THE DEATH OF INNOCENCE IN MARVELL’S NYMPH COMPLAINING FOR THE DEATH OF HER FAUN

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Interpretations of this poem run a very wide range from literal to allegorical, classical to Christian, pastoral to historical; large numbers of classical, medieval, and Renaissance writers have been adduced for sources and analogues. With all this learning, critical analysis, and even common sense brought into play, it might be thought that the poem had become sufficiently clear. Of course the opposite is true; so various are the types of interpretation that it is necessary to choose from all the proffered help. Moreover, it appears to me that the poem deals with a theme insufficiently discussed, the death of innocence, which I hope to discuss with the evidence provided by the poem and to set into the context of earlier studies. If this essay were an attempt at exhaustive analysis, it would also concern itself with the very characteristic wit of the poem—its glances and hesitations, its suggestions and withholdings. The wit provides for the maximum inclusiveness of experience in small compass and for the minimum pressure of the weight of any specifiable detail. It would be difficult to accept any reading of the poem that did not recognize, at least implicitly, the importance and difficulty of its wit.

There is general agreement that The Nymph Complaining for the death of her Faun is a version of pastoral complaint, and that into the pastoral, idealized world have come the “wanton Troopers” who threaten to destroy it. Although it is not clear that there is general agreement about the plot of the poem, that is probably only because it has seemed too simple a matter to deserve comment. Since anything simple in the poem provides a useful starting point, we may begin by considering the events of the poem, not in the sequence in which they are narrated, but in the sequence in which they are imagined to have occurred. There are four actions or episodes that can be described with considerable assurance.

Episode I: lines 25–36.—The Nymph and her “Huntsman” Sylvio had been in love. While still not found to be “counterfeit,” he gave her the Faun. The love did not last long, however, because Sylvio “soon” “beguil’d” the Nymph, who was left with “his Faun” where before she had had (in the familiar love trope) his “Heart,” with the obvious pun.

Episode II: lines 37–92.—“Thenceforth I set my self to play / My solitary time away”—with the Faun. The long middle section of the poem recounts her loving care, the beauty and good nature of the sportive Faun, and its purity.

Episode III: lines 1–24.—The “wanton Troopers” shoot the Faun, which lies bleeding to death before the Nymph as she questions the nature of such men and the heinousness of their act.

Episode IV: 93–122.—The Faun languishes and dies. The Nymph resolves to have cut, as a memorial, a marble statue of her weeping self and, at its foot, an alabaster image of the Faun.

Now our questions must begin. The one most relevant to the summary of the plot

1 In lieu of the usual initial review of existing scholarship, I shall first attempt to establish critically what the poem says and only thereafter go on to other possibilities, in the discussion of which most of the scholarly and critical studies of the poem will be introduced.

[Modern Philology, August, 1967]
is surely that of the relation between the characters—the Troopers, the Faun, Sylvio, and the Nymph. To begin with the Faun, it is contrasted with Sylvio and the Troopers.

Thy love was far more better then  
The love of false and cruel men [ll. 53–54].

If the applicability of the couplet is not clear enough, Sylvio had been described as “false” three lines before, and in the opening lines of the poem the Troopers were revealed to be cruel. They are described as “wanton” (l. 1) and “ungentle” (l. 3). What is not clear is the reason why Marvell has the Nymph say to the Faun in that couplet that its love is much better than that of the Troopers. Is it merely hypothetical, or is she in a state of mind only to reject men categorically, or have there been passages between the Troopers and her? The questions are not directly answered, but there is a kind of solution in the relation between Sylvio and the Troopers. He is not a usual pastoral shepherd of the kind that one expects to discover in the world inhabited by seventeenth-century nymphs. He is a self-styled “Huntsman” (l. 31). What the couplet does, then, is thematically relate Sylvio’s betrayal—his “counterfeit,” “false” behavior toward the Nymph—to the Troopers and their slaying of the Faun. What this implies, and requires for logical consistency, is a thematic relation of the Nymph to the Faun, and this is precisely the most extensively worked out relation of the poem. The couplet quoted is followed (in ll. 54–62) by a comparison of the Faun’s beauties with those of the Nymph and even with those of “any Ladies of the Land” (l. 62). In the next passage (ll. 63–70) the Faun’s speed is compared to that the Nymph can boast of. After a lengthy comparison (ll. 71–92) of the Faun to the “flaxen Lillies” of the Nymph’s garden, and after the death scene (ll. 93–110), the poem concludes with its description of the memorial statues. The last two lines imply a final comparison.

For I would have thine Image be  
White as I can, though not as thee.

Ostensibly the lines say that the Nymph cannot provide an alabaster as white as the Faun. But the obvious point is the metaphorical one made explicit earlier in the poem (ll. 55–62); the Nymph herself is not as “white,” as pure as the Faun.

Not as white as the Faun, the Nymph is whiter than Sylvio or the Troopers. We take her word for the one and her manner for evidence of the other. But it requires the utmost care to describe just how “white” the Nymph herself is and to say on what evidence one has measured her whiteness. Marvell does not permit us to ask anything so “ungentle” as whether the Nymph has lost her chastity, but he does provide a pastoral love plot and comparisons between the Nymph and the Faun. It is the animal that is said to have “pure Virgin Limbs” (l. 89). Sylvio is “Unconstant” (l. 25), “counterfeit” (l. 26), “wild” (l. 34), and “false” (ll. 50, 54). He “beguil’d” (l. 33) the trusting Nymph. Neither these details nor the strong force of the tradition of the woman’s love complaint makes it necessary that our Nymph had yielded to Sylvio before he proved untrue. Marvell himself is gallant enough not to make an issue of it. But what is implied by the parallel suggested earlier (between the Troopers’ slaying of the Faun and Sylvio’s betrayal) is the destruction of innocence. Or, to put it differently, the Faun grew up knowing the Nymph, whereas the Nymph grows up in another sense knowing Sylvio and the Troopers. She is the superior in experience
and sophistication, both of them attributes that are inimical to innocence.

In deciding how far we may go in relating the loss of innocence to the love plot of the poem, the only passage that might be thought to be useful to us is, in the event, a complicating factor. Toward the end of the poem, the Nymph speaks of making an offering of tears at “Diana’s Shrine” (l. 104). In view of all the recondite tradition that has been discovered to be related to the poem, one hesitates to come out with any remark so obvious as that Diana is goddess of chastity, but this is at least of demonstrable relevance to the poem. The problem is: how is it relevant? Diana is also goddess of the hunt, commonly pictured in statues and paintings as the Nymph imagines her marble and the Faun’s alabaster statues to be grouped. But we cannot allow an identification of the Nymph with Diana: the Nymph would not shoot a deer, she would not destroy the innocence represented by the animal. The manifest dissonance of this aspect of “Diana’s Shrine” with its traditional trophies of the hunt very greatly qualifies any possible inference that might be drawn about the chaste innocence of the Nymph. Moreover, what is offered is tears. The Nymph takes the “two crystal Tears” (l. 102) shed by the Faun as it dies and, using them as a kind of essence, fills up the “golden Vial” (l. 101) with her own tears. Under what conditions are tears the appropriate offering to Diana, goddess of chastity and the hunt? Each reader must answer, and answer with care. The Faun goes to a suitably classical Elysium to join “Swans and Turtles,” “milk-white Lambs,” and “Ermins pure” (ll. 106–8). The Nymph does not speculate about where she will spend eternity.

It is useful to say what there is that can be shown from the poem itself. There is, so to speak, a two-part plot; the related episodes of the shooting and the death of a Faun are separated by the recollection of a love story anterior to the shooting. Parallelisms between the characters in the two plots show that the poem is a love complaint as well as a complaint for the death of a pet. Such parallelisms demonstrate further that the death of the Faun is relevant not just in itself as the death of an innocent but also as an analogue for the damaged innocence of the Nymph. The two wounds or, in a very tenuous metaphorical sense, the two deaths of the Faun and the Nymph establish the theme of the poem as that of the death of innocence. The Faun dies through the sudden intrusion of the “wanton Troopers” upon a pastoral world, and the Nymph is wounded by her “counterfeit” “Huntsman” friend, Sylvio. In the one case, the action is decisive, and the innocent dies, while Innocence remains as a principle. In the other case, there is a betrayal leading to experience and knowledge, the loss of Innocence as a principle except in recollection. The Nymph is aware of the difference, and one major function of the Faun in the poem is to provide her with the psychological satisfaction of nursing an innocent when she has become experienced. This maternal, or if that is too strong, this feminine prizing of a substitute for innocence, is related to the other surrogate role played by the Faun, the surrogatus amantis, of which more subsequently. What, above all, the wit of the poem suggests is that the death of the Nymph’s innocence is but partial. She is only guilty by comparison with a symbol of complete, ideal innocence, not by comparison with the Troopers. But at the same time the wit insists that her participating awareness is as much involved as the actions of Sylvio.

Thus far I have treated matters which, the wit apart, seem to me demonstrable from the poem, and the wit itself is
palpably there as well, although different people might assess its functions and significance differently. There are other elements that are felt by readers but that are, like the wit, difficult of assessment. The poem has not proved the less attractive for the tenuousness of these other matters. Quite the contrary. But the problems are such that the evidence for further interpretation is so fine and the sources so increasingly external to the poem that hesitation like Marvell’s own wit is equally called for and difficult to sustain. I suggested earlier one further kind of interpretation, the psychological.

Pierre Legouis has given a double psychological interpretation, one feature of it being the general situation in which the Nymph finds herself grieving, the other the relevance to Marvell’s own experience. The former would be difficult to fault; the latter is open to disagreement because Marvell’s personality itself is so variously interpreted. Another interpretation that is in practice psychological, although presented in learned exposition of the traditions, *topoi*, and tropes of the poem, is that of D. C. Allen, who argued (with much else) that the Faun is a *surrogatus amoris* for the Nymph. He adduced many classical, medieval, and Renaissance precursors. But the precursors are really not needed, since we can all sense from the Nymph’s detailed account of her care of the Faun, play with it, and love for it, that she has turned upon the Faun the affection rebuffed by Sylvio. Indeed, although one feels that the German translator of the poem, Werner Vorfriede, goes altogether too far in describing the situation as “eine bacchantisch-erotische Szene zwischen Nymphen und Faunen,” he is right to the extent that, psychologically at least, the Faun is less a *surrogatus amoris* than a *surrogatus amantis*. It was only after Sylvio had proved untrue that the Nymph turned for consolation to the Faun.

Thenceforth I set myself to play
My solitary time away,
With this . . .
[ll. 37–39.]

But beyond this sort of obvious taking consolation in one creature and devoting to it the affection she had once devoted to another, human, creature, it is difficult to see what kind of detailed analysis is possible. The difficulty with psychological readings is that the poem requires that they be made with the greatest tact, lest hints be taken as avowals and hesitations as refusals or, in contrary fashion, what is simple and obvious be rendered altogether complex and abstruse.

Those who have sought to explore the even less conclusive thematic significances of the poem have worked from what have been presumed the sources of the poem. One of the first of the thematic interpretations was the religious interpretation advanced by M. C. Bradbrook and M. G. Lloyd Thomas, who argued that although the poem opens “with straightforward and charming naturalism,” it ends “by drawing largely on The Song of Solomon and its identification of the fawn with Christ,” or that “the love of the girl for her fawn is taken to be a reflection of the love of the Church for Christ.” Although they were far from arguing a thoroughgoing allegory

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3 Allen, “Marvell’s ‘Nymph.’” ELH, XXIII (1956), 91–111. The article is something of a *tour de force* vitiated by one’s doubt that the poet possessed the learning of the scholar in the Fathers and such worthies as the Venerable Bede. Allen’s sceptical *panache* involves, among other things, the introduction of learning explicitly irrelevant, and he scorns anyone with the “undergraduate” temerity to say “that the poem is about lost chastity.” The epithet apart, I think it equally simple-minded to suppose that to the seventeenth-century chastity was a simple undelflowered state or that innocence cannot be lost in other ways.


5 Bradbrook and Thomas, Andrew Marvell (Cambridge, 1940), pp. 47–50.
for the poem, Miss Brabrook and Miss Thomas did succeed in drawing attention to the religious suggestiveness of the Garden passage (ll. 71–92). Strenuously objected to by some more recent criticism, the religious interpretation has been severely modified. Most people would be willing to compromise to the extent that, although they would deny a religious allegory, they would agree that the Garden passage does use religious language and that, in effect, there are religious "overtones." The difficulty with the religious reading is that its full validity requires a thoroughgoing allegory that hardly sorts with the love plot of the poem. (The Faun is hardly at once Christ and a surrogatus amoris or amantis.) It seems possible to conclude, however, that Marvell sought in the Garden passage a glancing, witty, but serious parody of The Song of Songs that reveals more about the innocence lost by the Nymph and more about her solemnity concerning the Faun than any patterning of the Nymph upon the church and the Faun upon Christ.

The other "sources" of the poem have not been so fully followed through, primarily because it is not wholly certain that most of them are in fact sources, or analogues, call them what one will. The most widely known of the proposed sources is that given currency by H. M. Margoliouth in his edition of Marvell, William Browne's story of Fida's Hind in Britannia's Pastorals (I, iii–iv). This source has the advantage over almost all the works brought forward by Allen in that Marvell can be believed to have read it. Moreover, it does have a parallel action, beginning with a pastoral love story and going on to the slaying of the Hind by an outside force, Riot, and ending with larger thematic suggestions. But if Marvell was indebted to this story, his version is a very different reaction colored by a wit unknown to the solemn Browne of Tavistock. The story of Fida and her Hind remains a possible source which is of relevance to the outlines of Marvell's poem but of little pertinence to the handling. Much the same thing may be said of the story of the stag of Cyprissus treated by Ovid in Metamorphoses x. 106–42. In itself, the story is far less close to Marvell's than is Browne's, since it involves the homosexual love of Apollo for a male protagonist; a killing, albeit an accidental one, of the stag by Cyprissus himself; and indeed little except a young person, a deer, and a slaying of the deer that is in common with Marvell's poem. Le Comte has, however, in effect claimed a debt to the kind of story Ovid tells by stressing the possibility of similar metamorphosis in Marvell's poem (ll. 91–92), and even more the analogue of the weeping Nymph to Niobe. If Marvell recalled Ovid's story, he changed it with great freedom.

The final "source" is one that seems to me capable of more exploration than it has received in the past, both because it is in a work that Marvell certainly knew and because of intrinsic resemblances with both this poem and with other poems by Marvell. It is the story, first identified by Kenneth Muir, as an "echo"—the death of Silvia's pet deer at the hands of Ascanius in the seventh Aeneid, ll. 475–509. The passage tells how the curious Allecto puts the hounds of the Trojan huntsman Iulus on the scent of the stag of Silvia, who had tended it with her own loving hands;

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6 See Edward S. Le Comte, "Marvell's 'Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Faun,'" Modern Philology, L (1952), 97–100. Allen has his objections, too, in the article cited, n. 3, above.


9 See Le Comte's essay, cited in n. 6, above.

10 Muir, "A Virgilian Echo in Marvell," Notes and Queries, CXCVI (March 17, 1951), 115. Le Comte, Allen, and I myself have all apparently come upon the "echo" before reading Muir's anticipation.
how Ascanius himself shoots the stag with an arrow; and how the action rouses the Latins to battle against the Trojans. What is closest to Marvell’s poem in this story is Silvia’s tending the animal by hand, the mortal wounding by an outsider, and the dying of the animal before the mourning girl. What seems farthest from the poem is Virgil’s context and import. The episode is the third and climactic action of Allecto to stir up the Latins to war against the Trojans. The war is an obstacle to the founding of the new Troy, Rome, and the story of Silvia is a tragic idyl amid the larger workings of fate in the epic of the formation of a new nation.

What I wish to propose as a possibility (the evidence admits no higher degree of probability) is that the death of Marvell’s Faun has a historical or political significance dependent upon a parallelism with this passage from the *Aeneid*. What the parallel connects with in the poem is what first meets our eye there, the “wanton Troopers” of the opening line. Le Comte observed that “Troopers” was first applied to the Covenanting army of 1640, and Muir suggested that the poem might possibly be based upon an episode of the Civil War.11 In exploring such hypotheses, we may begin with the question posed by J. B. Leishman’s book, *The Art of Marvell’s Poetry* (London, 1966): “Is it not likely [that in spite of earlier poems on the death of pets], however, that Marvell’s untraditional particularisation of this traditional topic, the slaughter of a child’s pet by foraging (and presumably Parliamen-

11 Le Comte, p. 100; Muir, p. 115. E. H. Emerson in “Andrew Marvell’s The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Faun,” *Etudes anglaises*, VIII (1955), 107–10, suggested that the poem embodies “Marvell’s emotional reaction to the fate of the Church of England in the 1640’s.” In his trenchant “Réponse à E. H. Emerson,” *Etudes anglaises*, VIII (1955), 111–12, Pierre Legouis called such a reaction “impossible,” “contraire à la logique.” As Emerson was aware, his interpretation depends upon a date for the poem in the early 1640’s, and as Legouis remarked, the hypothesis that the poem concerns the Anglican church that Marvell was a supporter of the church in the 1640’s, and that the poem therefore dated from the 1640’s is a hypothesis with circular logic. It will be evident that I think Emerson wrong in the particulars of his topical significance.
need hardly be said that such a tone is to be found in Virgil’s episode. And I think that Marvell’s attitude in the Horatian Ode and in Upon Appleton House is sufficiently mixed to allow for an a priori acceptance of this third concentric of meaning, as is Marvell’s well-known statement that, “upon considering all, I think that the [Parliamentary] cause was too good to have been fought for. Men ought to have trusted God; they ought and might have trusted the King with that whole matter.”

Upon Appleton House makes a similar, although more explicit and demonstrable, allusion to military and political matters in the description of Fairfax’s gardens as a fort (sts. XXXVI–XLVI) and in the preceding narration of the elder Fairfax’s dispossessioning (l. 272) of the nunnery of “the blooming Virgin Thwates” (sts. XI–XXXV). These two passages alone provide a provocative topical gloss upon The Nymph Complaining for the death of her Faun, showing how love, innocence, experience, pastoral, and war can be made to exist in the same poem. The two passages very considerably strengthen the possibility that the similar pastoral overtones and immured innocence of the world of the Nymph have a topical significance like that discerned by many readers in the wanton Troopers. An Horatian Ode upon Cromwel’s Return from Ireland weighs similar elements of “ancient Rights” of “the Kingdome old” which Cromwell with his “forced Pow’r” was establishing “Into another Mold.” Similarly, there is Charles I, “the Royal Actor” on “The tragick Scaffold.” Again, we discover an order that may be considered in some sense ideal yielding to force from the outside. Of course in the Horatian Ode the balance is favorable to Cromwell and “the forced Pow’r” rather than to the old order. What these two poems suggest is that the situation of the Nymph is one in which innocence is caught and destroyed by an outside force and by its own intrinsic weakness and that this innocence, like that of Silvia’s affection for her deer in the Aeneid, is connected with a political tradition yielding to the superior strength of a new order. The love the Nymph felt for Sylvio is like the desire of the “Virgin Thwates” to enter the nunnery of Upon Appleton House in that the innocence of both holds the roots of experience. The political significance discernible in the situation of the Nymph is indeed closer to the treatment of such issues in Upon Appleton House than that in the Horatian Ode. But all three poems possess complexities of tone that make them by no means easy to sort out.

Marvell’s poem about the Nymph and her Faun is truly “enigmatic.” The Civil War saw a rebirth of the enigmatic poetry of the Renaissance, in which emblem, parallelism, beast fable, pastoral, parallel, or allegory—“darke” conceits of various kinds—were employed to convey a hidden meaning for those who shared knowledge and assumptions with the author but not for others. In the middle decades of the seventeenth century, the enigmatic mode was commonly employed to support the royalist cause (the parliamentary victors could speak more plainly) and also by men like Marvell with divided feelings. Lovelace’s poem “The Grasshopper” is a notable instance of this kind, and it is highly likely that another poem by him, “The Falcon,” possesses a similar significance. In such poems the styles of various poets in the first half of the century

13 Lines 38, 35, 66, 36.
14 Lines 53, 54.
15 Harold Tolliver, Marvell’s Ironic Vision (New Haven, Conn., 1965), p. 129. Tolliver discusses the poem in terms of what he calls the pastoral and history, but he weighs “history” more as I mean “experience” than as history as it is usually meant.
are blended into semi-opaque dark conceits dealing with events of the realm. What is typical of such poems is the suggestion—through allusion, emblem, or traditional tropes—of historical implications along with a simultaneous withdrawing, a reluctance to follow through with the metaphorical vehicle to a fully established tenor. Such a glancing technique well suited Marvell’s wit and division of mind, providing the basis of two of his finest poems, *Upon Appleton House* and the *Horatian Ode*. It is true that the political presence in those poems is more heavily felt than in the true enigmatic mode of “The Grasse-hopper” or even of Spenser’s *November* eclogue. But the complexity of tone retains much of the enigmatic character in the absence of obscure political tropes and figures. A historical reading of *The Nymph Complaining for the death of her Faun* suggests, on the other hand, that although the meaning ultimately arrived at is clearer than that of the *Horatian Ode*, the poem obscures that meaning with the usual opacities of the enigmatic mode. Ruth Wallerstein allowed room for such significances, without saying exactly what they were, when she described the poem as “a pastoral lyric of the symbolic parallels of which Marvell was deeply aware, so that they pressed upon his imagination, without, however, ever verging into actual allegory.”

In this poem the “symbolic parallels” are, I have argued, those involving the death of innocence in the betrayed love of the Nymph, the death of her pure Faun, and the death of an old order. Along with this death there is the birth of experience in the Nymph’s increased understanding of herself and Sylvio, as also of her awareness that the Faun is purer than herself. And her pastoral tragedy suggests a national epic in which a pastoral “Garden” world of the “ancient Rights” of the *Horatian Ode* are destroyed by the incursion of “wanton Troopers,” who, however, while reminding the Nymph of her faithless Sylvio, also remind Marvell of Ascanius and the birth of a new nation.

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