REVIEW


Has any poet lived or written more between the lines than Andrew Marvell? Accused of fighting “backward and forward” in an insulting attack by Edmund Hickeringill that also counts as one of the earliest and most astute critical measures of his style, the protean Marvell and his works have recently been fixed as objects of critical scrutiny by a series of essential books that include Nigel Smith’s Longman edition and biography, Nicholas von Maltzahn’s chronology, and the Yale Prose Works edited by Annabel Patterson and others. This body of work informs Joan Faust’s project in Andrew Marvell’s Liminal Lyrics, but she also departs from it; her primary inquiry is aesthetic rather than historicist and it is premised on the suggestive notion that Proteus, counter to legend, speaks his most profound truths when unbound.

In Faust’s stimulating account, Marvell gives poetic expression to the technique Leonardo da Vinci labeled sfumato—“smoke-like” painting that blurs strong, distinct lines in favor of indeterminate shadows suggesting movement, depth, and complexity. Both painter and poet create a liminal space, neither here nor there, and Faust explores the way this prompts what the art historian E. H. Gombrich called “the Beholder’s Share,” a participatory experience that requires the viewer or reader to fill in the gaps left by the artist. Indeed Faust’s book might with justice have been called Seven Types of Liminality, because it is her contention that Marvell turns every form he encounters into a threshold and space of free signification, as she explains in an introduction and seven subsequent chapters on Marvell’s lyric canon. At the outset, Faust deftly draws from Victor Turner’s anthropological studies of coming-of-age rituals to define “liminality” as such a site of “becoming,” of possibility, of play (13). The next five chapters define Marvell’s liminal poetics in terms of various visual arts and their theories. Chapter 2 introduces Leonardo’s concept of sfumato and his thoughts on the artist’s life, which he claimed should be solitary to allow the artist to “reflect upon that which he sees” (19); he also thought such reflections should reject boundaries since “the boundaries of bodies are the least of all things” (21). Leonardo’s principles powerfully mirror Faust’s thesis (or is it the other way around?), and she returns to them in subsequent chapters even as she explores Marvell’s relation to other artistic forms: landscape painting as it relates to “Upon Appleton House” in Chapter Three, horticultural garden art and “The Garden” in Chapter Four, the “shadowy chiaroscuro of Jacobean realism” alongside the Mower poems in Chapter Five (79), and perspective-bending anamorphic painting (most familiar to students of the Renaissance from Hans Holbein’s “The Ambassadors”) juxtaposed with “The Gallery” and other poems in Chapter Five.

In the final two chapters Faust follows her interest in the overlapping realms of visual and poetic representation into a discussion of cartography and anatomical illustration. Although this foray into early science and geography might seem like something of a departure from the book’s discussion of more overtly artistic painting and culture, the discussion of “The Definition of Love” in Chapter Seven emphasizes not how tools like maps clarified the notion of geographical space in Renaissance England, but how their widely differing approaches and portrayals of heaven and earth illustrated the “gap between concept and its concrete portrayal” (169). This gap is another of those liminal spaces that draws the attention of Marvell and finds expression in his own work, where
the lovers are so impossibly separated that they could be joined only by a rupture that would cram heavens and earth “into a planisphere.” In other words, even in his efforts to define love—either in the sense of bounding it within map space or stating its meaning in Aristotelian or Euclidean terms—Marvell directs our attention not in one direction but into a dimension of multiple possibilities. For Faust this makes Marvell’s work fundamentally dialogic, and she concludes the book with an insightful discussion of “A Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body,” explaining that the poem’s formal structure and possibly fragmentary ending creates “a liminal space of intrigue” that solicits completion by the reader (200). In other words, by the time we reach this seventh type of liminality, the true ambitions of Faust’s book become clear— not just to describe Marvell’s poetics, but also to describe the way varying artistic forms, across time, space, and medium, solicit the reader’s participation in an ongoing conversation.

As the book concluded I admit to wondering whether this was one type of liminality too many; could the concept of the “liminal,” when pushed to these limits, encompass any experience of communication? At times the historicist in me also objected to the book’s method. Here Leonardo da Vinci’s artistic theories map neatly onto Marvell’s poetics, gardens and poems are both similarly “liminal areas” (57), and seventeenth-century garden design shares a “similar self-reflexive effect” to the theory of visual art espoused by the twentieth-century artist René Magritte (59). Faust offers a clear and compelling justification for her approach: she resists limiting her study to local historical and political contexts, or even to Marvell’s artistic contemporaries, because “the entire corpus of Marvell’s work and the life that produced it, derive from a refusal to draw a definite divide” (3). But I’m still not always convinced the equivalence between Marvell’s work and such disparate artistic materials can be asserted so cleanly, just as I’m not sure how the term “nymphomaniac” can have any bearing on “The Nymph Complaining,” as Faust asserts (99), since the OED doesn’t record its usage until the late nineteenth century. To my mind, such historical nonchalance threatens to undercut the very real significance of Faust’s description of the nymph as a “naive, semipastoral figure who seeks to remain in a permanent liminal state” (99).

But again, our shelves are now stocked with books on Marvell that follow an impeccable and familiar historical method, and Professor Faust’s goal is clearly not to give us another but to open a productive “space,” as her title suggests, for discussing Marvell’s strange, powerful poetics. At this she succeeds, and in this regard Magritte’s thoughts on representation really are provocative. Indeed, I might add that they are a welcome provocation to those of us who rest a little too easy in the confidence that our own historical approach gives us the correct perspective on Marvell and his culture, only to discover occasionally that we share a viewpoint with the observer of Magritte’s La Conditionne humaine. In that painting, as Faust notes, the “real” landscape turns out to be the combined product of artistic representation and our own imaginations. In such a space, backward and forward, Marvell seems fully at home.

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