

THE TREATMENT OF INNOCENCE BY MARVELL IN "THE PICTURE OF LITTLE T.C. IN A PROSPECT OF FLOWERS"

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Abstract

Andrew Marvell (England, 1621-78) is a metaphysical poet that dealt with a theme that according to H. R. Swardson can be called presexual or nonsexual innocence. Even though the poem to be analysed here may have various tones and themes, one can prove that its tone is serious and its theme singular; namely, the impossibility to achieve a world of innocence within a world of experience.

Resumen

Andrew Marvell (Inglaterra, 1621-78) es un poeta metafísico que enfocó el tema de la inocencia que de acuerdo a H. R. Swardson puede en su caso denominarse inocencia presexual o asexual. A pesar de que algunos argumenten que el poema que aquí se analiza tiene diversos tonos y temas, puede probarse que su tono es serio y su temática es singular, la imposibilidad de alcanzar el mundo de la inocencia dentro del mundo de la experiencia.

Andrew Marvell (1621-78) is a metaphysical poet with a variety of talents and attitudes. In him, specifies Douglas Bush, one can identify the metaphysical wit, the traits of a classical artist, of the Puritan platonist and a poet who treats nature in a spontaneous and philosophic way (1962: 167-8). He also affirms that Marvell can be considered "the finest flower of secular and serious metaphysical poetry" (1962: 167). And indeed that word "flower" is appropriate for nature is one of his important and seriously treated themes. Nature in his case stands as a reminder of the harmony

once existed between it and man's mind. According to the poet, "man's mind once had reflected the harmony of nature but love divided it and disturbed it" (Bush 1962: 171). Marvell's idea seems then to be to reacquire, at least poetically, the lost balance, to move back to a context of innocent perfection or order— or both (Bush 1962: 178). In the case of the poem "The Picture of little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers", the battle is against "wanton love" right in the midst of a natural context where the female image is to be the conqueror.

One may argue that the tone of this poem is not singular, and that indeed, it has more than one. However, there are enough facts that can allow the reader to look at it from a singular and serious angle. Thus, the poem may be said to stand for a successful attempt to avoid sexuality based on wanton love. The critic Lawrence W. Hyman, for example, recognizes there is in some of the poems by Andrew Marvell, basically in those addressed to young girls, a "desire for love which is free from sexuality" (1964: 28). Even though such a statement may lead some people to think he goes overboard, a poem such as "The Picture of little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers" may well illustrate what this critic has stated. In this poetical context, the poet presents a man who, while looking at a girl playing innocently in a green field with flowers, displays some of his views about life, men and women, innocence and experience.

In order to do that, he does not stay in the present, but envisions her behaviour in a future time. He sees

this child as a grown up disdaining "wanton love," and thereby becoming the "Enemy of Man." This image in turn could imply that there is a general tendency in man to look at a woman, essentially, as a means to fulfil sexual pleasures, and that this is what can most likely draw a man and a woman together, the temptation of the flesh. This girl is meant to be a warrior, though, enforcing her "chaster Laws" upon those men that are above all sexually oriented. And the speaker himself gives her all the victories; this is why he finally withdraws, too, "Let me be laid," he tells her, "where I may see thy Glories from some Shade" (ll. 23-24).

The poem opens with the image of this beautiful child during the early years of her life that he calls "her golden daies" (l. 2). This means that for him, she is in an age of glory, away from sexual love, a situation which in turn renders life another quality, simplicity. His description attempts to make clear the inherent power this girl has, "And there with her fair aspect tames / The Wilder flow'rs, and gives them names" (ll. 4-5). He points out how, even at that early age, she unconsciously enjoys playing with the roses, symbolic of passion, of love, and not with the wild flowers she finds in the fields, "But only with the Roses playes; and them does tell / What colour best becomes them, and what Smell" (ll. 6-8). This description anticipates her future commanding role in the realm of love between a man and a woman in life. The fact that she charms nature with her beauty at this early age is important. This will later be the temptation men will not be likely to resist. Her present status, as the queen-like figure of the fields, the "boss" and not the subject in her environment will be carried forward to his envisioned future for her.

Stanza II takes the reader to that future. She no longer appears among the green grass, the wild flowers and the roses. There she is among men now, in society that could also be considered the metaphoric battleground of love pursuing what the speaker considers to be a high cause:

Who can fortel for what high cause
This Darling of the Gods was born!
Yet this is She whose chaster Laws
The wanton love shall one day fear (ll. 9-12).

She again emerges in the eyes of the speaker as a resolute, independent, beautiful female controlling her

world, and with enough power to be victorious at the end,

And under her command severe,
See His Bow broke and Ensigns torn (ll. 13-14).

The speaker himself sees that he cannot help falling in love and feeling physical desire for this woman. His final words in this stanza, "Happy, who can / Appease this virtuous Enemy of Man! (ll. 14-15) show his desire to make her his and his impossibility to fulfil that wish. These final lines make evident, too, his awareness of the existing contrast between the virtuous nature of this woman and the lusty nature of the men he sees around her including himself. In other words, we find that virtue leads to lack of sexuality based on wanton love, to denial of the flesh. In this sense, she becomes an "Enemy of Man!"

Stanza III clarifies the last two lines of the previous stanza. Her physical beauty, that can be summarized in the words "conquering eyes", will be as powerful as her innate desire and capacity to preserve virtue in life,

O then let me in time compound,
And parly with those conquering Eyes;
Ere they have try'd their force to wound,
Ere, with their glancing wheels, they drive
In triumph over Hearts that strive,
And them that yield but more despise (ll. 17-22).

He recognizes that his own approach to her will be in vain; thus, he gives up,

Let me be laid,
Where I may see Thy Glories from some Shade
(23-49).

This middle stanza shows her at the climax of her role. It makes her shine as the winner of the battles with the final defeat and withdrawal of the speaker himself to a safer place where he can not be seen or hurt.

Stanza IV takes us back to the age of innocence. But the speaker this time reminds us that the world is far from being perfect, that man cannot expect units of perfection, of beauty, of everlastingness in life. The girl

appears again as a beautiful being, and therefore powerful, in a world that is imperfect. Thus his words,

Reform the errors of the Spring;
 Make that the Tulips may have share
 Of sweetness, seeing that they are fair;
 And Roses of their thorns disarm:
 But most procure
 That Violets may a longer Age endure (ll. 25-32).

That is, the tulips are fair but lack perfume; the roses are beautiful but like life or love in life, they can wound with their thorns. The short life of the violets is in itself a reminder of the briefness of beauty that like purity or innocence is bound to definite limits of time.

This notion dealing with the transiency of innocence, of this period of purity in a human being's life, is carried on to stanza V where the speaker approves the child's gathering of the flowers but not of the buds,

But O young beauty of the Woods,
 Whom Nature courts with fruits and
 flow'rs
 Gather the Flow'rs, but spare the Buds;
 (ll. 33-5)

The flowers, like men and women, have reached maturity. As Lawrence W. Hyman says, "the flower is the sexual part of the plant" (1964: 28), and as such the girl can gather them something that may be considered to be a way of taking their existence away. But in contrast, he warns her not to do so with the buds,

Lest Flora angry at thy crime,
 To kill her Infants in their prime,
 Do quickly make th' Example yours;
 And, ere we see,
 Nip in the blossome all our hopes and
 thee (ll. 35-40).

The buds are still innocent and pure; they stand, therefore, for her own present and future life. To take them would symbolize her own destruction, the disappearance of the hopes of both—hers, of being an unconquerable

living symbol of innocence, of virtue; and his, of loving that beautiful woman he has envisioned. It will come to be their end. Thus the warning given in those lines.

The lives of these two people go and will continue to go parallel in one point. Hers is and will be a life detached from physical contact with men; his love for her is and will follow the same fate; he will never reach her physically. This ideal resistance to the natural desires of the flesh, its appetites, appears in some of this poet's poems as a need to reflect in them life's imperfections, unfulfillments, limitations—reminders all of the fall of man in paradise. In opposition, then, he unveils an ideal in a poem, like the one just analyzed, a vision in which virtue can stand confidently by itself above the power—or better, the weakness of the flesh. And Marvell's



treatment of innocence as presented in "The Picture of little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers" leads H. R. Swardson to discover and describe the type of innocence this poet treated. It is one that goes a step further the natural innocence of the classical pastoral. In him, he found, "a presexual or nonsexual innocence that nourishes the mind and provides a kind of philosophical or religious retreat from the world" (Lewalski 1976: 1057).

And Lewalski, likewise, has a pertinent comment to make on Marvell and that vision previously mentioned. In the case of Marvell, he finds that "a contradiction frustrates the shaping of a world view," and he affirms that "it centers itself on the impossibility of achieving a world of innocence within what is necessarily a world of experience" (1976: 1053). Thus the unveiling of innocence the way Swardson discovered in Marvell—innocence in a presexual or nonsexual state, a possibility that this poet knew how to make alive in his world and that gave his poetry one of its characteristics—the presence of opposing views kept in a state of unresolved tension. And this is something that according to Lewalski "usually gives rise to conflicting interpretations which depend upon the reader's personal views of the evidence" (1976: 1054), statement that backs the present analysis on "The Picture of little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers"—that of its serious tone and its singular theme.

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