

## SNOW BLINDNESS

*Michael Taylor*

It's not my intention in this note on Francis Zichy's "Images of Confinement and Liberation in Margaret Avison" (see this issue pp. 232-43) to offer a more persuasive reading of any of the poems by Margaret Avison which Zichy discusses in his article. Nor do I find myself in basic disagreement with the main thrust of the critic's argument. From even a cursory reading of her poetry it seems to me perfectly legitimate that anyone might very well want to talk about Margaret Avison's advance-and-retreat responses to the often terrifying reality around her on which her imagination must work. So when Zichy takes the sonnet "Snow" as the exemplary instance of a continued struggle in the poet's mind between an exuberant venturesomeness and a death-like stasis — an octave of venturing, a sestet of snowy paralysis — I can only by and large applaud the choice, ready, then, to enjoy the more laborious fruits of this initial discrimination. It's at this point, in my judgement, that things start to go cock-eyed.

To begin with, Margaret Avison's poem is notoriously elusive. While it may not be impossible to pick one's way respectfully through the octave, the sestet not only undermines the octave's bravado but does so in formidably mysterious ways, transporting us, for example, to the banks of the yellow Yangtze where the snow of the poem's title whirls and "where the wheel / Spins an indifferent stasis that's death's warning." Even the octave ventures puzzlingly. Why do sedges and wild rice (a hint of the Yangtze here perhaps) chase, of all things, "rivery pewter"? Why are the cinders (and why "cinders"?) "astonished" and "quake / With rhizomes"? There's so much in both sections of the poem that cries out for patient elaboration — particularly under the rubric of "confinement and liberation." The poem's only straightforward lines are the opening ones:

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.  
The optic heart must venture: a jail-break  
And re-creation.

The greater part of Zichy's analysis of the poem concerns these relatively simple statements — relative at least to the ones that follow:

Sedges and wild rice  
Chase rivery pewter. The astonished cinders quake  
With rhizomes. All ways through the electric air  
Trundle candy-bright disks.

Zichy chooses, in other words, in his pursuit of the imagery of confinement and liberation, to make much of what needs it least, at the expense of what could do with it most.

The initial strategic evasion (as I see it) wouldn't be culpable if what Zichy says about these lines — the first one especially — didn't smack so much of the factitious. He spends paragraphs, for instance, asserting the dubious proposition that the opening line "says the opposite of what she [the poet] needs to say" because of its "excessive" quality, its "gratuitous violence," its "intrusive violence," and so on. To use the poem's words, the line cannot bear his unseen freight:

The poet has cannily raised a possibility which contradicts her surface statement, the possibility that the world may not only fail to remain passive and elusive, but may attack us violently, at our most vulnerable and sensitive place. (p. 234)

The flat assertion "Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes" must somehow mean additionally "But I fear that someone might" or, at one more remove from its simple meaning, "that the world will insist on stuffing itself in at our eyes." (Here, the "nobody" in Zichy's reading simply drops from sight. Nobody indeed!) Everything hinges on our accepting Zichy's notion that this opening is in fact, somehow, excessive and gratuitous. But in order for the second and third lines to make the forceful statement they do — namely, that the creative imagination must sally forth and engage the world — it's necessary for the poet to *insist* that nobody is going to do it for us, particularly if we are poets or creative artists of some kind or other. To put the matter another way, a very simple change in the first line would give some credence to Zichy's perverse interpretation, and might perhaps illuminate my own argument. Had Margaret Avison written "thrusts," let's say, instead of "stuffs," then the horror lurking in reality (according to Zichy) might be conveyed by the force of the verb. But only by a very determined act of will can "stuffs" rid itself of suggestions of overflowing boxes or over-full stomachs, images hardly conducive to the intrusive violence that Zichy finds in the line.

The real explanation for Zichy's insistence that the poem's opening section — the first three lines — "suggest[s] uncertainty at the deepest levels" lies in a familiar critical procedure whereby in a work of literature every part must relate in as many ways as possible to the whole: organic unity at any price, even of logic and commonsense. Because the sestet of the sonnet takes such a different tack (as sestets of sonnets traditionally do), because the argument turns against itself (an "organic" move in itself of course), because snow blankets and deadens the octave's venturing imagination — somehow or other these changes *must* be signalled somewhere in the first section of the poem to give it the total cohesiveness modern criticism finds so desirable. Yet by spending so much time and effort

on such a fragile thesis for such a simple opening, Zichy allows the real challenge of the poem to go unmet. For a writer like Margaret Avison there's absolutely no need to concoct difficulties: in "Snow" there are enough real ones to raise an exegetical blizzard.

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