

## EXEGETICAL BLIZZARD

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I would like to respond to Francis Zichy's article, "'Each in His Prison / Thinking of the Key': Images of Confinement and Liberation in Margaret Avison," and to Michael Taylor's response to Zichy, "Snow Blindness" (both of which appeared in *SCL*, 3 [Summer 1978], 232-43 and 288-90 respectively).

At one point, Zichy claims that Avison's form of poetic expression in "Snow" is characterized by "ambivalence and near incoherence," but it could be said that Zichy himself is, at times, much more ambivalent and incoherent than Avison. His exegesis attempts to account for every meaning of the poem and, by doing so, accounts I believe for none. Witness, for example, Zichy's confusing approach to the opening lines of the poem. Zichy's analysis appears to begin from his assumption that the lines constitute "one of Avison's most striking declarations of the need for a personal effort at liberation." As I see it, the word "striking" suggests poetic power and effectiveness. But Zichy seems to interpret the word differently, for no sooner has he considered the implications of the first line than he labels it "excessive"; moreover, the lines which follow are seen as "ambiguous." Zichy goes on to inform us that in these "striking" lines Avison "says the opposite of what she needs to say," and he asserts that Avison's ambiguity arises from her refusal to state or imply a moral position: "... we are not told whether in fact it is a good thing or not that, as the poet declares, 'Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.'" A large part of Zichy's argument seems to hinge upon his identification of this "ambiguity," but, in the end, he remains swamped by the complexity of the poem. We are left with the vague conclusion that "Snow" is composed of two parts: the octave asserting creativity and liberation, the sestet countering with "a movement of death-like resignation and passivity." Although Zichy postulates a dialectical relationship between these two parts (between liberation and confinement), his analysis proceeds only by creating bipolar critical structures composed of a series of antitheses (as is made clear by the two-part structure he originally identifies). Moreover, the validity of Zichy's interpretation is, in my view, seriously undermined by the fact that he does little to relate the

imagery of lines four to eight to the dialectical pattern he is ostensibly exposing. In fact, the major thrust of his argument is derived from a lengthy commentary on the poem's first three lines.

In response to Zichy, Taylor contends that "the poem's only straightforward lines are the opening ones" and that in concentrating on these Zichy chooses "to make much of what needs it least, at the expense of what could do with it most." Although I am not sure that the opening lines are as straightforward as Taylor claims, I do agree that Zichy is guilty of "strategic evasion" and of spending paragraphs "asserting the dubious proposition that the opening line 'says the opposite of what she [the poet] needs to say.'" Still, Taylor does little to remedy Zichy's errors, and when he states that "It's not my intention . . . to offer a more persuasive reading," I am left wondering why not? For if we are going to label Zichy's viewpoint "Snow Blindness," it would seem essential to suggest some reading routes out of the exegetical blizzard. The following is offered, then, as yet another interpretation of Margaret Avison's "Snow."

The sonnet is about our ability to use imagination as a means to visionary creation. Avison suggests that the world must not be received in the mimetic sense, but envisioned as if it were seen for the first time. The opening emphasis upon the eye and upon metaphors of sight points to the singer as seer: the poem will unfold as a demonstration of the ways in which the world can be envisioned — created rather than empirically known. The speaker invites the reader to cease being a mere receptor (or a "sad listener") and to participate in the poem as an envisioning venture. This means that the octave and sestet not only set up a relationship between the speaker and the world; they establish a link between the speaker and the reader and another between the reader and *his* world. Thus the directive contained in the first two and one half lines is addressed both to speaker and reader; the remainder of line three to line eight demonstrates the directive in action (here the world is not being realistically apprehended but seized in consciousness as an interior vision) and presents the reader with the option of subjectively partaking in this envisioned world, rather than making objective sense of it. But lines nine to fourteen describe "snow's legend" — the story of the reader's failure to grasp the proffered vision. For in seeking to uncover meaning, the reader strays from the initial directive which informed him that meaning would not be something that could be regulated or made static, white and clean, but rather something dynamically ventured after and imaginatively seen. If the end of the

poem describes failure, then, it is not of the speaker, but of the "sad listener" reader who remains content to be an ear, not an eye, not an I. This is why the images of hope and freedom connected with the opening lines give way to signs of silence, "Suffering," "mourning," and imprisonment. Although the speaker becomes free, the listener remains cloistered, looking in and out on a wasteland of white. The greatest paradox of the poem is thus connected with the whiteness associated with Avison's title: we read snow as stasis, winter, "death's warning," and so we accept the archetypes, eat them cold, all the while forgetting that snow is white is colour, prismaticism waiting for our "soul's gates" to unseal. Who will read "Snow" and see rainbow? Who will read white and say Eden?

Eden, because the first lines are the beginning — out of the given garden into a much more exciting flood. Break the world, make genesis: "a jail-break / And re-creation." Create and re-create through vision. And so when we read, "Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes," the meaning seems to be: nobody is going to give you a world, no one will give you instant sight. World and word are there, but first you must learn to see. Thus the optic heart, eye's centre, becomes the pupil which (and who) must learn to venture out in vision. And venture it does, as vision follows, from the end of the sonnet's first sentence to the beginning of line nine.

In keeping with the creation motif established in the first sentence, these lines present us with a vision of the origins of a new earth imaged in terms of a volcanic explosion. The "rivery pewter" becomes optic lava, burning a path to sight and to images of fertility associated with erupting vision. (The metaphor finds its basis in the actual anatomy of the eye, which is composed of a vitreal chamber — Avison's jail — and filled with gelatinous vitreal liquid — the poem's pewtery lava.) Hence the pewter is seen as a river and is chased by vegetation associated with well-watered, fertile land. Rice, of course, is itself a symbol of creation and fertility, and so in *The Golden Bough* Frazer tells us that in "the East" (a region which appears distinctly in "Snow") "the growing rice-crop is often treated with the same considerate regard as a breeding woman."<sup>1</sup> The image of creation connected with the rice, the sedge, the rhizomes, the rivery pewter is reinforced by the appearance of "astonished cinders" which suggest the fiery nature and the "quake" of the eye's eruption. The vision presented to us here, however, is not simply

<sup>1</sup>J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1957), p. 151.

meant to indicate the qualities of a momentary visionary genesis: the colour, the movement, the drama of this world made by the optic venturer will exist "All ways" in space and time, or at least as long as the visionary quest continues.

But a caution enters here: the true weight and meaning of the vision just created by the speaker can be apprehended only by those who are willing to place their faith in imaginative truth, only by those who take the mind's motion as a serious poetic force. For all the others, whose imaginations remain closed, for those whose "soul's gates seal," the metaphoric objects will be meaningless, "desolate / Toys." To miss creation's "freight," in fact, is to remain blindly attached to a realm of the "unseen." And so the vision that is linked to the "electric air" is contrasted with the blinded being who is seen as grounded and forced to "shudder under" and mistakenly to try to escape from the weight of the "freight" he has missed.

It is for this person who *cannot see*, for the reader who wants to know why the Yangtze appears in a volcano of snow, that the lament which constitutes the sestet is written. In keeping with traditional sonnet forms, Avison has used the octave to state the central problem of the poem: can the speaker and the reader come together in pursuing art and vision, or is the tragedy of art that the visionary must forever remain alone in a world that his most ardent admirers can never really see? The sestet, I have suggested, resolves the question, albeit negatively. For in the volta expressed through the ninth line's "But soft," we enter not the legend of creation celebrated in the octave, but a subdued story of snow. Here we see the weight that the listener, as opposed to the seer, must bear. The "yellow Yangtze" coloured in "mourning" and showing "death's warning" stands in blatant contrast to the images of liquidity and energy connected with the "sedges and wild rice." Whereas the "electric air" of vision is dynamically crowded with objects that move, the sestet gives us "indifferent stasis," "tumbled quietness," and a "starry blur." The little movement that appears here turns perpetually in circular action that goes nowhere. As the poem draws to a close, the brilliantly *seen* images which characterized the octave, and the entire opening emphasis on sight, give way to a description of the unfocussed vision of the "starry blur." As vision fades, the images of sound which identify the "sad listener" become more prominent. From an initial "quietness," we move to the "ring" of the final line. Here, the word "ring" functions in two ways. It introduces the previously encountered imprisonment motif, but in a new form. The

sounds that the listener is enslaved to hearing are also the walls that ring him in and prevent him from experiencing "The rest" of a future of temporal and spatial "change" (in contrast to the "All ways" of line five). The listener who cannot (will not) see remains locked in an aural prison, while the voice of the optic heart rings in the new, completing its jail-break by finding sight *and* sound. The completion of the last line also rings a note of sadness as it registers "Suffering" and "mourning" for those who never join the optic heart and venture into vision.

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