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978-0-521-12933-6 - The Poet's Time: Politics and Religion in the Work of Andrew Marvell

Warren L. Chernaik

Excerpt

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1 · THE TWO WORLDS

The forward Youth that would appear
 Must now forsake his *Muses* dear,
 Nor in the Shadows sing
 His Numbers languishing.
 'Tis time to leave the Books in dust,
 And oyl th'unused Armours rust:
 Removing from the Wall,
 The Corslet of the Hall.¹

Poets entering the world of politics have always laboured under certain difficulties. The fate of Cinna the poet in *Julius Caesar*, who wandered out on the street and was torn to pieces for the name he bore (or for his bad verses) seems somehow archetypal – the threatened end, all the more painful for its absurdity and utter lack of decorum, lying in wait for all poets who feel impelled to 'leave the Books in dust, / And oyl th'unused Armours rust'. Milton's account of his feelings at taking up his sword is classic:

I trust hereby to make it manifest with what small willingnesse I endure to interrupt the pursuit of no lesse hopes then these, and leave a calme and pleasing solitarynes fed with cherful and confident thoughts, to imbarke in a troubled sea of noises and hoars disputes, put from beholding the bright countenance of truth in the quiet and still air of delightful studies to come into the dim reflexion of hollow antiquities sold by the seeming bulk, and there be fain to club quotations with men whose learning and belief lies in marginal stuffings... Let any gentle apprehension that can distinguish learned pains from unlearned drudgery, imagin what pleasure or profoundness can be in this, or what honour to deal against such adversaries.²

The worst indignity the poet faces is the likelihood that, having submitted to the onerous command of the 'great task-Master', stifling any feelings of rebellion against 'the meanest under-service,

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if God by his Secretary conscience injoyn it', he finds that no one will listen to him.³ The blind rage of the mob, even a descent into the fetid morass of political intrigue, are in some ways easier to face than the bland indifference of the practical man of affairs. James Harrington, presenting his elaborate, comprehensive scheme for settling the future of England to Cromwell, who remarked that he had no intention of giving up his power for 'a little paper shot'; Milton, publishing *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* when the Restoration of Charles II had become a certainty; or, to choose a more recent example described by Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*, the handful of intellectuals outside the Pentagon who thought that the symbolic act of stepping over a police line would overthrow the American military-industrial complex – are all quintessential figures.⁴ A voice crying in the wilderness is, almost by definition, unheard.

Yet the poet-prophet must write; even if the inhabitants of the cave prefer their darkness, the poet cannot cease telling them of the realms of light. Milton's lamentation at the English nation's headlong plunge into the darkness of servility and 'the base necessitie of court flatteries and prostrations' is at once a recognition of man's fear of freedom and an anguished protest, that, even now, it is not too late. In *The Readie and Easie Way*, Milton tries to shame his audience into accepting the responsibility of freedom:

That a nation should be so valorous and courageous to winn thir liberty in the field, and when they have wonn it, should be so heartless and unwise in their counsels, as not to know how to use it, value it, what to do with it or with themselves; but after ten or twelve years prosperous warr and contestation with tyrannie, basely and besottedly to run their necks again into the yoke which they have broken, and prostrate all the fruits of thir victory for naught at the feet of the vanquishd, besides our loss of glorie, and such an example as kings or tyrants never yet had the like to boast of, will be an ignominie if it befall us, that never yet befell any nation possessed of thir libertie. (*CPW*, vii, 428)

The poet's inner necessity is independent of his outer circumstances; indeed, he is driven all the more to sing of light when 'on evil days . . . fall'n, and evil tongues; / In darkness, and with dangers compast round, / And solitude' (*Paradise Lost*, vii lines

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26–8), asserting his inner freedom when outward freedom appears to have been extinguished.

Marvell's lines in 'Tom May's Death' provide a fine statement of the role and responsibilities of the poet in an ugly and chaotic world:

When the Sword glitters ore the Judges head,
And fear has Coward Churchmen silenced,
Then is the Poets time, 'tis then he drawes,
And single fights forsaken Vertues cause.
He, when the wheel of Empire, whirleth back,
And though the World's disjointed Axel crack,
Sings still of ancient Rights and better Times,
Seeks wretched good, arraigns successful Crimes. (lines 63–70)

The ideal stated here serves as explicit standard by which the 'most servil wit, and Mercenary Pen' (line 40) of May, as Marvell presents him in the poem, can be judged. Heroes are rare: most men are ruled by expediency rather than conscience. The Tom Mays of the world aspire to the high office of poet, but are impostors. In many ways, Marvell's attitude toward May resembles Dryden's toward Shadwell. 'Tom May's Death', like *MacFlecknoe*, anathematizes a false claimant to poetic greatness, accusing him of subverting moral and literary standards, prostituting the 'spotless knowledge and the studies chast' (line 72) of poetry to unworthy uses and pretending to a poetic stature he does not possess. Like Dryden, Marvell sets out to refute his opponent's claim to be the true heir of Ben Jonson – in Marvell's case, by bringing Jonson into the poem to serve as his poetic spokesman, banishing May from the Elysian Fields. But the contrast between the ringing denunciations and affirmations of 'Tom May's Death' and the ironic poise of *MacFlecknoe* reflects a fundamental difference in attitude as well as technique. Dryden's terms are more exclusively literary and his stance somehow more secure; he writes as guardian of and spokesman for a tradition, rather than as a lonely, beleaguered voice for right.

The note of heroic defiance in Marvell's lines, with their picture of the one just man armed against adversity by his faith alone, indicates some of the problems a poet may face when he enters into political controversy. Faith requires no food other than the spiritual; but the realm of politics is the actual. The satirist or

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controversialist needs to prove his case, and the poet enmeshed in circumstances needs somehow to maintain the force of his convictions. The poet's advantage over the ordinary man is that he inhabits two worlds at once. He is not confined to the immediate phenomenal world and its muddled, shifting values, but can preserve a vision of 'better Times' – a paradise lost or the prospect of a paradise regained:

Hence oft I think, if in some happy Hour
 High Grace should meet in one with highest Pow'r . . .
 What we might hope, what wonderful Effect
 From such a wish'd Conjuncture might reflect.
 Sure, the mysterious Work, where none withstand,
 Would forthwith finish under such a Hand:
 Fore-shortned Time its useless Course would stay,
 And soon precipitate the latest Day.
 But a thick Cloud about that Morning lyes,
 And intercepts the Beams of Mortal eyes.⁵

As the lines indicate, though a poet may see reason to hope for the millennium, he can never assume it has occurred. All men are fallible and their vision necessarily limited; poets are not exempt from the taint of mortality, nor from the dangers of error and self-delusion. The two poems by Marvell I have quoted – one, in 1650, bitterly attacking May's apostasy in supporting the Parliamentary side in the Civil War, and the other, written five years later, fixing millennial hopes in Cromwell's government – can indicate how thick the cloud before the eyes even of a poet-seer may be.⁶ The poet's daemon may be giving him bad advice; the strongest and most certain convictions may simply be fallacious.

One of Marvell's strengths is his consistent awareness of the dangers of spiritual pride and blind self-assurance. He addresses his insufferable antagonist Samuel Parker to this effect in *The Rehearsal Transpros'd*:

You do hereby seem to imagine, that Providence should have contrived all things according to the utmost perfection, or that which you conceive would have been most to your purpose. Whereas in the shape of Mans body, and in the frame of the world, there are many things indeed lyable to Objection, and which might have been better if we should give ear to proud and curious Spirits. But we must nevertheless be content with such bodies, and to inhabit such an Earth as it has pleased God to allot us.⁷

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In a sense, the poet is the only realist. His private vision does not blind him to the world around him or disable him from functioning. Instead, it enables him to see more clearly in order to act, to distinguish among alternatives (and to provide guidance for others) in the world he inhabits with all men. As Milton writes in *Areopagitica*:

To sequester out of the world into *Atlantick* and *Eutopian* polities, which never can be drawn into use, will not mend our condition; but to ordain wisely as in this world of evill, in the midd'st whereof God hath plac't us unavoidably. (*CPW*, II, 526)

Though Marvell and Milton shared many of the same concerns, their careers in the Commonwealth and Restoration years followed different patterns. Where Milton abandoned the world of political action after 1660 in pursuit of a paradise within and dedicated his last years to the construction of a self-contained imaginative universe, Marvell beginning with the mid-1650s deliberately chose action over contemplation, fully aware of what he was sacrificing in doing so. Both Marvell and Milton are in their later poetry committed to a moral vision, but one chose the realm of epic poetry, the other that of satiric and occasional writing, where the imagination, no longer able in entire freedom to create 'Far other Worlds, and other Seas', has to fight a running battle with fact. Perhaps, as several critics have suggested, the delicate and precise equilibrium of Marvell's lyrics, with their elegance, fastidiousness, and worldly unworldliness, represents a precise moment in literary history which could never be extended or repeated.⁸ But these lyrics make up a small fraction of Marvell's total oeuvre. The debate between withdrawal and involvement was resolved for Marvell (insofar as it can ever be resolved) by the decision to write a literature of commitment, which attempts to preserve the inner vision in the world of action and events. Perhaps the neglect in which Marvell's later writings so long have lain is testimony to how difficult it is for a poet to maintain that vision 'in a troubled sea of noises and hoars disputes'; if the poet himself manages to stay afloat, the reader, surrounded by the flotsam of half-forgotten circumstances, ephemeral quarrels between furious yet shadowy antagonists, is likely to sink or to strike out for shore at the first opportunity, never to venture on these waters again.

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Nevertheless, the neglect of the bulk of a major poet's work seems to me unjustified. The stature of the author alone is reason enough to examine Marvell's later writings carefully, and not rest behind phrases like the 'dissociation of sensibility' or the assumption that the past is irrecoverable, a mass of endless, unconnected, ultimately meaningless details, or that involvement in the world means surrender to it.

A satirist, controversialist, or writer on topical subjects presents certain special problems to the critic. A scholar approaching a work by such a writer needs to exercise great tact in maintaining a balance between two perspectives, historical and literary, never allowing one to overwhelm the other. It is equally unsatisfactory to treat a literary work as a neutral historical document or to ignore its historical circumstances entirely. Marvell scholars, when they treat his later works at all, seem to me, with rare exceptions, to have failed to provide an adequate context, literary or historical, by which the works can be understood.

A case in point is John M. Wallace's *Destiny His Choice: The Loyalty of Andrew Marvell*, the most extensive study to date of Marvell's political writings.⁹ The general principle which underlies Wallace's study is incontestable: when an author deals with political events and themes, a full understanding of the work requires careful attention to its historical circumstances and to relevant issues of political theory. Yet Wallace's book aids the reader's understanding of Marvell far less than one would hope; indeed, the book seems to me a particularly striking example of learning misapplied, devoting great care, scholarship, and ingenuity to the support of a highly questionable thesis, to which all considerations of literary form or historical context are subordinated. Wallace finds in Marvell a consistent love of 'moderation and agreement', an overriding belief that since the ways of providence are unpredictable, 'loyalism' or nonresistance to *de facto* power becomes a prime moral necessity. 'An Horatian Ode', for all its 'multiple ironies' and 'semblance of impartiality', is to Wallace essentially an argument for accepting the legitimacy of Cromwell's rule; indeed, even Charles I, in his dignified resignation to his fate, is in Wallace's view tacitly abdicating and giving 'permission' to Cromwell's succession. *The First Anniversary* carries the doctrine of acceptance a step further: to Wallace, the

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poem's unifying factor is a covert argument that Cromwell consent to be crowned as King and inaugurate a new line of English monarchs.¹⁰ Wallace continues to find a consistent 'loyalism' in the anti-government poems and pamphlets Marvell wrote after the Restoration. Poems and prose works which to other readers might appear to be bitter attacks on the court of Charles II (and by implication on Charles himself) are to Wallace adjurations to 'accept what was given and make the best of God's designs. . . . The alternative to loyalty could not be contemplated without the thought of another civil war.' Even *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government in England* (1677), a Whig pamphlet whose basic attitude is clearly indicated in its title, is somehow transmogrified into a plea for moderation and unity, expressing a 'loyalty . . . to Charles II even when there was the least reason to trust him'.¹¹

Mr Wallace's book is learned, intelligent, and consistently stimulating, and furthermore he is one of the few critics to treat Marvell's later writings seriously. But the Marvell he presents in his book is simply unrecognizable. The consistent opponent of arbitrary power and champion of man's rational freedom becomes a proponent of 'a strong executive' under all circumstances; the Country Party satirist and pamphleteer, of whom Caroline Robbins can justly say, 'his work became a part of every Whig history, his integrity the text of every diatribe against corruption', is turned into a moderate royalist, not unlike Waller or even Dryden.¹² If a poem like 'The Kings Vowes' or 'The Statue in Stocks-Market' fails to fit into his view of a Marvell consistently respectful of royal authority and dignity, Wallace simply excludes it from the canon, using the argument that 'none of Marvell's indisputable writings can be accused of levity on so important a subject' or shows such 'coarse freedom' or 'the debasement of a low style'.¹³ Besides its patent circularity, the statement betrays a radical misunderstanding of the principle governing any author's style and approach, 'the grand master peece to observe' in satire as in any literary work: decorum.¹⁴

'The debasement of a low style' in Marvell or another satirist is likely to be quite deliberate, since it is one of his major satiric weapons. Style should fit the subject, and when it does not, the satirist argues that the fault lies not with him but with the object

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of his satire. The inappropriate 'low' terms of *Hudibras*, the inappropriate 'high' terms of *MacFlecknoe*, are designed to reflect and to expose the specious pretences of Presbyterian squire and hack poet. The satirist holds the mirror of truth up to imposture: 'my purpose', Milton writes in one of his anti-prelatical tracts, 'is not . . . to looke on my adversary abroad, through the deceiving glasse of other mens great opinion of him, but at home, where I may finde him in the proper light of his owne worth' (*CPW*, I, 869). If he fails to treat Samuel Parker with the dignity becoming a clergyman, Marvell says, it is because Parker has failed to act in a manner befitting his position. Parker has violated reason and decorum, not Marvell:

For it is not impossible that a man by evil arts may have crept into the Church, thorow the Belfry or at the Windows. 'Tis not improbable that having so got in he should foul the Pulpit, and afterwards the Press with opinions destructive to Humane Society and the Christian Religion. That he should illustrate so corrupt Doctrines with as ill a conversation, and adorn the lasciviousness of his life with an equal petulancy of stile and language. . . In this Case it is that I think a Clergy-man is laid open to the Pen of any one that knows how to manage it; and that every person who has either Wit, Learning or Sobriety is licens'd, if debauch'd to curb him, if erroneous to catechize him, and if foul-mouth'd and biting, to muzzle him. For they do but abuse themselves who shall any longer consider or reverence such an one as a Clergy-man, who as oft as he undresses degrades himself and would never have come into the Church but to take Sanctuary. (*RT*, II, pp. 163-4)¹⁵

The position Marvell is arguing is commonly upheld by the Augustan satirists in their apologiae, as well as by Milton. Like Dryden and Pope, he represents himself as reluctant to unsheathe his sword, even in self-defence: 'not to Write at all is much the safer course of life', and both modesty and Christian charity suggest that it is preferable to 'have sate at home in quiet' than to 'send a Challenge to all Readers' by entering into controversy (*RT*, II, pp. 159-60). An author ought to be particularly wary, furthermore, of engaging in 'Invective' from reasons of personal pique: 'it is a praedatory course of life, and indeed but a privateering upon reputation' (II, p. 162).¹⁶ Yet when a man (especially one who is 'prosperously unjust') has become, in Dryden's words, 'a public nuisance', it is the poet's responsibility as artist and citizen to speak out:

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'Tis an action of virtue to make examples of vicious men. They may and ought to be upbraided with their crimes and follies: both for their own amendment, if they are not yet incorrigible, and for the terror of others, to hinder them from falling into those enormities which they see are so severely punished in the persons of others.¹⁷

Or, as Marvell puts it, 'wheresoever men shall find the footing of so wanton a Satyr out of his own bounds, the neighbourhood ought, notwithstanding all his pretended capering Divinity, to hunt him thorow the woods with hounds and horn home to his harbour' (*RT*, II, pp. 164–5).

In leading the hue and cry after the vicious man, the poet is acting out of the dictates of his conscience as representative of the community:

He that hath once Printed an ill book has thereby condens'd his words on purpose lest they should be carried away by the wind; he has diffused his poyson so publickly in design that it might be beyond his own recollection; and put himself deliberately past the reach of any private admonition. (*RT*, II, p. 164)

Pope similarly sees the poet as communal voice in those situations where 'private admonition' is no longer sufficient.

Ask you what Provocation I have had?
The strong Antipathy of Good to Bad.
When Truth or Virtue an Affront endures,
Th'Affront is mine, my Friend, and should be yours. . .
Mine, as a Friend to ev'ry worthy mind;
And mine as Man, who feel for all mankind.¹⁸

Under ordinary circumstances, a man of the clergy ought to be treated with respect ('the Clergy certainly of all others ought to be kept and preserv'd sacred in their Reputation', *RT*, II, p. 162) and the decencies of public order ought to be observed. But when the times are corrupt, when those in power connive at offences rather than attempt to 'stop the infection . . . and chase the blown Deer out of their Heard' (II, p. 164), the poet recognizes a greater obligation than that of expediency, a higher decorum in truth; he 'seeks wretched good, arraigns successful Crimes'. The position which Marvell is arguing here is closely parallel to the liberal contract theory which he defends throughout his political writings. Public order is desirable, but is not an absolute good; when a

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choice must be made, the commands of conscience take precedence over the commands of the state. Marvell consistently opposes the claim put forth by Parker and other defenders of absolutism that the authority of the state or the requirements of propriety are necessities against which there can be no appeal. The grounds for his defence of individual conscience, as we shall see in later chapters, are both practical and theoretical, secular and religious. But one major element in this defence is an appeal to common sense, in terms which anticipate Locke. When a society is unjust, and those in authority do not 'take care to redress in good season whatsoever corruptions that may indanger and infect the Government', Marvell says in *The Rehearsal Transpros'd*, then the citizens of the state are forced by mere self-preservation, 'Sense and Nature', to exercise their right of revolution and reassume their delegated sovereignty (II, p. 240). In very similar terms, Locke defends contract theory against accusations that it 'lays a ferment for frequent rebellion'. The responsibility for rebellion lies with those who would illegitimately assume arbitrary power, and the exercise of conscientious dissent is not only justified, but inevitable, given the nature of man:

For when the *People* are made *miserable*, and find themselves *exposed to the ill-usage of Arbitrary Power*, cry up their Governours, as much as you will for Sons of *Jupiter*, let them be Sacred and Divine, descended or authorized from Heaven; give them out for whom or what you please, the same will happen. *The People generally ill treated*, and contrary to right, will be ready upon any occasion to ease themselves of a burden that sits heavy upon them.¹⁹

The view of the artistic and political conscience implicit in Marvell's satires is a militant one, which as we shall see in a later chapter is ultimately religious in origin. 'Tom May's Death' and 'Fleckno, an English Priest in Rome' resemble Marvell's later satires in their essentially Puritan, iconoclastic conception of the function of the artist. In 'Fleckno', the nunnery episode of 'Upon Appleton House', and *The Growth of Popery*, Marvell's strong anti-Catholic bias is not mere xenophobia, but reflects a consistent suspicion of the arts of illusion and 'the Batteries of alluring Sense'. In politics as in art, the poet is 'Sworn Enemy to all that do pretend', exposing the tricks of the enchanters who hold truth prisoner.²⁰ There can be no compromise with evil and deception: