
Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane is a fascinating book. It is also a peculiar one. Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker acknowledge in their very first sentence that “it is polemical and speculative and may not satisfy all readers, but we hope that it provides new ways of thinking about Marvell’s relations to his writings and new readings of his texts” (1). Their book is neither a literary biography nor a work of literary history, although it has recognizable elements of both of these forms. It is in effect a psychobiography. In a surprising turn of events, Hirst and Zwicker, long-established and highly respected historical and literary scholars of the seventeenth century, have become Freudians, and they apply the language and assumptions of psychoanalysis (though that term is never used, and Freud is never once cited) with impressive tenacity to the life and works of Marvell.

As I was writing this review, I read an essay in the London Review of Books on children’s tantrums by the psychoanalyst and literary critic Adam Phillips. Phillips opens with the arresting statement: “No one recovers from the sado-masochism of their childhood.” The trauma of being a child comes, he writes, from the frustrating and humiliating experience of abject dependence upon the parent, who can intensify the trauma through acts of punishment: “Children don’t know Freud’s useful suggestion that desire is by its nature always insatiable … The promise of total satisfaction is a promise of catastrophic disillusionment, which makes it an incitement to violence. Every child feels punished by being frustrated, and is then sometimes punished on top of that for his response to being frustrated. At its best, parental authority contains rather than creates this fanciful escalation.” The child then “turns his frustration into a pleasure. The adult becomes sadistic, the child becomes masochistic.” Phillips calls the childhood tantrum, the primal scene of frustration, the “magical act of a desperate person.”

Hirst and Zwicker treat Marvell’s lyric poems as something akin to these magical acts of a desperate person, as (intensely formalized) linguistic expressions of the repressed memories of the (sexually pleasurable) trauma of childhood frustration and punishment. Indeed they go further to connect private with public, and interpret Marvell’s politics of liberty and toleration in the same light of a childhood experience of punishment at the hands of patriarchal authority. Central to the book is the claim, in opposition to the dominant critical tendency of recent years to find discontinuity and discord in Marvell’s life and work, that the Marvell canon, both poetry and prose, is coherent (what Hirst and Zwicker call “an interpretable whole”): not necessarily in terms of political allegiance or social context or formal literary concerns, but of its continual reversion to primal scenes of desire, punishment, wounding, and despair.

At the heart of their analysis of Marvell, and the subject of the most daring section of the book, is the cryptic lyric “The Unfortunate Lover.” This chapter, “Wounds of Desire,” has previously appeared as an article in English Literary History in 2006 and the argument remains substantially the same. Large claims are made for a poem that has never been considered a major work: “To understand The Unfortunate Lover as the supreme text of Marvell’s imagined life is to take the poem that has most eluded interpretation and proclaim it the key to the whole” (75). With its violent images and swaying perspectives, “The Unfortunate Lover” is certainly a poem which lends itself to extreme and various interpretations that are not easily refuted in the conventional terms of critical evidence, and this seems to be part of the attraction for Hirst and Zwicker. They make the argument that “scholarly diffidence over biography, and the kinds of questions of meaning and purpose that biography can be legitimately supposed to answer, sever
material sites and landscapes from the life which was imagined in them” (74). Their fundamental point is that scholars have not allowed themselves to respond to the wildness and extremity of “The Unfortunate Lover,” which they describe, in terms familiar from psychoanalytic theory, as "a narrative of abusive, sustained, and yet pleasurable and deeply guilty violation” (81).

There have been some intricate but never wholly convincing (and indeed sometimes downright unhelpful) historical-political readings of “The Unfortunate Lover”—the most persuasive is probably Robert Wilcher’s detailed comparison in his 2001 study The Writing of Royalism, 1628-1660 (not Marvell and Royalism, as Hirst and Zwicker refer to it in one footnote [86 n. 23]) of the imagery of storms, blood, and violence in Marvell’s poem with that of the prayers ascribed to Charles I in the Eikon Basilike (1649). Indeed most scholars, including Hirst and Zwicker, conclude that the lyric was likely written in the immediate aftermath of the regicide. But Hirst and Zwicker are quite clear that any political context is actually irrelevant to understanding the poem: "Marvell situated this biography amid the events of the late 1640s because these were a convenience, a symbol for and an objectification of psychic states that have nothing to do with national crisis and disaster but which find … release in those dislocations” (87). So the reason why scholars have been unable satisfactorily to offer a political or historical allegory for this poem, and by extension Marvell’s lyric poems as a whole, is that the political is never their subject; the external, historical event acts at most as a kind of objective correlative of previously experienced personal trauma, stirring up the memories of that trauma and facilitating their expression through recurrent poetic tropes. This seems potentially a helpful critical method, which can correct the tendency to deform the aesthetic unity of Marvell’s lyrics by attempting to impose a political or contextual reading upon them, while still preserving a sense of the lyrics as poems of their time, a time of self-divide, psychologically fracturing civil war. Other enigmatic lyrics, such as “The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Fawn”—the appearance of Civil War “troopers” in the opening couplet of which provokes expectations of historical comment that are never fulfilled—also show how “the contours of a particular psychology discover an unusual or obscure fit with the hinted shape of external events” (87).

This is finely put. Yet the general lack of sustained attention to formal poetic matters in Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane—there is oddly little quotation from the verse itself in the book, and consequently not much serious close reading—combined with the almost complete absence of comparison of Marvell’s poetic techniques with those of his contemporaries (at least until the appendix on dating the lyric verse) leads to a neglect of the greater historical resonance of poetic imagery that is taken to be a characteristic product of the individual Marvellian psychology. Take these lines from "Mourning," which are said to show how Marvell “turned repeatedly to the condition of the Unfortunate Lover” in that they display the Marvellian motif of “the seductive and infinite yet non-reproductive economy of self-pleasure” (88): “She courts her self in am’rous Rain; / Her self both Danae and the Showr” (ll. 19-20). Hirst and Zwicker regard anxiety about and aversion to heterosexual, procreative sexuality as one of the common elements that runs throughout the Marvell canon (although they prefer not to associate this aversion with homosexuality, and do not engage in any detail with Paul Hammond’s work on Marvell and sexuality). But the image cited here from “Mourning” is also an example of a formal poetic technique that Christopher Ricks, in a classic but somewhat under-used 1978 essay, found to be a characteristic figure of speech in Marvell: what Ricks calls (after William Empson on Shelley) the self-inwoven simile. The self-inwoven simile, writes Ricks, "is a figure which both reconciles and opposes, in that it describes something both as itself and as something external to it, which it could not possibly be.” But if it is a figure of speech particularly characteristic of Marvell, Ricks shows it to be a prominent feature also of the work of Marvell’s contemporaries, including Richard Lovelace and Thomas Stanley, and concludes that it is "a language for civil war (desolatingly two and one) … the peculiar attraction of the figure, though, is that while it acknowledges (as truth must) such a civil war, it can yet at the same time conceive (as hope must) a healing of such strife.” Indeed Ricks goes on, fascinatingly, to show how the self-inwoven simile is also a recurrent trope in Northern Irish
verse of the 1970s. Now this analysis does not in any way preclude the argument of Hirst and Zwicker that reflexive imagery in Marvell embodies his personal psychological attraction to a "non-reproductive economy of self-pleasure"; but it does suggest that Marvell’s experience of civil war is integral to the origins and nature of his poetic art, and certainly amounts to more in the poetic process than “a symbol for and an objectification of psychic states that have nothing to do with national crisis.”

Hirst and Zwicker’s rather claustrophobic and (of necessity, given their psychobiographic argument) repetitious concentration on the ways in which Marvell always returns to certain primal scenes of personal trauma helps us to reconsider, for instance, how and why children are represented in oddly sexual ways (“The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers”; Maria at the end of “Upon Appleton House”); but it gives us little sense of how unusual or otherwise Marvell’s use of language, image, and form is in relation to his contemporaries. It may be that Marvell offers us more accomplished and intense variations on a poetics of civil war that we find also in the work of his contemporaries, including friends (and perhaps, as I have argued elsewhere, poetic collaborators and competitors) such as Lovelace and Stanley. One source of Marvell’s trauma is of course “the powerful father who was at once destructive and inspirational” (151), the Reverend Andrew Marvell, as he is referred to here. While the drowning of Marvell’s father when Marvell was twenty is an event that likely echoes through the verse, unfortunately Hirst and Zwicker offer no evidence that he was an abusive or harshly punitive parent other than some fairly conventional rhetoric concerning the punishment of sin in manuscript sermons. They nonetheless link a supposedly “unusually harsh sermon” (89) preached by the father to the cruel physicality ascribed to the persecuting clergy in Marvell’s prose arguments in support of toleration. The evidential bridge between personal experience and public principle is not sturdy enough to carry the argument here. Moreover, the analogy or indeed direct connection between religious persecution by clerics and the practice of whipping schoolboys is a common enough topos in the writing of contemporaries, including the Leveller Richard Overton (whose anti-clerical prose polemic is indeed linked to Marvell’s imagery in “The Unfortunate Lover” at one point in a footnote [80 n. 13]).

It is not that Hirst and Zwicker do not seek to position Marvell in a social world, it is just that this social world does not apparently include other poets and their work: indeed the final chapter, “Into the World,” seeks to trace the “social and political form” that Marvell’s “practices and values took.” This form was “service,” specifically a high-minded ideal of service to patrons (Fairfax, Cromwell, Buckingham, among others) and to the nation, whether embodied in the form of Parliament or Charles II. (What, one might wish to add, about service to the ideal of poetry itself, as invoked in “Tom May’s Death”?) The discussion here is particularly valuable in emphasising how Marvell’s loyalties to an ideal of service cut across the ideological boundaries that modern scholars tend to project anachronistically onto the period. This final chapter recapitulates some of the themes of the first chapter, “Work of Service,” which itself is largely the article “High Summer at Nun Appleton” published in the Historical Journal as long ago as 1993 and in which Hirst and Zwicker sought to locate more precisely the occasion of the composition of “Upon Appleton House.” This was a fine article and remains a fine chapter in the book, but the thirteen-year gap between it and the 2006 article on “The Unfortunate Lover” is very apparent: the methodology remains recognizably and conventionally historicist in comparison with the fully-fledged psychobiography and occasionally purplish prose of the later work (“It is here and here alone that Marvell faced directly into the darkness” [75]). The introduction to Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane does make clear that the authors gradually came to realize that “historicizing, as conventionally practised and however fine-grained, might be inadequate to the task of accounting for the paradoxical continuities across Marvell’s so discordant texts” (6). The book embodies this realization, as it shows how the methodology of the early work on “Appleton House” is superseded or transcended by the new stress on the psyche, at least from the perspective of the authors; but this is an odd way for a monograph to proceed, even if the case is made that it is important to be as precise as possible about the occasion of a poem to see how external events have provided the occasion for an expression of pre-existent psychic states. And it feels odd too that the appendix returns to the
“fine-grained” issue of dating the poetry, making the basic but important point that the re-dating of some of the lyrics, especially “The Garden,” to the Restoration tends to ignore the possibility that Marvell’s poems may have circulated in manuscript in the 1650s and influenced the printed poems by Cowley and others to which Marvell is supposed, by the revisionist chronologers, to allude.

This slim but dense volume is probably not quite the groundbreaking work that it promised to be when the articles from which it derives first emerged—for one thing the approach of psychobiography that it adopts has a long tradition, even if it is a rarity in the field of early modern English studies—but this is still a courageous, constantly provocative, sometimes slightly weird book which tries to convey the strangely unsettling experience of reading Marvell, and then tries to account for it. Though Hirst and Zwicker tend to be overly solemn, given that nimbleness of wit is one of Marvell’s most attractive qualities, their (surely self-conscious) decision to conclude with a quotation from that mercurial provocateur Empson seems fitting.

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Notes

3 Nicholas McDowell, Poetry and Allegiance in the English Civil Wars: Marvell and the Cause of Wit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).