

SPECIAL REPORT

ANDREW MARVELL: LYRIC AND PUBLIC POEMS
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BY NIGEL SMITH

On the evening of 28 June 2012, I had driven a very wiggly way around the fields of New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania from Princeton to Sellersville to see the great English '70s prog band Van der Graaf Generator. Only three of the original five were left, but with still magnificently doomy Hammond organ if no longer harpy-like double saxophones. In order to make the mid-morning plane from Newark to Raleigh-Durham the next day I was determined to be home by midnight, and so I left at about 11 p.m. when the set was still in full flow. The brilliant quixotic singer-songwriter and frontman Peter Hammill noticed me leave: "another exit from a song," he said in a tone of patient mild disappointment. If only I could have told him why!

It is no disgrace either to Hammill, Richard Flecknoe or Marvell to imagine that gloriously gothic evening as a late extension of the backdrop in Marvell's "Flecknoe, An English Priest in Rome," with its dark interiors of Counter-Reformation side chapels and other ill-lit and cramped Roman rooms, and the repulsive behavior of French teenagers bound for holy service. Flecknoe the mocked but in his own terms highly successful priest-lutenist-poet of the Catholic households, and Hammill, always ready to mock with his own performances the mannered posture of the pretentious lover-singer.

Van der Graaf was a sublime prelude to my week at the National Humanities Center in Durham, North Carolina, last June. I had been asked to lead one of the two annual summer seminars which run after the visiting scholars who populate the place during the school year have mostly packed up and gone. I had been graciously invited by the Director, Geoffrey Harpham, and had been a Birkelund Fellow there while on leave in 2007-08. I resolved to present the Marvell familiar to those in AMS but not to the rest of academe and most of the reading public: the redeemed Marvell, "a fusion of the poet we thought we knew and the patriot politician revered by the Victorians, but both spheres of knowledge are now vastly expanded even as they coincide."

I said I wanted "an intensive reassessment of Marvell's famous poems ... and not so well known lyric and public poetry (both the praise poems and the verse satires) in the light of the new contexts in which we study Marvell." "Marvell will be presented as innovator and maintainer of excellence in poetry in and of itself, and also through his prowess as political and religious theorist, including as a precursor and shaper of freethinking and the Enlightenment," but I also wanted people to think about Marvell's "personality," as well as a host of "predecessors, contemporaries and successors," including "Pindar, Horace, *Ancrene Riwe*, Machiavelli, Guarini, Jonson, Thomas May, Milton, Hester Pulter, Katherine Philips, Waller, Richard Fleckno, Dryden, Swift, Sterne, Emerson, Archibald MacLeish, Susan Stewart." Above all, I wanted people to see that Marvell's "reputation [had] grown to the extent that he might be regarded as second only to Milton in his time," together with a thorough discussion of the relevance of his writings to our current moment.

When invited in 2010 I had proposed Marvell but had wondered whether Milton might not be the more popular choice, or something thematic: usually the seminars tackle central canonical authors or a central theme such as icons and iconoclasm. Geoff said, "Go with your heart," so it was Marvell and recruitments were indeed initially a bit slow. We opened the field to the recently tenured and to advanced graduate students, as well as the usual target group of assistant professors. We ended up accepting more people than usual simply because of the quality of the applicants.

What a group they turned out to be. We gathered in the sumptuous and old-style Carolina Inn, full of southern charm, in Chapel Hill, from where we would be transported each day by coach to Durham and brought back after the seminar met. We would be picked up at 8 a.m. each morning and be driven along I-40 for breakfast in the NHC's glass and steel pyramid building, quite the opposite of the Carolina Inn. Then a morning usually consisting of a little work for me, and a consultative meeting with members of the group, to find out what their aims were for the seminar, what they wanted to gain from participation in it. Lunch was followed by the afternoon seminar meeting itself, in which participants would present material as an introduction to further discussion, sometimes a person per poem, sometimes in groups. There were no papers required, but I did want serious discussions and I did want to see if people would present original material, and if such insights would grow during the course of five days' extensive work. I had grouped the poems by the day as lyrics, verse satires, poems from the Nun Appleton period, Cromwell-as-Lord-Protector period poems, and a final blast session where we dared to compare prose satire, poems on other poets and "greatest hits," like "To his Coy Mistress."

Perhaps escape from a hard year's teaching, especially by colleagues still young in the profession, produces an astoundingly positive, exciting atmosphere. Whatever it was, in this North Carolina summer we enjoyed some thoroughly outstanding discussions of Marvell's poetry, always well informed, very often new insight, and in the very best kind of collaborative atmosphere. I could not have been more pleased. I noted some outstanding moments: good and new arguments for resistance to the late dating for "The Garden"; new ways of thinking about Fairfax's interests in land cultivation relevant to "Upon Appleton House"; several new accounts of Marvell's understanding of satire, of his royalist elegies, of the painter poems and *The Rehearsal Transpros'd*; Marvell presented in the context of disability studies.

Sometimes we went out in the evenings for dinner together, a most pleasant experience, and in the time before dinner a chance to catch up with those whose work on other topics I knew about, like Ben Labreche with his important work on Milton and toleration. I enjoyed similar conversations with Amy Sattler on Marvell's use of Ovid in his satires, with Brett Hudson on *The Rehearsal Transpros'd*, with Brendan Prawdzik on Nun Appleton, with Michael Ursell on how Renaissance poets talk about other poets in their work, and with Anita Sherman on skepticism. I have to say that the Carolina Brewery is not quite of the same order as its namesake Inn, and despite menu choice help from our formidable historian seminar member Jamie Gianoutsos (herself an expert on early modern republicanism), I had to lie down for about two hours after beer and fried objects before I could ensure consciousness again. Maybe that was good because it kept me away a little longer from the excellent book and music stores on Franklin Street.

The last evening ended with a drinks session in the hotel bar after a splendid dinner in a Durham restaurant (and another session before dinner come to think of it), and, while firm new friendships were being confirmed and some listened to tracks from Wayside Shrines' new album *The Word on the Street*, months ahead of its release, we all agreed to be in touch and meet at conferences in the future when we could. The gathering at MLA in Boston last month was modest (just Blaine Greteman and myself, both of us with heavy colds; Ryan

Paul was laid up with flu in his hotel room) but much more important will be the presence of these seminarians in the AMS panels at SCRC's March 2013 gathering in Omaha, with no less than six presentations, including one complete panel, which is extremely encouraging. I was delighted to receive in the early Fall a packet of largely very generous evaluations of the seminar, and to hear in further correspondence how participants had made their colleagues envious with tales of our time together, "one of the most fun professional experiences I had in a while," and others went to the classroom to teach Marvell reinvigorated, and even as a single author to undergraduates. I think we managed to kindle our collective passion for literature with Marvell's help, the specialists taking their ideas and knowledge further, and those with less of an existing investment in Marvell being excited about him and leading some to contemplate more extensive thought about him in the years ahead, even possibly special issues in a journal.

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