

A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL TAYLOR'S "SNOW BLINDNESS"

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In "Snow Blindness" (SCL, 3 [Summer 1978], 288-90), Michael Taylor claims that Francis Zichy ("'Each in His Prison / Thinking of the Key': Images of Confinement and Liberation in Margaret Avison," SCL, 3 [Summer 1978], 232-43) has been misled by an obsession with "organic unity" to impose a "perverse interpretation" on the "straightforward," "relatively simple" opening lines of Margaret Avison's "Snow":

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

Taylor's criticism focuses on Zichy's reading of one word, "stuffs," in the first line of the poem. If the alternate reading which Taylor proposes is unconvincing, we will hardly be convinced by his more general comments on Zichy's basic critical procedures. How convincing is Taylor?

Taylor's reading of the opening of "Snow" is straightforward: "the creative imagination must sally forth and engage the world . . . nobody is going to do it for us." Zichy does not deny that on one level the lines present some such meaning. His point, and it is a difficult one to ignore once it has been made, is that the opening line contains a threatening note which is logically extraneous to the surface argument: having the world stuffed in at your eyes sounds unpleasant; it does not sound like a favour which, unfortunately, nobody will do for you. On one level, Taylor's paraphrase, "nobody is going to do it for us," is right; but on another level the line can be paraphrased "nobody is going to do it to us." In terms of the straightforward logic of the opening lines, it is obvious why the poet needs to deny that we are passive in relation to the world, that the world will be handed to us on a silver platter. But why does she need to deny that we are vulnerable to the world, that the world is going to intrude violently on us? In the very act of denying this second possibility, through the force of her imagery, she goes out of

her way to raise an issue which seems strictly irrelevant to the argument that "the creative imagination must sally forth and engage the world." But, although irrelevant to the surface logic of her argument, the issue of intrusive violence is highly relevant to the emotional logic below the surface. It is part of the dialectical process at work, here and elsewhere in *Avison*, through which desire and fear are one and the same thing, and every gesture of escape *into* the outer world is equally a gesture of escape *from* it, an attempt to stave off its intrusion.

In his criticism of Zichy's reading, Taylor seems to deny "the horror lurking in reality (according to Zichy)," although he has himself earlier acknowledged that reality is, in fact, "often terrifying" to *Avison*. He argues that the word "stuffs" does not bear the weight Zichy places on it. Taylor associates "stuffs" with "overflowing boxes or over-full stomachs." He suggests that the word "thrusts" would better convey a sense of threat, and that since *Avison* does not use it, or some such word, she does not intend this sense. *Avison* does, of course, use such a word, "pierced," in a passage in "Perspective" which, as Zichy points out, is remarkably similar to the opening of "Snow," but, be that as it may, there seems ample justification, in terms of Zichy's argument, for the use of "stuffs." The object of the act of stuffing is a thing, a passive receptacle, for example, Taylor's "box" or "stomach." Thrusting, however, can be directed against a thing or a person, passive or not. A person can fend off a thrust; a receptacle cannot defend itself against being stuffed. Thus the word "stuffs" evokes precisely the sense of defenceless vulnerability for which Zichy argues, and Taylor's associations with the word are not as irrelevant as he thinks to Zichy's reading of the first line of "Snow." One wonders how relevant they are to his own reading.

If Zichy's general argument shows anything, it shows that the apparent "straightforwardness" of the opening lines of "Snow" is a rhetorical strategy requiring as much "patient elaboration" as the more obvious complexities which Taylor cites. Zichy's decision to focus on this "simple opening" (while not, of course, ignoring the rest of the poem, which he analyzes at some length) is not a "strategic evasion"; it is dictated by the very nature of his argument. Perhaps the reason Taylor sees this decision as an evasion is that he has not fully grasped the implications of Zichy's argument: although he claims to agree with its "main thrust," his account of it is inaccurate. In paraphrasing Zichy, he speaks of "Margaret *Avison's* advance-and-retreat responses to the often terrifying world around

her," of the "continued struggle in the poet's mind between an exuberant venturesomeness and a death-like stasis." What Taylor fails to note is that, according to Zichy, Avison's impulses towards "advance" and "retreat," "exuberant venturesomeness" and "death-like stasis," are not simply opposed, with sometimes one dominant, sometimes the other — "an octave of venturing, a sestet of snowy paralysis"; they "are related dialectically" (p. 232) — every advance is *at the same time* a retreat. If this argument is correct, Zichy must be able to show that Avison's boldest, most "straightforward" gestures of liberation are the most profoundly defensive as well. We may disagree with this argument, but where better to test it than in the opening lines of "Snow," which, in their rhetorical effect, are the boldest, most straightforward in Avison's work?

If we find Zichy's reading of the opening lines of "Snow" convincing, we of course have no need to resort to Taylor's hypothesis that Zichy has been misled by an overzealous search for organic unity. Zichy is obviously concerned with organic unity, not only in "Snow," but in Avison's work as a whole. However, his reading of the opening of "Snow" is not dictated by this concern; it is a response to what is specifically there, not to what some general conception of the poem has led him to believe should be there. Can the same be said of Professor Taylor's reading?

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