

THE POETRY OF RAYMOND SOUSTER AND MARGARET AVISON

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Thesis presented to the School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Ph.D. in English literature

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

OTTAWA, CANADA, 1975

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<u>BCP</u>	<u>The Book of Canadian Poetry</u> , ed. by A.J.M. Smith
<u>CT</u>	<u>The Colour of the Times</u>
<u>D</u>	. . . . .	<u>The Dumbfounding</u>
<u>PM</u>	. . . . .	<u>Place of Meeting</u>
<u>PMC</u>	. . . . .	<u>Poetry of Mid-Century</u> , ed. by Milton Wilson
<u>SF</u>	. . . . .	<u>So Far So Good</u>
<u>SP 1956</u>	. . . . .	<u>Selected Poems</u> (1956 edition)
<u>SP 1972</u>	. . . . .	<u>Selected Poems</u> (1972 edition)
<u>TE</u>	. . . . .	<u>Ten Elephants on Yonge Street</u>
<u>WS</u>	. . . . .	<u>Winter Sun</u>
<u>Y</u>	. . . . .	<u>The Years</u>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Raymond Souster for his generous hospitality on my trips to Toronto, and his interest and perceptive comments that opened up new perspectives on his work; to the Inter-Library Loan department of the University of Ottawa Library, whose never-failing dependability saved much time; and finally to my Directress, Dr. Lorraine McMullen, who was consistently most helpful and encouraging in her advice. Their help has made this thesis possible.

INTRODUCTION

Raymond Souster and Margaret Avison are two poets from Toronto, now in their fifties, who first started publishing their poetry shortly before and during World War II. Neither is a flamboyant or aggressive personality, and it is partly because of their reticent natures that they have been slow in receiving the attention accorded to some other Canadian poets, but felt by an increasing number of critics to be their due no less. A further reason for their neglect until recently is their self-imposed exile from what was at least until a few years ago the relative security of an academic life.¹ Their absence from university circles and avoidance of the university reading circuits has not speeded their acceptance by university critics.

Both are involved with the everyday world, their working lives having little direct connection with their poetry. Souster, whose father was a banker, has worked for many years in the securities department of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce at Bay and King Streets in Toronto. Margaret Avison, formerly a social worker at the Evangel Mission in Toronto, is now (1974) employed in Toronto while continuing to do volunteer work for the same mission. Neither has attempted combining the roles of poet and literary critic, although Souster, who

¹Margaret Avison did spend the academic year 1972-1973 as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario. She states that while she was glad of the experience, she has no desire to return.

has been active as an editor of little magazines, continues to be active as an editor of anthologies. Although Margaret Avison has done some book reviewing, particularly for the Canadian Forum, she has published few reviews since 1960.

Beyond these similarities in externals, which in any consideration of their poetry must be relegated to a secondary position, it might seem that the work of these two poets has little in common. The type of poetry each writes has a radically different impact on most readers. Avison's poetry is primarily intellectual and impersonal in nature, characterized by subtleties of language and complex patterns of imagery, although her poems are certainly not devoid of emotional impact. Souster, on the other hand, writes a simple, unadorned poetry that is at its best a fresh and compelling representation of his Toronto world, although more artful than most critics have recognized.

Much of the importance of Margaret Avison and Raymond Souster to Canadian poetry stems from the fact that they are among the first Canadian poets for whom American poets were more important than British. Previous Canadian poets at least as far back as Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott had turned their attention to Canadian themes, but in dealing with these themes language and form were often derived from British models. It was only with Avison, Souster, and some other Canadian poets who reached maturity during the second World War that the focus of attention was shifted from British to American poets. This area will be discussed more specifically in the first chapter.

Raymond Souster's links with American poetry are especially clear.

The American poets Kenneth Patchen and Kenneth Fearing were important early influences,² while William Carlos Williams was an important poet for Souster from the early 1950's on.³ Later American influences came from Robert Creeley and, to a lesser extent, "beat" poets such as Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti. Through the publication of the little magazine Contact from 1952 to 1954 Souster established a close relationship with Cid Corman, the editor of the American little magazine Origin. The latter magazine, closely associated with the work of the "Black Mountain" school, published poems by Creeley, Olson, Zukofsky, and many other poets who were considered avant garde at this time. A number of these poets, including Corman, Olson, and Creeley, also published poetry in Souster's Contact magazine, and in this way were first introduced to a limited Canadian audience.

Margaret Avison's personal links with American poetry are less extensive, but nonetheless present. She published a number of her poems in Origin, the same publication edited by Souster's associate Cid Corman. The January 1962 issue featured her poetry. It was with the help of the American poet Denise Levertov, also associated with the "Black Mountain" school of poets that her second collection, The Dumbfounding, was published by W.W. Norton. The influence of the American poet Elizabeth Bishop is also important, as Avison has acknowledged.

Although these personal links are important weathervanes, the

²Raymond Souster, "Some Afterthoughts on Contact magazine," in Michael Gnarowski, An Index to the Contents of Contact, 1952-54, (Montreal: Delta Canada, 1966), p. 1.

³Ibid., p. 1.

more important bonds with American poets lie in the nature of their poetry. Both Souster and Avison frequently employ a conversational idiom which owes much to American sources. Both reject, in most of their poetry, the concept of a regular metric line in favour of more conversational rhythms. While these are generalizations, it is true that American poets rely less on traditional concepts of prosody than the British, with Souster and Avison being much closer to the American poets. Both adapt techniques and approaches to poetry which have much in common with such recent American poets as Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley. In their use of these techniques they act as a bridge to the Vancouver poets of the sixties, and are two of the most important Canadian poets of their generation to do so. These areas will also be discussed in the first chapter.

While the American influences on these poets are certainly strong, Avison and Souster are both alive to the Canadian context as well. It may be a surprise to some that Souster has always admired Archibald Lampman, although their poetry is so different that any actual influence is very doubtful. Of more direct relevance to Souster's poetry is W.W.E. Ross, a Canadian who started writing his simple but forceful poetry in the 1920's. Souster's colleagues of the 1940's were also important in furthering his development. Louis Dudek was particularly important in providing him with intellectual stimuli in his earlier years, particularly by acquainting him with the poets whom Dudek met during his years of study at Columbia.

Any direct influences of Canadian poets on Margaret Avison are, if present, well concealed. Of the earlier moderns, her poetry is

closest to that of A.J.M. Smith, although Avison's poetry is more oriented to sensual reality and generally less austere. She was associated with neither the First Statement nor Preview groups of the early 1940's, apparently preferring to work alone. Of more recent Canadian poets, she states that she admires the non-concrete poetry of bp nicol. A letter from Avison to bp nicol prefaces his first volume, Journeying & the Returns.⁴

But while the historical connections are important in establishing the poetic context of each poet, the most important contexts are the similarities and differences in their poetry. The poetry of both Margaret Avison and Raymond Souster explores the problem of the individual and his relation to urban society. Both avoid dealing with the more affluent or stable members of society in favour of those who in one way or another are out of tune with their surroundings. This is especially true of Souster, who is concerned in his poetry with the derelicts of the city, and even with the non-human residents of the city such as cats, birds, insects, and flowers. Both poets portray the city as a repressive, restrictive force, continually endangering the survival of the individual. War, a further important negative element in Souster's vision, is rarely present in the poetry of Avison.

Both poets portray childhood as a time when our senses were able to experience the full force of sensual reality. Souster is more prone than Avison to nostalgic reverie about childhood, as well as many other subjects. Avison ventures into history, religion, and mythology

⁴bp nicol, Journeying & the Returns, (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1967).

frequently, areas avoided generally by Souster.

Both Souster and Avison write with their eye steadily on the object, although Souster is more concerned with the emotional reaction of the narrator to the object than Avison, who is more impersonal. Avison often conceptualizes, while Souster keeps the emotion simple and direct. Both employ irony frequently, although Souster generally turns the irony back on the narrator. Avison most often focuses the irony on the subject of the poem.

Both rely mainly on rhythms and language which are close to those of conversation, although Souster is much closer to common speech in most of his poetry than is Avison. Avison employs a greater variety of rhythms and language. She is unusually sensitive to nuances of meaning, often weaving elaborate conceits as she attempts to utilize the full force of each word.

The important links between Avison and Souster, then, are through their associations with American poetry and through similarities and differences in their poetry itself. I intend to work inductively with a minimum of preconceptions from a close examination of their poetry to explore the nature of the poetic achievements of each. Each illuminates aspects of the other which would not be as clear in a thesis devoted to only one of these poets.

For my sources I try to use the most accessible materials wherever possible. With Souster this means frequent use of The Colour of the Times, The Years, and the 1972 Selected Poems. References to other collections are made when the most suitable illustrations are not contained in these volumes. Avison's two volumes, Winter Sun and The

Dumbfounding, will also be referred to frequently.

As will be elaborated in the first chapter, Avison and Souster, despite far-reaching differences, have important common roots. Through an examination of these roots, particularly in Canadian and modern American poetry, a foundation will be laid for an examination of the poetry of each.

CHAPTER I

POETIC ROOTS OF RAYMOND SOUSTER AND MARGARET AVISON

This chapter will aim at placing the poetry of Raymond Souster and Margaret Avison in an historical context. Each poet has a definite relation to a Canadian context, but each has displayed wide-ranging affinities as well. Both, particularly Souster, have strong links with modern American poetry.

While Souster has indicated little concern for pre-modern poetry, he has definite sympathies for the poetry of Lampman. An article in Current Account, a bank magazine, quotes Souster as stating that Lampman has for a long time been his idol.¹ There is certainly a similarity in their externally undramatic lives in the worlds of business and government, respectively. But more importantly there is a similarity in the basic tensions of their poetry. The main polarity in Lampman's poetry is between the peace of nature and the harsh brutality of the city. Souster has less faith in the peace of nature, but his negative view of the city is similar. In Souster's poetry the refuge of nature is repalced by the struggling individual who, bereft of the support of nature, must contend directly with the city.

Souster is not, however, as sympathetic to Lampman's

¹"Bank Poet Wins Acclaim," Current Account, (June 1964), p. 8.

Canadian contemporaries. One of his rarely expressed poetic views on some of Canada's nineteenth-century poets is found in the early poem "Fredericton!"

So this is "the poet's corner
Of Canada"—Bliss, Sir Charles
And Francis Joseph Sherman,
All born, all Latin'd and Greek'd here.

Not one of them
With anything really to say,
But dressing it up, faking it,
So that they fooled quite a few in their time.²

Perhaps Lampman does not "dress it up" to the extent of the poets mentioned here, but the difference between his poetry and that of Souster is too great for there to be any similarities beyond those of a general nature.

Until the 1940's Canadian poetry was strongly influenced by the central tradition of English poetry. This tradition includes most of the major neo-classical and romantic poets, and such Victorians as Tennyson, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Swinburne. Yeats and T.S. Eliot are two of the most prominent modern poets who have carried on this central stylistic tradition of poetry as an harmonious, rhythmic, intelligent work of art. The major Canadian poets of the 1920's and 1930's—E.J. Pratt, A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott, A.M. Klein—were influenced primarily by British writers.

Most British poets of this time relied mainly on variations on traditional prosody for their poetic techniques. Meter, accent,

²Raymond Souster, Selected Poems, (Toronto: Contact Press, 1956), p. 23.

rhyme, diction, tone, assonance, and consonance were in all their permutations and combinations the means through which their poetry conveyed its content. As a generalization this is open to numerous exceptions, such as the imagist poems which were written by many poets on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1910's and 1920's. Canadian practitioners of this form include F.R. Scott, A.J.M. Smith, and W.W.E. Ross. But in general Canadian poetry was until the 1940's strongly influenced by the stylistic concerns of the English tradition.

As Gnarowski and Dudek indicate in their book The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada,³ modern Canadian poetry received its start with Arthur Stringer's Open Water⁴ and Frank Oliver Call's Acanthus and Wild Grape.⁵ While the literary value of these collections is not great, they do indicate that the development of modern Canadian poetry was much earlier than the often assigned parent-hood of A.J.M. Smith and F.R. Scott during the mid-1920's. Other Canadian poets who started writing in the 1920's are of greater literary importance than Stringer and Call. W.W.E. Ross, R.G. Everson, Raymond Knister, and Dorothy Livesay all started publishing free verse in the early 1920's. The difference between their irregular forms and the traditional verse that was in the ascendant

³Michael Gnarowski and Louis Dudek, eds., The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada, (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1970), pp. 3-4.

⁴Arthur Stringer, Open Water, (Toronto: Bell and Cockburn, 1914).

⁵Frank Oliver Call, Acanthus and Wild Grape, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1920).

at this time is obvious. The free verse of these poets is generally even more austere and direct than the poetry of Smith, Klein, and Scott, the better known Canadian poets of this time.

W.W.E. Ross is an especially important poet for Souster. Ross writes in a lean, spare style, devoid of the prosodic techniques which most Canadian poets had considered essential for poetry. The following stanza from "The Walk" is representative:

He walked through the woods
and saw the merging
of the tall trunks
in the green distance,—
the undergrowth
of mottled green,
with sunlight and shadow
and flowers starting

The avoidance of rhyme, striking imagery, or patterning of sounds is different from the majority of poetry being written in Canada at this time.

Souster has discovered a particular affinity for the poetry of Ross and has edited with John Robert Colombo a collection of his poems.⁷ One of Souster's anthologies, New Wave Canada, is dedicated to Ross as "the first Canadian poet". In an afterword to Experiment, a selection of poems by Ross which Souster published on Contact Press,⁸ Souster indicates his reasons for his admiration of Ross:

⁶W.W.E. Ross, Shapes and Sounds, eds. Raymond Souster and John Robert Colombo, (Don Mills, Ontario: Longman's, 1968), p. 50. Originally published in E.R. [W.W.E. Ross], Laconics, (Ottawa: Overbrook Press, 1930), p. 19.

⁷W.W.E. Ross, Shapes and Sounds.

⁸W.W.E. Ross, Experiment, (Toronto: Contact Press, 1957).

W.W.E. Ross was the first important modern Canadian poet writing in English. In the preface to *Laconics*⁹ he states his intention:

"These pieces in
a style more "North American,"
perhaps, or in
a manner more "Canadian"
than the most
of what has been put down in verse
in Canada,
are not asserted to be so;

But it is hoped
that they will seemingly contain
something of
what quality may mark us off
from older Europe,—
something "North American"—
and something of
the sharper tang of Canada."

The subject matter of these early poems was entirely his own. As for style, although William Carlos Williams comes first to mind, he himself says that Marianne Moore was a far greater influence. In contrast to which we have the contributors to *New Provinces* (1936) with their borrowings from Eliot, Yeats, and others, all stemming directly from England. And it was to be these later poets who were to exert such an influence upon their contemporaries that it was to take another fifteen years to get any American influences¹⁰ working again into the blood-stream of Canadian poetry.

As the above quotation indicates, Souster sees the assimilation of American influences to be of critical importance for Canadian poetry if it is to acquire an integrity of its own. The significance of Ross is discussed further in an article by Stevens.¹¹ Peter Stevens states that Ross was "the first poet in Canada to

⁹E.R. [W.W.E. Ross], *Laconics*.

¹⁰Raymond Souster, afterword to W.W.E. Ross, *Experiment*, p. 23.

¹¹Peter Stevens, "On W.W.E. Ross," *Canadian Literature* 39 (Winter 1969): pp. 43-61.

use factual things unadorned by metaphor."¹² Like Cummings and some of the members of the "Black Mountain" school he searches for simultaneity, making the relationships in a poem spatial rather than sequential.¹³ As in the poem "The Walk", the first stanza of which is quoted on page eleven, each line adds a significant detail to the scene described, although a time sequence is avoided.

The American poetic tradition had its first major practitioner in Walt Whitman,¹⁴ whose "barbaric yawp" was the first major indication in American poetry of the new society searching for a suitable manner of artistic expression. Carl Sandburg and in particular William Carlos Williams have been the major twentieth century developers of this tradition. Although the techniques of all these poets of the American tradition are extremely different, all have in common the rejection of the concept of a regular metric line composed of light and heavy accents occurring at more or less set intervals, and the use of diction which approximates the language of conversation. All attempt to reflect artistically the spirit of a country which has through its revolution commenced the establishment of a society whose bases were different from those of English society. A country without a complex literary

¹²Ibid., p. 44.

¹³Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁴Souster states that Whitman, "our greatest poet of the hemisphere, has always been close to me, although he's so powerful he can only make you humble". Raymond Souster to Francis Mansbridge, 26 December 1974.

tradition, essentially democratic in spirit if not in fact, required a poetics that was a suitable medium for expressing the spirit of this democratic, traditionless, "free" society.

But many of the poets who rejected traditional prosody did so without attempting to postulate any new prosody in its place. This is, according to Williams,¹⁵ Whitman's great weakness, although Whitman's imaginative energy often saved him from the pitfalls which many of his later admirers, such as many of the "beat" poets of the fifties, did not always avoid.

One of Williams' most valuable contributions is that he investigated more thoroughly than any previous writer the theoretical and practical implications of writing in America. He sought to fashion a new poetics which would be adequate for dealing with this content. Williams combined a profound understanding of America with an ear for American speech rhythms and an ability to mold these into a poetic form that yet stays very close to the American speech in which it is rooted.

Writing for Cid Corman's magazine Origin in 1954, Williams provides valuable hints as to what he considers essential aspects of his poetry:

No verse can be free, it must be governed by some measure, but not by the old measure. We have to return to some measure but a measure consonant with our time and not a

¹⁵Letter to Richard Eberhart 23 May, 1954 in J.C. Thirlwall, ed., Selected Letters, (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), p. 321, rpt. in Charles Tomlinson, ed., William Carlos Williams, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 313.

mode so rotten it stinks.¹⁶

It is in this essay that Williams also introduces his controversial concept, the "variable foot", an attempt to combine a degree of regularity which would yet allow more freedom than traditional English prosody. Williams makes it clear that this is no final answer, but only a groping in the direction, hopefully the right one, of a new measure.

Elsewhere Williams emphasizes the tune or the music as the most important element, rather than the old rule of counted syllables. In a letter to Richard Eberhart dated 23 May, 1954, he states that the best of modern verse shall be known by the music, and that the words themselves don't really matter so much.¹⁷ His beat, he argues, gives resources to the ear which result in a language which we hear spoken about us every day.¹⁸

As a pioneer in the field of modern prosody, Williams' statements are naturally tentative and allusive, leading to numerous critical arguments as to both their nature and their value. Paul Fussell considers Williams' measure a cadence midway in formality between traditional English metric and the complete anarchy of uncontrolled free verse. He decides that a poet such as Robert Frost, who combines traditional prosody with the unique

¹⁶William Carlos Williams, "On Measure," Selected Essays, (New York: New Directions, 1954), p. 339.

¹⁷William Carlos Williams, p. 313.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 313.

metrical tone of the language,¹⁹ is preferable. A. Kingsley Weatherhead is more favourable, arguing that the incompleteness of the form provides opportunities for subtleties and ambiguities of meaning.²⁰ He also helps clarify Williams' statement that poetry must be known by its music with his noting that what might appear to sight as an arbitrary arrangement of words is often revealed to the ear as beautiful.²¹ The way that the poem is supposed to sound can be communicated only by its shape on the page.²² So the sound of the poem, appreciated either silently or by being read aloud, is of key importance for Williams. The spatial arrangement of his later poems facilitates the communication of this sound.

Although not directly influenced in his early poetry by Williams,²³ Souster's poetry is characterized by diction and rhythm which are far closer to the laconic movement of Ross' line than the poetry of Smith or Scott. Part of the motivation for this unadorned manner of expression may be due to his concern with poetry as communication, a concern which is most directly expressed in the preface he wrote for his section of Cerberus:

¹⁹Paul Fussell, "Some Critical Implications of Metrical Analysis," Poetic Meter and Poetic Form, (New York: Random House, 1967), rpt. in William Carlos Williams, p. 316.

²⁰A. Kingsley Weatherhead, "William Carlos Williams: Prose, Form, and Measure," in English Literary History, Vol. 33, rpt. in William Carlos Williams, p. 327.

²¹Ibid., p. 325.

²²Ibid., p. 319.

²³See below, p. 19.

S. has always believed (and still believes) that the primary function of poetry is to communicate something to somebody else. Not too important what that something is, the big thing is to get it across, "make contact". If you fail here all that follows, everything else you throw in, is wasted, and you might as well start all over again. Ninety per cent of modern poetry fails here.²⁴

Whether or not the content of the above quotation was influenced by Williams, the idea that the content of the poem is of little importance in comparison with the manner in which this content is communicated, parallels statements by Williams.²⁵

Souster appears to have been especially intrigued by the visual arrangement which Williams gives much of his later poetry. A few years after first reading Williams' poetry, Souster revised much of his own poetry to incorporate a more visual appeal. He may also have been influenced in this direction by the fact that W.W.E. Ross and Kenneth Patchen, two poets whom he has long admired, employ visual arrangements of their lines in a modest fashion.

A good example of the effect of this technique can be illustrated by comparing different versions of the same poem, with and without visual arrangement of lines. A suitable poem for this purpose is "A Bed Without a Woman," originally published in For What Time Slays in 1955 as follows:

A bed without a woman
Is a thing of wood and springs, a pit
To roll in with the Devil. But let
Her body touch its length, and it becomes

²⁴Raymond Souster, Louis Dudek, Irving Layton, Cerberus, (Toronto: Contact Press, 1952), p. 75.

²⁵See above, p. 15.

accurate visual representation of the material object. All these effects are beyond what could be achieved through a non-visual arrangement of lines.

Souster did not first read Williams until May 1952, when Dudek came to Toronto and gave him a copy of Williams' Later Collected Poems.²⁷ Dudek was an important catalyst for Souster, introducing him to a new group of writers on his return from Columbia University in 1951. While at Columbia Dudek had met Paul Blackburn and Cid Corman, and become especially interested in Pound and Williams.²⁸ This was a decade after Souster had started writing and publishing his own poetry, but prior to his reading of Williams, Souster had been influenced by Fearing,²⁹ whose long discursive line reveals in turn the influence of Hart Crane and Carl Sandburg.³⁰ His links with American poetry were clearly established. Further indication of the affinities between Souster and Williams is provided in a letter the latter wrote after Dudek sent Williams a copy of Cerberus:

But somehow when I read you I am moved. I am moved by your subject matter and I am moved by the way that has induced you to conform to it as the very fountain head

²⁷Raymond Souster, "Some Afterthoughts on Contact Magazine," in Michael Gnarowski, Index to Contact Magazine, p. 1.

²⁸Hugh Cook, "The Poetry of Raymond Souster," (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1968), p. 13.

²⁹Raymond Souster, "Some Afterthoughts on Contact Magazine," p. 1.

³⁰Sy Kahn, "Kenneth Fearing and the Twentieth Century Blues," in The Thirties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, ed. Warren French, (Deland, Florida: Everett Edwards, Inc., 1967), p. 137.

of your art.

It is the way that the man speaks that we wait for. A poet does not talk about what is in him; he talks a double language, it is the presence in him that speaks. For the moment he is lost in that identity. And each age is marked by the presences that possess it so its poets are seized by them also, in the flesh, and strut about among us unknown. Poor powerless ghosts, their only life is that which they gain from the poets who lend them a life now and then.

We identify ourselves today (by our technique, unaffected) with those presences which live defeated about us. For do what we may, it is a technique which we have to understand and to master. Try to broaden the treatment of the line. You have to know what a line is, what it has to include, when to expand, when to move rapidly, trippingly and when to plod heavily along. I was happy to see you refer to Olson. But never forget that you are definitely you. You have a chance. "Light and Shadow" was the first thing that caught my eye. "The Lilac Poem" is also good. "To an Antisemite" has it also. There are others. Have confidence in yourself. You've got it.³¹

A further important parallel between these two poets is their exploration of a particular locus. Souster with Toronto, and Williams with Paterson, immerse themselves in a particular place until that place becomes their poetry.

Fearing's influence on Souster was more direct than Williams; a number of parallels in theme and technique exist between their poetry. Both lived in and wrote about a particular place (Fearing in New York and Souster in Toronto), and both see in the modern city a force that continually threatens to crush the imagination and sensitivity in life. Both are passionately concerned that this

³¹William Carlos Williams to Raymond Souster, 28 June 1952. This letter is published in its entirety in Island, 17 September 1964, p. 47. The portion quoted here is also published in Gary Geddes, "A Cursed and Singular Blessing," Canadian Literature 54 (Autumn 1972): p. 28.

imagination and sensitivity survive, often expressing this concern through an anti-capitalistic or anti-bourgeois stance. Both are relatively non-intellectual, accessible poets, appealing primarily to the reader's emotions. Of the two poets, Fearing is much more clearly antagonistic to the middle class and the conformity he sees being imposed on society through the mass media. Souster expresses a more complex, ironic attitude in much of his poetry.

Fearing, one of the foremost and most representative of the American poets of the 1930's, helped provide Souster with a conversational idiom for his poetry, using a line whose boundary is the end of the idea or emotion rather than any set number of syllables. Two aspects of Fearing's poetry that are especially characteristic of Souster's earlier poetry are his use of the long line and his use of repetition. A representative poem by Fearing in which these elements are illustrated is "John Standish, Artist," a stanza of which is quoted below:

When it is night, and millions are awake, moving like
 a sea, not human, not known,
 When millions are aroused to stare, to laugh, to kill,
 When I feel them,
 When they have no voices, but they have mouths and eyes,
 When their wants are confused, but implacable,
 When a theory about them becomes nothing, and a portrait
 of them would look well on no studio wall,
 When they cringe, when they scowl, when they are counted
 by millions,
 When they have no meaning to me, to themselves, to the
 earth, but they are alive.³²

³²Kenneth Fearing, New and Selected Poems, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956), p. 5.

The repetition through long lines packed with bitter resentment is also characteristic of such early Souster poems as "Search", first published in Unit of Five (1944):

Not another bite, not another cigarette,
 not a final cup from the coffee-urn before you leave
 the warmth steaming at the windows
 of the hamburger joint where the Wurlitzer
 booms all night without a stop, and the onions are thick
 between the buns,

Wrap yourself well in that cheap coat that holds back the wind
 like a sieve,
 you have a long way to go, the streets are dark, you may have
 to walk all night before you find
 another heart as lonely, so nearly mad with boredom,
 so filled with such strength, such tenderness
 of love.

(CT, p. 2)

Fearing is much more emphatic in his use of repetition than Souster. His lines tend to be end-stopped, while Souster uses enjambement frequently. These characteristics contribute to a shriller tone than in Souster's poem, which is more conversational in its manner of expression. This manner, combined with the more regular lines of Souster's poem, contributes to an atmosphere of sympathetic humanity rather than confrontation. In each of these poems is a mixture of compassion for their subjects with anger at their oppressors. It is indicative, however, of differing concerns in their poetry, that the subject of Fearing's poem should be the common people generally, while Souster focuses his attention on a specific individual.

One characteristic way in which both Souster and Fearing use the long line is by breaking it up into a series of short, powerful phrases. Consider, for example, the first line of the

While Souster uses the long line frequently in his earlier poetry, the rapid decrease in its use after the 1940's indicates the rapid lessening of Fearing's influence. It was not, as Souster apparently soon realized, his truest voice.

The American poet Kenneth Patchen was another important figure in Souster's early poetic development. In a short preamble to Gnarowski's Index to Contact Magazine, Souster describes this influence as follows:

The poetical influence of first Stephen Spender and then Kenneth Fearing had been supplanted about 1944 by Kenneth Patchen, then just making a name for himself. This is to say that my own work was moving away from "proletarian concerns" to a much more romantic approach. Read my Ryerson Press collection Go to Sleep, World if you need to be convinced on this score.³⁴

In a later conversation with this writer, Souster has stated that the most important volume of Patchen's in relation to his own poetry was Last Will and Testament, published in 1939.

The following excerpt from "A Debt", a tribute to Henry Miller and Kenneth Patchen, was published by Souster in Direction:

Of Kenneth Patchen I can only say that he alone of all the poets writing at this hour has not compromised his art and sold out his personal beliefs to a much greater and surer place than would have been his had he taken the easy path as so many have elected to take.

. . .

But even more important than the "Journal" to us is his poetry, which has been called formless, chaotic, and all the rest of those slick literary [sic] labels, but only occasionally rich and gushing like blood from the wound of a giant, seldom as quietly beautiful as snow-

³⁴Raymond Souster, "Some Afterthoughts on Contact Magazine", p. 1.

flake falling, rarely savagely snarling as a tiger in the last jungle of the world; no, there has been too much of the other, too little of the truth. When Patchen tells us "This is a man. You are not to kill him." he is merely paraphrasing the Bible, and if we attack one we must be fair and attack the other. And he is only going one step further from Auden and the others who pictured for us the decaying ruins of our civilization when he shows us the warm blood flowing among them and the guns pointed straight at the memorials to our late dead.³⁵

According to this statement, the greatest value of Patchen for Souster is that of an inspirational figure, of someone who has kept the faith in a time of doubt. Patchen has much of Fearing's straightforward power, but less of a social or political and more of a human commitment. It is this combination of humanity with poetic force that appears to have impressed Souster.

Patchen's poetry appeared in a series of twelve volumes between 1936 and 1956.³⁶ As in many of Souster's poems, love and death are frequently opposed. Love and the positive forces of life are often expressed through the correlative of a young girl, while death is most often expressed in the context of war. The dual feeling of both victim and victimizer that is so pervasive in Souster's poetry is also present in some poems. A good example of this duality is the Patchen poem "Nice Day for a Lynching":³⁷

³⁵Raymond Souster, "A Debt," (Direction 1, 1943), p. 1.

³⁶Margaret Avison reviewed Kenneth Patchen's Selected Poems for the Canadian Forum 27 (April 1947): p. 21. She gives them a mixed reception, admiring the beauty of some, but objecting to "the leftist's shibboleths and the moralist's generalizations".

³⁷In his thesis "The Poetry of Raymond Souster", p. 55, Hugh Cook observes a similarity between this poem and Souster's "Welcome to the South" (CT, p. 68).

The bloodhounds look like sad old judges
 In a strange court. They point their noses
 At the Negro jerking in their noose;
 His feet spread crowlike above these
 Honorable men who laugh as he chokes.

I don't know this black man.
 I don't know these white men.

But I know that one of my hands
 Is black, and one white. I know that
 One part of me is being strangled,
 While another part horribly laughs.

Until it changes,
 I shall forever be killing; and be killed.³⁸

A similar ambivalence is portrayed in such Souster poems as "Boys and Ducks" (CT, p. 79), and "On the Way to the Store".³⁹ Both poets try to balance the pressures of society with a struggle for individuality.

Specific parallels occur between Patchen's poem "The Hangman's Great Hands"⁴⁰ and Souster's "Shake Hands with the Hangman" (CT, p. 10). In Souster's poem the hangman represents those forces in society that are hostile to the beauty which persists in expressing itself, represented here by the man selling flowers on the street:

The man selling flowers outside Child's
 has the nervous, shifting eyes of the hunted,

Shake hands with the hangman.

³⁸Kenneth Patchen, Collected Poems, (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 97.

³⁹Raymond Souster, Selected Poems, (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1972), p. 62.

⁴⁰Patchen, Collected Poems, p. 64.

Notice how steady those hands are
after such bloody work.

Although more explicitly social, the viewpoint conveyed in Patchen's poems "The Hangman's Great Hands" is substantially similar in its depiction of the struggle between the beauty of life and those forces that would repress it:

And all that is this day . . .
The boy with the cap slung over what had been a face . . .
Somehow the cop will sleep tonight, will make love to his wife . . .
Anger won't help. I was born angry.
Angry that my father was being burnt alive in the mills;
Angry that none of us knew anything but filth and poverty.
Angry because I was the very one somebody was supposed
To be fighting for
Turn him over; take a good look at his face . . .
Somebody is going to see that face for a long time.

While Patchen employs an idiomatic, colloquial manner of writing, the long line is used much less frequently than in the poetry of Fearing. His use of the line-unit is generally more controlled than Fearing's, and likely influenced Souster's own progression towards a tighter organization in his poetry.

John Sutherland was the first critic to indicate an awareness of the importance of American poetry for Souster and some of his contemporaries. Writing in First Statement in 1944, Sutherland states in a review of Souster's magazine Direction that "Writing in easy communicable forms, and employing the language of everyday speech they [writers in this magazine such as Raymond Souster, Irving Layton and Miriam and Patrick Waddington] show the influence of the American tradition of modern poetry rather than the English tradition to which the other new poets are so heavily indebted".⁴¹

⁴¹John Sutherland, review of Direction, ed. Raymond Souster, First Statement 2 (March 1944): p. 18.

This argument receives greater elaboration in Sutherland's preface to the anthology Other Canadians:

. . . Canadian poetry struggles to follow the American example even while its dominant bias remains English. One could even venture a prediction, spread a "rumour" that will seem "savage and disastrous" to very many ears. It is quite apparent that the American example will become more and more attractive to Canadian writers, that we are approaching a period when we will have "schools" and "movements" whose origin will be American. And perhaps it is safe to say that such a period is the inevitable half-way house from which Canadian poetry will pass towards an identity of its own.

. . . And of special interest is the writing of Raymond Souster, a young poet who is still in his early twenties. Souster has a freedom of form and an ability to handle colloquial language, which will not be liked by those perfectionists who can do so much damage to a young and developing poet. He has a way of calling a spade a spade, of saying what he thinks and feels in the most uncompromising terms, which must be positively embarrassing not only to members of the C.A.A. but to those who go around assuming deliberate disguises. Most important of all, Souster's poetry becomes the embodiment of the common man, completing in poetic terms what the average Canadian thinks and feels. It is poetry on a high creative level which yet remains perfectly communicative and full of meaning for reader who have not succumbed to spiritual old age.⁴²

Or, as Robert Creeley said in regard to earlier Canadian poetry: "The model is English, and it is precisely the English which is of no use whatsoever".⁴³ The tendency to draw sharp dividing lines between North American and British trends in poetry can easily become dogmatic, and ignore the fact that the majority of poets

⁴²John Sutherland, Preface to Other Canadians, (Montreal: First Statement Press, 1947): pp. 18-19, rpt. in Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski, eds., The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada, pp. 59-60.

⁴³Robert Creeley, "A Note on Canadian Poetry," Contact 9, p. 22.

cannot be categorized easily. Still, it would be hard to imagine Whitman or Fearing, or for that matter Souster, living and writing in Britain.

As one of Souster's first outlets in print, Direction played a significant role in the development of his poetry. The place of this magazine in his poetic career has been aptly summarized by Hugh Cook in his thesis on Souster's poetry:

Direction reaffirmed Souster's conviction that Canadian poetry was in a state of torpor, and that what was needed was "fresh", "vital", and if necessary, shocking poetry. . . . Second, the magazine provided Souster a place to publish his work just when he was beginning to be published, which is important in the development of any poet. . . . Furthermore, the magazine followed the lead of First Statement in publishing the poetry of social realism in reaction to the poetry then being written in Canada which was exemplified by the work still appearing in Preview.⁴⁴

More recently, Souster has found affinities with the Italian poets Giuseppe Ungaretti and Eugenio Montale. Souster describes their influence as follows:

I first encountered Montale in any depth when George Kay published his wonderful translations in 1964 from Edinburgh University (now reprinted in Penguin Modern European Poets—a must if you haven't got it). Poems like "Arsenio", "Eastbourne", "Little Testament", "The Eel", "Hitler Spring", "The Shorewatcher's Home", etc. have proved vital to me. Of course I's also read Robert Lowell's versions in Imitations, for which I shall always be grateful. Ungaretti I first read in Mandelbaum's Life of a Man (New Direction) about the same time and his effect has been equally great, although⁴⁵ these poets couldn't be farther apart from each other.

Although Souster dates their influence from the mid-sixties, it

⁴⁴Cook, "The Poetry of Raymond Souster", p. 13.

⁴⁵Raymond Souster to Francis Mansbridge, 26 December 1974.

should be pointed out that translations of Montale's poetry by Cid Corman appeared in Souster's magazine Combustion as early as no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1957). While he would then have had some knowledge of these poets at this time, he does not appear to have read them intensively until several years later.

Montale and Ungaretti are ageing veterans of Italian poetry, having started their poetic careers in the early years of this century. Both reacted against the ornate, self-conscious poetic style that was characteristic of Italian poetry when they started writing, just as the imagists reacted to the traditional poetry of the English tradition. The poetry of Montale and Ungaretti is quiet, unpretentious, and deeply humanitarian, influencing Souster's development toward a tighter, more controlled style.

Ungaretti writes poems that are especially brief and allusive, often having the spirit, if not the form, of haiku. The epigrammatic nature of such poems as the following certainly has similarities to much of Souster's later poetry:

Agony

To die like thirsty larks
upon the mirage

or as the quail
the sea once past
having no more
will to fly
dies in the first thickets

But not to live on lamentation
like a blinded goldfinch⁴⁶

⁴⁶Giuseppe Ungaretti, Selected Poems, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971): p. 18.

Ungaretti identifies his existence with that of nature in poems such as "Annihilation",⁴⁷ as does Souster in some of his poems such as "There's No Way out of It".⁴⁸ Ungaretti's poetry is direct and forceful, with a sense of wonder at the world around him that parallels Souster's.

Montale's poetry is more complex than that of Ungaretti or Souster. But he shares with both poets a horror of the unnecessary suffering caused by war. All three poets have managed to avoid political commitment while retaining a compassionate concern for the state of humanity.

Robert Creeley has influenced Souster's poetry in the direction of compression also. In a letter to Hugh Cook dated 7 February, 1967, Souster states that he learned compactness and directness from Creeley.⁴⁹ The first exchange between the two poets seems to have been during the publication of Contact in the early 1950's, in which Creeley published a number of poems and some prose.

While the poets with whom Souster has the greatest affinities are generally his older contemporaries, the poets with whom Margaret Avison has the greatest affinities have little obvious relation

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁸Raymond Souster, The Years, (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1971): p. 7.

⁴⁹Hugh Cook, "The Poetry of Raymond Souster," p. 40.

to any particular time or place, ranging back at least as far as the British metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. Book reviews which Avison wrote for the Canadian Forum are an important way in which her literary preferences may be revealed. She has reviewed twenty books for this periodical, mostly in her earlier years. The first review was published in 1943, and the last in 1965, with the majority appearing between 1943 and 1951. The majority of these reviews are of books of poetry by both Canadian and non-Canadian poets. She is a sympathetic reviewer, never condemning a book completely; she is more concerned with communicating her understanding of the writer's work than with passing judgement. Her most negative statement is reserved for Irving Layton in a review of Here and Now: "Mr. Layton's statements are not poetry."⁵⁰ But even here she manages to end the review on a favourable note. Her most favourable reviews are of volumes of poetry by Dylan Thomas, Pablo Neruda, Edith Sitwell, and W.B. Yeats.

Most of these reviews are less than a page; some are only a brief paragraph or two. Twice, however, she has contributed to the "Turning New Leaves" section of the Canadian Forum, which has allowed greater scope for the expression of her views. Her first appearance in this section was in 1951 when she reviewed T.S. Eliot's Selected Essays, and her second in 1965 when she ventured out of the field of poetry to review Simma Holt's Terror

⁵⁰Margaret Avison, Review of Here and Now by Irving Layton, Canadian Forum 25 (May 1945): p. 47.

in the Name of God. This latter book is a history of the Doukhobors in Canada.

Although the subjects of these two reviews are quite different, there are interesting similarities in her criticism of each book. In both she reacts strongly to what she regards as the dogmatism and intolerance of each writer. In regard to Eliot's Selected Essays she writes that: "he dwarfs and dessicates his opponents, robs them of their proper stature, and thus incidentally misrepresents the point of view he would set in opposition to theirs".⁵¹ Her review of Simma Holt's book is even more negative, as she makes a rare departure from the controlled sympathy that informs most of her criticism to attack the basic premises of Miss Holt's book:

The tone is often simply resentful of differentness. . . . There is no interest in the evolution of Doukhobor teaching, and nothing but contempt for the peoples' belief that their leaders are inspired and have to behave erratically sometimes as part of the tactics of solidarity.⁵²

Miss Avison's criticism is unified by the assumption that truth has many facets. Those writers who try to over-simplify and thus shut out a part of the truth distort the truth they retain; they receive her strongest criticism. Those who succeed in embodying a large part of the truth in their work receive her highest praise. This quest for comprehensiveness is certainly

⁵¹ Margaret Avison, Review of Selected Essays by T.S. Eliot, Canadian Forum 30 (March 1951): p. 274.

⁵² Margaret Avison, Review of Terror in the Name of God by Simma Holt, Canadian Forum 44 (March 1965): p. 280.

present in the ceaseless search of her poetry, with its scupulous rejection of anything approaching over-simplification.

In spite of her less than favourable review of his Selected Essays, T.S. Eliot is the most evident influence on her poetry. There is a similar combination of fidelity to sense experience with an uncompromising intellectuality which produces considerable difficulties in comprehension. There is a similar elimination of transitional passages between different sections of a longer poem, much use of allusion and myth, and a highly sophisticated use of irony, with complex patterns of imagery.

Both move in their poetry from a position of doubt and search to one of spiritual affirmation. T.S. Eliot's earlier poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" record his search for meaning in a fragmented society, as do many of Avison's earlier poems. In the closing lines of "November 23" Avison can evoke an impression of horror at the sudden realization of her mortality:

Or is it the persistence
Of harbour fog-horn, cars,
My neighbour muttering to herself,
No bothering not to, when
Stillness glimmers beyond there—just beyond the senses—
That mankes me sweat with vertigo
On this peculiar shelf
Of being?⁵³

The corresponding period of Eliot's poetry is that of "The Waste-land" and other early poems that portray a bleak picture of the

⁵³Margaret Avison, Winter Sun, (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1960), p. 33.

modern world.

In The Dumbfounding, her later volume, Avison expresses in a number of poems the position of religious faith and salvation she has found through Christ. In the closing lines of the title poem, "The Dumbfounding", for example, she asks Christ 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-brimming, until
time be full.⁵⁴

Eliot's later poetry, such as Four Quartets, also reveals a position of religious faith. Avison's development to this position is much less definite than Eliot's, as even among Avison's earlier poetry there is a strong religious note. In his introduction to Margaret Avison in the 1943 edition of the Book of Canadian Poetry, for example, A.J.M. Smith describes her poetry as "essentially religious"⁵⁵. While her earlier poetry is not explicitly religious, such poems as "Easter" (WS, p. 42) or "The Mirrored Man" (WS, p. 71) are religious at least to the extent that they reveal a profound reverence and sympathy for man and the world around him.

⁵⁴Margaret Avison, The Dumbfounding, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Ltd., 1966): p. 59.

⁵⁵A.J.M. Smith, ed., The Book of Canadian Poetry, (Chicago: University Press, 1943): p. 426.

Considering these parallels with Eliot, it is not surprising that there are echoes of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets in Avison's poetry. The first lines of "Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes (In Prospect)" provide one instance:

Those who fling off, toss head,
 Taste the bitter morning, and have at it--
 Thresh, knead, dam, weld,
 Wave baton, force
 Marches through the squirming bogs,
 (WS, p. 21; D, p. 89)

Redekop points out that these lines, with their sequence of strong verbs and heavy accents, recall Donne's "Sonnet XIV",⁵⁶ in which the poet prays God to:

. . . knock, breathe, shine and seek to mend;
 That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
 Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.⁵⁷

A further parallel, also noted by Redekop, is between the closing lines of "Intra-Political" and some of George Herbert's poems:

(George Herbert—and he makes it plain—
 Guest at this same transfiguring board
 Did sit and eat.)
 (WS, p. 47)

References here, as elaborated by Redekop,⁵⁸ are to Herbert's poems "The Collar" and "Love".

"R.I.P." (WS, p. 65) recalls a poem of a slightly later era. The line "It is a rather private place" echoes lines from

⁵⁶ Ernest Redekop, Margaret Avison, (Toronto: The Copp Clark Publishing Company, 1970): pp. 22-23.

⁵⁷ W.H. Auden and Norman Pearson, eds., Elizabethan and Jacobean Poets, (New York: The Viking Press, 1962): p. 400.

⁵⁸ Redekop, pp. 91-93.

Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress": "The Grave's a fine and private place, / But none I think do there embrace".⁵⁹

Gerard Manley Hopkins is a more modern poet who is well-known for his intensely spiritualized emotion. Avison has acknowledged his influence in a letter to Lawrence Jones.⁶⁰ This influence has been noted also by a number of reviewers, particularly in regard to her religious poems. Keith Harrison notes that "Poetry for Miss Avison, as it was for Hopkins, is a celebration of God's world."⁶¹ In a similar fashion Robert Gibbs notes that: "Her debt to Hopkins . . . is not one of manner and certainly not one of mannerism, but of purpose. She, like him, is concerned with haeccitas, the thisness of experience, and her efforts bend like his toward total comprehension."⁶² Avison is full of articulate awe at the mystery of God's universe. Abundant life is never far below the surface, frequently bursting into the open with glorious energy.

A similar theme to Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven", in which God pursues the fleeing sinner with unrelenting mercy, also appears in some of her poetry, most explicitly in "Searching

⁵⁹Auden and Pearson, p. 534.

⁶⁰Lawrence M. Jones, "A Core of Brilliance," Canadian Literature 38 (Autumn 1968): p. 57.

⁶¹Keith Harrison, Review of The Dumbfounding by Margaret Avison, Tamarack Review 42 (Winter 1967): p. 76.

⁶²Robert Gibbs, Review of The Dumbfounding by Margaret Avison, Fiddlehead 70 (Winter 1967): p. 70.

and Sounding":

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)

Generally she has affinities with those poets whose work is intensely spiritual. As Robert Gibbs states in his review of The Dumbfounding, "Miss Avison [is] clearly in the great tradition of English devotional poetry."⁶³

Redekop has pointed out that the influence of the American poet Elizabeth Bishop has been acknowledged by Avison. Like Avison, Elizabeth Bishop has avoided close association with any particular school of poetry or any radical experimentation in form. Relatively traditional structures have proved satisfactory for her. Like Avison, Bishop is vitally concerned with precise observation. Poems by Bishop such as "The Fish" reveal the extraordinary care she takes to "get it right". A portion of this poem is quoted below:

and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip—
grim, wet and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread

⁶³Gibbs, p. 70.

still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.⁶⁴

The appearance of the fish and the five pieces of line are described with meticulous precision. In her book on Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Stevenson notes a "wry detachment", which is evident in the above passage. Avison is less detached, but also extremely objective in her approach. Both have mastered the use of a powerful but flexible line.

A further parallel is their interest and work in translation. Bishop, who has lived most of her life in Brazil, has translated numerous poems. Avison has been active in translating Hungarian poems that were published in The Plough and the Pen and Hungarian short stories that were published in Acta Sanctorum and Other Tales by Joseph Lengyel.

Among contemporary poets, Margaret Avison has established a close relationship with some American writers and critics associated with the "Black Mountain" school, particularly Cid Corman, the editor of Origin, the magazine most closely linked with the "Black Mountain" poets. Raymond Souster also worked closely with Cid Corman in the publication of Contact. Avison's "The Agnes Cleves Papers" was published in Origin XX (first series), while a special issue in the second series⁶⁵ featured thirteen of Margaret Avison's poems. An extremely interesting letter from Avi-

⁶⁴Elizabeth Bishop, The Complete Poems, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970), pp. 49-50.

⁶⁵Origin 4, Second Series, (January 1962).

son to Cid Corman was published in the same issue. Following an intriguing discussion of the point she is at in her poetic development, she closes the letter as follows:

Your letter makes me swell & ache over that long poem—
I would like to bring it into being to give you!

Bless you for the right help—costly it must be, to listen so closely, but that makes one wish for the Ernte [harvest] as your ultimate return (not a return to you but another "giving" you make possible)⁶⁶—

The empathy between the two poets is apparent.

Denise Levertov, often associated with the "Black Mountain" school, is a contemporary poet with whom Avison has definite links. Avison first met Levertov in the late 1950's, and it was with her help that Avison's second volume of poems, The Dumbfounding, was published by Norton.

Although Levertov is a less dramatic, more personal poet than Avison, similarities between the two exist. While Levertov has been influenced by Williams' insistence on natural speech rhythms and a reasonably concrete image,⁶⁷ she is much less dogmatic than Williams in her use of American idiom. As she states in Part 111 of "A Common Ground":

Not 'common speech'
a dead level
but the uncommon speech of paradise,
tongue in which oracles
speak to beggars and pilgrims.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Margaret Avison to Cid Corman, March 9, 1961, Origin 4, Second Series (January 1962), p. 11.

⁶⁷Linda W. Wagner, Denise Levertov, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967), p. 29.

⁶⁸Denise Levertov, The Jacob's Ladder, (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 3.

For Levertov, the poet's first obligation is not to the American idiom but to his own voice.⁶⁹ Avison is likewise less concerned with the relationship of poetry to society than with finding the particular manner of expression that will best suit her own poetic vision. Perhaps they represent the next stage beyond the nationalistic stance of Williams.

Similarly to Levertov⁷⁰ and Eliot, Avison often portrays experience cyclically, thus making it possible to draw affirmative conclusions from unlikely subjects. In Avison's poem "Far off From University", life asserts itself even in the drab environs of a hobo jungle:

The fragrance of cool tar,
 smoked coffee, wet
 machine parts, seagulls, dawn,
 jolted a hobo torpor. After the sour
 senility of night, suddenly,
 a more than animal joy, a sanity
 of holy appetite awoke;
 breast bared for its blind suckling
 a more than mother leaned, drew breath, tendering.
 Cement and weeds, sky, all-night diner, flesh,
 gathered as being; fumbling, fed.
 (WS, p. 76)

Even the refuse of civilization is regarded with sympathetic respect. All is gathered into a unity that is revived for the coming day.

A structural similarity between the poetry of Levertov and Avison is division of some of their longer poems into sections, with the different sections often used in a dramatic fashion to

⁶⁹Wagner, p. 29.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 55.

present different lines of narrative or points of view. Levertov's "During the Eichmann Trial"⁷¹ is divided into three parts. The first part deals with Eichmann at his trial; the second with Eichmann as a child; the third depicts a vision of war-time Germany. Avison is even more concerned with avoiding a fixed point of view. The limitations of human perspective and efforts to transcend these are among the most pervasive concerns of her poetry. "The Earth That Falls Away" (D, p. 38) and "Five Breaks" (D, p. 54) are examples of poems by Avison that are divided into sections.

Perhaps the most important similarity between the two poets lies in their organic approach to form. Form is viewed as an extension of content. In a perceptive essay, "Notes on Organic Form", Levertov distinguishes between free and organic verse:

. . . free verse isolates the "rightness" of each line or cadence—if it seems expressive, o.k., never mind the relation of it to the next; while in organic poetry the peculiar rhythms of the parts are in some degree modified, if necessary, in order to discover the rhythms of the whole.⁷²

While free verse often consciously rejects form, organic verse embraces all types of form. The organic nature of Avison's poetry will become evident in the course of this thesis.

The assorted nature of those poets who have influenced Avison's poetry aptly indicate the impossibility of classifying

⁷¹Levertov, The Jacob's Ladder, p. 61.

⁷²"Notes on Organic Form", Poetry 106 (September 1965), rpt. in Denise Levertov, The Poet in the World, (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 11.

her work rigidly. However, she shares with Raymond Souster the historical importance of being among the most important of their generation of Canadian poets to serve as links with the Vancouver poets of the sixties. While the Vancouver poets of the sixties, such as Frank Davey, Fred Wah, Lionel Kearns, George Bowering and many others, were not directly influenced by Avison and Souster, they were strongly influenced in their early poetic career by such American poets as Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley who were influenced in turn by William Carlos Williams and poets of the "Black Mountain" group.

One of the major differences between the Vancouver poets of the sixties and most of the Canadian generation of the forties lies in the attitude of the poet to the world. Most Canadian poets of the forties tried through their poetry to impose order on the disorder of the world. The poets of the sixties, on the other hand, attempt to incorporate more of the flux of the world into their poetry. The external world becomes their poetry, so that the poet has no ego in separation from the world.

Avison and Souster both anticipate the West Coast poets in this regard. In many of Avison's poems, such as "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes' Herball" (WS, p. 12) and "Intra-Political" (WS, p. 44), the external landscape becomes a metaphor for the internal state. Switches between microcosm and macrocosm are made with a rapidity which is at times disconcerting. In "Mordent for a Melody" we are told that "Clip but a fingernail, and lo! / A supernova drops away." (WS, p. 49).

Souster's separate ego is evident in many of his early poems, where he is more concerned with communicating his ideas. But as his poetry develops, these ideas become a less important part of his poetry, as he immerses himself in his Toronto world. His Toronto world suffuses his poetry to create a body of work that is quite different from the more egotistic approach of a poet such as Irving Layton.

Without any pretensions to completeness, the preceding has aimed at establishing the poetic genealogies of Raymond Souster and Margaret Avison. They have been among the first Canadian poets to realize that contemporary Canada, as a part of North American technological society, has much more in common with the United States than with Britain. This is not to deny the separateness of the Canadian tradition. Both are firmly rooted in Canada while at the same time they are internationally minded.

Souster, influenced in his early poetry by the Americans Kenneth Fearing and Kenneth Patchen, and associated closely with the American scene through his work as editor of little magazines, has obvious links with American poetry. Avison, while a much more impersonal poet than Souster, has definite affinities with such American poets as Cid Corman, Denise Levertov, and Elizabeth Bishop. Both Avison and Souster have published extensively in American, as well as Canadian, periodicals. These links with American poetry help give Avison and Souster the historical importance of being among the most important Canadian poets of the forties'

generation to serve as links with the West Coast poets of the sixties. Avison's influences, however, are much broader than Souster's, including many writers from the English tradition, both in the twentieth and preceding centuries. Souster is influenced mainly by his older American and Canadian contemporaries.

A brief survey of criticism that has been written on each poet will be followed by an investigation of their characteristic uses of theme and technique through an analysis of a number of representative poems by each poet.

CHAPTER II

CRITICAL VIEWS ON AVISON AND SOUSTER

It is interesting to trace some of the critical opinions on these two writers, using articles and reviews of their books as sources. Some of the major areas of concern in their poetry can be highlighted in this way. Margaret Avison's critics will be discussed first.

Avison has always been extremely concerned with the craft of her poetry, never allowing a poem to be published until it has reached what is, for her, its final form. This has meant the publication of few poems, especially when compared to many other Canadian poets who started writing at about the same time. But if Avison did not overwhelm the critics with her prolific output, the unusual quality of her work did not go unnoticed. A.J.M. Smith selected several of her poems for inclusion in the original 1943 edition of his anthology of Canadian poetry, and in 1947 five of her poems were published in the prestigious Poetry (Chicago) magazine, accompanied by critical comments by Brewster Ghiselin.¹ In these comments Ghiselin emphasizes the role of idea in Avison's poetry. In regard to the poems "Geometaphysics" and "Perspectives", he states that: "Imagery and other concrete substance

¹Brewster Ghiselin, "The Architecture of Vision," Poetry 30 (September 1947): pp. 318-323.

are determined by the need for such specification as will bring to life the matter of discussion".² He states, however, that the poems are less important for any ideas they present than for the immediacy with which they bring us to experience these ideas.³

After the relative activity of the 1940's, there was a lull in Margaret Avison's publishing, and consequently little further critical attention for some time. She published only one poem between 1949 and 1956,⁴ but in the late 1950's started to publish again. Milton Wilson took note of this development in a perceptive article, "The Poetry of Margaret Avison", published in Canadian Literature in 1959.⁵ Where Ghiselin emphasized the function of idea in Avison's poetry, Wilson emphasizes the role of the perceiving eye.⁶ He regards her as a less conceptualized Wallace Stevens, and not primarily a metaphysical poet.⁷ No Canadian poet, in his view, is better able to depict the clutter of the urban here and now.⁸

Wilson's article was followed the next year (1960) by Avison's long-awaited first volume Winter Sun. This collection received favourable and at times rhapsodic reviews, although some of the older, more traditionally oriented critics, confessed themselves

²Ibid., p. 325.

³Ibid., p. 328.

⁴"Song of the Flaming Sword," Contemporary Verse 35 (Summer 1951): p. 16.

⁵Milton Wilson, "The Poetry of Margaret Avison," Canadian Literature 2 (Autumn 1959): pp. 47-58.

⁶Ibid., p. 47.

⁷Ibid., p. 50.

⁸Ibid., p. 51.

a little baffled by it all. N.J. Endicott, for example, wrote that some lines seemed "cold-bloodedly complicated".⁹ Arthur Bourinot states in the Ottawa Journal that "we have read a vast quantity of modern poetry, and must admit found this book about the most difficult to interpret and understand".¹⁰ Eli Mandel, however, perhaps having these reviews in mind, states that the least sensible charge that can be brought against her is wilful obscurity.¹¹ This charge certainly does become irrelevant in a close study of her poetry. If her poetry is complicated, it is no more so than the content merits.

Like a number of other reviewers, Mandel emphasizes the effort her poetry makes to resolve contradictions. "Diction, imagery, and form, nervous with the energy of paradox, seek to express the contradictions of unity in multiplicity, presence in change, essence in existence."¹² Similarly, X.J. Kennedy states that she sets "ideal vista . . . against hardscrabble reality",¹³ while Reaney perhaps puts it the most succinctly when he says that she "teaches us to be an archangel who can see everywhere and a

⁹Norman J. Endicott, "Recent Verse," Canadian Literature 6 (Autumn 1960): p. 61.

¹⁰Arthur Bourinot, "Poetry in the Modern Idiom," Ottawa Journal, 16 July 1960, p. 33.

¹¹Eli Mandel, Review of Winter Sun by Margaret Avison, Queen's Quarterly 67 (Winter 1961): p. 704.

¹²Ibid., p. 704.

¹³X.J. Kennedy, "Five Poets in Search of Six Lines," Poetry 98 (May 1961): p. 118.

slug in a fern bank who can see practically nowhere, all at the same time."¹⁴

Smith, another admirer of Avison's poetry, emphasizes her metaphysical fusion of sensation and thought.¹⁵ Wilson's review, however, echoes his article in downplaying her intellectuality. Wilson states that she is less an intellectual than a voluptuary of the mind, and does not so much affirm or discard hypotheses, as move through them.¹⁶

In spite of the praise lavished on this first volume there was, surprisingly, no article on her poetry published. Her appeal appears to have been to a relatively small if articulate group of writers and critics, particularly poets such as Mandel, Reaney, and Smith, whose poetry is generally regarded as mythological or metaphysical, and who therefore may have been more sensitive to corresponding qualities in Avison's poetry.

The Dumbfounding, her second volume, received favourable reviews from a much wider range of critics. The select few are joined by a variety of others, whose heterogeneous nature reflects the more widespread acceptance of Avison's poetry. Highest praise comes from A.J.M. Smith, who considers The Dumbfounding the most

¹⁴James Reaney, Review of Winter Sun by Margaret Avison, Canadian Literature 50 (March 1961): p. 284.

¹⁵A.J.M. Smith, "Critical Improvisations on Margaret Avison's Winter Sun," Tamarack Review 18 (Winter 1961): p. 86.

¹⁶Milton Wilson, Review of Winter Sun by Margaret Avison, University of Toronto Quarterly 30 (July 1961): p. 380.

original book of modern poetry in Canada.¹⁷ He considers the religious poems to be among the finest of our time.¹⁸ Robert Gibbs likewise considers some of the Christian poems to be worthy of the epithet "great".¹⁹ Praise for the religious poems is general, though not unanimous. Both John Robert Colombo²⁰ and Hugh McCallum²¹ consider much of their success to lie in the fact they are poetry before devotion, but in Colombo's view her religious poems do not come to terms with spiritual reality.²² Similarly, Tillinghast considers her religious poems good, although they sometimes fail.²³ The least positive voice is registered by Keith Harrison; although he likes her poetry generally better than that of Hopkins, he does not think her religious poems come off well.²⁴

The richness of The Dumbfounding is reflected in the variety of critical comment, with each reviewer extending himself in trying

¹⁷A.J.M. Smith, "Margaret Avison's New Book," Canadian Forum 46 (September 1966): p. 132.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁹Robert Gibbs, Review of The Dumbfounding by Margaret Avison, Fiddlehead 70 (Winter 1967): p. 70.

²⁰John Robert Colombo, "Avison and Wevill," Canadian Literature 34 (Autumn 1967): p. 75.

²¹Hugh McCallum, Review of The Dumbfounding by Margaret Avison, University of Toronto Quarterly 36 (July 1967): p. 357.

²²Colombo, p. 75.

²³R. Tillinghast, "Seven Poets", Poetry 110 (July 1967): p. 266.

²⁴Keith Harrison, Review of The Dumbfounding by Margaret Avison, Tamarack Review 42 (Winter 1967): p. 76.

to coin some illuminating phrase or sentence that will capture an aspect of the book. Colombo points out her Keatsian utter selflessness,²⁵ MacCallum her refusal of the heroic gesture and the stock response.²⁶ Harrison describes her poems as being like etchings "cutting . . . their way into a recalcitrant medium,"²⁷ while Smith states that "Nothing is without the significance of everything".²⁸ Her concern with the quality of perception is noted by Harrison²⁹ and MacCallum.³⁰ Or, as Robert Gibbs admirably puts it: "The poem itself, poised as if listening, holds these voices in balance and is the resolving medium. Happenings happen not casually like existential happenings but like answers pointing beyond themselves toward a centre".³¹

Since this volume there have been a number of articles and one book devoted to Margaret Avison's poetry. The first article, by Lawrence Jones,³² offers helpful explications of a number of Avison's poems, but provides little general insight into her work. Of much greater importance is Ernest Redekop's book,³³ which provides not only detailed analyses of key poems, but adds much to a comprehension of the overall patterns of her work. This is by far the most important and comprehensive analysis of Avison's

²⁵Colombo, p. 73. ²⁶MacCallum, p. 355. ²⁷Harrison, p. 76.

²⁸Smith, "Margaret Avison's New Book," p. 132.

²⁹Harrison, p. 76. ³⁰MacCallum, p. 355. ³¹Gibbs, p. 70.

³²Lawrence Jones, "A Core of Brilliance," Canadian Literature 38 (Autumn 1968): pp. 50-57.

³³Ernest Redekop, Margaret Avison.

poetry. Redekop has continued his work on Avison with an article, "The Only Political Duty,"³⁴ which analyzes translations of Hungarian poetry she wrote for The Plough and the Pen, an anthology of modern Hungarian writing edited by Karl Polanyi and Ilona Duczynska.

Also important is an article by W.H. New in his collection of critical essays Articulating West.³⁵ Using a roughly chronological approach to her poetry, New explores the relationship of thought with feeling, her use of pun and paradox, and the role of Christianity in her poetry. Bowering has made a detailed study of Avison's religious poetry in his article "Avison's Imitation of Christ the Artist".³⁶ This article is a perceptive exploration of the paradox involved in the artist striving to be Christ-like. The artist must imitate Christ's humility, sacrificing his individuality in order to find it.³⁷ The most recent article on her poetry, by Daniel Doerksen,³⁸ traces the theme of spiritual search and discovery through her poetry.

Three theses on Margaret Avison's poetry have been completed.

³⁴Ernest Redekop, "The Only Political Duty," The Literary Half-Yearly 13 (July 1972): pp. 157-170.

³⁵W.H. New, "The Mind's Eyes (I's) (Ice): The Poetry of Margaret Avison", in Articulating West, (Toronto: New Press, 1972): pp. 234-258.

³⁶George Bowering, "Avison's Imitation of Christ the Artist", Canadian Literature 54 (Autumn 1973): pp. 56-69.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 59.

³⁸Daniel Doerksen, "Search and Discovery: Margaret Avison's Poetry", Canadian Literature 60 (Spring 1974): pp. 7-20.

Janet Ade's "The Poetry of Margaret Avison" was completed in 1966, Hendrika Williamson's "Man and Mandala: The Poetry of Margaret Avison" in 1971, and Christopher Klus' "The Religious Poetry of Margaret Avison" in 1972. While these provide the occasional helpful insight, they are not of major importance to an understanding of Avison's poetry.

Avison's poetry has been fortunate in receiving a considerable amount of perceptive criticism. Perhaps the difficulty of her poetry brings out the best in a critic. One of the major interests of critics has revolved around the explicit Christianity of her later poetry. This aspect receives more emphasis than it might have in another age, as an important poet who is also a Christian is certainly an unusual phenomenon in present-day Western society. Criticism of her poetry generally has been thematic rather than technical; there has been little attempt to determine where she fits in the rapidly shifting patterns of contemporary poetry.

The complexity of Avison's poetry has led nearly all her critics to attempt an understanding of what she is doing rather than analyze its success or failure. Part of the difficulty of assessing the merit of her work lies in its relatively isolated nature. Although there are links with other writers, as indicated in the previous chapter, these are of a general rather than specific nature. Their value as entries to her work is limited. George Bowering, W.H. New, and especially Ernest Redekop have contributed most to an understanding of her work. But more work

is necessary before the merit of her work can be assessed.

Avison has received substantial critical attention within the past decade, although certainly not more than is warranted by her complex poetry. Souster's poetry has not received comparable attention, although his numerous publications have occasioned even more numerous reviews. These tend to be briefer and more repetitive than the reviews of Avison's volumes, but also have the effect of defining clearly the main areas of concern in regard to Souster's poetry.

While critics of Avison's early work are few but favourable, Souster's early reviewers often tempered their comments with serious reservations. His work has always provided a tempting target for the critic, and the few reviews his early books received were often less than laudatory. Dorothy Livesay, for example, reviewing When We Are Young for the Canadian Forum in 1946 states categorically that: "This is not literature, but journalism; not poetry but verse. . . . none of these attitudes, alone or together, can create the permanent emotional impression which is poetry".³⁹ Perhaps it should not be required that a critic remain consistent over a quarter century, but it is interesting to note the difference in Livesay's attitude reviewing As Is for Canadian Literature in 1968: "These are moments, tested against time, delicate and strong as ceramics. Put them on your shelf and they will insist

³⁹Dorothy Livesay, Review of When We Are Young by Raymond Souster, Canadian Forum 26 (September 1946): p. 142.

on being noticed."⁴⁰ This change cannot be attributed entirely to development in Souster's poetry, as such Souster standards as "The Hunter" and "The Penny Flute" were in the earlier volume.

While this is the most dramatic turnabout in attitude that any critic has made in regard to Souster's poetry, it is by no means unique. Souster has always had his devoted following, but it is only within the last decade that his books have received serious critical attention in the major journals. Even his Selected Poems (1956) made little more than a ripple on the literary scene. Milton Wilson reviewed the book in the Canadian Forum in a generally favourable manner, although he does not seem to know what to say about it: "He aims at the genuine, the honest-to-god, the unmistakable. Such poetry does not invite question or scrutiny; you just take it or leave it."⁴¹ A 1963 review of Place of Meeting and A Local Pride indicates that his ideas on Souster's poetry have developed considerably. While noting that at least intellectually and aesthetically "Souster works close to the minimum edge",⁴² Wilson is one of the first critics to praise the formal elements in Souster's poetry:

The really irreplaceable and life-giving qualities in Souster's work are more formal, even rhetorical. . . . what

⁴⁰Dorothy Livesay, "Odd Poet Out", Canadian Literature 36 (Spring 1968): pp. 81-82.

⁴¹Milton Wilson, Review of Selected Poems (1956) by Raymond Souster, Canadian Forum 36 (October 1956): p. 164.

⁴²Milton Wilson, Review of A Place of Meeting and A Local Pride by Raymond Souster, University of Toronto Quarterly 22 (July 1963): p. 377.

gets Souster's low-trajectory flight into the air is the quiet buoyancy of the phrasing, the elasticity without snap or grip; and from these come the special, very unemonstrative qualities of the arc itself.⁴³

Wilson's notice of the formal elements in Souster's work is greatly expanded by Eli Mandel in an important review of A Local Pride. Mandel rejects the popular idea of Souster as a social realist, arguing for a position which takes into account the formal elements of his poetry. Mandel sees in Souster's poetry:

. . . a rigid vision of society and nature as a demonic city inhabited by beast-man, harlot and cripple, surrounded by a scarcely attainable garden where lovers become trees or budding leaves, and flowers turn into gypsies and sirens.⁴⁴

This is a far cry from the view of Souster as only a social realist, and has set the tone for much subsequent Souster criticism.

Mandel is able to understand Souster's poetic aims even though his own poetic preoccupations are quite different. Northrop Frye has less sympathy for Souster's poetry. Frye reviewed Canadian poetry for the University of Toronto Quarterly from 1950 to 1960, with Souster getting at best a mixed press. The poems in Cerberus "sound moralizing and prosaic, attempting to express their subject by the energy of direct statement alone".⁴⁵ A review of For What Time Slays is slightly more favourable, although Frye still crit-

⁴³Ibid., p. 376.

⁴⁴Eli Mandel, "Internal Resonances", Canadian Literature 17 (Summer 1963): p. 64.

⁴⁵Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1971): p. 21.

icizes the majority of the poetry for too much moralizing, too much preoccupation with the process of writing, and too much unsuitable sexual reverie.⁴⁶ Later reviews of the 1956 Selected Poems and Crêpe Hanger's Carnival are considerably more favourable. Frye now considers Souster "a genuine poet",⁴⁷ although he still objects to his moralizing. Souster, for him, is primarily a social realist, whose main method is photographic.⁴⁸ His low opinion of the poetry of social realism is reflected in his comments on Souster's poetry.

Frye apparently thinks little of Souster's regard for technical matters. Souster's attitude to craft, however, has always intrigued some critics, with many regarding him from early in his career as a conscientious craftsman. Fred Cogswell, who has followed Souster's career from its relatively early stages, states in a review of Crêpe Hanger's Carnival that Souster is "a sensitive craftsman",⁴⁹ although he feels that Souster "takes for granted that experience and insight meaningful to him will invariably be meaningful to his readers".⁵⁰ A slightly more favourable review of Place of Meeting praises Souster's "great craftsmanship and dedication".⁵¹ Cogswell is reticent, though, about the nature

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 54. ⁴⁷Ibid., p. 61. ⁴⁸Ibid., p. 62.

⁴⁹Fred Cogswell, Review of Crêpe Hanger's Funeral [sic] by Raymond Souster, Fiddlehead 40 (Spring 1959): p. 55.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 55.

⁵¹Fred Cogswell, "Poet Alive", Canadian Literature 13 (Summer 1962): p. 71.

of this "great craftsmanship".

Louis Dudek has been Souster's most loyal and influential fan over the years. In a review of Place of Meeting and A Local Pride he refers to Souster as "my favourite poet among the Canadians".⁵² Dudek then goes on in this review to emphasize Souster's simple moral and religious vision, referring to him as "the only Canadian poet whose poetry is associated with simple belief".⁵³ It is this profound simplicity that Dudek apparently admires most in Souster's poetry.

Dudek's admiration for Souster is further expressed in an article "Literature in English", in which he states that: "Here a perfectly relaxed style of unmarred genuineness reveals a personality and carries a verdict on modern life that will probably remain the best poetic expression of the last quarter-century in Canada."⁵⁴ Later he states that: "The language of common speech is the modern touchstone".⁵⁵ And the language of common speech is certainly used by Souster.

Layton is but a short step behind Dudek in his admiration of Souster. In a letter to Souster, published in Civ/n and reprinted in Engagements, he states that:

⁵²Louis Dudek, "A Load of New Books", Delta 20 (February 1963): p. 31.

⁵³Ibid., p. 31.

⁵⁴Louis Dudek, "Literature in English," in The Canadians 1867-1967, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Limited, 1967): p. 651.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 652.

your place in the literary history of this country is secure. Yours is an original voice—there's absolutely nothing like it in Canada. You have your own myth, your own way of seeing things, your own way of leaving your signature at the end of a poem.⁵⁶

The importance of Souster and his colleagues has also been recognized by Hugh Kenner, a major North American critic. Writing in Poetry in 1958 he states that the Layton-Dudek-Souster group, along with several others in England and America, constitute the poetry of the 1950's.⁵⁷

Recognition of Souster's achievement became general with the publication of The Colour of the Times. The Governor-General's award, articles in Time and Macleans, and lengthy reviews in most of the literary journals all encouraged Souster's critical and popular acceptance. Purdy, writing in the Canadian Author and Bookman, indicates approval for Mandel's emphasis on the formal elements in Souster's poetry⁵⁸ in a review which indicates as well admiration for Souster's unique ability to make poetry out of expressions which in the hands of anybody else would be clichés.

Like Purdy, Gnarowski emphasizes the individuality of Souster's work,⁵⁹ and like Milton Wilson is not happy with the minimal

⁵⁶Irving Layton, "Crêpe Hanger's Carnival", Civ/n no. 7, p. 26, rpt. in Irving Layton, Engagements, ed. Seymour Mayne, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1972), p. 38.

⁵⁷Hugh Kenner, "Columbus's Log-Book", Poetry 92 (June 1958): p. 177.

⁵⁸Al Purdy, "Some of the Colours are Fast", The Canadian Author and Bookman 39 (Summer 1964): p. 15.

⁵⁹Michael Gnarowski, "Raymond Souster: au dessus de la Mêlée?", Culture 26 (March 1965): p. 59.

materials that Souster uses for his poetry. Gnarowski's most significant contribution is a discussion of Souster's use of form, which he feels relies on "a proper balance of components within the structure of the poem".⁶⁰ This is a development of the idea that Souster's poetry is formal rather than strictly realistic in its structure.

A long and rather disjointed review by Hayden Carruth in the Tamarack Review is the major dissenting voice in the reception of The Colour of the Times. Carruth is sharply critical of Souster for not revising⁶¹ and rejecting attention to technique.⁶² Although he makes some perceptive comments on some of Souster's poems, the review is limited by its overly detached, analytical point of view. If Canadian reviewers are sometimes too sympathetic to Souster's work, American critic Carruth is unjustly negative in his comments.

The other important negative reaction to The Colour of the Times is by Michael Taylor in Edge.⁶³ Taylor objects to Souster's "unsure grasp of elementary technique" and "an alarming disdain for the reader"⁵⁴ generally, and "the awkward syntax and

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 62. See also below, p. 215 for further discussion of Gnarowski's comments.

⁶¹Hayden Carruth, "To Souster from Vermont", Tamarack Review 34 (Winter 1965): p. 83.

⁶²Ibid., p. 82.

⁶³Michael Taylor, "Bad Times", Edge 3 (Autumn 1964): pp. 108-111.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 108.

unabashed sentimentality"⁶⁵ in some of his poems. Although these reviews by Carruth and Taylor do miss many of the positive qualities of Souster's poetry, some of which I hope to demonstrate in the course of this thesis, they do indicate that from a strictly formal point of view, Souster's poetry does have serious limitations. Both critics make specific comments on a number of Souster's poems which make their reviews valuable documents in Souster criticism.

Milton Acorn has written an article partially in reply to Carruth and Taylor, which is published in The Progressive Worker. In this article Acorn compares Souster to Al Purdy, to Souster's advantage. He praises Souster's total involvement in his poetry, in contrast to Purdy, whom he feels is often unconcerned with the subjects of his poems:

. . . one appreciates poets like Bowering and Purdy, but one rarely delights in them. To turn from their ironies, less-than-ironies, their tonal finesse and their versimilitude to the simple and thoroughly believed in statements of Raymond Souster is to turn from duty to pleasure.⁶⁶

Acorn goes on to praise Souster's simplicity and mastery of "natural human speech" in his poetry, although he criticizes him for not being sufficiently ambitious in the content of his poems, an idea which echoes the comments of Wilson and Gnarowski.

The most important criticism of Souster's work is by his old friend and admirer Louis Dudek. In his article, "Groundhog Among the Stars",⁶⁷ Dudek provides an illuminating reading of Souster's

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 109.

⁶⁶Milton Acorn, "The Art of Raymond Souster", The Progressive Worker 2 (July 1966): p. 13.

⁶⁷Louis Dudek, "Groundhog Among the Stars", Canadian Literature 22 (Autumn 1964): pp. 34-49.

work, analyzing the major themes in his poetry through the most frequently used correlatives. He goes far beyond the view which so many critics have had of Souster as a realistic poet. He does, however, concentrate on a thematic approach, avoiding mention of Souster's technical achievements.

Since The Colour of the Times, volumes of Souster's work have appeared with great frequency. These are composed largely of uncollected poems from his earlier years, although many have been extensively revised. New poems have continued to appear, and in fact his latest volume, Change-Up (1974), is composed mostly of poems previously unpublished in book form. Critical attention to his more recent work has become widespread, and generally favourable.

Critics often note that there has been little development in Souster's poetry. Pacey states that while there has been no significant development in Souster's poetry, at least there has been no deterioration.⁶⁸ Z.S. Solecki notes in a review of The Years "the formal and thematic continuity of the poetry from the early forties lyrics to those of the past decade".⁶⁹ Gibbs, also reviewing The Years, does see some development from closed to more open forms.⁷⁰ He admires the suggestiveness that Souster imparts to the latter.

⁶⁸ Desmond Pacey, Creative Writing in Canada, (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1961), p. 174.

⁶⁹ Z.S. Solecki, Review of The Years by Raymond Souster, Queen's Quarterly 79 (Summer 1972): p. 275.

⁷⁰ Robert Gibbs, Review of The Years by Raymond Souster, Fiddlehead 94 (Summer 1972): p. 131.

The simple honesty and integrity of his poetry is praised by George Jonas reviewing The Years,⁷¹ and by Ralph Gustafson reviewing As Is.⁷² Similarly, Geddes notes in his article, "A Cursed and Singular Blessing", that Souster "sees the poem as an utterance that moves as quickly and directly as possible to its inevitable conclusion".⁷³

Mike Doyle, reviewing the 1972 Selected Poems, praises Souster's ability to deal with the "local, immediate, concrete experience".⁷⁴ David Zaiss, however, writing for Poetry, feels that Souster lacks "the unobtrusive, almost incidental quality that makes for incisive observation".⁷⁵

But while reviews have been generally favourable, Souster's poetry has received little critical comment beyond the reviewer's mandatory thousand-word limit. Besides articles by Louis Dudek and Milton Acorn, the one exception is Gary Geddes' article, "A Cursed and Singular Blessing". Geddes emphasizes Souster's craft, especially his attention to the use of the line. Souster's sense of implication in the evils of which he writes is noted. Geddes

⁷¹George Jonas, "It Is Hard Not to Be Affected by His Spell", Saturday Night (December 1971): p. 36.

⁷²Ralph Gustafson, Review of As Is by Raymond Souster, Queen's Quarterly 75 (Summer 1968): p. 372.

⁷³Gary Geddes, "A Cursed and Singular Blessing", Canadian Literature 54 (Autumn 1973): p. 34.

⁷⁴Mike Doyle, "Singing Small", Canadian Literature 59 (Winter 1974): p. 123.

⁷⁵David Zaiss, "Perfect Circles", Poetry 116 (April 1970): p. 53.

feels that the expression of this is at its best when it avoids "complacent moralizing or righteous indignation".⁷⁶ The article is a very well-written synthesis of various aspects of Souster criticism, although it breaks little new ground. Souster remains a poet concerning whom many critics have found it unusually difficult to write.

One critical area in which Souster has proved relatively popular is with the writers of M.A. theses. At this point there have been four M.A. theses completed which deal solely with Raymond Souster and his work. One of the most useful of these was completed in 1969 by Robert Campbell of the University of New Brunswick, detailing Souster's involvement with the little magazines.⁷⁷ But although this thesis provides much valuable information on Souster's literary associations, it does not attempt to deal with his poetry. By far the most helpful is Karen Wood's thesis,⁷⁸ which provides a detailed study of Souster's poetic development through comparisons of successive drafts of representative poems. Hugh Cook's thesis⁷⁹ is helpful primarily for his comments on the American influences on Souster. Patrick Tee's thesis

⁷⁶Geddes, p. 31.

⁷⁷Robert Reid Campbell, "A Study of the History and Development of Raymond Souster's Direction, Contact, and Combustion," (M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1969).

⁷⁸Karen Wood: "Raymond Souster: A Stylistic Analysis and a Chronology of Poems", (M.A. thesis, Sir George Williams University, 1972).

⁷⁹Hugh Cook, "The Poetry of Raymond Souster", (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1968).

offers little of any value.⁸⁰

A number of critics, such as Wilson, Gnarowski, Carruth, and Doyle, have rightly noted Souster's small poetic canvas as a limitation in his poetry. Related to this is the lack of significant development noted by Pacey and Solecki. The simple honesty and directness of his poetry, which has appealed to George Jonas, Ralph Gustafson, Louis Dudek, and others is the more positive side of this limitation, but Souster is still a poet whose work lacks the depth and subtlety that greater intellectuality would give it.

Souster's technical ability is another major area of controversy. Northrop Frye, Hayden Carruth, and Michael Taylor have a low opinion of his technical skill. Others, such as Fred Cogswell, Michael Gnarowski, Eli Mandel, and Gary Geddes, have a much higher opinion of his merit in this area, although their comments tend to be general rather than specific. One aim of this thesis will be to demonstrate that in many of his poems Souster's technical skill deserves serious consideration.

The preceding surveys of criticism have hopefully clarified some of the main critical concerns with each of these poets, as well as giving the reader some idea of the nature and extent of the criticism their work has received. Criticism of Souster's work has been especially cursory. There is certainly ample room for

⁸⁰Patrick Tee, "The Vision and Poetry of Raymond Souster", (M.A. thesis, Sir George Williams University, 1972).

further critical consideration of each of these poets. The next two chapters will discuss the work of each through analysis of representative poems.

CHAPTER III

MARGARET AVISON

The relation between the individual and the city is one of the dominant themes in the poetry of both Margaret Avison and Raymond Souster. Both poets portray the city as a negative force, inhibiting the growth and expression of individual life. But both also have an enduring faith in the power of the heroic individual to survive and even assert himself in the face of the almost overwhelming repressiveness of the modern urban environment.

Avison's work is a poetry of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual search, of posing questions and suggesting answers in a manner which scrupulously avoids any attempts at over-simplification. She explores the question of the relation between the individual and urban society from various points of view in her attempt to grapple with this complex subject. The relationship of the child with the city and the relationship of the child with the adult are two of the contexts through which she explores this question. While far from being a sentimentalist, she portrays childhood as essentially positive, representative of vigour and spontaneity in opposition to the drab repressiveness of the urban environment.

These characteristics are demonstrated in "The Absorbed", a detached description of a winter's day from the vantage point of an office interior:

The sun has not absorbed
 this icy day, and this day's industry—in
 behind glass—hasn't the blue and gold, cold
 outside. Though not absorbing, this
 sought that:

sheeted, steely, vaulted,
 all gleam, this morning;
 bright blue with one stained wing in the
 northeast, at lunch hour;
 in early afternoon
 abruptly a dust-flurry,
 all but this private coign of place
 deafened, all winding in one cloth of moth.
 Then space breathed, hollowing twilight
 on ice and the pale-grey, pale-blue,
 and far fur-colored wooden trees
 and ornamental trees.

(D, p. 34)

The poem opens with a contrast between the industry of an office building's interior and the cold exterior of a winter's day. The oppositions established in the opening lines are between the sun and the icy day, and between the inside of the office building and the outside cold. Yet among these objects is a possible interdependency, as "this / sought that" (ll. 4-5).

The second stanza describes the office building through a series of adjectives—"sheeted, steely, vaulted"—that emphasize its isolated impregnability, like that of a steel safe. The sequence of a day's weather contrasts with the lack of any real change in the building. The morning is clear; with noon there is some cloud in the northeast; while a flurry suddenly appears in early afternoon. Describing the snow as a "dust-flurry" supports

the drabness of the picture. The snow "Winding in one cloth of moth" suggests the spinning of a chrysalis, perhaps implying the eventual rebirth of the narrator from the chrysalis of the office building. Finally, with twilight the sky clears, opening up the narrator's view once more:

Towards sundown
 a boy came with an aluminum toboggan.
 He worked his way, absorbed,
 past footmark pocks, on crust,
 up ice-ridge, sometimes bumping
 down to the Japanese yews, sometimes
 scooter-shoving athwart the hill,
 then, with a stake,
 kneeling,
 he paddles, thrusting, speed-wise, then
 stabbing, uphill; then
 dangling the rope and poring on
 slope-sheen, standing, he stashes
 the aluminum, upright, in a frost-lumpy shoal
 and beside coasting motorcars and parked cars
 listens . . . and off again, toque to the eyebrows,
 alone still in the engulfing dark.
 (D, p. 34)

In the above third stanza a boy appears on the scene described in the first two stanzas. It is nearly sunset, as the boy walks with his aluminum toboggan to the top of an ice ridge, past footprints which are like blemishes on the smooth surface of the snow. The boy, unlike the sun, office building, and winter's day of the first stanza, is "absorbed", or in harmony with his surroundings. He is a more realistic version of the child in the poem "A Child: Marginalia on an Epigraph" (D, p. 31) who is described as "completely absorbed". In both cases the absorption is an expression of harmony with surroundings.

The emphasis in this stanza is on the movement of the boy.

Verbals follow in quick succession as the boy is depicted "shoving", "kneeling", "thrusting", "stabbing", "dangling", "poring" and "standing". The tense of the verbs shifts from the past tense at the beginning of the stanza to the present midway through, as the narrator seems to catch some of his enthusiasm. Repeated "st" sounds also help give the impression of explosive action. His intense activity contrasts with the inactivity of the narrator.

A number of images suggesting water exist in this stanza. The boy "paddles" his toboggan, stashes it in a "frost-lumpy shoal" by "coasting" cars, and is finally depicted as being in the "engulfing dark". The function of this imagery is not clear, although it may help emphasize the distance between the boy and the narrator:

The inside breathing here
 closes down all the window but a visor-slit
 on the night glare.

New cold is
 in dry-thorn nostrils.

Alone, he plays, still there. We
 struggle, our animal fires
 pitted against those
 several grape-white stars,
 their silence.

(D, pp. 34-35)

In the fourth stanza the poem shifts to the interior; it is now night with only a narrow slit left through which the narrator can see. "Visor-slit" suggests the window is like armor for his protection from the outside, recalling the chrysalis imagery from stanza two. Both images suggest that the building is a protection for the narrator. In this latter instance the narrator is responsible

for his protection through his breathing, although this also limits his vision.

In the final stanza the boy has become an epiphany for the narrator, who is awed by his continuing to play alone outside as the darkness deepens. The reader has been prepared for this epiphany by the isolation of "kneeling", with its spiritual connotations, as a one-word line in the third stanza. The "stained wing" of stanza two may suggest an angel's wing. The narrator, however, remains inside, able to admire but not emulate the boy's spontaneous vigour. The measured, emphatic cadence of the first line of the last stanza, its three feet separated by commas, communicates the narrator's wonder at the boy's energy. "Alone" and "still", repeated from the last line of the third stanza, emphasize the boy's detachment from the narrator and his surroundings. "Still" has a dual sense of continuing time and peaceful serenity.

In contrast to the boy's energy "We" (which includes the reader) "struggle". The slight pause which naturally occurs at the end of the line after "We", helps give "struggle" greater weight. It is as if the narrator is searching for the right word, and after a momentary pause finds it in "struggle". Life, for the narrator, is not harmony but conflict against vast and incomprehensible forces. An interesting image is developed in these last lines, in which the narrator describes himself as "pitted" against the "grape-white stars", as if he is like the seeds or pits of

a grape enveloped by the "grape-white stars". The overwhelming odds against the struggle do not appear to have affected the boy.

Dramatic changes in Avison's poetry are rare. More often, as in this poem, the narrator simply responds to a situation with heightened sensitivity and communicates this awareness to the reader. The experience modifies the perception of the narrator, although there is careful avoidance of any exaggeration as to its importance. Everything is seen in perspective.

In "Prelude" (WS, p. 9) and "A Conversation" (WS, p. 69), childhood is portrayed as a time when sense perceptions are fresher and more accurate. In "September Street" (WS, p. 77), the natural meaningful life of childhood is juxtaposed with the young man's ambitious move into the less meaningful world of business. This theme is given extensive treatment in "A Child: Marginalia on an Epigraph" (D, p. 31), which provides a detailed evocation of the beauty and intensity of a child's pleasure. The dual epigraphs referred to in the title of this poem are significant. The first is: "Believe me, unless you become like little children again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18: 3). The second is: "He who welcomes this child in my name welcomes me; and he who welcomes me welcomes him who sent me. He who is least in all your company is the greatest" (Luke 9: 48). These quotations provide through the words of Christ both support for and an added spiritual dimension to her view of childhood.

While all writers are naturally concerned with language and its effects, Margaret Avison is more than usually talented in her

ability to gain the maximum effect from each word she uses. In many of her early poems, such as the sonnets published in Winter Sun, this concern is evidenced through an elaborate use of language and allusion. While her ability in this direction is impressive, these earlier poems seldom achieve the crystal clarity of her later poetry. In The Dumbfounding she expresses simply but accurately a great range of thought and feeling through a sensitive use of language along with punctuation, rhythm, and a flexible use of the line. Reviews of Dylan Thomas' and Edith Sitwell's poems reveal that in her earlier years she admired their poetry; perhaps she was influenced by their love of verbal pyrotechnics. The quiet unassuming nature of her later work is certainly far removed from their manner of writing:

Small, then, surprised altogether,
 helpless, but carried, he is
 soon able to cram down, gulp in, trembling with hunger
 feeding (no need to name the food, or find it)
 or browsing on poison-berries (weep
 because Birds have eaten the crumbs
 marking the trail
 homewards) (in the woods, weeping).
(D, p. 31)

This first stanza from "A Child: Marginalia on an Epigraph" uses the Hansel and Gretel fairy-tale—also used in "The Artist" (WS, p. 40; D, p. 91)—as a backdrop to a young child's awakening consciousness. Hansel and Gretel drop crumbs to serve as a trail to find their way back out of the forest into which they are being led, only to find that birds have eaten them. Like Hansel and Gretel, the child is alone in a bewildering environment.

The confused nature of the child is emphasized in this stanza through a liberal use of commas, which imparts a breathless, almost frantic atmosphere as he struggles for survival. The parenthetical interjections also reflect through their fragmentary nature the turbulence of the child's early years. Numerous verbals indicate his rapidly changing emotional states in a complex and confusing world.

The following stanzas continue a description of the child's early years. The energy and imagination of the child is threatened but not subdued by his early experiences. He waits:

to strip off shoes and socks in the
first light of the new world of April's
first grass

(D, p. 31)

The latter part of the poem, commencing with the line "New day, new life time", shifts from the imaginative description of the opening stanzas to a more realistic description of the child as a slightly older being, more conscious of himself as a creature in society:

On the festal day (long promised) he
wakes to ice-cream-flavored air; he possesses
the polka-dot, strut-singing, wave-suds, winking
wonder of off and out to
roads, to a ferry crossing, to
shadows of clouds and seagulls afloat, to
rainbows in salty sand that smells of drydock cement--
and the smell clings to fingers and knees--
to bobbling, butterfly-flotsam
crowds, flowing in and coursing
under the gate: the flags,
the white-painted poles, the mealy
sawdust and straw and weed-cracked drought-withered
pathsmooth flaking
corners and eavesdropping

silent sunny places
 around the edges, before the
 waves of attention heap up and ride round and
 break in clapping and laughter and you
 (Lord!) don't know where to look
 for being here
 and for joy.
 (D, p. 32)

The lines tumble along at breakneck speed as they recreate the emotional state of the boy as he travels to the local fair. The fair itself almost becomes incidental, as everything he experiences is suffused with his joy. Even though the physical appearance of the fair is not much objectively, with "weed-cracked drought-withered / path-smooth flaking / corners" the boy's joy is far too great to be the least affected. Water imagery is frequent here, as it is in "The Absorbed", although again its exact function is not clear. In any case, the total joy of the boy is apparently what Avison is implying as necessary if we are to become Christ-like in the manner referred to in the dual epigraph of the poem:

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, pp. 32-33)

These closing lines qualify the exuberance of the previous stanza. The headlong movement of the preceding lines gives way to a more detached, thoughtful tone. The boy's heart may be "radiant", but it is also "bone-barred". He is still mortal. While he longs for "fullness", he is not sufficiently "out of the light" (of his child's innocence) for this fullness to be achieved. Margaret

Avison appears to imply that while we must become like little children, we must still go through the process of maturing before this simplicity can be reached. To put it in Blakean terms, a synthesis of experience with innocence is necessary.

The search for human values in an environment that is essentially non-human is ever-present in Avison's poetry, but more dominant in The Dumbfounding. Throughout this latter book there is a ceaseless quest for spiritual reality. The modern city is depicted as a place of glass, steel, brick, and cement, traditionless and without history, divorced from the cultural continuity known by previous ages. Nature, on the other hand (especially trees), is positive, although seldom providing any refuge for the individual. Often her poems of search for human values take the form of epiphanies in which some simple physical object radiates a deeper spiritual significance. This is true of the young boy tobogganing in "The Absorbed" (D, p. 34), but one of the best examples of a poem in which an experience modifies her perception of the world is "A Nameless One":

Hot in June a narrow winged
 long-elbowed-thread-legged
 living insect lived
 and died within
 the lodgers' second-floor bathroom here.

At six A.M.
 wafting ceilingward,
 no breeze but what it living made there;

at noon standing
 still as a constellation of spruce needles
 before the moment of
 making it, whirling;

at four a
wilted flotsam, cornsilk on the linoleum:

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

Its insect-day
has threaded a needle
for me for my eyes dimming
over rips and tears and
thin places.

(D, p. 97)

The life and death of the insect in the enclosed room provides the narrator with a context through which to view the mystery of life and death. It is not so much that the insect's brief life is a symbol of man's short life on earth as that it is analogous to it,¹ with both similarities and differences. The second-floor bathroom is a restricted, unventilated place, one in which the insect could not possibly survive for long. It is the introduction of life and death into this sterile environment that makes the room adequate for the narrator to "be" in. The room has thus acquired a more meaningful context through which it can be viewed. Also implied in this poem is that while man's environment may be suitable for man, he could no more survive unaided in nature than the insect can survive in the bathroom. In the final stanza the narrator reaches a combined sympathy for the life of the insect

¹Analogy is of central importance in a number of Avison's poems. Examples are "The Butterfly" (BCP, p. 428); "For Dr. and Mrs. Dresser" (D, p. 64); "Janitor Working on a Threshold" (D, p. 78); and "Apollo XIII" (Toronto Telegram 25 April 1970, p. 51, rpt. in Redekop, p. 146.

with an awareness of its essential otherness.

Subtle, serious punning is characteristic of much of Avison's poetry. Redekop's explication of this poem illuminates many of the poem's achievements in this regard.² Recurring related images and word-plays, such as the water imagery in "The Absorbed",³ occur in many of Avison's poems. In the last two stanzas of "A Nameless One", the "eye" imagery is of central importance. In the second last stanza the "I" acquires new "eyes" with which to perceive. In the final stanza the threading of the "eye" of the needle gives a new vision to the "eyes". The needle not only holds things together through its thread (also recalling the "thread-legged" insect from the second line of the poem), but also eliminates "tears" from the eyes, thus assuring clearer vision.

Reaching out for communion combined with an awareness of the incredible difficulty of its achievement informs much of her poetry. The city does not support, and is often antithetical to, this communion. Isolation is often the price one must pay for perception. Often those who achieve perception are highly unlikely candidates, such as the derelict in "July Man", who parallels many of the figures who populate Souster's poetry:⁴

²Redekop, pp. 16-18.

³See above, p. 70.

⁴See below, pp. 188-193.

Old, rain-wrinkled, time-soiled, city-wise, morning man
 whose weeping is for the dust of the elm-flowers
 and the hurting motes of time,
 rotted with rotting grape,
 sweet with the fumes,
 puzzled for good by fermented potato-
 peel out of the vat of the times,
 turned out and left
 in this grass-patch, this city-gardener's place
 under the buzzing populace's
 square shadows, and the green shadows
 of elm and gingko and lime
 (planted for Sunday strollers and summer evening
 families, and for those
 bird-cranks with bread-crumbs
 and crumpled umbrellas who come
 while the dew is wet on the park, and beauty
 is fan-tailed, gray and dove gray, aslant, folding in
 from the white fury of the day).

In the sound of the fountain
 you rest, at the cinder rim, on your bench.

The rushing river of cars
 makes you a stillness, a pivot, a heart-stopping
 blurt, in the sorrow
 of the last rubbydub swig, the searing, and
 stone-jar solitude lost, and yet,
 and still—wonder (for good now) and
 trembling:

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)

In the first stanza the old man, caught in a moment of morning
 sobriety when his vision is unblurred by wine, is contrasted with
 the elegant park and those for whom it was constructed, whose
 time is fashionable evening. The series of compound adjectives
 in the first line, giving a vivid picture of the derelict, is a
 technique Avison uses frequently, as in the opening lines of "The
 Earth That Falls Away" (D, p. 38), or in the second last stanza

of "A Child: Marginalia on an Epigraph" (D, p. 32).

The old derelict is rejected by society, but has an innocence and harmony with nature similar to that of the boy in "The Absorbed" (D, p. 34), combined with the purification of experience. His escape is wine, and his place the park bench, although the park is a poor refuge, being only a "grass patch". Ornamental trees are being planted, as the elm trees are being destroyed by disease. The old man is out of tune with his surroundings, turned out to the park like an animal to pasture.

The technique of repeating a noun with the adjective altered, as in the line "square shadows, and the green shadows" is used also in the last line of the second stanza of "The Absorbed" (D, p. 34) with its "fur-colored wooden trees and ornamental trees". In both instances it helps create an atmosphere of vague discontent. The first stanza ends with the striking image of the evening compared to a bird and perhaps also a woman with a fan who has been subdued by the masculine vigour of the day.

In spite of his less than ideal situation, the derelict is much more alive than the middle class habitués of the park, who stroll through the grounds that have been carefully planted with ornamental trees. These people come only in the evening when the uncomfortable heat of day has passed. The derelict becomes a point of reference as the crowds of people pass by, and cars flow by in a steady stream. The last lines of the second-last stanza recall the compressed, hurried style of "A Child: Marginalia on an Epigraph" (D, p. 31) as the narrator gives the impression

of searching desperately for the exact manner of expressing his perception. Like the young boy in "The Absorbed" (D, p. 34) and the insect in "A Nameless One" (D, p. 97), the derelict is important for the poet, both in himself and for what he represents.

References to time are an interesting thread tying the poem together. The word "time" is repeated in the first, third, seventh, and last lines of the poem. In all except the first line, the word is at the end of the line, giving it added prominence. Consonance provides further links. In the first stanza the "m" sound in time is repeated in one of the two final words of half the lines. The derelict cannot escape from time, no matter how much he might try through wine or other means. Time is like "hurting motes", those invisible specks that get in the eye and prevent clear vision. At the end of the poem the derelict remains mired "in time". He has a degree of perception but is unable to cope with the insight thus achieved.

In Avison's poetry the tensions between the individual and the city become most evident in those poems dealing directly with the industrial or business aspect of society. Garnet and Miss Rothsey in "The Agnes Cleves Papers" (WS, p. 78) forsake their youthful artistic ambitions for the drab security of careers with an export-import firm. But in some other poems there is more hope. At times the individual still wins through in Avison's poetry. "A Friend's Friend" states what first appears to be the disillusion of a young man who finds that the gold in the hills is not for his taking:

This fellow is bewildered,
 Puckers his eyes like querulous age
 at a curb. His nails are bitten.
 His still-young skin has the look of
 thumbsmears on a hard-boiled egg,
 half-shell, half wrinkled membrane
 tougher to break.
 As if the natal stars shortened his stirrups
 and set his rocking-horse facing the west
 he seemed ambitious.
 Did some cynical gaffer
 hand him the pan and seive [sic], talk of the canyon
 where you squat in a mulch of pebbles
 in the sun-eyed-mountain's evening,
 as if in the tilt of a page someone sick of the glare
 reads easier so?
 Somehow he has kept these tools in balance.
 The presence of his angel burning him
 to this bewilderment makes popcorn of the
 experience
 he thought his life; he is munched now,
 trivial snack, a movie interlude.
 Gratuities will buy his beer
 till all the jobs are boarded up against him
 but he won't mind. He is by now
 no longer kernel-proud;
 Proof against mountain-sickness;
 Well-nigh illegible.
 A tinker likes hard times.

(WS, p. 75)

This is another poem about a reject from society, although there
 is more hope for him than the figure in "July Man". Titles of
 Avison's poems often have a subtle but illuminating relationship
 with the poem. The fact that the title is not "A Friend" but
 "A Friend's Friend" removes the subject matter from direct per-
 sonal association, heightening its objectivity. This objectivity
 is emphasized by the detached diction and tone of the opening
 lines. This calm, measured manner contrasts with the breathless
 wonder which is characteristic of the style of "A Child: Margin-
 alia on an Epigraph" (D, p. 31) and many of her later poems.

The opening images, in which his eyes squint like those of an old person about to negotiate the step onto a sidewalk curb, and his skin looks like thumb-prints on a hard-boiled egg, provide both a vivid visual description and an evocation of his inner state. His skin not only looks like the shell of a hard-boiled egg, but he himself is hard-boiled, with a shell which, like that of the egg, is tough to break.

"He seemed ambitious" recalls Caesar, as described by Mark Antony in his funeral oration in Shakespeare's play Julius Caesar—"Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?". Things do not work out too well either for Caesar or the figure in this poem, although if both are misunderstood the figure in this poem at least escapes assassination. He has taken Horace Greeley's advice and gone west, at least metaphorically, as he was supposedly born under a lucky star ("natal stars") and has hitched his wagon to it. But the anti-hero of this poem has been misled. He has been lured by the tales of easy money, taken in by the talk of gold in the hills and an easy life. He has bought the clichés of middle class society without questioning their validity.

But if his enthusiasm has been dampened, his integrity is intact. Although his actual life has little meaning, with about as much substance and functional value as pop-corn, he has an inviolable core, having lost any illusions of his own uniqueness ("no longer kernel-proud"). The pan and sieve which have been referred to earlier in the poem as instruments for panning gold have deteriorated to tools for making pop-corn. This conceit

is combined with another thread of references to film. "Gaffer" in line 11 can be either an old man or a person in film production who handles the microphone. Here film is associated with a facile optimism. But instead of a major role, he is now only a snack for "a movie interlude". He is used to the altitudes of mountains ("Proof against mountain-sickness"), recalling his panning for gold in earlier lines, and also his separation from humanity. He is almost "illegible", perhaps because he is not easily understood, and also recalling the reference to reading in ll. 15-16.

Avison portrays fascination in her poetry for those who attempt to march to a different drummer. In "Our Working Day May Be Menaced" (WS, p. 57), Madeleine disobeys the regulations imposed by her employer. She has been employed in the fruitless endeavour of extracting seeds from oranges, thus rendering them more palatable to middle class tastes, but also depriving them of their fertility. Instead of leaving after work by the regular exit, Madeleine leaves via a windy extension bridge. Her action is viewed as the possible first step in undermining a useless industry and thereby initiating a possible transformation in society:

Yet may we, when the morning steam-cocks open
 For our new day aloft
 Find there is come about a universal
 swallowing-up
 (Proceedings against Madeleine alone
 Clearly being absurd)?
 With only the racks and the vats,
 The lifts and cages left, uncrated and forgotten,
 And the pipes steaming thinly
 Under a fading crescent?
 (WS, p. 59)

In a number of other poems in Winter Sun there is a similar expectant

hope in the closing lines that some human annunciation will force the necessary crack in the façade of contemporary society that will lead to the inception of a new order. "Intra-Political" (WS, p. 44) and "Apocalyptic" (WS, p. 52) are further examples of poems that express this hope. Hope rests ultimately not in society, not even in orthodox religion, but in the individual and the way in which he can transcend the obstacles of life. Avison's sensibility, in this sense at least, is essentially Protestant rather than Catholic.

Although Avison continually searches for underlying meanings whose communication necessitates a wide variety of approaches, at the same time her poetry remains firmly rooted in physical reality. Avison often harmonizes these apparently divergent goals by taking a realistic situation and dislocating it just sufficiently—but no more—for the underlying meanings to shine through.

"To Professor X, Year Y" is addressed to an historian of the future who is trying to understand the nature of our civilization. The scene the poet uses to communicate this meaning is a contemporary downtown city square at evening rush hour; but instead of going home the office workers have congregated in this square in silent expectancy:

The square for civic receptions
Is jammed, static, black with people in topcoats
Although November
Is mean, and day grows late.

The newspapermen, who couldn't
Force their way home, after the council meeting
&c., move between windows and pressroom
In ugly humour. They do not know

What everybody is waiting for
 At this hour
 To stand massed and unmoving
 When there should be—well—nothing to expect
 Except the usual hubbub
 Of city five o'clock.

(WS, p. 34)

A scene such as this has not likely happened in reality, but it becomes an objective correlative for an imaginative state which the poet apparently believes characteristic of modern urban society. Like Madeleine in "Our Working Day May Be Menaced" (WS, p. 57), the assembled office workers communicate a vague dissatisfaction with a society that leaves certain needs unfulfilled. Probably every office worker has at some time felt a vague unease. In this poem Avison imagines the state that would occur if a large number expressed this feeling simultaneously. The meaning of the scene is beyond the power of the newspapermen to uncover, trained as they are in factual reporting.

Perhaps this is how revolutions start. At any rate this gathering disturbs the structures of society:

But the few thousand inexplicably here
 Generate funny currents, zigzag
 Across the leaden miles, and all suburbia
 Suffers, uneasily.

(WS, p. 35)

Suburbia may not be about to crumble from this happening, but it is definitely unsettled.

There are, as the narrator says, concepts that are beyond a simple logical presentation, although of paramount importance for understanding the world around us:

You, historian, looking back at us,

Do you think I'm not trying to be helpful?
 If I fabricated cause-and-effect
 You'd listen? I've been dead too long for fancies.
 Ignore us, hunched in these dark streets
 If in a minute now the explosive
 Meaning fails to disperse us and provide resonance
 Appropriate to your chronicle.

(WS, p. 35)

This becomes, of course, a justification for her own poetry, which eschews cause and effect for subtler modes of discovery. Much of her poetry is a search for more comprehensive ways of understanding.

"The World Still Needs" also deals with problems of urban living, concentrating more specifically on how our needs for solitude can be reconciled with our need for community, and the function that art plays in this regard:

Frivolity is out of season.
 Yet, in this poetry, let it be admitted
 The world still needs piano-tuners
 And has fewer, and more of these
 Gray fellows prone to liquor
 On an unlikely Tuesday, gritty with wind,
 When somewhere, behind windows,
 A housewife stays for him until the
 Hour of the uneasy bridge-club cocktails
 And the office rush at the groceteria
 And the vesper-bell and lit-up buses passing
 And the supper trays along the hospital corridor,
 Suffering from
 Sore throat and dusty curtains.

(WS, p. 27)

An atmosphere of boredom and monotony is created in the opening lines through a description of suburbia and the "Gray fellows" who call it home. Husband and wife are apart from each other as the late afternoon city activities are described, culminating with the ominous "supper trays along the hospital corridor".

Perhaps the hospital, with its drab regularity, is a microcosm of our society. Words such as "gritty", "uneasy", and "dusty" contribute to the oppressive atmosphere, as does the repetition of "and" at the beginning of three successive lines. The presence of piano-tuners, however needed, seems far away; little community or personal satisfaction is apparent in this view of society:

Not all alone on the deserted boathouse
 Or even on the prairie freight
 (The engineer leaned out, watchful and blank
 And had no Christmas worries
 Mainly because it was the eve of April),
 Is like the moment
 When the piano in the concert-hall
 Finds texture absolute, a single solitude
 For those hundreds in rows, half out of overcoats,
 Their eyes swimming with sleep.

(WS, p. 27)

The second stanza continues the theme of the necessity of the artist and the right type of solitude in our present society. Solitude may be found in places such as the "deserted boathouse" or the "prairie freight", but this does not approach in desirability the "single solitude" it is possible to have through sharing the experience of music. The experience is similar to that of the office workers who congregate in "To Professor X, Year Y" (WS, p. 34). The experience of art in the concert-hall appears to combine the suburbanites' need for solitude with their communal needs as a social animal. The audience, admittedly, is less than ecstatic. Perhaps they are not yet ready for this experience:

From this communal cramp of understanding
 Springs up suburbia, where every man would build
 A clapboard in a well of Russian forest
 With yard enough for a high clothesline strung
 To a small balcony. . .

A woman whose eyes shine like evening's star
 Takes in the freshblown linen
 While sky a lonely wash of pink is still
 reflected in brown mud
 Where lettuces will grow, another spring.
 (WS, pp. 27-28)

Our society knows the necessity of solitude, but the type of solitude sought is the wrong one—that of isolation in a physical sense from each other rather than the "single solitude" of the concert hall. We create suburbs in which each house is a self-contained unit isolated from the others. The poem ends, as it began, with evening, but with some hope that the future will see improvements. Nature exerts a positive effect; the gritty wind of the first stanza here creates "freshblown linen". The "lonely" sunset sky is not isolated like the suburbanites, but is "reflected in brown mud". Perhaps the rows of lettuce parallel the rows of people at the concert in the second stanza, implying that the imaginative experience of nature and art are parallel, each providing an alternative to suburban isolation.

Avison is frequently concerned in her poetry with the unnecessary limitations imposed on the individual either by himself or by society. This concern is often communicated through imagery suggestive of enclosed spaces;⁵ these are at times linked to the outside by a window as in "The Absorbed" (D, p. 34) or "Rich Boy's Birthday Through a Window" (WS, p. 56). These enclosed spaces generally have restrictive and hence negative connotations. As

⁵See below, pp. 194-196 for discussion of Souster's use of this technique.

the narrator says in "Unfinished After-Portrait" (WS, p. 37),
 "even hanging a coat at the doorway sometimes / barricades, cages,
 crams". In "The Mourner", the narrator is content to remain in-
 side, window boarded up, even though he is sure of the beauty of
 the outside world:

"Because the windows were boarded up
 on us, though when the wind
 blew in this dry tree-scaley scruff
 or the swimmer's morning freshness, we can, now,
 not securely remember,
 but because the windows were
 boards, one pencil beam
 no longer diffused, no longer confusable
 with the virtues of visibility,
 but purely, narrowly,
 compellingly,
 itself, is evidence that there is
 Tree. Morning. Freshness. Even though
 the windows have been boarded
 up on
 us,"
 told the Mourner, moving
 down the grass-blowing years, marking
 a day.

(D, p. 20)

All except the last three lines of this poem are narrated by a
 person who is with someone or some other people in a building,
 the windows of which have been boarded up. The narrator is content
 to remain inside, not objecting to his seclusion. He is a far cry
 from the adventurous figures in "A Friend's Friend" (WS, p. 75)
 or "Our Working Day May Be Menaced" (WS, p. 57), although Avison
 as usual avoids rhetoric, simply presenting the poem with an ob-
 jectivity that demands the reader take an active part in formulating
 his understanding of the poem.

The boarding-up of the windows has kept out both the "tree-

scaley scruff" and "the swimmer's morning freshness", two divergent aspects of the world outside. Only one beam of light penetrates through a knot-hole, a beam too narrow to provide any real illumination, but sufficient to satisfy the narrator that the world outside continues as before. His attitude is a prosaic, factual one, in which a sunbeam is regarded as "evidence" and described as a "pencil beam", further suggesting his orientation away from nature. His use of "because" twice in the opening lines also indicates his cause and effect manner of viewing the world.

The closing three lines are an ironic comment by another voice undercutting the narrator's long justification of his exclusion of the outside world. The narrator is a "Mourner" because he is oriented to death rather than life. A day is only a cause for another mark, all of them being much like one another. The adjective "grass-blowing" is a good example of Avison's use of the unexpected but suitable modifier. As used here, it has suggestions of aridity and lifelessness, like the "wind in dry grass" of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men".

Avison's use of language in this poem is effectively simple. The description of the sunbeam through a series of three adverbs, "purely, narrowly, / compellingly", defines its qualities well, especially by isolating the last adverb "compellingly" in a line by itself. "Tree. Morning. Freshness". parallels these three adverbs. Their isolation into three separate sentences enforces their importance, for they are what is being shut out.

Enclosed spaces are associated in Avison's poetry with a

limited perception or understanding which is at times linked with the urban environment. Glass, metal, brick, and cement imagery are associated with this urban environment. In "The Earth That Falls Away" (D, p. 38), fabrics are made by "Chemists and great, / plate-steel gnashing bricked-and-glassed-in places". The personal touch has obviously been lost. The soul fleeing from God in "Searching and Sounding" (D, p. 61) has a heart that "is sore, as its / bricked-in ovens smoulder". Finally, the narrator in "A Season of Unemployment" (D, p. 85) feels that he is "bricked in early by a stifling dark". This imagery is supported in this poem by the description of the park benches, which are "cemented down, planted / and then cemented". Stone and cement imagery is used in similar contexts to that of brick imagery. In "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball" they support a picture of desolation:

No beetles move. No birds pass over.
The stone house is cold.
The cement has crumbled from the steps.
(WS, p. 12)

In a similar fashion, "Prelude" finds the narrator musing on the ways in which we have lost touch with the simple perceptions of childhood. While doing so she contemplates "The stone lip of a flower, / the lowest, on the left side, / on the government building" (WS, p. 9).

A concern with the relationship between nature and technology is a natural outgrowth of Avison's concern with the nature of the relationship between the individual and the city. Urban society is depicted as the ultimate expression of this technology. As

she explains in "Dispersed Titles" (WS, p. 3), the most disturbing feature of technology for her is that it is rootless, a break away from the cycles that are found in nature. These cycles have given previous civilizations meaning and harmony with the natural processes that our present civilization lacks. The cycles have not disappeared, but our technological society has encouraged an aggressive attitude that has made us lose touch with them.

In "Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes (In Prospect)" (WS, p. 21; D, p. 89), the aggressive characters of the first stanza are associated with a domineering attitude that destroys even while it loves:

Those who fling off, toss head,
 Taste the bitter morning, and have at it—
 Thresh, knead, dam, weld,
 Wave baton, force
 Marches through squirming bogs,
 Not from contempt, but
 From thrust, unslakeably thirsty,
 Amorous of every tower and twig, and
 Yet like railroad engines with
 Longings for their landscapes (pistons pounding)
 Rock fulminating through
 Wrecked love, unslakeably loving—
 (WS, p. 21; D, p. 89)

A curious array of characters parade through the opening lines. Their actual professions are less important than the roles in which they appear in this poem. Those who "Thresh, knead, dam, weld" all change the natural order of things—perhaps for the better, but they still alter the natural processes in one way or another. Conductors and soldiers form a strange conjunction in the next lines. Perhaps what they have in common is an attempt to bring things about by an act of will. They are not without love for

what they are doing, but because of their aggressiveness cannot be satisfied. The repetition of "unslakeably" emphasizes this fact.

The passive characters of the second stanza, on the other hand, are less in tune with technology, but much more imaginative. They "make / Peculiar cats-cradles of telephone wire". Technology, in other words, can have its artifacts divorced from their intended ends and made into imaginative games. In the final stanza of this poem the approach of these two groups to each other is described. Even though they do not actually meet, reconciliation does not seem out of the question:

But when they approach each other
The place is an astonishment:

. . .

Not knowing how they wait at the node, the
Curious encounter.

(WS, p. 22; D, p. 90)

Less optimistically, "Rigor Viris" portrays man as all but crushed by the society he has created:

One bland ellipse in cornflower blue
Fans out beyond the gunnysack.
The profiles of Egyptian smiles
Confuse the clues these chimneystacks
Suggest of smoking miles,
 Wed smoke to sun instead,
 And blazon that parade
 Of all intolerables, in flowing frieze,
Against a pink brick wall in a dun autumn.

(WS, p. 62)

Literally "stiffness of life", "Rigor Viris" is a pun on rigor mortis, a term used to describe the stiffness of the body after death. The poet implies that there is a moral and spiritual

stiffness of death that can take place before our actual physical deaths.

In the first stanza, quoted above, suggestions of ancient Egyptian friezes are interwoven with imagery of smoke-spewing factory chimneys. It is suitable that the Egyptians, with the stiff, stylized manner in which they were presented by their artists, combined with the orientation of their society towards death, should be associated in this poem with a dismal picture of our industrial society. Our society has the stiffness of the Egyptian frieze without its beauty.

The first lines appear to be communicating impressions the narrator receives from a frieze of Egyptian figures, after which the factories themselves are described. The impressive magnitude of these factories is illusory. The last four lines of the stanza bring the reader down to earth with a jolt, as the rhythm changes from regular iambic to a rough, irregular rhythm. In the last line the sharp, clipped sounds of "pink brick" are juxtaposed with the softer sounds of "dun autumn". A more appropriate frieze for our society would be the ugly scars made by smoke and sun on the brick wall of one of our factories.

In each of the first two stanzas a regular quatrain in iambic meter is combined with five or six lines in an irregular rhythm. These shifts help reflect the narrator's uncertainty:

Can this sere serried dance revive him now
 Whose imminent demise
 Stales the blown sky, and air
 Embattled, and lends glare
 To dying light in a lost season (how

Ragged among the slag he sprawls
 Deployed within a static plan:
 Along the trillion prism walls
 Of diamond creeps the prisoned man)?
 (WS, p. 62)

The second stanza is a long question as to whether or not man's "imminent demise" can be avoided. At this point there seems little hope. If man can dance, it is only "sere" and "serried", suggesting that the dance is not only worn out but disjointed. This dance may also refer to the poem itself, or art in general. Imagery of war, with the air "embattled" and man "Deployed" suggests a conflict for which man appears to have little competence. The fact that he is "deployed" also suggests his loss of freedom, while a "static plan" allows no room for individuality. By the last lines of the stanza he has been metamorphosed from man to a dehumanized creature sprawled among the slag to an insect crawling along a wall. The diamond walls along which he crawls signify not beauty but extreme hardness and restriction:

Evening is come too close now
 For breath to come between.
 Leaves blacken on a silver bough.
 The ocean's sullen green
 Sprouts in the cruel white of foam-flowers, whittled
 for vanishing.
 Now, child Pandora, lift the lid again
 And let the clamouring mysteries be dumb.
 In this clear twilight contour must contain
 Its source, and distances with contour come
 Opening peacock vistas that can no man entomb.
 (WS, p. 62)

The first lines of the third stanza continue an expression of the pessimistic view of the second. Striking images enforce an atmosphere of subtle menace. Night, both actual and metaphorical, is approaching. Evening is too close for another breath, while leaves

are blackening with the approaching night. The bough, however, remains silver (but not golden). The sea is turbulent, hostile, and ceaselessly changing.

But the closing lines of the poem take an unexpected turn with their reference to the myth of Pandora's box. As Redekop explains,⁶ this myth has both positive and negative connotations. In this instance the positive connotations appear more relevant. This is enforced by the form being more regular than in the preceding stanzas. The lid of Pandora's box becomes a gateway to another dimension which provides an escape from the limitations of the contemporary world. The prism walls no longer limit our humanity; in their place are distances and "peacock vistas". "Peacock", another unusual adjective, is particularly appropriate in suggesting the splendour of this new vision in contrast with the pessimistic imagery of the first two stanzas. The final word of the poem, "entomb", looks back to the first stanza and its suggestion through Egyptian imagery of death and burial, also associated with industrial society. At the end of the poem this limited state has been transcended.

But reaching this state is possible only for those who do not seek it out too directly. The passive and aggressive figures who are presented in "Meeting Together of Poles and Latitudes (In Prospect)" (WS, p. 21; D, p. 89)⁷ are representative of individuals in much of Avison's poetry. The passive are associated

⁶Redekop, pp. 45-46.

⁷See above, pp. 93-94.

with imagination, while the aggressive, often linked with technology and society in its industrial or business aspect, are viewed with less sympathy. "The Fallen, Fallen World" (WS, p. 23) expresses the positions of three different types of characters. The revolutionaries have primarily aggressive tendencies, while the idealists and the learned are, in this poem at least, primarily passive. A further parallel of this nature is portrayed in the poem "A Conversation" (WS, p. 69). The aggressive person is sealed off in his own ego and unwilling to make contact with others. His perceptions are consequently limited:

"Fish have a way of wavering through water.
 They don't beat with their fins. What is their death
 To me? I can't confront
 A tree to really know it, and feel odd
 To exchange glances with a squirrel,
 And wish to keep my springs of life
 Private from the Big Eye.
 (WS, p. 69)

He accepts his isolation from the rest of nature, and is audacious enough to think he is not accountable even to God, whom he familiarly refers to as the "Big Eye". Perhaps there are ironic overtones here of the "Big Eye" also being the "Big I", as well, perhaps, as a "Private Eye". At any rate this figure's world is one of conflict, that cannot comprehend the harmony that such creatures as fish have with their environment.

The passive figure, on the other hand, is characterized by a sensitive awareness of nature and of his past. He talks of lying in a church loft as a child where:

you dared
 Not move, as if a fresh sweet-flowing wound

Would open if you did, and let you lie
 In lovely death there on the crimson steps
 Under the long pale windows."

(WS, p. 70)

This individual is a believer in calm acceptance, even of death; the separateness of his ego is not his prime concern. His views are expressed in long, wavering rhythms, unlike the rapid pace of the aggressive speaker. With the former speaker, adjectives—"sweet-flowing", "lovely", "crimson"—are the most important words, whereas the latter speaker relies mainly on verbs. This complements their passive and active natures.

The parallels between passive and aggressive attitudes to life, or "being" and "doing", and the individual's relation with society, receive their most extensive treatment in "The Agnes Cleves Papers", the closing poem of Winter Sun. This poem is by far the longest in this volume. It acts as a suitable final poem, exploring in greater detail many of the themes that were introduced in previous poems.

The tone of the poem's opening approaches boredom, as the narrator is discontented with the unreality of his present life. He is at a dance with a friend, but depressed with the artificiality of it all:

And inside all the orchestra has played
 Is waltz and wedding dance and windy harbours
 And the sweets of sophisticated shepherds.

(WS, p. 78)

The sense of entrapment is expressed in a much more personal, direct fashion than in most of Avison's other poems that touch on this theme. "How few persist in penetrating farther" (WS, p. 78)—

as expressed in "Rigor Viris",⁸ the individual can surmount the limitations that surround him, but at this point the narrator of "The Agnes Cleves' Papers appears to have little desire to do so. The figures in the poem who do so disappear into a mysterious unknown beyond, "And all the rumour that subsides after them / Is of some outdoor chill." (WS, p. 78). The Finnish student, envied by the narrator, is one who has penetrated farther. This student has a sense of purpose; he has beliefs which motivate his actions. The narrator, on the other hand, mired in his present life, has nothing but a "Statistical identity".

A dismal evening winter's day is then described. External nature acquires negative connotations because of the narrator's depressed frame of mind. "Stories of Uncle Remus" (WS, p. 79) are regarded with condescension as for children only, echoing the scornful attitude to stories expressed in the second stanza of the poem. Is this, then, the choice there is—either the unreal fantasy of stories or the "Dour winter" and "Barbarian snow" of reality? These alternatives are further exemplified in the persons of dreamy, story-telling Valerius and violently realistic Alec. But Valerius has gone, disappeared to Mexico; the Finnish student has gone as well.

But telling stories about these people provides only a temporary escape, and the sense of entrapment closes in on the narrator once again in his emphasis on the negative aspects of reality. The external world, with:

⁸See above, pp. 96-97.

a cedar row
 Half-dead and silted up with cinders,
 And the trainman's car, missing two fenders
 And torn in the leather and stuffing half through.
 (WS, pp. 80-81)

is once again ugly and sordid. A sense of oppressive space pervades this passage in lines such as "While the planets seed down their big backyards" (WS, p. 81).

This sense of oppressiveness is continued in the next stanza with the effective image of the narrator describing his feeling as if he is continually removing his rubbers in the vestibule of an apartment. He finds himself in an apartment to which there are many doors. There are so many possibilities, but all of them open on to a reality which is shabby and undesirable. There is no escape here, either. The narrator is unwilling to act, as no action seems preferable to another. He would prefer, instead, to stop up some of the doors, thus eliminating some of the possibilities.

He is better at finding reasons for avoiding action than for action, as is said in the following stanza:

And it would be clumsy walking (after climbing
 The new wire fence) to go down there
 And why should courage be hailing you to go
 Because it is muddy and March and there are a few
 Siney snowy geese
 Stretching their necks?
 (WS, p. 82)

A rejection of the physical world is apparent in these lines.

The narrator finally decides to tell a story, although this story will have no illusory beauty about it. It will not obscure the way things are:

This plot is not among the magic stories

Although it has their dream finality.
 (WS, p. 83)

The story is a modern, realistic, Antony and Cleopatra story, avoiding the romanticism of the other story-tellers who distorted their characters by surrounding them with "seablue, or a china nutmeg dayyard" (WS, p. 83). Garnet and Miss Rothsey both have pasts as artists in music and painting respectively, although neither was apparently particularly talented. There are no empires to be won or lost today, only minor skirmishes in their world of little business. There is no glamour or majesty in their romance—not even, it seems, much personal satisfaction.

But through the telling of the story the narrator comes to understand things that he had not before. Like the Eureka of Archimedes in "Voluptuaries and Others" it is:

a particular instance of
 The kind of lighting up of the terrain
 That leaves aside the whole terrain, really,
 But signalizes, and compels, an advance in it.
 (WS, p. 64)

The Garnet-Miss Rothsey story makes the narrator realize that his previous attitude, in which a distaste for reality led to a lack of action, was wrong:

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

Like Pan, who tried to stay young forever, the narrator has tried

to avoid reality. But those very things that he has spurned, the familiar realistic world, other people ("All eyes I do not own")-- in short, the "known enigma" of this world, are what we must use to get beyond a solipsist attitude. Reality is a mountain pass, and therefore not easy to negotiate—but it is a pass, a way to the unknown beyond. Our physical vision, this "iris bed", is not reliable, as it is susceptible to distortion. The repetition of "I" three times in this stanza, plus the use of "eyes" and "iris" emphasize the new-found confidence the narrator has in himself and his rejuvenated vision.

The poem is in large part an elaboration of the theme of "The Swimmer's Moment" (WS, p. 36; D, p. 37). There is a point at which risk is necessary if we are to avoid a mundane existence. The narrator of "The Agnes Cleves Papers" makes the plunge, immerses himself in the destructive element, and emerges on the other side in the "more ample, further waters". Reality is not left behind, but transfigured. "The Agnes Cleves Papers" ends with a beautiful affirmation of one who has come through:

The wild smell is the other side
 Of the impenetrable world of stone
 And is no athlete's incense.
 After the match is called, before midnight,
 We will go dreaming into secondhand junkstores,
 Or go for a late sail out beyond the gap
 And in the morning, you will see,
 The children will be chalking hopscotch on
 The Moscow streets, on Lima's cathedral square
 Past beaky statue shadows. . .) .
 (WS, p. 89)

The tension between the ideal and the actual that exists in such poems in Winter Sun as "Meeting Together of Poles and

Latitudes (In Prospect)" and "The Agnes Cleves Papers" is not absent from the poems of The Dumbfounding, although it is more subtly expressed. In "Many as Two", for example, such modest techniques as parentheses, quotation marks, and indented lines are used effectively in the communication of the content:

"Where there is the green thing
life springs clean."

Yes. There is blessed life, in
bywaters; and in pondslime
but not for your drinking.

"Where the heart's room
deepens, and the thrum
of the touched heartstrings reverberates—Vroom—
there I am home."

Yes. And the flesh's doom
is—a finally welcome going out on a limb?
or a terror you who love dare not name?
(No thing abiding.)

No sign, no magic, no roadmap, no
pretested foothold. "Only that you know
there is the way, plain,
and the home-going."

Outside the heartbreak home I know, I can own
no other.

"The brokenness. I know.
Alone."

(Go with us, then?)
(D, p. 21)

The dialogue takes place between one who at the beginning of the poem is characterized by shallow optimism, and a person who has a much deeper insight into life—or they may be two voices within the same person. The intensity and bitter perception of the voice with the deeper insight is emphasized through the use of italics. The former believes in a benevolent view of nature. The latter does not, pointing out that while there may be much life in pondslime, it is "not for your drinking". The poem portrays a gradual reconciliation between these divergent points of view which

is reflected in the form. The italics beginning "No sign, no magic" are moved to the left margin along with the following passage by the speaker whose words are in quotation marks, indicating a lessening difference between them. This decreasing difference is enforced by verbal echoes in the final lines, with "heart", "home", and "know" all words used by the speaker in italics which were formerly used by the speaker whose words are in quotation marks. Finally, "own", in the first line of the last stanza, is rhymed with "alone" in the fourth line, indicating through the rhyme a relation between their speeches and also the nature of the speakers.

Two statements, enclosed in parentheses, are neither in italics, nor enclosed in quotation marks. These lines "(No thing abiding)" and "(Go with us, then?)" may indicate the presence of a third voice. The last line is a question rather than a statement, which with the parentheses indicates doubt as to whether or not the invitation will be accepted. The voice appears to be of someone who has already proceeded along the spiritual way which the speakers in the poem are only contemplating. Thus another dimension is added to the poem.

The difficulty of breaking out of the needless restrictions of our society, which is such a pervasive concern of Avison's Winter Sun poetry, is viewed more optimistically in the poetry from The Dumbfounding. While in this later poetry the imagery of brick, stone, and cement is still used to suggest enclosed spaces, positive images associated with life and nature become more frequent.

Trees, especially, are often portrayed as symbols of life and vitality that assert their vigour against the limitations of our urban environment. The poem "Urban Tree", for example, portrays the tree as a vital link between the earth and the air above, fighting its way past the lifeless buildings:

An orphan tree
 forks for air
 among the knees of
 clanking panoplied buildings.
 Its auburn fernstrings pour
 invisible waterthreads of falling life
 from the overplastered earth into
 the very air-pillars that build that
 dove & lambswool cloud.
 And the loud
 wonder of my breath
 the tree too angles in, to
 further the dark ways of root and loam
 even among
 subsurface pipes, steel stems, cellars, the drumming
 onrush.
 In a thin whitish space
 off center, 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)

The scene is humanized, the tree an orphan at the knees of the surrounding buildings. Its parentage is certainly not here. In the opening lines Avison takes a cliché, fighting for air, and gives it just enough of a twist to make it an original and accurate perception without losing its familiarity. "Fork" is certainly appropriate in describing the reach of the separate yet joined branches of the tree to the sky. Similarly, the tree has "fernstrings" instead of heartstrings, another example of breathing

new life into a hackneyed expression.

The poem is divided into four sentences, each of several lines, with the end of each sentence corresponding with the end of a line. The first sentence gives a relatively straightforward description of the tree among the buildings. The next sentence, however, goes beyond the physical appearance to an imaginative rendering of the movement of the tiny particles of water from the earth through the tree to the air and the clouds. The tree serves as a unifying factor, words such as "waterthreads" and "air-pillars" emphasizing this binding together. This is enforced by the concrete nature of the description in words such as "dove & lambswool cloud". References to the dove and lamb emphasize the tree's association with peace and innocence.

The third sentence, composed of lines of widely varying length, introduces the narrator into the poem. In a very real, physical way the tree takes in the narrator's breath, for the carbon dioxide of our breathing assists in its growth. The unity of creation is emphasized; all is interdependent. The varying lengths of the lines help communicate the sense of wonder that the narrator consequently feels.

In the fourth and final sentence the narrator withdraws from his intimate involvement with the tree to describe the whole scene of sun, buildings, and tree. The repetition of "lives", "alive", and "lives" in three successive lines focuses attention on this central concern of the poem. This concern is further heightened by calling the tree a "sapling", sap being the tree's

source of life. The withdrawal from the scene imparts an objectivity that leads to a final description of the scene as if it were a painting, "a thin whitish space" with the sun in one corner, and the buildings in the foreground on which the sapling is "traced in fingering".

As with so many of Avison's images, the tree is given a spiritual dimension also; there is a subtle but definite comparison of the tree to the cross on which Christ was crucified. The tree is a symbol of regeneration, pouring "invisible waterthreads of falling life" into the air, just as Christ is a symbol of renewal throughout her poetry. The fact that the buildings are described as "clanking panoplied" and "armor" suggests a parallel between the buildings and the Roman soldiers responsible for Christ's arrest. Describing the armor as "arrested", although not applied to the tree, recall's Christ's arrest before his trial and crucifixion.

Seeds have natural connections with life also. Avison's recounting of the parable of the sower in "A Story" naturally associates the act of sowing with fertility and regeneration. In "Once" seeds and spring are placed in the context of the other seasons in a remarkably compressed poem of celebration:

"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.

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

"The myths of earth-ferment,
seed-nub in dissolution
spiking up swords of
green, bright under blueness,

make shy our brutish,
averted, black-drinking, still-
ice-splintered
eyes."

(D, p. 75)

The poem is in quotation marks, a characteristic it shares with the greater part of "The Mourner" (D, p. 20).⁹ While there is little apparent irony in "Once" compared with "The Mourner", both poems convey a feeling of the presence of an individual behind the poem. This makes the statement less abstract, and more concrete and dramatic.

The poem depicts the movement from winter to spring with the accompanying rebirth of nature. Nature is personalized in the first stanza, with the earth turning its back on an understanding sun to confront the darkness of winter. Nature is manageable, winter but a family quarrel. The second stanza continues the depiction of winter with a lovingly exact description of snow. The poem moves from a depiction of the solar system to a view of a snowflake—both are important. The fact that the snow is "breathing"

⁹See above, p. 90.

indicates the presence of life even in the depth of a winter night.

The third stanza recreates the sudden onrush of spring. The sun moves into varying aggressive roles, "hurting and lirting, / dimming and flashing" as it transforms the snow to life-giving water. A feeling of tremendous vigour and energy is communicated. This impression is heightened in the fourth stanza by the striking imagery that describes the growth of spring plants, "spiking up swords of / green".

The final stanza makes an abrupt shift from external nature to man. The rebirth of external nature does not always find its corresponding rebirth in man. In the face of this tremendous energy we should be ashamed that our vision is so impaired. Our eyes are "brutish"—turned to animal desires; "averted"—concerned only with our immediate environment; "black-drinking"—perhaps because we prefer lack of vision to vision; "ice-splintered"—because we are still back in winter. Like the narrator of "The Mourner", we are too often content to shut things out, although the narrator of this poem at least realizes what has to be done.

A number of devices help structure this poem more subtly than at first appears. The familiar Avison reference in the final line of the poem to "eyes" reveals one line of allusions. In the last line of the first stanza the "utter dark" has "eyes", while in the last line of the second stanza the snow has an "eyelid pallor". The long "i" sounds of "light", "white", "night", and "bright" also enforce this reference to "eyes". There are also

rhyme links with "sky's" in the last line of the third stanza, and with "shy" in the first line of the fifth. The "ice" in the second-last line of the poem contrasts with the "eyes" of the final line. The sound is similar, but the meanings are opposite. "Ice" impairs the vision of our "eyes". Throughout the poem references to eyes, or vision, are juxtaposed with references to the negative elements of darkness or ice. These contrasts, which underline the contrasts in the poem between winter and spring, and man and nature, have been elaborated also by W.H. New in his article "The Mind's Eyes (I's) (Ice): The Poetry of Margaret Avison".

Other sound patterns occur within each stanza. In the first stanza, for example, partial rhyme exists between "cold" and "shoulder", with the long "o" sound repeated in "pole". Assonance exists between "earth" and "turns", while short "u" sounds are repeated in "ungrudging sun", "fronting", and "utter". Short "i" sounds are repeated in "is", "it", "its", "tilted", and "into". Similar, if slightly less complex patterns, occur in successive stanzas.

Music, like nature, also has positive connotations. Often it serves as an imaginative foil to an over-regulated society. As is said in "The World Still Needs":

The world still needs piano-tuners
And has fewer, and more of these
Gray fellows prone to liquor
(WS, p. 27)

References to music are frequently present in the final lines of the poem, often providing an expectant hope that our perceptions will be radically extended. "Apocalypitics", a poem descriptive of the problems of imagination in the city, closes with the following

lines:

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

Music and all?

Some time?

(WS, p. 55)

That would be some time, all right. The hoped-for annunciation that will free us from the drab restrictions of our urban lives is linked with music. In Winter Sun this is seen in a human context, but in The Dumbfounding is given a typical extension into a spiritual dimension. "The Christian's Year in Miniature" (D, p. 65) describes the choirs of angels singing on the night of Christ's birth:

Beside the still waters,
Infant-pure
God is, in flesh,
Now the skies soar

with song.

(D, p. 65)

The five sections of this poem describe different aspects of Christ's ministry on earth. The first two parts fuse references to the psalms with references to Christ, so that the Old Testament is fulfilled through the coming of Christ. The reference to Psalm 23—"The Lord is my shepherd"—is linked to the choirs of angels who sang to the shepherds on the night of Christ's birth. The narrator identifies himself and the reader with these latter shepherds. The incarnation is not a moment in history, but a dynamic,

continual occurrence.

Similarly, in the second part a reference to Psalm 122 is linked with Christ as teacher—"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help". The help comes from Christ, alluding specifically to the Sermon on the Mount; the promise of the Old Testament is again fulfilled. The second stanza in this part, in which:

The breeze wafted
your voice through and through
our hearts.

(D, p. 65)

may be a reference to the Holy Ghost, which is often associated with wind, and Christianity in its more evangelical aspect.

The third part links reference to the crucifixion with an allusion to the gold brought by one of the three kings to Christ. Birth and death are telescoped. In contrast to the selfless devotion of the three kings, the narrator identifies himself with those who have been responsible for Christ's crucifixion. His sins are a partial reason for Christ's death.

Images of light and dark illuminate the contrast between the narrator and Christ. Christ is "Unsullied", to whom even the depths of night are "lucid". This clarity has been marred by the narrator through his sin. The king, with his gold being brought by "starlight", also supports the light imagery associated with Christ.

After the night of the third part, morning breaks in the fourth. The image of the "wafered skull" of the walnut shell combines references to Christ's death and the Hill of Golgotha

(the place of the skull) and the communion wafer. "Day-swell" and "pulse-set" in the next stanza suggest the renewed life of Christ in his resurrected state.

The final stanzas express the narrator's commitment to Christ. Christ's "place of dwelling" may be ours also if we can commit ourselves to him. The poem moves from specific references to Christ's life and the Old Testament to a general expression of faith and acceptance.¹⁰

The art of Margaret Avison's later poetry is such that it is difficult to point out definite faults. They have a sureness of touch that invites analysis rather than judgement. But poems like "Once" (D, p. 75) and "Urban Tree" (D, p. 98), while good poems, are slight in comparison to some of her longer works. One of her most complex poems is "Black-White Under Green: May 18, 1965" (D, p. 14), which gathers up many of the themes of her other poems, blending them with an unusual mastery. The title is, as usual, cryptic. Why exactly "May 18" is not clear, although the time is definitely spring. "Black-White" probably represents a newspaper being read under the "green" of a tree:

The day of the leafing-out
 speaks with blue power—
 among the buttery grassblades
 white, tiny-spraying spokes on the end of a weed-stem
 and in the formal beds, tulips
 and invisible birds inaudibly hallooing,
 enormous, their beaks out wide, throats bulging, aflutter,
 eyes weeping with speed
 where the ultraviolets play and the scythe of the jets
 flashes, carrying

¹⁰ See Redekop, pp. 124-128 for further explication of this poem.

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

The time is spring; the vigour of nature recalls "Once".¹¹ It's
 the day of the "leafing-out", with leaves and flowers making their
 spring debut. The grassblades are "buttery" from the sun, or per-
 haps from yellow flowers that are growing among them. There are
 white flowers on weeds and a sense of abundant life in nature
 existing just beyond the senses, with "invisible birds inaudibly
 halloing". But just because they are invisible or inaudible to
 us doesn't mean they are any the less there. They are a part of
 "creation's unseen freight" which Avison mentions in "Snow" (WS,
 p. 17). Spring is making its appearance in both the untended
 places of grass and weeds and the orderly formal beds of tulips.
 The scene is set for the introduction of a young man, who seems
 at least first cousin to the hero of "A Friend's Friend" (WS, p. 75).¹²

The buoyant energy of the spring is tarnished by the in-
 troduction of death, presumably in a story that the narrator has
 been reading in a newspaper during this spring day. The first hint
 of death is in "scythe of the jets", with its suggestion of the
 grim reaper. The jet is carrying a boy pianist who is both "mind-
 wounded" and mortally ill physically. His parents are typical

¹¹See above, pp. 108-111.

¹²See above, pp. 82-84.

earth-bound Americans, from whom he is alienated. The boy is associated with those things beyond our senses, the world of invisible birds with their inaudible cries. His dying is linked with the plane; both are opposed to the imagery of nature. If not an artist-figure, the boy is certainly a figure isolated from society:

The day of the leafing-out is one to remember
 how the ice crackled among
 stiff twigs. Glittering strongly
 the old trees sagged. Boughs
 abruptly unsocketed. Dry, orange gashes
 the dawn's fine snowing discovered and powdered over.
(D, p. 14)

The second stanza returns to the description of spring, but with a much less joyous view than was expressed in the first stanza. Now the more violent aspects of nature are emphasized, with freezing rain breaking branches from a tree, snow powdering the resultant breaks. Parallels to the boy's situation are emphasized through such words as "unsocketed", which normally applies to human rather than tree limbs. But is it nature that has changed or the perception of the narrator? Perhaps nature is ultimately indifferent and any moods we assign to it purely arbitrary. This view of nature recalls "The Agnes Cleves Papers" (WS, p. 78) in which nature changes according to the mood of the narrator.¹³ Both poems portray the efforts of a narrator to think and feel his way through a complex problem:

. . . to remeber the leaves ripped loose
 the thudding of the dark sky-beams
 and the pillared plunging sea

¹³See above, p. 100.

shelterless. Down the centuries
 a flinching speck
 in the 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)

The external influences of nature and the boy's dying turn the narrator's thoughts inward to speculations on our origins. The mood verges on pessimism, a far cry from the exuberance of the opening lines. The narrator's mind continues to concentrate on nature in its more violent aspects as he thinks back to the beginning of all life, when a "flinching speck" in the sea, a one-celled animal, started its development towards a more complex form of life.¹⁴ We have developed from our fishy origins, "threading / the perilous combers" to our present state, but to what end? The young pianist still dies. The purpose of evolution is questioned if its best products are still destroyed:

Faces fanned by
 rubberized, cool air
 are opened; eyes wisely
 smile.
 The tulips, weeds, new leaves
 neither smile nor are scorning to smile nor uncertain,
 dwelling in light.

¹⁴In "The Religious Poetry of Margaret Avison", (M.A. thesis, McMaster University, 1972), p. 19, Christopher Klus suggests that these lines refer to the boy's growth from the moment of conception. It would seem, however, that lines such as "Down the centuries" make the interpretation of these lines as a description of the evolutionary process more suitable.

A flick of ice, fire, flood,
 far off from
 the day of the leafing-out I knew
 when knee-wagon small, or from my
 father's once at a horse-tail, silk-shiny
 fence-corner or 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)

The fourth stanza returns to modern civilization, to faces that are divorced from nature, yet apparently content to be so. Nature is outside our experience—our society has destroyed the interdependence that in the past has made our evolution possible. Spring is now but "A flick of ice, fire, flood". The narrator then digs back into his own past, thinking of his childhood springs. Apt adjectives emphasize the positive aspects of this time, as he describes himself as "knee-wagon small" and horsetails as "silk-shiny". These springs of his childhood are greatly preferable to the present. In contrast with this idyllic time new leaves are now metal planes torn out of the sky. This gives a macabre twist to the common saying "turning over a new leaf".

The narrator searches for the meaning of the boy pianist's death, looking first at the nature around him, then at our own evolutionary past, then at his childhood. While he finds no meaning, he does not make the mistake of assuming that therefore there is no meaning. He is content to remain in a state of uncertainty.

Many of Avison's themes are gathered together in this poem, illuminated through a characteristic balance of opposites. Childhood innocence is contrasted with our present adult state; nature

with technological society; the sensitive person with technology (represented by the plane); and nature in both its peaceful and violent moods, to name only the more obvious examples.

The individual and urban society thus receive illumination from a number of different perspectives in Avison's poetry. Childhood is viewed without sentimentality, but as a time when our perceptions, both spiritually and sensually, have not been diverted by a society that has lost its own grasp of spiritual and sensual realities. While society hampers the growth of the individual, hope is expressed that society may yet be transformed. This hope is given most explicit expression in The Dumbfounding through the spiritual conversion that Avison experienced herself, and which imparts an atmosphere of spiritual celebration to this book.

Stone, brick, cement, and glass, and the enclosed spaces that limit our perception, are negative images associated with the city. Music, trees, seeds, and nature generally, are positive images. Two major types of characters appear in her poetry. One is aggressive, and associated with negative aspects of technological society; the other is passive, associated with imaginative activity, and viewed positively.

The relationship between the individual and the city is also of paramount importance in Souster's poetry.¹⁵ The main point at which Avison differs from Souster is in her use of time and space. Although Souster often writes poems about the past, and in

¹⁵See below, p. 156.

his most recent volume, Change-Up, includes a number of poems based on historical events, he is concerned primarily with recording his reactions to a specific event, whether that event is in the present or the past. Allusions to history, myth, religion, and literature are present but rare, and seldom central to the meaning of the poem. Avison, on the other hand, while she is also vitally concerned with the specific event, uses a much wider range of material in her poetry. Allusions to other times and other places are frequent throughout her poetry.

Avison's treatment of time and space is one of the most complex and intriguing aspects of her poetry. A poem that starts in the present may end with a sudden curve back into the distant past, or an opening in a geographically familiar area may end with a sudden shift of scene to Peru, or Greece, or China. Geographical telescoping of space is a characteristic of her earlier Winter Sun poetry only, although her use of references to the past is frequent throughout her work.

Time and space are rendered not as Ptolemaic projections of the limited human mind, but limitless expanses over which the creative imagination can range at will in its effort to perceive some pattern in human existence. Much of her earlier poetry is concerned with bursting the restricting bonds which she apparently feels perception rooted in a fixed point in time and space places on the individual. The following stanzas from "Perspective" are a clear presentation of this view:

Yet I declare, your seeing is diseased

That cripples space. The fear has eaten back
 Through sockets to the caverns of the brain
 And made of it a sifty habitation.

We stand beholding the one plain
 And in your face I see the chastening
 Of its small tapering design
 That brings up punkt.
 (The Infinite, you say,
 is an unthinkable—and pointless too—
 Extension of that punkt.)

But ho [sic] 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 shock¹⁶
 Of that great thundering sky?

The poem is addressed to a person whose vision physically, mentally, and spiritually, is drastically limited. It is fear, according to the narrator, that leads us to adopt mentally the limiting perspective of our physical vision, which regards distant things as smaller and hence less important. "Sockets" and "caverns" suggest the skull and a death-like atmosphere with which this view is associated. Its "sifty habitation" in the brain suggests sand and instability, as physical vision is a subjective stance which will change when the person who holds it moves. The reference to sand also suggests an hourglass, and the passing of time, which in turn suggests change.

While they both view the same reality, the narrator's companion sees it only subjectively. The "chastening" effect of this manner of vision is less one of purification than the needless purging of many good things which this subjective attitude to life

¹⁶Milton Wilson, ed., Poetry of Mid-Century, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1964), p. 87. See also Redekop, pp. 11-14, for further explication of this poem.

rejects. Even God is viewed in subjective terms. Worth noting here is the metaphysical pun on "pointless". As used here it means both without any extension and without any meaning.

In the third stanza quoted, the narrator gives his own reaction, which is based not on the way things seem, but on the way things are. A boulder is no less a boulder, and no less to be ignored, just because it is miles distant. A blade of grass on the horizon is still a blade of grass, and perhaps a "great spear" to an insect. We must let it go, make ourselves alive to the possibilities of the universe.

The effect of the poem is heightened through complex arrangements of sound. In the first line assonance and consonance exist between "seeing" and "diseased", while the assonance is repeated in the second line with "eaten". Consonance links "back", "brain", and "habitation", the last words of the second, third, and fourth lines respectively, while assonance links "brain" with "space" in the second line and "made" and "habitation" in the fourth line. "Brain" is also rhymed with "plain", the last word of the first line in the second stanza. Similar patterning exists throughout the poem. This use of sound is not as characteristic of her later poetry. While many of her later poems employ extremely complex arrangements of sound, the effect is more subtle, without the obvious gymnastics of this poem.

Avison's use of apparently disparate materials without regard for the normal limitations of time and space gives greater depth and illumination to her themes. The first stanza of "Prelude"

is a good example of this technique at work:¹⁷

The turning point is morning:
 now Budapest, now feathery
 fields—where explorers' maps showed nothing—
 now a crippled crofter's in his doorway or
 the Scandinavians' by the sea.
 (WS, p. 9)

These lines describe a sequence of mornings in various areas of the world. The reference to the ancient city of Budapest is juxtaposed with recently discovered lands, perhaps of North America. The soil-loving crofter, tied to his piece of land, and in this sense "crippled", is contrasted with the adventure-oriented Vikings. In both cases a traditional place or type of person is contrasted with an untraditional place or type of person. These two different aspects are elaborated in the course of the poem, in which the narrator describes similar conflicting elements in himself.

The Wordsworthian title is appropriate. Just as in his long poem of the same name Wordsworth describes the growth of a poet's mind, Avison describes the efforts we must make to keep our senses and imagination from being destroyed by society. But times are tougher now. Although the poem reaches toward a cautious optimism, the weight of modern society is an element that Wordsworth did not have to shoulder.

The poem closes with a reference that again extends both time and space:

¹⁷See Redekop, pp. 33-36, for an explication of this poem.

now in Osiris, stepping
 along the reedy shore of sunset where
 stone skiffs manoeuvre through
 wild grass and the dark water-gates;
 now chipped among the textures of
 the chrome, the celanese, the rough-cast plaster,
 the stone flower, and my fingers resting on it;
 In each at least light finds
 one of its forms
 and is:

even in the invisible neighbour,
 periwigged, black, in hunting pinks,
 or rinsing clouts beside the holy river,
 who does not bother glancing up to see.

(WS, p. 11)

In Egyptian mythology Osiris was both the god of the dead and—probably more relevant here—an agricultural deity in whose cult was combined the killing of the divine man and the belief in the dead god's resurrection. Thus he becomes a source of "light" for the narrator, giving hope for the renewal of the sterile features of urban society that he has been contemplating. In each (both the Egyptian and modern Western societies) "light" finds a form of expression. Light is used metaphorically to indicate the type of vision which as children it was possible for us to have of the world.

The final stanza refers to other classes and other societies. The mysterious "invisible neighbour" reappears from the earlier part of the poem, here assuming a number of different forms. The fact that he is "periwigged" and in "hunting pinks" suggests relationships with the old English aristocracy. "Black" and "rinsing clouts beside the holy river" suggests affinities with non-Western societies, specifically the African and the Indian. The Ganges is India's holy river. Generally this "invisible neighbour"

seems to be representative of the common man in society, no matter what his place historically or geographically. The import of the final stanza is that in both the aristocratic, individualistic West and the passive, unindividualistic East there is some "light", some meaning, even though people might not recognize its presence.

The sonnet "Snow"¹⁸ is one of the clearest examples in Avison's poetry of the problems of creative perception and what it means to put it into effect:

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.
 The optic heart must venture: a jail-break
 And re-creation. Sedges and wild rice
 Chase rivery pewter. The astonished cinders quake
 With rhizomes. All ways through the electric air
 Trundle the candy-bright disks; they are desolate
 Toys if the soul's gates seal, and cannot bear,
 Must shudder under, creation's unseen freight.
 But soft, there is snow's legend: colour of mourning
 Along the yellow Yangtze where the wheel
 Spins an indifferent stasis that's death's warning.
 Asters of tumbled quietness reveal
 Their petals. Suffering this starry blur
 The rest may ring your change, sad listener.

(WS, p. 17)

The octet states the theme of creative perception through an imaginative picture of nature in which the dominant impression is one of abundant life. The "optic heart", Avison's unique term for imaginative perception, must take an active role not just in perceiving, but in re-making what it perceives. The relationship between the optic heart and the world around is a dynamic one from which both benefit. The optic heart gives the world a life and energy which it would not otherwise possess.

The sestet, on the other hand, illustrates creative perception

¹⁸See Redekop, pp. 4-7, for an explication of this poem.

through a depiction of images which suggest its opposite. The wheel of the riverboat on the Yangtze is static and associated with death, as is the snow that introduces it. Possibly the static nature of the Chinese civilization and winter is to be linked with uncreative perception. So the final line refers back to the life-affirming images of the octet. These images may be sufficient to change the uncreative perceptual habits of the "sad listener".

A further example of the effect of creative perception is provided in "Rich Boy's Birthday Through a Window", a precise description of a high-altitude town and its surroundings:

Some sod-cart dropped a weed.
Limp, dragging its roots and clotted dust
It lies in the high-altitude main street.

When the squaw and the pony farmer
Walk to the hardware store
Their shadows, smaller and in sharp focus
Seem brisk, alive with tensions
In pulled off-triangle shape.

The cars park in the queen's sun
Like inedible candy.

Upslope, below the treeline
The conifers fade to dry-moss colour,
Old snapshot-blue; below the rockwall
A long score in the mountain's flank
Shows where the open iron seams are worked
Even in tourist season.
The peaks saw-tooth the Alberta noon.

Things of the heart occur here.
Some wilt before sea-level.
Some are tamped down in the
Icelandic poppy beds
Under the cabin-walls.

Tip-alien, rigged like a court monkey
A bell-hop from a railroad challet [sic]
Darts through the sun. And piercing, piercing,
A saxophone shrills on the
Ionic shore, at Marathon.

(WS, p. 56)

A series of four apparently unrelated vignettes are described briefly in each of the first four stanzas. There is a progression in the description from the near to the far—from a weed that drops from a cart, to a squaw and pony farmer, to parked cars, to the lower slopes of the nearby mountains, gradually moving higher until the jagged peaks are viewed. Images of nature and humanity contrast with the town and "civilization". The weed lies limply on the town's main street; the squaw and pony farmer, "alive with tensions", are followed by the striking image describing the parked cars; the impressive mountains are scarred with civilization's iron mines. Associations of nature with life are heightened by describing the dust by the weed as "clotted", suggesting blood. The iron mines are on the "mountain's flank", as if the mountain were an animal, and the mines a wound on its leg.

Further contrasts are set up between motion and rest. Nature and humanity are portrayed actively, while civilization is described statically. Even though the weed is not actually moving, describing it as "dragging its roots" makes it seem almost as if it is. The squaw and pony farmer move briskly, while the cars are still. The static description of the mountain mines ends with the active line "peaks saw-tooth the Alberta noon".

The scene is described in a peaceful manner; although there are contrasts, these serve more to create a sense of harmony than a feeling of unease. But into this harmonious scene darts a bellhop from a railroad chalet—perhaps the local CPR hotel—and the

spell is broken. The last stanza, with its reference to the historic Greek town of Marathon, indicates that the peace of the scene has little chance of lasting. The bell-hop's relation to the scene is similar to that of a saxophone being played on the shores of the Aegean Sea at Marathon. Both are disruptive messengers of modern civilization.

In a number of other poems high altitude is portrayed in a positive fashion, a place or state in which both literally and metaphorically one's perceptions become more clear. In "The Apex Animal" (WS, p. 1), the omnipresent horse is "the One, in a patch of altitude / troubled only by clarity of weather, / Who sees." In "The Valiant Vacationist" (PMC, p. 85), the heroine climbs up Brock's monument to a world in which "Frost burns so quickly and the sun today / Was yellower than you are used to see it". But this state is not for the faint of heart. The narrator of "Identity" finds the high altitude and its lack of normal shelter and safeguards less than congenial:

Half-sleeping, bewildered, one accepts
The countless footsteps, the unsounding thud,
Not even asking in what company
One seeks the charnel houses of the blood.

Some mornings when the naked courtyard dwells
With listless sun, or when a darkening sigh
Stirs the old air along the quarried halls
One is aware of many passing by.

But on this sheet of beryl, this high sea,
Scalded by the white unremembering glaze,
No wisps disperse. This is the icy pole.
The presence here is single, worse than soul,
Pried loose forever out of nights and days
And birth and death
And all the covering wings.

So pressed, aloft, the errant angel sings.
 Should any listen, he would stop his breath.
 (WS, p. 61)

Paradox and unusual diction run throughout this poem that describes an individual's search for identity. The state of the seeker is one of acceptance and freedom from confusion, but one also of semi-consciousness. Paradox accompanies the search. An "unsounding thud" makes no literal sense, although it certainly contributes to the strangeness of the atmosphere. The "charnel houses of the blood" may refer to the past—house being used in the sense of a family with its ancestry. Possibly this is a reference to some inner realm, such as the unconscious. Both are certainly possible areas in which to pursue the search for identity.

The "countless footsteps" of the first stanza reappear in the second stanza in the persons of the many passing by, although in both cases they are heard rather than seen. The adjectives employed enforce a dismal, restricted picture—"listless", "darkening", "old", and "quarried". The location, with its courtyard and majestic halls, is an aristocratic and perhaps ancient one. There seems to be no connection between the narrator and the many who are passing by. Like the narrator of "The Mourner" (D, p. 20), he has shut out the outside world, although the ironic attitude towards the narrator that exists in "The Mourner" is not nearly as evident here.

The third stanza locates the narrator in a different area, a very unpleasant metaphorical "icy pole". The place is paradoxically "scalded" yet an "icy pole". The "white unremembering

glaze" may be the metaphorical ice that surrounds him on the "high sea". "Unremembering" enforces the lack of harmony between himself and his environment. The narrator has given up humanity in his search for identity and now bemoans his harsh lot, his loneliness, and his lack of any comfort from the security of the cycles of daily activity or life and death.

The fourth stanza is in a different voice from the remainder of the poem, one much closer to that in the majority of Avison's poems. The "errant angel" is the narrator of the preceding three stanzas, emphasizing the dual possibilities that the narrator had. He has chosen wrongly, however, and thus been "errant". The last line—"Should any listen, he would stop his breath"—is certainly ironic, referring to the morbid sensitivity of the narrator. The poet is suggesting here, as she does elsewhere, that involvement with humanity is crucial for self-realization. She certainly practises what she preaches in the daily social and office work she does.

In "Rich Boy's Birthday Through a Window" (WS, p. 57), and a number of other poems, geographical and historical motion are combined. The historical aspect is especially important in her poetry. The past is as much material for Avison's creative perception as the present, and can be rendered relevant and vital through her imagination. At times this may take the form of the relation of an individual's childhood to the present. But on a larger scale this can be an effort to portray the present in its relation to the past. In the sonnet "Unbroken Lineage", an

aristocratic bird, again on the elevated level associated with clarity of vision, is a link with the past. The bird also is a correlative for the poet:

Pinfeathered Fancy, from his high perch views
 His broad domains, and rests a Royalist.
 Though in the menial round he can subsist
 Crafting for rats through the obscurest mews,
 Or hop with twittering chickadees, enticed
 By winter berries, or in the smokey blues
 Of the October steppe mournfully cruise
 Nightlong with the last tufted anarchist,
 Yet from his pinnacle piercing all disguise
 He will see marbled gardens, the young prince kissed
 By imperial doom, kings eyeless, mad, resist-
 ing toppling combers, or a king of the Jews.

Mews, meadows, steppes, bear still the fabled kings
 Long after roofless courts are left to chalky whirring things.
 (WS, p. 18)

The identification of the bird as "Pinfeathered Fancy" makes the association of the bird with the poet definite. A "high perch", or separation from too intimate an involvement with society is seen as a poetic necessity. The bird is a "Royalist"—while he may associate with the low class "twittering chickadees", or even the "anarchist" who rejects tradition completely, this is not where his true destiny lies. The poet, similarly, may be involved with society, including those whose values are different from his, but must retain his own separate identity. Where he differs from these other birds is in his awareness of things beyond the immediate present. The "marbled gardens" are perhaps the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the "young prince kissed / by imperial doom" probably Hamlet. "Kings eyeless" and "mad" suggests Lear and Oedipus, and "resist / ing toppling combers" recalls Canute, the English tribal monarch. The "King of the Jews" is Christ, particularly

as Christ crucified. All these visions of previous royalty suggest the general importance of the past for the poet, but each has other connotations as well. The references to Lear and Oedipus recall blindness, but perhaps more relevantly a rejection by their offspring and consequent isolation. The madness they each experienced suggests further the alienation of the poet from society, which is carried on by the reference to Hamlet "kissed / by imperial doom". In one aspect Hamlet is a figure symbolic of the relation between the sensitive artist and insensitive society. The reference to Christ indicates the sacredness of the poet's calling, while the suggestion of the crucifixion indicates what he can expect from society for his pains. Canute, according to Henry of Huntington (1130), who originated the story, rebuked his courtiers for saying he could command the sea, showing them their flattery was false. The reference to Canute, then, would indicate the danger of accepting advice from the public. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon, finally, are traditionally a symbol of opulence, presumably to be avoided by the poet, whether seen as actual material comfort or an ostentatious use of language in poetry. Emphasis is placed on the mortality of the kings mentioned, while those of nature continue to exist.

"Unbroken Lineage" is one of four sonnets published in Winter Sun on pages sixteen to nineteen. The others are "Tennis", "Snow", and "Butterfly Bones". "Banff" (WS, p. 30) is a fourteen-line poem, but has few other sonnet characteristics. All her sonnets employ a basically Shakespearean form, although enjambment is

common, with full stops occurring more often within than at the ends of lines. None of the sonnets adheres throughout to a regular use of rhyme. "Enticed" in line five of "Unbroken Lineage", for example, creates dissonance with "anarchist" in line eight. At least a partial answer for this avoidance of exact patterns is found in her sonnet "Butterfly Bones", which recounts the dangers inherent in the regularity of the sonnet form. "The cyanide jar seals life, as sonnets move / towards final stiffness". Using assonance, consonance, and dissonance to vary rhyme is an effective way Avison has of disturbing our expectancies of regularity, making the form less rigid than it normally is.

Much of Avison's earlier poetry shares with that of the early T.S. Eliot a view of the present as a bleak waste land cut off from the life-giving roots of the past. While in some poems, such as "Unbroken Lineage", the past provides some assurance for the present, in others history is a burden, acting to restrict rather than liberate. The more negative reaction to history is expressed in "Stray Dog, near Ecully":

The dog called Sesamè* slewed out
 Under the Norman arch, open
 For the gardener's walked bicycle. No doubt
 On some wild leash still, in three-legged loping

He circles the grey stone and barley fringe
 Of the Roman amphitheatre, canting
 To quit the guide, the stopped sun, the mélange
 Of Rome's new coin-conducted legions. Panting

He sloughs all touring finally, in the shade
 Of a wild apricot-tree, not glancing up.
 Fire-points in his sad eyes fix on the fading
 Campagna ghost. A Rouault hoop

The limited landscape wobbles down
 Its sandy track of planetary time.
 Back in the courtyard, through the hills around
 Deployed, they search, shouting "Séy-sáhm, Séy-sáhm".
 (WS, p. 60)

The title of the poem suggests a painting—a dog near a small Italian town. This suggestion is more than superficial, as the poem has the relatively objective nature of a painting, with the tone and choice of words allowing minimal emotional coloring.

In the first stanza a dog escapes from his home, an apparently elaborate place; the presence of a gardener suggests considerable wealth, and a "Norman arch" considerable antiquity. The name of the dog, Sesamë, suggests associations with even more remote times. "Open Sesamë" is a phrase used to open a cave in the tale "Ali Baba's Cave" from The Arabian Nights. Its relevance here, as the dog breaks away from his home, is evident. Sesamë is also the name of a seed, emphasizing the dog's connections with new beginnings, although his lameness and "wild leash" indicates that his own past has had its detrimental effects.

The dog circles the amphitheatre, which is crowded by a "mélange" of tourists ironically described by the poet as "Rome's new coin-conducted legions". Having avoided this area, the dog then rests under a wild apricot-tree. The sadness in his eyes as he looks at the Italian countryside may be related to the fact that this countryside is described as "fading" and a "ghost". Perhaps this refers to the natural harmony of Italian life which is so important in the writings of E.M. Forster and D.H. Lawrence, and which is now being replaced by the mindless efficiency of the

conducted tours described in the second stanza. The dog is related to a time when things were better. The reference to the landscape as a "Rouault hoop" alludes to Georges Rouault (1871-1958), a religious painter. Rouault united religious and popular traditions, which had been divorced since the Renaissance. He restored concern with both human life and the transcendental. Perhaps the allusion indicates a precarious combination of the spiritual and the human in the landscape here described.

As described in the fourth stanza, the Italian landscape is like a cart wobbling precariously down its sandy track of history. If the landscape is equated with the mental and the spiritual as well as the physical landscape of Italy, then it is precarious because succeeding civilizations (Roman and Norman) have affected it in such different ways. It is not cause for much optimism that the Italian heritage in this poem should have its most able representative in the figure of a dog. The fact that those who search for the dog are described as being "Deployed"¹⁹ suggests lack of freedom on their part. The free treatment of the quatrain, on the other hand, with enjambment occurring between each stanza, reflects the liberty sought by the dog.

In this poem history and time are portrayed as limiting factors from which the individual can try to escape, just as in "Our Working Day May Be Menaced" (WS, p. 57), and other poems, society is an unnecessarily restrictive force from which we can escape. The dog recalls the stoic individualists who frequent

¹⁹See above, p. 96 for use of the word "Deployed" in "Rigor Viris".

many of Avison's earlier poems, such as "A Friend's Friend" (WS, p. 75), whose struggle is less with history than with the unnecessary restrictions of society.

With the publication of The Dumbfounding, however, the present is more often linked with the past. Religious experience itself provides continuity, especially through Christ. The struggle does not disappear, but the reward of the struggle becomes more evident. In "Branches", the struggle for rebirth in our present civilization is described through references to Saul, King David, and Christ. The title may have been suggested by a well-known passage from the New Testament: "I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." (John 15: 5). The branches, then, are not only the branches of the diseased elms in the poem, but the inhabitants of modern civilization which, like the elm trees, is diseased.

The poem opens on a gloomy note—the people of the first stanza seek out the escape and darkness of movie theatres, but find little satisfaction. In the second stanza the narrator commences his search for understanding by reaching towards other times:

O Light that blinded Saul,
 blacked out Damascus noon,
 Toronto's whistling sunset has
 a pale, disheartened shine.
 (D, p. 46)

The Light (of God) is paradoxical, as it blinded Saul. But although it made the Damascus day a night for him, it led to spiritual enlightenment. Perhaps we must be broken before we can be made

new. In contrast with this spirituality of the past, modern Toronto is described at sunset; night, both literal and figurative is approaching. The sunset is "whistling", perhaps from passing jets, and "disheartened" in a literal sense of not having a heart. We must, as the next stanza says, work for "wholeheartedness" instead.

King David and Christ are described as having a knowledge that our present society lacks, but needs desperately. The possibility of salvation through Christ is still present:

But he died once only
and lives bright, holy, now,
hanging the cherried heart of love
on this world's charring bough.

Wondering, one by one:
"Gather. Be glad."
We scatter to tell what the root
and where life is made.

(D, p. 47)

Christ's sacred heart is in the world, available to those who can recognize its presence. Redemption is not a moment in time, but a perpetual possibility. The world is a "charring bough", suggesting blackness and deterioration, but perhaps also the purifying possibilities of fire.

The final stanza certainly suggests the possibilities of regeneration. "Gather. Be glad." indicates a divine imperative, an harmonious meeting together to be followed by a scattering to bring the good news to others. The scattering also suggests seeds and the life they convey, and the disciples going out to convert the heathen.

While with Souster autumn or winter signifies death without

of drawing with wisps of snow. A sudden shift from the near to the far indicates the sky is "chalk-blue", which in its reversal of the "blue-white" of the snow drifts contributes to a picture of unity.

Nature is described in a manner suggesting bleakness, but not hostility. The wind has "a sudden shift of temper", but not sufficient to disrupt the scene. The pines "lean" and the sky "stares", all contributing to a picture that is enveloped in an aura of expectancy in a present of wintry isolation.

Repetition of "blazing" in lines nine and ten indicates a more vigorous aspect of the scene, which is elaborated in the closing lines. Through the static winter landscape bursts the Bow River, defined in a sequence of vivid compound adjectives which emphasize its vigour. While all the rest of the landscape accepts the bonds of winter, and with them the cycles of seasons and time, the river rushes on with magnificent disregard for such trivialities. So even in the dead of winter there is hope. Perhaps we too need not be bound in the patterns of "cyclic Time".

Many of the poems in The Dumbfounding take a more favourable view of the cycles of life. There is a greater desire to seek fulfillment within the pattern rather than attempting to break away. Cycles of nature are often seen as providing potential encouragement for man. "Once" (D, p. 75) describes the coming of spring with striking imagery, seeds "spiking up swords of / green, bright under blueness,". Other poems communicating a cyclic view of life in this volume are "Old . . . Young" (D, p. 9) (the

opening poem of The Dumbfounding), "Two Mayday Selves" (D, p. 11), and "And Around" (D, p. 95).

This cyclic view enables Avison to cope more successfully with death than does Souster in his poetry. While Souster approaches death with a fascinated horror in his poetry,²¹ Avison is much more successful in coping with it on an intellectual and spiritual level. This is especially true of her later poetry, although even in Winter Sun the attitude expressed toward death is questioning rather than negative. As in the following poem "Death", the acceptance of an after-life is intimated. The fact that the poem is a question, although perhaps a rhetorical one, however, indicates an inquiring attitude rather than an affirmative one:

I ask you how can it be thought
 That a little clay house
 Could stop its door
 And stuff its windows forevermore
 With the wet and the wind and the wonderful gray
 Blowing distracted in
 Almost night
 And trains leaving town
 And nine o'clock bells
 And the foghorn blowing far away
 And the ghastly spring wind blowing
 Through thin branches and
 Thin houses and
 Thin ribs
 In a quick sift of
 Precious terrible coldness?
 (WS, p. 28)

Absence of any punctuation except for the question mark at the end of the poem contributes to a rhythmic flow and an unusually light tone considering the nature of the subject. The "little clay house" is, of course, a symbol of the body, the place in which

²¹See below, pp. 196-203.

we live during our time on earth. Set against the comfort and security of the house is "the wet and the wind"—not necessarily enjoyable physically, but a part of life and therefore to be embraced rather than excluded. It seems that the "death" in this poem could refer either to our actual physical death or to an exclusion of life while we are still alive, and a consequent metaphorical death.

A break occurs in the poem after the line "Blowing distracted in", as the poem switches from wonder at how life could cease to be to a series of correlatives for approaching death. The repetition of "and" at the beginning of each line helps create an atmosphere of dreary monotony. The spring wind is "ghastly" (and perhaps ghostly), bringing with it no life. The repetition of "thin" emphasizes the horror of the scene, as the wind blows through the trees, then the house, then the ribs of the person being described. Short "i" sounds help create a quick movement. The coldness of the wind is "terrible" because of its association with death, but also "precious", perhaps because it can be associated also with life, as in the fifth line.

The rhythms of the poem are created through a combination of regular with irregular metric lines. The first and fourth lines of nearly regular iambic tetrameter bracket the irregular second and third lines. The fifth line is regular anapestic tetrameter, while the ninth through the eleventh lines combine iambic with anapestic feet. The remaining lines are mostly irregular.

The alternation between regular and irregular metric lines

underlines the dual vision of the poem. The wind is both a spring wind and "ghastly". Death is viewed with a mixture of wonder and fear, the ambivalence being emphasized through the "Precious terrible coldness" of the final line.

The problem of unexplained death, particularly of those who should have many years of good life ahead of them, occurs several times in Avison's poetry. "Black-White Under Green: May 18, 1965" (D, p. 14) provides one expression of this theme,²² which on a larger scale is the problem of evil—how can evil and suffering exist if God is both benevolent and omnipotent? "On the Death of France Darte Scott" communicates a less complex attempt to understand an apparently needless death. The subtitle of the poem is "Upon the Death of Twin Sons Who Later Died". The death of the mother while giving birth, which might have been understandable if the twins had lived, becomes much less comprehensible with their death:

For the gemini, lost in the womb
 Of the fair May mother lost in the snow
 In the wintry wastes the ancient alone should know
 There is vastly room
 From the mortal dominions yielded;
 But not where the fields are gilded
 With buttercups and the children's sun.
 The purple arc of the polar night
 Inscribes horizon for them, where light
 Would nightless glow, could the winter wane
 Before that winter inspire the twain
 With the frore May mother's mortal chill.
 The seven-months' boys are borne to ride
 A snow-melled limitless flood of morning's tide
 Who should, by a greening hill,
 Sleep warm and still.

²²See above, pp. 114-119.

The others, not strange yet, not forlorn,
 Sundered in summer, only themselves can mourn.
 (WS, p. 66)

While the tone of the poem avoids bitterness, it definitely questions the rightness of what has happened and, by implication, the benevolence of a God who could allow such things. Images of snow, winter, and night are associated with death, while images of spring and sun are linked with life. Varied, irregular rhyme is suitable for the questioning but unbitting tone of the poem. The mythical imagery of the opening lines, and archaic words such as "frore" and "melled" help distance the emotion expressed in the poem.

Although in The Dumbfounding Avison's view of death is not without tension, there is a greater effort in this volume to view it within a Christian context. Death is often associated with the death of Christ and the redemptive implications it has for our lives. Poems such as "Branches" (D, p. 46) and "In Truth" (D, p. 49) are efforts to comprehend what is for her the tremendous mystery of Christ's death and the redemption of man. One of the most compressed expressions on this subject is the short poem with the long title; "Miniature Biography of One of My Father's Friends Who Died a Generation Ago":

You, sovereign, Lord, have let this be,
 Love's gesture here on earth to me.

Your touch would prove all.
 Shall I fear it, who want your approval?

My friend's sorrow
 I cannot endure. Our
 shrinking is your pain.

Let Love's word speak plain.
(D, p. 48)

In a manner recalling "A Friend's Friend" (WS, p. 75), the title distances the poem, here removing the subject not only from close personal relationship with the poet, but also removing it in time to a generation previous. The poem appears to be told from the point of view of the father, as it refers to "My friend's sorrow."

The poem communicates the effort of the narrator to reconcile God's goodness with the death of his friend. The death of his friend is "Love's gesture", or in other words must be accepted as a part of God's plan. The difference in attitude between this poem and "On the Death of France Darte Scott" (WS, p. 66) is clear. The questioning of this earlier poem is replaced by the acceptance of the poem discussed here. God's touch proves, or tests, everything, and must be openly accepted in all its aspects. The narrator wants God's approval, both in the sense of desiring it, and also of lacking it. Acceptance of God's will and everything this might imply is reached in the last line: "Let Love's word speak plain".

While not explicitly stated, parallels give a further depth to the poem. Acceptance of the death of Christ is the most obvious parallel of a death which it is difficult to reconcile with divine benevolence. "The Word" is another name for Christ, so that "Love's word" in the last line may also be a reference to Christ, with "Love" referring to God.

The poem is narrated in a series of four couplets, the first and last of which are regular in length, with lines of eight

and five syllables respectively. The irregularity of the intervening couplets underscores the conflict in the mind of the narrator. In the second couplet, for example, lines of five and ten syllables are rhymed. The strained nature of this couplet is further emphasized through the strained rhyme of "prove all" and "approval". The rhyme of "sorrow" and "our" in the third couplet is even more awkward. In the final couplet, however, the similarity in the lengths of the lines and the harmonious rhyme of "pain" and "plain" reflects the affirmation achieved by the narrator. The affirmation is further emphasized through the isolation of the last line and the heavy accents that fall on each of the five one-syllable words.

Many aspects of Christianity are given contemporary relevance in Avison's poetry. This is especially true of her use of the garden. The Garden of Eden, as Avison states in "Neverness",²³ is not historical, but an ever-present dream that is always with us:

Old Adam with his fist-full of plump earth,
His sunbright gaze on his eternal hill
Is not historical:
His tale is never done

The narrator turns from thoughts of Adam to thoughts of Leeuwenhoek, the discoverer of one-celled plants. These still exist, even though they pre-date Adam:

²³A.J.M. Smith, ed. The Book of Canadian Poetry, (Chicago: University Press, 1943), p. 426. See Redekop, pp. 47-52 for an explication of this poem.

The one-celled plant is not historical.
 Leeuwenhoek peered through his magic window
 And in a puddle glimpsed the tiny grain
 Of firmament that was before the Adam.
 (BCP, p. 427)

The discovery of the one-celled plant and the dream of the garden are paralleled. Neither are historical—or at least not only historical—each represents a perfect simplicity that is no longer attainable by man.

But now we are being worn down by our modern lives. We have lost touch with any patterns that exist, but the absence of patterns implies impending chaos. The poem ends with an apocalyptic vision of a world in which the simplicity of the Garden of Eden or the one-celled plant no longer exerts any hold:

Is this the Epoch when the age-old Serpent
 Must writhe and loosen, slacking out
 To a new pool of Time's eternal sun?
 (BCP, p. 428)

"The Mirrored Man" (WS, p. 71) is slightly more optimistic in its description of the efforts of various individuals to find within themselves their own particular gardens. As Avison states in this poem: "All of us, flung in one / Murky parabola / Seek out some pivot for significance". But the problem is that we as beings in time and space cannot have perfect calm or perfect peace. The search is doomed to failure before it starts, although this does not prevent man from searching, or negate the desirability of the search:

We always turn our heads away
 When Canaan is at hand,
 Knowing it mortal to enjoy
 The Promise, not the Land.
 (WS, p. 71)

The seekers in this poem do achieve some satisfaction, even though largely illusory. Perhaps the desire for peace helps create it.

As she says of one of these seekers:

No banging shutters desolate his guests
 Who entertain illusion as he wills it,
 And grant him the inviolate privacy
 His hospitable favour purchases.
 (WS, p. 72)

The garden receives its archetypal expression in "A Story", in which Christ's parable of the sower is interpreted as a parable of one who creates a garden in the wilderness:

. . . only
 the choked-weed patches
 and a few thin files
 of windily, sunnily
 searching thirsty ones
 for his garden
 in all that place.
 But they flowered and shed
 their strange heart's force
 in that wondering wilderness--
 (D, p. 28)

The ending of the poem recalls the subtitle of "Neverness or The One Ship Beached on One Far Distant Shore" (BCP, p. 426). But in "A Story" the tone of frustration in the earlier poem gives way to resonant affirmation. In "A Story" the boat containing Christ is beached on the near shore, with at least a few people still around:

Perhaps a few
 who beached the boat and
 stayed, would know.
 (D, p. 29)

Much of this discussion of the garden relates to the poem "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball (i.e. Oriental Myrrh not English Myrrh)" (WS, p. 12). John Gerard (1546-1612) was an

English herbballist; his Herball is the best-known of English herbals. Cicely is a perennial herb which has aromatic and stimulant properties, and myrrh is an agreeably aromatic but bitter-tasting resinous substance obtained from small, thorny trees. It is also one of the three gifts brought by the Three Wise Men to the Infant Christ, and is associated with his future suffering. The bitterness of the myrrh is traditionally considered symbolic of the suffering undergone by Christ during his crucifixion. The gardens described in this poem are a picture of sterility:

Myrrh, bitter myrrh, diagonal
 Divides my gardenless gardens
 Incredibly as far as the eye reaches
 In this falling terrain.
 Low-curved in rams-horn thickets,
 With hedge-solid purposefulness
 It unscrolls, glistening,
 Where else the stones are white,
 Sky blue.
 No beetles move. No birds pass over.
 The stone house is cold.
 The cement has crumbled from the steps.
 The gardens here, or fields,
 Are weedless, not from cultivation but from
 Sour unfructifying November gutters,
 From winds that bore no fennel seeds,
 Finally, from a sun purifying, harsh, like
 Sea-salt.
 The stubbled grass, dragonfly green,
 Between the stones, was not so tended.
 Wild animals with round unsmiling heads
 Cropped unprotested, unprotesting
 (After the rind of ice
 Wore off the collarbones of shallow shelving rock)
 And went their ways.
 (WS, p. 12)

Paradox is a frequent feature of Avison's poetry. But the "gardenless gardens" of the second line, while apparently contradictory, are an accurate way of describing the bleakness of the terrain in

this poem, which appears to be the interior landscape of the narrator. Words such as "collarbones" emphasize the relationship between the external and internal landscape. The myrrh is like mist enveloping and desolating all. No signs of life are present. The house has fallen into disrepair, and the land surrounding is so barren that not even weeds will grow. The only sign of life is some grass which has been cropped short by some mysterious animals who have passed on.

The desolate atmosphere of the poem is enforced by abrupt, unmusical rhythms. The language is simple and forceful, with a minimum of descriptive words. Line lengths of from two to twelve syllables support the picture of disorder:

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

(WS, pp. 12-13)

The myrrh, associated with suffering, cannot revive this house, which is linked with the state of the poet. Decay is portrayed as irreversible; an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world in which everything ends with dramatic finality has been replaced by this gradual, unspectacular deterioration. It is a "rabbinical gloss" because there is no new testament, no possibility of redemption. Christ has not yet come, and there is no intimation that he may. A further reference to the Old Testament occurs in the fifth line, in which the "rams-horn thickets" recall the Abraham and Isaac story. When Isaac is spared they find a ram caught

by its horns in a thicket; the ram is sacrificed in Isaac's stead. Perhaps "pass over" in line ten can be read also as Passover. Both references have associations with death, although both also involve reprieves. Both Isaac and the first-born of Israel were spared:

With the maps lost, the voyages
Cancelled by legislation years ago,
This is become a territory without a name.
No householder survives
To marvel on the threshold
Even when the evening myrrh raises
An aromatic incense for
Far ivory nostrils
Set in the vertical plane of ancient pride.
(WS, p. 13)

The complete desolation is emphasized further in this final stanza. The interior landscape of the narrator is "terra incognita", like the unexplored new world of a few centuries ago. The approaching dark ages have wiped out what civilization there was, and deprived it even of the dignity of a name. A new twist is added in the closing lines, as the myrrh stirs up intimations of what once was. Aristocratic beings from a time past who thought they were in control of what was going on are recalled. But these times have passed.

Some of the more important qualities of Avison's poetry have been demonstrated in the previous discussion. Most important is her ability to use language skilfully and originally while retaining a penetrating hold on objective reality. While ideas abound in her poetry, things come first, at least sequentially. Williams' dictum, "No ideas but in things", is appropriate to

her poetry.

Avison's later poetry acquires a greater unity through her use of certain words, particularly "all", "thread", "river", and their derivatives. These words help unify her poetry both through their recurrence and their connotations of unity and interrelatedness.

Avison delights in the unusual word, and has even coined a few herself—"eporphyrial" is one example.²⁴ But the unusual or unexpected word is always justifiable. Most often the unexpected word is an adjective. Avison is very careful in her use of adjectives, and places great reliance on them in her poetry. In "Hiatus" (WS, p. 31), light is described as "weedy", and airs as "mournful". The former is an especially unusual manner of description, recalling the poetry of Edith Sitwell in which different senses are often fused.²⁵ Often two words are yoked together to form a compound adjective. In "Black-White Under Green" (D, p. 14), for example, the narrator describes himself as a "knee-wagon small" child, and a horse's tail as "silk-shiny". Almost any poem finds her using an adjective or some other word in an unusual but appropriate fashion.

One of the most striking aspects of Avison's poetry is

²⁴"In Eporphyrial Harness", (D, p. 77). In a footnote to his article on Margaret Avison, "The Mind's Eyes (I's) (Ice)", p. 258, W.H. New explains the possible derivations of this word.

²⁵Avison has published a very favourable review of Edith Sitwell's The Canticle of the Rose, Canadian Forum 29 (February 1950): 262-263.

her extreme versatility in the use of language and form. Colloquial words and expressions are frequent in her poetry, but so are such exotica as "frore", "fulminating", and "lollop". Her use of form ranges from impeccable sonnets and quatrains to extremely free verse and even one concrete poem ("Sliverick" in bp nicol's The Cosmic Chef). Generally her attitude to form seems to be that any form and any language can be used if the poem so requires. In practise, however, while her range is extremely broad, she generally avoids the more visual use of language characteristic of such modern movements as concrete poetry. A strong concern for statement and meaning pervades her poetry. Language is not an end in itself, but intimately related to reality.

Avison's love of paradox and a highly serious, metaphysical punning are other aspects of her use of language. In "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball" (WS, p. 12), there are "Gardenless gardens",²⁶ while in "Black-White Under Green: May 18, 1965" (D, p. 14) birds are described as "inaudibly hallooing".²⁷ Her metaphysical punning reaches its most highly developed form in some of her later poems, such as "A Nameless One" (D, p. 97).²⁸ Accompanying this erudite use of language are a lack of sentimentality and a highly impersonal yet individual approach.

Yet although her poetry is impersonal in the sense that the poet does not intrude on the poem, it still embodies considerable emotion. Whenever possible Avison presents her material in a concrete rather than an abstract fashion. The description of

²⁶See above, p. 148. ²⁷See above, p. 115. ²⁸See above, p. 78.

nature is often personalized. In "Urban Tree" (D, p. 98), for example, a tree "forks for air". The subjects she describes acquire an active personality rather than remaining static. Often, as in "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes' Herball" (WS, p. 12) and "Intra-Political" (WS, p. 44), external landscape becomes a metaphor for our internal state.

A final striking characteristic of Avison's poetry is her democratic attention to all aspects of creation. Both the small and the great are equal cause for wonder; she may switch abruptly from one to the other in the same poem. "Urban Tree" (D, p. 98)²⁹ and "Mordent for a Melody" (WS, p. 49) provide good examples of this switching from the minutiae of existence to cosmic views. This makes her poetry for the wide-awake reader only, but being awake in her poetry repays itself.

²⁹See above, p. 107.

CHAPTER IV

RAYMOND SOUSTER

Raymond Souster and Margaret Avison have both lived and worked in Toronto throughout nearly all their adult lives, quietly chronicling the minor tragedies and triumphs that comprise the fabric of life. They know each other, and respect each other's work. Raymond Souster has written a poem which he states is based on a visit he made with Cid Corman, editor of Origin, to Margaret Avison's room. The poem, "Room at the Top of the Stairs", is quoted below:

Crowds
five o'clock
policemen's whistles
whipping waves
of motors, lights
across the black
endless intersections.

Noise grates
rain mocks
these faces cut
as never before

Then to come
to hid house
street still
climbing
to room
where the dim
one light
breathes peace
and the great
untroubled
voice of poetry
is all

(CT, p. 32)

The first two stanzas create a harsh, unpleasant mood through their evocation of an urban rush hour. Individuality is obliterated in the masses of people, whose freedom has been surrendered to the policemen who control their movement. The atmosphere is enforced by the use of such words as "bleak" and "endless", and the use of sharp "t" and "k" sounds, especially in the words ending lines. Language is pared down to a bare minimum, as Souster uses a stark form to communicate the ugliness of the scene. The "faces cut", presumably because they affect the sensitive narrator with their situation.

The last stanza contrasts the bleakness of the first two with the peace found in the room, removed from the hurry and confusion of the outside world. Instead of "lights" there is now "one light", which emphasizes this unity. The sharp "t" and "k" sounds are replaced by the softer "m's" of "come", "climbing", "room", and "dim", and the "s" sounds of "breathes", "peace", and "voice", although there is no corresponding change in rhythm. Involvement and withdrawal are both expressed in this poem, as they are in much of Souster's work. The poet is involved and yet apart, both a part of the urban scene and a detached observer.

The contrast between urban confusion and the individual's need for peace is effectively done in this poem.¹ Souster often

¹Michael Taylor, in his review "Bad Times", Edge 3 (Autumn 1964): 108-111, gives a rather less favourable explication of this poem, objecting to what he calls its sentimentality and unsuitable form.

manages to make poetry out of the most hackneyed subjects, while rarely attempting topics that cannot be communicated in a clear, forceful manner.

While in Avison's poetry the theme of the individual in the city is important, this theme is even more central for Souster. Like Avison he sees the city as a negative force inhibiting the individual's growth, but his view of the individual is placed in a different context. Souster views the individual's struggle in humanistic terms. In his poetry man receives no help from religion, and is provided with no consolation or explanation for his situation from the sources of myth, religion, or literature. Individuals are isolated from each other. Neither Souster nor Avison indicates much faith in community or personal relationships as a possible solution for man's isolation. Souster, with his lack of alternatives, is driven back on personal relationships more often, although these are rarely portrayed as satisfactory. It is not surprising that his poetry should be stark and pessimistic at times. What is surprising is that the individual should be able to assert himself so often, even though he is devoid of any support. Avison, on the other hand, views man as a spiritual being whose spirituality must provide his salvation from a society that has lost touch with anything beyond its material nature.

Avison's poetic world has no limitations of time, space, or physical versimilitude. Souster, however, restricts his world to the here and now. While the poetic possibilities he foregoes are vast, this restriction does impart an intensity and passionate

concern to his poetry. Each struggle for survival is critical; there is no implication that survival in the next struggle will be any more likely.

The main thematic tension existing in his poetry is between the life of the individual and the forces in society that continually threaten to crush individual life. The situation of the individual is communicated through a number of correlatives— young girls, birds, a worm, a dandelion—just as society may be the city itself, or war, or death. A great part of his poetry portrays this bitter struggle against those forces that would restrict life, including repressive elements that are within the persona in the poem as well.

In "The Orange-Painted Shed", the brightly painted shed is a symbol of life among the other darker buildings that passively await their destruction:

Set down right in the middle
of old houses waiting their turn
to be torn down but still living
hugely, defiantly;

nestled under the protective arm
of the Russian Orthodox Church
itself lost in this jungle of brick-

the orange-painted shed
seen from a fourth-floor apartment window,

riot of colour among these sombre
clichés of browns, darkened green, and reds,

a burning bush ready
with its revelation.

(CT, p. 58)

While the narrator views the colourful shed in a positive manner,

he views it from the fourth floor of a neighbouring apartment building. Probably a building similar to the one he is in will be replacing the old houses and orange shed. The narrator is thus implicated in the fate of the shed, a part of the society that is demolishing it.

The shed is described in the first line as "set down", implying that this is not its natural place. This idea that the shed is not a natural denizen of its surroundings is enforced by the description of the surrounding buildings as a "jungle", and in the final lines by the reference to the shed as "a burning bush". This relates to God's communication to Moses through a bush that was burned but not consumed. Biblical imagery is much more central to Avison's work, but makes the occasional appearance in Souster's poetry.

There is a problem with the syntax of the first stanza. "Still living" would be more likely to refer to the orange shed than the old buildings, as "hugely, defiantly" describes the attitude of the shed rather than that of the old houses. But the way the first stanza reads, "hugely, defiantly" could with equal logic be attributed to the old houses. A comma after "down" would make the structure much more clear.

Souster's poetry is full of those individuals who, like the orange shed, celebrate life even though there is no logical reason to do so. The narrator's relationship with these individuals varies from an ironic detachment to efforts at identifying with their life-affirming nature. Most typical is the type of wry

objectivity expressed in "The Rooster in the City":

Since he moved to the city
 this rooster's gone all to hell.
 Sleeps in till nine,
 then up on the back fence
 to face the east
 and salute the dawn
 three hours too late.

(CT, p. 57)

Nature and individual life can and do survive in the city, but scars are often acquired in the process. Generally nature is symbolized by small, fragile creatures, whose existence is continually threatened. Only occasionally does nature move with triumphant power. In "Ten Elephants on Yonge Street", the elephants proceed up the main street of Toronto with a magnificent disregard for civilized protocol:

they slowly twist their trunks
 and empty their bowels
 at a pace that keeps
 the two men following
 with shovels and hand-cart
 almost swearingly busy.

(SP 1972, p. 74)

The expression is simple and direct, but certainly effective.

Souster's poetry, as has been mentioned in the first chapter, is characterized by a use of the language of common speech. Those words which the average person would not use in a conversation are only rarely used in Souster's poetry. His use of syntax and rhythm, however, while it most often approximates those structures common to everyday speech, has a much wider range than his diction. At the farthest extreme are poems such as "Girl at the Corner of Elizabeth and Dundas", whose extreme directness, both in language and syntax, communicate a remarkable force:

You want it or you don't
 You got five bucks or no
 I'm twenty-one I ain't
 Got any time to waste
 You want it or you don't
 Make up your Jesus mind.
 (SP 1956, p. 128.)

Generally Souster's poems are written in more urbane, relaxed rhythms, such as the above-quoted "The Rooster in the City" and "Ten Elephants on Yonge Street". The majority of Souster's poems, and nearly all his better ones, employ the colloquial language and the relaxed rhythms characteristic of these poems. At the other extreme are those poems which use more rhetorical, less conversational syntax and rhythm. These, more characteristic of his earlier poetic years, are represented by such poems as "The Falling of the Snow", first published in 1947 in Go to Sleep, World:

Like the idle fingers of wind caressing the forehead of God,
 The falling of the snow,
 White rice
 Of a marriage of joy
 Thrown softly and silently down from the churchsteps of
 heaven.

Look up and taste its whiteness,
 See, breathe its stainless purity,

Falling all without favour
 On the head of the magnate
 And the bum with his head in the garbage,
 Falling on the graves of our late, young, foolish dead,
 And the cold silent killer's lips of the guns.

(SP 1956, p. 32)

The rhetorical expression is evident especially in the extravagant simile of the opening lines. As Souster has developed in his poetic career, poems written in this ornate style have become more rare. He has developed the more direct manner of writing which has

also been present from his earliest poems such as "The Groundhog" and "The Penny Flute".

The poetic world from which Souster's poems are drawn is a limited and well-defined one, with each element employed in a generally consistent manner. It is remarkable that Souster can create as many variants as he does on this basic theme of the individual and the city. He has an unusual ability to capture the individual aspects of each situation. A discussion of the key elements in his imaginative world will illuminate more clearly the nature of the struggle between the individual and the city, also revealing important aspects of his poetry.

In Souster's poetry the adults can rarely hope for more than the power to endure. But hope resides with the young. As in the poetry of Avison, the innocence of childhood is usually idealized, although the shape of a brutal society that will inevitably corrupt their purity often lurks in the background of such Souster poems as the following:

Midsummer, Queen and Sherbourne

Between two factories in the dirty littered space
a boy and a girl in the hot sun playing so intently
with the pieces of junk left lying around that I hope
they never grow up, no, never,

to find the sweet true
smell of these streets at their throats.

(CT, p. 75)

The poem has Souster's usual clarity and force, but is not without fault. The repetition of the three negatives in the fourth line is effective, but "pieces of junk" is an inexact phrase. More importantly, the diction of the last lines is confusing. Perhaps

they are in a pool implies a restriction on their activity. Describing the water as "too-blue" also seems to imply an artificiality and lack of durability—all may not be quite as it appears with the children below.

Souster does not attempt to probe the consciousness of either the old man or the children. As in most of his poems, he merely presents a situation through a subtle use of language that communicates some of the overtones that exist in the simplest situation.

As he grows older, Souster's view of youth in his poetry becomes tinged with sentiment and nostalgia, as he sees it at times through the distorting romantic haze of the intervening years. In "Kew Beach Revisited" (Y, p. 125), the poet contrasts the pleasantness of the beach as it seemed to him when he was young and in love with the smelly, messy state of the beach as it appears to him now. He himself has deteriorated physically, his stomach paunchy, his hair graying at the temples. As the poet recognizes in "Not Wholly Lost" (CT, p. 34), "John [Sutherland] warns me of nostalgia / and I suppose he's right—but what the hell—". Many of Souster's weakest poems are those pervaded with nostalgia, in which his usual crisp objectivity is surrendered in favour of a maudlin sentimentality, as he ranges over subjects from his past which apparently have great meaning for him, but little for most readers. Good examples of this are the poems which recall his days in baseball, such as "Looking at Old Photographs", which positively wallows in nostalgia for the good

old days:

Vitore, Bugala, Moszynski, where are you?
 Angelis, Crosswell, Calgone, what has time done with you?
 (SP 1972, p. 79)

Souster is much better when he sticks to the here and now.

Both Avison and Souster portray childhood as representative of a vigour and spontaneity that the adult world has lost, a time of fresh and unadulterated sense perceptions. But while Avison attempts to search out links between the worlds of child and adult, Souster simply presents the world of childhood as a time which has passed forever.

"Humber Valley Prospect", for example, looks back to youth as a golden age that has passed forever:

This must be where we stole
 The young not-yet-ripened carrots
 Out of the dry black earth--and up there
 The farmhouse half on the hill.

But the farm's gone, field's gone, whole valley
 Flattened out, grass-stripped, a thing
 Neither for praise nor beauty. And these rows
 Of apartment blocks with only the ugliness
 Showing--a far cry from stolen carrots
 And the eyes of boys wary for the farmer. . .
 (SP 1956, p. 111)

The rows of carrots have become replaced by rows of apartment houses. The pleasing, natural irregularity of the location has been destroyed in favour of a monotonous urban subdivision. The excitement of stealing carrots has disappeared, implying that the new residents of this area will have changed with the countryside to a monotonous uniformity.

In Souster's poetry young girls also are linked with a youthful vigour and affirmation of life, often with the awakening

of spring and the blossoming of flowers, most often of lilacs:

Lilac Bush in Spring

Push your buds, lilac,
as a young girl feels
her nipples shiver
then suddenly harden
as her lover fondles her

as the spring wind tonight
takes you in every branch.
(CT, p. 101)

Spring, lilacs, and young girls are all similar in that they possess a striking, sensual beauty. The sexual imagery of the lilac bush, as related to the young girl, is obvious. The awakening of spring and the flowering of lilacs is linked with the awakening sexuality of the young girl. The spring wind becomes the male figure, imbuing the lilac-girl with its rejuvenating power.

Spring is a time of awakening, in which the forces of life and love assert themselves, unsullied by any thought that they will ever pass or fade:

Now That April's Here

He smiling eager
curly-headed Adam

She dark-haired
temptress Eve

tongue and ear
kissing
on the subway platform
(what comes next?)

Nobody's told them
subways are for sleeping.

A hundred eyes on them
but they only laugh
in their aloneness

at the loveless.
 (SP 1972, p. 126)

The mythic stature which the lovers approach through their parallel with Adam and Eve in the opening lines recalls the lovers in "Dominion Square" (CT, p. 8).³ But then with "on the subway platform" we are brought back down to earth—or to be more accurate, below earth. This is no garden of Eden. While these lovers are apart from the crowds that surround them, they are still human. The narrator's wry interjection, "(what comes next?)" also serves to bring the poem back into a realistic sphere. But the lovers are above those that surround them, solely because they are lovers.

Birds are another frequently recurring correlative in Souster's poetry whose connotations are usually positive. Often, as in "Print of the Sandpiper" (CT, p. 12), the bird is associated with the poet himself,⁴ whose print on the sand is like the poet's scratches on paper. The tide, or time, will inevitably erase both. In other poems, such as those on ducks, birds become a more generalized symbol of nature at odds with the city, or the struggle of the individual against the repressive forces that surround him. Ducks are often associated with water as it is just about to freeze, which emphasizes their distance from urban comfort. In "Ninety Ducks" they become an embodiment of vigour as they churn their way through a narrow passage free of ice:

³See Dudek, "Groundhog Among the Stars," p. 37.

⁴Ibid., p. 48.

Charging the dead day
 into life with a hoopla
 of grunts cries quackings

ninety ducks
 class of schoolboys
 attack the yellow popcorn
 strewn along the bank
 then slide off the slippery
 ice one by one
 ingloriously into
 the cold-black water

where they churn and paddle
 that narrow passage
 hacked out of the ice
 with such abandon
 such energy
 that I glow all over
 my chilled my miserable
 indoor-winter body!

(CT, p. 93)

The ducks have little dignity as they devour the popcorn and then slide "ingloriously" into the wintry water. But they do have a natural energy, accentuated by such verbs as "Charging", "attack", "churn", "paddle", and "hacked". The narrator, meanwhile, remains on shore, able to admire but not emulate their activity as he views his "indoor-winter body" with ironic self-deprecating humour. In many of Avison's poems, such as "The Absorbed" (D, p. 34)⁵ and "A Nameless One" (D, p. 97)⁶, there is a similar view of a simple event in a way that provides an epiphany for the speaker. Moments of insight come at the most unexpected times, but reward the aware person with sudden joy.

Birds are often a symbol of freedom in poetry. This is true

⁵See above, pp. 68-72.

⁶See above, pp. 76-78.

in Souster's poetry, although like his other correlatives drawn from nature, they must overcome great opposition before they can enjoy this freedom even temporarily. This correlative provides another form for the recurrent expression of the tension between the individual life and its opposites, the city and death. Almost invariably the bird—or nature—survives, although each survival is no more than that, implying no cause for optimism for the future. But just as the ducks are able to churn their way through the almost-frozen water, so the wild canary in the following poem is able to ride its weedstalk for a time in spite of the buffeting of the wind:

Wild Canary

Blow the wind as it may
 through the tall grasses
 you ride your weed-stalk
 with the ease, the poise
 of the high-wire artist
 who takes every bend
 every crazy sway
 indifferently; all the time pecking
 at the season's fruit before you
 intent on your fill
 then O
 the wind must tire of your insolence
 for with one great gust he flings
 you from your perch, up and over
 in a sudden yellow flash
 that blinds like the sun.
 (CT, p. 121)

While the canary is forced to submit, at least momentarily, to the power of the wind, the impression is hardly one of defeat. As with the sandpiper in "Print of the Sandpiper" (CT, p. 12), parallels between the canary and poet are evident. Both the sandpiper and the canary assert their independence, even though the

forces of sea and wind win a temporary victory.

Souster's poetry is not free of mannerisms, which sometimes spoil the fresh, natural response which is the mark of his best poetry. Two of these mannerisms in "Wild Canary" are his addressing of the subject of the poem as "you", and his use of the exclamation "O". "Wild Canary", first published in 1963, is a comparatively late poem, although these characteristics are present in some of his earliest poems also.

His frequent use of "you" was picked up from reading Kenneth Fearing in the early 1940's. Both employ it in a direct, conversational manner. The most evident effect is a heightening of the personal nature of the poem, as the person who is addressing the subject often becomes a figure in the poem. This often necessitates the use of personae to avoid too direct an involvement on the part of the poet. While this characteristic is sometimes obtrusive in his earlier poetry, it is generally more subtle in his later work, including this poem. The use of "O" is less justifiable in this poem. As an expression of emotion it is rarely appropriate to the conversational, ironic idiom of Souster's poetry.

The comparison of the canary to a high wire artist introduces a further avenue through which the opposition between the individual and the city is explored. Imagery of carnivals, or amusement parks, or fantastic events is usually associated with imaginative freedom. "Flight of the Roller-Coaster" is probably the best-known example of the imagination completely defying the laws

of logic and society in Souster's poetry:

Once more around should do it, the man confided . . .

and sure enough, when the roller-coaster reached the peak
of the giant curve above me, screech of its wheels
almost drowned out by the shriller cries of the riders,

instead of the dip and plunge with its landslide of screams,
it rose in the air like a movie-land magic carpet, some
wonderful bird,

and without fuss or fanfare swooped slowly across
the amusement park,
over Spook's Castle, ice-cream booths, shooting gallery.
And losing no height
made the last yards above the beach, where the cucumber-cool
brakeman in the last seat saluted
a lady about to change from her bathing-suit.

Then, as many witnesses reported, headed leisurely
out over the water,
disappearing all too soon behind a low-flying bank of clouds.
(CT, p. 50)

This low-key description of the escape of a roller-coaster from its confining track is deservedly one of Souster's best-known poems. Once again the poem is structured on a balance of opposites. The opening lines reveal the unpleasant characteristics of the actual roller-coaster ride, with the "screech of its wheels" and "the shriller cries of the riders". The long "e" sounds which predominate in the second and third lines, and the "i" sounds of the fourth, underline the unpleasant nature of the actual roller-coaster ride. While sounds do not in themselves have inherent meanings, certain sounds have through long associations acquired a certain range of suggestions. Words such as "screech" and "scream" have usually unpleasant connotations.

In contrast with these opening lines, the last three stanzas emphasize the quiet pleasantness of the roller-coaster's air-born

flight. The roller-coaster flies "slowly" and "leisurely", in contrast to its previous hurry, and without the irregular vertical motion that had characterized its previous existence. Long "o" sounds, as in the line "over Spook's Castle, ice-cream booths, shooting-gallery" underline the untroubled atmosphere. Consonance among the last words of most of the lines ("height"---"saluted"---"suit"---"water") contributes to the unity of the last part. The isolation of the last word of the poem, "clouds" from this assonantal pattern imparts a suitable openness to its ending.

A dry sense of humour is evident in this poem as the brakeman salutes "a lady about to change from her bathing-suit". This sense of humour helps Souster maintain his firm grip on reality in his poetry. "The Grey Cup" is another fantasy poem in which a sense of humour helps give a cool objectivity to an unusual scene:

No doubt it was someone's
idea of a joke—

for on the opening kick-off
when the football spun through the air,

it burst like an over-stuffed balloon,
and floating down in the sun
one great smog of virgin greenbacks. . . .

When order was finally restored
two referees had to be assisted
to the stadium hospital

while at least seven players
lay dying like uprooted turtles
on that striped, bloody field.

(SP 1972, p. 52)

In spite of its whimsical tone, the poem is quite clearly an indictment of the crass commercialism that envelops much professional

sport. The diplomatic pause after the third stanza allows time for the reader to fill in through his imagination the undescribed battle for the falling bills. The idea that the stadium should have a hospital is itself fantastic, although only slightly so in view of the carnage that characterizes much professional sport. The unusual image in the last stanza makes little literal sense-- in what way could a dying football player be compared to a turtle, and how can a turtle be "uprooted" anyway? Yet in spite of its lack of rational clarity, it has an imaginative suitability. Many of Souster's images or poems fall short on an intellectual basis, but have an imaginative appeal that cannot be explained rationally.

Music is a further correlative associated with imaginative freedom in Souster's poetry. There are times, as in "Cape Breton Summer Evening" (CT, p. 28) when the freshness of nature is preferable to the tawdry dance-band music. But more often, especially in the context of the urban environment, music is a positive force continuing to exist in spite of a callously indifferent society. This is true of "Penny Flute" (CT, p. 1) and the numerous poems concerning jazz. Jazz, one of the freest of musical forms, is a natural opposite to the repressive society Souster portrays in many of his poems. "Chet Baker at the Colonial" is representative of the freedom Souster sees in jazz:

Play your horn to the floor, boy, keep the sound
 Close to the bandstand, keep it there
 with you and the others beside you making, living this music.
 Don't ask those at the tables, drunk, talking too loudly,
 laughing too crazily, to share it, possess it.

See what they've done with their lives, see
 what they'd like to do to the lives of others. Go on
 playing with your horn down, blowing the perfect notes
 to the goddess at your feet, that swooning silent
 angel of perfection.

(CT, p. 41)

Like the poet the jazz musician must fashion his art even though those around him are totally ignorant of the beauty that is being displayed for them. It is even preferable that he should be ignored, for those around him have been contaminated by society, and spell danger for the artist.

A skillful use of punctuation and language helps give the poem its force. Verbs are predominantly in the imperative mood. These, combined with numerous verbals and frequent repetition, help give the poem an active thrust. Repetition of the verbs "keep" (ll. 1-2) and "see" (l.6) enforces this movement, as does the frequent use of parallel constructions in such lines as the fourth and fifth. The isolation of "boy" and "drunk" by commas in lines one and four respectively, and the frequent commas throughout the rest of the poem help impart an irregular pulsating rhythm which to some extent reflects jazz music. Use of the word "boy" is certainly ironic, as this is a pejorative term for a black, which many jazz musicians are. Both poet and black jazz musician share a position as outsiders.

Pauses are also used skilfully. Denise Levertov states that she considers the pause at the end of a line to be the equivalent of about half a comma.⁷ This can give an ironic twist to

⁷Denise Levertov, The Poet in the World, p. 22.

the first words of the next line, coming as they do after this slight pause. In the sixth line of this poem the second "see", which balances the construction of this line, is followed by "what they'd like to do to the lives of others." The pause adds to the wry irony of this line, as "others" certainly includes both poet and jazz musician, who must avail themselves of the groundhog's ability to cunningly withdraw.

The positive aspect of music as an imaginative refuge from the dreary world of everyday is the theme of other poems such as "Request":

The band mustn't stop now, even if it's after one,
 the dance mustn't stop but go on, two, even three o'clock,
 beat still as even, saxes low and sweet, no low-down jive
 from the horns,
 keep turning that sheet music, boys, play the same num-
 bers over if you have to,
 send out for more beer if you feel your thirst getting you
 down,
 but keep playing, boys:
 give them a few more hours
 of pleasure before that world outside, dark and ugly,
 claims them, lines them up again,
 if only a dream a dream is something anyway, not too much,
 admit, but still more
 than machines would grant, the time clocks allow:
 a dream of happy times, of peace
 their fathers bungled and lost, their grandfathers left un-
 written in their wills.

Give them their little dream, boys,
 keep that beat even, sax sweet and low and soft, horns
 muted.

(Y, p. 163)

The music provides a welcome if unreal relief from the outside world with its machines and time clocks. The past golden age has been lost, but the music can still provide some satisfaction. The narrator, though, is on the outside looking in. While he

favours the artifice created by the music, the fact that he is aware of it means that he cannot share it. It's "Give them their little dream", not "Give us". Many of Souster's poems disclose a similar awareness of the desirability of participation with a self-consciousness which makes participation impossible.

In his poetry Souster stays firmly rooted in the way things are; there is generally a quiet resignation to the ironies of life. Even the violent attacks on war and other injustice do not indicate any real hope that these evils will disappear. Art, in Souster's poetry, must learn to survive in an inartistic society. Avison, on the other hand, is reaching toward a visionary state in which the artistic and the unartistic become subsumed under a more powerful spiritual reality. The different vision of each poet influences his choice and treatment of materials.

Animals are a favourite correlative in Souster's poetry for expressing his concern with and admiration for the individual. The cat is one of the most frequently employed animals; in its unassailable individuality and apparent ability to take the best that society has to offer without being the least bit compromised it is a suitable candidate for Souster's admiration. The "Cat on the Back-Fence" (CT, p. 50), like the ducks who in "Ninety Ducks" (CT, p. 93) churn their way through the almost frozen water, or in "The Waterfall" (CT, p. 88) balance precariously on the waterfall's brink, is able to pursue its own dangerous but individual course unhampered by the vagaries of life:

Cat on the Back-Fence

Nothing was ever more certain,
 the cat doesn't like snow. But damned
 if she's going to let it
 cramp her style!

And by her simply
 walking our back fence with such grace
 she's almost convinced me

that winter doesn't exist, that the foot of snow
 laid over everything is simply a trick
 of the eyes, that the north wind
 slapping my face is a summer breeze
 heavy with night and the honeycomb of lilacs.

(CT, p. 50)

The narrator is "almost convinced", but not completely so. "Al-
 most" is a favourite Souster word, as his poetry often portrays
 realistically partial achievement or partial failure. "Slapping"
 describes the effect of the north wind with suitable realism.
 The last line, however, drops the realistic tone for romantic,
 imaginative imagery. Winter and snow do exist, although their
 imaginative transcendence almost works. In this poem the flight
 of the roller-coaster is not far away, although most of Souster's
 work is more closely tied to the way things are.

In other poems, such as "The Cat at Currie's", the cat's
 apparent softness combined with its ability to be vicious makes
 it a suitable female symbol for Souster:⁸

The cat comes to me
 slowly, cautiously, one pad before the other,
 lifting the springing muscles over,

Then strikes—to find me ready
 and she unready—rolls over on her back,
 fighting the losing battle with my hands
 which soon pin her down:

and as I hold her
 I remember your body, more soft, more pulsating

⁸See Louis Dudek, "Groundhog Among the Stars", pp. 40-41.

were in the space, the effect is that of emphasizing the quiet, introspective tone of his poetry. With the conversational, laconic idiom he employs, the spaces are a natural, almost inevitable outgrowth. Often they correspond to the blank spaces that might exist in conversation, those moments of Forsterian panic and emptiness that are a part of modern life for so many:

Death by Streetcar

The old lady crushed to death by the Bathurst streetcar
had one cent left in her purse.

Which could mean only
one of two things: either she was wary of purse-snatchers
or all her money was gone.

If the latter,
she must have known that her luck must very soon change
for better or for worse:

which this day has decided.
(CT, p. 49)

The tone of this poem is matter-of-fact, a terse but emotional rendering of an everyday urban happening. In the blank spaces it is as if the narrator is pausing a moment to reflect on the implications of what he has just said or seen. The reader is led to do the same, being drawn more completely into the world of the poem. This technique also has the effect of dividing a poem into stanzas, but with less formality than the traditional fashion, which tends to seal the stanzas into self-contained units. The advantages of stanza breaks are acquired without the formality that might be unsuitable for his poetry.

These blank spaces also render "nothingness" an integral part of the poem, thus giving it a positive existence. "Nothingness" is also a concern of such modern writers as Beckett and Hemingway. Beckett deals extensively with the concept of

railing, while the blank space following "down" reflects the moment between her letting go and hitting the water fifty feet below.

Like the birds and cats in Souster's poetry, the groundhog is a representative of the forces of life struggling against the city. It is a suitable correlative, as it is one of the few wild animals that can survive in a semi-urban environment, and Souster comes closer to identifying with it than with any other aspect of nature.¹¹ In "Groundhog's My Nature", the groundhog, hiding from the cold, only to be maimed whenever it ventures out, has clear affinities with the speaker as man:

Groundhog's my nature:
 hole up deep in winter,
 walk cautious above ground
 in spring and summer:
 leave a piece
 of arm or leg
 and a smear of blood
 in the crafty hunter's trap
 just to hold his interest.
 (CT, p. 98)

The omission of the I as subject from the verbs helps impart a wry, laconic tone to the poem. The hunter is associated with normal society, leaving his traps out for those who, like the groundhog, live by rules other than those of the status quo. Those who avoid society and its rules can expect to pay a price, but they can still survive. It is interesting that the groundhog takes a perverse delight in being able to hold the attention of the hunter by leaving a part of itself in the trap. It is this interest of the hunter who is trying to trap the groundhog that forces

¹¹See Louis Dudek, "Groundhog Among the Stars".

it to be wary, and helps define its individuality. The relationship is mutually advantageous; the hunter takes delight in pursuing his quarry, while the groundhog-poet derives a masochistic satisfaction from the price he must pay for his independence.

In a slightly different fashion, insects also have positive connotations in many of Souster's poems. In "Butterfly", for example, the slow, irregular, noiseless flight of the butterfly contrasts with the noisy, fast ostentatious, highly regular flight of a passing jet plane. The butterfly's "pass" in the second line seems more sexual than plane-like:

The beautiful striped butterfly
made a slow wandering pass
over the garden, no screaming engine
leaving a madman's whistle behind it,
a show-off trail of vapour.

Instead,
noiselessly, effortlessly it fluttered
on its aimless, summer-easy way,

and for a moment all the world
stopped breathing with me as we watched it
climb suddenly and disappear
behind the empty-hanging lilac bushes.

(CT, p. 61)

The light, delicate rhythms, which reflect the flight of the butterfly, are especially evident in the lines "noiselessly, effortlessly it fluttered / on its aimless, summer-easy way." The repeated "s" sounds and the relatively large number of unaccented syllables contribute to the slow movement and peacefulness of the scene. The poem ends on a note of wistful, boyish wonder, a quality which Souster has never lost. His wonder at beauty, and his distress at suffering and injustice remain as strong in his latest poetry

affirming force is emphasized. In both "Prelude" (CT, p. 97) and "Together Again" (Y, p. 147), the sun is associated with the death of winter and the renewal of spring:

Prelude

Race the water downhill
to the sewer, let the sun
careen off your winter face
the same way it bounds
and rebounds off the snow
left in dirty piles;

but mostly let your mind
strip itself naked, free
of all but music, sound
of water drowning winter
in one crazy flood,

dancing the daftest step
on the black corpse of the snow!
(CT, p. 97)

In contrast to "Butterfly", the rhythms of this poem are quick and forceful,¹² reflecting the vigour with which the coming of spring is celebrated. This vigour is heightened by the imperative mood of "race" at the opening of the poem, and the general use of verbs denoting strenuous action.

The individual addressed in this poem is identified with the seasons; hopefully the warm sun and spring will effect the same change in this individual as it does to winter, leading to his rebirth. The dirty, melting snow is identified with death; both have been conquered once more.

Although the sun and spring are generally positive, snow, their opposite in many ways, is not always portrayed as negative.

¹²See above, p. 181.

In "Like the Last Patch of Snow" (CT, p. 96), the tenacity of the last unmelted patch of snow is an image of the individual fighting to survive. In "Night of Snow", the mood communicated through the description of the falling snow is one of calm acceptance:

Night of snow
 slow-sifting down
 drifting shifting and piling over
 streets, fences, houses, skyscrapers,
 piling over and spilling down
 till all the world is swallowed up
 by one last fragile shivering
 flake of snow.

(CT, p. 69)

The repetition of "i" and long "o" sounds, the internal rhyme of the first, second, and third lines ("snow"- "slow", "sifting"- "drifting"- "shifting"), and the repetition of "down" and "piling over" enforce the peace of the poem, while the lengthening lines reflect the deepening of the snow as it covers first the streets then deepens until the fantasy of the houses and even skyscrapers being buried is introduced. Choice of such words as "down", with its double meaning, also adds to the effect of the poem; this word means both a direction and a small, soft, white feather, suggesting qualities of the snow.

At other times, as "The Wild Wolves of Winter" (CT, p. 107) and "The Fortress" (CT, p. 104), snow and cold are avoided by the narrator as things with which he is not able to cope directly:

The Wild Wolves of Winter

The wild wolves of winter

Swept through the streets last night. Hate glared
 in their eyes like unexploded neon
 the wind of their howling a thousand moon-curdling moans
 the teeth of their hunger endless fields of aching snow.

The wild woves of winter
 welcome nowhere, scratched at doors and windows,
 ripped at roofs, tore at chimneys, kept us wide awake,
 nervous in our warm sleep-calling beds.
 The wind moan. The crazy clawing. The shaken doors.
 Then as suddenly
 were gone, all was quiet. We turned a last time
 in our beds and slept.

(CT, p. 107)

The apprehension of the narrator at the approach of the storm recalls such poems as "Ninety Ducks" (CT, p. 93) and "Cat on the Back-Fence" (CT, p. 50), in which the imaginative bravery of the ducks and cat is portrayed as far preferable to the caution of the narrator.¹³

The distinctive tone of most modern poetry is low-key and intimate. There are many exceptions to this generalization, but much truth in relation to Souster's poetry, which often degenerates into rhetoric when he abandons his quiet manner. The above poem resorts to extravagant diction in its attempt to gain poetic force. "Unexploded neon" and "moon-curdling", for example, are certainly vivid expressions, but the meaning is unclear. The ironic, self-deprecating humour or the low-key passion, marks of his best poetry, are absent here. The difference between a poem of this type and one such as "Chet Baker at the Colonial" (CT, p. 41)¹⁴ is apparent. Souster's poetry has a rhetorical strain which is especially strong

¹³See above, pp. 167 and 176.

¹⁴See above, pp. 172-174.

in his earlier work.

Through nature imagery, old buildings, and other correlatives associated with the affirmation of life, Souster continually celebrates the instinctual and spontaneous as opposed to the rational and the conscious that characterize modern civilization for him. The latter is linked with timidity and fear of action. Other representatives of the instinctual are the early explorers. In "Etienne Brulé Re-enters the Humber (October 1958)", the explorer's shock at the degenerated state of the river he must navigate culminates with his progress being blocked by a concrete dam:

Nobody knows how History's mistakes are repeated,
they just happen—

for instance,
Etienne Brulé sailing this time up the Humber
and twice grounding on the pitiful shallows
below the Bloor Street bridge while above
the very latest in convertibles fling themselves
east and west.

Throwing out nets for fish
his men haul in a strange collection—
used condoms
aspirin bottles
tomato cans,
and only a mile upriver he encounters
someone building a concrete dam slap across the channel. . . .

I'll not repeat the words he quills
as he sits in his cabin writing at length to the Governor,
nor try to capture that look on his face next day
as he pulls up anchor to sail
for the last time down the muddy stagnation
of this once great river, crowding all sail to lose sight
of such putrefaction.

(Y, p. 88)

The opening lines of the above poem recall the direct, at times blunt phrasing employed in some of Margaret Avison's poems. The opening lines of her "Chronic" provide a good illustration:

My house is made of old newspapers.
 Not very old ones, always about a week's
 Accumulation. And don't pretend you recognize it.
 You don't.

(WS, p. 8)

Both poems have a conversational, direct tone. "Chronic" verges on rudeness in the manner that it addresses the reader, while Souster's poems is more casual. But both have the same unsettling directness, like cold water thrown in the reader's face.

Beginning a poem with an indefinite pronoun is a quite common technique in Souster's poetry. "Late Arrival" (SP 1972, p. 100) is a further example. This technique helps create a casual, conversational tone from the very beginning of a poem.¹⁵

Comparison of a degenerated present to an idealized past has been done innumerable times in literature, but Souster gives this theme his own authentic twist, which prevents the poem from being derivative. The rhythms and language are even more conversational than most of Souster's work, which here helps draw the reader into the world of the poem. The attention to the exact time and location, and the itemized list of treasures they land with their net give the poem a convincing precision. The poem conveys criticism of urban society in a tone that is light and whimsical without lapsing into sentimentality. "Coureur-de-Bois" (CT, p. 54) makes a statement similar to that of the preceding poem, juxtaposing the free life of the runners of the woods, "strong, clean as the forest air", with the eviscerated nature of the church and state.

¹⁵See above, p. 182.

Souster's most frequent correlatives for expressing the indomitable vigour of the individual are the human misfits—the drunks, the bums, the barflies, the rejects from the middle class system who frequent the downtown streets of any large city. Like Avisaon he expresses a fascination with those who have avoided the restricting patterns of urban conformity. Souster writes no poems about his banker colleagues or his middle class neighbours in Toronto's west end. His poetic sympathies lie with those whose difficulties are more obvious. His direct style is not suited to the delicate psychological dissection that one would expect from poems on the more affluent, so Souster is likely wise in limiting his human poetic concerns the way he does.

Souster reveals a mixture of sympathy, fascination, and repulsion for the human derelicts he describes. His better poems on these subjects avoid sentimentality, honestly revealing his mixed reaction. He admires those who can retain their dignity. Even the blind and the crippled can rise above their deficiencies; like the scars of Hemingway's or Conrad's heroes these can be marks of initiation to a level beyond that of the average human. Those who cannot rise above their deficiencies, like the subject of "Panhandler" (Y, p. 97), evoke only his disgust.

Quite often the blind, the crippled, or the ugly receive far more sympathy than those who are apparently normal, including the very normal narrator of many of the poems. Like the denizens of nature who contend with the obstacles cast in their way by the city, they are generally associated with a life-affirming attitude,

as in the following poem. Here Souster imagines a world in which all the freaks will have their place:

Freak Show

Perhaps some day the Professor's fleas may pull
in gilded coach the Thinnest Man in the World
together with his bride The Crocodile Girl
up to the doors of the church where The Armless Woman
waits to throw confetti with her skilful toes;

and together with the best man The Tatted Giant
and the bridesmaid the demure Leopard Girl,
they will walk altarwards with the music of The Bearded Brothers
loud in their ears, where The King of the Midgets,
modest J.P., will perform the nuptials;

with the Half Man puffing calmly on his cigar
in the front row, and the impatient clamour
of flea-hoofs sounding outside upon the cobbles.

(CT, p. 21)

Souster has a whimsical imagination, which often takes off on flights of fantasy such as the preceding. Yet this is not only fantasy, as underlying the poem is a very realistic plea that those who are different should be accepted into society and allowed to lead normal lives. This need not be related solely to misfits of a physical nature. In this poem the possibility of all the freaks being accommodated in the coach drawn by the team of fleas seems none too likely.

This is not one of Souster's most successful fantasy poems. The structure is too rigid for it to be convincing as fantasy. It moves in a rather predictable manner, a new character appearing in each line. Other poems of this type by Souster, such as "Flight of the Roller-Coaster" (CT, p. 50),¹⁶ are more successful.

¹⁶See above, p. 170.

center of Toronto, a place often linked with conformity and respectability. The narrator identifies himself with the thoughtless crowds who laugh at this ridiculous figure, although the sandwich board man is able to embarrass at least the narrator by throwing the laughter back in their faces. The derelict, with his elaborate make-up, becomes the clown revealing society's weaknesses to itself. The reader, with the mention of "you", is also included among those who are laughing at the man with the sandwich board.

Souster naturally extends this fascination with society's misfits to minority groups such as blacks and Indians. "The Walk" is a tribute to an old Indian woman:

Cane feeling the way,
the old Indian woman
inches out her door
and makes it regardless
through the weeds surrounding
her shack on the crouched side
of a hill as you leave
Blind River behind.

(TE, p. 11)

Like the city derelicts, the old Indian woman embodies an admirable refusal to submit. The description is controlled, objective, without any attempt to get closer to the Indian woman than would be likely in reality. The old woman is using a cane, but whether she is simply feeble or actually blind is left untold and unknown. A few well-chosen words—"feeling", "inches", "regardless"—sketch in the slow, dogged movement of the woman out of her shack and through the surrounding weeds. The last two lines reveal that the narrator has been driving past in a car, and is now leaving the scene behind, probably forever. The last line, with its mention of Blind River,

provides an ironic balance to the possible blindness of the first.

As in the above poem, the narrator of Souster's poems is often separated from his subject either physically or emotionally, and associated with the insensitivity of the city. Trains, street-cars, and subways are often used to indicate a separation between the observing narrator and the observed individual. In "On the Way to the Store" (SP 1972, p. 62), the narrator is carried swiftly by on a street-car, unable to help the old woman whose bottles have fallen onto the sidewalk from her bundle buggy. In "Meeting in the Subway", the narrator describes his view of an argument between a young man and woman from his position in a stalled subway car. Unable to get out or to hear them, he is forced to watch them torment each other. Meanwhile he is:

. . . the unwitting onlooker,
the unscheduled spectator, more than slightly glad when
at last
the train jerks forward, leaving them behind on the plat-
form
with nothing resolved, or so it seems,
with still that casual hunch to his shoulders,
still that torn furrowed crease of pain between his eyes. . . .

The separation between the narrator and those he describes suggests the absence of personal contact among most modern city-dwellers.

In many of Souster's poems there is a juxtaposition of an enclosed space, linked with comfort and security, and the open activity and danger of the world outside. In "A Kind of Voyeur", the narrator compares himself to a cat watching the daily dramas outside, while he avoids anything more than vicarious involvement. He is able to maintain a poetic detachment and an ironic

portrait of himself as too timid to experience the life of which he writes:

A Kind of Voyeur

My oldest cat's
 a voyeur like his master,
 not the peep-hole variety
 but the wide window-gazer kind,
 in which everything passing by
 is worth at least a second look,
 cars, children, dogs, of course, other cats,
 while anything with birds has him tail-twitching,
 violently come alive. Most of all he treasures
 the sudden action, simple tragedy
 stirred up on the glass' other side,
 which he can watch almost as one involved,
 really sweating it out, at the same time be safe
 from all hurt or difficult decision,
 like looking out from a part of the world
 on another world below: can tremble with rage
 or passion, lust for the sight of blood
 without lifting a paw,
 without taking a claw.

(Y, p. 44)

This poem which clearly identifies cat and poet in the opening lines, also expresses some of the main principles underlying Souster's poetry. Everything "is worth at least a second look" for the cat, just as Souster writes poems on a wide variety of subjects. The "simple tragedy" that the cat loves to watch also finds its parallel in many of Souster's poems. Like the cat, the narrators of many of Souster's poems are intensely involved in what they view, yet avoid direct responsibility. A wryly ironic criticism of lack of real involvement is implied. The "rage" and "passion" are certainly present in Souster's poetry, and while he may not literally "lust for the sight of blood", these tragedies give rise to many of his best poems, so have their positive side for the poet.

With both Avison and Souster the use of a framing device, most often a window, often separates the narrator from the scene observed, thus helping diminish the possibilities of sentimentality which too-direct involvement might bring. With both poets this is often seen in the context of an urban society, which leads to the isolation of one individual from another, although with Avison the separation is de-emphasized in favour of other aspects of the poem. "Rich Boy's Birthday Through a Window" (WS, p. 56) is a good example.¹⁹ In Souster's poetry the isolation of the narrator often becomes one of the major themes. In his poetry Souster relates this separation directly to an urban context, while Avison generally presents it in a less particularized manner. Perhaps the most important difference between the two poets in their use of this technique is that Souster, in his poetry, accepts this isolation as the way things are. Avison, on the other hand, indicates hope for a time when isolation will no longer be necessary. This is especially true of her religious poems in The Dumbfounding.

In a poetry that is so concerned with the possibilities of affirmation in this life, it is not surprising that the major negative element in Souster's vision is death. Death, in Souster's poetry, is not only physical death. Death is often a death of the spirit, often portrayed as a consequence of a repressive, restrictive society.

Fascinated horror is the most frequent reaction to physical

¹⁹See above, pp. 126-128.

death in Souster's poetry. It is an unexplained and inexplicable mystery, leavened by no religious hope of an after-life. "Death on the Construction Site" emphasizes the horrible finality of death for Souster:

Perhaps it was a sudden
unexpected gust of wind,
perhaps a fellow worker's carelessness--

Anyway, twenty tons of steel came down wham
and as it happened it was his day to die.

Nobody argues that his chest wasn't crushed,
nobody argues that he died without a cry,
nobody argues that he died without any time for pain.

No time either for any vice-president of the corporation
to express a vote of thanks on behalf of the management,
no time either for the chairman of the board to press one
drop of that blood, one piece of that bone into any
part of the corner-stone,
no time either for his comrades to ask the gleaming giant
stretching above them: are you satisfied with one
death or will you demand more before we leave, and
if so, why,
no time for anything but call for a stretcher, cover the
body, carry it quickly away, notify his wife,
no time so let's get moving, boys, we've got a job to finish
here. . . .

Only time to wipe carefully away
any trace of his blood still remaining.
(Y, p. 22)

This is one of the simple tragedies that the cat of "A Kind of Voyeur" (Y, p. 44) would find fascinating, and correspondingly arouses the fascination and anger of the poet. The death is arbitrary, the cause unknown and irrelevant--the important fact is that a man has been killed. The negatives "nobody" and "no time", which commence the lines throughout the middle part of the poem, combined with the parallel constructions of many of these lines, hammer home the anger felt by the poet over what has happened. The language

is especially casual, almost off-hand in the opening lines with such phrases as "Perhaps it was a sudden" or "as it happened". The tragedy is arbitrary; logical cause and effect do not exist.

The backdrop to the death of the worker is the capitalistic society that has no concern for the fate of the worker. Its only concern is that things function smoothly, and that the building be finished on time. Here, as in many of his poems, Souster reveals a rather naive, simplistic attitude to evil.²⁰ The capitalistic bosses are portrayed as absolute ogres unrelieved by any tincture of good. The last two lines, with the echo of Pontius Pilate washing his hands of Christ's execution, imply that those in charge cannot abdicate their responsibility so easily.

While physical death is a major concern in Souster's poetry, it is also possible to die spiritually before actual physical death. As in "Day at the Falls" (Y, p. 74), death can be associated with giving up, a denial of the struggle of life. Souster's poetry is so concerned with carrying on, even though this carrying on may have neither purpose nor rational justification, that the refusal to struggle is the unforgivable sin:

Day at the Falls

He sits in the shade
of the picnic pavilion
still shaky drunk
at twelve o'clock noon.

Comes over to our table
asks for something to eat
lost three brothers at Dieppe

²⁰Michael Macklem, Introduction to Selected Poems (1972) by Raymond Souster, p. 18.

I won't kid you
I'm an alcoholic
he says

I give him a dollar
wish him all the luck
and am glad when he leaves

Let's just say
I can't stand the smell
of the living dead.
(Y, p. 74)

Sentimentality is avoided in this honest presentation of the narrator's disgust at this degenerate figure. Man must instead, like the last patch of spring-time snow, engage in a ceaseless struggle against death. The inevitable result of the fight is no excuse for not being defiant to the end:

Like the Last Patch of Snow

That's the way
we've got to hang on—

like the last patch of snow
clinging to the hillside
crouching at the wood edge
with April done.

dirty-white
but defiant

lonely
fighting death.
(CT, p. 77)

On the other hand, though, there are a considerable number of Souster's poems that progress from illusion to disillusion, or from the heroic to the anti-heroic. The poems recalling his childhood generally share this characteristic.²¹ Laura Secord, in one poem, starts as a heroic figure, but ends up as a figure

²¹See above, pp. 161-164.

on the cover of some "over-sweet chocolates" (TE, p. 33). "The Bride" (TE, p. 19) commences with a description of a beautiful bride, but ends with the revelation that what is being described is a mannequin in a store window. "The Changes" is a more personal rendition of the deterioration in a once powerful man.

I can remember when you
 were a man we all feared, jumping up
 at the sound of your voice, often tortured
 by the crazed look in your eyes,
 raked over time and again
 by your broadsides, your salvos of fury.

Meeting today the withered, beaten shell of that man,
 I understand you more, sensing your bitterness
 drained away at last, leaving you
 human again, one of us.

And it does me no good
 to see death's yellow shadowing your face.

(TE, p. 38)

The first stanza reveals ambivalent feelings on the part of the narrator. If the man was admired, he was also "feared", and has made life uncomfortable for those around him. Neither is the second stanza entirely negative. Although the man has become lesser than he was, the narrator is now able to understand him more than he did. He ends, however, with an expression of rejection. The man has become something he fears he may also.

In his more effective treatment of the subject of death, Souster maintains a degree of detachment through his use of suitable objective correlatives. His attempts at a more personal approach are not usually as successful. "At Split Rock Falls" is a case in point:

At Split Rock Falls I first saw my death
 in a sudden slip the space of a breath;

my windmill body met the crazy shock
of uncounted centuries of stubborn rock.

At Split Rock Falls I saw green so green
it was as though grass had never been;
in the dappled depths of that pure pool
my face looked at me, recognized a fool.

From Split Rock Falls as I came away
the hint of a rainbow topped the spray,
and the trees tossed down: O let nothing matter
if not beautiful, swift as that singing water.
(CT, p. 66)

Apparently Souster considered this an important poem, as it was originally published separately in a chapbook.²² But while the experience, apparently involving a near-accident at a falls, may have been important and profound for Souster, its poetic expression has serious defects. The diction is trite ("uncounted centuries", "green so green"). "Crazy" is a favourite word in Souster's poetry that does not have a precise meaning here. One of the problems of using a conversational idiom is that many words as used in conversation lack precision. It is difficult for the poet to combine the conversational idiom with the exactness necessary for good poetry.

The handling of the meter is at times awkward. The rhythmic pattern is established in the first line as iambic tetrameter, but the frequent insertion of extra syllables and unresolved tension between the form and the demands imposed on it by the content, make the rhythm rough and jerky. The last line of the first stanza, "of uncounted centuries of stubborn rock" contains seven unaccented syllables and only four accented. The three unaccented

²² Raymond Souster, At Split Rock Falls, (Norwich, Vermont: American Letters Press, 1963).

syllables together are particularly awkward. Only the last stanza reveals some metric felicity, and here the diction, with rainbows and "singing water" is not original.

Life and death are associated with the cycle of the seasons in Souster's poetry. But unlike Avison, whose essentially religious view provides her with a vision of continuous renewal, Souster's view expressed in poems related to this subject matter is not cyclic. Spring brings life and hope for another year without thought that winter is not far away, but autumn brings death with no hope of renewal. All that is known is the here and now. "There's No Way out of It" (Y, p. 7), which is the introductory poem to The Years, and "Autumn" are examples of poems that express the association of autumn with death. "Autumn" is quoted below:

AUTUMN

And with it the slow burning-out of the year:
 Each leaf that my feet tramples under
 Is dead, and the trees are bare and there is only
 Rain and that early mercy, darkness,
 Along the burial streets of this city,
 Only darkness of evening and death
 In the tight blind rooms of this city.
 And now there is more rain in the night,
 Rain that is the sound of ceaseless cataracts,
 Rain that could fall for centuries and never
 Cleanse what it should wash most, our filthy hearts.²³

The "burial streets" and the reference to death in the line following re-inforce the links between autumn and death. The rooms of the city are "tight" and "blind", not only because they are shutting out the inclement weather, but also because they are shut up and withdrawn from whatever life there is outside. Partially

²³Raymond Souster, Go to Sleep, World, (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1947), p. 13.

Particular instances of love may be frustrated, and the narrator may take an ironic view of his amorous shortcomings, but love itself is never crushed.

The majority of his poems concerning love are earlier poems, published during the forties and fifties. These, including such poems as "All the Thrones of Their Kingdoms" (Y, p. 147) and "Their Guns Are Pointed" (Y, p. 154) tend to be extremely romantic and often sentimental, using rhetorical, extravagant imagery. His later poems on love are generally more successful. They are less romantic, more detached and ironic. "Path in the Park" is an example of this more successful type of love poem:

First her long russet hair
 then her sex-sleepy mouth
 then his arms coming over
 then her blue denims shifting. . . .

They hardly bother
 to look up at me,
 the surprised intruder
 on this parkland idyll.

They are lovers in love
 want each other badly
 can't wait any longer.

As I go down the path
 out of sight I hear
 the sound of their laughter,

and feel with a shiver
 that it isn't at me.

(Y, p. 128)

The narrator is ignored by the lovers, whose only concern is with each other. His loneliness is not even broken by their laughter, as he remains isolated even from their rejection.

Sex is often linked to love in Souster's poetry. Sexuality

divorced from love is viewed negatively, often associated with other negative elements of Souster's vision such as war, violence, and the urban environment. In "World Traveller at Twenty-One" (CT, p. 44) and "One of Our Young Soldiers, Drunk, Spends His First Night in Brussels" (SP 1972, p. 46), sex as a purely animal, brutal act is directly linked to war:

World Traveller at Twenty-One

Caught in the cone of searchlights over Hamburg
he prayed: Lord, get me out
and I'll make it all up to You . . .

so the next evening
got stoned in the mess, laid a crying
sixteen-year old up a Darlington Lane.
(CT, p. 44)

The use of the colloquial "stoned" and "laid", and the meticulous attention to the age of the girl and the place where the sexual encounter takes place add to the simple, powerful contrast between the false piety of the first stanza and the ugly brutality of the second. But generally sexuality is associated with at least some degree of feeling and viewed affirmatively. Examples are "A Bed Without a Woman" (CT, p. 48)²⁴ and "The Extra Blanket" (CT, p. 94).

War, often associated with death and the most restrictive elements of our society, is one of the major negative elements in Souster's poetic vision. Though at times coloured by nostalgia for his war-time years, the activity of war itself is viewed with angry hostility. Souster portrays war as hostile to the natural

²⁴See above, pp. 17-19.

expression of love and individual life. Poems which express this attitude are especially common among his early work, written during and immediately after his years of service, but more recent work shows this concern continued with poems on Biafra and Viet Nam. Hatred of the violence and brutality of war is expressed in poem after poem. At times Souster loses his objectivity and slips into a tone of rhetorical denunciation of war's evils, but in his better poems on the subject, such as the following, he is able to balance this passionate concern with themes and images that act as counterpoint:

June 1945

There, O there, see how
suspended, how like gulls
of some fabulous age, side-slipping,
veering, O prancing like colts
let off the rope, whole fields
for them to romp in, kings
in their mane-shaking young strength--

this last trio of bombers going home,
quitting this England they have known
intimately, with a giant love,
leaving a red trail across Europe
where their anger spit fire, drew blood
in the last agony of its death
that ran like a thousand rivers
(angry leeches on the rotten, corrupt flesh).

Flares shower above them, around them,
all the gayest colours on this grey day
not enough to show that all the hearts left here
swoop with them, dive with their every boyish pass
over these fields, these runways, silent now--
and O God please forever. . . .

(CI, p. 7)

In the first stanza the planes are "suspended" as if they were a boy's model plane hanging from a ceiling, then compared successively to gulls and colts. These images, with their suggestions of

freedom and innocence, are ironically undercut by the unholy trinity of the first line of the second stanza, "this last trio of bombers going home". This is the first direct mention that the poem concerns planes. The images of freedom in the first stanza, and the gay colours of the flares in the final stanza, bracket the more direct middle stanza. An effort is made to distance the description of the planes, describing them as being "like gulls / of some fabulous age". "Runways" in the second last line, suggests runaways, and the colts of the first stanza.

Sexual imagery occurs in both the last two stanzas. The violence and directness of the middle stanza, in which the planes are "quitting this England they have known / intimately, with a giant love" becomes subdued to a "boyish pass" in the final stanza. The use of imagery normally associated with life is bitterly ironic. It belies the planes' true natures, that of purveyors of death.

Postponing the explicit naming of the subject of the poem until well on into the poem is a technique Souster uses frequently. "The Orange-Painted Shed" (CT, p. 58)²⁵ does not name its subject until over halfway through the poem. This technique provides great opportunities for irony, as an elaborate description can be punctured with a blunt statement of what is really being described.

"Dream of Hanlan's, Southern England" is a further example of a poem in which war is juxtaposed with a more positive vision of life:

It's not home-sickness, it's the thought of the morning sun

²⁵See above, p. 157.

strong on the beach, warming the sand for the feet
of the young boy and girl I can almost see running
out of the cottage door, down the walk and out, free of the house
and anything holding them from the cool, fresh, deep-diving water.

And it isn't loneliness, it's just imagining
the peace of mind, the quiet of those mornings
when no planes roared off to bomb, to destroy, no machine-guns
shook out sprays of death,
but only the shouts of the swimmers in the water, the cries
of the children as the waves broke on their impractical
castles of sand.

It's nothing but desire to live again, fresh from
the beginning like a child.

(CT, p. 13)

The death and destruction of war are counterpointed with an idyllic picture of innocence evoked by memories of the narrator's home environment in Toronto. Each picture gains poignancy through contrast with its opposite. This contrast becomes assimilated into the imagery of the poem, with the "sprays of death" in the second stanza becoming transformed in the following line to sprays of water. Growing up has transformed these sprays of water into sprays of machine gun bullets.

The theme of loneliness is implicit in many of the preceding poems. The narrator of Souster's poems is generally the perennial loser, the outsider of nearly every group and situation he encounters. "In Praise of Loneliness" suggests that this state may be a necessary one for the writing of poetry:

Loneliness of men makes poets,
The great poem is a hymn to loneliness,
a crying out in the night with no ear bent to.

This is a breeding ground for poets.
Here the spawning, glittering rivers of poetry.
Here is loneliness to live with, sleep with, eat with,
Loneliness of the streets, of the coyote.

O Mistress Loneliness, heed your worshipper.
 Give him the voice to be heard in this land
 Loud with the cluck of the hen and the croak of the frog.
 (Cf, p. 18)

This is one of Souster's earlier poems, first published in Contemporary Verse as part of the longer "Poem for My Twenty-Ninth Year". Personifying an abstraction, as he does here with loneliness, is not a usual technique in his later work. This personification contributes to the heavy-handedness of the last stanza, as Souster tacks on a moral rather than letting the poem speak for itself.

The poet expresses an ambivalence in his view of loneliness in this poem. While he starts out by saying that "Loneliness of men makes poets", he ends by asking loneliness to "Give him the voice to be heard in this land". While Souster accepts a certain separation of the poet from society as necessary for the writing of poetry, he is also vitally concerned that poetry communicate. A tension is expressed in this poem between these two ideas—the need for separation and the need for communication.

Souster has written a number of poems which are concerned with the process of writing or with the situation of himself and others as poets. These are slightly more common among his earlier work. They are not generally among his best poems, as often they are too-direct expressions of his feelings. Poems such as "Portrait From the Year 1952" (Y, p. 129), or "The Specialist" (Y, p. 104) are more valuable for the insight they provide into the poet than for any intrinsic poetic merit. A poem such as "The Nature of Poetry", which deals more objectively with the problems of writing poetry, has greater merit:

Poems should never be written
 (you tell me)
 about a white-haired man
 carrying bundles of old newspapers
 (bent back covered with the strips
 of a one-time shirt)
 from one lane to another.

Instead (you say)
 make them
 out of dark-haired young women
 with cooing-dove breasts
 sheathed in dresses that drown them
 in pools of the rainbow.

But I write both

one for my pleasure
 one for my pain

one from guilt
 the other from desire

(which no-one reads
 anyway)

(Y, p. 124)

The treatment of the theme of how wide the scope of poetry should be is rather over-simplified, but the poem has some saving merits. The parentheses enclosing "you tell me" and "you say" have the effect of casting doubt on the statements by a person that poetry should portray only the beautiful side of life. The narrator believes that all things can be the subjects of poems. Parentheses are used frequently in the poem to indicate a quieter, less public voice on the part of the narrator. These statements save the poem from being rhetorical, and, in the final lines, provide a nice twist of humour.

While he avoids downgrading poetry, the life of a poet is viewed with attitudes ranging from sardonic amusement to the type of bitterness expressed in "The Literary Life":

While in some poems Souster portrays the isolation of the poet from society, in other poems he expresses the guilt of the white middle class liberal at having so much while others have so little. Souster is both the poet and the bourgeois, which helps him to be convincing in writing poems from both these divergent points of view. The contrast between the comfort of the bourgeois and the underprivileged, undernourished masses are oppositions which pervade much of his poetry. In his early poem "The Penny Flute" (CT, p. 1),²⁶ the old man playing his flute alone in the backwaters of the city is contrasted with the impatient youths who pass by on the other side, involved in their own activity. In his later poetry Souster often communicates more explicitly a feeling of the vast and unjustifiable chasm that exists between the lives of the affluent and those less fortunate. A good example is the poem "And Now We Take You to Biafra":

They are dying, the commentator says,
 from simple protein deficiency,
 these children all eyes looking up
 two each from the hospital beds.

It's morning now in Biafra
 a month from now this won't be news any more.

No one will care that a million starved to death—
 what's a million people more or less in this world?

Their leaders say they fight for independence,
 so I suppose these children will continue to die
 as long as there's a flag left to wave
 and young men willing to murder other men.

Count the scarecrow bodies--thousands—
 as the camera takes a shot of the camp.

a month from now it won't be even news.

²⁶See below, pp. 216-217.

During the commercial I select
 a cool nectarine from the refrigerator.
 (Y, p. 15)

Short stanzas and simple, direct statements provide a forceful expression for the intense emotion communicated by the narrator of the poem. The simple poignancy of the opening clause, "They are dying", sets the tone for the poem. The rhythms are abrupt, with little flow from one line to the next. This jagged movement supports the tone of hopeless anger, as does the grim chorus of the sixth and third last lines. Lack of contact by the narrator is emphasized by such statements as "the commentator says" and "Their leaders say", which implies that there may be more to the truth than they are telling. Part of his reason for lack of action seems to be lack of belief that this is actually happening. It culminates with the narrator going to his refrigerator and implicating himself in the evils of which he writes by taking a nectarine from his refrigerator. He is implicated in their plight both through having a refrigerator (and also a television set) while they are starving, and through buying expensive nectarines, a product of Africa. Examples of this type of opposition are expressed also in the poems "The Dogs of Korea" (CT, p. 100), "Lucky People" (Y, p. 156) and "Show Time".²⁷

The fact that the narrators of these poems recognize and are greatly concerned with their complicity with the forces of bourgeois materialism, although at the same time very attached

²⁷Raymond Souster, lost & found, (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1965), p. 111

to their bourgeois comforts, gives the poem added poignancy and integrity. A less honest approach would have been to identify completely with the underprivileged. The narrators of these poems realize that, no matter how desirable this might be, it would not be true. This reveals a more realistic approach to evil than the more simplistic attitude of such poems as "Death on the Construction Site".²⁸

The oppositions revealed in many of Souster's poems are underlined by his use of language, which is often more subtle than has been recognized. The most perceptive published analysis of Souster's basic approach to this use of opposition is expressed in Michael Gnarowski's review of The Colour of the Times:

On the purely technical side, Souster has spared himself the need of searching out or creating new and fantastic forms for his poetry. Of the true moderns in Canada, his have been the most cautious departures from conventional forms. As a matter of fact Souster seems to be satisfied with a rarely varying form which is quite traditional in free verse. This "conventionality" has its advantages, and the accepted proof of the pie endorses the wisdom of Souster's choice. By avoiding aberration in form or stylistic extravagance, the Poet has left himself free to cultivate a set of much more valuable characteristics. These are balance and equilibrium, and may be said to constitute the true essence of form. Experiences intensely perceived give rise to the poems of Souster, and as they clamour for expression the Poet proceeds to subordinate that which is heartfelt but formless to the idea of meaning which is to be achieved by a proper balance of components within the structure of the poem. A deceptively quiet beginning is offset by a dramatic ending; a simple idea in the first stanza evokes a powerful summation at the end. In this respect the balance is immediately apparent because Souster's poems tend to be short, with emotion balanced against emotion; idea against idea; image against metaphor; the actual against the imagined; the general against the specific; the trivial

²⁸See above, p. 198.

against the insignificant.²⁹

The implications of Gnarowski's analysis become more clear when employed in the explication of individual poems. "The Penny Flute", which was first published in 1941, reveals that the method described by Gnarowski was an integral part of Souster's earliest poetic efforts:

On the side street as we came along it in the darkness
an old man, hat beside him on the pavement, was playing
a penny flute.

The sound was small and sweet, a whisper beside the machinery
of the cloth factory across the street (almost as if he wasn't playing
for an audience, only for himself).

I wondered
who he was, how long he'd been standing there
piping that thin string of music.

But we were late
for where we were going
and young and impatient: we didn't have time for old men
and thin lonely tunes,
especially tunes played on a penny flute.

(CT, p. 1)

The major contrasts in this poem are between youth and age, camaraderie and loneliness, the restless mobility of the youths and the old man's immobility and contentment at staying where he is, and the small, sweet sound of the flute with the noise of the cloth factory. A comparison may be implied between the sound of the flute and the loud, brassy music it seems likely the young people are going to hear. Describing the music as a "thin string" may imply a further contrast between this metaphorical string and the material thread, or string, that is used in the cloth factory. A delicate balance is struck between art, represented by the old man's music, and

²⁹Michael Gnarowski, "Raymond Souster: au dessus de la Mêlée?", pp. 62-63.

society, represented by the young people and the cloth factory, who are at best indifferent, and at worst inimical to art. Overtones of the Good Samaritan story, with the narrator and his friends passing by on the other side of the old man, give an added context to the poem.

Souster's universe is one in which opposites co-exist. Evil is not merely the negation of good, or an aspect of existence which is unpleasant but necessary, and to be accepted. Evil, which is responsible for the destruction of innocence, beauty, and love, is endowed with a definite and unjustifiable existence in Souster's poetry. His poetic world is one in which good and evil clash continually; there is no indication that either will be victorious.

Many of Souster's best poems are those in which a sensitive balance is created through the use of opposites. It is interesting that in "The Penny Flute" and many other poems the persona created by Souster is placed on the side of the philistines. In this poem Souster uses a middle class persona which appears frequently throughout his work.³⁰ This persona is contrasted in other poems with a more rhetorical persona often assumed to denounce the injustices of society. The latter voice, more common in his earlier poetry, allows for a more direct expression of feeling, but less scope for humour. The former voice relies more on subtlety of expression and a greater use of ironic distance. Even in the personae employed there is a use of opposites.

³⁰See above, pp. 213-215.

Souster's use of opposites may be further elucidated through another early poem, "Dominion Square" (CT, p. 8):

They wouldn't understand my haste
 in getting out of the rain, in leaving this cold
 wind-blowing night for the tavern's
 warm heart, for its hot, steaming food,
 much beer, and the subtle music
 of the violin:

 they seem almost a part of the rain
 like the policeman in the white cape, white rubber boots to the thighs,
 who stands in the centre of the traffic
 and directs with a sure hand:

 They seem almost a part of the night,
 these two lovers,
 with their slow lingering steps, their total unawareness
 the honest lust in their bodies touching
 as they walk across the Square . . .

(CT, p. 8)

The comfortable world of the tavern, with its hot food, beer, violin music, and warmth, is associated with the narrator and middle class comfort. This is opposed to the "honest lust" of the young lovers, the rain, and the policeman directing traffic.

The haste of the narrator is contrasted with the "slow lingering" movement of the lovers, while his consciousness of his surroundings is balanced by the lovers' oblivion to everything except each other. His loneliness is contrasted with their togetherness.

The whiteness of the policeman's rainwear stands out in contrast to the darkness of the night. The two worlds are linked by the persona's feelings of painful and irretrievable loss.

The similarity between the first and the last lines, and the repetition of "they almost seem a part of the rain", with the last word changed to "night" also unifies the poem. Other parallel constructions occur in the third and fourth lines, and the third last line. Combined with the opposites described, the poem

acquires both strength and balance.

As Souster progresses in his poetic career, this use of artistic balance created through the use of opposites continues. But, at least in his better poems, this balance becomes more subtly implied through the patterns of imagery rather than explicitly stated, as in the poems previously discussed. "The Candy Floss of the Milkweed", first published in 1959, provides a good example of this later approach:

Softer, more delicate
than the skin of any girl
who ever walked up Yonge Street,

the candy floss of the milkweed
carried by the wind
to the farthest corners
of the valley
(valley dead
and dying with autumn)

a first snow
already lightly falling,
but carrying life
not death
wherever it touches
however carelessly the earth.

(CT, p. 72)

Opposition exists in the title, as candy floss is man-made, artificial and very unsubstantial, while milkweed, in spite of its superficial physical resemblance, is natural, and, as a seed, a bearer of life. Its first associations are with the skin of a girl, another image suggesting vitality, although this is immediately countered by the introduction of Yonge Street, which is associated with the deadening effect of the city. In the second stanza the milkweed is associated with the wind and the valley, both natural, vital forces, although it appears that the locale

is one of both fascination and mystery for the young girl. Trips to the supermarket and wandering through back alleys are enveloped with an excitement and mystery which the adults cannot share. To Francine supermarkets have the same imaginative appeal as circuses. Music can be made even on garbage cans; hedges, flowers, and animals are objects to be touched and enjoyed, not only for what they are, but for the way in which her senses and imagination interpret them. In this and a number of other poems an added dimension is given by the implicit identification between the attitude the child has and the attitude the poet must have to external reality. Both must use imagination to transform apparently ordinary material into things of beauty.

As Souster says in the last line of "Poem for Francine", the world is both "beautiful" and "terrifying", with these two aspects being inseparable sides of the human experience. This duality is not absent from Avison's poetry, but usually she is more concerned with resolving the opposites into a unified point of view. Souster allows his poetry to reflect what is for him the duality of the world, while Avison attempts to transcend the material world to an imaginative world in which these apparent contradictions become reconciled.

In a few other poems, such as "The House", Souster combines a use of opposites with a minimal use of language:

Up above
broadloom's
deep

walls
gleam

hi-fi
booms

Underneath
drains
bulge

garbage
festers

rats
swarm
(Y, p. 49)

The poem is divided into two equal parts. The first three mini-stanzas describe the opulent satisfactions of the house above, while the last three depict the no less real garbage and rats below. Use of the ultra-short lines results in the elimination of all but the absolutely essential sequence of noun and verb. In addition, each part is introduced by a three-syllable phrase and preposition, respectively. Unity of each part is also emphasized through sound. In the first part "booms" is rhymed with "broadlooms", while there is consonance with "gleams", and assonance between "gleams" and "deep". The assonance of "Underneath" in the second part with "gleams" in the first part indicates that these two worlds are not as far apart as might appear. This is further enforced by the consonance between "gleams" and "swarm". Unity in the second part is created through assonance between "rats" and "walls", while there is consonance between "bulge" and "garbage", and "festers" and "rats". The poem does not escape a certain amount of triteness in its simple comparison of these two worlds, although the use of sound reveals considerable technical dexterity on Souster's part.

A quotation from an article by Frank Davey, reprinted in Gnarowski and Dudek's The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada, is a suitable way of summing up much of the appeal of Souster's poetry:

Rimes of theme are more thoroughly in the hands of the poet. Stretching over series / sequences / years of poems, these only reveal themselves if the poet has a unifying vision of his world and his relation to it. Rime is structure; reflects order. Only so much as the poet's vision is ordered by his own sense of occurrence and recurrence, by a sensitivity to the rhythms / rimes of the natural world, will he be able to give rimes of theme.³¹

The appeal of Souster's poetry as a whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts (the poems). The above quotation from Frank Davey's article is helpful in defining the nature of this appeal. The poems on derelicts, birds, cats, love, war, death and other subjects create what Eli Mandel calls an "internal resonance"³² to his work. The different poems echo and re-echo each other through their similarities and differences, thus providing additional depth. Although the smallness of his canvas may be a disadvantage in some regards, his narrow range and lack of significant development allow his poetry to achieve an unusual intensity. His work as a whole communicates a satisfying, unified vision of the world.

It is easier to pick out Souster's poetic faults than his virtues—and the faults are certainly there in many of his poems. Occasional carelessness in diction and syntax, and moralistic notes

³¹Frank Davey, "Rime, A Scholarly Piece", Evidence, no. 9, ca Winter 1965, rpt. in The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada, p. 300.

³²Eli Mandel, "Internal Resonances".

appended to the ends of poems are the most frequent and obvious of these. But his moralizing is only his compassionate humanity getting the better of his poetic self, while his occasional slackness in diction and syntax is the other side of his exuberant, spontaneous energy.

There are, of course, numerous positive aspects to Souster's poetry. He has a perennial ability to be surprised with joy at the most apparently insignificant events, and the ability to communicate this joy in a lucid, forceful manner. He has also the ability to enter the dark underside of life, and give articulate expression to the isolation and frustration which in many ways seem to be the key-notes of our time. In many poems the joy and despair interpenetrate in a strange and fascinating manner.

The fact that he has remained firmly rooted in bourgeois society gives him an unusual viewpoint among contemporary poets. In putting down with honesty and accuracy what it feels like to be Raymond Souster, he communicates what it feels like to be a modern city-dweller in a manner that has no equal in Canadian poetry. His is very much a poetry of our time.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Raymond Souster and Margaret Avison are two Toronto poets now in their fifties who have been active in writing and publishing their poetry since about 1940. Externally Souster's life-style is what one might expect of a middle class, moderately successful bank employee. Margaret Avison lives a slightly less conventional life, having worked at a variety of different jobs. But both are deeply involved by choice in working society. This involvement is reflected in their poetry.

On the surface Raymond Souster and Margaret Avison appear to be facing in different directions in their poetry. Raymond Souster is usually aligned with the social realists, while Margaret Avison is often considered a metaphysical poet. But good poets have a way of bursting out of their categories. While Raymond Souster is a social realist, and Margaret Avison a metaphysical, they are both much more as well. In spite of all the differences there is a kinship between their poetry, especially their later work. Both have moved towards an unpretentious simplicity, resolving their earlier conflicts into a balanced, peaceful view of the world around them. Both reject universal solutions in favour of a compassionate humanity.

Both are poets with an international orientation. In spite

of his firm roots in Toronto, Souster's poetic interests have been far-ranging. He has been involved especially in the American poetic scene, but has shown more than a passing interest in such European poets as Montale and Ungaretti. He has contributed two translations of short poems to The Plough and the Pen, an anthology of modern Hungarian writing. Avison has contributed translations of a number of poems to this volume as well as translations to Acta Sanctorum and Other Tales, a collection of Hungarian short stories by Jozsef Lengyel.

Raymond Souster's poetic roots lie mainly with the American poets who wrote between 1920 and 1950, particularly William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Fearing, and Kenneth Patchen. It must have been with delighted recognition that Souster first read the poetry of Williams, for here was a poet of recognized importance to whose poetry his own displayed many affinities. Both deal in depth with a specific locale, and both employ forms that embody the vocabulary and rhythms of North American speech. Direct influences of Williams on Souster are not of as much importance as they might have been if Souster had read him at an earlier date, for by the time of his reading of Williams in the early 1950's Souster had already developed his own distinctive poetic voice. One of the most important influences of Williams' poetry on Souster's was to make its structure more visual. Williams' technique of using blank spaces as an integral part of the poem becomes characteristic of Souster's poetry from the late 1950's on.

Fearing was one of Souster's earliest models. This American

poet of the 1930's influenced Souster's poetry in the direction of social concern, often expressed through long rhetorical lines and an anti-bourgeois stance. While Souster soon outgrew the direct influence of Fearing, he retains throughout his poetry a deep involvement with humanity. This concern comes to be expressed more through efforts to achieve empathy with the particular individual than the more abstract rhetoric of social revolt. Souster's belief that poetry must communicate to the reader is a further common link between the poetry of Souster and Fearing. Both poets work toward a conscious simplicity in both diction and content; technique is aimed at making the content fresh and immediate. Kenneth Patchen, whose influence became important about 1944, influenced Souster in a romantic direction toward a poetry more concerned with the individual and less concerned with the institutions of society.

Among Canadian poets, the most important for Souster was his older contemporary W.W.E. Ross, whose poetry he and John Robert Colombo edited. Ross is one of the first Canadian poets to write in a conversational idiom, which is also an important characteristic of Souster's own poetry.

Souster's poetry develops toward a greater tightness and artistic control, while avoiding any sacrifice of his adherence to simple diction. As Souster himself says in "The Responsibility", "The verse gets leaner / the gut gets fatter".¹ Poets who have

¹Raymond Souster, Walking Death, (Toronto: Contact Press, 1955), p. 22.

helped him in this direction are Robert Creeley and the translations of the modern Italian poets Eugenio Montale and Giuseppe Ungaretti.

While Raymond Souster has generously acknowledged his poetic debts, the nature of which are, at least up to a certain point, clearly discernible, Avison has been reticent in this regard. The fact that Souster's poetry is closely tied to a world of physical reality makes its relations with other poetry both more definite and more relevant. Avison's poetry, however, invokes no particularized landscape, and avoids limitations of time or space. Her poetic affinities are likewise far-reaching. Generally her most definite ties are with those poets who do not experience what Eliot describes as a disassociation of sensibility. Her poetry likewise contains a high degree of both intellectual and emotional force. The English metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, and the contemporary Americans Denise Levertov and Elizabeth Bishop are poets with whom she has a great deal in common. Cid Corman, the American poet, critic, and editor has been an important associate for both Avison and Souster.

While both poets employ conversational rhythms which cannot usually be analyzed in terms of traditional metric, Avison's use of language is much more complex than Souster's. The diction of Souster's poetry is simple; he frequently repeats words such as "almost" and "crazy" that enforce links with the repetitive nature of much speech. Not only does Avison use words in her poetry that are

not conversational, but she often uses simple words to radiate different levels of meaning, giving her poetry a complexity which Souster's does not share. While she often uses conversational rhythms, a greater use of varying pitch sets her rhythms apart from the slow, laconic pace of most of Souster's poetry. The vocabulary and rhythms in her poetry usually avoid either traditional patterns or colloquial idiom. She has a highly individual voice whose main characteristics are compression and a masterful use of language to radiate a maximum of meaning with a minimum of words.

Souster's diction is at its best when it gives the essence of conversation and colloquial idiom rather than a more literal transcription. Idiom dates rapidly, and conversational language must be purged of its dross before it can become poetry. Margaret Avison's statements in a review of Callaghan's short stories are relevant here:

If you imagine that the words of these stories are simply the spoken language of everyday life, think of the rapid change in idiom over the past four decades, and look at the stories again. Has any sentence "dated"—or lost its immediacy? The words are plain talk, but not a resonance² is permitted, not an overtone that localizes the effect.

The writer of prose or poetry in a conversational idiom is therefore limited in both directions. Not only must he avoid language that would not be believable in conversation, but he must also avoid language and expressions that might become dated. While many of Souster's poems will probably date, as he does use slang

²Margaret Avison, "Callaghan Revisited", Canadian Forum 39 (February 1960): 276.

frequently, many of his poems of the 1940's such as "The Hunter" (CT, p. 3) and "The Penny Flute" (CT, p. 1) remain among his best work. It is doubtful that these will become dated, as they have a simple clarity which should remain appealing for a long time.

Avison generally employs any form or language which is necessary for the particular effect that she desires, although her later poetry moves toward a freer use of form and a simpler use of language. Souster generally avoids the appearance of regularity in his poetry more than does Avison. While it is not necessary or desirable for poetry to be chaotic to reflect a chaotic society, the semblance of chaos can be communicated through forms and techniques that are not obtrusive. Souster has succeeded admirably in accomplishing this in his best poems. Avison sees more possibilities for order in society and in her poetry, but Souster is probably closer to the experience of the average sensitive person in society. The fact that his finger is so accurately on the pulse of today's world gives his poetry a good part of its power.

Both poets are careful to maintain a proper distance between themselves and the subjects of their poetry. This is most evident in Avison's poetry, but Souster's employs a far greater degree of ironic distance than is apparent at first. The persona in the foreground of his poems is often viewed with humorous detachment, which imparts subtlety and complexity to his better poems. This detachment is especially true of his later work.

Both poets use the line fluidly; enjambment and a minimum of punctuation facilitate a quick and forceful movement. Souster

is particularly concerned with the line, experimenting with lengths from one word to lines that run several lines of print in length. Repetition and parallel grammatical constructions are the main techniques he employs to give form to the long line.

Visual arrangement of lines is used to a modest extent by each poet, although with few exceptions the main emphasis is on other techniques to convey the meaning of the poem.³ Their emphasis is on the intellectual and emotional rather than the visual aspects of the poem. Blank spaces of one line in length are Souster's most common visual technique; these are particularly suitable in enhancing the quiet, introspective tone of his poetry.

Both poets, particularly Avison, employ traditional forms. Her imaginative vigour contends successfully with the restrictive nature of fixed forms, especially the sonnet and quatrain, to produce complex, powerful lyrics. Souster is less proficient in his use of traditional forms. His use of these—most often the quatrain—is more characteristic of his earlier poetry. At his best he is quite competent in his use of traditional forms, but appears more at home with the freer forms which are more suited to his conversational rhythms.

Traditional prosodic effects, such as the patterning of sound and meter, are used by both poets, particularly Avison. Rhythm is often varied to reflect meaning in Avison's poetry, while rhyme is subtly varied with assonance, consonance, and

³Margaret Avison's one concrete poem, "Sliverick", is published in bp nicol, ed., The Cosmic Chef, (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1970), p. 72.

dissonance to produce effects that combine rhythmic suitability with illumination of the content. Repetition is used frequently by both poets to help impart a forceful rhythm to their poetry, although its use by Souster often becomes rhetorical.

The most basic technique of Souster's poetry is the use of opposites to create an artistic balance in his poetry. In his poetry Souster portrays the world as a place in which opposites co-exist with one another. Evil, or the negative side of life in his poetic vision, is endowed with a positive existence, especially through war. Avison, on the other hand, depicts evil only as the negation of good.

Souster and Avison are both concerned with the theme of the individual versus the city in their poetry. This theme is considered from a number of different perspectives, such as the relation between the artist and society, the problem of the imagination in society, or the way in which human values may be retained in a society that indicates little concern for the individual. Both poets vigorously affirm the individual and his power to win through. Souster is most definitely not the pessimist that some critics have portrayed.⁴ His poetic moods are often melancholy, and sometimes angry, but he has a toughness and belief in poetry as celebration that prevents him from giving way to despair.

Both portray childhood as an ideal time when it is possible

⁴See, for example, Patrick Tee's thesis, "The Vision and Poetry of Raymond Souster", (M.A. thesis, Sir George Williams University, 1972).

to perceive the world as fully integrated and hospitable to the imagination. Adulthood, on the other hand, is a time when difficult and perhaps crippling adjustments to society must be made. Avison often portrays the individual breaking out of the patterns of a rigid society. Her poetry often depicts the average middle class person, whereas Souster does not deal with the middle class in his poetry. Both poets, and more Souster, reveal mingled feelings of horror and fascination for the derelicts who form a considerable part of the urban population. Both express admiration for those who have been successful in avoiding the patterns that have been set out for them by society, but a sadness that the expression of individuality is hampered by so many obstacles.

Each poet uses similar imagery. Music imagery is employed by both Souster and Avison positively in association with the individual in his opposition to the city. Both poets employ enclosed spaces to suggest limited and restricted perception, with the narrator often being within this enclosed space. Both use nature imagery positively. Often the contemplation of some simple object provides them with an added perspective on the world around them. Examples are "A Nameless One" (D, p. 97) by Margaret Avison, and "Ninety Ducks" (CT, p. 93) by Raymond Souster. Trees are the most important nature imagery in Avison's poetry, linking the earth with the sky above, bypassing man's creations, which have an imperfect relation with either earth or sky. The theme of the individual and the city being so much more important in his poetry, Souster uses a greater number of correlatives in the expression of this

theme than does Avison. Young girls, ducks, cats, flowers, derelicts, and groundhogs are all correlatives for the individual in Souster's poetry.

Avison's treatment of the individual in the city always has its roots in a possible situation in society, such as the clerk on his lunch-hour in "The Apex Animal" (WS, p. 1) or the relationship between Garnet and Miss Rothsey in "The Agnes Cleves Papers" (WS, p. 78), although there are nearly always aspects that go far beyond normal physical reality. Souster, however, employs correlatives which have only an implicit relationship to this theme. Different forms of the individual lend variety to its expression, with the cat often being associated with woman, and the bird with the poet. The city also assumes a number of different forms, as it is only a symbol of the deeper repression that is characteristic of our civilization. War and death are the most common alternate faces of this repression in Souster's poetry.

A major difference between these two poets is the area each has chosen (or which has chosen him) for his poetry. Souster restricts his area to the contemporary urban environment; he is concerned with casting his poetic vision on the darkness immediately surrounding him. Avison, on the other hand, has a voracious, far-ranging imagination that rejects the limitations of the fixed point of view. Although she is vitally concerned with present society, she tries to comprehend it in the context of history, myth, and religion. Many of her poems recall the parables of Christ in their attempt to find the exact expression for some idea, emotion,

or spiritual intuition. Christianity becomes of key importance in her later poetry as a source for her vision. This is an aspect of her art which has no parallel in the poetry of Souster, although he uses the occasional biblical allusion.

Avison's approach necessitates complex techniques. Language is stretched almost to the breaking point, with words often working simultaneously on two or more levels of meaning. She constructs analogies and complex figures of speech in her effort to embrace as much reality as possible. Souster, with his more restricted area, has less need for complex techniques. It is consistent with Avison's poetic search that her attempt to eliminate her own limitations of time and space should lead her to Christ and Christianity, through which earthly ties can be transcended. Souster's poetry, on the other hand, is concerned with the here and now.

One of the major differences between these two poets is their attitude toward poetry as communication. Souster emphasizes the function of communication in his poetry—his poems have an immediate emotional effect. While imagery and other figures of speech are employed, these are generally kept sufficiently simple that the directness of the poem is not affected. The other aspect of this emphasis on immediacy, however, is that the more complex intellectual or emotional subjects, which do not lend themselves to direct treatment, are absent from his poetry. Often his message is made explicit through moralistic tags at the ends of poems. While he has been criticized for restricting his poetic area so

drastically, his best poems are those which deal with a realistic present. When he looks back on the past with nostalgic reverie, or tries to communicate some idea, the poetic products are seldom convincing. He seems wise to have restricted his poetic concerns the way he has, although this is still a restriction.

Ideas certainly receive their due in Avison's poetry, but often to the detriment of the poem's immediacy. It is not possible to respond to most of her poems in the spontaneous manner that most of Souster's work invites. The emotion is often bound up with the intellectual content, so that considerable thought and patience are necessary to unravel the meaning of the poem. Although emotion is present in her poetry, the predominant appeal, particularly of her earlier work, is to the intellect. Paradox, irony, and complex imagery contribute to a highly sophisticated, intelligent poetry.

Both poets move chronologically from a more complex to a simpler poetic style. This movement is most obvious in the poetry of Souster, with the shift from the often rhetorical poems of the 1940's to the direct, simply expressed work of the past decade. A similar shift can also be seen in the poetry of Avison. The complex, sometimes rhetorical poetry of her earlier work such as the sonnets, becomes replaced in The Dumbfounding by lyrics of a pure clarity. This is especially true of her religious poems. The artifice with which the poetry of both Avison and Souster is created becomes less obvious in their later work, although certainly not less present. The poetry of their last decade is

often quite similar in its unpretentious simplicity.

There is a maturing and deepening in the course of Souster's poetry, as Souster himself has changed from the angry youth to the middle-aged man who has learned to live with the ironies of the world. The vivid colours of his earlier poetry become muted to subtler shades. But while there is some development in regard to his technical ability, there is little significant change in the themes that are discussed or the techniques that are employed in their communication. The themes that concerned Souster in 1940 still concern him today, although their expression is much more subtle and complex. This lack of any major development is perhaps a consequence of Souster's approach, in which a specific locus is mined in ever--increasing depth. The temptation to say that this is a limitation in his poetry is tempered by an awareness that a writer may be a major force even though his area is a limited one. Williams himself would seem sufficient proof of this. Yet even Williams showed significant development from his early imagist poems through his later experiments with his triadic stanza, variable foot, and other forms. Whereas Williams was an inventor of techniques, Souster is an adapter of already existing techniques rather than an innovator.

But there is more than one way for a writer to be of importance. A writer may have importance for his national literature which makes him of unique value for his historical contributions. Souster is a poet whose position in his national literature is secure; his historical contribution is much greater than Avison's.

He will always have the historic importance of being among the first Canadian poets to write effectively in the conversational idiom that has its roots in North American poetry. Also, he will be remembered as one of the most tireless editors that Canadian poetry has ever seen. Both Avison and Souster, especially the latter, act as links between the poets of the forties and the Vancouver poets of the sixties through their common interest in American poetics. The Vancouver poets turned even more directly to such American poets as Duncan and Creeley for their early poetic models.

In his editing Souster has been extremely perceptive in his discovery of new talent, but his ability for self-criticism is unfortunately not as great. His direct manner of writing poetry generally makes failure obvious and success easy to overlook. It is unfortunate that his reputation may be marred by his not being judged by his best work. Avison's talent for self-criticism, on the other hand, is highly developed. Nearly every one of her poems reveals a painstaking care with the use of language and form. There is a consistently high level of excellency throughout her work that Souster's does not share, although part of the reason for this is that Souster has published almost ten times as many poems.

Margaret Avison eludes attempts at categorization. The individuality of her poetic vision is more evident than her associations with other writers. Unlike Souster, whose importance is likely to be primarily Canadian, Avison is too independent of her

time and place to be important for only national reasons. There is little in her poetry that ties it to a Toronto or Canadian locale. If she is to have importance for readers beyond her time, it will have to be for her poetic achievement itself, rather than for any historic importance. With approximately half her poetry having been published outside Canada, and her acceptance by a number of leading American poets and critics, she is almost as likely to become important in the United States as in Canada. She is a powerful individual voice who stands a good chance of being heard well beyond her own time, both within and beyond the borders of Canada.

In spite of their differences, and in large measure because of them, the comparison of Avison and Souster brings out aspects of their poetry which a study of only one of these poets could not achieve so readily. There is a peculiar kinship between their poetry which might best be described as a wide-ranging, deeply humanitarian sympathy. Nothing and no one is too small for their attention or for its expression in poetry. Irony abounds, but cynicism is a long way from the poetry of either.

It has become a commonplace of Canadian criticism to say that certain poets write a poetry that could be written nowhere else, and because of this give unique expression to the Canadian fact. While this may be true, proof of such matters is impossible. More to the point is that both Avison and Souster have assimilated into their poetry some of the most important poetic developments of this century, and combined these with an individual vision

that makes the work of each a deeply satisfying experience.

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