



The End of an Era: A Review of Margaret Avison's *Listening: Last Poems*

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It seemed in 2003 that when Margaret Avison became the Canadian recipient of the Griffin Poetry Prize for *Concrete and Wild Carrot* that this would be a fine culmination to her distinguished poetic career. When Brick Books released it, it was only her second new collection of poetry in thirteen years – and only her sixth, in a career that began with her highly acclaimed first book, *Winter Sun*, which had come out in 1960. When she won the Griffin she was already well into her eighties, and was no longer venturing far from her home in central Toronto. The Porcupine's Quill soon began to release her three volume collected poems: *Always Now* (Volume one came out in 2003, volume two in 2004, and volume three in 2005.) Since I knew there were to be some new poems included in *Always Now*, when I interviewed Margaret in November 2004, I asked her if she might consider publishing another collection after that. She avoided giving me a straight answer by saying, "I haven't come to a crashing stop" (Martin 2005, 76). She certainly had not.

In 2006 McClelland & Stewart released what I consider to be the finest single collection of Margaret Avison's career: *Momentary Dark*, and at the time of her death last summer she had almost completed the manuscript for her final book of poems, *Listening*. I knew nothing about this manuscript, until Joan Eichner – Margaret's close friend and the first sounding board for much of her work – came to a reading I was giving in Toronto last spring. Joan was justifiably excited about the release of Margaret's "last poems."

When Margaret Avison died on July 31, 2007 at the age of 89, I was saddened – although I doubt she would have wanted anyone to respond in that way. I had the chance to

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meet her twice, to interview her in public at The Word Guild's 'Write! Toronto' conference, and to correspond with her — primarily to expand and refine the interview for publication in the journal *Image* (Martin 2005). I consider Margaret Avison to be one of the most significant poets of our time.

What makes her poems stand out, among the work of so many poets, is the way they grow deeper and deeper with subsequent readings. Their density, initially obscured through her unorthodox sentence structure, slowly reveals their meanings. Consider, for example, her reflections in "The Eternal One":

His nestlings are
sheltered within
deep-bosomed trees;
these raise soft domes, care
for the air. We breathe.
Underneath, when
stunned by sunmelt
their felt dimness is
shimmery rest...

(Avison 2009)¹

As her final collection of poetry, *Listening* can best be understood within the context of her life, her faith, and the body of her work. She was born in Galt, Ontario (now part of Cambridge) in 1918, but spent her childhood in Regina and Calgary, before returning to Ontario for her high school and university years in Toronto. It is through the impressions of this prairie girl, in the poet's memory, that we see tall Toronto trees, and feel their presence. Squirrels, branches and leaves appear throughout, but I believe it is particularly Toronto trees (as specifically identified in "Ever Greens" and "Soundings") that she is thinking of.

In Margaret's final years she was less able to get beyond the city, and yet Toronto's natural offerings were rich enough in inspiration for her. The title of her collection, *Concrete and Wild Carrot*, speaks of her observations of the physical world — what I called back then, "urban nature poetry." Even though she was confined to downtown Toronto, she could see nature pushing its way up through the concrete: "the wild carrot you can find by walking along mews and laneways or looking through the subway window along the open cuts," she said.

In *Momentary Dark*, I sense Margaret doing more and more of her observing through windows. In "Making," for example, she begins by considering mist-like snowflakes. "Our roof / breathes them" she says, and then her imagination carries itself up to the clouds and beyond to the stars. The poem concludes when an observation through her window brings her back down to earth.

Just now a glint of
sunlight on glass alerts me.
That massive cloud has all
come underfoot, unsullied white.

(Avison 2006, 31)

In *Listening*, she seems to be even more hemmed-in: "Last year's pussy willows / branch about all / winter in / a dry pewter vase" she writes ("A Lingering Touch"). Similarly she sees that, "The last two daffodils / are dying on my table" ("Still Life"). Her observations of the out-of-doors here come frequently through the lens of memory — sometimes childhood memories such as, "that last / evening, in good old summertime / before the

move out West". In "Other" she remembers an early morning, in a small Toronto backyard when various birds "twittered and piped and gurgled all / at once" – all the more remarkable because to her "The birds seem few now." Such distances did not dull her razor-sharp perceptions.

I asked Joan Eichner – her literary executor – if perhaps Margaret became more prolific in her final years because she was able to avoid the distractions that a more mobile life thrusts upon us. Joan agreed, and said of the time prior to her death, "physically she was limited and her eyesight was poor, so she was not very active though she made a point of walking with her walker outside every day for a short distance. What she could still do was to read/write under a strong light in her high-backed chair; this enabled her to carry on with her poetry, as well as with her autobiography" (Eichner, 2009).

That autobiography has recently appeared in the book, *I Am Here and Not Not There* (Avison, 2009). That volume includes some shorter pieces: two essays written by Margaret, some early letters from the 1940s and 1950s to other writers, and three interviews, including the one I conducted with her for *Image*.

In holding her work in such high esteem, I am in good company. At her death, Michael Higgins, of St. Thomas University, called her, "arguably Canada's pre-eminent poet writing in English" (Higgins, 2007). She has twice won the Governor General's Award for poetry – for *Winter Sun* (1960), and for *No Time* (1989) – she received the Griffin Poetry Prize for 2002's *Concrete and Wild Carrot*, she won the 2005 Leslie K. Tarr Award for career achievement, and she has been made an officer of the Order of Canada. Canada's first Poet Laureate, George Bowering, once referred to her as, "the best poet we have had" (Martin, 2005, 65).

Forms of the word "listen" appear throughout the new collection. Margaret Avison's poetry is often about giving attention, and often about reflecting on meaning; therefore, *Listening* is a most suitable title. The title poem, "Listening (for Grandma)" is about language, and words – in this case words given by "a kindly / elder," that to the young Margaret seemed to have "no heft" for her:

Words up in the
air they'd seemed, blown eastward with
the early spring winds. When I am old
perhaps I will be savouring the
squirrelling words at play in
my innermost branches?

Years later she discovers how those words take on the voice of the deceased, as she comes to know what her grandmother knew, and "how / real words are" even though we can take them for grated.

...Those
words, still hers, now
murmur within, massy as a
golden heirloom.

Margaret Avison began writing poetry when she was very young. Her parents had encouraged her early efforts. "The family myth designated me as a writer," she said; "I myself narrowed that in time to poet, sensing that poetry could utter what understanding could not, or had not, penetrated" (Kent, 2008, 51-59). As an elementary school student her first poems appeared in a Calgary newspaper, and then in *The Globe and Mail* once her family had returned east. When she was a grade nine student at Humberside Collegiate, in west

Toronto, a teacher had been very encouraging to her concerning a poem she had written, called "Ode to the apple core." She makes reference to this early effort in one of the later poems in *Listening* – "Occasional Poem" – which was written after the death of her niece. In part she reflects on the different views of death at various stages of life. Here and throughout the book she seems to be finally acknowledging her age.

Avison's poetry can at first be difficult to access. Her sentences often cause the reader to take several stabs at them in order to decide how a word functions within the whole, and how one sentence relates to another. For example, "For the Children's Questions" begins, "What is this glinting / deep (or gasping uprush); / the "why, how, when" of it?"

Her asides in the middle of a complex thought can be distracting, but it is her use of words as nouns that seem to want to be read as verbs – or as verbs that deceive us into thinking they are nouns – that slows me most. In "Slow Start" she says, "On the / muddle of not yet un- / differentiated clouds / stray / marbling streaks." Perhaps you clearly read that sentence without trouble, but it took me several tries before I read "marbling" as a noun (not an adjective or adverb) and "streaks" as a verb (not a noun). In this way, Avison slows her readers' progress, enabling them to be more reflective and thoughtful, as she is herself being reflective and thoughtful. As David Kent – an important Avison commentator – has said, "Her poetry is, first of all, challenging because her own voice is so distinctive and her poetry so freshly unpredictable" (Kent, 2008, 51-59).

Like in her earlier books, her obsession with the meanings of words, root words and etymology continues. She asks "Don't we tend to / twist lines, try to ad lib some / 'general sense' of / what the words mean?" ("Misconstruing"), challenging us to have more care. In this example she considers the meaning of the word "abominable," relating it to its root, "omen," and reflects on our evasion of meanings that we're not yet ready for. Margaret Avison does not toss words around casually; her respect for language assures us that every word will be used with precision. In describing a long incarcerated, although innocent, prisoner on the day of his release ("Releases") – she focuses on that word, what it means, and what it means for him and his family. She concludes with the following metaphor that will stir our understanding of that meaning:

Back where the icejam
breaks, where frolicking waters
foam and swirl down, up, over flooding
wintry fields and rutted roads, the scramble for
deliverance is, this day,
in all its senses widely,
widely understood.

In "Two Whoms or I'm in Two Minds" – which Joan Eichner tells me is a conversation between a philosopher (who speaks in generalities) and a poet (whose focus is particulars) – Margaret not only compares specific and general, but contrasts common and fancy words. Here she grows playful – "let's have a cluster of / particulates that I can / dance among, with castanets." – and even this playfulness is in service of her reflectiveness.

Another recognizable Avison stylistic trademark is to often conclude a sentence that would otherwise be read as a statement with a question mark. In "Come! With No Hostess Gift," from the new book, she is exploring God's perfection in the context of his omniscience, and says, "But / that would be an / imperfection without / the spice of now and then / wincings, and... / wit?"

I believe she adds the question mark partly to avoid being didactic, as if she is asking her readers if they think her statement is true. I asked her about this technique in the con-

text of her poem "Meditation on the Opening of the Fourth Gospel" from *No Time*. She said, "One reason I do it is in order to get under the text. I particularly like to ask these questions of something familiar in scripture, to try to read it in a new way. Something familiar can become unfamiliar as you approach it. Sometimes my questions are a way of feeling my way into a subject, and sometimes they're straight questions" (Martin, 2005, 70).

There are many examples of such straight questions in *Listening*. A few poems have question marks in their titles, and there are only 16 of the poems in the book that don't use question marks at all. This emphasizes just how much questioning is part of her style. In this way she even communicates much through the absence of a question mark. In "Ever Greens" she refers to God as "the / eternal Who, / creator of / trees". The poem concludes with the words, "Who / knows." It is not a question.

In *No Time*, Avison wrote extensively of Christ's incarnation and of God as saviour, whereas, recently she has focussed on him more as the creator. In her poem, "On a Maundy Thursday Walk" (from *Concrete and Wild Carrot*), she begins, "The Creator was / walking by the sea," and then she considers the unsullied perfection of his creation in contrast with the faultiness of "even our / most excellent makings" (Avison, 2002, 71). In *Listening* she continues this reflectiveness in "Come! With No Hostess Gift" in "Ever Greens" and as follows in "Pilgrim":

As the Creator made
every orb and places
where they could roll, and every
ocean, each with its beaches and
promontories so there could be
land greening day by day,
at peace with the dark hours, He
saw that it was good.

Margaret's conversion to Christian faith in January of 1963 was not an incident independent of her poetry, but very much a result of her poetic vision. She followed a path that is common to many poets who come to Christian faith: she closely observed the world, and expected it to reveal something of itself to her. Later, when she began reading her Bible, she was ready for a similar opening of meaning.

She grew up within the church – her father was the minister at High Park United Church during the depression – but she turned away from its teachings and the middle-class lifestyle she had been raised to. Her politics were leftist, and she became an agnostic for many years. At this time, she had published her first book, *Winter Sun*, to much critical praise.

One day she was smoking and working on some proofs in the basement of Emmanuel College at University of Toronto, when a girl came in and spoke to her of Jesus. Margaret brushed her off, but the girl invited her to attend Knox Presbyterian Church, which she eventually did. Even with time, she had trouble getting at the obvious faith of the congregation, so the minister challenged her to read from the Gospel of John every morning before she went to work. At seven o'clock one morning she read John 14:1 "You believe in God; believe also in me." Margaret told me that she had had a strong sense of Jesus' presence within the room. "Well, okay, I'll believe in you, but don't touch the poetry, because it's all I've got left." she had said. Immediately she felt cold and hardened. She picked up her Bible and threw it across the room. "Okay, take everything then!" – "And that," she told me, "was the beginning" (Martin, 2005, 68).

How is it that someone – whom some might dismiss as being "merely" a religious

poet – has, in our very secular age, been able to attract such notice? Perhaps it's her lineage, working in the rich tradition of great poets of Christian faith such as John Donne, George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and T.S. Eliot. More likely, it is just the fact that she is such a talented and disciplined poet. She matter-of-factly said to me, "Coming to faith enriched my subject matter" (Martin, 2005, 67).

In the praise poem "Diadem" from *Momentary Dark*, she says:

To the
awakened eye, although
sea-wrack green and bronze are un-
promising, fresh growth peers visible forth.

(Avison 2006, 41)

And she wants us, her readers, to be listening and paying close attention, too.

To Margaret, having people probing into her life has always been a regrettable result of her artistic success – an infringement on her privacy. "I wish it could be deferred until people are dead," she told me in the *Image* interview. David Kent found this out the hard way, having her at first co-operate with him in his research towards a critical biography, but later finding her increasingly uncomfortable. He insightfully points to two reasons: The first, theoretical objection – which I think is a smoke screen – is she felt "attention to the writer's life inevitably distracted readers from the work itself" (Kent, 2008, 51-59). If this were the real reason, I doubt she would have written her own memoirs. Her emotional objection, according to David Kent in a recent piece in *Canadian Notes & Queries*, relates to growing up as a pastor's daughter, always under the scrutiny of the entire congregation. Perhaps he is right. He eventually offered to not publish anything biographical about her while she was still alive. "The project that has been dormant for over fifteen years can now be resumed," he told me (Kent, 2009).

Every poem in *Listening* had been completed when Margaret died – and was sitting in a particular drawer – with the exception of the extensive, "Our ? Kind" (thirteen pages long in *Listening*). Joan Eichner does not believe Margaret had quite finished revising it, but it is included because it had been such an important poem to her. She had been preoccupied with the trial of Saddam Hussein, Joan told me, and this gives the proper context for understanding the poem – even though it veers into the behaviour of swans, her own childhood mistreatment of a neighbour child, medieval Europe ravaged by the Black Death, post-Great war pacifism, and the behaviour of city racoons. It is not a political poem, so much as a poem about humanity.

Having a familiarity with the Bible would be helpful in reading some of Margaret Avison's poetry, but she is well aware that many of her readers do not. She helps us with footnote references to scripture, which will enable us to delve deeper, although often the reference isn't needed to catch the essential meaning. What they give us is somewhere to further pursue the background of her thinking. Similarly in "A Hearing" from *Momentary Dark* the footnote to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* simply gives us the background from which her musing began.

Beyond the noted Biblical references to "consuming fire," in the poem "Flaming?," I suspect there's also an allusion to the story of the three Hebrew youths in Babylon that Nebuchadnezzar had thrown into his fiery furnace for not bowing before him (Daniel 3). Such unnoted allusions, however, in her poetry are less frequent.

I have learned to pay close attention, though, to such details as capitalization. She will

often capitalize words such as “You” or “His” (as in the title poem) as obvious references to God; in other cases, she’s letting us know a word has more than its apparent significance. Sometimes it’s relating to scripture; Joan believes “Day” (“Heaven”) refers to “the day of the Lord” from Revelation 16:14 and elsewhere in the Bible. Sometimes it’s referring to something of importance from elsewhere in the poem; “Head’s” (38) in “Our ? Kind” is referring to Saddam Hussein who is later called the “Head of State” (48) in the same poem.

Growing old is a subtle theme within this final collection. In “Soundings,” for example, she compares three things: art, old age, and Toronto trees – and here makes the observation that “Old age excels / in listening.” She uses a traditional rhyming quatrain in “Safe but Shaky,” which expresses the concerns of the elderly. Also, in “Slow Breathing,” reflecting on the time of recovery during the lull between Christmas and New Year’s, she says, “Old age too is an / un-festive interlude.” Interlude? Yes, she expresses her firm hope that, just as a new year follows the old, death is not the end. She acknowledges there are losses that shatter

the heart, ripen a
person’s experience before
the last-of-light is, once-
for-all, the new
threshold.

She gives us much to consider.

Margaret Avison’s Christian faith is central to how she viewed this world, and to the insights she expressed in some of the best poetry ever written in Canada. In the end she set an example as to how to speak about ultimate things with humility and grace – with a voice that causes us to listen. “Her death was very peaceful,” Margaret’s close friend, Joan, told me by e-mail that summer, “and she wanted to be with her Lord.”

Notes

1. From this point onwards, poems from *Listening* (Avison 2009) will be mentioned by poem name but not cited with page numbers.

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