The Essential Margaret Avison
selected and with a foreword by Robyn Sarah

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

In 2007 one of the strongest poetic voices in Canada fell silent. Born in Galt, Ontario in 1918, Margaret Avison experienced the adversity of being a female artist at a time when the art world was dominated by men. Robyn Sarah says in her foreword: “Regarded by some as a poet’s poet, credited as one of the first to bring modernism to Canadian poetry, considered by many a difficult poet, always a favourite of academics, Avison was from the beginning taken seriously – her linguistically vibrant poems admired, analyzed, and much written-about” (7). Surprisingly, for a country that seems to value conservatism, Avison won many awards for this difficult style of poetry, a style characterized by Sarah as “broach[ing] the metaphysical and theological by way of the concrete, the physical, the social and human, delineating these with almost hallucinatory attention to detail” (8).

Her verse reflects the new rhythms that jazz musicians were discovering in the late ’50s and early ’60s – a jagged, angular rhythm that ripped into the jugular of those attuned to this new sound. It also reflects the experiments that were being done around San Francisco at the time – that of the Beats and, in particular, the discursive structures being developed by Philip Whalen.

Margaret Avison twice won the Governor General’s Award (for her first collection, Winter Sun, published in 1960, and for her 1989 collection No Time) and, in 2003, the Griffin Poetry Prize for Concrete and Wild Carrot (Brick Books, 2002). In 1985 she was appointed to the Order of Canada.

There is but one complaint about this excellent collection – its brevity. Avison published more than 450 poems in her lifetime, and Sarah says that she was limited to 49 pages, four pages of which are taken up with “The Story,” Avison’s first post-conversion poem. Avison, whose father was a Methodist minister, re-embraced Christianity in 1963.

The opening poem, “The Butterfly,” exemplifies the Philip Whalen influence as well as the jagged rhythms. Here are the first few lines:

An uproar,
a spruce-green sky, bound in iron,
the murky sea running a sulphur scum,
I saw a butterfly, suddenly.

It clung between the ribs of the storm, wavering,
and flung against the battering bone-wind. (11)

The unusual opening line in this excerpt takes us directly into the midst of the storm, two little words that erupt into edginess. The New Critics, whose legacy dominated the analysis of poetry at the time this poem was written, would have been baffled by the structure but delighted by the repetition of consonantal sound – the sibilance of the first three lines followed by the plosive ‘b’s of the next three – “butterfly,” “battering,” “bone.” The displacement of “suddenly” from its normal position at the beginning of that sentence to the end, separated by a comma, ejects the word into its meaning. The descriptors, too, are unusual: “spruce-green sky,” “sulphur scum,” “ribs of the storm,” “battering bone-wind,” the placement of the last hyphen connecting “bone” to “wind” and not to the expected “battering” creating an eerie displacement. Almost lost within this avalanche of sound is the internal rhyme of the last two lines.

This structure is not the only one Avison was to employ. She resorted to end-rhymes at times. “Mordent for a Melody” seems to pay homage to Einstein with its opening stanza:

Horsepower crops Araby for pasture.
TV slides past the comet’s fin.
No question, time is moving faster
And, maybe, space is curling in. (23)

Unusual imagery cascades like constellations throughout this astronomical poem where we encounter the Milky Way and supernovas. Note the humour of the first line with the play on “crops” and “pasture,” and the incredible line “Sleep has a secret weapon.” with its distribution of “s” and “p” sounds. How long did Avison fret over this line before getting it exactly right?

Avison delighted in the creation of new juxtapositions of sound. Take “In a Season of Unemployment,” which returns to the Whalen poetic style and plays with the “p” sound:

These green painted park benches are
all new. The Park Commissioner had them
planted.
Sparrows go on (28)

the word “painted” a playful touch, and the delight in the long “e” sound of the first two words.
“A Story,” with its indented sections, is a conversation. Here is a part from early in the poem:

I’m sorry I talk so. Young
is young. I ought to remember
and let you go and be glad.
No. It’s all right.
I’d just sooner stay home. (32)

This poem opens doors for others to emulate. Avison captures the ordinariness of conversation, foregoing her usual vocal pyrotechnics in the process. Yet, this subdued idiom is used to describe what, for her, would have been one of the most awe-inspiring events she had encountered, given that this poem represents her return to her upbringing.

Robyn Sarah has chosen well. The poems included in this far too brief encounter with Avison enable the reader to get a good overview of what made her poetry unique and memorable. For the reader new to her, this is an excellent introductory collection. For avid Avison junkies (of whom there are many), this is a back-pocket book, one to carry around with you to obtain your momentary fix.

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for Malahat Review, Arc, Antigonish Review, Fiddlehead and The Danforth Review, in the U.S. for Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge and Galatea Revisits, and in Australia for Jacket.

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