack us violently, at our most vulnerable and sensitive place. This disruption of the logical surface introduces an ambiguity about the motive for the venturing which is prescribed in lines 2 and 3. The poet appears to be telling us that we must venture in order to establish contact with the world, but the violence of the imagery suggests strongly that a deeper motive for venturing may be the fear that the world will be stuffed in at our eyes. The surface statement indicates that the venturing of the optic heart is a courageous, liberating gesture towards contact with an elusive world, but the imagery and tone suggest that the venturing is also a defensive effort to anticipate and forestall the intrusive violence of a world which is only too palpably present.

Thus, as we may expect, the ambiguity about the motivation for venturing extends to the nature of that venturing itself. As Avison describes it, the venturing of the optic heart is itself an act of violence, a desperate

breaking out as much as a confident going forth. These opening lines are written in the volatile language of challenge, suggesting uncertainty at the deepest levels. A "jail-break" is a curiously aggressive metaphor for seeing;<sup>6</sup> the reference to stuffing in at the eyes implies that the protagonist's deepest fear is not that there will be nothing to see, but that what she will be forced to see will strike her blind. We notice that for all its dryness and restraint the tone of the poet's injunction is itself aggressive; her imperative rhetoric stuffs itself at us ("the optic heart must venture"), and this coercive gesture suggestively denies the respect for freedom of action which ostensibly informs the second line. The volatile language, the gaps in the surface logic (what we are told will not happen in the first line appears more interesting and important than what is happening) — all this indicates some underlying struggle of an intensely personal nature, which can find expression only in ambivalence and near incoherence. The deeper action, or (as the reader feels it) the more instinctive reaction described in these lines, is one of defense rather than confident self-liberation; this reaction is a response to a radical ambivalence about the possibility obliquely raised in the opening line, that the world will insist on stuffing itself in at our eyes. The defensiveness of the protagonist's reaction is only intensified by the fact that it is a defense against something which is deeply desired; the dry assurance of the surface statement tells us that contact with the world, even contact by having it stuffed in at our eyes (because this is the kind of contact which first occurs to the poet), is desired, but we need to look at the imagery to discover the menace which this contact poses.

The rest of the poem unfolds the consequences of the poet's ambivalence towards what she perceives as the threat that the world will stuff itself in at her eyes. More than this, the poem offers a gradual exploration of results of the poet's own violent effort to forestall intrusion. By this effort the protagonist intends to break free of her restrictions and encounter the world freely and confidently, only to discover that she has merely shaped for herself a more complete confinement. The deepest irony of the poem, its most important message to the poet and the reader alike,<sup>7</sup> is that the anticipatory violence of the jail-break results only in the complete passivity, confinement, and blindness of the protagonist in the sestet. If the "optic heart" ventures too aggressively, if the partly defensive act of

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<sup>6</sup>The special violence of Avison's concept may be confirmed by contrasting it with two famous statements on the nature of seeing; thus, Emerson: "such is the constitution of all things, or such the plastic power of the human eye, that the primary forms . . . give us a delight in and for themselves . . . This seems partly owing to the eye itself. The eye is the best of artists" ("Nature"). Compare Wordsworth: "Therefore am I still / A lover . . . of all the mighty world / Of eye and ear, — both what they half create, / And what perceive" ("Tintern Abbey," ll. 102-06). Both Emerson and Wordsworth find in the eye a fertilizing power for creation, an ability to enter into a give-and-take relation with the world which is noticeably absent in Avison's formulation.

<sup>7</sup>It is characteristic of Avison that there should be a message and that it should be difficult to record and full of menace. Compare "The Valiant Vacationist," in which the poet dramatizes herself as a sender of messages from a region of fear and uncertain struggle.

liberation succeeds too well, then the self will shut the world out entirely and deprive itself of that contact which it longs for and fears intensely, which it cannot think of without ambivalence because contact is experienced as intrusion in a sensitive place, a stuffing in at the eyes. In the final lines of the poem the optic heart, blinded by the "starry blur" of snow, the "colour of mourning," has become a passive "sad listener," and the refrain it hears is the story of its frustration by its own sincerest efforts to establish contact with the world.

We can explicate this unfolding in some detail by examining the development of the imagery. The imagery of the next few lines suggests that if we prevent intrusion entirely, we will by our efforts shut out the forces of life. (It is a crucial sign of the ambivalence at work in the poem that although the poet begins with a call to venture, to go out to the world, she continues with an elaboration of the dangers of shutting the world out — perhaps the disjunction between the first three lines and the development which follows is great enough to lay the poem open to the charge of incoherence.)<sup>8</sup> The beauties of the world, the colourful attractions described in lines 3-6, "are desolate / Toys if the soul's gates seal, and cannot bear, / Must shudder under, creation's unseen freight." Here the language of venturing has given way to the language of bearing, receiving; this confirms our sense that it is the prospect of intrusion, even in the first few lines, which is the poet's deepest concern. Like the language of the opening lines, the image of bearing points two ways, towards closure as shutting something out and closure as holding something in. Again, the less obvious meaning may be the most challenging and interesting. The first meaning is clear and straightforward: the soul's gates (the eyes) may seal and shut out the world, which then becomes "creation's unseen freight." But the soul's gates (the mouth? the womb?) may also seal what is within. Read in this way, the lines evoke a metaphor for the process of birth and creation; "creation's unseen freight" may be a poem, a child. Closure may both prevent something from entering and keep something from getting out; this second function of closure may be a very desirable one. The lines enact an ambivalence just as the first lines do, but with a different conclusion. There is no immediate injunction here to venture and break out, but instead a suggestion that we must learn to "bear," to be receptively open rather than aggressively venturesome. And there may be a further suggestion, with an even greater emphasis on passivity, that in fact certain kinds of closure may be a good thing. The word "bear" can mean at least two things, to receive something from without, but also to carry something held within — if this latter meaning is being invoked, then the phrase "cannot bear" would mean unable to contain for proper nourishment. If the word "bear" refers to the process of giving birth — and there are compelling reasons to think of this meaning in a

<sup>8</sup>This near incoherence may help to explain why the conclusion of the poem conveys a feeling of being stunned and passive, rather than released, fulfilled — but more of this later.

context so concerned with ideas of receptivity and openness to the world — then it suggests a fruitful and salutary holding in, for the purposes of gestation, of a poem or child. At the deeper level of imagery rather than logical argument, the poem is as much concerned with the need to receive and take in — indeed it is concerned with the need to hold in, to feed and nourish — as it is with the injunction to break actively out of confinement. Lines 6-8 retreat from the venturesome attitude assumed in the opening lines and seek some more balanced, mutual communion with the world. However, the sestet of the sonnet indicates that it is actually too late to achieve such a relation of give and take with the forces without.

In the sestet the gesture of self-assertion with which the poem began is completely reversed and turns into a movement of death-like resignation and passivity. It appears to be too late to fulfil the promise of renewal through openness and receptivity suggested by the imagery of bearing in the previous lines. Instead, "there is snow's legend," which insists on the fact of death (snow is "colour of mourning") and prescribes an attitude in which not only venturing but all action is impossible: "the wheel / Spins an indifferent stasis that's death's warning." In the next image, the venturing heart no longer actively discovers the world; the optic heart has become entirely passive, as the world reveals itself, in its own way: "Asters of tumbled quietness reveal / Their petals." This is the beauty of silence and death. The images of silence and passivity and barren paralysis ("an indifferent stasis") are in striking contrast to the active, aggressive language of the first lines. Finally, the protagonist is not liberated but overwhelmed: "Suffering this starry blur / The rest may ring your change, sad listener." The image of ringing a change is ambiguous; it may suggest a release or renewal, but it also suggests a circular search for renewal which only returns us to our starting point, as in the repetition of a circular and inconclusive musical phrase, a series of notes that winds upon itself without reaching a musical resolution. This latter meaning is given weight by the action of the wheel a couple of lines earlier, spinning "an indifferent stasis that's death's warning." There is something enforced and joyless about the protagonist's "rest"; it is a "starry blur" (an image of beauty, but also of terror and confusion) that the protagonist suffers at the end, no clarity of vision, no satisfying resolution of conflicts. Perhaps some consolation is taken in the recognition that it must be so. There is a submerged hope in these final lines, the suggestion that if the rest from action could be accepted in a positive spirit, then the stasis of death could be understood in a new way; it could be seen as the necessary, desired goal. But in this poem the realization of death leads only to a severely muted affirmation, leaving the listener passive and sad at the end. The last apostrophe, "sad listener," is addressed by the poet-protagonist to herself: she has been the jailor all along and is listening now in a jail which the reader recognizes to be of her own making. The death experience and joyless passivity at the end are what the venturesome protagonist has

created for herself; "snow's legend" is her own soul's final ironic word to itself. Hence the curious, suggestive apostrophes at the beginning of the sestet ("but soft") and at its conclusion ("sad listener"). In the culminating irony of the poem, the poet's self is split, expressing the underlying dialectic by which the protagonist has been working against her own desire for freedom.

"Perspective" is probably the poem which most dramatically and frankly illustrates the dialectical relation between confinement and liberation in Avison. At the outset of "Perspective" the poet speaks of her eyes as a "sport, an adventitious sprout," the self-mocking bravado momentarily dispelling the underlying fear which recalls the uneasiness generated in the early lines of "Snow." To describe the eyes as a "sprout" is a joking variation on the rather more serious venturing of the optic heart in "Snow." In the last stanza of the poem the poet returns to the idea of her eyes as a "sport," telling her listener (in this poem the listener is clearly someone other than the poet herself) that his fear, his conventional way of seeing things, "has me infected, and my eyes / That were my sport so long, will soon be apt / Like yours to press out dwindling vistas from / The massive flux massive Mantegna knew." There is a suggestion, in the phrase "my eyes / That were my sport so long," that the poet's eyes have been the consciously manipulated objects of her courageous will; as the poet presents it, this venturesome playing with one's eyes corresponds to the "jail-break and re-creation" in "Snow." It is an act of courage, a refusal to see things according to the limiting conventions of ordinary perspective: "Yet I declare, your seeing is diseased / That cripples space." We cripple space in this way, says the poet, because of fear, and it is against this fear and its crippling consequences that the poet's own courageous sport with her eyes is directed. And yet the poet's own way of seeing things is itself intensely frightening; she expresses and heightens the fear, even as in her boldness and jocularly she combats it:

But do you miss the impact of that fierce  
Raw boulder five miles off? You are not pierced  
By that great spear of grass on the horizon?

It is perhaps difficult to know how to take this stanza, with its combination of violence and grim playfulness, just as it is difficult to know at first how to respond to the violent excessiveness of the first three lines of "Snow." In both poems, there is a similar ambivalent, volatile interplay of desire and fear. The poet's perspective is no more natural than that which cripples space, for her perspective abolishes space entirely. In this stanza, surely,

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<sup>1</sup>Is there an echo here of *Hamlet*, III. i. 87 ("Soft and now! The fair Ophelia!")? Hamlet has just given his soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," which is insistently concerned with questions of suffering and resistance. Certainly Hamlet's soliloquizing on such themes is relevant to the situation of the protagonist in "Snow," who is also alone with her intense consciousness of her plight.

the world is stuffing itself in at the poet's eyes ("You are not pierced / By that great spear of grass on the horizon?"); and yet this is the poet's own personal vision, which she finds most true and satisfying. The tone of bravado prevails over the fear which underlies the stanza.

There is satisfaction and an intensely disturbing pleasure as well in the next stanza where the tone shifts to an alarming and barely controlled celebration of personal heroism:

I took a train from here to Ottawa  
On tracks that did not meet. We swelled and roared  
Mile upon mightier mile, and when we clanged  
Into the vasty station we were indeed  
Brave company for giants.

This stanza is, in one of its aspects, an elaborate and conscious joke, an absurd exaggeration of a vision which wilfully ignores the laws of perspective. The reader has to judge the tone of the stanza in order to decide whether the poet is only making fun of her timid interlocutor, scaring him out of his conventional wits, or is seriously offering an alternative vision and scaring herself in the process. Perhaps she is doing a little of both. (There is a similar tension between conscious fun and underlying seriousness in the stanza cited just above.) There is an identifiable lack of geniality in the humour, a troubling suggestion of grimness and ungenerous accusation. ("Your law of optics is a quarrel / Of chickenfeet on paper" — in these lines we sense the accusation and grim self-defense, in spite of the clever humour of the image, the chickenfeet [three lines converging on a point] which illustrate the cramping operation of conventional perspective.) The poet's grimness suggests that she has some serious investment in the humorous bravado which she flings at her interlocutor.

The underlying seriousness of the stanza is confirmed by the breakdown of the poet immediately after this moment of comic heroism. Her courageous, consciously comic resistance to fear and fact leads to disillusionment and retreat:

Keep your eyes though,  
You, and not I, will travel safer back  
To Union station.

There is pathos in this admission, although of a rather dry, grim sort. The poem enacts a drama similar to the one we found in "Snow"; an effort to break out of a conventional perspective has led only to the shaping of a vision of life which is terrifying and self-defeating. The difference between the poems is that in "Snow" this defeat is at least implicitly understood to be the work of the poet's own efforts. Hence the listener addressed in the poem is at the end the poet-protagonist herself. In "Perspective," on the other hand, the resolution is an accusation and a self-justification. The audience



addressed is not the poet herself but someone else. The fear that defeats her at the end — this is how she presents it — is not her own fear but her companion's ("Your fear has me infected"). Yet the most interesting thing in the poem is the poet's own fear, the fear that is held off, and intensified, by her wilful, venturesome sport with her own eyes. As in "Snow," we need to read Avison's language as dramatic gesture (to borrow a phrase from R. P. Blackmur). The volatile tone and imagery indicate that the real struggle of the protagonist is, in the first place, against her fear of what she sees and then against the consequences of her violent efforts to stave off her fear. (This effort is at work when the protagonist takes "a train from here to Ottawa / On tracks that did not meet.") Of course, it is the poet herself, the poem itself, which has alerted us to this interesting fear; and perhaps the recognition that "your fear" is really less of a problem than "my fear" is implicit in this final stanza. Yet the repetition of "your" ("your fear," "my eyes . . . like yours"), the clear distinction made between the poet and her companion, and the final affirmation (with no comic qualification now) of the poet's heroic vision ("The massive flux massive Mantegna knew / And all its sturdy everlasting foregrounds"), all this suggests that, in intention at least, the poet has not come down from the high ground of self-celebration onto the lowly ground of ironic self-awareness.

In "The Valiant Vacationist" the poet-protagonist has again an audience and again finds it impossible to share her frightening vision. (The repeated presence of an implied or actual audience in these poems is one sign of their enactment of a dramatic struggle.) The opening tone in addressing her companion is casual and chatty, but from the third stanza there are suggestions of underlying seriousness and menace: "Anyway, I knew at once / That this dutiful interlude would not be followed / By squashed-egg sandwiches and coca-cola." As the protagonist climbs, the landscape contains suggestions of violence which are reminiscent of the fear evoked in "Perspective." As in that poem, the venturesome, valiant protagonist must face increasing menace, as she ranges farther afield from the conventional world of "a picnic lunch in the park, / Beside the car, well away from the public toilets." Her valour and effort (the casual, mocking tone, too grim to be genial, conveys the sense of suppressed effort) lead the protagonist to a place from which she can send no communication, her silence and solitude here corresponding to the state of the "sad listener" in "Snow," whose message was to herself (in this poem, even the poet cannot bear to hear her own message):

The word I send from here  
Is pitched so fine it lances my tympanum  
And I begin to wonder whether you hear it?

This central passage of the poem (the first of two tercets, set aside by special indentation) ends on a bleak vision of the dawn as bringing snow and

death: "and now I smell / The morgue-dawn will be snow, but myriad." Here as in "Snow" white is a "colour of mourning," and a possible new beginning (for, after all, snow at dawn may purify the world for renewal as well as blanket it for death) is ironically, sadly turned into a termination by death. The poem ends on a note of sadness and pathos rather than accusation and resistance, on an admission of aloneness and inability to communicate. The final statement is more pathetic than tragic, and it is less than a recognition: it is only an admission, a grim confession, because even the poet herself fails to understand what it is she wishes to communicate:

          Their language here you wouldn't understand.  
          Myself, I find it difficult  
          and so far have been unsuccessful  
          in finding anyone  
          Even to interpret for me to myself.  
          When I have mastered it, I'll let you know.

This is the prison of the self, from which Avison's protagonists are always striving to break free only to find themselves trapped in some further confinement. Like the others, this poem presents a journey which brings no satisfaction. "The Valiant Vacationist" ends on an admission of defeat given in tones of halting pathos — the lame, disjointed stringing out of the last lines conveys this feeling very effectively. "Perspective" turns defeat into an accusation against the hostile world; in "Snow," finally, there is no longer spirit for accusation, but instead an almost despairing recognition of the failure to break free and establish a satisfactory relation to the world.

We may summarize the themes of this discussion by looking briefly at "Voluptuaries and Others," one of Avison's most explicit statements on the dialectical tension between confinement and liberation. Here the dialectic is extended and applied to the tension between silence and communication. The first nine lines deal with the problem of communication and what it costs. The formulation is traditional, recalling Wordsworth's "we murder to dissect." The poet is concerned with the killing that results from the effort to fix meaning in order to communicate it, and she sees this as a problem not only in poetry but in all aspects of life. "That Eureka of Archimedes out of his bath," that effort to communicate a pressing message, "is the kind of story that kills what it conveys." But the cryptic, banal "Eureka" is the only way he could have said it, since the story "is not a / communicable one." Yet, despite this warning that the real story is always incommunicable, the poet now proceeds to define more closely the way in which the story is not communicable; by undertaking this self-defeating attempt at communication the poem itself enacts the difficulty it discusses, that to live fully one must communicate, even though to communicate one must limit and define and therefore kill what one conveys. The struggle for free contact with the world, which in "Snow" leads only to a more complete isolation, is now paralleled

by another kind of struggle, for meaning and definition, also one in which the struggler works ironically against himself. The essence of communication, like the essence of living, is just such a dialectical struggle:

The kind of lighting up of the terrain  
That leaves aside the whole terrain, really,  
But signalizes, and compels, an advance in it  
Such an advance through a be-it-what-it-may but take-it-not  
quite-as-given locale:  
Probably that is the core of being alive.

This is a very complete summary, in characteristic terms (terrain, advances, compulsion, locale), of Avison's usual concerns. The prosaic awkwardness, the hyphenated constructions and ill-shaped run-on lines, are functional, indicating the struggle for definition and its necessary frustration. "The kind of lighting up of the terrain / That leaves aside the whole terrain, really" is a good description of the version of the world the poet gives us in "Perspective," when she exercises her own vision to view things courageously but monstrously, abolishing space entirely to see "that fierce / Raw boulder five miles off . . . that great spear of grass on the horizon." We note the language of will and aggression in "Voluptuaries and Others": the poet "advances" through her terrain, and something (the demands of self?) "compels" this advance, an advance which seeks to establish some contact but must risk leaving aside the terrain entirely. The very intensity of the advance may cause the poet to miss her goal, which is, after all, to light up the terrain which is actually there. Yet the hope remains that the advance need not leave aside everything; it may even make room for the unexpected by always opening up new horizons. In its very frustration, the advance gives us our most important discovery, that the terrain is impossible to define or light up completely, that the world can remain always surprising and new, "a be-it-what-it-may but take-it-not-quite-as-given locale." This defining of the terrain is not, then, a complete imprisonment of the optic heart, nor is it "a concession to limited imaginations," such as the imagination of her companion in "Perspective," whose "seeing is diseased / That cripples space." Momentarily at least, the poet has found a way of reconciling the need for definition and the need for freedom.

It is interesting to note, however, that the first stanza of "Voluptuaries and Others" ends on a description of another kind of seeing, the definitive, imprisoning vision which cannot accept the world as a locale not quite given:

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

The vision of complete comprehension, having succeeded in lighting everything up, wiping out all shadows, does by that very intensity of lighting

up make everything dark, wiping out all but shadows: Avison shows a deft touch for evoking the fatal, numbing effects of this kind of lighting up (there is a fine sadness in that closing cadence, coming almost as an afterthought); the personal, meditative tone of the verse here suggests the poet's familiarity with this baneful vision, and it suggests the irony which underlies the poem, that this intense lighting up is necessarily the poet's own object to which all her most important efforts are bent. To live with the effects of this sort of lighting up appears to be the poet's doom. (Compare the conclusion of "Butterfly Bones; or Sonnet Against Sonnets," where after an intense statement of the struggle against "final stiffness" in poetry the poet ends nevertheless on a vision of terrifying finality: "Might sheened and rigid trophies strike men blind / like Adam's lexicon locked in the mind?" — putting it that way, as a question to which the answer seems inescapable, strikes the note of personal doom very reminiscent of the poignant, despairing conclusions of "Snow" and "The Valiant Vacationist.")

The poet's intimacy with the vision that wipes out "all but shadows" suggests that she cannot repudiate the effort to light all things up, to produce a final order, but perhaps she can find consolation in the recognition that to succeed in the truest sense such an effort must accept its own defeat. It is this effortful frustration that is "the core of being alive," this acceptance of the inconclusive struggle between order and chaos, between the impulse to confine and the urge to liberate, between the will and the world. The moment of fullest understanding comes when both the prison and the freedom are seen as the creation of the will struggling for its necessary relation with the world — necessary because, to combine terms used in "Voluptuaries" and in "Person," the advance of the will is compelled by the demands of the self, the "I AM" which is "drenched with Being." In "Voluptuaries" this relation is stabilized to some degree: the poem ends on an affirmation of a kind of illumination which "cannot be assessed either as conquest or as defeat." (We notice the terms of will and aggression coming up once more, but now shown to be inadequate to defining the relation of the self and the world.) This new definition of the relation of the self and world, a constantly dynamic, constantly re-negotiated relation in which there is for the self neither conquest nor defeat, looks forward to the sort of solution Avison celebrates throughout *The Dumbfounding*. We may end where we began with a poem from Avison's latest volume, ". . . Person, or A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost." Here the poet asks the "self-effacing" Holy Ghost "to lead my self, effaced / in the known Light, / to be in him released / from facelessness." In this formulation the ironies which attend all efforts at self-assertion are transcended in a religious paradox, a self-effacement in which a new, larger self is discovered — new but the same, larger but still the distinct self. In this effacement in "the known Light," the venturing heart finds at last a stable relation to the world without.