A RESPONSE TO ROBERT LECKER'S "EXEGETICAL BLIZZARD" AND MICHAEL TAYLOR'S "SNOW BLINDNESS"

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All readers of Margaret Avison are indebted to Robert Lecker for his interesting interpretation of "Snow" (*SCL*, 4 (Winter 1979), 180-84), and particularly for his detailed exegesis of the difficult lines three to eight. I would like, however, to explore a few difficulties which I think his interpretation raises, and to clear up certain questions he may have had about mine.

Lecker begins, perhaps with some justification, by asking why I use the word "striking" (suggesting "poetic power and effectiveness" — Lecker) to describe the opening lines of "Snow," when I go on to say that there is something in these lines which is "excessive" and "ambiguous." In the first place, I don't think a certain measure of excessiveness or ambiguity is incompatible with poetic power. In fact, I take these qualities to be an essential part of Avison's distinctive power as a poet, which is notably of the arresting, challenging sort, so that, to use a phrase of E. A. Robinson, in reading her poetry we ponder as we praise. This is the note I find in the opening lines of "Snow": the arresting challenge (perhaps I ought to have used "challenging" rather than "striking"?) which engages the reader and also arouses his wits and perhaps his resistance. Are there not readers who, when told that "Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes," might want to answer, "Whoever said anybody did?" It seems to me that to find this special note of challenge in the poetry of Avison, and to respond to it thoughtfully, is to take her poetry as she intended. And I must stress that I see the challenge as aimed not only at the reader (as I think Lecker sees it) but particularly at the poet herself. Thus when I speak of dialectical process in Avison's work, I mean that she entertains impulses which seem to challenge each other. In "Snow," an impulse towards liberation and imaginative engagement with the world is undercut by a muted recognition of imprisonment and near blindness. My argument is that Avison is a poet who confronts herself with a special intensity and

inwardness, and thus the opening line of "Snow" is a question as well as a confident statement, addressed not only to the reader but to the poet's own self. In all her poetry Avison engages with an almost unrelenting seriousness (I have noted some instances of dry humour, especially in "Perspective") in an interior colloquy which raises the most decisive issues of existence, particularly the issue of the relation between the self and the world. As I suggested in my article, Avison's version of this relation is troubled and problematic; hence her later willingness to resolve the issue by a gesture of self-effacement, as in the poem "Person," where the poet asks the Holy Ghost "to lead my self, effaced/in the known Light/to be in him released/from facelessness." It may seem tricky business to read a poem partly in light of a later statement by the same poet; however, I am not saying that the resolution in "Snow" is the same as the resolution in "Person," but that it points forward to it, and that there is a fundamental continuity between the poems. In reading a poet as preoccupied as Avison is with a few related fundamental issues, there is a special warrant for exploring continuities between the poems.

Since I hold this view of Avison's work up to and including *The Dumbfounding,* I approach "Snow" rather differently from the way Lecker does in his offered reading. He accuses me of having unjustifiably assumed that the poem hinges on "the poet's refusal to state or imply a moral position," namely, her failure to tell us whether it is a good thing or not that "nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes." But I see the poem as hinging on a moral *dilemma,* or on a disturbing irony, that in its necessary efforts to achieve liberation and a satisfactory interaction with the world, the self may become its own worst enemy. For Avison, such an insight about the ironies attending self-assertion seems fundamental and can be found at the centre of all the poems I discuss. In "Snow" I see Avison working towards a resolution of this dilemma, though not yet achieving it, which is why the poem appears nearly overwhelmed by the difficult situation the poet perceives and explores.

Lecker charges me with failing to describe the poem in genuinely dialectical terms, with proceeding "only by creating bipolar critical structures composed of a series of antitheses." I think he has misunderstood the gist of my argument. If I am saying anything, it is that the movement towards liberation and engagement with the world (octave) and the movement towards passive stasis (sestet) are complementary phases of a single struggle. It is curious that Michael

Taylor accuses me of having perversely sought "organic unity at any price, even of logic and commonsense" *(SCL* [Summer 1978], 289), while Lecker accuses me of dividing the poem into "bipolar structures": neither, I think, has completely understood what I am getting at. "Snow" is essentially unified because for Avison's protagonist there is no venturing which does not lead to a more total and problematic imprisonment — problematic because partly self-induced, causing the self to become implicated in its own defeat. It is from this perception of the involvement of the self in its own fate that Avison's moral complexity, her religious gravity, stems. Without it, the struggle for liberation and engagement with the world would be sterile or purely confrontational, as it appears to be in Lecker's reading, which posits a simple contrast between a poet-protagonist isolated in visionary detachment from the world, and a hypothetical reader who cannot share the poet's vision (a "bipolar critical structure" indeed!). The process I describe, in which the self works ironically against itself, is only transcended when the self is able to view its efforts with a compassionate detachment and it ceases to struggle, without, however, ceasing to hope ("teach us to care and not to care" — thoughts of another modern poet, seeking a similar resolution to a similar difficulty, suggest themselves naturally at this point). I take it that this acceptance of the place of the self in a larger pattern, which is neither liberation nor imprisonment, is evoked in a poem such as "Person," and that is why I begin and end my discussion with a reference to this poem. I am rather surprised that Lecker can seriously address my reading of "Snow" without saying anything about my very careful placing of this poem in the context of several other poems expressing similar concerns.

I may be misreading him, but it seems to me that Lecker sees in "Snow" a simple and rather accusatory contrast between imaginative "success" and "failure" (the sestet, he tells us, presents "the story of the reader's failure to grasp the proffered vision" of the octave). For Lecker, "the sonnet is about our ability to use imagination as a means to visionary creation." This is, it seems to me, an appropriate and useful way of looking at the poem, and at other Avison poems. In my discussion of "Voluptuaries and Others" and in my references to "Butterfly Bones," I tried to suggest that these poems are explicitly concerned with the uses, for good and ill, of the imagination. They discuss the difference between using the imagination to see the world, and using it to ignore the world ("the kind of lighting up of

the terrain/That leaves aside the whole terrain, really" — "Voluptuaries"), or to finish the world off in a "final stiffness" ("Butterfly Bones"). The struggle for liberation and active engagement with the world in "Snow" can indeed be seen as parallel to the struggle for expression in "Butterfly Bones" and "Voluptuaries." But, as Avison presents them, both struggles may lead to a conclusion that is opposite to the desired one — and here I must stress that, if I am right, the ambivalence and difficulty I am discussing are in the poems themselves, and essential to their power to engage and disturb the reader. For Avison, the process of visionary creation may be a less simple and straightforward matter than Lecker suggests, when he tells us that "the poem will unfold as a demonstration of the ways in which the world can be envisioned — created rather than empirically known," or that in the octave "the world is not being realistically apprehended but seized in consciousness as an interior vision." Is it really a matter of choosing between two opposed attitudes, a subjective vision which ignores the world that is actually there, and a purely passive noting down of the facts? In raising this very question in my discussion of "Snow" (Lecker does not acknowledge that in discussing the poem we are in fact addressing very similar issues), I cited two interesting accounts of imaginative vision, by Wordsworth and Emerson (*SCL* [Summer 1978], 235). Both these writers suggest that the creative vision lies neither in total subjectivity (the eye acting independently to create what Lecker calls "an interior vision") nor in passive objectivity (a mere recording of what is there). Wordsworth states clearly that the eye both perceives and creates, recording reality as well as re-creating it. Emerson also stresses both the delight of things "in and for themselves" and "the plastic power of the human eye." Presumably this power is derived partly from the delight taken in things as they are in and for themselves, whereby the creative eye, recognizing the independence of the world and going out to it, enters into an appreciative, invigorating *relationship* with the world. Lecker's reading serves this relationship, but surely this is not what Avison is seeking in "Snow." For Avison, if I read her correctly, "visionary creation" is not simply a matter of the seer creating her own world, as Lecker suggests. No matter how intense and subjectively delightful our "plastic power," there is still the problem of the real world, in Avison's phrase, "creation's unseen freight." Lecker takes this phrase as referring to the products of the poet's own vision, which are not

seen by a hypothetical reader. Both the "vision" and the reader are, it seems to me, bold but unnecessary extrapolations: "creation's unseen freight" is quite simply the glory of the objective world, which we are always in danger of missing, especially, perhaps, when blinded by the intensity of subjective preoccupations. Of course it is only the genuinely personal vision which can see the world truly, which can interpret and render the meaning it has in and for itself, but the creative vision, as Emerson and Wordsworth suggest, lies neither in the subject nor in the object, but in the delightful, invigorating relationship between the two. It seems to me that Lecker views creative vision as an autonomous power, whereas I view it as depending on the world it works with, of necessity. I think it is the latter view which Avison holds and explores.

Moreover, it seems to me that Avison has something to add to our awareness of the complexities attending the act of seeing or liberation (and again we must remember that Avison crucially views seeing as a form of self-liberation), which is not stressed in Wordsworth or Emerson. I touched on this earlier when I suggested that Avison presents a particularly troubled and volatile relationship between the self and the world it seeks to engage. Avison's "optic heart" confronts the world with a special force, and makes itself particularly vulnerable as a result. She decisively describes seeing as a venturing forth, a breaking out of prison (who or what, we wonder, has created the prison in the first place?). I don't think I was exaggerating or spinning out "a fragile thesis for such a simple opening" (Michael Taylor) when I suggested that this version of seeing has a special violence about it. Lecker is clearly responding to this violence when he says that lines three to eight "present us with a vision of the origins of a new earth imaged in terms of a volcanic explosion." This is an accurate and helpful description but in reading it how can we help thinking of another very different image of creation, in Genesis: "and the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." Surely Milton was not misreading this passage when he saw in it an image of creation, not as explosion, but as fecund relationship: "Thou from the first/Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread/Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss/And mad'st it pregnant" (*Paradise Lost,* I, 19-22). In Avison's version of creation, this life-enhancing relationship with the world is not easily won, though always desired and sought after.

The lack of ease comes from the very intensity with which the relationship is sought. The violent engagement of the venturing optic heart in "Snow" has as its consequence a special physical and moral danger which, I have suggested, can be detected in the opening lines of the poem. In breaking jail a risk is being taken, and it does not make things easier (*pace* Michael Taylor) that the optic heart *must* venture. I appreciate Taylor's salutory invoking of commonsense in response to my reading of the first line of the poem (he notes that "it's necessary for the poet to *insist* that nobody is going to [sally forth] for us"), but I must insist that I did *not* say that the opening statement was "excessive" or "gratuitous" to a reader who had fully apprehended the volatile struggle the poem describes; at the same time, I wished to say very definitely that, on first glance, the opening statement did in fact appear excessive and even gratuitous, particularly to a reader quick to resort to the bracing commonsense that Taylor invokes against my reading. There is always an *a priori* case for bringing such commonsense to bear in the reading of any poem (and certainly any critical article), and I myself introduced a commonsense response to the opening lines of "Snow," which I think was more radically and appropriately logical and commonsensical than Taylor's response. "Nonsense," my commonsensical reader might want to exclaim, "whoever said that anybody *did* stuff the world in at your eyes; and anyway, who is this 'nobody' who is doing, or not doing the stuffing? Why can I not relate to the world freely, neither by resting imprisoned (I do not believe that anyone has imprisoned me) nor by venturing forth aggressively?" But then I spent a good deal of time showing precisely that this kind of logic and commonsense will *not* do in reading these lines, that the *apparent* gratuitousness of the opening lines is in fact essential to the full meaning of the poem, a meaning not accessible to "logic and commonsense," whatever those may be in the reading of poetry. Avison's logic, I would suggest, is more volatile and inclusive, and her mind much more troubled, than Michael Taylor's. Even the commonsense reader, who of course may continue to feel that his commonsense has a lot to recommend it, has to acknowledge this trouble and volatility, if he is to read "Snow" at all. If I am right, then to respond to the poem adequately our own thinking must rise above the sort of logic I think Taylor is invoking and become dialectical, so that we can simultaneously see *both* the excessiveness and the importance of the violence in these lines, since that violence

is important precisely because it appears excessive. And, I am anxious to say, by the standards of a certain commonsense, which is valuable and which, if we have it, we need never surrender, that violence may always appear excessive. But reading "Snow," like the reading of all worthwhile poetry, is a complete experience rather than a neat intellectual exercise, and it is in the nature of experience to be both absorbing and lacking in finality. "Snow" is emphatically one of those poems which requires of us, in that phrase of Coleridge which cannot be improved upon, "a willing suspension of disbelief." It creates its own audience, establishing (temporarily perhaps) the frame of mind — the level of commonsense, we might say — with which it has to be apprehended, and I was trying in my interpretation to indicate the *process* by which the reader acquires this frame of mind. What I was attempting to invoke, and I wish Michael Taylor could have followed me here, was a progress in the reader from an initial surprise to a deeper understanding of what at first quite naturally surprised and even repelled us — and it is essential that the deeper understanding *include* our memory of the surprise, even as it transcends it. I particularly wish Taylor had followed me more scrupulously, since he states provocatively that he did not find himself in basic disagreement with the thrust of my argument.

The danger confronted in the surprisingly violent opening lines of "Snow" is very like the menace the poet faces at the conclusion of "Perspective," where she grimly admits that her timid companion "will travel safer back/To Union station than she will." This partly self-created menace exacts its toll at the conclusion of "Snow" just as it does at the end of "Perspective" and "The Valiant Vacationist." It is her instinct to evoke a relationship with the world as a risky venturing of the self, and her sense of the moral danger attendant upon this venturing, which make Avison such a distinctive and challenging poet. Avison's poetic world is "drenched with being" ("Person"), and haunted by the moral ambiguities which attend the venturing self's efforts to engage the world. To neglect this dimension of her work, to read Avison (as I think Lecker does) as a straightforward affirmer of the sufficiency of the imagination to create its own world, is a mistake. In Avison the relation between the imagination and the world it must work with is a troubled and problematic one, but the connection is never completely broken. Where a discontinuity between the imagination and the world is perceived, it never results in the sort of consolatory self-sufficiency

which Lecker sees in "Snow." "Butterfly Bones" expresses fundamental scruples about the propriety of fixing things in poetry which go far beyond the concern Wordsworth expressed in his phrase, "we murder to dissect." This radical questioning of the work of the imagination looks forward to the renunciation of the powers of self in many poems in *The Dumbfounding.* Even before this volume appeared, Milton Wilson hinted that, while it might seem attractive to view Avison as a kind of "Wallace Stevens of the North," there were probably more appropriate analogies to be drawn, as, for instance, with the Eliot of "Gerontion" (*Canadian Literature,* 2 (Autumn, 1959), p. 59). When we read "Snow" we do not naturally think of that unhampered freedom with abstractions sensuously apprehended which so distinguishes "The Idea of Order at Key West," nor do we think of the poised, uncompromising hedonism of "Sunday Morning." Avison's formidable gestures challenge and undercut themselves, whereas Stevens' very different sort of courage appears almost entirely self-sustaining. Perhaps, however, it is useful to mention these poems as illustrating just the kind of poet Avison is not. The apprehension of the vicissitudes of the imagination in the Avison poems I discuss points forward to the poet's particular resolution of the question of the relation between the self and the world in several poems of *The Dumbfounding,* and this is another reason for at least considering the reading I have offered. For me, this reading makes the poem more interesting, more deeply suggestive of Avison's preoccupations and poetic development.