UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

TOWARDS A CONTINUING CITY IN THE POETRY OF MARGARET AVISON

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

1983

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank first my advisor, Dennis O. Cooley, for his enthusiasm, patience and direction.

I am grateful to Professors Alexandre Amprimoz and Daniel Lenoski for their helpful critical comments.

I wish also to thank Ken Probert for continually directing my attention to valuable bibliographic material.

Finally, I am especially thankful to Jan and to Jacqui for their unfailing support and encouragement.

for Sharon

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For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

(Heb. 13:14)

ABSTRACT

This study traces Margaret Avison's poetic development by focusing on the city as it emerges in each of her three volumes of poetry: Winter Sun, The Dumbfounding and sunblue. The first two chapters explore the poet's search for civility in the urban landscapes of Winter Sun. As a place and as a state of mind, the unredeemed city offers only the possibility of civil achievement. The third chapter considers the effect of Avison's conversion to Christianity on the language of The Dumbfounding. In this volume, communitas emerges as the poet's Christian understanding of civility. The recurring metaphor of the city as human body anticipates Avison's later apprehension of the mystical body of Christ in sunblue. Communitas then becomes the basis for communion. Chapter four focuses on the relationship between the poet's symbolic use of language and her anagogic vision of the city. Augustine's City of God is the literary model for the structure of this chapter. sunblue's ongoing dialectic between "here" and "out there" is partially resolved by the poet's discovery of "that invisible City" within her own transient, earth-bound Toronto.

Throughout her poetry, Avison's urban sensibility is intimately connected to her conception of language. The direction of the city's ongoing transformation only becomes

clear in sunblue, which in turn, illuminates dimensions of the city explored in Winter Sun and The Dumbfounding. Avison's "continuing city," then, suggests both the process and the culmination of her search for civility.

Introduction

Margaret Avison is widely regarded as one of Canada's finest poets. Although her poetry has frequently appeared in anthologies, her reputation rests on a surprisingly small body of work. Since Avison began writing in the late 1930's, she has published three volumes of poetry: Winter Sun (1960), The Dumbfounding (1966) and sunblue (1978).[1] Each collection reveals a meticulous craft. It is impossible, however, to place her work within any one "school" of writing. The poet's early formation seems to have been partially influenced by the rise of urban poetry in the 1930's and the subsequent emergence of distinctly Toronto and Montreal voices. Still, Avison's response to her city environment in Winter Sun is quite different from Souster's or Dudek's. We hear more direct echoes of Eliot's and Auden's civic voices in this first volume. Overall, the language of Winter Sun is shaped by a high modernist idiom. Avison's sensibility here is both urban and urbane. Her dense, convoluted syntax often creates an impression of some distance between the speaker and the setting. Yet throughout her poetry, Avison's urban sensibility is intimately connected to her conception of language. As the poet's comprehension of the city expands in The Dumbfounding, the language begins to open up as well. Avison's conversion to

Christianity, dramatized in this second collection of poems, is the source of her poetic unfolding.[2] By the time she writes sunblue, her anagogic reading of the city is accompanied by a language pared down to elemental expression. At first glance, the radically different language, sensibility and subject matter of Winter Sun and sunblue suggest little continuity in Avison's poetic development. In fact, we can follow this development by focusing on the city as it emerges in each of her collections of poems.

If we cannot trace Avison's urban sensibility to any particular "school" of writing, we certainly can locate it more generally within Canadian literary tradition. The relationship between man and his environment appears again and again as a theme central to Canadian writing. For Northrop Frye, the growth of Canadian civilization has directly informed the development of its literature.[3] He argues that the garrison or outpost community is bound together through a common fear of the wilderness. The expanse of the landscape alone continually threatens to overwhelm the human element within. Implicitly, Avison recognizes this garrison mentality in her early conception of the city, but she finds inhospitable space within her own urban environment as well. Although Frye acknowledges the negative implications of the garrison, he tends to see it as a positive force in the shaping of Canadian literature and culture.[4] He proposes that within the modern metropolis, the garrison becomes that inner core of resistance to

society.[5] We do find a current of dissent running through Avison's urban poetry protesting the onslaught of mass technology, but the garrison can scarcely contain this dissent. Many of the early poems exude apocalyptic overtones: the walls of the garrison are threatened from within as well. Avison's notion of the ideal city, which gradually assumes religious significance, resembles more closely the argument D.G. Jones offers in opposition to Frye's theory of the garrison. Jones argues that the garrison often appears in Canadian literature as a prison of uniformity and convention.[6] He further points to a number of Canadian writers who have abandoned this mentality by knocking down the walls of the garrison to let the wilderness in.[7] For Avison, this tradition becomes a living presence in her later Christian poetry. Having lost her fear of boundless space through the process of her conversion, Avison quite literally discovers "out there" as the source of her salvation in sunblue. Jones' reading of Canadian literature as a whole draws attention to the religious implications of the garrison and its dissolution.[8]

In spite of the recent upsurge in Avison criticism, very few studies have considered the poet's crucial development beyond The Dumbfounding. It would seem that sunblue's radically simple style and explicitly Christian subject matter have not appealed to prevaling critical tastes. Of course, it is true that literary critics are accustomed to talking about Christian "myth." With this latest book,

Avison is talking about actual Christian faith. To acknowledge this distinction does not preclude a literary approach to sunblue. Avison's remarkable "gift" of the creative Word insists on a craft appropriate to her subject. Hence, if few critics have attached any religious significance to Avision's city, it is not hard to see why. The direction of the city's ongoing transformation only becomes clear in sunblue, which in turn, illuminates dimensions of the city explored in Winter Sun and The Dumbfounding.

The movement towards Avison's continuing city originates in Winter Sun with the poet's search for civility. "Civility a Bogey or, two centuries of Canadian cities" (WS, 14-15) ironically recounts the growth of Canadian civilization and concludes that our notions of civility are inverted. This poem informs our understanding of some of the more contemporary urban landscapes in Winter Sun. Throughout much of this collection, the poet seems to define her civil ideal by negation. In the process she discovers that true civility is not inherent to this "pre-baptismal" place. Among several poems, "Apocalyptics" (WS, 52-55) looks to human possibility as the source of any civil achievement. The poet's search, then, does not evolve in any linear pattern.

In Winter Sun the poet also discovers that the physical city projects and reinforces a particular state of mind. "The Mirrored Man" (WS, 71), for example, focuses on the source of modern man's alienation within a biblical

landscape. Much like Jones, Avison evidently finds the typological origin of the garrison mentality within the Old Testament.[9] While most of the poems in Winter Sun resist a clear distinction between mind and place, the tension between the two is nonetheless prevalent. This tension is particularly apparent in "The Agnes Cleves Papers" (WS, 78-89), the long narrative poem which concludes Winter Sun. With this poem we are reminded that alienation is not an exclusively biblical theme for Avison at this point.

In The Dumbfounding, the poet's radical apprehension of the Word made flesh begins to resolve some of the dialectics of Winter Sun. A number of poems enact the poet's conversion by focusing on the city through the metaphor of the human body. These poems underscore Avison's sense that surrender to the power of the Word is a kind of deliverance. In "Branches" (D, 46) Avison's supreme model of civility emerges in the figure of Christ. His example sustains the relationship between language and the city. Many of the pieces in this collection appear, then, as poetic communities of words. Communitas becomes Avison's Christian understanding of civility.

The divine model continues to inform the poetics of sunblue. But in this volume, the poet's conception of language is symbolic instead of metaphoric. On a literal level, the simple, concrete diction tends to evoke a city rooted in place rather than in the mind or the human body. On an anagogic level, of course, the city emerges as the

poet's vision of the City of God. Avison frequently refers to these two modes of perception in the spatial terms "here" and "there." This traditional Christian dialectic is the source of some tension as the poem "Transients" (sb, 82) acutely conveys. It would seem that the technological forces of the city preclude any symbolic association between "here" and "there." Avison then looks upon her discovery of celestial signs in the urban landscape as both a given and a gift. "From Age to Age : Found Poem" (sb, 102) emerges at the end of sunblue as Avison's fullest poetic embodiment of the continuing city.

Chapter One

This Pre-Baptismal Place

> When day and life draw the horizons
> Part of the strangeness is
> Knowing the landscape.
> "From a Provincial" (Winter Sun, 32)

Winter Sun, Margaret Avison's first volume of poetry, is an achievement prefaced by some twenty years of writing.[1] Throughout this period (which has since been called her "non-Christian" period),[2] the poet explores the relationship between urban man and his physical situation, a relationship which is often tenuous, disagreeable, and potentially destructive. According to the brief introduction on the dust cover of Winter Sun, the poems which appear in this book are not arranged in any particular order, since the poet prefers that her readers make their own connections and groupings.[3] Accepting this invitation, active readers soon find themselves embroiled in a struggle worthy of the poet's self-confessed struggle with Dylan Thomas: "The poetry ... calls for attack. You pounce, you fasten your teeth in its gristle, you worry it and drag it around in circles, and perhaps you come out on top."[4] For this reason, Winter Sun may seem to stand apart from works by many of Avison's contemporaries whose poetic sensibilities are somewhat less formidable. Still, Avison's concern for a creative and

dynamic human presence in the landscape is a widespread concern in much Canadian literature. For Avison, as for many, nature is not a benevolent or even a moral force. Winter Sun presents a nature which is sometimes hostile, but more often indifferent to human life. In the poet's search for habitable space, she finds that the city is almost invariably her point of departure and return. Many of the poems focus on the city itself in the hope of discovering what she calls "some pivot for significance."[5] Like many Canadian writers, Avison seeks an authentic connection between creativity and civility. She finds, however, that true civility is not inherent in any place in itself, but is rather a hard-won achievement. Hence, the poet's search for civility in Winter Sun does not evolve in any identifiable pattern.

In this context, "civility" is not simply a pretext for decorum or propriety. Beyond this, it seems to be the collective spirit of the social, intellectual and cultural aspirations of a community which animates the life of its citizens. In much the same spirit, historians of the city generally regard the invention of writing as the beginning of civilization.[6] The etymological origin of "civilization" and "civility" is, of course, "civitas," one of the Latin words for city. The peculiarities of Canadian history and geography, however, do not make these connections self-evident. "Civilization," so to speak, has really only taken root within the past one hundred years or so in Canada.[7]

Moreover, it was not accompanied by the invention of a distinctive new writing; at first, what literature could be found was largely imported from Britain. For that matter, even our notions of how a city should be built were for the longest time decidedly British. These often ignored the spatial realities of the Canadian landscape. Northrop Frye remarks:

> Civilization in Canada, as elsewhere, has advanced geometrically across the country, throwing down the long parallel lines of railways, dividing up the farm lands into chessboards of square-mile sections and concession-line roads. There is little adaptation to nature: in both architecture and arrangement, Canadian cities and villages express rather an arrogant abstraction, the conquest of nature by an intelligence which does not love it.[8]

Avison's "Civility a Bogey or, two centuries of Canadian cities" is a speculative poem which surveys this peculiar genesis and the subsequent evolution of the Canadian city. The scepticism in the title suggests a stance of ironic detachment, but the pronounced judgement in that title is startling in its directness. The poet's detachment here is not typical of her begrudging attachment to the city in Winter Sun. But in this poem, the unusual point of view contributes to the overall ironic effect.

The first stanza conjures up the nineteenth-century Canadian landscape:

evoke the motions of the machine age. In yoking these two possibilities together, Avison seems to be making a further disparaging comment about the "sophistication" of a big bull technology.

In the fifth stanza, the reader is confronted with another radical shift in perspective:

> 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. (WS, 15)

The controlling motif is water, and yet it is the sky which "laps leisurely / round wrack and jetty." The chuckling pigeons are a wonderfully ambivalent presence as creatures which frequent the docks between land and water. Nevertheless, the "moorings" of the ruined cities, as the word implies, still anchor in space. This word is carefully chosen: it also means a wasteland covered with heath. The rationale for this inverted perspective becomes clearer in the next stanza:

> To walk the earth
> is to be immersed,
> slung by the feet
> in the universe. (WS, 15)

This stark change in tone, effected by the switch to formal meter, draws attention to an underlying sense of fear in the poem. The humour falls away when we think of a similar nightmare of the "lone balloonist" in "Intra-Political":

(presumably) is not for drinking. The verbs "sharded" and "shoaled" are phonically linked by consonance and semantically linked by the metaphor of ruthless consumption and abandonment. Inherent in the verb "sharded" is the image of smashed china bits. "Shoaled," on the other hand, literally means to make shallow, an undertone, which coupled with the later mention of "firewater" in the fourth stanza, suggests a kind of drunken greed. In turn that greed points to the commercial exploitation and senseless depletion of natural resources. Interestingly enough, these large corporate men are drawn as "big bull buildings," a testament to their inhumanity. The word play on "big bull" is wonderfully suggestive -- as in "full of bull," "bull sessions," and, of course, "bull in a chinashop."

Whereas the city in Winter Sun is usually and quite remarkably androgynous, here it is uncharacteristically masculine. The images of moustaches, drinking cups and fat cigars comically reinforce this sense. The tone deflates this frontier male bravado, suggesting that what it gains in aggression it loses in intelligence. "Crater[ing] the moonlight" indicates a mentality that does not love the landscape. From another perspective, the big bulls are corporate mice rattling paper. This image also recalls the child-like association between cheese and the moon. Ernest Redekop informs us of a version of another folktale "in which a mouse torments a bull who cannot catch him."[9] Redekop also makes the astute connection between "bogey" and

"Hallowe'en," and by implication, draws attention to the fear which underlies the sardonic wit of the poem.[10]

The third stanza goes on to propose, however, that the chinashop has not been completely destroyed by the big bulls:

> Chinashops tame bulls
> in time,
> glass and enamel
> annealed have the glitter
> of schist, or a gunmetal
> sheen. The ceilings
> tilt, and the filled ground flounders. (WS, 14)

In time, even these bulky entrepreneurs learn to assume some Old World elegance, even though it is displaced. The fusion of outpost and metropolis is described in geological terms; glass and enamel have become metamorphosed into a schist-like formation. As the geological connotations imply, this formation has come about through intense heat or pressure. But schist, as in mica, is brittle, and easily splits apart. Again, the idea of false civility is reinforced by the "glitter" and "sheen." Furthermore, "gunmetal" is used not only for casting valves and gears -- the nuts and bolts of technology -- but also for metal novelties and trinkets. As the ceilings tilt and the ground flounders, it would seem that the natural landscape can no longer support this ill-planned, mechanical emporium.

The fourth stanza sets the stage for a somewhat comic version of the Western "show-down":

Earth, air, firewater
crack their joints, daring
a dust-up;
no man can shape his own rump
though the seats of the might swing sunlight.
claw in the
and crane

The overall tenor intimates that our romantic notions of the Wild West are just as corny as taking high tea on the "hard-wheat flat-land." Both are imported. The four elements, earth, air, and the compounded firewater (Redekop notes the whiskey pun),[11] take on these big bulls, cracking their joints and kicking up the dust of their ruin. The last lines of the fourth stanza have been the subject of much critical speculation. Mia Anderson's analysis of this passage is perhaps the best, and certainly the most in keeping with the poem's earthy sense of humour:

> despite your big ass, the poem says, and shows in the shape of the 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 sophmoric 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.[12]

While it would be difficult to improve upon this reading, it is worth noting the comic and ambivalent allusion in the verbs

"swing
claw
and crane." The downward textual movement hints at an evolutionary regression, reinforced by the animalism which the verbs themselves evoke. At the same time, the verbs

"Zones of the ultramarine / clutch at his jugular" (WS, 45). "Space is a hazard," says the speaker there (WS, 45). I would differ, though, with both Anderson and Redekop in their suggestions that this inverted perspective is necessarily one which man must learn to live with.[13] Human perception, Avison tells us over and over again, has the potential to shape habitable space through the power of the imagination which she conceives in the image of the "optic heart" (WS, 17). Our notions of civility, the poet seems to be saying, are inverted. The imported language and finewear, the ruthless (but temporary) conquest of nature and the rise of big business and technology reinforce man's insignificance in a landscape which continually threatens to overwhelm him. It is perhaps this fear of boundless space which compels the Canadian to be "civilized," as Northrop Frye would argue[14]; a fear which Avison wholly acknowledges but finds in itself an inadequate basis for any real sense of civility. Still, the poet looks with bemused sympathy upon those "blessed heads" who manage some semblance of civil accord as they blithely walk the ocean-sky floors:

> The blessed heads learn smiling upside down
> shored on a crumb
> whether in hinterland or town.
> It's all one. (WS, 15)

Although speculative, "Civility a Bogey" offers the reader a point of entry into the more contemporary urban landscapes of Winter Sun. As the poem reveals, the stunted

"Zones of the ultramarine / clutch at his jugular" (WS, 45). "Space is a hazard," says the speaker there (WS, 45). I would differ, though, with both Anderson and Redekop in their suggestions that this inverted perspective is necessarily one which man must learn to live with.[13] Human perception, Avison tells us over and over again, has the potential to shape habitable space through the power of the imagination which she conceives in the image of the "optic heart." (WS, 17) Our notions of civility, the poet seems to be saying, are inverted. The imported language and finewear, the ruthless (but temporary) conquest of nature and the rise of big business and technology reinforce man's insignificance in a landscape which continually threatens to overwhelm him. It is perhaps this fear of boundless space which compels the Canadian to be "civilized," as Northrop Frye would argue[14]; a fear which Avison wholly acknowledges but finds in itself an inadequate basis for any real sense of civility. Still, the poet looks with bemused sympathy upon those "blessed heads" who manage some semblance of civil accord as they blithely walk the ocean-sky floors:

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imagination which conceived the first Canadian towns and cities is for Avison no less prevalent in modern times. A series of poems repeatedly underscores the sense that the physical features of the metropolis tangibly project such an imagination. So the poet's search for civility is not so much threatened by the hazards of boundless space as it is by the inherent limitations of her urban environment.

Typically, the poet will frequently consider what is "out there" from a window. Critics from Milton Wilson onwards have noted the recurring window ledge as that "centre of gravity" between Avison's inner and outer space.[15] Many of her titles come to mind as examples, but perhaps the most beautiful and illustrative passage comes from a poem which Wilson has singled out, "New Year's Poem":

> Gentle and just pleasure
> It is, being human, to have won from space
> This unchill, habitable interior
> Which mirrors quietly the light
> Of the snow and the new year. (WS, 29)

This, as other poems in Winter Sun remind us, represents only a tentative victory over space, but it is interesting to note that the speaker's interior mirrors the unknown of the new year and the outside light. In effect, this civil moment for the poet incorporates the undefined space surrounding her without being overwhelmed by it.[16]

On the other hand, a current of dissent runs through Winter Sun. It proposes that the shape of the modern metropolis is resistant to the poet's struggle for a civil life.[17] In her poem "The Artist," Avison seems to be

illustrating her own precarious position as a citizen and as a poet. The artist is "at once Hansel and Gretel, dropping crumbs," and he

> Applies himself to penetrate the forest
> But to maintain a sensible base where bread
> Is baked, and axes honed, and lumber loaded.

But at the same time,

> The city has so many mews and mulleins
> By daylight, and geometrics of shadow
> By night, and is at all times no regarder
> Of cats or their unrectilinear
> Pursuer (WS, 40).

For Avison, civility is ultimately a state of mind, yet within the actual city -- the product of a limited imagination -- she sees tangible impediments to realizing this desired state. The monuments she finds are simultaneously literal and metaphoric.

For example, the museum in a couple of Avison's Winter Sun poems effectively displays fragments of life, isolated in time and memory. Specimens are cased in a "white glare," as in "Butterfly Bones" (WS, 19), and artifacts like the Egyptian frieze of "The Agnes Cleves Papers," what Avison calls "Ruin[s] in large" (WS, 86), represent cultural acquisitions for the lonely or the leisurely classes.

The poet's working and middle classes, on the other hand, frequently appear as commercial commodities, "Boxed, bottled and barrelled" in their respective offices, factories and warehouses (WS, 44). The steelworkings of the orange-pippery in "Our Working Day may be Menanced" evokes a particularly powerful metaphor of human ravishment:

> From this orange-pippery --
> Where without violation
> We force (the technique is of course secret)
> The jumbled fruit to disgorge, severally,
> Seed without juice. (WS, 57)

"These packaged us-es," the speaker of "Intra-Political" protests, "are to the gamboling of real nourishment / as mudcake to transmuted sun" (WS, 44). Madelaine, the "wild-wood" assembly line worker in the orange-pippery, resists the claim of that unredeemed world in choosing to leave by the extension bridge instead of by the usual tiled exit. It is not merely her act of nonconformity which threatens normal operations in the eyes of her superiors and co-workers; it is also her strange visionary experience on the bridge which "privately pique[s]" them:

> It was
> As if a spoke of the final sky
> Snagged her suddenly.
> For what seemed only one
> Queer moment, she was swept
> In some sidereal swerve,
> Blotted sheer out of time....(WS, 58)

Among the few individuals who choose the rebel's path in Winter Sun, Madelaine is perhaps the most disruptive to the technological advancement of the city. A collective motion of dissent among downtown workers in "To Professor X, Year Y" is apparently stifled by the physical structure of the city itself. For some "inexplicable" reason, the working populace does not make its usual five o'clock exodus to the suburbs, but gathers instead in the "square for civic receptions." The people stand "massed and unmoving," inadequately accommodated by the space around them, waiting for some kind

of deliverance. Although there is a slight note of condecension issuing from the speaker's aerial point of view, she does give voice to the crowd's silent frustration: "It is disgusting, this uniformity / of stature" (WS, 34). But even if they were to climb in human pyramids, "As circus families can ... / Strictly, each knows / Downtown buildings block all view anyway" (WS, 34). The citizens are, to borrow a phrase from "In a Season of Unemployment," both physically and spiritually "bricked in early by a / stifling dark"(D, 85). No one, including the speaker, is able to articulate the exact nature of this shared discontent, but "all suburbia / Suffers uneasily." The speaker herself refuses to fabricate "cause-and-effect" for the benefit of the future historian. The message which she does leave him, however, anticipates a slow burgeoning explosion, much as we find in "Intra-Political":

> Ignore us, hunched in these dark streets
> If in a minute now the explosive
> Meaning fails to disperse us and provide resonance
> Appropriate to your chronicle.
>
> But if you do, I have a hunch
> You've missed a portent. (WS, 35)

Moreover, this message implies that while the cityscape does tend to reinforce the cultural malaise of the masses (among which the speaker now includes herself), the relation between the two, as place and state of mind, cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect. In her struggle for some civil achievement, the poet must surmount both the physical impediments of the city and the mentality which informs them.

"Apocalyptics" further considers the city's burgeoning need for deliverance on a more compassionate note. Here, the poet literally descends into the civic arena. She places herself in the midst of a recreation centre which includes skating rink, pool and gymnasium. From this perspective, the details of the commonplace matter:

> Skates have gouged the wooden floor
> And wet has worked its fibres loose
> Like corn-silk, grey. (WS, 52)

The poet visualizes the physical framework of the city in the jungle jim or the climbing bars in the gymnasium:

> The city is a jungle jim.
> Some of its bars and levels
> And uprights
> Are soap-soaked wood, some the
> Sooty wires scallop-top fences for
> Ruined gardens are made of.
> The mats are used carpets, and
> Rusty grass threaded with shepherd's purse.
> And there are plastic portions,
> Scaling iron,
> And new paint bright on pole-new parts,
> And steel of course. And steel.
> 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. (WS, 53-4)

The reader imagines that as Avison watches the children climb and swing back and forth from their hands and knees, she is struck by the thought that this structure is veritably a jungle, albeit a place of amusement. The image of the seats of the mighty which "swing, claw and crane" in "Civility a Bogey" also comes to mind. The notion of harmless play

quickly falls away though as the poet considers the treachery lurking in some of the bars and levels of this jungle. Some, she says, are made of "soap-soaked wood," and hence, are too slippery for anyone to maintain a firm grasp. Others, she seems to suggest in "sooty wires scallop-top fences," are made of barbed wire; they offer a painful grasp at best. In either case, Avison implies that parts of the city are clearly uninhabitable or even detrimental to human life. The sense of lost innocence is further reinforced by the image of the ruined garden, surrounded by a barbed wire fence. This image also recalls concentration camps, Gethsemane, the crown of thorns and the intensely human sufferings of Christ. Although the redemptive force of Christ's suffering is not realized in this "pre-baptismal" poem (WS, 53), the poet discovers within the urban wasteland small signs which suggest the possibility for redemption. Amidst the "rusty grass," for instance (a lovely phrase which brings to mind both the mechanization and the destruction of nature), Avison lights on "shepherd's purse," a flourishing common weed. The Christ figure is evoked not only in the name "shepherd," but also in the small white flower and notched triangular pod which the shepherd weed bears.

The focus then returns to the jungle jim itself. Its plastic, iron and steel parts both literally and metaphorically represent the machinery of the industrial city. The city's pathetic and perhaps parodic emulation of the highly civil examples found in Christ and Michelangelo can be

illustrated in this way:

plastic portions, / Scaling iron a shepherd climbed after one sheep

And steel of course and steel.

new paint bright on pole-new parts a fresco painter swung on scaffolding

In spite of the steel barrier (double reinforced by repetition) which cuts off the age of technology from the civility of the past, "Some climb here. Some swing." And yet, any civil achievement in the modern city is called into question by the ambivalence of the verbs climb and swing. For, in whatever way we choose to look at the city, it is still a jungle (jim).

Some people, the poet suggests, look to other models and learn to survive in this environment quite well: "Because of old agility on rigging / Some run along aux matelots." "Aux matelots" means: to the sailors or to the seamen (who characteristically embrace a life unattached to any one city or port). But the verb here is "run," not "sail." On the surface the word "rigging" sustains the sailing metaphor, as the word commonly means the rope or cordage system of a ship. But as a noun, "rig" also means a temporary structure, and as a verb, it means to control fraudulently. The possibilities work simultaneously as metaphors for the jungle jim city. The rig as ropes recalls the gymnasium, rig as a temporary structure reinforces the significance of the title,

"Apocalyptics," and rig as fraudulent control summons up the ethos of the industrial city.

The poet's response to human life in the jungle-city, "All must still feed," remarkably differs from the speaker's stance of ironic detachment in "Civility a Bogey." Admittedly, this phrase does contain a solemn-eyed assessment of basic urban survival. The judgement might leave the reader wondering: upon whom or what must we feed? On the other hand, the ambivalent syntax of "All must still feed" allows for the sense of both taking and giving nourishment. Moreover, the further allusion to the Good Shepherd in "feed my lambs" offers a civil alternative to the tooth and claw politics of survival. Implicitly, then, all those who "swing claw and crane" in the sunlight must still feed too. Hence, the informing compassion which Avison finds in the exmaple of the Good Shepherd considerably alters the perspective from which she views the city:

> But these marvels, scrambling the crazy structures
> Each in his fashion,
> Are not sediment,
> Not instruments;-
> People, every one with a different world, from
> Supernovae to amoeba in his soul,
> Craving act, and harmony (shebang!)
> Bewildered. (WS, 54)

The possibility for civility is to be found within the human element of the city, not within its crazy structures. In the above passage, the poet is able to transcend whatever impediments these structures may present, and to consider the marvels of human existence with microscopic intensity. Here,

the conglomerate masses in several other Winter Sun poems are conceived as distinct entities who collectively crave act and harmony. Correspondingly, the environment emerges as tangibly human:

> In Bowles Lunch, in the passage to
> the washrooms and the alley exit,
> They have an old piano, in case of
> a wedding, or 30-years-medal party for one of the ones
> who lope and sway and pick at things on any of the
> Twenty-four (24) levels above.
> Don't you suppose
> Anything could start it?
> Music and all?
> Some time? (WS, 55)

James Reaney tells us that Bowles Lunch was at one time a familiar Toronto landmark, though (in his words), "mercifully defunct" at the time of his writing.[18] This is perhaps the most specific reference to Toronto in all of Winter Sun, even though the title of this volume was supposedly inspired by the poet's walks about that city. In Avison's later religious poems, the reader is much more aware of the reciprocity between the poem making the city and the city making the poem. While several of the poems in Winter Sun may evoke the Toronto landscape (for one who knows it), they do not effect a close relationship between what Burton Pike calls the "word-city" created in the poem and the "real city" existing outside of the poem.[19] In this sense, "Bowles Lunch" is an exception, though in the context of the poem, it too acquires a level of meaning which is (or which was) only indirectly apparent in the "real city."

It is unlikely that Avison could have chosen a more

ridiculous locus of human potential than Bowles Lunch, and the underlying irony threatens to overwhelm the spiritual value of the commonplace. It doesn't quite though; for the time being, the speaker seems willing to embrace both points of view -- the admiring and the ironic -- as part of jungle city life. The whimsical questions at the end of the poem leave open the possibility for a civil life even within Bowles Lunch.

At best, Avison's search for civility in Winter Sun leads to "Possibility not / God."[20] As we have seen, the poet's sense of direction is not clearly mapped out. In a sense, her longing for civility emerges more distinctly than any sustaining discovery. Ernest Redekop comes to a similar conclusion: "The exact dimensions of Avison's civility are hard to measure."[21] These dimensions are gradually illuminated in her two later works, The Dumbfounding and sunblue where civility becomes the basis for the poet's Christian understanding of communitas and communion. Yet within the earliest poems of Avison's "pre-baptismal" period, she intuits that if some "pivot for significance" can be found, it will be within the city. She finds, however, that if the city is merely conceived as a refuge from the terror of the unknown, it can also be a prison of uniformity and convention. That assumption, as I shall argue in my next chapter, is extraordinarily difficult to break because the myth of the garrison is so ingrained in our unredeemed conceptions of the city.

Chapter Two

The Mind of Enoch

> The honeycombing sun
> opened and sealed us in
> chambers and courts and crooked butteries,
> cities of sense.
>
> "Prelude" (Winter Sun, 9)

As D.G. Jones implicitly argues in his survey of Old Testament typology in Canadian literature, the garrison mentality is not simply a result of European culture grafted onto the North American landscape.[1] Its biblical counterpart can be found in the story of Cain in Genesis. There fratricide serves as the founding spirit of the first biblical city. After Cain has murdered Abel, he is cursed by God to wander the earth as a fugitive and is marked that no one might slay him in revenge:

> And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden. And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived and bare Enoch: and he builded a city and called the name of the city, after the name of his son Enoch. (Gen. 4:16-17)

Cain builds the first (biblical) city, then, after contravening God's will. For Cain, as for all humanity, the city functions as both refuge from wandering the earth and a fortification of his alienation from God. Theologian Jacques

Ellul also remarks the existential implications of Cain's (second) transgression:

> The seed of all man's wanderings is to be found in Cain's life and in the land of wandering, always searching for a place where his need for security might be satisfied. But the only place he finds is that very country characterized by being uninhabitable.[2]

In Old Testament tradition, then, the city is tainted with an original sin of its own -- a kind of desperate hubris -- part of the fall-out from Adam and Eve's original sin. The downward spiral continues, for example, with the building of the Tower of Babel. Man then removes himself even further from God and his fellow man with the "confounding of tongues."[3]

The underlying anxiety which characterizes much of Winter Sun emanates from Avison's personal and global sense of estrangement from God. The first stanza of "The Fallen, Fallen World" directly addresses this concern:

> When, breathing murk and apprehension of
> Slow sure estrangement from the sun,
> Night and the withering Arctic wind explore
> The vacant corridors that are allowed
> Us for our enforced passage,
> We are, in snow and sleep's despite,
> Straightly sustained. (WS, 23)

As I mentioned earlier, the brief introduction on the dust cover of Winter Sun tells us that "the title of this collection of poems comes from a walk in the wintry streets of Toronto."[4] Toronto winters are characteristically bleak and grey; it is understandable that this locale would particularly augment the poet's sense of the sun being at its

furthest point from the earth. Mia Anderson amplifies this idea:

> Winter is when the earth is most tilted away from the light, and the 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.[5]

It is significant, then, that almost all of Avison's biblically inspired poems in this first volume are derived from the Old Testament (before the coming of the sun / Son). Many of her profoundly religious poems in sunblue take passages of the Old Testament as sub-texts, but in that collection, the Word has been illumined, made whole, by the poet's encounter with Christ. Whereas in Winter Sun, it often seems that "Time has bleached out the final characters / Of a too-open Scripture (WS, 22)." One might even argue that in "Apocalyptics" the shepherd figure is not the essential Christ, but an Old Testament prefiguration of Christ found in Jeremiah 23:3, Ezekial 34:11-22, and in the Psalms 23:1-4. Although Jones' survey of biblical typology only makes passing reference to Avison, it provides us with a helpful gloss to our understanding of Winter Sun:

> If the world of Canadian literature is an Old Testament world, it is a world of Adam separated from his Creator and cast out of Eden to wander in the wilderness. It is a world of scattered tribes of Israel, in exile from the Old Kingdom and not yet restored to the New, in bondage to foreign powers, aliens in their own land, tied to the law of the fathers from which their hearts tend nonetheless to continually turn away.... It is a world in which life in all its fullness remains distinctly a promise rather than an

> actuality.... It is an Old Testament world which implies, sometimes without much hope, sometimes with great confidence, its completion in the New.[6]

"The Mirrored Man," whose references are almost wholly rooted in the Old Testament, powerfully expresses the alienation and imprisonment found in a peculiar urban situation. This difficult poem largely eludes the reader who looks solely for intrinsic meaning. The image of the city is not attached to any specific locale; rather, it becomes the state of an inquiring and troubled mind which ranges through biblical and contemporary landscapes, seeking "some pivot for significance." It is a poem which documents a dialectic process, not a sustaining discovery.

In many of Avison's poems, the destruction of the city provides a powerful exemplum. Then, it seems the destruction of Sodom, from which Lot and his wife flee, preceeds our flight from the Garden of Eden:

> Lot put his wife out of his mind
> Through respect for the mortal lot:
> She having dared to yearn defined
> All that to him was naught.
>
> So now we flee the Garden
> Of Eden, steadfastly.
> And still in our flight are ardent
> For lost eternity.
>
> We always turn our heads away
> When Canaan is at hand,
> Knowing it mortal to enjoy
> The Promise, not the Land. (WS, 71)

In this light, I think one has to read "Garden of Eden" as an ironic reference to the biblical account of Lot in which the Sodom landscape is compared to the "garden of the Lord" (Gen. 13:10-13). In this post-lapsarian world, the poem

suggests, ultimately we flee from the same source because of our need for redemption. Nevertheless, the speaker's attitude to Lot's flight (and, by implication, our own) is ambivalent. The departure is, first of all, part of a covenant with God. Lot and his family, the only righteous citizens of Sodom, are spared God's wrath, and, under an edict not to look back, are led out of the city. But Lot's wife does turn back and is turned to a pillar of salt. Her figure, perhaps more than Lot's, sustains the relationship between the first two stanzas. "Daring to yearn" is our common condition, to yearn beyond what has been ordained. The word-play in the second stanza on "steadfastly" and "still in our flight" suggests some affinity between the pillar of salt and ourselves. On the other hand, "steadfast" is also an appropriate epithet for Lot, although the blatant pun on "Lot-lot" in the first stanza casts the strength of his conviction in a wry light. But the "So" which prefaces the first line of the second stanza suggests that in spite of our ardent yearnings for what is lost or denied, we follow Lot's example in our departure from the Garden.

Though if we turn away from Sodom (an ironic version of the "garden of the Lord"), we also turn away from Canaan, the Promised Land. The ongoing pattern of repudiation suggests that these two extremes cannot be reconciled. In this biblical landscape, which, for the speaker is all too contemporary, the "Promise" holds little promise for those who are forced to wander through the "cimmerian" wilderness:

> Yet the cimmerian meadows know the sword
> Flaming and searching that picks out
> The children for this earth, and hurls the curse
> After us, through the void.
> So each of us conceals within himself
> A cell where one man stares into the glass
> And sees, now featureless the meadow mists,
> And now himself, a pistol at his temple,
> Gray, separate, wearily waiting. (WS, 71)

The image of the flaming sword in this stanza recalls the Miltonic vision of the angels who guard the gates of Eden once Adam and Eve have been expelled. We are caught between the curse of their transgression and the distant promise of our redemption. And this condition is all the more tragic for modern man, who, like the children of Israel, will not recognize the incarnate Promise in the figure of Christ. But the speaker's tone is not so evangelical as this last comment might suggest. The poem depicts a world in which our intellectual capacities for any such recognition are severely limited.

Still, the instinct for refuge is quite powerful. Much like Cain, man becomes a city unto himself, and discovers another kind of spiritual void within his own state. He is separated from both God and his fellow man. "Waiting," says the speaker of "The Fallen, Fallen World," "is all / A rebel can" (WS, 24). The burden of this condition (with the pun on wait-weight) is picked up in the next stanza:

> We, comic creatures of our piebald day,
> Either ignore this burden, nonchalantly
> (Dragging a dull repudiated house
> At heel, through all our trivial ramblings)
> Or gravely set ourselves the rigorous task

Of fashioning the key that fits that cell
(As if it hid the timeless Garden). (WS, 71)

In spite of our desperate attempts to build cities of stone and cities of sense, we are wayfarers, "Dragging a dull repudiated house / At heel, through all our trivial ramblings." At the same time, we are prisoners of that "dull repudiated house" of our own design. While we might attempt to break out of this self-imposed prison, the puns on "gravely" and "rigorous" imply that this jail-break is potentially suicidal: "Such men are left possessed / Of ready access to no further incident." It is one thing to try to break out of this cell, but quite another to subsequently find ourselves wandering through the midst of the "cimmerian" wilderness with vague hopes of recovering "the timeless Garden."

What we make of this cell, again, in the speaker's view, tends to vacillate between two extremes. But either response is pyschologically imbalanced, spiritually bereft. One tableau of utter despair is juxtaposed against another of vain illusion. One man violently seizes his passage for escape through the mirror, while the other turns his cell into a love nest, cramming his mirror full of garish ornaments, which, if nothing else, grant him the "inviolate privacy" he desires (and suffers). Both men manage to unlock their cells, though neither finds the image of "the timeless Garden" subsequently reflected in the mirror -- unless we continue to read the "Garden" as an ironic reference to

Sodom, a version of which the love nest-keeper seems to have embraced. But more fundamentally, these two extremes dramatize the disaster of mirrors. Paradoxically, we find the two minds turning in upon themselves in the process of (so-called) liberation. In the first case, especially, it would seem that what is behind the mirror is beyond the boundary of what can or should be humanly known. The figure of Lot's wife contains these two extremes in both looking back to Sodom and yearning for unholy knowledge.

The final stanza merely recapitulates, not resolves, the process of being trapped within the mind:

> All of us, flung in one
> Murky parabola,
> Seek out some pivot for significance,
> Leary of comets' tails, mask-merry,
> Wondering at the centre
> Who will gain acess, search the citadel
> To its last, secret door?
> And what face will the violator find
> When he confronts the glass? (WS, 72)

The image of the "murky parabola" acutely conveys the sense of man moving in a plane (plain) between two fixed extremes (literally, a fixed point and a fixed straight line). Unable to recover the "timeless Garden," he will search the "citadel" for that "last, secret door," which parallels the biblical anticipation of the City of God in Revelations. But this is an ironic analogy. If the Garden is the fixed point to which he cannot return, then the City of God is the fixed straight line which he cannot yet attain -- that is, a mathematical given within his parabolic world. For the speaker, the final confrontation with an "apocalyptic" mirror

image constitutes violation, not revelation. It would seem that man is compelled to seize the secrets of the universe because of the "mathematical certainty" through which he perceives his parameters. Later in The Dumbfounding we learn that "In the mathematics of God / there are percentages beyond one hundred" (D, 51), but here, the fixed, angular perspective is confining and ultimately solipsistic. Again, Milton comes to mind with an ironic version of "A paradise within thee, happier far" as man looks to his mirror image for the last secret.[7]

In this poem, Avison documents the disastrous consequences of a particular mental process; she does not disclaim the aspirations of human intellect in one sweeping gesture. In his discussion of power, knowledge and language in Margaret Avison, J.M. Kertzer cautions that the poet's view of science is rather complex.[8] As we have seen, she is disdainful and even fearful of the effects of modern technology, because for her, they signal a regression rather than an advancement in knowledge. And yet "Dispersed Titles" celebrates the achievements of Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe and "Voluptuaries and Others" celebrates the "Eureka" of Archimedes. Hence, Avison does not simply pit science against religion or some version of reason against the imagination. There are two kinds of discoveries, the speaker tells us in "Voluptuaries and Others." The first is

> The kind of lighting up of the terrain
> That leaves aside the whole terrain, really,
> But signalizes, and compels, an advance in it.

The other

> 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) (WS, 64).

Meaningful discovery, then, must be made within that "be-it-what-it-may but / take-it-not-quite-as-given locale"; it depends on yoking the powers of reason and imagination. This kind of knowledge, Avison stresses, "cannot be measured in values ... Cannot be assessed either as conquest or defeat." But the search for absolute knowledge demands some kind of qualitative measuring which effectively removes the discovery from the "chasm of creation." With "all but shadows" wiped out in that "other kind of lighting up," man is subsequently left in total darkness. Thus, in the context of "The Mirrored Man," we come back full circle to wandering in the "cimmerian" wilderness.

Although Francis Zichy does not consider "The Mirrored Man" in his study of confinement and liberation in Avison, he anticipates my conclusion in proposing that "in several key poems confinement and liberation are related dialectically; a sense of confinement makes an effort at liberation essential; efforts at liberation enforce yet another confinement."[9] Oddly, few other critics have remarked upon the dialectic structure of many of the poems in Winter Sun. For his part, Zichy articulates a central dialectic in the pyschological urban landscape of the poems, a landscape which he does not really explore. But the main weakness in his article lies in

his misapprehension of the dialectic in general. A dialectic is necessarily an open-ended structure, one which proposes no final enclosure of meaning. One can either find some kind of synthesis in the busy current of exchange between the two extremes or, in the case of "The Mirrored Man," find oneself trapped. In the abstract, an impasse is even less conclusive than a synthetic resolution. Hence, it is difficult to follow Zichy's argument that it is necessarily the poet's "doom" to live with the effects of this sort of "second lighting up" (i.e. showing the whole terrain comprehended) in which the attempt to define dialectic process invokes a "terrifying finality."[10]

Presumably, we must make some distinction between the poet and the protagonist if the poem documents process at all. In "The Mirrored Man" the minds of the protagonists turn in upon themselves, but the mental process of the poem does not. The word-play in the poem, for example, escapes the "fix" of rigid semantics, an element which Zichy misses in his analysis of other early Avison poems. Hence, even in poems which explore themes at the nadir of human experience, a quiet and whimsical sense of humour offsets any stern sobriety the experiences invite. Furthermore, many poems in this first volume, including "The Mirrored Man," end with a question or a series of questions. To read these questions merely as the poet's white flags which announce defeat is, indeed, "a concession / To limited imaginations" (WS, 64). The "who" and "what" interrogatives at the end of "The

Mirrored Man" direct the movement of the poem outward: the poet does not believe the whole terrain has been comprehended. So a poem which documents a process of defeat is not, as Zichy tends to argue, itself a failed poem. But it does mean taking risks. A poem open to question is open to possibility, and at the end of "The Mirrored Man," the reader is left with a sense that if "some pivot for significance" can be found, it will be within the city of the mind, however bleak it may appear to be. Implicitly, the poet seems to be saying,

> Myself, I find it difficult
> and so far have been unsuccessful
> in finding anyone
> Even to interpret for me to myself
> When I have mastered it, I'll let you know.[11]

To be trapped within the landscape of one's own mind is not, at this point, an exclusively religious or biblical theme for Avison. Nevertheless, in the most secular of her urban poems, the reader may remark a strong correlation between the Old Testament landscape and a Canadian landscape where the city is both refuge and prison. "The Agnes Cleves Papers," the long narrative poem which concludes Winter Sun, is rooted in a secular urban landscape, albeit largely within the confines of the protagonist's mind. The poem is, as James Reaney suggests, a "compressed epic"; containing, as it were, fragments of the entire volume.[12] Reaney sees Agnes Cleves "not as a human being as we generally think of them but rather as a being who contains all the universe, contains opposites of all sorts, banalities and

profundities."[13] If this is the case, she is a universe which chooses to unfold within the confines of her circular apartment, "in the safe / Odour of floorwax" (WS, 88).

The story of Agnes Cleves (that is, the story which exists outside of her own storytelling) is about a woman who attempts to set her "dull repudiated house" in order. As the strong recollection of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in the first stanza suggests, Agnes Cleves is also a lonely wayfarer, with few spiritual or emotional roots. She, like the ancient mariner, fixes her gaze on a young wedding guest outside the reception hall and is compelled to tell her story, though not in her case through any supernatural force. In contrast to the terrified young man in "The Ancient Mariner," the young woman who meets Agnes Cleves is "abrim and pent," and does not leave at the elder woman's bidding. In fact, the example of the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" stands in more effective contrast than comparison to "The Agnes Cleves Papers." Redemption through expiation of guilt remains for Agnes Cleves a lofty theme, a "magic story" outside of the realm of her imaginary grasp. Moreover, as Kertzer notes, "Unlike the ancient mariner ... she has not yet mastered her story ... We observe her in the act of constructing her tale ...."[14]

In her compulsion to craft her own story, she harbours some hope of defining the landscape within and around her. She too would have a locus, some "pivot for significance" which would draw her scattered memories into meaningful

order. Although Agnes Cleves is a creative artist of sorts, capable of some imaginative insight, she is distrustful of the function of memory. Well into the narrative she confesses that she is

> much alone, as well as old,
> And fearful sometimes of the tedious fondness
> Peculiar to my kind, where soft light
> Plays among things remembered (WS, 82-3).

In spite of this mistrust of her powers of recollection, she drifts through streets, factories, warehouses and museums, which come, almost exclusively, from her past. She does not even seem concerned with establishing an illusion of contemporaneity in her environment, as is, for example, the speaker of "Apocalyptics." For the most part, Agnes Cleves speaks in the past tense, and she is not always able to make vital links to the present, much less to the future. As Burton Pike argues, although any word-city (physical or pyschological) is implicitly evoked from memory,[15] there is a marked difference between the workings of the author's mind and the workings of the protagonist's mind. The dramatic monologue form which the "Agnes Cleves" poem takes demands this distinction. As much as the protagonist would have the universe for her secret, she is not an omniscient narrator (p. 83).

The way in which Agnes Cleves chooses to assemble her "Papers" might initially strike the reader as rather idiosyncratic. Why, for example, would she break in the midst of her tale of Garnet and Miss Rothesay to speculate on

the "range of harmonizing chemistry" between arsenic and radish (p.84)? Or why would a dried weed under the fencepost recall for her a child-like version of David and Goliath (p.82)? These and other examples do not seem to be inherent to her narrative, but they are inherent to the poem. In The Poetry of Experience, Robert Langbaum comments on the structure of the dramatic monologue in contrast to more analytical forms of poetry: "The analysis into events is a product of logical hindsight, implying that the events have a structure, meaning and purpose of their own; whereas experience takes its shape from the flow of consciousness."[16] Of course, Agnes Cleves does have the benefit of hindsight in her persistent references to the past, but she is not terribly logical.

A logical development would also imply a consistent point of view, which is not the same as a controlling flow of consciousness. A close reading of the poem reveals that Agnes Cleves strings her narrative together largely by a process of association.[17] Hence, to speak of "The Agnes Cleves Papers" as a "poem of experience" as Langbaum uses the term, highlights the mind of the speaker in the process of telling a story. The reader is drawn into this process before the intrinsic meaning of the narrative has emerged.

Langbaum's insistence on the "flow of consciousness" as the ordering principle of the dramatic monologue, then, would urge us to consider Agnes Cleves' pysche as the real locale of the poem's experience. But how are we to identify this

locale? The site of the narrative shifts continuously, both temporally and geographically. In the space of only a few lines, for example, we are transported from Tours to Australia or from Cleopatra's Nile to the Sewanee River. The narrator's point of view shifts almost as rapidly as the setting, and frequently becomes bound in paradox: "The need to tell you is exciting / And very bleak" (p.83). As she begins her narrative with "What story do you want?," Agnes Cleves realizes that more than one version of her life is possible: a consistent point of view would hinge on that very "pivot for significance" she is seeking. In fact, the apparent disunity of setting and plot is a projection of the separate, compartmentalized, "strange perfumed anterooms" of the protagonist's pysche. Her mind, in other words, is both refuge and prison; the walls of which she would like to penetrate with imaginative vision, but does not wholly succeed. The tyranny of her bleak past is her garrison.

This garrison makes itself manifest in a number of ways. At times, setting and state of mind fuse so strongly they are almost indistinguishable from one another:

> from my room in the back of the house
> I hear black water churning
> Out where the street was,
> And sense the lumbering passage of
> The old black-iron tug in the lost canal
> Under a weight of
> Smoke, and oil smudge, and snow. (p.79)

The passage which describes "that circular apartment" with "too many doors" is also a projection of an inner state:

> God knows the hall outside is narrow enough
> Though the stairs are worse.
> Why is it necessary for me to have
> So many means of egress? ...
>
> Tell me, would they object if I stopped up
> Some of these doors? (p.81)

The image of the stopped up doors recalls the poem "Death," and the speaker's fear of that "quick sift of / Precious terrible coldness" (p.28). Still, for Agnes Cleves, of all the doors,

> The woven door in particular bothers me
> With all its tall fawn dapper birds, and cobblestones,
> And I would be less aware of the black draughts
> If it were not there (p.81).

The bird is on the threshold of what is outside her prison-like refuge, the wilderness beyond the garrison. "For the soul's voice you need the crow," / she says, "But for a man and herself a game of cards" (p.81). The stark whiteness of the geese in Grenadier Pond unnerves her, "And beat like echoes makes [her] eyelids flutter." She resolves that "it would be clumsy walking (after climbing / The new wire fence) to go down there" (p.82). Nevertheless, she knows that such a venture would hail courage (p.82), and she seems to admire Alec who both worked for the "Continental Can" and "knew / How the blood of a gamebird spilled in snow" (p.80). But for Agnes Cleves, "The wild smell is the other side / Of the impenetrable world of stone." In the end, she watches "clay figurines" "By dining room window sunlight, in the safe / Odour of floorwax" (p.88).

Perhaps the most somber effect of the closed circuit in Agnes Cleve's urban world is her isolation from the

characters of her narrative. All are, in some measure or other, urban types: the Finnish student finds his locus at the factory gates; Alec works for the Continental Can; Valerius remains indoors by the fire (but later goes to Mexico); and Garnet and Miss Rothsey renounce artistic careers to work in the "export-import firm." In a sense, the narrator attempts to create a community of characters, but it is a community to which she cannot fully belong. Each in his or her own way is able to transcend the stifling barriers of the urban landscape by which Agnes Cleves is so firmly held. At the same time, the reader discovers echoes of many other alienated voices in Winter Sun within Agnes Cleve's own voice, a chorus which collectively longs for warmth and renewal.

Chapter Three

Community of Words

> Earth is all pools and all the
> waters speak, in the new
> sky's language.
>
> "Once" (The Dumbfounding, 75)

Much of the urban bleakness characteristic of Winter Sun dissipates with the coming of spring, the prevailing season of The Dumbfounding. Spring, of course, ushers renewal and rebirth into the earth's natural cycle. It also signals the earth's return to the sustaining warmth and illumination of the sun / Son's light / Light. To use William Aide's lovely phrase, the poet's encounter with Christ evokes a "lyric thaw" in The Dumbfounding.[1] The cityscape now takes on warmer, brighter tones as the voice of ironic detachment gives way to compassionate and musical urgency. Even so, though most of these new poems were written within two months following Avison's conversion, many are not expressly religious.[2] Indeed, none of the five poems reprinted from Winter Sun -- "The Swimmer's Moment," "Thaw," "From a Provincial," "Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes," and "The Artist" -- are directly related to the theme of Christian renewal. These poems do, however, find a substantially altered poetic community within this second

volume. Like the pieces in Winter Sun, they are not arranged in any particular chronology, but the handful of religious poems which dramatize the poet's conversion are significantly found at the centre of the book. This literal and metaphoric centre forms a radius from which the other poems extend; tangents which explore various "points of growth" in a new light.[3]

Some of the religious poems central to The Dumbfounding are meditations on passages from Scripture, notably the Gospel of St. John. In an interview Avison relates that the implicit challenge of John 14 -- "You believe in God, believe also in me" -- transformed her reading of Scripture.[4] It is this radical apprehension of "the Word made flesh" which seizes her poetic imagination. "The Word" traditionally refers to both the person of Christ and to the Bible. For Northrop Frye, it "makes good sense" to call the two by the same name and "even better sense" to identify them metaphorically, since the Bible "is our only real contact with the so-called 'Jesus of history'."[5] In this context (as one critic once remarked of Avison's religious scope in Winter Sun),[6] Frye does not read Scripture "throuh the eyes of revealed religion." For Avison, the "Jesus of history" transcends time. This belief becomes essential to her poetic process. Nevertheless, I think Frye is right in his notion that any attempt to verbalize the hypostatic union of Christ and the Word inevitably translates into metaphor. This metaphor breathes in much of Avison's Christian poetry since

she conceives of the Word as a living presence. As the Word, Christ makes divine will and grace manifest through the material world. The power of the Word - whereby utterance evokes form - is the sustaining source of Avison's religious poetic.

Hence, in imitating the Word through her poetic meditations on Scripture, Avison is also imitating the model of Christ. In his brilliant essay on The Dumbfounding, George Bowering holds Avison's model of Christ to be a kind of meta-human artist.[7] Given my focus on the city in Avison's poetry, I am inclined to read the figure of Christ as a model of civility for the poet. The two models are surely not antithetical. Artistic expression is, in a sense, and in a special sense for a Canadian poet, an expression of civility. Throughout his paper, Bowering keeps coming back to the significance of the human Incarnation of Christ. This reading may be more orthodox than he thinks: St. Paul writes that we may know Christ's life and sufferings through our own flesh (2 Cor. 4:11). Christ's humanity, the fact that he "took skin, muscle, hair / eyes, larnyx"(D, 58), is shared by all people, and is the basis of Avison's understanding of the community of the Word.

The unifying principle of this community is love, the other great theme of John's Gospel. God is love, Christ is the Word: the relationship between the two is also highly metaphoric. Frye's musing on contemporary theory, which proposes that people do not use language, language uses them,

leads him to the idea that we find the charter of our freedom in the community of the word, not in nature.[8] Still, Frye's argument is more secular than religious. Interestingly enough, however, theologian John McKenzie's interpretation of John's treatise on love is extraordinarily similar to the post-modern conception of language as the active source of human grammar: "The love of God consists not in loving Him but in being loved by Him; God initiates, man responds."[9]

Implicitly, Avison seems to have recognized the same relationship between language and divine love in this second volume of poems. In "The Word," for example, her response to the captivating power of the Word is love:

> you implore
> me to so fall
> in Love, and fall anew in
> ever-new depths of skyward Love till every
> capillary of your universe
> throbs with your rivering fire? (D, 56)

The sense of the Word as captor is especially dramatized in "Person" and "Five Breaks." Perhaps inspired by the example of the Word made flesh, the poet conceptualizes the city through the metaphor of her own body. This locale of the self moves beyond our earlier understanding of the city as a spatial or a temporal reality. Now the self is at once a physical and a pyschological entity, the sum total of "I am." Clearly, this city serves not simply as a metaphor for a particular state of mind.

"Person," a meditation on the parable of the Good

Shepherd (John:10), ponders the implications of the "I AM." At the outset, the urban self, characterized as "tomb" or "cell," finds itself at odds with the pastoral landscape of the Good Shepherd. The speaker's prison is "not enclosed earth, or hill." In fact, consciousness or self, or the sealed "door that is 'I AM'," separates the speaker from the communal sheepfold lying "under open sky." With "no knob, or hinge," the fortress of the self looms formidably; no one can enter, nor can she escape. "A skied stonehenge," suggesting both the wondrous monument of pagan worship and the skeletal frame of the speaker's body, at first seems to offer a sustaining community but in the end it reinforces self-enclosure. Stonehenge was not, properly speaking, a city, but in Avison's poem it does claim significance as an ancient centre of solar worship. Hence, "A skied stonehenge" plays upon variations of enlightenment, but not of essential Light. So the walls close again, and in effect, Stonehenge becomes the foundation structure for the "steel tiers," the walls and bars of the modern metropolis. With the poem's metamorphic shift to a contemporary urban locale, there seems to be no further means of egress: "I lay / barred, every way." The reiteration of "'I am' The door / was flesh; was there" summarizes the speaker's imprisoned state, but it also signals a dramatic turning point. These lines, in fact, are saturated with double meaning. We are reminded of what Christ also says: "I am the door; I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7-9). Such doubleness informs the poet's

understanding of the Incarnation, as her echo of the Word made flesh suggests. Through the door, which nevertheless remains bolted and latched - "Nothing moves" - the speaker and Christ meet. True liberation, then, is not really a "jail-break" as an earlier voice in Winter Sun proposed (WS, 17), but a penetration of divine Love: "In all his heaviness, he passes through." As consciousness of self becomes inextricably linked with consciousness of Christ, the city of the human body gives way to the pastoral domain of the Good Shepherd. With this shift to the pastoral in the final stanza, the speaker likens herself to one of the lost sheep, about to witness the Light of the approaching Christ or Morning Star (Rev. 22:16). The inverted syntax of the last three lines again emphasizes the captivating power of the Word:

> and to the woolly, willing bunt-head, forth
> shining, unseen, draws near
> the Morning Star. (D, 56)

The community of the sheepfold knows its keeper by the sound of his voice (John 10:4).

Avison's celebration of Christ's presence hardly resides in the pastoral mode, as the final movement of "Person" might suggest. Urban life remains at the heart of The Dumbfounding. Although, as we have seen, the basis of what for her constitutes the city has been considerably widened to the point of including the opposite notion. Again, in "Five Breaks," the city of the human body is the locus the poet chooses to dramatize her conversion.[10] The sense of being taken by

God's love is more emphatic in this poem. Here, the city is under seige:

> In your
> held breath, new pinpointed--
> were they besiegers' eye-prongs circling
> as though a City's famine could be succulence? (D, 54)

The potential violence of these lines startles the reader into the tumult of being won over by Christ. (The terror of utterly losing oneself and the divine paradox of feeding on famine is particularly reminiscent of Donne.) The image of the city throughout this third stanza functions much like a metaphysical conceit. On a metaphysical level, of course, no paradox exists. The formal process generates the meaning. Under seige, this corporeal city recalls the landscape as well. The real aliens to this city are not the circling eye-prongs of religious conscience, but the speaker's "my-minded versions" of Christ's glory:

> (like seeing death, life as [his]
> memoranda left on the blotter
> for my day's work.... (D, 54)

The city reads like an office desk calendar, routinely observing the same "chronologies of 'mercies'," which deny the body any real nourishment. It is, again, characterized as a prison, where one feels "the flesh as tomb," prior to its surrender to Christ. The circling eye-prongs have, in effect, drawn out the aliens who have held the city in the bondage of "funereal pieties" and willful endurance. Surrender, then, becomes a kind of deliverance.

In the subsequent stanza of "Five Breaks," the metaphor

of the human body expands to incorporate a whole community sustained by love:

> Valentine cards
> In the February lace of daylight
> through window and doorway glass:
> store; children; love; a lakeblue sudsbright. (D, 55)

Even the "scorched" and "graveled" eyes that indicate grief and utter disappointment find a "pivot for significance" in the "arrowing sunburst" which transfixes this urban scene.

The central experience of both "Person" and "Five Breaks" rests on the traditional Christian paradox of discovering freedom within divine captivity. The city of the human body, however confining it may be, testifies to the fact that any urban centre of consciousness contains a physical reality which must be "taken for what it is." George Bowering comes to a similar conclusion:

> poetry (or spiritual praise) cannot be
> properly served by the notion that the mind
> or the spirit may be liberated and separated
> from matter. Form is simply how the body of
> matter is perceived. Reason cannot be removed
> except by sham from the seeming unreason it is
> born in. Like a blind man in a city, or a
> swimmer in fast water, the artist will participate,
> not dominate. He will be used by things even
> as he uses them.[11]

The reciprocity which Bowering notes between being used and using characterizes the relationship between city and Christ in these two poems. Even as the city is overtaken (for what it is), it takes Christ's model of civility for its own and becomes a community.[12] Similarly, when the poet's imagination is seized by the Word made flesh, she responds with a poetic community of words. Language and locale fuse;

hence, our earlier discussion of the "word-city" can now be better understood perhaps as a "city of words." Like Frye, Avison does find the charter of her freedom in the community of the word / Word, but this requires an active commitment.

Probably the greatest temptation for any poet, but especially the Christian poet, is to retreat into silence. In direct apprehension of the divine, the poet, like Dante, is struck dumb. The Christian poet must then look to the phenomenological world to articulate signs of Christ's presence. For Avison, this ongoing discovery depends on a "de-ciphering heart," which appears, appropriately enough, in "Words":

> The ancient, the new,
> confused in speech,
> breathe on, involving
> heart-warmed lungs, the reflexes
> uvula, shaping tongue, teeth, lips,
> ink, eyes, and de-
> ciphering heart. (D, 23)

Implicitly, the "de-ciphering heart," a modulation of the "optic heart" once bent on "jail-break" and "re-creation," knows the paradox of freedom within confinement. Hence, its locale tends to be more tangible and immediate than the speed-blinding, panoramic scope of the "optic heart." But there are at least two versions of confinement, religious and secular, which are not readily distinguishable. Of course, part of the dialectic between the religious and the secular has been resolved by the poet's belief in the Incarnation. Nevertheless, the sense of confinement in "Person" and "Five breaks" is not quite the same as that in "The Mourner" or "A

Nameless One." The distinction hinges upon the relationship of the self to the city. In the first two poems, the city connects to the self through the human body; whereas, the city in "The Mourner," "A Nameless One," and many other poems, is a geography outside of self or its body. The distinction will not break down into simple temporal and spatial terms, but we can perhaps settle on the terms "interior" and "exterior" without denying the physical or pyschological elements in either dimension. In which case, the "interior" city is prone both to divine captivity and secular imprisonment within the "exterior" city. It is difficult to maintain this distinction with any degree of firmness, however, since the "de-ciphering heart" is frequently able to articulate spiritual liberation within either state of confinement.

"A Nameless One," for example, documents the life cycle of an insect in a "lodgers' second-floor bathroom." Having assumed the perspective of this insect, the speaker acknowledges the limitations of her mortal significance, but at the same time, discovers habitable space:

> now that it is
> over, I
> look with new eyes
> upon this room
> adequate for one to
> be, in. (D, 97)

In another dank, enclosed place, the speaker has only to witness "one pencil beam" of light to find evidence of "Tree. Morning. Freshness. Even though / the windows have been

boarded / up" (D, 20). It would seem that as space becomes less and less of a hazard, the hope of finding a pivot for significance within the "exterior" city becomes more and more secure. Yet, it is important to note, as Bowering does in quoting Germaine Greer' that Avison is not "compulsively looking for security."[13] She is able to find spiritual resonance within urban settings which, in themselves, would seem to offer little hope of certainty or comfort. For the poet, the "de-ciphering heart" must venture "in the sour air / of a morning-after rooming-house hall-bedroom" (D, 60) or "among the knees of / clanking panoplied buildings" (D, 98). Although Avison now finds the "exterior" city less consistently depraved than she once did in Winter Sun, she still does not compromise her experience of pain or oppression. So, in spite of the fact that she looks upon the Toronto landscape "with new eyes," the physical structure of the city is not fundamentally altered. Even in Christ's presence, the city does not become a "Gemmed Palace," "Marble Island," or "Cathedral under the Sea" (D, 50). Such fanciful terms once more, offer "my-minded versions" of the power of the Word.

Among the many urban poems in The Dumbfounding, "Branches" yields what Avison considers to be an authentic version of Christ's relationship to the city in its multiple dimensions. The dismal urban setting of the first stanza is reminiscent of the bleak landscapes of Winter Sun:

> The diseased elms are lashing
> the hollowing vaults of air.
> In movie-washroom-mirrors
> wan selves, echoing, stare. (D, 46)

The dutch elm disease which plagues the meagre bit of nature in this city metaphorically extends the spiritual malaise within its inhabitants. The metaphor is sustained by the title, "Branches," an oblique reference to John 15: "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered." "Hollowing vaults of air" further suggests the empty-headed stares of the alienated and anonymous "wan selves." These "selves" reveal interior versions of the harshly lit environment which oppresses them. In much the same spirit, the nameless faces in the mirror evoke the despair of "The Mirrored Man." In both cases, there is no recognizable "pivot for significance."

The second stanza focuses on the contrast between Christ's illuminating presence and the "pale, disheartened shine" of the Toronto skyline. The voice shifts to address Christ directly in this stanza; hence, the tone assumes an urgency lacking in the first. The reference to "blinded Saul" takes us back to the biblical accounts of St. Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. The "blacked out Damscus noon," then, refers both to Saul's blindness and the power of the Light, which makes the noon sun black by comparison. In this Light, the shift foward to the pale Toronto sunset may not be entirely "disheartening"; there is at least room for ambivalence. "Wholeheartedness," the speaker tells us in the guise of a rhetorical question, would

"make the world come true." The image of the squalling child is highly suggestive of what the speaker means by "wholehartedness" in both an aural and visual sense. The child also hints of the Christ-child in response to the question which this stanza raises. The subsequent stanza confirms this identification of the child through the indirect Pauline reference to the "seed of David" (Rom. 1:3).

With the further shift back to Toronto in the next stanza, the promise of the Word becomes muddled and silenced. We are again reminded of the dulling sensation of "feeling the flesh as tomb" with the mention of "funeral incense," "darkness" and "a last rite." The city's refusal of the Light lulls it into a "narcotic" stupor: it is perhaps less painful not to seek out this Light. Yet, in spite of this refusal, the city in darkness anticipates the blinding vision of Saul: "Can <u>this</u> kind of blanking / bring us to our knees?" We are also reminded of the blindness which Christ suffered before his death:

> Christ, the soldiers blindfolded you
> and slapped mouth and teeth
>
> asking you "Who?"
> and nothing was said.
> You knew.
> And knew they needed bread. (<u>D</u>, 46)

Christ's silence under scourge echoes the silence of the city, only his is a silence of knowing, whereas the city's is a silence of fear.

"The elms, black-worked on green," the speaker tells us in the next stanza, "signal wordlessness / plumed along the

Dark's way." The implications of this stanza are, again, highly ambivalent. On one hand, the dying elms provide evidence of the city's spiritual wasteland. But on the other hand (and this, chronologically, following the scourging of Christ), they seem to recall in the mind of the speaker Christ's death. This impression is confirmed in the subsequent stanza which celebrates Christ's resurrection: "But he died once only / and lives bright, holy, now." Moreover, the "black-worked on green" of the previous stanza offers the possibility that the dying trees are subsumed by a larger life, "rich in the rich old day." In the interim, "wordlessness," a simple but eloquent expression of Christ's temporary death, hushes over the city. It stands like the Roman soldiers, spiritually famished and waiting for the Word.

"This kind of blanking" compels not the entire city, but "Stray selves" to crowd like moths and form a somewhat ironic community around the word "light":

> Stray selves crowding for light
> make light of the heart's gall
> and, fly-by-night, would light on
>
> the Light that blinded Saul. (D, 47)

Each line of this stanza explores a different semantic possibility of the word: illumination, frivolity, grounding, and finally, the essential Light -- at once blinding and illuminating -- which is the source of these other possibilities. There are as many versions of light and darkness here as there are of the city. They merge in the convergence of the Light and the Word. The irony is that the "selves" gravitate

toward a Light which would cast them back into darkness, albeit a positive, temporary darkness like the blindness of Saul. Unwittingly, they are on the perilous verge of conversion.

In the next stanza the urban locale expands to incorporate the whole world. The diseased elms become one "charring bough" which, nevertheless, bears the fruit of the vine (John 15:5), "the cherried heart of love." It is no coincidence that love is the central message of the biblical chapter which inspired the poem. Christ's commandment to love one another as he has loved humanity expresses the supreme model of Christian civility. In the final stanza, his voice enters the poem, imploring the "Stray selves" to "Gather, Be glad." In contrast, "We [the speaker now includes herself among the community of the "selves"] scatter to tell what the root / and where life is made." The active reader is left with the possibility of communitas even within this urban landscape.

At the end of The Dumbfounding, Christ himself becomes the tree for the speaker of the poem "Urban Tree." The image of the tree recalls Christ's death on the cross and the subsequent redemption of mankind. The speaker's "loud wonder" expresses both joy and astonishment at how the "orphan" tree thrives in a city seemingly steel-armed against spiritual invasion. The city in this poem is cast as a giant, clanking warrior: we read its "knees" and "panoplied buildings," its "onrush" of "pipes" and "drumming," and, of

course, its "arrested armor" at the end of the poem. So the city is not entirely inhuman; in fact, there is a human body beneath all that armor which is vulnerable to the tree's redemptive touch. Like a celestial fountain, the tree pours

> invisible waterthreads of falling life
> from the overplastered earth into
> the very air-pillars that build that
> dove & lambswool cloud (D, 98).

The tree, too, is obliquely personified, not as a warrior, but as fisher of men, for it "angles in" the speaker's loud evangelical wonder "to further the dark ways of root and loam." Further, we learn that "the sun lives / as its alive sapling lives": the tree is an elemental sign of the Son's "vast unblue" "In a thin whitish space / off center." This double perspective of source and emanation anticipates many of the poems published twelve years later in sunblue. Then too, the urban tree can be read as a prefiguration of the Tree of Life in the city of God (Rev. 22:2), an ideal which the urban poems in sunblue work toward.

Chapter Four

The City of God

Even citied, at sea, shop-bound,
the here is veined
in light.

"Christmas : Becoming" (sunblue, 94)

sunblue, Avison's most recent collection of poems, continues to celebrate the Word made flesh within the community of the word. On the whole, this collection affirms the poet's commitment to Christianity, focusing now not on the process of her conversion, but on the expression of her faith. Once again, we find a number of poems which are not overtly religious but which nonetheless testify to Avison's imitation of Christ, the artist. The setting of these and some other poems in sunblue, however, is not consistently urban. In fact, there are proportionately fewer urban poems in this volume than in the previous two. And within the urban poems themselves, the wilderness or "out there" often appears as an inspired source of wonder. Sheila McColm has characterized the transition between The Dumbfounding and sunblue as a movement from religious poetry to poetic religion.[1] To some extent, Avison's understanding of the city has undergone a similar transition. In The Dumbfounding the poet's conception of the city hinges on its relation to

the self; in sunblue, it hinges on its relation to God. Hence, the tenuous distinction between the "interior" and "exterior" dimensions of the city gives way to the more traditional dialectic between "here" and "there." With this shift in perspective, the image of the city no longer functions as a metaphor of the self but emerges at the end of sunblue as a symbol of the City of God.

To quote W.M. Urban, "metaphor becomes a symbol when by means of it we embody an ideal concept not otherwise expressible."[2] The impulse of Avison's "poetic religion" is generated by a very similar notion. Throughout sunblue, the poet seeks to articulate phenomenologically what is "out there, inaccessible / to grammar's language" (sb, 94). She continues to look to the Word which embodies all of creation as her poetic model:

> The Breath -- flower-gentle, in,
> is Word of power, out:
> creating that invisible City, and
> mountain, forest, sea,
> tundra, ore-vein, light . (sb, 94)

The focus on "Breath" in this poem and many others surely does not deny the importance of the human body for anyone who seeks to emulate the divine model in her writing. She has merely re-orientated her perception to the source of her inspir-ation which "can bless / on earth and on high / ineradicably" (sb, 61). This reorientation has fundamentally influenced the poet's use of language in sunblue. In a recent interview Avison disclaimed the difficult language of her earlier poetry and expressed her desire to write in a

language as simple as a child's nursery rhyme.[3] Although she gave this interview sometime after writing sunblue, she seems to have been diligently working towards this poetic for several years before the book appeared. We note, for example, the small case in the title. Often pared down to elemental expression, the language of sunblue strives for symbolic associations between the visible and the invisible.[4] Correspondingly, Avison's depiction of the city works towards this ideal, an ideal often resisted by the complexity of city life. As one might expect, then, the significance the poet eventually attaches to the city does not emerge in any linear fashion. Rather, her discovery of "that invisible City" within her own transient, earth-bound Toronto in "From Age to Age: Found Poem" comes as the culmination of a difficult process.

Some of the opening "Sketches" in sunblue anticipate this later "found" poem. Their scenes are sketches (as the name implies) towards poems of increasing depth and colour, yet they themselves are nonetheless striking in clarity and detail:

> On the hall-table a safetypin
> under the
> small brass fern pot with its
> artificial fern
> No dust
> but no smell of cooking;
> the carpet's corner's curled. (sb, 10)

Of course, Avison's keen sense of urban detail runs

throughout her poetry, but here, the simplicity and directness of several "Sketches" especially sustains the illusion of the scene making the poem. Two "sketches" are specifically rooted in Toronto. Their titles become vital parts of the texts: "SKETCH: A work gang on Sherbourne and Queen across from a free hostel for men" (sb, 12); "The Seven Birds (College Street at Bathurst): SKETCH" (sb, 18). Untitled, these "Sketches" could be located on any city map. In effect, the act of naming the place begins to materialize the word-city on the page. By implication, then, these scenes do assume a specific context. As a matter of fact, the relationship between the word-city and the real city (outside of the poem) tends to be more reciprocal in sunblue than in Winter Sun or in The Dumbfounding. This sense of reciprocity is wholly realized in "From Age to Age: Found Poem." It finds symbolic representation of the City of God within the "given" urban landscape. The locale is unmistakably Toronto. This "found" poem together with the two earlier "Sketches" of Toronto scenes, frame the other urban poems in sunblue which, in themselves, do not evoke a specific locale. In effect, these three poems act as a geographic frame of reference.

By and large, the city in sunblue is conceived as a place (as opposed to a state of mind or being), a locus in which human and divine chronicles unfold. Again, it is worth noting, as I did in Chapter Three, that the poet's religious vision does not fundamentally alter the physical features

common to any modern metropolis. In sunblue, for example, Toronto is still partly characterized by its "swallowing downtown blocks of shadow," its "heavy/trampling home-bent crowds," and its "cement crumbs cinders newspaper scraps." Of course, how the poet (or the reader) chooses to interpret these unalterable facts is what really matters, as the voice of one "Sketch" ostensibly argues:

> Yes yes a hydrant
> was always there but now
> it's his, and flows. (sb, 13)

Still, the poet's attitude to the city itself is often disquieted, as the tone of this passage from "Morning Bus" conveys:

> We breathe:
>
> something is nonetheless, foul -
> fish in the stew of time
> flaked, on green sand? the
> bulky buildings sweating rancid stove oil? (sb, 33)

While "Transients" departs somewhat from the poet's overall conception of the city as place, it does elaborate on the theme of transience and being in transit, suggesting, perhaps, the source of this urban malaise. The poem charts the perennial course of "progress" in the city through various seasons. In spring, the "affluent" city, meaning both wealthy and free-flowing, "shaves" its lawns by "tractor-mower" and waters them with "chlorinated and fluoridated rain" from an underground sprinkler system. (Hence, the perspective is already somewhat inverted.) Then in summer, a "high / rise enterprising developer" "up roots"

both grass and waterworks. Undaunted, the city waits "ready to spread another quilt, / ... from truckload stores of good fat cakes of grass" (sb, 82). In these first two stanzas, then, the city assumes some human characteristics, yet takes on an intelligence of its own. The incongruous metaphors, such as "shaves the turfs / ... by tractor-mower," underscores the sense that the human and technological forces of this city are almost indistinguishable. The next stanza plays with this idea by interchanging pronoun references:

> The city ("it" I called us),
> fluent, unruffled by February sop-root
> or Labour Day cloth-&-sticks,
> lights up at night.
> It lays and trims and turfs up and
> replenishes and hardens in vacant lots and
> parking lots. We are forever
> doing, done-to. (sb, 82)

We, though now "fluent," an ironic derivative of "affluent," are directly implicated in this inane cycle of life, death and renewal. In the final stanza, "twitchgrass" invades the cultivated lawns and threatens to "shag" (suggesting both "shag" carpet and wild overgrowth) the city's "tracks and blocks"

> if we fall
> silent or
> simply let be (sb, 33).

This stanza evokes an image of any number of fallen cities now covered by moss and grass. The city has, in effect, "sown the seeds of its own destruction." Fluency, free-flowing speech, apparently sustains the human spirit before the forces of technology. In "Technology is Spreading," for

example, the poet scrambles computer language through a series of light-hearted but devastating puns (sb, 39). So to "fall / silent" is to concede civility to anarchy. To "simply let be" recalls the final lines of "Morning Bus":

> This slump of letting be
> refuses fusion; it is a
> non-homogeneity that goes on
>
> For each, enough
> is destination. (sb, 33)

The double meaning inherent in "refuses fusion" -- to renounce a blending together and to re-detonate a nuclear reaction -- reverberates the apocalyptic overtones of "Transients." The implied dialogue between the two poems, then, articulates the idea that we move through a transient city as transients ourselves. The poet's anxiety stems from being unable to distinguish between the transient course of the city and the transient course of its inhabitants.

That such a distinction is at all possible is the central argument of St. Augustine's The City of God. He considers the citizens of the City of God as transients in the material cities of the world. Avison's theological conception of the earthly city, the "here," is similar to Augustine's, only her wariness is stirred by this city's worship of technology rather than its worship of the flesh.[5] In this regard, her thinking resembles much more closely the argument of Jacques Ellul's The Presence of the Kingdom, which she admits strongly influenced her critical views of technology.[6] For Ellul, the "presence of kingdom"

is a demonic presence which has become detached from human motivation through the rise of modern technology. He argues that it has, in effect, become the controlling intelligence of the city which perpetuates the breakdown of language, community and faith in God. At no point in sunblue does Avison ever assume Ellul's dire tone, but she is clearly struggling with the effects of technology on the human spirit.[7] At the same time, technological inventions, such as the spaceship in "Poem on the Astronauts in Apollo XIII's Near Disaster," may offer her an appropriate metaphor to describe the course of human transit:

> We in our millions cruise along
> in the encapsuling blue
> not sure why we belong
> on earthship's crew,
> all at some instant scared
> to find ourselves aboard
> and not sure what to do
> for safety or for rescue. (sb, 88)

On the whole, Avision does not stress the distinction between the sinful and the righteous "communities of men" as Augustine does in defining his two cities.[8] Rather, she tends to see all of humanity as one beleaguered spiritual community.

The real dialectic for Avison exists between "here" and "out there." In marked contrast to her city environment, she perceives a "cold layered beauty / flowing out there," a "light / shining from beyond farthestness." The poet abstractly associates God's dwelling with the "radiant distance," the source which illumines even the "shop-bound"

"citied" "here." While many poems in sunblue directly recognize "out there" as their inspirational source, they affirm (by the body of their own texts) that this source cannot be pondered independently of the material world. In "Stone's Secret," for example, the poet tells us that "out there" is "inaccessible / to grammar's language," "past trace / of eyes" as she looks to the bed of a frozen river for a mirror image of the heavens (sb, 21). Similarly, in "Kahoutek," as the poet tells us about the comet's "Veering weird-brightness / from somewhere else" and its "cryptic / ... far unlanguaged precincts," she focuses on "a frozen lump / from a jolting fender" which "spins meteor-black" towards her where she waits at a bus-stop (sb, 90). In essence, Avison's notion of the "Pure" is inaccessible to language; the task she assumes, in "Stone's Secret" and "Kahoutek" especially, is to make those "unlanguaged precincts" even imaginable through language. The poetry itself, then, suggests a way of at least partially resolving the dialectic.

Within the context of Christian theology, this dialectic cannot be wholly reconciled until the apocalyptic descent of the New Jerusalem, at which point the celestial City will assume a corporeal reality. For Avison, the City of God seems to be both a temporal conception -- that is, an event which will mark the end of time -- and an ongoing spatial reality which is nevertheless invisible and outside of time. Hence, we find a number of poems which exude a quiet longing

for an apocalyptic event, and others which discover signs of the City's presence right "here." As the poet herself explains, these two impluses are not contradictory:

> To hear far off the unseen
> can make a here of there
> without absolving one from having been
> summoned to home or being
> enlisted here at home. (sb, 85)

Of course, the transient's real home is not "here," but "there."

Avison most resembles Augustine in her resolution to make "a here of there." Augustine writes:

> There was indeed on earth, so long as it was needed, a symbol and foreshadowing image of the city which served the purpose of reminding men that such a city was to be, rather than making it present; and this image was ... a symbol of the future city, though not itself the reality.... In the earthly city, then we find two things -- its own obvious presence and its symbolic presentation of the heavenly city.[10]

The "symbolic presentation of the heavenly city" is like a divine revelation for Avison, a sign which stirs her imagination. As Ernest Redekop notes, "understanding for the poet comes slowly and with difficulty";[10] especially, I would add, in an environment which often appears to deny any solid basis for association with the "invisible City." (Perhaps this is why there are comparatively fewer urban poems in this volume than in the previous two.) In this light, several of the urban poems in sunblue can be read as "found" poems, some of which realize the "gift" of symbolic significance in the landscape more clearly than others.

Among these poems, as I suggested earlier, "From Age to Age: Found Poem" most fully realizes the presence of Avison's City of God within the "given" urban landscape. This poem, appearing within the last pages of sunblue suggests, perhaps, the poet herself regards it as a culmination of sorts. There certainly is a direct correlation between the poem's power of evocation and the corporeality of the landscape. With this poem we find the most tangible depiction of Toronto in any of Avison's urban poems:

> The steady streetcar windows
> pass the window squares
> of the department stores:
> this is Toronto, queen
> city, Queen Street. Next come
> the flashing, flowering, high-crest-
> low-fall-and-level-shine
> City Hall fountains. (sb, 102)

Throughout sunblue, the poems themselves have gradually revealed that the poet must be able to depict what is "here" in order to articulate what is "out there." Hence, the idea of directly working with a "found" poem is richly suggestive. This is not a metaphysical venture in which the poet is compelled to seek out complex vehicles of expression. In this "found" poem, symbol, rather than metaphor, is a given in the landscape and a gift of the creative Word.

In fact, the meaning of the symbol is inherent in the Word itself:

> I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the
> end. I will give unto him that is athirst
> of the fountain of the water of life freely. (Rev 21:6)

So the poet (and presumably the reader) makes the association between the City Hall fountains and the apocalyptic fountain of life, noting the infusion of light which pervades the biblical account of the Holy City in Revelations (Rev. 21,22). Moreover, the word play in "queen / city, Queen Street" draws attention to at least four levels of meaning; the literal name of a street; a post-war epithet for Toronto; a biblical allusion to the city of Babylon; and a further biblical allusion to the New Jerusalem, bride of the lamb (Rev. 21). Much of this stanza, then, is filled with biblical typology, yet for the poet, the literal and the anagogic fuse only through the child exclaiming at the City Hall fountains:

> and in the back of the streetcar here
> rises the voice of the morning
> WAH-TEE!
>
> as in the morning day
> when Adam names the animals.
>
> Then the light sharpens;
> suddenly shaman di-
> dactic, he cries:
> LOOKIT the watee mommy! (sb, 102)

The colloquial touch in the expression "here" affirms the poet's participation in the child's experience inside the moving streetcar. It further refers, then, to the "here" as opposed to "out there." The second line is also carefully crafted to avoid any association between morning and mourning. The child's unabashed, glee-filled voice overpowers all others. "WAT-TEE" is a recognizable sound,

but only an approximation of adult speech. It is a "sounding out" of water, recalling for the poet the edenic innocence of Adam's lexicon in which word and object became one. In the pre-lapsarian world, the poet seems to be saying, all words were true signs of the things they referred to. As the light sharpens, the child becomes "suddenly shaman di- / dactic," a medium of divine revelation. His insistence that his mother (and everyone else on the streetcar) look at his discovery is a powerful moment for the speaker. In order to see through the commonplace, the man-made, the poet too must see through the eyes of the child. Again, the speaker's discovery is anticipated in the Word:

> Whosoever shall receive this child in my name receiveth me .... (Lk 9:48)
>
> Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. (Mt 18:1)

In spite of the fact that the child is in transit, moving away from the City Hall fountains, he is utterly absorbed by his experience and indifferent to its temporal duration:

> Stop succeeds stop.
> The day flows over him.
> He communes here, absorbed, confiding,
> at one:
> ("oo ... oh ... watee!")

To his mind, the entire day has become filled with his discovery and "flows over him." "He communes here," both conversing intimately and partaking of the eucharist. This passage is reminiscent of an earlier poem, "March Morning,"

in which another child communes in the warmth of the sun / Son's Light / Light:

> The neighbour's kid
> lets fall his mitts
> shrugs jacket loose
> and wondering looks breathing the
> crocus-fresh breadwarm
> Being --
> easy as breathing. (sb, 25) (my emphasis)

Even when the fountains are out of sight for the young boy on the streetcar, he continues to wonder, "grounding / elation and surprise." "Grounding" is a lovely word to suggest the contrast between the child's situation and the distant "blue and gold" which (only the speaker notes) is eclipsed by "Storm clouds, dove-grey."

The final stanza shifts back to the speaker's adult perspective which, nevertheless, has been illumined by the little shaman figure, her fellow passenger:

> West farther still
> every windowed car will be
> threaded through
> the far lake light and the reflective low
> waters of Grenadier Pond.

"The far lake light," like the "encapsuling blue" or "sunblue," reflects here, quite specifically in Grenadier Pond, a well-known feature of Toronto. The image of the shining car windows picks up on the mutually reflective store and streetcar windows in the first stanza, indicating a radical transformation of perspective. The windows in the first stanza become double mirrors in which there is no escape from rebounding images of the city's materialism; whereas, in the final stanza, the windows reflect only the

light which passes through them, therefore illuminating rather than confining. This image also appears in Avison's earlier meditation on Psalm 80:1 which seems to anticipate the City of God as well:

> until all the windows
> of the Kingdom shine
> and we can all be very sure
> You wanted every one. (sb, 80)

The image of the window also suggests something about the use of language in this poem. The child's diction is utterly transparent, allowing the light through. Avison seems to have espoused this ideal more generally in her desire to write in a language as simple as a child's nursery rhyme.[11] In this poem her diction is forthright and simple. But this is not a concession to her craft. For example, the combined alliterative and onamatopeic effect in the last stanza reflects the poet's child-like delight in sounding out language. In essence, the language opens a window to an entirely different level of reality without losing its "grounding" in the phenomenological world. Avison's tremendous demands on language show her faith in its power, an idea which Sheila McColm notes:

> Avison's poetry, then, does not seem disturbed by the modernist dilemma of whether or not words are adequately attached to their referents. There is in her poetry a wonderful trust in the strength and resources of a language, a trust that is likely derived from the belief that language is incarnational, a memorial to, and actual case of, flesh embodying the spirit, the concrete manifesting the abstract.[12]

The language, which, after all, is an expression of Avison's

poetic religion, fills the chasm between "here" and "out there," a source of alienation for many voices in Winter Sun. We find the same Augustinian dialectic in sunblue as a positive source of inquiry because the promise of the City of God has been substantiated by the example of the Word made flesh. In a highly religious sense, then, sunblue witnesses the dissolution of the garrison through its incorporation of what is "out there" within the body of its own text.

The title of the poem "From Age to Age" recalls St. Paul's quest for a continuing city (Heb. 13:14); a quest which Avison herself began with her search for civility. For in Winter Sun Avison discovered that civility was not a given in the urban landscape. It resided instead in "Possibility," something yet to be attained. Hence, much of Avison's early work is a poetry of process which rejects final enclosures of meaning. With her conversion, Avison does not abandon her search for civility. It too is transformed within the community of the word / Word. Communitas emerges as Avison's Christian understanding of civility. The poet's dramatization of her conversion in The Dumbfounding is evidently a poetry of process as well. Her conception of the city as the human body anticipates her later vision of the mystical body of Christ in sunblue. Communitas then becomes the basis for communion. Avison's discovery of the continuing City's symbolic presence in her Toronto does not rest in static resolution. She would see it rather as a divine "opening-out" (sb, 57) of human "Possibility."

Notes to the Introduction

[1] Margaret Avison, Winter Sun, London, 1960; rpt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961).

----------, The Dumbfounding (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966).

----------, sunblue (Hansport, N.S.: Lancelot Press, 1978).

All textual references to Avison's poetry will be taken from the above editions unless otherwise indicated. Notation will appear parenthetically within the text of each chapter. The titles will be abbreviated as follows: Winter Sun (WS); The Dumbfounding (D); and sunblue (sb).

[2] We find a secular parallel in the poetry of many of Avison's contemporaries. By the mid 1960's their syntax has become more relaxed, their expression more colloquial.

[3] Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1971), pp. 215-51.

[4] Frye, The Bush Garden, pp. 226-31.

[5] Frye, The Bush Garden, p. 231.

[6] D.G. Jones, Butterfly on Rock (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 7.

[7] Jones, Butterfly on Rock, p. 8.

[8] Jones, Butterfly on Rock, p. 7.

[9] Jones, Butterfly on Rock, p. 15.

Notes to Chapter One

[1] The introduction on the dust cover of Winter Sun informs readers that the earliest poem in this volume was written in 1937, although most of them date from 1956-59. My point here is that Winter Sun was the poet's first major publication, the culmination of twenty years of writing.

[2] Harry de Nederlanden, for example, refers to this period of Avison's writing as "non-Christian," which the poet herself seems to endorse. See his interview, "Margaret Avison:The Dumbfoundling," Mennonite Brethern Herald, 28 Mar. 1980, p.4. Of course, critical distinction between Christian and non-Christian periods oversimplifies Avision's religious and poetic development.

[3] dust cover to Winter Sun.

[4] Margaret Avison, rev. of New Poems, by Dylan Thomas, Canadian Forum, 23 (Sept. 1943), 143.

[5] James Neufeld singles out this phrase from Avison's "The Mirrored Man" (WS, 71) in his thematic study of the poet's treatment of perception and space. See his "'Some pivot for significance' in the poetry of Margaret Avison," Journal of Canadian Studies, 11, No. 2 (May 1976), 35-42.

[6] Emrys Jones and Eleanor Van Zandt, The City : Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow (London:Aldus Books Ltd., 1974), p.26.

[7] I am referring here to the civilization which extends and departs from Europe.

[8] Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1971), p.224.

[9] Ernest Redekop, Margaret Avison (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing Company, 1970), p.73.

[10] Redekop, Margaret Avison, p.73.

[11] Redekop, Margaret Avison, p.74.

[12] Mia Anderson, "'Conversation with a Star Messenger': An Enquiry into Margaret Avison's Winter Sun," Studies in Canadian Literature, 6, No.1 (1981), 114.

[13] Anderson, p. 115. Redekop, Margaret Avison, p. 75.

[14] Frye, The Bush Garden, pp. 225-6.

[15] Milton Wilson, "The Poetry of Margaret Avison," Canadian Literature, No.2 (Autumn 1959), 48.

[16] As I mentioned in my introduction, D.G. Jones theorizes a similar notion of the Canadian city. See his Butterfly on Rock (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), pp. 166-7.

[17] Urban geographer Lewis Mumford is even more emphatic in his negative appraisal of the modern metropolis: "So far from representing adequately the forces of modern civilization, the metropolois is one of the biggest obstacles to their fruitful human use." See his The Culture of Cities (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1938), pp. 223-24.

[18] James Reaney, rev. of Winter Sun, by Margaret Avison, Canadian Forum, 60 (March 1961), 284.

[19] Burton Pike, The Image of the City in Modern Literature (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1981), p.12.

[20] In a much later sunblue poem, "Strong Yellow, for Reading Aloud" (p. 41), Avison comments on her "religious" vision in "The Apex Animal" (WS, 1).

[21] Redekop, Margaret Avison, p. 107.

Notes to Chapter Two

[1] D.G. Jones, Butterfly on Rock (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), pp. 15-32.

[2] Jacques Ellul, The Meaning of the City, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 3.

[3] Ellul, The Meaning of the City, p. 5.

[4] dust cover to Winter Sun.

[5] Mia Anderson, "'Conversation with a Star Messenger': An Enquiry into Margaret Avison's Winter Sun," Studies in Canadian Literature, 6, No. 1 (1981), 104.

[6] Jones, Butterfly on Rock, p. 15.

[7] John Milton, Paradise Lost, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1962), p. 306. (Book XII, 587).

[8] J.M. Kertzer, "Margaret Avison : Power, Knowledge and the Language of Poetry," Canadian Poetry 4 (Spring / Summer 1979), 35.

[9] Francis Zichy, "'Each in His Prison / Thinking of the Key' : Images of Confinement and Liberation in Margaret Avison," Studies in Canadian Literature, 3, No. 2 (Summer 1978), 232.

[10] Zichy, p.10.

[11] Margaret Avison, "The Valiant Vacationist," in Poetry of Mid-Century, ed. Milton Wilson (Toronto : McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p.86.

[12] James Reaney, rev. of Winter Sun, by Margaret Avison, Canadian Forum, 40 (March 1961), 284.

[13] Reaney, p. 284.

[14] J.M. Kertzer, "Margaret Avison's Portrait of a Lady : 'The Agnes Cleves Papers'," Concerning Poetry, No. 12 (Fall 1979), 17.

[15] Burton Pike, The Image of the City in Modern Literature (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 12.

[16] Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York : W.W. Norton, 1957), p. 226.

[17] Kertzer, "Portrait of a Lady," p.18.

Notes to Chapter Three

[1] William Aide, "An Immense Answering of Human Skies: The Poetry of Margaret Avison," in The Human Elements, Second Series, ed. David Helwig (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1981), p. 61.

[2] Harry der Nederlanden, "Margaret Avison: The Dumbfoundling," Mennonite Brethern Herald, 28 March, 1980, p. 5. Avison's conversion occurred in January 1963 after a long period of "wrestling with the angel." Her account of this event in her interview with der Nederlanden focuses on the relationship between her poetry and Scripture: "I threw the Bible out through the window and cried, 'All right, take the poetry!' That was it. There was an absolute difference in structure in myself. Right away I could read Scripture." Following this renunciation, most of the poems that make up The Dumbfounding "came one after another in about two months."

[3] der Nederlanden, p. 5.

[4] der Nederlanden, p. 5.

[5] Northrop Frye, The Great Code (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982), p.76-7.

[6] Norman Endicott, "Recent Verse," rev. of Winter Sun, by Margaret Avison, Canadian Literature, 6 (1960), 59.

[7] George Bowering, "Avison's Imitation of Christ the Artist," Canadian Literature, 54 (1972), 56-69.

[8] Frye, The Great Code, p. 22.

[9] John L. McKenzie, Dictionary of the Bible (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1965), p. 523.

[10] Ernest Redekop finds a similar metaphor of the city as human body in some of Avison's earlier poetry as well. See his Margaret Avison, p. 99.

[11] Bowering, "Avison's Imitation of Christ the Artist," p. 61.

[12] In turn, one could perhaps read this community as part of Christ's mystical body, a notion which Avison further explores in sunblue.

[13] Bowering, p. 56.

Notes to Chapter Four

[1] Sheila McColm, rev. of sunblue, by Margaret Avison, Brick 11 (Winter 1981), 29.

[2] As quoted in C.H. Holman, A Handbook to Literature, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1972), p. 519.

[3] "A Conversation with Margaret Avison," University of Toronto Library, videocassette 001085. As cited by J.M. Kertzer, "Margaret Avison," in Profiles in Canadian Literature # 19, ed. Jeffrey M. Heath (Toronto: Dundurn Press, Limited, 1980), p. 33.

[4] Ernest Redekop reiterates this observation, but sees the associations as metaphoric rather than symbolic. He also uses the terms "emblems" and "icons" which seem to me more akin to symbol than to metaphor. See his "sun / Son light / Light: Avison's elemental sunblue," Canadian Poetry 7 (Fall / Winter 1980), 21 - 37.

[5] St. Augustine, The City of God, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), pp. 475-520. (Book XV)

[6] Jacques Ellul, The Presence of the Kingdom, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967).
As cited in Harry de Nederlanden, "Margaret Avison: The Dumbfounding," Mennonite Brethern Herald, 28 March 1980, p. 5.

[7] As we have seen, Avison's disdain for modern technology does not rule out her recognition of positive scientific discovery.

[8] St. Augustine, The City of God, see especially p. 668.

[9] Augustine, p. 480.

[10] Ernest Redekop, "Avison's elemental sunblue," p.36.

[11] see my note 4.

[12] Sheila McColm, rev. of sunblue, p. 32. Again, the function of Avison's language as McColm describes it seems to me more symbolic than metaphoric.

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