THE RELIGIOUS POETRY OF MARGARET AVISON: An Examination Of The Dumbfounding

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DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to Patricia Lynn, without whose help and encouragement it would never have been completed.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

D Margaret Avison, The Dumbfounding, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966).

PMC Milton Wilson, ed., Poetry Of Mid-Century: 1940-1960. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967).

WS Margaret Avison, Winter Sun. (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1960).

CHAPTER I:
FROM WINTER SUN TO THE DUMBFOUNDING

Since the publication of her first poem in 1939[1], Margaret Avison has made a distinctive mark on Canadian poetry with poems which have appeared in numerous Canadian magazines and anthologies. Her first book of poems, Winter Sun (1960), won for her a Governor General's Medal and her first major recognition by critics. She published very little for the next six years until the appearance of her second volume, The Dumbfounding (1966). Though she won no prizes, critics were nevertheless impressed with the book. A. J. M. Smith, a long time supporter of the poet, wrote in The Canadian Forum:

> It seems to me beyond question that apart from collections and retrospective volumes this is the richest, most original, most fully and deeply engaged and therefore the most significant book of poetry published in Canada since the modern movement got under way more than a score of years ago.[2]

Though the quality of Miss Avison's poetry has

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1 "Gatineau", published in Canadian Poetry, IV (December 1939).

2 A. J. M. Smith, "Margaret Avison's New Book", The Canadian Forum, XLII (September 1966), 132.

been consistently excellent, a reader soon notices many differences between her first volume and The Dumbfounding. Richard Tillinghast notes:

> A quarter way through The Dumbfounding, it is a surprise--a jolt almost--to realize that, like Miss Smith[3], Margaret Avison is a religious poet. Her poems on this subject are modestly placed in the middle of the book, so that one discovers them gradually, coming to see her Christianity as a natural part of her love and tenderness towards the world.[4]

And A. J. M. Smith goes on in his review to say:

> Some of these [poems] --"Person", "Prayer Answered By Prayer", "The Dumbfounding" "To Dr. And Mrs. Dresser" and a few others seem to me to be among the finest religious poems of our times.[5]

Though Christ and Christianity are a part of the world that is presented in Winter Sun, a living Christ and an enriched Christian life are the outstanding features of The Dumbfounding. Lawrence M. Jones, in his article in Canadian Literature, looks for "the clue to what A. J. M. Smith calls in his review of The Dumbfounding[6] 'an immense step forward'"[7].

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3 He refers to Stevie Smith, a British poetess.
4 Richard Tillinghast, "Seven Poets", Poetry, CX (July 1967), 266.
5 A. J. M. Smith, "Margaret Avison's New Book". The Canadian Forum, XLII (September 1966), 133.
6 Ibid.
7 Lawrence M. Jones, "A Core Of Brilliance", Canadian Literature, XXXVIII (Autumn 1968), 50.

In an article she was kind enough to send me before its publication, entitled "I wish I had known..."[8], Miss Avison makes some statements which shed light on this question. The article concerns the progress of her personal beliefs from the "will to be good" of her early days as a minister's daughter to the present "getting to be where Christ's suffering goes, terribly on" of the mature religious poet. She tells how the period between these points--that of church-joining and Christian service--had given her a "blurry but adequate" portrait of God and a concept of Jesus as "about the best person who ever lived", and how the bible became increasingly "opaque" to her as she substituted her invented Christ for the scriptural Person.

She then describes the single most important event in this progress of belief, the occasion of January fourth, 1963, when the "Jesus of resurrection power" revealed Himself to her when she was supposedly alone; says the poet:

> I would not want to have missed what he gave then: the astounding delight of his making himself known at last, sovereign, forgiving, forceful of life.

Under the influence of the refocusing caused by this experience, she looks back upon her previous life and work and notes "how grievously I cut off his way by honouring the artist" and sees her past as a "long wilful detour into darkness".

In the light of these revealing statements, much of The Dumbfounding is immediately illuminated. Take, for example, the poem entitled "Person". This seems to me to be the poetic record of the liberation experience of 1963.[9]

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[8] I have found no record of publication for this article.

[9] Lawrence M. Jones, "A Core Of Brilliance", Canadian Literature, XXXVIII (Autumn 1968), 50-51.

Though I believe that "Searching and Sounding", and not "Person", actually describes poetically the moment of conversion and revelation, I agree wholly with Mr. Jones that Margaret Avison's religious experience of 1963 is probably the major factor in the change in her poetry from secular to religious. The actual nature of the experience, while clearly of considerable personal importance, remains a private affair of the poet, but the fact that it occured is of great significance to the critic in understanding the workings of The Dumbfounding.

"The Swimmer's Moment" of Winter Sun and "The Word" of The Dumbfounding both describe a choice to take the path that leads to a moment of vision. Though many experiences can be called visionary, I am basically concerned with two kinds of vision. The first is vision as awareness or comprehension of a situation and is best described by the Greek word GNOSIS meaning knowledge of spiritual mysteries, while the second kind of vision is an actual revelation. In the poetry up to 1963, Avison was concerned with finding in art new perspectives for seeing the world in order to understand it better. The poetry written after her own revelation is concerned with artistic awareness as a way towards revelation. Lawrence M. Jones says that after the experience

> she looks back upon her previous life and work and notes "how greviously I cut off his way by honouring the artist" and sees her past as a "long wilful detour into darkness".[10]

I'm quite sure that by this statement Miss Avison is not rejecting all her previous work, but merely finding fault with the intent of her work up to 1963. Since that time, her role as disciple of Christ has become fused with her role as poet. An article in Chatelaine Magazine describes her conversion as such:

> Reading the Bible one day she came across a verse in St. John, 14, which said: "Ye believe in God, believe also in me," and she said, "All right, I will, but you can't have my poetry." And then all at once threw the Bible across the room and said, "All right take my poetry too."[11]

The difference between awareness and revelation becomes evident in comparing "The Swimmer's Moment" and "The Word". The swimmer sees the whirlpool, which symbolizes the turbulent mental agonies one must pass through in order for a moment of awareness to be attained, and unhesitantly jumps in. He dares "the knowledge" (l. 11) that will be gained by such a plunge.

> But many at that moment will not say
> "This is the whirlpool, then."

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10 Ibid.

11 Merle Shain, "Some Of Our Best Poets Are Women". Chatelaine Magazine, (October 1972), 104.

> By their refusal they are saved
> From the black pit, and also from contesting
> The deadly rapids, and emerging in
> The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.
> (WS, p. 36)

The people who refuse to take their moment at the whirlpool thus turn away from the swimmer's moment of choice:

> With a despair, not for their deaths, but for
> Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret
> Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
> Where one or two have won:
> (The silver reaches of the estuary).
> (WS, p. 36)

The narrator of "The Word", one can imagine, has just finished reading a verse in the Bible[12] and is contemplating the central phrase upon which the poem is built. Like the swimmer, the narrator of "The Word" makes a decision to follow the way towards vision, but in this case, the way is the Christian life and the vision is of Christ himself. The narrator realizes that, like Christ, who in order "to make it head over heels / yielding, all the way" (ll. 38-39), "had to die for us" (l. 40), she too must go all the way and forsake all in order to be saved.

> "Forsaking all"--You mean
> head over heels, for good

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[12] Ernest Redekop in his book on Avison gives the biblical references as either Luke 5:11 or Matthew 19:27. Ernest Redekop, Margaret Avison, (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969), p. 115. Hereafter cited as Redekop.

for ever, call of the depths
of the All--the heart of one
who creates all, at every
moment, newly--for
you do so--and
to me, far fallen in the
ashheaps of my
false-making, burnt-out self and in the
hosed-down rubble of what my furors
gutted, or sooted all
around me--you implore
me to so fall
in Love, and fall anew in
ever-new depths of skywashed Love till every
capillary of you universe
throbs with your rivering fire?
(D, p. 56)

The swimmer is a man attempting to gain a better awareness of the world by plunging into the mysteries of living, to emerge in awareness, or gnosis, at "the silver reaches of the estuary". Christ became man and had to confront not only His life on earth, but also the grander religious design of His father, and He too plunged into the moment through His crucifixion and emerged through it in resurrection and ascension. Thus, in "The Word" Christ is the archetypal swimmer whose ways the earthly narrator must follow in order to reach awareness and eventually actual revelation and an everlasting life in heaven.

Another important distinction between Winter Sun and The Dumbfounding lies in the organization of the poems themselves. The cover of Winter Sun states that:

> The author has arranged her poems for readers who like to skim through a book when they first take it up, since she herself approaches a new book of poetry in this way and would rather find her own groupings than have the poems already grouped for her.

The Dumbfounding, however, is a highly structured book. It begins with poems set in spring and ends with poems set in fall with an anticipation of approaching winter. There is, besides, a central group of 22 poems concerning Christian revelation and the Christian life. These poems are set, appropriately enough, in summer, and, as Tillinghast notes, "are modestly placed in the middle of the book, so that one discovers them gradually"[13]. "Searching and Sounding", describing the actual moment of revelation and thus the climactic moment of the book, is set in the heat of July.

The poems preceding this central group deal with characters confronting important moments in their lives and discovering ways of enduring. The most prominent images in this section are images of trees, seeds and light which are established in the opening poem, "Old... Young...", and continue throughout the book. The poems in this opening section seem to be arranged in comple-

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[13] Richard Tillinghast, "Seven Poets", Poetry, CX (July 1967), 266.

mentary pairs. "The Two Selves" and "Two Mayday Selves" are such a pair, as are "Five Breaks" and "The Christian's Year In Miniature", "First" and "Person", "Miniature Biography of One of My Father's Friends..." and "In Truth", "For Tinkers Who Travel On Foot" and "The Swimmer's Moment" and "Ps. 19" and "Controversy".

The poems that follow the central religious group of poems show how a person filled with Christ and leading the Christian life finds love and harmony in the world. The whole cycle of poems in The Dumbfounding follows the process of coming to an understanding of the world through a Christian life, so that individual poems concerning this process, such as "Five Breaks" and "The Christian's Year In Miniature", become miniature representations of the cycle of the whole book. A unified vision emerges in many poems that completes itself in the cycle of poems as a whole.

The one poem in The Dumbfounding that does not fit into the cycle completely, "Of Tyrrany, in One Breath", is a translation of a Hungarian poem by Gyula Illyes. What makes this poem slightly incongruous in the cycle of The Dumbfounding is its particularly political flavour. Avison has never to my knowledge been interested in politics in her poetry and it seems odd that she should include the poem in a book extolling religious vision. How-

ever, the poem does add, by contrast, a new dimension to the poems of vision by showing how social tyranny acts against mankind and must be perceived, suffered and understood before it can be assimilated into the total vision that the book presents.

Margaret Avison's poetry is not easily understood. She employs a concentrated style, frequently involving cryptic phraseology, and she has developed a personal symbolism that leaves some poems obscure. The unity of vision in The Dumbfounding involves cross reference of images which allows for critical understanding of the special meanings of these images by induction. And an understanding of the cycle of the book leads in turn to an understanding of individual poems.

In the following chapters, I will examine some technical aspects of Margaret Avison's poems, the importance of her use of tree, seed, and light imagery and will finally explore the nature of her Christianity and what particularly characterizes her central poems of religious vision.

CHAPTER II:
FROM PARTICULARS TO VISION

An Analysis Of Poetic Technique In The Dumbfounding

In the poems of Margaret Avison's earlier period of writing, all of the poems up to and including Winter Sun, she prescribes a way of seeing reality which involves a conjunction of physical sight and intellectual comprehension which she calls "the optic heart"[1]. At the conjunction of these two types of 'sight' a moment of awareness and comprehension occurs, in which a greater knowledge and understanding of spiritual matters is gained.

"Perspective", dealing with the geometry of seeing, is one of the key poems of Avison's "optic heart" period. Avison asks the reader to see all the aspects of a vista and not become bogged down with conventional perspectives which actually distort reality and create railway tracks that meet (ll. 20-21) by the punkt, as she calls it:

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[1] See "Snow", (WS, p. 17).

(The Infinite, you say,
Is an unthinkable--and pointless too--
Extension of that punkt.)
(PMC, p. 87)

Avison demands a new way of seeing, a new perspective in order to see reality, which is paradoxically an old one that "massive Mantegna knew", in which one not only sees the "plain", or plane, as a whole, but also the flux of its component parts: boulder, grass and sky. By concentrating on perspectives, on that punkt:

...ho you miss the impact of that fierce
Raw boulder five miles off? You are not pierced
By that great spear of grass on the horizon?
You are not smitten with the shock
Of that great thundering sky?
(PMC, p. 87)

One can see a whole only through the sum of its particulars. One must perceive a 'micro' before one can see the 'marcro'. This new perspective is a union of physical seeing and emotional and intellectual 'seeing', both optic and heart. Avison defies dualistic philosophy and asserts the necessity of the union of body and mind before a moment of gnosis or understanding can occur.

In "Voluptuaries and Others", Avison contrasts two ways of looking at the world: the scientific method of analysis and artistic intuition. "The Russians" she says:

made a movie of a dog's head
Kept alive by blood controlled by physics,
chemistry, equipment, and

> Russian women scientists in cotton gowns with
> writing tablets
> The heart lay on a slab midway in the apparatus
> And went phluff, phluff.
> (WS, p. 64)

She contrasts this with Archimedes' accidental discovery of the principle of displacement of water. Archimedes' mind intuitively leapt from occurence to a total comprehension of a physical principle. "The banality" (l. 3) of his utterance at the moment of his discovery, his historic cry of "Eureka", "is right for the story" (l. 3) she says, since the feeling one has at the moment of great discovery "is not a communicable one" (l. 3). Archimedes' moment of discovery is:

> ...just a particular instance of
> The kind of lighting up of the terrain
> That leaves aside the whole terrain, really.
> (D, p. 64)

Archimedes had a moment of awareness that is not unlike the kind of awareness that is gained by seeing with the optic heart. Archimedes instantly saw not only why the water rose in his bathtub when he sat in it but also saw how this was related to all of nature. He had an insight into the workings of nature. Avison later compares this particular kind of awareness to an artistic awareness of the world through intuition.

The Russian experiment merely kept the dog's head alive; it did not discover a new principle in nature. It is an example of the scientific method of analyzing part-

iculars. It cannot, says Avison, "be assessed either as conquest or as defeat" (l. 29). But, like Archimedes' discovery, it too points to a mystery of nature, "the chasm of creation" (l. 30). Both Archimedes and the Russians are focussing on important aspects of nature, "contriving to cast only man to brood in it, further" (l. 31), but whereas Archimedes had intuitive insight into his problem, the Russians' scientific method of analyzing particulars restricts them from the necessary perspective to gain such an insight.

Avison contrasts the scientific mind with the artistic imagination again in "Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes (In Prospect)" (WS, pp. 21-22, PMC, pp. 94-95 & D, pp. 89-90)[2]. The explorers, who "force / marches through squirming bogs" (ll. 4-5) have artistic imaginations because they advance through a landscape without focussing on particulars, while those following after them, best described as developers, who "tracing the forced marches [of the explorers] make /

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[2] The only differences between the three appearances of the poem are typographical. In The Dumbfounding Avison capitalizes only the first word of each sentence, whereas in Winter Sun and Poetry of Mid-Century she capitalizes every line of poetry.

peculiar cat-cradles of telephone wire" (ll. 19-20), represent the scientific mind because they focus on particulars alone. The first group who advance through the landscape are as diametrically opposed to the second group, who concentrate on the landscape, as poles and latitudes. By taking a larger 'more universal' view of the landscape, the first group attains awareness by advance, while the second group, with a myopic viewpoint, never releases itself from the experiential world, and thus never attains awareness. The goal then is, as Avison puts it more clearly though cryptically, "The Promise, not the Land"[3].

The artist, in the poem of the same name (WS, pp. 40-41 & D, pp. 91-92)[4], is not at all like the artists of "Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes". He is at once both "Hansel and Gretel", applying himself "to penetrate the forest" of imagination, and at the same time trying "to maintain a sensible base where bread / is baked, and axes honed, and lumber loaded" (ll. 18-19)[5]. Like the artists of the previous poem, he enters and explores the forest of imagination and

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3 "The Mirrored Man", (WS, p. 71)

4 As before, the only differences in the appearances of the poem are typographical, The Dumbfounding capitalizing only the first word of each sentence.

5 For a more detailed explanation of the poem and Avison's use of the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale see Redekop pp. 39-40.

"falls in love with the old witch" (l. 23), who symbolically represents the core of imagination. But, "having offered up his flesh" to her, he:

> resents the cage where she will fatten it
> for her more succulent feeding.
> Her he incinerates, of course, at the
> eleventh hour.
> (D, p. 91)

The artist, then, refuses to live wholly in his imagination, but desires the union of mind and body. Though he has penetrated into the imagination, he knows he must live in a physical world. The artist must maintain this paradoxical position, hovering between imagination and actuality, because in order to be expressed, the imaginative must ultimately be translated into concrete terms. To explain visions, artists are forced to use the poetic techniques of simile and metaphor which are made up of words because:

> Words [themselves] strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still.[6]

The artist in this poem is a practical artist and is a union of the two types of figures in the previous poem: the visionary and the craftsman. Avison herself,

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[6] T. S. Eliot. Four Quartets, (London: Faber, 1968), p. 19.

is just this kind of figure, hovering between and fusing together imagination and actuality in order to write her poetry.

The process of approaching awareness by moving through particulars is the basis of a poetic technique Avison frequently uses in her poetry. She posits for the reader a number of particulars, objects or images, that on the surface have no apparent relationship. However, somewhere in the poem there is a key that relates these apparently unrelated images by pointing to their common features. The relationshop between these particulars, and not the particulars themselves, then becomes the larger more embracing image of the poem. Many of her poems are actually puzzles in which the reader searches for the clue. Thus, the reader journeys through Margaret Avison's poetry in the same way that the artist journeys through experience towards a final awareness of reality. Ernest Redekop shows how Avison correlates "centurions, tourists and midges"[7] in "From a Provincial" to reach a point of vision where we:

> ...are all provincials, all encircled by the horizons of day and life, all limited by geo-

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[7] Redekop, p. 15.

> graphical, sensory, or social restrictions, or by the kind of perspective that judges things by their size in our immediate field of vision.[8]

This same technique is used extensively in The Dumbfounding.

In "Pace", Avison focuses on the sounds of rain falling, of pigeons cooing and squirrels clicking and relates all these to the sounds of pedestrians' feet walking, to reach the larger image or point of vision where the rhythms of live can penetrate and transform urban man if only he'll hear them. In this poem, the images of sound are easily associated, but in "Black-White Under Green: May 18, 1965", Avison uses a more complex set of images. In the first stanza, she relates the "leafing out" of spring, in the image of the growth of a tree, to the flight of a jet and then to the dying of a boy pianist:

> where the ultraviolets play and the scythe
> of the jets
> flashes, carrying
> the mind-wounded heartpale person, still a boy,
> a pianist, dying
> not
> of the mind's wounds (as they read the X-rays)
> but
> dying, fibres separated, parents ruddy and

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[8] Ibid.

American, strong, sheathed in the cold of
years of his differentness, clustered by two at
the nether arc of his flight.
(D, p. 14)

She does the same thing in the third stanza, dealing with the boy's growth:

...Down the centuries
a flinching speck
in a white fury found of itself--and
another
the rich blood spilling, mother to child, threading
the perilous combers, marbling
the surges, flung
out, and ten-fingered, feeling for
the lollop, the fine-wired
music, dying skyhigh
still between carpets and the
cabin-pressuring windows
on the day of the leafing.
(D, p. 14)

And again in the fourth stanza:

...this
day when the runways wait
white in the sun, and a new leaf is
metal, torn out of that blue
afloat in the dayshine.
(D, p. 15)

Images of sea and rays are also used in the poem but they do not serve as prominent a role. Avison relates three major image groups to each other in varying relations: the leafing out of spring, in the image of the tree, the springing of a jet into air and the growth of a boy towards a premature death, to achieve a point of vision or awareness of the painful process of growth:

> Faces fanned by
> rubberized, cool air
> are opened; eyes wisely
> smile.
>
> (D, p. 15)

The particularity of these concrete images should also be noted. "The day of the leafing-out" (l. 1) is not just any day, but exactly "May 18, 1965". The boy is a "pianist", stricken with muscular dystrophy:

> ...dying
> not
> of the mind's wounds (as they read the X-rays) but
> dying, fibres separated.
>
> (D, p. 15)

whose parents are "ruddy and / American". In one phrase, "as they read the X-rays", Avison can evoke the atmosphere of a hospital and a mistaken diagnosis. The feeling Avison has about this particular moment, however, has a universal quality about it, for she received similar feelings from other particulars:

> when knew-wagon small, or from my
> father's once at a horse-tail silk-shiny
> fence corner.
>
> (D, p. 15)

Avison then, does not "miss the impact", as she says in "Perspective" (l. 15), of particulars but uses them to achieve awareness, advances through them poetically to a larger image that encompasses all particulars in a poem.

This process becomes apparent in the poem "Thaw"

(WS, p. 39 & D, p. 87)[9], where a multiplicity of scenes and times is built up into a final image of a lone boy in a court yard whacking spring in with a hockey stick. The "Sunday children" of stanza one:

> stare at pools
> in pavement and black ice where roots
> of sky in moodier sky dissolve.
> (D, p. 87)

The second stanza introduces an empty coach travelling along a river flat, "and random stones / steam faintly when its steam departs" (ll. 7-8). The third stanza creates an impressionistic scene of a street perceived by a child. In stanza four, which again concerns childhood, the narrator asks the reader to remember sensuous experiences with a raspberry box and a saucepan lid. In the fifth stanza the reader is asked to relate even earlier times and broader spaces to the poem by considering the destruction of the Black Death and the fall of Troy and Pompeii. The sixth stanza, the key to the poem, sums up the images of the previous five stanzas and expresses a keenly perceived image which suggests the cyclical nature of the coming of spring and new growth:

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9 Again, the only difference between the appearances of the poem is that The Dumbfounding capitalizes only the first word of each sentence.

> A boy alone in the court
> whacks with his hockey stick, and whacks
> in the wet, and the pigeons flutter, and rise,
> and settle back.
>
> (D, p. 87)

These disparate images are united by the poet's mind which associates one object or mood with another in the context of the theme of thaw. The pools of stanza one provide an image that relates to the river flats and steam of stanza two which then in turn relate to the "lime water" of stanza three. The "Sunday children" of stanza one are associated with the childhood impression of a street in stanza three and to the reminiscences of the sensuous experience of raspberry box and saucepan lid and to the final image of the boy in the courtyard. In stanza five, the reader is asked to think of three catastrophes which, like winter, destroyed an area thereby allowing new growth to spring:

> Think how the Black Death made men dance,
> and from the silt of centuries
> the proof is now scraped bare that once
> Troy fell and Pompeii scorched and froze.
>
> (D, p. 87)

Furthermore, "the silt of centuries" relates back to the "thin and sooty river flats" (l. 6), and the freezing of Pompeii relates to the "black ice" of stanza ome. Detailed as the particulars are, the reader finally is not asked to contemplate the particulars of the poem but to relate them to a larger pattern or vision of thaw.

The same process of movement from particulars to vision, somewhat more formalized, creates the four numbered sections of "A Sad Song". Here, however, unlike the multiplicity of images in "Thaw", Avison presents different ways of looking at a central symbol, the young but dying "catalpa / tree on Robert Street" (ll. 1-2):

> ...Storms
> break branches, strip
> the crisping leaves, soak
> the fake-brick wall-front.
> (D, p. 74)

Stanza two considers the tree in a previous time, in winter:

> It spokes out, forcible
> in iron radiance
> through snow,
> into the winter-blue nights that sing
> with cold and star wash.
> (D, p. 74)

Stanza three expands the time to past and future, as the tree's presence "form[s] long memory / for the young on Robert Street" (ll. 15-16). And stanza four sums up the previous three stanzas. The reader now looks at the tree not as a particular object but as a symbol of death in life. A moment of illumination or vision has been reached:

> June is now sealed, silent.
> Form without springing makes of it
> a wrong season
> makes even this perfumed rain
> autumnal.
> (D, p. 74)

This same kind of accumulation of images, but this time around a central theme, occurs in "The Christian's Year In Miniature", a poem in five parts, each part composed of two four line stanzas, offering an impressionistic account of a major event in the life of Christ. Part one concerns Christ's birth, part two the sermon on the mount, three His crucifixion, four His resurrection, and five His ascension into heaven. Each part describes one step in a process, Christ's life and the Christian's year.

"Five Breaks" is similar to "The Christian's Year In Miniature" both structurally and thematically[10]. Each of the five parts describes one state of the narrator's relationship to Christ. Allegorically, part one depicts birth into a state of childhood innocence:

> Top-spun, swiftly
> paid out,
> you flung me, dancing, humming.
> (D, p. 54)

Part two describes a sailor tangled in ropes who needs courage to escape. In the third part, the narrator's encounter with Christ is described in terms of medieval seige. The "Valentine cards" of part four, suggest a state of love that guides the narrator into the "transfixing life". The fifth part is a prayer for, as well

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[10] I discuss the thematic similarities in Chapter IV.

as a final step towards a vision of Christ and the attainment of heaven, "Your tireless rise, your daybreak, / o, here, touch home" (ll. 53-54).

"Five Breaks" and "The Christian's Year In Miniature" describe the consecutive times in a process which moves towards a vision of Christ. The reader is more conscious of direction and movement than of the vision itself. The visionary moment of seeing Christ is described in other poems such as "The Dumbfounding" and "Searching and Sounding".

Avison also concerns hyeself with the process of growth and evolution. One can see this concern in miniature form in the third stanza of "Black-White Under Green" in which Avison describes the growth of the boy pianist from conception to the present time (ll. 27-38). "A Child: Marginalia On An Epigraph" depicts the process in more detail. Here, Avison describes a child's growth from infancy, "Small, then surprised altogether" (l. 1), to the day he starts gaining a more adult awareness of the world, "winking / wonder of off and out to / roads" (ll. 53-55). In between, she focuses on specific moments of his life: the time he is "careless of clothing" (l. 9), and sleeping "Safe, at night, / in the deeps of the night-watch kept" (ll. 18-19) and times of play when he imagines himself to be an "earl king, changeling"

(l. 28) or choosing sides for a game in stanza five. In the final stanza, Avison translates the process of growth and evolution into a spiritual process:

> He is completely absorbed
> and his heart therefore aches
> (radiant, bone-barred):
> and to long for the
> not enough out of the light yet
> to be filled,
> fullness.
>
> (D, p. 33)

The explicitly Christian context of the poem is further substantiated by the epigraphs Avison uses for these "Marginalia": Matthew 18:3 and Luke 9:48.

"The Earth That Falls Away" likewise deals with growth towards an awareness of the world and Christ. In fifteen formally numbered sections, three distinct narrative threads are developed: a narrator pondering a rag, a man blinded by a bullet and awaiting an operation to redeem his sight, together with his child's reactions to these events, and an account of the Dawson city scholar, Sol. The thematic centre of the poem concerns physical and spiritual blindness which are present in each of the 'characters' of the poem.

The narrator's sections (1,2,4,7,9,11,13 & 15) are a series of impressions on a rag and the images in these sections blend together in the same way that the images in "Thaw" were associated. Section one

describes the rag, "brine-crusted, thread knobbed, / odd-shaped scrap" (ll. 1-2). In sections five and seven, the cloth becomes a "man-symbol" (ll. 84 & 112). Section nine describes the childhood game of hide and seek. The narrator is faced both with physical and moral winter in section eleven. Section thirteen concerns a search for identity, while section fifteen gives the whole poem a Christian context and reveals the necessity of blindness before awareness or vision can occur:

> In the intolerable hour
> our fingers and fists
> blunder for blindfolds
> to have you in our power!
> (D, p. 45)

Unity in the narrator's sections is maintained by blending one image into another in varying relations so that many aspects of the same thing can be examined. Basically, the sections are related to each other in pairs. One and three look at the cloth directly. Five and seven examine how cloth is made and suggest its symbolic importance. Section nine initiates the Christian context with children playing blind man's bluff on Sunday. Eleven depicts a winter scene and thirteen the beginning of spring. Fifteen, the culminating section of the poem, connects the previous fourteen sections in the way that the final stanza of "Thaw" connects the previous five stanzas of that poem.

Interwoven between the narrator's sections are two supporting narratives. The blinded man story (sections 2,6,10 & 14) involves a continuum of moments which move from physical blindness to sight. In section two the man narrates how he was blinded and expresses his hope that he will regain sight:

> I'm not relieved
> to be told the light's not dead
> just hibernating, for me (for good).
> (D, p. 39)

Section six takes place after the operation with the man waiting for the bandages to come off. In section ten, the man's child describes his or her reactions to the father's blindness and also an attempt to see what it's like to be blind:

> I tried
> for real, being blind.
> About two minutes. It bled
> black like, all at me.
> I couldn't bear it
> even two minutes.
> (D, p. 42)

In section fourteen, the man, having now regained sight, desires his "sealed-off dayshine" again:

> The dream of seeing
> I want, as it has been, open
> daybreak blue, with the sting
> of the far-off; not this urging
> of person, color, thing.
> (D, p. 44)

The story technique in these sections is similarly employed in poems such as "A Story" or "The Agnes Cleves

Papers". With this story technique there are well defined personae, as opposed to an anonymous narrator, who relate a story or talk in direct speech. A story recreates in words a moment of past time, and Avison frequently explores in these poems the ability of words to capture reality and the meaning of history. This aspect of the story technique, however, is more evident in the third narrative section of "The Earth That Falls Away".

The Dawson scholar sections (4,8 & 12) start with a bulletin announcing the finding of the papers of a mysterious scholar, "WHO WAS THE SCHOLAR OF THE NORTH?" (l. 57). The very short eighth section has two voices, one, presumably a person who knew the man who says, "A hoard? A treasure?...I remember of course. His books. A pity..." (ll. 117-120). The other voice is narrative, establishing the setting of the first voice:

> The fine
> voice from the hill over Dawson city
> wanders across dayblue, daygreen.
> (D, p. 41)

Section twelve is a third person narrative and describes the life of the scholar, Sol, and the discrepancy between the trivialities of his prospecting "while he wore / his eyes out, alone" (ll. 180-181) and the ultimate worth of his papers. These sections expand the thematic concern of the poem and examine knowledge

as awareness or vision. The solitude of prospecting or exploring is another aspect that becomes important in these sections.

Giving the poem further dimension is the epigraph from Beddoes' Death's Jest Book, slightly reworded by Avison[11], and a proem in italics which sets the tone, basically biblical, for the rest of the poem. Avison's use of the epigraph in this poem is an example of her fondness for using the text of another work as a foundation for her own poem. She does this also in "A Child: Marginalia On An Epigrpah", "Ps. 19" and "The Word". "The Earth That Falls Away" is technically the most daring and expansive poem in The Dumbfounding and can be matched in scope of vision and narrative technique only by "The Agnes Cleves Papers" in Winter Sun.

There is however, a marked distinction in tone, between the poems in The Dumbfounding and Margaret Avison's earlier poetry. In The Dumbfounding we do not find anything that matches the extended punning of "Tennis" (WS, p. 16) or the etymological playing of "A Grammarian On A Lakefront" (WS, p. 25). Margaret Avison still uses, however, the whole gamut of meanings of

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[11] See Redekop, pp. 130-131.

words and we must certainly commend her grasp of language. She has developed a poetic voice that is distinctly her own and easily recognizable. On the whole, her poetry in The Dumbfounding has a more mellow and contemplative tone about it, easily seen by comparing any poem in the volume to "Of Tyrrany, In One Breath", a translation of a Hungarian poem.

The Dumbfounding is more subtle in technique than Winter Sun; A. J. M. Smith, in his review of The Dumbfounding calls the technique of Winter Sun "more ornate"[12]. Probably because of her increased subtlty, Avison has created in The Dumbfounding a poetry that can examine and explore all the difficult nuances of religious contemplation as well as the joy, and feeling of optimism, that comes after a revelation. However, like other twentieth-century poets Avison frequently uses a very private language. The meaning of her images can often be explained only by understanding her entire poetic system. The situations of many of her poems, for example, the great number of poems on waterfronts or beaches, seem to have private meanings. All this adds up to the fact that Avison is a difficult poet

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[12] A. J. M. Smith, "Margaret Avison's New Book", The Canadian Forum, XLII (September 1966), p. 133.

but one ~~what~~ who can nevertheless be explained by a careful analysis of her images.

CHAPTER III:
FROM IMAGE TO VISION

An Analysis Of Tree, Seed And Light Imagery In The Dumbfounding

The three most important images that are central to The Dumbfounding are the tree, seed and light. Avison uses them throughout the book in varying relations to develop her Christian themes. The tree and seed are symbols of growth and are used to represent human growth on earth as well as spiritual growth towards Christ, while light is a symbol of Christ.

"Old...Young..." begins the cycle of poems in The Dumbfounding and hints at the way Miss Avison will use these images at later stages of the volume. The first stanza of the poem depicts branches "of the ancient / members of the orchard" (ll. 1-2) lying among "young grass" (l. 3). In the second stanza, "candles are carried" (l. 5) into cellars, "to seek out those" (l. 6), presumably apples from the orchards of stanza one, that lie "granular in their lees" (l. 7) from a winter of storage in barrels. In the final stanza, cobwebs in the cellars "are forked away" (l. 8) and "the wind rises" (l. 9):

and from the new pastures long after longstemmed
sunset
even this springtime, the last
light is mahogany-rich,
a "furnishing".
(D, p. 9)

The ambiguity of "longstemmed sunset" can be explained if one imagines a shaft of light pouring into the cellar from a single window in the wall. It is a peculiar kind of spring evening light that has a "mahogany-rich" texture, and its presence in the cellar makes it a "furnishing", something added to the scene. Particular as the situation is, there are hints of a more universal application. "Even this springtime" suggests that the "furnishing" quality of the light happens every, or at least many, springtimes, and the plurality of "candles" and "cellars" suggests that this particular occurence happens in more places than one. There is further mystery in the anonymity of those who carry the candles as well as in the landscape in general.

There are three kinds of age and youth presented in the poem: the old branches and the new grass, the oldness of the apples, having rested all winter, and paradoxically, their newness as seed apples for spring planting, and finally, the newness of spring clearing away the last vestiges of winter. There are also three kinds of light and dark: the grass "breathing light" (l. 4), implying the darkness of the "bleaching" bran-

ches, the light of the candles and the darkness of the cellar, and, finally, the last light of a spring evening entering into the winter darkness of the cellar.

The image of the seed, in the granularity of the apples, contains within itself both the properties of old and young, while the "mahogany-rich" light, just breaking through the darkness of winter and night, but not yet fully warm and bright, contains within itself both the properties of light and dark. Thus, to explain the ambiguity of the final image of the poem, the light is a "furnishing" because a moment of vision, the revelation that is achieved in "Searching and Sounding", has not yet been achieved but lies in wait in the seeds of the apples and the promise of spring. And, though the occasion occurs many times and in may places at once, Avison is only considering this particular one.

There are many other poems in The Dumbfounding that deal with youth and age. In "Words", the herald, both emblem and messenger, is a symbol both for an old time and a new time "when napalm and germ-caps and fission are / eyeless towards colors, bars, quarterings" (ll. 5-6). In the confusion of meanings, only the heart (perhaps related here to the "optic heart") can be trusted to find the right meanings:

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

"Black-White Under Green" also deals with the confusion of meanings between old, in this case winter, and young, here seen as spring, and the flight of a jet plane. Avison juxtaposes the "leafing-out" of the tree to a boy pianist who is growing but dying at the same time, and both symbols are juxtaposed to the flight of a jet plane. In relation to the boy, the tree symbolizes human growth and in relation to the jet it symbolizes a 'trip' or a life span. At the end of the poem, the images take on the paradoxical meanings of both life and death. The tree in "Urban Tree", surrounded by the imprisoning presence of the city, is also a symbol of human life:

> In a thin whitish space
> off centre, vast unblur,
> the sun lives
> as its alive sapling
> lives and is traced in
> fingering on the
> arrested armor here, this
> morning.
>
> (D, p. 98)

And "In Time" affirms the possibility of human growth in terms of a tree's growth:

Stumps in the skull
feel smooth.
No juice. No punkwood.
Sheaves
of tall timber
sprout awkwardly--poplar clumps
by the railway cut--
in a matter of years.

That's growth.

Smell the leaf-acid
in a new sky.

(D, p. 18)

On the other hand, the "young catalpa / tree" (l. 1-2) of "A Sad Song" is a symbol for the failure of growth in a city environment. Thus, one can see how Avison uses the symbol of the tree to stand for human growth.

The growth process becomes extremely important in Avison's poetry. In "Many As Two", two voices discuss the topic:

"Where there is the green thing
life springs clean."
Yes. There is blessed life, in
bywaters; and in pondslime
but not for your drinking.
(D, p. 21)

In growth there is only process, only progression:

No sign, no magic, no roadmap, no
pre-tested foothold. "Only that you know
there is the way, plain
and the home-going."
(D, p. 21)

The two voices are diverse aspects of the mind, as, say ego and alter-ego, each discussing its knowledge of the human individual. At the close of the poem, as a pair

they ask the reader to join them in the growth process:

> Outside the heartbreak home I know. I can own
> no other.
> "The brokenness. I know.
> Alone."
> (Go with us, then?)
> (D, p. 21)

suggesting that growth can only occur through the intersection of opposties. The narrator of "Two Mayday Selves" similarly asks the reader to join her in the growth process:

> "The power of the blue and gold breadth
> of day is poured out, flooding all
> over all.
> Come out. Crawl out of it. Feel
> it. You,
> too."
> (D, p. 11)

Life and growth begin with the seed, the union of sperm and ovum. In a passage which recalls Dylan Thomas's poem "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines"[1], Avison describes the conception, gestation and birth of a young pianist in "Black-White Under Green":

> Down the centuries
> a flinching speck
> in a white fury found of itself--and
> another--
> the rich blood spilling, mother to child,
> threading
> the perilous combers, marbling
> the surges, flung

---

[1] Dylan Thomas, Collected Poems: 1934-1952, (London: Dent, 1966), p. 21.

out, and ten-fingered, feeling for
the lollop, the fine-wired
music.

(D, p. 14)

Using very similar language, "Five Breaks" also describes birth:

Top-spun, swiftly
paid out,
you flung me, dancing humming.

(D, p. 14)

In the same way that Avison used the tree as a synthesizing image of growth in the poem "In Time", the seed becomes a synthesizing image for growth in "Store Seeds":

The seeds sorted in bins
clean strange and plain
under sagging tarpaulins
sifted several fine

shifting as the scoop tilts
or the bins are sloped
walled off from loams rain silt
the darkness that corrupts

in the grocery shoals here
or in paper parcelled
for water pot and fire
or cupboarded dry bottled:

the seeds that lie go
down go under go in
go on. However slow
the encompassing.

(D, p. 30)

The seed becomes an important image in "A Story". Avison juxtaposes a child telling his mother of an extraordinary man he saw preaching on a beach and the

child's mother who interrupts his story telling with chidings and questionings:

> You're not sick? did you
> get too much sun? a crowd,
> I never have liked it, safety in numbers
> indeed!
>
> (D, p. 26)

Neither mother nor child can understand the importance of what happened on the beach, nor can either understand the other. There is a true "generation gap" here:

> I'm sorry I talk so. Young
> is young. I ought to remember
> and let you go and be glad.
>
> (D, p. 26)

The story the man or "gardener" was telling and the child retells is the parable of the sower and the seed[2]:

> No. Now it sounds strange
> but it wasn't, to hear.
> He was casting seed,
> only everywhere.
> On the roadway, out
> on the baldest rock
> on the tussocky waste
> and in pockets of loam.
> Seed? A farmer?
> A gardener rather
> but there was nothing
> like garden, mother.
> Only the queer
> dark way he went
> and the star-shine of
> the seed he spent.

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[2] Ernest Redekop gives the biblical reference as Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 and also deals with the poem in some detail. See Redekop, pp. 128-130.

(Seed you could see that way--)
In showers. His fingers
shed, like the gold
of blowing autumnal
woods in the wild.
He carried no wallet
or pouch or sac,
but clouds of birds followed
to buffet and peck
on the road. And the rock
sprouted new blades
and thistle and stalk
matted in, and the birds
ran threading the tall grasses
lush and fine
in pockets of deep earth--.
(D, pp. 27-28)

The seeds that Christ sowed on earth have the same symbolic suggestion as the store seeds, though in this poem they are placed in an obviously Christian context and represent spiritual as well as physical growth. The store seeds, in that poem, also hint at spiritual growth. In order to grow they are "walled off from...the darkness that corrupts" (ll. 7-8), which could suggest evil or earthly chaos or both.

The seeds are a life principle, the force of growth, and symbolize even more clearly than the tree, man's need to grow spiritually and to develop the faith that Christ has placed in each one of us. The tree is an extension of the seed image and represents man living in an alien environment, usually the city, and searching for a meaningful relationship with the environment. Another important image in Avison's poetry is light.

The position of the earth and sun in the daily cycle of evening and the seasonal cycle of spring, creates the peculiar "longstemmed" light of "Old... Young...", that becomes a "furnishing". Avison is very conscious of the differences in sunlight and the different emotional responses each type of light creates. "Once" is a prayer for vision using the seasons as symbolic representations of the narrator's state of mind. The positioning of the earth and sun creates winter, cold and darkness which represent and inner, spiritual cold and darkness:

> "When earth is cold,
> when it turns its shoulder
> on the ungrudging sun
> pole-tilted into fronting
> the eyes of utter dark:
>
> "snow forms and falls, crystals, air-fretted,
> in depth wind-shaped, in the light
> white, and with a breathing
> even by night of, as if,
> eyelid pallor."
>
> (D, p. 75)

When spring comes:

> "The melting, coursing sun
> moves (hurting and lilting,
> dimming and flashing).
> Earth is all pools and all the
> waters speak, in the new
> sky's language."
>
> (D, p. 75)

In the fourth stanza the reader is told that it is the regenerative powers of the sun that create a spring

and not the powers of "earth-ferment":

> "The myths of earth-ferment,
> seed-nub in dissolution
> spiking up swords of
> green, bright under blueness."
> (D, p. 75)

The sun, then, is an extra-terrestial force of growth. It later becomes associated with Christ and the powers of spiritual growth. The fifth stanza is a prayer to

> "make shy our brutish,
> averted, black-drinking, still-
> ice-splintered
> eyes."
> (D, p. 75)

On a spiritual plane, "Once" conveys the same message as the epigraph of "The Earth That Falls Away": "Can a man die? Ay, as the sun doth set: / It is the earth that falls away from light" (D, p. 38)

This same emphasis on the position of earth and sun, both in the daily and seasonal cycles, creates the beautiful and magical situation in "Natural/Unnatural":

> Evening tilt makes a
> pencil-box of our
> street.
> The lake, in largeness, grapey blueness
> casts back the biscuit-colored pencil-box,
> boxes, toys, the
> steeple-people, all of it, in one of those
> little mirrory shrugs.
>
> The north-east sky too
> grows fuselage cool.
>
> On the horizon
> ghosts of peeled parsnips point their
> noseless faces up,

> out; ghost-bodies pile up on each other, all
> prone, all
> pointless, blanking, refusing.
>
> Even the west, beyond the tinged rooftops
> smells of cobalt;
>
> "no-the
> charring of a peeled stick in a bonfire
> is the smell: newness,
> October crackling...."
> (D, p. 83)

Likewise, a large constellar observation of a situation gives the narrator of "And Around" the vantage point to see one tree in the larger cycle of seasons as "the tree's barb / rides tinily springward." (D, p. 95)

The quality of evening sunlight in "Twilight" is the catalyst that sets the narrator's mind pondering and describing the situation before her:

> Three minutes ago it was almost dark.
> Now all the darkness is in the
> leaves (there are no more
> low garage roofs, etc.).
>
> But the sky itself has become mauve,
> Yet it is raining.
> The trees rustle and tap with rain.
> ...Yet the sun is gone.
> It would even be gone from the mountaintops
> if there were mountains.
> (D, p. 13)

The sun, here, has a regenerative effect on the mind, for as soon as the sun sets, the narrator's mind stops its frenzy of activity:

> It is gone. It is all over:
> until the hills close to behind
> the ultimate straggler, it will

never
be so again.

The insect of thought retracts its claws;
it wilts.

(D, p. 13)

"The Mourner", boarded up in his room of despair, still has "one pencil beam" (l. 7) of light that enters his world. Like the shaft of light in the cellars of "Old...Young...", this light:

no longer diffused, no longer confusable
with the virtues of visibility,
but purely, narrowly,
compellingly
itself, is evidence that there is
Tree. Morning. Freshness.

(D, p. 20)

The shaft of light is not an aid to visibility, but to understanding. The light itself has meaning and stands for the whole of reality. Margaret Avison again associates light with reality in "July Man":

The too much none of us knows
is weight, sudden sunlight, falling
on your hands and arms, in your lap,
all, all, in time.

(D, p. 22)

Light, then, is a symbol of Avison's vision of reality.

However, one begins to notice that Avison associates Christ with sunlight. In "Ps. 19", Christ is "clear sunlight":

Fear is to live high
and know longing for clear
sunlight.

(D, p. 24)

Once one has chosen to follow Christ, one becomes "green / with life" (ll. 21-22) and is "drawn / towards an enduring sun" (ll. 24-25).

Longing for "clear sunlight" or vision is the central concern of "The Earth That Falls Away". The blind man's desire for sight, in the context of the whole poem, takes on spiritual overtones and suggests a desire for vision. Blinded, "it is winter where I live" (l. 24), he is forced to recreate the world in his imagination from his other senses:

> I knew how to live
> by hearing and touch
> and sense of place. I could pre-judge
> obstacles too: at first the couch,
> lamp, table; you have to have
> them mapped in your mind--you clutch
> notions, till you trust sense. Then I could move
> out among trees and traffic, a march
> in Nomansland to risk it, a dive
> into invisible interdependence, no crutch
> needed, for all the dread. I knew how to live.
> (D, p. 44)

The world that the blind man recreates is like the world seen in a moment of vision or awareness; there is a universality about objects because he only "sees" their outlines and shapes, "not this urging / of person, color, thing" (ll. 215-216). Having become accustomed to blindness, it is not strange to hear him say, after the operation proves successful:

Please. Leave me alone.
Bandage my eyes again.
The dream of seeing
I want, as it has been, open
daybreak blue, with the sting
of the far-off; not this urging
of person, color, thing.
Unclutter me. Relieve
me of this visible. Give
back my sealed-off dayshine....
(D, p. 44)

His child, on the other hand, cannot accept the imaginative world of blindness:

I tried
for real, being blind.
About two minutes. It bled
black like, all at me.
I couldn't bear it
even two minutes.
(D, p. 42)

The blind man will never achieve vision, however, for Avison asserts the necessity of the union of physical and mental or imaginative perception in order for a moment of vision to occur. Our knowledge of the world, a mental "seeing" which has someting to do with imagination, must correspond to an objective reality. Our eyes may be fooled into believing that railway tracks meet, because we actually see them that way, but our mental vision will correct us and show us that they do not, in fact, meet. Avision, then, is not very far removed, here, from the position she advocated in "Perspective".

The sun symbolizes both physical and mental seeing. It physically sheds light that allows one to see, and, if

we keep in mind the close association of the sun and mental processes in "Twilight", it also symbolizes mental perception. The sun, in "Natural/Unnatural", by its peculiar positioning, distorts the landscape and at the same time excites the narrator's mind to perceive the landscape imaginatively. Thus, the cloth in "The Earth That Falls Away" is both a wick and a blindfold, and thus is a "man-symbol" because we see both physically, with a candle or wick, and imaginatively, without the aid of sight, thus blindfold. But, the narrator associates the cloth with Christ, and she says:

> ...And to say to me it's always
> man-symbol: that has no
> mother-naked truth about it. I am
> not afraid of your
> cloth in my eyes and on
> my lips and tongue--.
> (D, p. 41)

In the final section of the poem, Christ becomes the symbol of light and fire, for he gives us vision, and the narrator asks for a blindfold because one does not see Christ physically but mentally and imaginatively:

> ...Who broke it
> in words, fire-pure?
> on lips wine-bright?
> so that night was in clear
> oases lit, not a smokey flare,
> no illusory gleam-and-gone?
>
> Your beauty and holiness,
> Your fair-seeing, scald.
>
> In the intolerable hour

> our fingers and fists
> blunder for blindfolds
> to have you in our power!
> (D, p. 45)

The disciple also perceives Christ as he is manifested in the beauty of the world that surrounds the disciple. This point will be discussed in the next chapter.

The poem "Branches" expertly employs tree, seed and light images. "The diseased elms" become associated with "wan selves" staring into "movie-washroom-mirrors" to create a mood of spiritual blight. "Toronto's whistling sunset" is hardly of the magnitude of the "Light that blinded Saul, / blacked out Damascus noon" (ll. 5-6). In the third stanza, the narrator asks:

> If, like a squalling child
> we struggled, craving, who
> would hear wholeheartedness
> and make the world come true?
> (D, p. 46)

Stanza five presents darkness as a type of death, and in the next two stanzas the narrator tells of Christ's beatings prior to his crucifixion and the soldiers' asking Him who is the King of the Jews. "You knew. / And knew they needed bread" (ll. 25-26). In stanza eight, the narrator again employs elms as symbols of spiritual death:

> The elms, black-worked on green,
> rich in the rich old day
> signal worldlessness
> plumed along the Dark's way.
> (D, p. 46)

Stanza nine symbolizes those who follow Christ as moths searching for His light. In the last two stanzas, Avison indicates that Christ died only once for us and will not return to save us individually. We must find the seed of our own salvation within ourselves and follow the way of Christ:

> Wondering, one by one:
> "Gather. Be glad."
> We scatter to tell what the root
> and where life is made.
> (D, p. 47)

Other poems also refer to Christ as the light. In "Person", Christ is "the Morning star" (l. 27). In "...Person, or a Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost", the light of Christ causes the narrator's face to shine with His presence:

> to lead my self, effaced
> in the known Light,
> to be in him released
> from facelessness,
>
> so that where you
> (unseen, unguessed, liable
> to grevious hurt) would go
> I may show him visible.
> (D, p. 53)

Again in the presence of Christ, the narrator of "A Prayer Answered by Prayer" burns as a "beacon fire" (l. 16). And in "The Word", when the narrator is contemplating a movement towards Christ, she says:

...--and
to me, far fallen in the
ashheaps of my
false-making, burnt-out self and in the
hosed-down rubble of what my furors
gutted, or sooted all
around me--you implore
me to so fall
in Love, and fall anew in
ever-new depths of skywashed Love till every
capillary of your universe
throbs with your rivering fire?
(D, p. 56)

"Searching and Sounding", describing the moment of conversion, is one of the most important poems in the volume. The poem begins in the light of a July morning:

...in light so strong
it seems a shadow of
further light, were the heart
large enough to find its succulence
and feed and not be gutted there.
(D, p. 60)

The narrator, searching for Christ in the beauty of the morning, finds Him instead:

...here
in the sour air
of a morning-after rooming-house hall-bedroom;
not in Gethsemane's grass, perfumed with prayer,
but here,
seeking to cool the gray-stubbled cheek
and the filth-choked throat
and the scalding self-loathing heart, and
failing, for he is
sick,
for I...

I run from you to
the blinding blue of the
loveliness of this wasting
morning, and know

it is only with you
I can find the fields of brilliance
to burn out the sockets of the eyes that want no
weeping.
(D, p. 60)

The narrator's mind is in a state of confusion as she runs away from the personal Christ that is beside her and with her, to the Christ that is in everything, but she realizes that she will not find the universal Christ without the personal one. We find fire imagery again as the narrator says:

My heart is sore, as its
bricked-in ovens smoulder,
for I know whose hand at my elbow
I fling from me as I run.
(D, p. 61)

As the first section of the poem, and the day, progresses, the narrator slowly begins to accept Christ and His light:

Lord, the light deepens as the
summer day goes down
in lakes of stillness.
Dwarf that I am, and spent,
touch my wet face with
the little light I can bear now, to mirror,
and keep me
close, into sleeping.
(D, p. 61)

In the second section of the poem, the narrator, apparently in her sleeping dreams, enters a waste-land Golgotha and comes to the point where Christ is:

Reaching
with Light that is perfect, needed no

kernels to swell nor juices to syrop nor
no further making--all newness--
all being
that the remotest fishrib,
the hairiest pink-thing there
might as one fragment
make towards the fullness you
put off, there, on the
ravening shore I view, from
my gull-blanched cliffs,
and shiver.

(D, p. 62)

The narrator, at this point, has made the choice to accept Christ, has reached the point of vision or light where earthly growth, the swelling kernels or seeds, is transcended and a landscape where there is "no further making--all newness-- / all being" (ll. 86-87) is achieved. At this point, the narrator becomes charged with the light of Christ in the same way that Gerard Manley Hopkins's world is "charged with the grandeur of God"[3]. Yet, where Hopkins uses an image of light radiating from a surface, "It will flame out, like shining from shook foil", Avison uses radium (l. 97), matter which transforms itself into light, to express the moment of contact with Christ:

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[3] W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, eds., The Poems of Gerard Manely Hopkins, (London: Oxford U. Press, 1967), p. 66. Redekop also finds a similarity between "God's Grandeur" and "Snow" (WS, p. 17). See Redekop p. 5.

GATHER my fragments towards
the radium, the
all swallowing moment
once more.

(D, p. 62)

There is an important transformation here that is brought out in the final image, the movement from being a disciple or follower of Christ who accepts the Christian life to becoming an apostle or missionary who actively preaches the Christian life. The disciple absorbs Christ's teachings and His faith, becomes charged with His light while the apostle is a Christ on earth who emanates faith just as radium emanates light from itself by transforming its own energy into light.

By examining Margaret Avison's use of images of growth and light, I have attempted to show how the images of seed or tree and the image of light are central in The Dumbfounding and express her particular type of Christianity. Light suggests clarity, love and Christ. The seed and tree imply growth towards light. Each symbol presupposes the other, for if Christ is the goal then growth is the way.

CHAPTER IV:
FROM CHRIST TO FAITH

An Analysis Of The Central Religious Poems In The Dumbfounding

What, more than anything else, distinguishes The Dumbfounding from Winter Sun is a group of poems that deals almost exclusively with a Christian revelation and is probably a result of Avison's personal revelation[1]. This group of twenty-two poems, the series from "Ps. 19" to "The Christian's Year In Miniature", occurs at the centre of the book[2] and forms the religious core of The Dumbfounding. The rest of the poems, many of which do not have an exclusively Christian meaning, at least direct our attention towards this poetic centre, if not openly point to it, in the way that the light imagery of the more secular poems becomes transformed to a specific symbol of Christ in the Christian poems.

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1 As mentioned in Chapter I, Lawrence M. Jones dates this revelation as occuring on January 4, 1963.

2 Fourteen poems precede this group and twenty-four follow it.

In the previous chapter, I pointed out that the narrator of "Natural/Unnatural", by looking at the landscape, anticipates the coming of night and winter. But these are only external symbols of the fearful night and winter of the soul. "Large pink children" (l. 21), still in their innocence:

> ...have, all the same, sniffed
> the ice in
> that quirk of sunset
> but refuse
> fear.

Assimilating the previous imagery of fear and night, the narrator questioningly says:

> "Hope is a dark place
> that does not refuse
> fear?"
>
> (D, p. 83)

To the narrator who is in a state of experience, this "dark place", she tells us in the next stanza, is "despair", total hopelessness, a giving up on life.

> True, the natural night is pressure on my
> ribs:
> despair--to draw that in, to
> deflate the skin-pouch, crunch out the
> structure in one
> luxuriant deep-breathed zero--
> dreamed already, this is
> corruption.
>
> I fear <u>that</u>.
>
> I refuse, fearing; in hope.
>
> (D, p. 84)

In the final line of the poem, which brings together the key words "refuse", "fear" and "hope", the narrator says she will refuse to accept the despair around her, fearful of it nevertheless, and by refusing it, she will live in hope.

I mentioned earlier that "Five Breaks" shows in schematic form the five steps towards a Christian life. According to this process then, the dilemma that the narrator of "Natural/Unnatural" faces corresponds to the second part of "Five Breaks", the sailor's entanglement in the ropes of experience, clinging on the brink of despair to hope with courage:

> Rope-burned, wind-sifted,
> praising the Stranger courage and
> barrenlands beauty,
> strong in your buffeting, I
> stood, speed-blind, among
> your synchronizing glories.
> (D, p. 54)

There are many figures in The Dumbfounding who, like the sailor of "Five Breaks" and the narrator of "Natural/Unnatural", teeter on the brink of despair. All these figures, however, are mourners, facing the fact of death head on. They are full of, as Avison puts it, the "largeness of mourning" (D, p. 49).

"The Mourner" rests in his prison of dark, an image signifying despair. The setting suggested is a room where "the windows have been boarded / up" (ll. 14-15),

but this setting is really a physical representation of a mental state. The mourner has cut himself off from the world, is locked up in his own prison of despair. The "one pencil beam" (l. 7) of light that "itself, is evidence that there is / Tree. Morning. Freshness." (ll. 12-13) suggests the light of Christ, though this is not explicit in the poem.

The persona of "In Truth" establishes in the first stanza the dichotomy between reality and the imagination:

> "The fact of a dead
> face will never fade
> into any beauty-bathed
> grove of imagined shadow:
> Island, jewelled Esplanade,
> City--in earth or ocean bed."
> (D, p. 49)

Death is a fact of reality, a "certitude" (l. 10), and cannot be reconciled with the imagination which is symbolized by the fantastic places of "Island", "jewelled Esplanade" and in the final stanza "Gemmed Palace", "Marble Island" and "Cathedral under the sea". Death affirms life and the persona makes the "earth shaking" decision to reject the imaginative world:

> "I cannot believe
> in harps, jasper..."
> (hesitantly, as if pitying
> one who may still be on
> stilts, and the earth shaken).
> (D, p. 49)

In the second part of the poem[3], the narrator says the "love-wrung and turbulent / and alone" (ll. 17-18) will achieve "quietness" (l. 16) and those "anticipating sorrow" (l. 20) will achieve "largeness" (l. 19). "In this place" (l. 22) of despair, similar to the "dark place" of "Natural/Unnatural":

> loss is torn--
> a vividness
> lost, out of the sun.
> (D, p. 49)

To the reader's "apple eyes" (l. 26):

> ...in the day
> this page, here open, lies
> in your way:
> (D, p. 49)

while "another's eyes" (l. 30), presumably the narrator's:

> look now, and say,
> one stone-dead face
> lived, is, will be.
> (D, p. 49)

The narrator has transformed the dead face of the opening part of the poem into the face of the resurrected Christ who "lived, is, will be", who "saw those in prison first" (l. 34), which could be a reference to the mourn-

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[3] The four distinct parts of the poem are not numbered, but separated by a series of dashes.

er's prison of despair, and who:

> rose, spoke with his
> lost friends,
> ate honeycomb, and fish.
>
> (D, p. 50)

In this realm beyond death, where the body is left behind and where the spirit alone lives, only Christ's words "speak, in that airlessness" (l. 39), and he:

> who hears them is
> roused to the utterance
>
> & who trusts him in this
> learns all, past time: a voice
> no deafness drowns, at last
> Love, a face.
>
> (D, p. 50)

If one can reject the safe and secure imaginative world, the narrator seems to say, and go beyond the fact of death, through "the largeness of mourning", then one can hear the words of Christ and actually see Him. The disciple's process parallels Christ's progress, who also went through death into the spiritual realm beyond death. The persona makes this choice to accept Christ in the last stanza:

> ("Gemmed Palace? Marble Island?
> Cathedral under the Sea?
> There are the dark blood's dream.
> My being would listen
> to Him.")
>
> (D, p. 50)

"Mininature Biography of One of My Father's Friends Who Died a Generation Ago", a poem that immediately precedes "In Truth", is undoubtedly meant as a companion

piece to "In Truth". In both poems the poetic persona faces death and the fears death generates by reminding one of his mortality. He summons up his courage and by doing so affirms his love of Christ. "Our / shrinking is your pain" (D, p. 48) he says. Death, in both the poems, is "Love's gesture here on earth" that there is a life beyond the earthly one and that life is with Christ.

The prospect of facing death and despair may be fearful, but the hope of seeing Christ can by just as frightening. "Ps. 19" is a meditation on verse 9 of that Psalm, "The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever"[4]. The desire to see Christ, who is symbolically presented as "clear / sunlight" (ll. 5-6), is a clean fear:

> Clean is the word with fear.
> Fear is to love high
> and know longing for clear
> sunlight, to the last ribcorner
> and capillary.
> (D, p. 24)

The narrator then wonders if her step towards Christ is actually an escape from life. She is "a sigh-ing-over-the-marshlands me" (ll. 6-7), or a mist that might be evaporated by Christ's "clear sunlight":

> Yet to live high
> is with this very fear
> to shrink and seek to be made plain.
> (D, p. 24)

---

[4] The King James version of the Bible.

In the process towards Christ, the disciple must accept or "openly own" (l. 12) both good and evil, or as Avison imagistically puts it:

> but the mists smoking from pure
> stone-cold lake-still sun-sweetened places
> and the dank mist that rises
> from the long-unsunned, sour
> pools, hid even from the storm's sluices.
> (D, p. 24)

And, finally, "Enduring is the word with clean" (l. 18), for once the disciple has accepted Christ and is at the same time afraid of Him, he is then capable of spiritual growth and escapes the wasteland of the mind:

> The fear once won
> of sunward love, it proves--not boulderstone,
> baldness, slowly in fire consuming--but green
> with life, moss, cup-rock-water, cliff riven
> for a springing pine;
> and thus, trusted to fire, drawn
> towards an enduring sun.
> (D, p. 24)

The narrator here is, like Bunyan in "For Tinkers Who Travel On Foot", contemplating a verse of the Bible. Bunyan's meditations on a "verse in the / Epistle to the Hebrews" (ll. 2-3) gave him the spiritual support to survive "through / deaf and dumb months" (ll. 5-6) of his imprisonment for preaching, and his physical prison recalls the mourner's cell of despair. This period of imprisonment and biblical contemplation led him to his revelation:

...when the sky was
finally sundered with glory
and the cornet
rang out, created stillness,

he knew it, instantly.
He consented, himself, to
the finality of
an event.

(D, p. 36)

Although there is much thematic and imagistic similarity between the five poems examined, there is a distinction between "Natural/Unnatural" and "The Mourner", "In Truth", "Miniature Biography" and "Ps. 19". The distinction between these poems is the same distinction that occurs between part II and part III of "Five Breaks" and reveals the difference between a choice about a secular part of one's life and a Christian part of one's life. Furthermore, this is the same distinction that occurs between "The Swimmer's Moment" and "The Word" that I described earlier[5].

"The Swimmer's Moment" is concerned with a choice about a secular part of one's life and involves, to use Professor New's phrase, the "mind's relationship with the world"[6], while the choice made in "The Word" is to follow

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5 Chapter I, pp. 4-7.
6 William H. New, "The Mind's Eyes (I's) (Ice): The Poetry of Margaret Avison". Twentieth-Century Literature, XVI (July 1970), 188.

Christ and involves the mind's relationship with God. The swimmer, in making his choice, merely dissociates himself from others and is sealed up in "an eternal boon of privacy" (D, p. 37), while the narrator of "The Word" must forsake all and, like Christ, give up his body and go:

> head over heels, for good,
> for ever, call of the depths
> of the All.
>
> (D, p. 56)

There is a strong similarity between "The Swimmer's Moment" and part II of "Five Breaks". The sailor's entanglement in ropes is similar to the surrounding force of the whirlpool. The swimmer and the sailor both must conquer water. And finally, the last lines of part II of "Five Breaks" remind us of the last lines of "The Swimmer's Moment":

> strong in your buffeting, I
> stood, speed-blind, among
> your synchronizing glories.
>
> ("Five Breaks")

> Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
> Where one or two have won:
> (The silver reaches of the estuary).
>
> ("The Swimmer's Moment")

The inclusion of "The Swimmer's Moment" in a context of specifically Christian poems, alters the meaning of the poem somewhat. "The Swimmer's Moment" is immediately preceded by "For Tinkers Who Travel On Foot",

Bunyan's moment of choice, and is probably meant as its companion piece. It should also be noted that almost all of the poems that are reprinted in The Dumbfounding[7] alter their meaning slightly because of the volume's generally Christian context.

"The Word" expresses a conscious choice to follow Christ which involves a movement from "the largeness of mourning" (D, p. 49) to "Christian brightness and / unmourning" (D, p. 76). The disciple's progress towards a Christian life is an imitation of Christ's life. Notice how the persona and the narrator of "In Truth" follow Christ's path from death to eternal life. Thus, the disciple's process in "Five Breaks" is an imitation of Christ's process in "The Christian's Year In Miniature".

In part I of "The Christian's Year", Christ is born:

> Beside the still waters,
> infant-pure,
> God is, in flesh.
>
> (D, p. 65)

Part I of "Five Breaks" describes the disciple's birth:

> Top-spun, swiftly
> paid out,
> you flung me, dancing, humming:

---

7 "Simon: finis", "Thaw", "From a Provincial", "Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes" and "The Artist".

"Joy it is
to ride the day,
lest that one toy with
God's play."
(D, p. 54)

Part II of "Five Breaks" describes the disciple's journey into adulthood and the need for courage in order to accept the despair he finds there. This is "The Swimmer's Moment" domain and is paralleled by part II of "The Christian's Year" with Christ's sermon on the mount, one of His major duties as a man. In part III of "Five Breaks" the disciple has made the choice to follow Christ after a battle with despair and has attained a Christian revelation: "O, then, a careful face / shone bare" (D, p. 54). The disciple sees:

...death, like, as you
memoranda left on the blotter
for my day's work.
(D, p. 54)

which is exactly what the narrators of "In Truth" and "Miniature Biography" see. The disciple then feels:

...the flesh as tomb
stoned by its own
funereal pieties,
braced for the rotting geologies of endurance.
(D, p. 55)

Although the soul is encased in the prison of the body, there is a rebirth with the revelation of Christ. Having seen Christ's face, the disciple burns with Christ's light of fire and like the Phoenix is reborn from the

consuming fire:

> (...and after that for grubbing,
> engine-heat, the
> firebird cycle...).
>
> (D, p. 55)

Appropriately enough, the disciple's climactic moment on earth is paralleled in "The Christian's Year" by Christ's crucifixion in part III.

This chapter is entitled "From Christ To Faith" which seems paradoxical at first, since the usual progression is from faith towards Christ. Avison is fond of paradoxes, and for her, faith follows the moment of revelation and is described in part IV of "Five Breaks". Faith creates a world of love, even though grief and despair are all around:

> Valentine cards
> In the February lace of daylight
> through window and doorway glass:
> store; children; love; a lakeblue sudsbright
> eleven o'clock outdoors, seen to
> by the scorched eyes of grief,
> the graveled eyes of
> utter disappointment, these
> zero in the
> arrowing sunburst, cone-tip, the
> transfixing life.

The Christian's resurrected world of faith and love is paralleled by Christ's resurrection in part IV of "The Christian's Year":

> The garden, awaking
> to a terrible day-swell
> knows the rock-sweet, the pulse-set
> of Emmanuel.
>
> (D, p. 66)

Part V of "The Christian's Year" describes Christ's ascension into heaven and is paralleled by part V of "Five Breaks" which describes the disciple's final attainment of heaven: "Your tireless rise, you day-break, / o, here, touch home" (D, p. 55).

The poems that spring from faith will be dealt with later in this chapter, but now it is necessary to examine more closely the part of the process towards a Christian life that is described in part III of "Five Breaks" and that is evident in other poems.

The poetic persona of "Person" finds herself locked up in her prison of the body and feels, as it is expressed in "Five Breaks":

> ...the flesh as tomb
> stoned by its own
> funereal pieties.
>
> (D, p. 55)

Her soul tries to escape, but finds itself "barred, every way" (l. 14). The narrator comes to a realization in the poem that one attains eternal life not by an escape from, but by passage through the body or earthly life:

> No hinges swing, no latch
> lifts. Nothing moves. But such
> is love, the captive may
> in blindness find the way:
>
> In all his heaviness, he passes <u>through</u>.
> (D, p. 52)

On earth, the body and soul must unite by living a Christian life so that at death the soul can live eternal life in heaven. Notice how this passage recalls "Many As Two", in which the two selves discuss the growth process:

> No sign, no magic, no roadmap, no
> pre-tested foothold. "Only that you know
> there is the way, plain,
> and the home-going."
>
> (D, p. 21)

And in the companion piece to "Person", "...Person, Or A Hymn On And To The Holy Ghost", the narrator again reaches a point of freedom where she gains a new identity and is "released / from facelessness" (ll. 14-15):

> Let the one you show me
> ask you, for me,
> you, all but lost in
> the one in three,
>
> to lead my self, effaced
> in the known Light,
> to be released
> from facelessness.
>
> (D, p. 53)

The first steps towards a Christian revelation involve a recognition of the wonder and splendour of Christ. As Avison says in "First":

> His new creation is
> One, whole, and a
> beginning.
>
> (D, p. 51)

The next most important step is the recognition of the omnipresence of Christ. Just as Avison can cut through

time in her secular poetry, uniting past, present and future in one image, so she can readily associate the historical or biblical Christ with a contemporary moment. In "A Story", an obviously biblical Christ who preaches to the people the parable of the sower and the seeds is present in a modern situation. This recognition of Christ as the ever present "I AM" (D, p. 57) who "lived, is, will be" (D, p. 49) is a crucial step in "The Word":

> But to make it head over heels
> yielding, all the way
> you had to die for us.
> The line we drew, you crossed,
> and cross out, wholly forget,
> at the faintest stirring of what
> you know is love, is One
> whose name has been, and is
> and will be, the
> I AM.
>
> (D, p. 57)

"The Dumbfounding", which gives its title to the whole cycle of poems, involves a recognition that all people are guilty of Christ's death. At the same time, however, there must also be a recognition that there can yet be salvation for everyone if Christ's way on earth is followed. The narrator associates herself with the apostles who deserted Christ the evening before the crucifixion:

> The evening you spoke of going away
> we could not stay.

All legions massed. You had to wash, and rise
alone, and face
out of the light, for us.
(D, p. 58)

She again associates herself with the apostles after the resurrection:

When you were seen by men
in holy flesh again
we hoped so despairingly for such report
we closed their windpipes for it.
(D, p. 58)

Christ passed through death into eternal life with His resurrection and subsequent ascension, and He sowed the seeds of faith in man who tries to hide from Him:

Now you have sought
and seek, in all our ways, all thoughts,
streets, musics--and we make of these a din
trying to lock you out, or in,
to be intent. And dying.

Yet you are
constant and sure,
the all-lovely, all-men's-way
to that far country.
(D, pp. 58-59)

If the disciple can place his trust in Christ and recognize His regenerative powers, the disciple can grow on earth by leading the Christian life and after death he will reach heaven, "that far country":

Winning one, you again
all ways would begin
life: to make new
flesh, to empower
the weak in nature
to restore

or stay the sufferer;

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

(D, p. 59)

Christ is the dumbfounding because in Him the narrator sees all the mysteries and all the ways of spiritual life.

Though "The Dumbfounding" may be the central poem in the book, "Searching and Sounding" is the most important, for it describes the actual moment of revelation. It is also important biographically, for it probably describes in poetic terms Avison's own revelation that she described to Lawrence M. Jones.

I dealt with the poem extensively in Chapter III, but I would like to examine more closely the descent into the wasteland of spiritual emptiness that the narrator takes in part II of the poem. In "The Dumbfounding" Christ leads the narrator "through the garden to / trash, rubble, hill" (D, p. 59) where the narrator finds Christ, "the outcast's outcast" (D, p. 59). In "Searching and Sounding", Christ again leads the narrator into a land of spiritual emptiness:

From the pearl and gray of daybreak
you have brought me to
sandstone, baldness, the place
of jackals, the sparrow's skull,
tumbled skeletons of what were

hills clothed in forest
and spongy meadows, the place of
baked stone, dryness, famine,
of howling among tombs.

From the first dews, the
grasses at their budding,
fragrance of mountain snow
and sunfat cedars
to the farthest reaches
where your Descent began, on the beach gravel
ground by sea-slimed teeth...
those bloodless horses....
(D, p. 62)

The poetic persona looks for Christ in the beauty of a July morning but finds Him instead "here / in the sour air / of a morning-after rooming-house hall-bedroom" (D, p. 60). The persona, very unhappy in his situation and teetering on the brink of despair, seeks Christ:

...to cool the gray-stubbled cheek
and the filth-choked throat
and the scalding self-loathing heart.
(D, p. 60)

The persona, who has universal characteristics:

...though I am he
or I am
a babbling boy
aged twenty, mentally distracted, blunted
by sedatives and too-long innocence
without your hand, teaching his the ax-heft or
throttle-bar or
grease-monkey's gun or
any craft or art.
(D, pp. 60-61)

thus runs from his room into "the / loveliness of this wasting / morning" (ll. 25-27) but at the same time knows that he cannot escape his own despair by this flight into the beauty of nature. It is only with Christ that he

"can find the fields of brilliance" (l. 29). In order to be able to enjoy the beauties of nature in the carefree way that children do, the persona must return to his own situation of oncoming despair. He must accept the help of Christ and with faith in Him gain the hope and courage that is necessary to confront the travails of daily living. In this way he can begin to live a Christian life of harmony and happiness with the expectation of everlasting life in heaven. "To what strange fruits in / the ocean's orchards?" (ll. 81-82) points to this Christian life that is to come for the persona and is reminiscent of the orchards in "Old...Young...". And further, the light in "Old...Young..." that is a "furnishing" becomes in "Searching and Sounding" the saving light of Christ who shows the disciple on earth the way to lead a Christian life.

Following the poems that deal with Christian revelation is a series of poems that present a new world where life and faith are presented in action. The narrator's perspective has been altered and she sees the world in a new light. "Janitor Working On Threshold" presents a worker "prising some broken stripping loose" (l. 6) and making a walkway safe so that "no one need be afraid of falling" (l. 8). However, this normal and everyday occurence:

> this street
> and door in the final stilling
> of all (of the one at the threshold with
> the rest)
> recall the less than the least,
> John, and the wings, and healing.
> (D, p. 78)

A particular sight sets the narrator's mind pondering the universality of the situation and the biblical importance of it. This man, like all of us, is on the threshold of salvation and even the lowliest of men will reach heaven.

"Walking Behind, En Route, In Morning, In December" also makes universal a particular situation. Seeing a man walking ahead of her, the narrator ponders this man's relationship to other people and other things: "This man is not entirely / ,by himself, satisfactory" (ll. 1-2). He is seen by other people and his peculiarities, "as his topcoat splits at the / unbuttoned slit" (ll. 10-11) and his individuality are not factors that cut him off from other people, but rather unite them to him. Because the narrator sees this man and shares a moment of time with him, she can write:

> I admit that this man, since he is
> not by himself, is a
> one, is
> satisfactory.
> (D, p. 81)

The poetic persona of "In a Season of Unemployment" sitting on a park bench watching a man on another bench,

associates him with astronauts flying around in space that she reads about in a newspaper. The man on the bench is on a journey of equal importance to that taken by the astronauts and the narrator watches him in his flight in the same way that ground observers watch the flight and comment on the condition of the astronauts:

> The newspaper-astronaut says
> "I feel excellent under the condition of
> weightlessness."
> And from his bench a
> scatter of black bands in the hollow air
> ray out--too quick for the eye--
> and cease.
>
> "Ground observers watching him on a TV
> circuit said
> At the time of this report he
> was smiling," Moscow ra-
> dio reported.
> I glance across at him, and mark that
> he is feeling
> excellent too, I guess, and
> weightless and
> "smiling".
>
> (D, p. 85)

The narrator in all these poems looks with love at these characters and at the world. It is a love and acceptance that springs from the faith gained in the living of a Christian life. The narrator feels herself in communion with everything and everyone she sees, and finds herself on the same flight as they, all in the same world and all with the possibility of salvation through the living of a Christian life.

"Unspeakable", the last poem in the book, is a

celebration of the magic of life, of the particular objects and places that are "unused" or generally unnoticed. The poem reminds us of "The Artist", with the "manx cat" that is discovered by the narrator suggesting the white cat of the imagination that is discovered by the artist figure of Hansel-Gretel. The poem is an artistic statement of intent, a poetic manifesto declaring that "the beauty of the / unused...should be / confidently...celebrated" (ll. 11-19). Avison states that, as a poet, she must search out the "unused" particulars in the world and in her imagination, and celebrate them in her poetry. The "one I know, of / excellent indolence" (ll. 12-13), to my mind refers to Avison herself who in the process of the book moved from "season into / skywide wintering" (ll. 14-15). Further the reference to "wintering" supports the progression in the latter part of the book to poems of winter which in turn suggest the possibility of yet another spring as described in "Old...Young..." and yet another cycle of growth both in physical and spiritual spheres.

CONCLUSION

What repeatedly impresses me on every reading of The Dumbfounding is the unity of the book. The poetic techniques Margaret Avison employs are an extension of her way of seeing reality. The imagery consistently supports this new way of perception and each poem intricately falls into place in a well ordered pattern of movement from spring and the search for Christ to the acceptance of Christ and Christianity. Though, as I suggest, agreeing with Lawrence Jones, the motivation for the book was probably Avison's own Christian revelation of 1963, the book is not so much a description of one human's search for and discovery of Christ as a manual for all other humans in their process of growth towards Him.

There is a great similarity of attitude and language between writers who wrestle with the concept of Christ in modern times. I've suggested Avison's similarity to Eliot and Hopkins, in this respect, but the similarity exists not only between poets. In an article that appeared in The Toronto Star on Friday, June 30, 1972, written by Tom Harpur and entitled, "The Crisis Of Our Culture: Progress Strangles Us", Father Gregory Baum, a leading Canadian theologian, was asked to define "truly human":

> ...being truly human [is] "being open to the truth--children of light, as Jesus said."
>
> In an interview, he expanded: "This means being open, sensitive to others, ready to share in a life greater than my own which has its roots in God. Humanity is not simply something we are given; it has to be grown into. We are called to it in Jesus and have to decide to move towards it with others."

In Father Baum's words we recall the choice taken to follow Christ in "The Word", and the same word "light" is used to describe Christ. We are all children of Jesus or "children of light". Also notice the emphasis on children and recall Avison's descriptions of childhood innocence.

Malcolm Muggeridge, a British essayist and Christian convert was asked the same question in the article and wrote:

> "For me, to be truly human is to have a personal experience of Christ. You only become a full human being when you escape from the prison of your own ego. To be enclosed in our own selves or egos--and our present materialism is simply an extension of egotism--is to be in a dark dungeon. You live and are reborn into true liberty when Christ frees you from this, as the Gospel has always said."

In these words we recall Margaret Avison's own revelation of Christ and conversion to Christianity as she described it to Lawrence Jones and in "Searching and Sounding". The"dark dungeon" of the ego recalls "The Mourner" and his prison of self and the narrator of "Person" locked in his prison of body.

And George Grant, professor of religion at McMaster University, who, like Avison, is "torn between the two emotions of hope and despair"[1], finds hope in Christ in the way that Avison finds hope in Christ in "Natural/Unnatural" and "Ps. 19". He says in the same article:

> "I see many people in the suburb where I live, for example, finding their way towards quality of life--depth of living--even in this incredibly difficult time. Life could easily become a shallow wasteland, but in God every man's future is open and you can find meaning and purpose if you are determined to do so."

Though the article admittedly intends to examine the myth of progress in modern culture and the writers are people already devoted to a life of Christ, it is still interesting to notice the similarity of language that describes similar visions.

In the poems of The Dumbfounding, one not only finds a poetic record of Margaret Avison's personal struggle to accept Christ and Christian living, but also a view of Christianity that is shared by many people and finds expression in very similar language.

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1 Tom Harpur, "The Crisis Of Our Culture: Progress Strangles Us", The Toronto Star, (Friday, June 30, 1972), p. 8.

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