"CONVERSATION WITH THE STAR MESSENGER": AN ENQUIRY INTO MARGARET AVISON'S **WINTER SUN**

Mia Anderson

This peculiar shelf of being

This way under a summer sun we have an enchanted world. It is not the world but it is part of the world; it is not salvation but it is cognate with salvation. It is a state of grace, if such a state may be restrained from implying salvation. It is certainly gracefulness, and it is gaiety and music and harmony, all of which keep company with that ultimate saved state. There is mathematics without certainty, light without blindness, courts without frippery, ellipses without evasion, and joy. It is "Tennis," Margaret Avison's first sonnet (there are only four) in her first volume of poetry, *Winter Sun.*[1]

When I pursue the implications of Avison's struggle with modern astronomy, I find this poem to be almost by itself, a circle charmed against the threats of a scientific cosmology: a dôme.

"Service is joy" (p. 16); that is familiar from the Christian texts: Christ washed the disciples' feet, the woman of the city wiped Christ's feet, Paul "serves God in newness of spirit" (Romans), "with good will doing service" (Ephesians). "To see or swing": whether it's your serve or your opponent's or partner's which you watch, in this space we can be happily both passive and active, the disparity is not irreconcilable like straight poles and curving latitudes, the flingers or the flung. Right action is preceded by right rest: a Zen archer at the performance of his art. "Allow/ all tumult to subside. Then tensest winds/ buffet, brace"; here the tensions implicit in tension are reconciled — stimulus and support are two aspects of the same thing. Stress both pushes and leans. This reconciliation is harmonious; it

[1]This paper has been written with an *eye* to the reader sitting with the open text of *Winter Sun*. Quotations are not, therefore, *quite* as copious as they would otherwise be. Those quotations that are required are given page references in the body of the paper, all page references being to the first and only edition: Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960. Unless *The Dumbfounding* is referred to with a prefatory *D,* the pages are those of *Winter Sun*. The edition of *The Dumbfounding* is, again, the one and only: New York: W.W. Norton, 1966.

makes music of life as much as the concerted efforts of the cello and its bow in concert make music of sound: "viol and sweeping bow." And it makes of a tennis serve, music in movement. (Heraclitus: "It is a harmony of opposed tensions, as in the bow and the lyre."[2]) "Courts" (in Avison implied, with their arches and porticos, each time we meet the preening parade postures of pompous people, patrons or party-goers, peacocks or politicians) here "are for love and volley." This is an innocent love, unintrusive, discreetly disappearing from the game forthwith; in fact it is a perfect and tranquil O, as in the score it represents. But it is there; this charmed grace would not be gracious without love. The old triumvirate of 'the poet, the lover and the madman' follows nicely upon this gentle love, in the gentler form of the fool ("volley"). Folly is a sport of purpose, one might say, a mutation. If purpose were so to be suborned as to be purposeless, that would be folly, doing of a thing for no reason. Of course it is a blessed folly. Fools of God ("will they do better?" p. 51) lark about lobbing balls like this (just as they do in Maupassant monasteries), volleying and sometimes scoring. The poet hasn't made his entrance yet; his fellow artists have, though, the musician, and the tennis player as artist. The poet arrives riding on an inference: the inscriptions on foolscap of the players in the closing couplet.

"No one minds": it is a peopled world, then, though one imagines no more than five are entitled and one of *them's* asleep; it could be (though as the final rhyme informs us it isn't) a game of doubles with an umpire not keeping score; courtly love requires at the least one double and a possible third, the absent Lord, let's say). "No one" (then) "minds/ The cruel ellipse of service and return"; the whole point, in this pointless game, is to have someone seem to be your adversary, challenge your sweeping serve with a stunning return that cuts the arc of your serve's bounce off in its infancy, while you bounce up and down at the net trying a companion cruelty, "dancing white galliardes at . . . net/ Till point, on the wire's tip . . ./ . . . marks game and set," or else dash to drive a slam home from white line to white line, from the taped selvedges of your part of the domino-patterned court to the outer boundaries of the far court your partner cannot sprint to in time: "dancing white galliardes at tape . . . / Till . . . the long burn-/ing arc to nethercourt marks game and set," for all the world as playful as "little planes practising

[2]John Mansley Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 96, #5.44.

folk-dance steps or playing hornet" (p. 22). The ellipse is, I venture, a case of synecdoche in relation to the shapes in air of serve and return: two pieces of an ellipse stand for the whole. Ellipse is the chosen image, as a refinement on 'arc' though not completely accurate, because (thanks to the nature of the game) it is a turning and returning curve that the ball cuts and 'arc' would not suggest the closed-upon-itself nature of the ball game as well as 'ellipse' does.[3]

These fools' motley is white on white, the tennis standard, and they inhabit a dated world (no courts now *intend* to hire fools) where galliardes are danced, an especially strenuous routine; they are probably, in fact, in a world untouched by the scientific events of the beginning of the seventeenth century — say, Shakespeare's young world, or Henry VIII's; he played tennis and danced galliardes, could have known Euclid, couldn't have known Kepler. It was Kepler who, reading Tycho Brahe's tabulations and interpreting them, made sense of the charted courses of the planets by positing ellipses instead of circles. This was a Pandora's box, this break with circles, and all the evils (more of this presently) of progressive science came jumping out in tow. (See just such a box in "Rigor Viris": Pandora, who let the evils get abroad though 'hope' was not lost, is requested to box them up again so as to free man, p. 62.) This, I think, reading from the rest of Avison's canon into the present poem, is the further resonance of "cruel" ellipses. But here, nobody minds; nobody is troubled because nobody is paying any mind to them. We are still in the circle, though it has to be charmed, like Brigadoon, to be making its appearance in the modern day. It has to be a sport of nature, inheritance but not in the direct line.

"Purpose apart" is dreaming circles, too, though it is hard to tell the difference between his/her dream of whirring balls and this reality of whirring balls. ". . . perched like an umpire, dozes,/ Dreams golden balls whirring through indigo"; the white tennis balls catch the sun's gold like harvest moons and bounce it back, as they spin across a sky a certain prismatic colour of blue so full it seems to swim in front of the balls. Purpose, of course, having meant to outrace the

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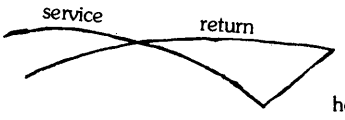
3 

hence: 

pursuer (time? or is it space?) has been sidetracked by the sight of these golden balls as much as Atalanta was by Melanion's tricky Aphrodisiac. The purpose of an umpire is to keep score, not to doze and dream mythologies, but no one minds the abdication of purpose; who's racing? Purpose is another dear fool, with a dunce's peak on, I think, a foolscap, no doubt of paper.

"Clay blurs the whitewash": the clay and dust whereof we are made (especially our feet) may seem to limit the efficacy of our whitening grace, our mortality somewhat undercuts our divinity, but "day still encloses/ The albinos," white we nevertheless are in our robes of innocence and under the glorious sun and in the heavenly blue, for now. A writer might as easily have said, "whitewash blurs the clay" to describe the rinsing down of the clay courts the tennis is being played upon, but that it would sacrifice some excellent sounds, the internal rhyme of "clay" and "day" and the matching rhythm of the two disjunctive clauses within the one line: / /˘/˘. We can pick up the echo of the potential inversion for ourselves.

At this point in the poem, I suggest that one begins to sense the ambivalence of the poet to this world, much beloved as it obviously is. The albinos are "bonded in their flick and flow." Of course, that's a measure of quality, too, as bonded paper is (white, needless to say, like finer bread), and the flick and flow of these sporting sports (albinos being accidents of nature) is a reminder of the tandem calmness and suddenness which are components of the game, as subsided tumult and buffeting winds were of the serve. But a bond is a bond; this game in its little time-space capsule is bounded by restraints of some sort. Bondsmen are not freely serving. One under bond binds himself to forfeit a certain sum on an appointed day — perhaps a "singeing day"? Day actually encloses them, just as in "Prelude," "The honeycombing sun/ opened and sealed us in . . . courts . . ." (p. 9). We are reminded of the similarity of bonds and seals. We may think of a bell-jar, plopped prettily over this tennis court, sealing in the unattainable beauty. Think of the terrarium-like controlled atmosphere in there; or think: vacuum-packed; one puff of the outside air, and poof! disintegration. The mummy crumbles like papyrus. For Avison, an accidental salvation isn't good enough. The grace you find for yourself must be available for all, else it is no fair salvation, but élitism. And the Lord must not be absent, omitted as he is; a universal love is needed and the messenger and embodiment of that is needed too: Christ. This we may read back into the poem

with the hindsight our knowledge of *The Dumbfounding* gives us. This is a metaphorically "pre-baptismal place" — a phrase Avison uses in another poem ("Apocalyptics", p. 52), but it is as if Christian truth laps at the shores of this island, sustains it, unrecognized, unbeknownst.

The poem's sestet brushes very lightly over this dark side. The closing couplet returns us to the sense that, yet, it *is* grace. "Playing in musicked gravity, the pair/ Score liquid Euclids in foolscaps of air." (A certain licence in the use of Euclid goes on here, or metonymy: one geometrist standing for another near contemporary [he standing in turn for his penmanship], Apollonius, the one who actually worked with conic section curves and who, ironically, started off the epicycle system; he saw the relevance of ellipses to the movement of the spheres not one whit.) The scoring that the players finally do is not only at tennis but in science and also calligraphy; they delineate, by means of their flying tennis balls, almost-parabolas against the air now seen as sheets of foolscap paper, folios. Not only that but like good Pythagoreans they sound the musical equivalents of their geometrical patterns. The spheres sing. Even so modern a man as Kepler would have approved.

The trajectories of their tennis toys would be perfect parabolas if gravity alone were responsible; the arcs that gravity draws in space with its ball-points can be played out in musical terms. It so happens that the parabolas are snub-nosed because of air pressure; we are not, after all, in a superlunary sphere. But the couplet seems to zoom back from the action and freeze-frame the final shot, and from this vantage point even nimble galliards look decorous, solemn with "rose-sweet gravity" (p. 29). Even parabolas look perfect.

How many problems, as Avison sees problems, are avoided in this poem; how unthreatened the world seems to be. No revolutionary and expanding universe. No food (and all that that entails of entrails). No travail traversing matter through to light. The choice of sonnet, with Avison's ambivalence towards the form (see "Butterfly Bones; or Sonnet Against Sonnets"), is a giveaway, perhaps. There is, to my mind, scarcely any other ledge of such tranquillity in Avison's *Winter Sun*. This final pair reminds one of another final pair, the "One or Two" in "R.I.P." "Which it is/ Sufficient exaltation/ To be" (p. 65). In that heaven floored with diamond congoleum (congoleum: a variant of your common kitchen lino — and still advertised), play's the thing, and it's between one or

two. They make music too, and while the scene is geomorphic, it is, after all, heaven; the poem has a built-in excuse for not taking on the problems of existence.

Look at "New Year's Poem." Tranquillity is quite literally a ledge, a windowledge, and by derivation its adjacent room, the site of the past Christmas's celebration a week before, where the Yule tree still stands abutting the window. Again (as in "Tennis") we have a court not mocked with preening pomp. (Besides, the people at this party were very nice folk, not like the "grotesque glade" of "standing guests" in the "decorously airless air" of "The Party,"[4] a poem where perspective plays a different havoc from the one in the poem "Perspective" which we are shortly going to look at.) This courtyard's ambivalence is more serious than the clear distaste sometimes exercised by Avison, and suggests the echoing loneliness of the court in which the boy practises his hockey shots in "Thaw" (p. 39). As in the poem, there is something to be treasured in the environment that harbours such absorption (see "The Absorbed" in *The Dumbfounding*), or houses such a windowledge as the poet peers over to look at the new year. And yet they are great reminders of death. They are a kind of no-man's-land between "space" and the grave on the one hand and "gentle and just pleasure" on the other, the "unchill, habitable interior" won from space (p. 29), the human presence. Space, in Avison, seems to be the totality of uninspired matter ("stone," she sometimes calls it), the physical, law-abiding, determined world without the presence either of God or of the human spirit, and in this volume (I maintain) these are the same thing: God is a personal god. See the poem "Unfinished After-Portrait (or: Stages or Mourning)" (p. 37). The opening "A human, human presence/ startles the streets" and the closing "There is a human/ presence" (p. 38) are relevant to our discussion of "New Year's Poem." As the Christmas room of one "lapses/ into its previous largeness" (p. 29) while the wind blows its long loop from Arcturus' Arctic down into the snow-drifting courtyard, so "the wind blowing from summer, buffeting the snow-soft streets/ enlarges" (p. 38) in the other (often in Avison the summer wind blows in winter and the winter one in summer, reminding us of the turning world; see p. 52). For the equivalence of stone to the concept of space I have delineated (uninspired, lawful matter) one may consult "Intra-Political": "Nothing inert may, in stone, space, exist — except as/ our clocking selves insert it" (p. 45). If I am right in establishing

this equivalence, it is a very useful tool in interpreting certain other poems. More later. And it is well always to remember that "space is a hazard."

In the same breath in which the writer remarks on the courtyard (ringing, I suggest, with the resonance earmarked above), she remarks on the little pattern, the neat footwork of the birds (think of "little planes practising folk-dance steps" (p. 22), but also of "a quarrel/ Of chicken-feet on paper"[4] which we will come to in a moment), city birds (common starlings and sparrows; in "Thaw" it's pigeons; it's usually pigeons); the footwork has inscribed the snow with the emblem of death we're used to on poison bottles, the skull and crossbones. The seventeenth century with which Avison's poetry has a fair amount in common was easy with the object of a skull handy for meditation; Avison here is equally at ease, making the same meditative use, the end to which all living comes, both birds who feed (even sacramentally, breaking "the" bread) and girls as sweet as rosebuds, Anne gentle and destined for the same space, the grave where there's room for precious little else but these material remains: that which is subject to gravity. She marks the "delightful skull and crossbones," and then the "winter wind" and the courtyard, and then "the still windowledge." The courtyard is part of a delicate progression from death to a tentative and temporary grace, a sort of threshold to a threshold, the one of the windowledge, the feeders on it and the lookers over it making fresh starts and the needles on it that suggest Christening in the sound the poem gives their drying, so that they give a kind of dry baptism, a natural blessing, not exactly pre-Christian, more post-Christian.

The ambivalent status, or delicate balance, of the birds — delightful and bread-breaking yet strange and skull-leaving — is repeated by the guests: the rooms brim and do not suffocate, are "hospitable" and "stately" as a result of the human presences; the conversation is seasonal, appropriate; decorum is observed even in the black and silver dress; but they, too, leave behind death's crisscross patterns in one of the colours of death. Death's other standard, white, as explored in the sonnet "Snow" (p. 17), is here again in the snow that bears the queer delightful imprints. Snow reflects — like so much creature matter; but what it reflects is, after all, light. And so the poem ends balanced on its needly paradox —

[4] "The Party," *Poetry*, 70 (September, 1947), 323.

or is it a dilemma? — "the light/ Of the snow," an integral part of the paradox of the overtitle, 'winter 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.

What other auguries can we read in the writings of birdsteps? If we look at the argument to augury in reverse, we can read in certain human writings, silly scientific ones, silly birds' steps. ("Your law of optics is a quarrel/ Of chickenfeet on paper."[5] When Avison blurts, "Does a train/ Run pigeon-toed?" it is one of the least sympathetic references to those cement-coloured cement-dwellers that she in her charity ever gives. It is, it's true, an image sired by man, knock-kneed; pigeons are just being pigeon-like. But what of a train that's knock-kneed?

So to the poem "Perspective," and so to begin to watch Avison begin to ask questions, which force worried conclusions, though the tone of playfulness of which Avison is always capable in even the most serious situations perks at the corners of this poem, too. The very first word reminds us of play: "A sport?" (p. 320) — also, one might add, of recreation (cf. "Snow": "jail-break/ And re-creation" p. 17). The poet calls in question her biological credentials; does she belong with the albinos? Does she suffer from some sort of astigmatism, that her eyes refuse to focus to a point, "punkt"? Her vision, however, is not blurred; it is only too clear. Like the fairly near contemporary of Tycho Brahe, Mantegna, she sees distant objects as distinctly as foreground ones. Mantegna is to the science of perspective as Tycho to the science of astronomy: each sat on a swinging gate between an old and a new science. Each created a compromise solution which contained elements of both, entirely satisfactory to himself, and in a sense to Avison, who inherits their vision after many generations of its lying latent. The three-toed diagram of perspective illustrating the vanishing point carried along

[5]"Perspective," *Poetry*, pp. 320-1. All subsequent references to poems in *Poetry* will be given in the body of the text; no confusion is possible because they will be the only three-digit page references.

with it for painters the diminution of sharpness, of presence, and, by implication, of moral importance, of things on the receding ground. Not for Mantegna. Not for Avison. Roofedges and roadways may present their diagonals to the viewer as they move towards the back of the landscape, but the "great spear of grass on the horizon" is as sharp as this one at hand or foot (p. 321). "Pricking from points of clear," says another poem ("Watershed", p. 48).

Mantegna, though, living on the threshold of the new science, could hold his antic vision together. Those who came after didn't try. And now here is Avison in an alien world, where we "forget much more . . ." (p. 6), seeing ahead her own failure to remember ("Your fear has me infected, and my eyes/ That were my sport so long, will soon be apt/ Like yours to press out dwindling vistas," p. 321), or to buck the tide that "cripples space," turning space into the monster it is in much of her *Winter Sun,* though mostly via the inheritors of Tycho Brahe. I disagree with a small point in Ernest Redekop's fine book on Avison with which I agree so often; he suggests that Avison's traintrip to Ottawa which "swelled and roared/ Mile upon mightier mile, and when we clanged/ Into the vasty station we were indeed/ Brave company for giants" is an "imaginative absurdity," "straight out of fairy tales,"[6] the poet's satirical attempt to combine linear perspective with her visionary yet common-sensical perspective. I think it is not so complex, but simply a description of right seeing in a right world that is, alas, obsolete. "I took a train from here to Ottawa/ On tracks that did not meet," the poem reads. This is the truth, I hear her saying, about traintrips; I saw it as it really is. Besides, if trains ran pigeon-toed they'd have landed all of a heap, whereas I did get to Ottawa. On the way I inhabited the same world that heroes, gods (and giants) inhabit, the upright world, not the fallen, fallen one, and you have put an end to that world; yours is a pigmy world with stage-fright. Avison seldom refers to fairy-tales (there is a rare exception at the beginning of "Intra-Political," and there the notion of "faery-false springtime" [(p. 44)] seems to me to refer simply to the child's promise not being father to the man's delivery); her make-believe world is more theatrical than fire-side. What I am saying is that the word 'giants' should not trigger in our minds the word 'fairy-tale' when reading Avison, but the word 'theatre' or 'epic.' Let us look more closely at the world giants keep

[6]Ernest Redekop, *Margaret Avison* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1970), p. 13.

company with, through the poem, "Geometaphysics."

With "Geometaphysics" we take our first square look at the problem I think is the central one of *Winter Sun*. "The earth was once a circle-stage" (p. 318), and ends: ". . . our predicament/ Will be outgrown when one of us can find/ Where to locate new heaven and new hell./ . . . the true home only for the brave/ . . . ." The poem delineates the catastrophe of earth-science which has poked its knowing nose into the cosmos and snuffed out the holy spirit. By mapping the universe it has 'shown' that there isn't any place left over that could sensibly qualify as heaven or hell, most especially because 'up' and 'down', erstwhile valuative, even hortative terms, are now meaningless. In the words of another poem ("Voluptuaries and Others"):

> the measuring
> Consists in 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) (p. 64).

So the fitting shadows of theatrical wings have been wiped out, augmenting the shadows of the negative kind only too gaping in any case: "the outer utter darkness" (p. 319).

When there was theatre, when the earth was a circle-stage, then the gaping black hole of the auditorium was, not only fitting and had its place, but was mediated by the limelight with which it was fringed and accentuated. (Footlights in the good old days before electricity hit the boards with its unwavering and unkindly glare were spirit flame-lit pools of incandescent quicklime, which produced a moving, breathing light. Mind you, they only go back into the nineteenth century, not to the Elizabethan stage, which is the archetype for Avison, so that, while I am sure the pun is intended as I am sure every pun in Avison is intended ("limned by the glaring footlights of the unknown", p. 318), it is not to be taken as the cue for all theatrical wisdom.) There was a good script to play out, with heroes and horses and history and gods and trumpets. (Among them, you may be sure, giants.) The heroes may have been dead but the having them made "men alive." Above the stage was the canopy (good Elizabethan playhouse history, this) which was splendid with stars, the representation of the heavens. Even the eighteenth century

playhouse, your proscenium arch, painted an opulent sky-ey cupola over the heads of the spectators, and Avison doesn't sneer at the proscenium arch. You get to play a good script when everyone knows where he is at and you don't have to ad lib with the scenery falling down. When was there such a script? When was the earth a circle-stage?

There are two answers. One Shakespeare tells us and not only tells us but is the one example. "All the world's a stage" in 1600, and "within this wooden O the very casques" of dead heroes brave it out upright in 1599. What care they for Kepler plugging away at twenty-eight in Gratz and thumbing a ride on Jan. 1, 1600 to Prague to meet Tycho? Shakespeare was busy then writing Hamlet, student of Wittenberg (Tycho's university). The Tudor wooden O was half arena theatre (Greek), half proscenium backdrop (Italian), the thrust stage causing a partial loop of spectators to view the action sometime in front of exits and curtains and galleries and gods and sometime in front of other spectators, a human, human presence. The creatures involved in this theatrical event lived in the security that god was up, and hell was down, the sun went round and the earth was in the middle. And of course it *looked* flat. Avison makes the same metaphorical connection that Shakespeare does: in those days, as they playwent, so they lived. The stage is a mirror of their life, and their stage was a mirror of the life before the last fall, the scientific revolution. The inheritance from then on dwindles out in a weakening line until Avison feels something of a dodo, alive to-day. Even the eighteenth and nineteenth century theatres retained 'up' for the gods, though their position was now that of the cheap seats, the uppermost gallery for the spectators, rather than the engine ready for descent in the classical tradition. Meanwhile, Shakespeare survived, on the boards.

And the other answer? It explains somewhat why the theatricality of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is not irrelevant even though it co-exists with the familiarization of scientific cosmology, the growing, popular acceptance that the earth is a ball spinning and rolling round the sun. It is the Bible.

The inescapable literal cosmology of the Old Testament and the New is that the earth commands a stationary position between the firmament and the waters of the deep. It is referred to as a disc in "He set a circle upon the face of the deep" (Prov. 8, 27) and in "it is He that sitteth upon the circle on the earth" (Is. 40, 22). The

firmament above containing the sun, moon and stars firmly holds off the upper waters, and below the lower waters (possibly also held off by the firmament) is Sheol, hell, the desultory place of the dead existing in lethy, lacklustre pointlessness, empty of desire. When Abraham was "gathered unto his people" (Gen. 35, 29), it was to Sheol below that it was supposed he went. God is in heaven, up beyond the sky; Jacob witnessed His ladder with His angels ascending and descending between earth and heaven (Gen. 28, 12). Paradise, a rabbinical notion of a compartment within Sheol for the righteous, makes a migration in later rabbinical thinking to heaven, so that (again, a late development, but by Christ's time) the resurrected righteous dead get to go to heaven where God is, after the Last Judgment. Paul comes along and explains how we'll all get there if we're of the faithful — Paul still thinking the end will come in his lifetime so that he won't actually die — because Christ had led the way. He was the first. Except for Elijah, he was the first one to die upwards (give or take three days in the other direction). Luke reports on Christ's being "carried up into heaven" (24, 51), which every Christian hopes to emulate. Paul describes how it will be for us:

> For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord (I Thess. 4, 17-8).

And elsewhere he writes:

> So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. . . . The first man [Adam] was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man [the second and last Adam: Christ] is from heaven (I Corinth. 15, 42 & 47).

As for the sun, it runs up and down the heavens above "and rejoiceth as a strong man to run his course" (Ps. 19, 5), and only by an act of God stops (Josh. 10, 13-4) only temporarily. And the only way to escape this cosmology is to take your religion metaphorically, a high price to pay, to lose your faith to gain a poem.

That, at any rate, was the predicament for generations of Christian believers long after scientific obviousness was knocking at

the door, and long after the wise and subtle prelates of the Catholic Church had offered Galileo a very easy, functional way of avoiding collision with the Church, by holding as working hypothesis anything which was not utterly proven, no sense accruing that lack of proof was dishonourable: a position reflected in Popperian philosophy of the present day but rejected by Galileo. The predicament continued, for those who were not subtle prelates, right up into the twentieth century and is not fully faced yet, by most people. Avison, it seems to me, wrestles with it still, and Redekop reprints a poem in his 1970 monograph written, presumably, within the four years after *The Dumbfounding,* which illustrates this; it is entitled, revealingly, "On Believing the Bible (toward parable depth)." Whether one takes it, as I suggest, that Avison has a problem with the literal clash of science and scripture, and so, faith, or whether one limits it to a sense, equally potent, I feel, in her poetry, that something went wrong at the beginning of the 1600's whose legacy we suffer under, severed from some earlier wisdom, and which she expresses in the metaphors of astronomy, whichever, in *Winter Sun* I suggest that she faces the problem, the catastrophe, as such, sees it very clearly and pretty clearly sees what's needed to put it right. It takes dumbfounding before *she feels* put right, while recognizing that the injuring of the world goes on. Most people abandon the ship for science, both the technocrats and the others who know the evils of science's step-child but who look for faith in other vessels than the Bible, ones that won't collide with science.

The curious thing is how moved Avison is by what she finds ludicrous in the physical relationship we now bear to the universe. Though the medieval church assimilated the fact without indigestion, that the earth is a ball appears over and over in Avison as a sort of disappointment, sometimes taken with humour, sometimes with more serious concern. That we on this ball are necessarily at right angles sticking out likes spines on a hedgehog with the constant threat of shooting off strikes her as ridiculous, the sad side of laughable, a thought which, for instance, troubles me, who was brought up with much less knowledge of the Bible, not at all.

> . . . the Holy Office has declared that to maintain this opinion [that the earth is a moving globe] is to dissent manifestly from the infallible dogmas of the Church. So here we are at last,

> safely back on a solid Earth, and we do not have to fly with it as so many ants crawling around a balloon. . . .[7]

She is not alone, it is clear; this was Monsignor Querengo writing about the decree of Mar. 5, 1616, shortly thereafter. The second joke played on us by the new cosmology is that "our fear is now of falling upwards" (p. 318). This is meant, I feel, to convey not only the nonsense of the common sense 'You can't "fall" up! You have to *fall* to earth! You can *rise* up!' vs. the scientific sense that you could get beyond gravity and so fall away, else "dependent on our gravity to check/ The valiant's course at the excursion's nadir," where both "valiant" and "course" help to suggest the "horses of terrible arrogance" who "sped night's / Remoter ways godbearing," of the first stanza, and "nadir" reminds one that unlike their godbearing forbears who knew what was up, their top is bottom; but also the miserable nonsense now made of the valuative side of the word 'up.' We all have, built into the language and so into ourselves, certain habits of thought springing from 'up's (and 'light's) identification with 'good' and 'down's (and dark's) with 'bad,' but perhaps it is that a serious, Biblically-minded Christian (which tends to mean someone from the low Protestant tradition, a use of the word 'low' contentiously in the same language packet of which I speak!) takes these habits more seriously than others, and so has more of a quarrel with modern physics. How terrible for faith, Avison seems to say, that we should now fear to fall upwards.

To sum up, "Geometaphysics" (a word which, as far as I know, Avison has coined; it makes good sense) says, among other things: 'It was better before Copernicus, Tycho, Kepler and Newton, not to mention Einstein (though she speaks of "the parabolic vastures/ Of soundless finity" (p. 318), I suspect she means to withdraw infinity from the physicists for a different reason from his — not because it's not true but because infinity ought to be reserved for God[8]) demolished our theatre and turned us from actors into astronauts.[9] There was still fear, still damnation, still the unknown, but *this* groping about in the ocean-like wastes of the physical universe is more puerile than the childhood of our civilization'. Or perhaps the sense is: 'We've lost our innocence; now we're in a horrible

[7]Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers* (London: Pelican, 1968), p. 468.
[8]Koestler, p. 222.
[9]In this early 1947 poem a latent image only; see Redekop's reprint of a 1970 poem, "Apollo XIII."

adolescence; here's the way towards adulthood', the "callowness of our predicament" being one of the misfortunes of immaturity, like pimples, or the absence of wings.

I note that Darwin presents no problem for Avison in her poetry, though he presented a crisis for many a Christian. Since I am contending that sky-physics is what compelled her, like such honourable predecessors in the seventeenth century as Donne and Marvell, both attracted and disturbed her, where do I found this conviction? Of course in "Dispersed Titles", the most complicated, abstruse and scientific of all her poems.

The tilt of my words in other parts of this paper has already cashed in on the centrality to Avison's thought of the title's punning metaphor. Inheritance, diaspora, even nobility, all reverberate. The sub-titles of the poem, which, as others have remarked, constitute a mini-poem in themselves, have been thrown to the wind as, the poet says, have the winnowed and strayed selves of our disinherited, wandering, cut-off, twentieth century souls. But D.P.s have new homes, if they can find them, even Zion. Now to the poem.

Since it is, I think, so very knotty and slow to yield its meaning, I am going to present my version of a running exigesis of it, like a prose translation, or like an actor's sub-text to a soliloquy, or like our own head's stream of inner chatter out of which arise the few words we speak; the gentle reader will by the end of it be eternally grateful to the poem that it is *it,* and not the banal equivalent I offer for its elucidation. Nonetheless. . . .

What comes in parentheses is my own interpolation, meant to help but not to be parallel to the text. At first I offer my own make-believe setting; it helps me to imagine it as, but is not necessary to, a location of what follows. See, if you will, the poet wandering along the sandy beach beside the sea with its insistent horizon that throws the gaze upwards to the sky, wandering and worrying at space as is her wont and, oh look! there goes a plane overhead. She doesn't care for planes, she doesn't care for flight of any kind much; for one thing you have to do it in space, and space is a hazard. And then, think of how it, the plane, got there. ("Nothing inert may, in space, stone, exist — except as/ our clocking selves insert it" [p. 45].) And so the poem begins.

STANZA ONE: Trace back through the measuring skills of the modern-day engineers in space, in aerodynamics, your pilots, your up-date, new-world navigators, with their macho bronco-busting

mastery of material nature, which though they and theirs spring from it they consider themselves separate from, through this think back to what started them off: think of the days of Tycho Brahe. He was an arch-measurer too, but he still inhabited a non-modern world — he didn't even have a telescope, all his observations were "of the eye" — where bells in villages marked the hours more than clocks.

STANZA TWO: He was the one whose science made such sweet music to Kepler (the real founder of modern science), who, indeed, in Kepler's Pythagorean eyes, could make the stones (space, planets) sing, humming in their — as Tycho thought — circling. He was the one to whom Kepler danced attendance, anxious for the measurements the master-measurer had taken with his posh instruments, the measurements that would confirm and prove the earth-spinning, heliocentric hypothesis. But he, Tycho, did not mean to prove a heliocentric universe at all; rather, he had everything but the earth and stars buzzing round the Narcissus sun, lending those clods a shining, and then that solar system circling round the earth, still the stable centre of all things. He was a Renaissance Dane, like Hamlet as seen through the pen of Shakespeare, noble to boot (though in some ways there the analogy stops). "Good night, ladies. Good night, sweet ladies" is the constricted Ophelia speaking; think of the ladies she's speaking to; think of that way of life, sewing in closets, suffering in toothache (Copernicus, whose history prickles with bishops, made notes for its remedy on the back cover of his Euclid[10]). But of course if the lady's too sweet, she'll rot her own teeth anyway (I don't think this is my joke, I think it is Avison's). It is the world of Shakespeare, of the feudal system — Tycho was given an island across from Elsinore by the Danish king and for twenty years he exacted his livelihood from its tenants', even unlawfully, even, at one point, stuffing a whole family into his prisons, presumably for failure to pay unwarranted tithes, could be straw or bran? — of belief in human destiny such as the 'weird' sisters hold in their hands, in the supernatural, the metaphysical, and in romance: Tycho's bucolic island, called Hveen, had lively fables attached to it (one of which gave it the sobriquet, Scarlet) even if the modern, de-fabling world was turning the corner with Tycho's arrival. From this island, for twenty years, Tycho watched the stars by Danish night, and charted them. But that world is hard to think of, now, when it is no longer permissible to consider it as existing on a secure

[10]Koestler, pp. 126 & 137.

footing under a sun dutifully spanning the sky in architectural solidity like a proscenium arch.

STANZA THREE: Are those dead people really, as science tells me, all only appendages to a stick-toy, whirling around in space and time the way I am (like ants on a balloon, or bumps on a hand-grenade), a four-dimensional, manufactured play-thing of some brain-child alone in his ivory tower? (Here I think the solitary brain-child is possibly Kepler, not Tycho, the inheritor of the chart and hieroglyphs rather than the man who started them and who died before he understood what it was that he had charted, and hence, really, Kepler's other charts and hieroglyphs which explain to the modern the movements of the heavens.) This sterile promontory, now a mere ball, no longer singing hymns of praise to its creator for its goodly frame, now claims to be its own creator and to move in its orbit by its own inherent natural, not supernatural, laws, as a ball now falls according to a Newtonian law. Comets, it claims (it's the modern earth claiming) are on chance orbits compared to our planets' regular ellipses, but nothing now moves in circles, which have no extremes at all.

STANZA FOUR: (The poet now cautions thought:) if you, world, are going to be self-sufficient, self-explanatory, you do realize, don't you, that you have no recourse to God; flying about round the sun, which burns, in space, which freezes (there may be a suggestion, too, of the poetic temperature extremes of the polarities of south and north), you have no shield from the final fire or final ice of your own will's path, your pride's fall. You refuse the sweet surrender of your stubborn free will to God's Will (these are evangelical words: cf. Charles Wesley:

> give the sweet relenting grace,
> soften this obdurate stone;
> stone to flesh, O God, convert;
> cast a look, and break my heart[11]).

Even the medieval, let alone the evangelical, sensibility would be alienated by your deed, sprung from Tycho; you have robbed it of the superlunary spheres' immunity to change, by discovering both new comets flying (1577) and new stars sitting (1572), in the celestial firmament where no Mutability should ever be, not to mention the

footnote #11 is on page 99

movement of the planets as ellipses instead of the impeccable circle (Kepler's contribution, not directly, though indirectly, Tycho's — and denied by Galileo, which prompts one to see why Avison may have found these two so much more interesting than Galileo). "This little fierce fabrique," this world, this tight little island, this rebelling machine, tiny now in its expanded universe, this man-made concept of what we are, a spinning ball, has defied, like, if you will, Lucifer, but also like Adam, the God-in-formed heavens as conceived by the old world (with circles and epicycles as the necessary if poetic language of conception) of whom one of the last members was old Tycho, and it's done it in Tycho's name, in the following of his truth. "Kepler repeatedly claims for Tycho the merit of having 'destroyed the reality of the orbs'. "[12] (For the connection of "seal" and "toy" elsewhere in Avison than here in stanzas 3 and 4, the "man-toy" which "seals the defiant break," see "Snow":

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[11]*The Methodist Hymn-book* (London: Epworth Press, 1933) #366. This same hymn also includes, "Jesu, seek Thy wandering sheep, / Make me restless to return." Wesley writes of another sweet surrender (#339) but it is of the angel-man, Love, to him, Jacob-fashion. Then, again, he writes:

> And shall I slight my Father's love?
> Or basely fear His gifts to own?
> . . .
> Refuse His righteousness to impart
> By hiding it within my heart? (#361)

And:

> What is it keeps me back
> From which I cannot part,
> Which will not let my Saviour take
> Possession of my heart?
> . . .
> Jesus, the hindrance show,
> Which I have feared to see;
> Yet let me now consent to know
> What keeps me out of Thee. (#364)

. . . and so on. The singer makes it in the end, we reckon.

Lastly — still Wesley; it's his signature-tune —

> Thy powerful Spirit shall subdue
> Unconquerable sin,
> Cleanse this foul heart, and make it new,
> And write Thy law within. (#366)

[12]J.L.E. Dreyer, *A History of Astronomy from Thales to Kepler* (New York: Dover, 1953), p. 371.

"they are desolate/ Toys if the soul's gates seal . . . / . . . creation's unseen freight" [p. 17]).

STANZA FIVE: But wait, hold on there, Tycho (Tycho Brahe wore ostentatiously curly handlebar moustaches but was otherwise bald): I don't hold you solely responsible for the demise of the old inheritance, old man. It's not possible for any one man to be the sum of a historical movement (in space-science) any more than (STANZA SIX) one man can sum or scrunch up all the earth (in an earth-science). Buckminster Fuller, who made a brief walk-on appearance in stanza 1 in the male chorus (a man to whom we may attribute one of the earliest uses of the image of earth as a spaceship with a flying crew and a limited food supply), is another modern, alienated man, alienated by his own pretensions to self-sufficiency, self-will through science, his particular mode being the architectural structure (rivalling the globe) of the geodesic dome which denied the roots of its form found in the natural world. (One notes the discomfiture of a sentence which discovers it is eating its own tail, in the unpleasant non-sentence used to describe the Fuller earth dome of glass and steel.)

STANZA SEVEN: As in sky and on earth, so at sea, men are now at sea, disinherited from old natural ways such as growing things and small lean-tos, seaweed- and barnacle-encrusted, one imagines, their straight lines softened by time and weather (the beloved), and songs (music is always salutory in Avison, even a symbol of salvation). The word "shanties" more than accidentally puts one in mind of chanties, seasongs, and "peri-winkle" is used to pun-skip from seashell to vinca flower to iris eye-colour. The present generation, too young to have experienced a world which gave one the exhileration the Renaissance explorer had, is lost, its individuality submerged in modern statistical data and overweening technology, among other sorts of regimented ("barracks") overbearing. (For other instances of the grinding and mincing down of distinct, personalized forms, crag-shapes *et al,* to sediment, sludge, gravel, cement ["CEMENT suddenly./ (why not cement?)" says the more dumbfounded Avison, *D,* p. 17], see "Civility a Bogey": "Came big bull buildings/, sharded and shoaled/ even the moustache-cup" [p. 14] and "Apocalyptics": "But these marvels . . . / Each in his fashion,/ Are not sediment,/ Not instruments; —/ *People,* every one", [p. 54].) The rest of the world seems to take to this kind of cakewalk (this includes part of STANZA EIGHT & NINE) pretty

easily, the "parade ground for pinioned grotesques" upon which my brother (Buckminster is one of my brothers) struts "under waving plumes of strangeness." Me, I find myself "failing more and more/ In credence of reality as others/ Must know it, in a context, with a coming/ And going marshalled among porticos,/ And peacock-parks for hours of morning leisure" ("Chronic," p. 8).

STANZA EIGHT: In the name of the man who sat on the swinging gate as it swung open between the old pasture and the new, linking them, I find my identity in my roots, my history, my ancient beliefs, but, oops, I fall off the gate, for it's very hard in these latter days of unsaintly gravel to retain a sense of the craggy original, even Adam (Hebrew for 'earth'), the first singular.

STANZA NINE: Did I say singular? For singularity, take a look at my brother; he is really odd, no need to go delving after Adam. Ah, well, living as I do in the hemisphere that brought you Europe, in the century that brought you hydro-electric power and static-electric air (having noticed the static-electric fur of earth), I cannot retain a sense of the Biblical terrain, that world, oh, older than Shakespeare's and Tycho's, back, back to the births of civilizations, holy lands, fully natural and supernatural both, both of which we have destroyed.

STANZA TEN: I cannot retain — and yet my very loss of grip is a reminder — the name of the Lord who is not to be named in any case, but I have a sense, a returning sense of it. Not 'God', of course, that's just a word men have to swear by, or curse with, and stands for a hocus[13] idol, a talisman against the consequences of the wrong-doing of the scientists, their defiant revolt which has left so many of us frightened.

STANZA ELEVEN: Knowledge isn't the right mode of experience to describe what I am sensing, but certainty lurks near, common senses, too, and common scenes, ordinary folk. Meanwhile, one waits, walking on this beach, dispossessed and desert-ed, shifting sand. As the legendary Jewish wandered waits, too. As the planet under its holy old name, wanders, too, and waits.

(And now the final stanza makes a sudden shift, providing a coda or epilogue to the poem. The flying title is "AND 'UP' IS A DIRECTION." I do not agree with Zezulka's interpretation that "Avison fears that . . . "Up" is just another direction in which one

[13]Not Avison's word, but a curiosity that is apt: "Hocus pocus" comes from *hoc est corpus meum* and is the low church's put-down of the high, with its idolatrous, so it is thought, conjuring trick with the sacrament.

can travel"[14] — nor have I, it will be seen, agreed with his/her ensuing interpretation of "refusing the sweet surrender." I concur with Redekop's "the subtitle suggests a return to a specific vantage-point, older and more primitive, than the perspectives of Brahe, Kepler, or Buckminster Fuller."[15])

STANZA TWELVE: After 'up' has been bandied about by the neophysicists and made mock of, I retrieve it and shelter it in a moral context again. 'Up' is still in the hortative, a directive of God's to his creatures, of God's will to our will in its free fall, and the metaphor for it is the sense of direction the stage gives us (caught, as Redekop says, in the very phrase 'stage directions'). Here I walk along this desert beach by the sea, drawing my eye to the horizon and above, to the architrave of the eye's lidded gaze filled with sky, and it seems to be a proscenium arch opening onto, depending whether you're spectator, the grand enactment of the spheres or, if you're player, the black hole of the audience. But I belong to a rebel race, revolutionaries we are, now that the earth revolves; that classical theatre is decadent, so they say, or the art is moribund, they complain. Call me stagestruck if you like, then, as I rant this soliloquy of mine; that theatre's the truth I abide by in these hard, Cromwellian times. I know there's no audience of *people* out there, and I know why. I have just described it in historical terms. Its result, in my theatrical metaphor is that the script has lots its hold on an audience disappointed too many times by the lack of a good plot and characters, gods, heroes, (a sense of 'up') any longer to attend. (I imagine Avison would hate Samuel Beckett.) Even a stray dog couldn't find solace in that empty edifice now ("Panting/ He sloughs all touring finally, in the shade/ Of a wild apricot-tree, not glancing up": "Stray Dog, near Ecully," p. 60), only peanut shells, not even a hack player ghost, let alone a Drury Lane Theatre gentleman ghost, let alone (in that temple to a spiritual flat-earth) a Holy Ghost, who last was truly listened to (if you look at history another way than the theatrical way) when He spoke in tongues, through the disciples.

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[14]J.M. Zezulka, "Refusing the Sweet Surrender: Margaret Avison's 'Dispersed Titles,' " *Canadian Poetry*, #1 (1977), p. 53.
[15]Redekop, p. 32.

II

The Fallen, Fallen World

We live in a fallen, fallen world. "Can a man die? Ay, as the sun doth set:/ It is the earth that falls away from light", Avison quotes Beddoes in *The Dumbfounding,* where the quotation's second half provides the title for one of her poems (*D.* p. 38). But where the Beddoes quotation suggests 'a man doesn't really die, anymore than the sun really goes down; it is an optical illusion,' Avison's use of the notion moves it in a different direction. The earth, she suggests, *wills* to fall away from light, just as the blind man who is given back his sight by an operation finds he wishes to get away from his new sight. "Give/ back my sealed-off dayshine," he cries (*D.*, p. 44) (where "seal" makes its appearance in the way that's been remarked on already). And yet, earlier, made analogous by his eye-bandages to children at their "games of/ face-hiding," "blind man's buff" (*D.*, p. 42), and both made analogous to modern man, ducking the truth made visible, the Light, he had yearned, a bundle of contradictions:

> They did operate, though.
> The tissue did begin
> to form again. I know
> I found out, waiting, how
> I had hoped, though
> it would have been a sin
> to let myself, till then (*D.*, p. 41).

In this character's self-analysis we have, I think, Avison in capsule. Our sight has been taken from us by what makes the world turn; we long for the light again, but if we must live without it, it would be suicide to say "I must have it or I die.' Better one should work out a rationale for living satisfactorily without it. This is the saw-off (propped up with homesickness) that *Winter Sun* explores, the absence of the ground of faith. It is for *The Dumbfounding* to explore the other turning-away from light, the moral inertia of rejecting "this urging/ of person, color, thing" (D., p. 44), urged Mantegna-fashion: the absence of the ground of good works — and its Presence.

Where the poem in *The Dumbfounding* described the plight in medical terms of blindness, its epigraph from Beddoes, and *Winter*

Sun in general, both use the astronomical metaphor. There is such a thing as a winter sun, there are seasons like winter at all, because the earth tilts and orbits; the axis makes for the winter solstice. Winter is when the earth is *most* tilted away from the light, and warmth, of the sun. The age-old analogy of the sun's light to the Son's Light is a given in the metaphor; the earth's wilfulness in turning away is the attitude Avison gives to modern man, in his fallen state, willing his world away from God's truth — unwitting of consequences but also, more literally, as if we were responsible with our scientific knowledge for the earth's tilt and travel, as if, had we not known, it would not be. That's a conundrum. This version of modern man shows up in the poem of the name, "The Fallen, Fallen World." Good humour hums tinily in its echo of the folksong, "The Foggy, Foggy Dew." Notice the closing stanza:

> 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 (p. 24).

This poem displaces the act of knowing (and so the act of falling) from the Renaissance to even earlier than the Garden of Eden — to Lucifer; there are many instances of The Fall, it appears, but they are all spiritually linked.

What is interesting is the sense in Avison of a kind of salvation via nature, a natural salvation, too tentative to be Christianity, but there, present, something she struggles to work out. The poem has described three positions of despair wherein the desperate are nonetheless somehow (it is the somehow that is being explored) not dropped out the bottom on their despair into the outer, utter darkness but are "straitly sustained" (p. 23), in the hope of "a new burgeoning," even those who (from the summit of poetic Fancy the Apex Animals also occupy, both horse [p. 1] and hawk [p. 18]) dream of getting beyond burgeoning, atrophied as they are by hope:

> And, some, alas . . . having
> . . . sensed
> The three-day darkness on the eternal's doorstep
> Not once, but more than once, now are but weary
> Because the hope is certain . . . ;
> They, stubborn, on the frozen mountain cling
> Dreaming of some alternative to spring (p. 24);

(Yeats: a golden nightingale; Beckett: "get it over", "it all" "over"), even they, says the poem, are sustained by the return of the south. Even they receive a natural blessing, like the crispening of pine needles.

And so the unwitting wait, with bandages on, or sandals, shifting sand. But meanwhile the world is full of creatures, of person, colour, thing, and one of the most endearing things (if one is not Beckett) in the poetry of Margaret Avison is her utter love of the world, 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 round it. One can see why photosynthesis is an attractive image for her ("Intra-Political"). If ever anybody bore the collision of the real and the ideal head-on, it's Avison. Because you yearn for how life should gambol you might reject how it actually trundles. If you like how it cavorts now, you might not look further to how it could gavotte. Not Avison; she holds them both together. Dogs, for instance. She's extremely loyal to dogs, even when they lead a dog's life, even when their traits endow us with doggedness ("Glee dogs our glumness so," p. 46). In the dog-days of the year (in another poem "August, the tired emperor" — "From a Provincial" p. 32) in mid-southern France, just to the west outside Lyon, a stray called Sesame escaped the walls of the village by the old Roman remains and took a breather out in the countryside. Love me, love my dog, says this poem — or says the world to the poet, and she does. It's a sad, gentle, tolerant poem: poor man, waiting in his fallen world; love redeems. It is a small moment in time, acutely detailedly observed, and made to stand for everything else Avison has to say. Doors open for this graceful grotesque with his game leg, this ringed-circus clown's apprentice on a coffee break, avoiding the tourists, thickest in August ("Rome's new coin-conducted legions"), and the sun, so hot it must have stopped in its tracks, Joshua-like, finding a bit of shade, and resting unglancing in his natural blessedness (like the children, before the cities of sense locked in their light, in "Prelude", who "did not bother glancing up to see," p. 9), seeing without interpretation the last of the ghosts in the echoing foyer (see "Dispersed Titles", p. 7) of the sad clown's landscape, the hoop's vision, the flat earth sent sillily reeling, its sandy track a reminder of sand-shifting sandals (p. 6). "Back in the courtyard" (with all the ambivalence that courtyards entail), people are looking for the touch that opens doors as they

open for him; they are calling him (in French): "Sey-sahm, Sey-sahm."

"Easter" could almost be the voice of THE LEARNED, the third of the groups of "The Fallen, Fallen World", undergoing the weariness of hope at the recurrent certainty of spring. The Rouault hoop is now "the bulge of earth" which "seems again comic, and,/ On it, the city sails along the swerve" (p. 42). People are balanced precariously on their cities on the swerve, which is an arc of the earth viewed as turning ball. "The old man reels," says another poem, of this image ("Apocalyptic?" p. 51)

> Figures of fun ['how ridiculous we all are!'] before us and behind
> Glimpse wry stone silhouettes ["still monuments" of a few lines earlier], and find an eye
> Emptily searching theirs. ['What are we DOING here, on this ferris wheel??']

As at Easter, and in youth, "The faint cry/ Where the wheel verges upwards peals/ A splendour in our hearts." But one may grow tired of pealing.

> For just this sparrow time, we tramp in day,
> Our one arc under the magnificent sky.
> If love first turn the doggedness to dance
> Then staggers one the why, still [both 'yet' and 'standing'] monuments
> Hover oblique to a descending wheel.

It is a gloss on Shakespeare's Jacques, where the astronomical metaphor takes a turn in place of the theatrical one. The sparrow has Gospel overtones, of course, but once again it is a city bird that's chosen. You don't have to go far to be an Avison naturalist; you can do it on a subway token. She's a democrat, that way. In "Easter," the pigeons are dolled up as doves, but it's only a scriptural way of looking at the same species: "After the blur of doves the milky air/ Lulls" (p. 42), just as in "Thaw", "the pigeons flutter, and rise,/ And settle back" (p. 39). In fact, this particular daily event reappears frequently in Avison, including *The Dumbfounding*. Perhaps there is the rustle of gutterwaste newsprint to it; at all events, it is a favoured image. (Avison did an M.A. thesis on an analysis of Byron's *Don Juan* in the light of Regency newspapers.) In even the meanest thing that can call itself a bird or piece of paltry poultry, hardly given to flying, indeed, only feeding and defecating, scrounging a grub-street

living out of the dirty city streets, not singing, only muttering coos, even this fallen, fallen creature is God's creature, is love-worthy, like ourselves (who live much the same), and reminds us, each time of seeing, for those who can see, of a natural blessedness we would do well to remember. Before the fall it was a dove, the Holy Ghost. It is, I find, an absolutely perfect image for Avison.

Sparrows, as we saw, qualify, too; in "Easter" there's a robin (most probably), but you don't need even your busfare for that, either; every lawn sports one from St. Patrick's Day on; they even stay the winter nowadays of hotted-up cities.

> A bird sings, forceful, glorious as a pipeorgan,
> And the huge bustling girth of the whole world [faintly comic]
> Turns in an everywhere of sunwardness (p. 42).

In "Unbroken Lineage", it is true, we look at things for a moment from the undemocratic side; the hawk or falcon of this "rests a Royalist," as at times, in a sense, does the imagination which it symbolizes. Certainly it calls for heroes and "the fabled kings" (p. 18) — Hamlet, Oedipus, Lear, Richard II and Jesus of Nazareth.

> He will see marbled gardens, the young prince kissed
> By imperial doom, kings eyeless, mad, resist-
> ing toppling combers, or a King of the Jews.

And oh, look how unkind it is to pigeons:

> Mews, meadows, steppes, bear still the fabled kings
> Long after roofless courts are left to chalky whirring things.

Politics is hard. Abandoned courts are not actually so bad as present-day occupied ones; in fact, old courts were for kings who were good things then; if pigeons want to make them their own, so much the better for pigeons, but they do remind one of the lost succession. See "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball":

> The stone house [it is an estate, really] is cold.
> The cement has crumbled from the steps (p. 12).

This is the site of another decayed inheritance. "Myrrh"

> Divides my gardenless gardens
> Incredibly as far as the eye reaches
> In this falling terrain. ["the earth that falls away"]
> Low-curled in rams-horn thickets . . .
> It unscrolls . . .

The Old Testament/rabbinical imagery continues. The poem seems to say that the Judaic tradition has had no more success than the Christian in keeping intact the holiness of the scriptures in the unblinking glare of the secular, post-scriptural centuries. It is a secular poem, suggestive of "man-made magic, to fend off/ the ice", of misguided though serious attempts by even the cabalists to give meaning and life to a parched and deserted holy landscape.

> The bitter myrrh
> Cannot revive a house abandoned.
> Time has bleached out the final characters
> Of a too-open Scripture.
> Under the staring sky
> This rabbinical gloss rustles its
> Leaves of living darkness.

Yet another way, along with "the northern centuries/ funnel me, a chute of/ steel and water tumbling,/ and I forget" (p. 5), of stating the problem.

A really unhappy poem is "The Mirrored Man." Here is the emotional reaction to the problem, at its darkest. "We, comic creatures of our piebald day" (p. 71) is this poem's nutshell version of the longer Jacques-speech of "Apocalyptic?", day and night being the fool's motley of our turning world; these comedians may be seen either "dragging a dull repudiated house/ At heel (reminiscent of the abandoned house of "Not the Sweet Cicely"), or laughably but lethally ("gravely") seeking comfort where lies suicide: "fashioning the key that fits that cell/ (As if it hid the timeless Garden)." The internal cell refered to is occupied by the cut-off self, the solitary, self-made man, "lost in the sludge of the ancestral singular" (p. 5), "gray, separate, wearily waiting" (p. 71), staring into a mirror, "refusing the sweet surrender" (p. 4) that Lot's wife obeyed.[16] The first man Avison laconinally reports on, after Lot, gave in to despair (*not* a

[16]Avison reverses the expected allegiance towards these two, making quite a prig out of Lot.

sweet surender) and helped the inner self to do away with himself: he committed suicide. His self pulled the trigger, forced by himself, the violator. The cell has been mirroring the young man and his pistol and the locked door up till then; now it is mirroring the empty cell with the unlocked door swinging idly. A pyrrhic escape. "Such men are left possessed/ Of ready access to no further incident" (p. 72).

The next man Avison reports on, I take to have 'opted' (as far as the psyche does 'choose' these things) for madness as an exit from the cell — into another one, of course; it is an ironic poem. It seems that a certain narcissism is involved in madness, still the self's refusal of the sweet surrender: "unlocked his cell/ To use it as a love-nest." But there is a certain richness of imagery does go along with being insane; one hears a little less heavy irony in the poet's tone as she speaks of "fond report":

> Whatever winter ravages his gardens
> No banging shutters desolate his guests
> Who entertain illusion as he wills it,
> And grant him the inviolate privacy
> His hospitable favour purchases,

with a tiny echo of hospitalization in the last, elegant line. The poet says, 'Who am I to say him nay? He thinks he's happy.' But she concludes with the expression of doubt all the rest of us face, if threatened by despair, and who not? — will we ourselves some day take the same way out? "What face will the violator find/ When he confronts the glass?" Mine? the poem asks. Will *I* push in and force the hand?

It's a nadir in the affairs of the soul. The poem, "Watershed" (p. 48) (the word Koestler in *The Sleepwalkers* used to describe the period in history when science turned over and became modern: the period of Tycho and Kepler) isn't quite so bad, saved, perhaps, in part, by a singsong tone you can bounce your knee to. But it's not cheerful, at that. The scene is autumn. It seems to say, 'Now that we know that "the foothold really is gone" from terra firma, now that the old cosmology has abandoned us to the monster new, the reason we don't immediately fall apart at the seams is that common sense we all thought so good and which is now wrong-headed, still functions. My educated imagination informs me that it's all changed, but the old perspective is a habit; the earth looks flat. I know it's a

fiction, but it gets me to the store and back.' There is an ode to a medieval tapestry (not Mantegna this time) in the second stanza and then a return in the third to grim reality. Our terrible clocking selves pay their respects in this last stanza: "And the clocks in the temples, in all the towers, sound on." The sense of the eleventh hour, the writing on the wall, hovers. Towers have clocks in them here, not bells as in the bell-rung hours of Tycho's day; even temples ring with ticks, perhaps it is the cash-register moving into the house of prayer. But above all, the doomed ticking of the blood in the temples of the forehead, like "the clocks in the wrists" of a few lines earlier, measuring out the life in quarters and halves like a time bomb, "waiting mwearily," is the legacy of our clocking selves, inserting ourselves and our inert notions into nature like shrapnel into flesh.

Before looking at some of the ways up from this nadir, I'd like to make some minor textual comments that interest me. We saw the role of mirror in "The Mirrored Man." Usually mirrors and mirroring are a neutral thing in *Winter Sun,* of imagistic richness — Avison has her favoured bits of nature and things that reflect are one of them — and, perhaps, moral and metaphysical ambiguity, like courts.

> Mirrory twilight frames
> the Valentine porch of natural day (p. 37).

This same poem provides the "mica-glinting [of] sidewalks". "New Year's Poem" offers

> This unchill, habitable interior
> Which mirrors quietly the light
> Of the snow, and the new year (p. 29).

And one of my favourites: the street-chanty that ends with the wish fulfilment, 'But words will never hurt me,' is nicely parroted in this reference to the bone-breaking urban street-scene:

> The Sticks-&-Stones, the City,
> Lies funeral bare.
> Over its gaping arches stares
> That haunt, the mirror mineral (p. 2).

The poem is "All Fools' Eve." For a moment (on March 31), the city has been evacuated by its citizens, who are spellbound for the countryside, for some, of their childhood, for others, just of what's

fresh and natural and far ("Where lettuces will grow, another spring" as another poem puts it, p. 28). And in that Mary Poppins moment, children too young for speech "are roundeyed, caught by a cold magic" (p. 2), not only figuratively, sensing the magic, the wonder, but literally, by the light of the moon, "the mirror mineral." Whether you take "mirror" or "mineral" as the noun and the other as a modifier makes very little difference. I prefer to hear Avison's voice being playfully archaic here, and putting the adjective after the noun, as in 'the knight errant,' so that the moon is 'the reflector [made of] tin,' so to speak — or mercury or silver or mica or whatyouwill. "Haunt" is like saying "spook," or "bogey," as she says of civility in the poem of the name. The moon, peering up, a white thing, over the arches of courtyards, is like Caspar the ghost, this night. And then, snap, the twilight transition is over, electric light robs the story-teller of his poetry (as Padraic Colum complains in his description of that lost art), and only lovers and poets and people who see spooks keep the windows of their holy souls open — or their eyes, for that matter, staying up all night, fading of glory.

In the poem, "Thaw" (p. 39), one of the loveliest in the canon for sheer musical sound and motif, a song, really, made of very even quatrains in a minor key with a tierce de picardy in the last line of the last stanza, notice the stick and straw, and compare Tycho's "straw and bran unfabling fields already"; here by the railway track the fields are fully unfabled. Another frequent image in Avison is the train hurtling through the countryside, freight or coach. We saw one on the way to Ottawa. There is one to bear oranges enough to describe the colour of the Apex Animal. There is one to hurtle the colt from his gentle pasturing in "Intra-Political," and a similar one, by implication, in "Mordent for a Melody" where "man swerves back . . . out of the glare" (p. 49); it could be based on a car and a racoon, though, not a colt and a freight-train; and there is this one, empty and running along "the thin and sooty river flats" (p. 39). That heart-breakingly brave child's cry about sticks and stones and bones and words not hurting is heard again in the lines, "And stick and straw and random stones/ Steam faintly when its steam departs." No royalist request that gardens and forests be provided; just what-we-can-all-have-is-what-I'll-write-about fair-mindedness. Trains and tracks, pavement puddles, stones, streets, sparrows, lone dogs, pigeons, hockey practise. If you can get hold of an old raspberry punnet, so much the better, and if you can't smell wet

coal-ash, wet cigarette butts wil do. The exercise is pretty much like the skull meditation we saw in "New Year's Poem," and the tenor of this poem was covered at that time. But notice the most exotic images, the Black Death, and Troy, and Pompey. Redekop is excellent in his analysis of the motifs of imagery running through the poem, connecting, for instance, the Black Death to the licorice streets and the coal-ash and so on, but is, I venture, needlessly ingenious with what he calls "the most ambiguous line," the first of:

> The proof is now scraped bare that once
> Troy fell and Pompey scorched and froze.

"The proof," he says,

> arises immediately from the personal and historical memories evoked by the scraping of the tongue along a slat and by the smell of water on burning coal, but it also refers indirectly to the thaw that uncovers pavements and river flats in the first three stanzas.[17]

Think of the everyday occurrence of newspapers which Avison pays such heed to (in "Chronic" she renders it quite strange, but in "Grammarian on a Lakefront Park Bench" she makes it laughably ordinary by attributing to the sky the carelessness of the daily reader). And then recall that, only quite recently, in the mid 1930's, Troy was excavated, and later Pompeii was exposed for all the world and coin-conducted legions of tourists to see; we knew about Pompeii's volcanic fate before but the archeologists, who had been scraping away at the lava for two hundred years, put a big push on under Mussolini who wanted the proof of a First Empire to support his establishment of a Second (and we know how many lives went down with *him*). Just a bit of daily news. Oh, look, 12,000 died in Iran last week. (But, think! says the poem. What do you make of it? And it offers the kind of caged and tentative optimism that the New Year does, Q.V.)

One last incidental: notice the fondness Avison has for the wordroot 'rig' and hence, "rigs" and "rigging" and "rigged", reminiscent of "dogged." All manners of meaning pertain:

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[17]Redekop, p. 80.

But salvage rigs and consultants
probe for scant profit (p. 38).

Because of old agility on rigging
Some run along aux matelots (p. 54)

Strait thinking set us down in rows
and rigged the till (p. 46).

It is the sound that attracts her to the senses of the word, where, say, pigeons are led in by the visual, not by the sound of the word 'pigeons'. Dogs have it both ways.

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III

"Up" Is a Direction

What's the way up? One way is to have fun, and make fun. Take "Civilty a Bogey." As the gentle reader may have ascertained by now, Avison has her reservations about what passes for civilization at the hands of modern technology. She lives in it, and she won't abandon it, but she thinks she knows it's an ephemera, like St. Clair Avenue to old Susanna Moodie, riding along on a streetcar in M. Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie,* and saying:

Turn, look down:
there is no city;
this is the centre of a forest

your place is empty.[18]

So, the "TWO CENTURIES OF CANADIAN CITIES" that the poem of Avison's retails are destined for the same imagined fate, the truth behind the veneer, only her metaphor is never wilderness, but space, where here sky does a further flip as ocean, the waters of the deep, Genesis-like above and below, just as it does in "Geometaphysics":

[18]Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 61.

Where was bullshop, boardroom
sky laps leisurely
round wrack and jetty.
Pigeons chuckle at
plunging and all the fuss and feathers.
and the docks of seaborde, flatland, pinescrub
shine through the windy night in their dark moorings (p. 15).

Your civility, she says to the technocrats, is a bull in a china shop, you'll smash your doings all to bits. You'll be hoist with your own petard. Though your swaying skyscrapers hold your boardrooms, your seats of power lapped at by sky, though you scramble for your place in the sun, or your seat among the mighty (thank you, Gilbert Parker), though you make shift for green like the young man in the "September Street" (p. 77), claw or crane like your own clawing cranes you engineer with (a Vandal, loving, you lay waste, see p. 45), despite your big ass, the poem says, and shows in the shape of line the well-slung posteriors of the well-fed, along with their precarious position on the sling of outrageous fortune — despite its size, you didn't make it, nor the tyger. "No man can shape his own rump" is a gleefully sophomoric cash-in on Hamlet's "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will," and that, basically, is the message of the poem. Though you make a balls-up of your town-planning, your country-running, and bite the dust in your dust-up, it all comes out much the same in the end; we're all

immersed,
Slung by the feet
In the universe:

The blessed heads learn smiling upside down
shored on a crumb
whether in hinterland or town.
It's all one.

The same discomfiture over our ridiculous relationship to the earth-ball that we saw in "Geometaphysics" *et al* is here, but you might say that where the glass was half empty, now it is half full. Perhaps smiles which are upside down are really woeful frowns, like Stan Laurel's clownish droopy-mouth, and the antipodal smiles may be no more cheerful. But then again they may be; they may, if we

follow this nonsense out, playing about with gravity, have to pull very hard at the corners of their mouths to get them to continue to go up; nonetheless, they "learn." They look a bit like Le Petit Prince, standing on so small a planet as a crumb. They're blessed heads, as we say of loved ones, both affectionately and to tease, and, presumably, they're also blessed, having had divinity shape their ends for them. It's all one, it's not too good, not too bad, muddling along "until our singeing-day" (p. 50).

Another way: you can heckle. In the early poem, "The Local and the Lakefront"[19] we get a colonial comment not out of keeping with the preceding poem's ironic history of the butt-end of mercantilism. But it is a hortatory poem. Call off your fancy, second-hand culture, it says, our cash flow's not up to it. Importers, go home. You dwarf, you usurp, you comsume, you substitute soapy cleanliness for blazing godliness, you sing 'another day, another dollar with which to metal over the face of the land!'

> Who that must die but man
> can burn a bush to make a bar of soap?
> Who twists a draughtsman's line
> perversely, out of
> a stunted tree,
> or makes of the late sun an as-if-Gabriel
> to trump
> another day, another borough?
> Someone not at home. Exporters. Glutting us
> with Danish spoons
> and aum.

Leave us to our nowhere of rivering grasses, our winter-and-rough-weather, "to exchange/ among us few/ carefully." That's a possible way up. To take care of things, care for things, rescue stunt trees, stunted men. One of the most epigrammatic lines in Avison, the last line of the poem, "Grammarian on a Lakefront Park Bench," puts a more ironic complexion on the same issue: "The vintage elms wither by moral accident" (p. 25). No elm deserves the Dutch elm disease. Here is the whole of pastoral elegy in one line, 'Where were you, dryads, when this fate befell?,' the unforeseen consequences of the careless actions of careless people. What precedes this epigram/elegy is:

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[19]Atwood, pp. 108-9.

> All their newspaper sky
> squints through the milky midday Sunday
> to read them, carelessly,
> confusing saddle-pears and sundecks.
> [whatthehell, they're both somethin' t' sit on, *ey*?]

Who cares to know a hawk from a handsaw, or a raven from a writing desk, these days?

> Canon Koppernigk in his tower in Frauenburg would never have understood why the Reverend John Donne made him a pretender to the seat next to Lucifer's throne. With his blessed lack of humour he foresaw none of these consequences when he published his book with the motto: "For Mathematicians Only". Nor did his contemporaries. During the remainder of the sixteenth century, the new system of the universe went, like an infectious disease. . . . [20]

But the stevedore who spoke "The Local and the Lakefront" has suggested a remedy. It's interesting to note that both poems deal with an unwanted inheritance (who loves a foreign disease?), though the "Sargassos of inheritance thrid through/ choked day, swollen to almost total swamp" (p. 25) is not so easily chucked into the lake by grammarians as by "stevedores of the spirit."

You can make fun of the problem with sheer fantasy, too. "Our Working Day may be Menaced" poses the situation of a factory in the South Pacific devoted to the removing of pips from oranges (you've heard of seedless oranges: well, how do they get the seeds out? the poem gives the kind of answer to this that the eskimos give to explain how the robin got its red breast) in which, one day, one of its native workers, having had too much of the Heraclitus-river of the assembly-line, tries to commit suicide by jumping off the extension bridge. Many people saw it, for it was going-home time at the end of the working day. And it disturbed people. What could Madeleine have been finding unsatisfactory? If only they didn't have a sense that Madeleine possessed a kind of vision, a wisdom, a right holding of things — "a certain clarity, a caritas,/ But wood-wild . . ." (p. 57). But they did. Could it really be that there is some futility to all this removing of pips from oranges? Could it be that this is irrelevant to the feeding the species requires, and that the consumer (the great white god overseas) has found out? (The poet continues to occupy

[20]Koestler, p. 222.

the *persona* of a mocha-faced worker herself, "too bland for trouble," not getting the point of the story.) Could it be that, because Madeleine's rocked the boat, they'll shut down the factory and we'll all be posted somewhere else? Hinted in the diction is the language of resurrection and Revelations, the morning steam-cocks of the engines not only crowing us to a fresh start in a risen world (all echoes of Peter's betrayal having been forgiven) but even the worker's sickle (moon) fading in the sky, the fight of the proletariat no longer necessary. It must be the end of the world!

Another way up: you can pray. "Mordent for a Melody" ends with this prayer:

> Dance of the midges in the warm
> Sand reaches of infinity,
> May this invisible music swarm
> Our spirits, make them hep, and we
>
> Sing with our busy wings a gay
> Pas de million until our singeing-day (p. 50).

This poem, like "Thaw", sings along in skilful quatrains, with the reverse of its closing grace, a lengthened rather than a curtailed last line. One notes that in this more hopeful poem, the sand is not limited like the "sandy track of planetary time" (p. 60) of the dog Sesame's landscape, but seems, rather, somewhere beyond where time debouches into infinity (think of "the silver reaches of the estuary" in "The Swimmer's Moment" p. 36). One might think a midge a rather desultory symbol of human life: the midges in "Milton's candle's light" of the poem "From a Provincial" (p. 32), who, just as now, "survey[ed] their planes of brief discovery/ At a half-run" seem to depress the reader of postcards, and it is true that the note of bustling, unwary busy-ness these hep midges sound may seem to mock them. I think not, in the net, though. The tone compares with that of the closing lines of "Person" in *The Dumbfounding* (p. 52):

> and to the woolly, willing bunt-head, forth
> shining, unseen, draws near
> the Morning Star.

"Mordent for a Melody" aspires to that same light, is limited to the winter climate, but does all right for good cheer. Singing and music

(and there's 'singing' even in the word "singeing") are always touchstones of salvation in Avison. The coming-to-terms of this prayer is like Dennis Lee's "Song to Ookpik" in *Nicholas Knock and Other People* (I quote it in prose form) "Ookpik, Ookpik, dance with us, till our lives go luminous. . . . Feed the headlong green, in case we do not leave it living space . . . till the green world gallivants to the voltage of your dance. . . . Ookpik, Ookpik, by your grace, help us live in our own space."[21]

This kind of good-natured good sportmanship, this will to live with light and grace (a mordent is a grace-note, albeit a downward one) is found in "Apocalyptic?". I have quoted a good deal from this poem already, the honoured fools of God, the Jacqueësque ages of man, the comic vaudeville routine of the turning world, where old men reel downwards as young reel up. But notice "An amnesty/ No prince declared yet shines" (p. 51), and liberates us from our prison some of the way, is something of a jailbreak and re-creation. Paul allows for the salvation of the Gentiles, based on right action even though in ignorance of Christ,

> for when Gentiles which have no law do by nature the things of the law, these, having no law, are a law unto themselves; in that they shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness therewith, and their thoughts one with another accusing or else excusing them; in the day when God shall judge . . . (Rom. 2, 14-6).

All the world may be waiting for the sunrise of some new faith, some incarnate god, but for the nonce, there's a lot to go on; we may not have eyes for Christ, but we've eyes for creation: "Doom is luminous to-day." Though "Love in absurdity rocks even just men down," yet "Praise/ The light, that we can breathe it, and defy/ All mustiness around the living I" (p. 51). The hosanna is close enough to the poetry of *Dumbfounding;* it could happily pick a place between the covers. Perhaps the title, "Apocalyptic?", pulls us back from there with its question mark by suggesting, 'Am I just dreaming? Could this risen world never happen till the end of time?'

But the three-part poem, "Apocalyptics," asks the question more forcefully:

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[21]Dennis Lee, *Nicholas Knock and Other People* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 62-63.

Don't you suppose
Anything could start it?
Music and All?
Some time? (p. 55)

it ends, asking. This is the sturdy conclusion of a poem all of whose three sections have dealt with recreational sports. Like the triple elements in "Dispersed Titles," the first section of the poem uses an earth-image, a paying-public skating rink, the second a water-image, a paying-public bathing beach, the third a sky-scraping image, the city seen as gymnasium, and I don't see why one shouldn't have paid for that too, if only in city taxes. The first and second parts are each single stanzas accompanied by a small refrain in which the appropriate creature of God plays serenely, like the dog, blessed fool, skittering on the rink, or the seagull, holy spirit brooding on the waves that curl ("marcelled"; M. Marcel invented a particularly popular hair-style in days before the Sassoon cut) like the Lake Ontario ones of the protesting stevedore ("here/ we're still curling our waves", [p. 109] — "curling" being another of those rig-like words beloved of Avison), each creature, dog and bird, reminding us *here* of what we fail to notice when we're *There*, too busy with our blind man's buff, the landscape too obfuscated with chlorine, rubber, turnstiles, carbon monoxide, cigarsmoke, plastic, barbed wire, and steel. All our own doing, all our own fault, but no wonder we don't see the gull of God or hear the cold dog of God yapping in frolick, who "invites for all he's worth" (p. 52), almost as if he, too, were saying, "Why not hit out a tune on that Bowles lunch piano!" The poet has a good deal of sympathy for us in our myopia: "Nobody can thread the maze/ Out of this pre-baptismal place" (p. 53), where the baptism is more than the imminent immersion in the lake. Remember that of another recreational sport, tennis, we concluded that an accidental, ununiversal, undemocratic, unbaptised salvation wasn't good enough. So here.

The "jungle jim" of modern life (since all modern life necessarily presupposes the scrambling city for Avison the realist, Avison the democrat) shows people of various kinds making various attempts to solve the problem of living.

> Because a shepherd climbed after one sheep
> Some climb here.
> Because a fresco painter swung on scaffolding
> Some swing.
> Because of old agility on rigging
> Some run along aux matelots.
> All must still feed (p. 54).

Because Christ went out on a limb, some are still religious. Because Michaelangelo crankled his neck to paint God on the Sistine ceiling, some are artists. Because the seaborde men once explored in gladness the route to Cathay (or because the apes foraged in the trees), some are entrepreneurs, yu gotta eat somehow, even the artist and the missionary.

> But salvage rigs and consultants
> probe for scant profit (p. 38),

as another poem cautions us. Meanwhile the government turns physics into employment (ends into means) and the idealists and revolutionaries (see "The Fallen, Fallen World") lead us a wild goose chase too and keep the wheels of business turning. These are the folk who crave act and harmony, half believing them possible. They are described in cosmic terms, "every one with a different world, from/ Supernovae to amoeba in his soul" (p. 54). Avison shows a Pascal-like turn of mind in leaping from the stellar to the cellular (she used the seventeenth century Dutch Leeuwenhoek's discovery through the microscope elsewhere more explicitly) with the ease that equates these as two kinds of space-travel. They are also described, negatively, by what they're not, as being an individual as rocks or crags, contours of the shore, not sand: "not sediment,/ Not instruments" for making pavement with — suggestive of Kant's not means-to-an-end, but end-in-itself, person not thing, cf. the earlier "Governments . . . can misconstrue/ Use, though,/ Make physics instrument . . ." (p. 54). Each of us "craving act, and harmony (Shebang!)," longing for theatre to play in and music to tune to, is impatient of delay, wants it all to match and fall out right, and now, but can't see over the walls of his own prejudices and ideologies to how this might be, hears only a part harmony. Could we have yet grasped the whole score, the ultimate harmony would have struck up already — "there'd be ding-dong [merrily on high] now" (p. 55).

But, says the poet, from simple beginnings. . . . Cement, sticks, pigeons, juncos, snowflakes, soles of a fellow pedestrian's winter boots (*D.*, p. 81), and honky-tonk pianos in greasy spoons, "upright with too-loose keys/ But on the whole a lovely tone" as the piano in heaven is described (p. 65), from these could, can, come the resurrection of the world.

This poem has spunk, this poem is a piano-tuner (p. 27), this poem is more than a good sport, is more than a fantasist, more than a pray-er; this poem says, 'But really, no I mean, really, couldn't we just DO it? Let's go!'

There is at one point an interesting seed of an idea sown in this poem:

> Physicists have broken through; some are dismayed to find
> The new air they inhabit
> They share with poets (p. 54).

That they have broken through like this is true, and seminal. But the fact is, many are *not* dismayed to find the affinity of physics for poetry; if Avison would push on to Einstein and current astrophysics, that newer-style cosmology would perhaps fit her vision very well, the disappointing "man-toy" notwithstanding. If ever a poet's poetry could have handled it, it's Avison's. One might even say it is the poets, herself among the excluded, who are not up to discovering that they share the same air with physicists. The artist is notoriously lax about facts, but Avison is practically never scientifically inaccurate, a precision arrived at without recourse to poetic licence. (I mean to exclude her metaphors, *façons de parler,* from this licence.) Her poetic scope is so much greater than the private intrigues of adultery and rejection so superbly written about by many who make no thought-out connection between their individual life and the life of the species, of all species, of all being, a scope Avison is to be treasured for.

We have looked earlier at the end of "Mordent for a Melody," the melodic part, the secret tempo of the singing midges, but we have not yet looked at the first part and its indictment of the unsecret tempo, racing and noisy, of the contemporary globe. Here, and not only here, we find a subclassification under the malaise of mortal homesickness for The Promised Land that scientific knowledge (and its companion knowledge-crises, the Garden and the War in Heaven) has sickened us with. We have turned the world away from light.

But, turning physics into instrument, we have also created "the bleak hieroglyphs of chart and table" to fly airplanes with, and run trains with, and drive cars and all manner of engines with. This, remember, was written fifteen years before the fuel crisis hit the newspapers. We gouge out the earth to get at its coal and oil and uranium so we can burn them up and run faster. So the subclassification is one of practical politics. The environmentalists and the conservationists were going to public school when she was writing this. The Club of Rome hadn't been dreamt of. The greedy-guts consumer is horrifically painted as engineering the accelerated spinning of the globe by means of derricks (not only engines for weight-lifting but another word for gallows) which bleed under the strain of the work (like horses spurred to gallop, like busy gallows) and which are fuelled, fed, with oil, as witness the first line of the poem, a newsman's headliner dream: "Horsepower crops Araby for pasture" (p. 49). The image we are by now used to, of outer space seen as the primordial waters of the deep, is implied in Stanza 1 in the fishy locomotion of the comet past the window of the TV frame, a deep-sea goggle. The amoeba and its twin the supernova dance their passacaglia again in Stanza 2, where also the human responsibility for the universe, made inevitable by the utter interrelationship of all its parts, is suggested by the triggering fingernail, reminiscent (so to speak; it predates it, of course) of M. Atwood's poem on responsibility, "It is dangerous to read newspapers." That title is also the fifth line from the end, and proceeds:

> Each time I hit a key
> on my electric typewriter
> speaking of peaceful trees
>
> another village explodes.[22]

Whereas in this poem the suggestion that 'if I didn't . . . , it wouldn't . . .' is plaintively whimsical, in Avison it is more concrete. If we wouldn't consume inordinately, the earth wouldn't spin. If we wouldn't gobble, it wouldn't hurtle, the suggestion is. Patently mythic. Or is it? It is precisely parallel to the paradox we've seen before, marshalled in the case against science over the demise of

[22]Margaret Atwood, *The Animals in that Country* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 31.

faith; we with our knowledge are held responsible for the fact that the earth spins, as if, if we didn't know it, it wouldn't do it, along with all the rest of the cosmic doings that displace the God we know. Untrue? Our truth about space is something that we have discovered could have pertained for all past time; but who's to say reality hasn't changed and we've simply discovered the most recent laws it abides by, which we can only perceive by virtue of their subsuming previous ones? That's a conundrum, too.

"Intra-Political (AN EXERCISE IN POLITICAL ASTRONOMY)" is another poem that explores the subclassification, and ends with the same courageous advice, helped by the wisdom of Heraclitus, who makes several other appearances in Avison.[23] The river that you step in twice may be the same river ("form") but it is not the same water ("flow"); people are not sediment; they are each unique. And you must (says the poem) step, into that river; no loitering on the bank. Step daintily, but step. We will look at this advice in a moment; first, the practical problem, as outlined in the first part of the poem.

The poem is part fantasy or science-fiction, part, as it says, political exercise. It suggests political *astr*onomy is what's outlined; we are more used to political *e*conomy being in the syllabus. But it is, actually, a course outline in political *gastr*onomy, a sustained gastro-astro pun. The only excursion Avison makes into the biological sciences with any readiness is in the instance of feeding, and that, she never loses sight of: the need of creature living to process food. It *can* be holy, this "sanity of holy appetite," a "more than animal joy," as "Far off from University" describes it — all life "fumbling, fed" (p. 76). From one pun to another (a metaphor being a punning thought-cluster): she looks at animal digestion in the light of photosynthesis, the turning of the sun's light into carbohydrate energy by plants. She throws in for good measure a bit more science of optics, suggesting the trick of starting a fire with a convex lens by getting the light to refract to a point at the point of contact with the inflammatory material. Photosynthesis is also seen as astronomical event, a possible black hole sucking in to a small dimension (the

[23]The last couplet, for instance, of the sonnet, "Snow":

. . . Suffering this starry blur
The rest may ring your change, sad listener. (p. 17)

"Changing, it rests," says Heraclitus. The sonnet seems to say, If you think you can rest with rest, step into the same water twice, you will still have change thrust upon you but the worse (your death) for your having been a passive resister; better the active jailbreak.

ganglia of nerves in the torso we call the solar plexis) a whole spaced-out skyful of energy. That much energy, she says, is dynamite, is nuclear; it could be used for mighty illumination or it could be used for mammouth explosives. She takes time out to be amused at a harmless explosion-in-small, the amoeba-sized detonation of a sneeze. The whole passage goes like this:

> Truth is, men chew and churn
> . . .
> galactic courses:
> chlorophyll, mutton, mineral salts
> pinpoint multiple sunrise, and
> cram us with incendiary force;
> or we ingesting cede
> the solar plexus its serenes of sky,
> til every sunborn creature
> may lume deepforest pools, and floodlight
> his architects; find, too,
> lenses for micro-astronomical
> amaze (he — transport! —
> SNEEZES) (p. 44).

She fears that a big bang is what we're headed for; "this pre-creation density presses" (p. 45). She even entertains the thought that "a new Genesis" might be the best thing for us. Since we've so overcrowded the planet and so squandered its resources ("How can the engineer above/ Refuel, at the rate we burn?" says "Mordent for a Melody," p. 49), had we best just disintegrate and start again, would *that*

> set swinging
> the little horn-gates to new life's
> illumined labyrinths if, released
> from stifling,
> creatures like us were plant-bathed
> in new-born Light? (p. 46)

which suggests a new sun (capitalized to denote God), and a new baptism, dunking the whole planet in Light like the March Hare dunking his watch in his tea.

And besides, is there any possibility of avoiding it? Is it too late? "Beans . . . keg up" (p. 46) and you all know the explosiveness of beans: 'Beans, beans, the musical fruit, the more you eat, the more

you toot, the more you toot, the better you feel, so eat string beans for your daily meal!' (The Pythagoreans said: 'Don't eat beans.') And the death-inducing overdoses of tranquillizers pile up on the market shelves, too, "coronal pyres of sleep." "Strait thinking" is to blame; it "set us down in rows/ and rigged the till" — Newtonian physics, poles, pistons, technology, that's the line of descent. (What *would* she make of Einstein?) It could all go up in a dust-up, like civility, it does so "wobble on nitroblycerine."

But she offers other advice, in the end, than embracing the holocaust. Her use of "the little horn-gates" is a giveaway. They are the gates, in Virgil and in Chaucer, which let out the false dreams; it's the ivory-gated dreams that are true ones. She suggests for *her* ivory that we might get out of this mine-field by not treading on any of the mines, and set up — not shop, but play, elsewhere. Play has been a sustaining metaphor throughout the poem but the structure of the play has been the narrow confines of a game (like Monopoly, or Roulette) not the playful sport of gambolling, the play of lambs. She suggests the abandonment of the gaming table, the game of profit, gambling, for the yet riskier gamble — demanding of more courage, but more natural— the gambit of love. That is what George Herbert chose when he sat to eat at Love's transfiguring board, in one of his poems called "Love," the last line of which is quoted as the last line of Avison's poem. And love is a pregnant argument for God (as Browning's David discovers in "Saul"), with its "new expectant largeness" and "an immense answering/ of human skies" (p. 47). You will notice at the end of the poem, the mudcakes. The sun-to-food imagery must undergo this change at this point because photosynthesis is all too attractive a description of nourishment to be subject to the rejection the poem has brought us to; the early part of the poem used it to describe a function which could, "truth is . . ." (p. 44), go valuatively either way. It went, the poem says, one way. And now that way is described in terms of mudcakes, untransformed Adam-matter using the sun only to bake itself dry and call itself food. Put aside childish things now, says the poem, mudcakes and nursery games; 'shmarten up,' as the TV character has it. Then, perhaps, we will know the "fixity of our sun-shelves in our courses —/ that willed harmonics" (p. 45) of the Pythagoreans.

Love is a subject not often announced in *Winter Sun;* one of the main caches of it is in "The Agnes Cleves Papers." The poem we have just finished with endorses love via its quotation of George

Herbert. At the same time it fears space. The poet may seem to strike up a wary alliance with "space with its purple eye," attributing to it an understanding perspective on human frailty, that "colt hurtled," but not many lines later admits that "space is a hazard." We are not up to anything but a fearful mistrust of space, "the inexorable of/ weaving orbits," because we, sublunaries, are not heirs to weightlessness, we're bound earthlings ("Nothing made of earthy substance is absolutely light," says Kepler[24]), and those who force themselves upon the sky do it violence (so does not say Kepler). Nonetheless, that purple hue turns up again; it is in one of the concluding stanzas of "The Agnes Cleves Papers":

> What I saw was an exhibition rocket.
> Outside ourselves, time could be purpled so
> In one swift trail over the inky grandstand (p. 88),

and if we look we will find this strangely tied up with love as well.

Consider the Garnet-Miss Rothsey affair. We have the first impression from the poem that the narrator has worked at the same export-import firm as these two and over a period of years, it seems, has watched them become more and more involved each in the other's company, though always on the job. Garnet, who was married with children, began to stay on in the evenings, working at his shipping clerk duties; Rothsey was his overseer in "a meagre, secure administrative position." Reflection may lead us to consider that the narrator is telling the kind of story people do who begin, 'I have this sister who is in trouble . . .'; she may, we conclude, be talking nervously about herself. However, we notice the protestation, "No, it's of someone else I'm thinking now" (p. 83). Perhaps that's no never mind; perhaps the lady doth protest too much. But if that's so, how do we make sense of the story?

> 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; not that it would go out,
> But it might prove as centre of all
> Resolutions, and, defined,
> Limn with false human clarity
> A solar system with its verge
> Lost perhaps, but illumined in
> A mathematical certainty
> And for my secret I would have a universe.

[24]Koestler, p. 343.

After she has mastered her excitement and told us the Garnet-Rothsey story, she concludes:

> Telling it in plain words
> Makes me see how I feared the wrong thing.
> The other centre, the known enigma —
> All eyes I do not own, contours
> That force familiarity where I would
> Tumult and spurn like Pan — were the mountain passes
> Pure out of thought; this iris bed
> Is scarfed in dreadful mist
> And no sun comes
> Beyond the yellow stoneway (p. 88).

The first passage describes one "centre", the second "the other centre." The Garnet-Rothsey story hinges on the opposition of these two centres, the one the gravitational centre, the other, love.

The narrator makes quite a point of describing Garnet and Rothsey as "coming into their/ Foreknown specific gravity" (p. 83); she goes so far as to say,

> Because they met
> Each could achieve a doomed specific gravity
> And Antony and Cleopatra figured
> Ruin in large, but set the style they held (p. 87)

as if, had they not met, they wouldn't have gravitated. My contention is that the narrator is not Rothsey, but was scared off love, wrongly, she admits later in her life, by watching Garnet and Rothsey and mistaking a force "cognate with love" but "rocket only", for love itself. It is worth reiterating this passage:

> There ought to be a word cognate with love
> For situations people find themselves
> As means of coming into their
> Foreknown specific gravity.
> No, it's of someone else I'm thinking now (p. 83).

Early in our perusal we tend to catch on the "cognate," thinking, well, if it's to relate that closely to the word 'love,' then it *is* a kind of love but one that wasn't recognized as such by the participants; the poet is being ironic. Later, I suggest, we acknowledge that the irony is directed by the poet at herself; 'there ought to be a word that

graphically illustrates the wrong turning I took and how I came to take it.'

There are three patterns: the pious pattern, the cognate of love, and love. Certainly, the poet says, I wasn't fooled by anything so hollow as the first; that is what Garnet had with his wife and children, "neither kin nor keening until death." Kindred spirit and pain he *had* with Rothsey; that was alive. But the bond, she says, was a doomed and determined one. I see now that that is what I feared. I saw love all in material terms, in terms of hazardous space, of stone, of gravitation, because that is what *they* were going through. So I turned my back on my last experience, my one evening — though I might have known better for it was "simple" and "penetrating" (images both sexual and religious), not at all the "centre of all revolutions" tugging at the doomed universe with its gravitational force, the universe which must necessarily be both catching and caught in the gravitational fields much as I might "tumult and spurn like Pan" from its forced familiarity.

Here I would point out that as far as I can see this is one instance of poetic licence — or inaccurate science — in Avison; "specific gravity" (the ratio of the density of a substance to the density of water) doesn't fit in the sentences where she uses it, not literally; it sounds nice, though. Gravitational field is surely what she means. Two objects having mass exert an equal and opposite force on each other; the force increases radically within a certain proximity. This is the story of Garnet and Rothsey at the shipping firm. It is a curious coincidence that Koestler uses the same metaphor (describing Kepler and Tycho); he even titles a subsection of his *The Gravity of Fate.*

> But under the surface, they both knew, with the certainty of sleepwalkers, that they were born to complete each other; that it was the gravity of fate which had drawn them together. Their relationship was to alternate all the time between these two levels: *qua* sleepwalkers, they strolled arm in arm through uncharted spaces; in their waking contacts they brought out the worst in the other's character, as if by mutual induction.[25]

"After all," he says, "gravity in the physical sense is also merely a word for an unknown force acting at a distance".[26] It is this kind of

[25]Koestler, p. 307.
[26]Koestler, p. 300.

force the poet doesn't want to be slave to; even 'falling in love' reminds one of gravity. She doesn't like what the 'lovers' do to each other, any more than she likes the ruin Antony and Cleopatra wrought. Why, the very word "cognate" means 'material'; listen to Kepler:

> It is therefore clear that the traditional doctrine about gravity is erroneous. . . . Gravity is the mutual bodily tendency between cognate bodies towards unity or contact . . . so that the earth draws a stone much more than the stone draws the earth. . . . Supposing that the earth were in the centre of the world, heavy bodies would be attracted to it, not because it is in the centre, but because it is a cognate body. It follows that regardless where we place the earth . . . heavy bodies will always seek it. . . .[27]

It is a case of reducing love which is like photosynthesis to something posing as love which is like mudcakes. It would prove the centre of a hoaxing solar system which would be a universe. How can a solar system be a universe? A solar system has an end; the universe doesn't. But if, and only if, we consider the solar system as a gravitational field, we can think of it as unending like a universe.

Let us consider what she feared in another way. She speaks of "false human clarity" and "mathematical certainty." We know from several other poems the colour of this fear. As was quoted earlier,

> Such near values cannot be measured in values
> Just because the measuring
> Consists in 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) (p. 64).

The poems, "Butterfly Bones," disdains the "strange certainties" proved by pickling-bottles in the science lab, the learned's, like the lakefront grammarian's, transfixedness, the fix that fixes down for all to see and "leaves all living stranger" (p. 19), so that all miss the point. People like this don't see the trees for the woods. They map the whole universe and miss God. They evacuate mystery. I feared (she says) to look lest they rob my sight of mystery too; what I prefer is that

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[27]Koestler, p. 342.

> The shaft of vision falling on obscurity
> Illumines nothing, yet discovers
> The ways of the obscure . . . (p. 83).

(Like, as Redekop points out, an x-ray.)

We know (I dare to hope) from the whole of this essay that she fears the mathematical certainty of the new science, from the seventeenth century on, which has appeared to remove the ground of faith from the believing Christian and has clamped the world in other vices. This kind of false human clarity can affect all human relationships; she feared the over-familiarity of "all eyes I do not own" and she also feared the vortex of love, the suction towards a compulsion that would leave "all eyes I do not own" orbiting round at the edges. She feared depersoned existence. Though she might prefer destiny (Egypt, Cleopatra, the Nile, the riverboy) to gravitation, yet both are predetermined. A Calvinist she is not, nor a modern-day behaviourist.

What she had discovered is that she might, all the time, have feared simply how obscure the ways of the obscure finally remain, and that no amount of human clarity, or charity, could ever do in their mystery. They are the "known enigma." The eyes of fellow human beings in all their otherness make up an iris bed on the mountain pass (there is the "purpled so" colour-coding again) where they are "scarfed in dreadful mist"; the veils of unknowing are the real fear, which she must pit her life at, crossing those "mountain passes pure out of thought," venturing even, perhaps, beyond where the sun, wintery yellow, reflects off space and matter, "the yellow stoneway" on the threshold of the outer, utter darkness which is "the true home only for the brave" (p. 319). The poem ends, or almost ends, typically enough with an abrupt showbiz metaphor.

— — — — —

In conclusion I would like to plant the idea that, as the poet-narrator healed herself of her misapprehension of love, so the poet might have healed herself of a misapprehension, not of all science, but of part. Along with the physicists who have the courage and vision to occupy the same air with poets, she might have worked out an understanding of her Christ's domus on the new map of the universe, resting assured that no amount of intelligence can

altogether predetermine the post-Newtonian world. And as if in earnest of this cure, she herself offers us "B.irth Day".

Saturday I ran to Mitilene (p. 73)

We imagine a young messenger, the perfect embodiment of all that was good in the Greek inheritance, intelligent, fair-minded, an athlete, running across the Island of Lesbos bringing word of the arrival of the itinerant Paul and his disciples, bringing word of the life and birth of Jesus (Acts, 20, 14). Avison uses close to the Biblical spelling, rather than the modern 'Mitilini.'

> Bushes and grass along the glass-still way[28]
> Were all dabbled with rain
> And the road reeled with shattered skies.

It sounds like some of the imagery of "Thaw." It is spring.

> I saw the hills lie brown and vast and passive.

"The rest may ring your change, sad listener" — but not in this poem; *this* change will not make you sad, but glad. And then you won't be passive.

> The men of Mitilene 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.

Now, at last, we may take the Beddoes phrase in its simple, original sense: the earth merely falls away from my living as my living passes on and up to heaven, for eternity. Death where is thy sting, says Paul; wee are but turn'd aside to sleepe, says Donne. There need no longer be fear of the dark, death, but rather rejoicing. And rejoice they did, that day's night, in Mitilene, with songs that sum up much of the effort of *Winter Sun* in a benign achievement. All new life is fresh and fine, not numbifying with hackneyed hope; the youngsters feed on light, like plants, "gulping daylight," with "frangible robins' blue/ Teethed right around to sun" picturing the broken upper edge of the hatched sky-blue shell of the little robin's egg looking like teeth

[28] I strongly suspect the printers — who have most definitely committed other unacknowledged errata in the book — have flipped the "l" and "r" around in two words; the *text* reads, "Bushes and *glass* along the *grass*-still way."

in an upturned mouth ready to chew the sun into goodness. The disappointing ball-toy that spun off from the big bang is forgotten for the universal firmament, become a paunchy and living and loving leviathan bellying forth a babe and likely to become even fatter, and perhaps dolphin-playful, when the little swaddling child gets going on him, feeding him up from His strange new transforming board. We do not mind the humourousness of *this;* we laugh for joy, and know there is nothing to fear from an expanding universe that "orbs" — or curves.

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, marvellously
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 Mitilene.

*

Cambridge, Ontario