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COMMEMORATION AND REFLECTION

On Mr. Friedman's *Marvell's Pastoral Art*,
fifty years later

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As the contentious, polarizing 1960s came to an end, literary criticism seemed curiously eager to confront the enigmatic figure of Andrew Marvell, who had himself survived some rather contentious, polarizing times. Against the background of the social turmoil of 1968, John Wallace's wonderful book on Marvell's studied moderation, *Destiny His Choice: The Loyalty of Andrew Marvell* (Cambridge University Press), was published. And as 1970 rolled around, the world of scholarship welcomed both the graceful, erudite eclecticism of Rosalie Colie's *"My Echoing Song": Andrew Marvell's Poetry of Criticism* (Princeton University Press), and the confident nonconformity celebrated in Pierre Legouis's *Andrew Marvell: Poet, Patriot, Puritan* (Oxford University Press). In this annus mirabilis of Marvell studies, Donald M. Friedman's *Marvell's Pastoral Art* (University of California Press) also emerged, a remarkable work that has stood the test of what Shakespeare calls "reckoning time" (Sonnet 115). Criticism has a notoriously short shelf-life; a friend once said that a scholarly success is a book that is reviewed before it is remaindered. And it is rare indeed that a book is worth reading 50 years after its publication. But *Marvell's Pastoral Art* is certainly one of the charter members of that elite company.

I am perhaps prejudiced, though. I was lucky enough to take several courses with Mr. Friedman, as we students at Berkeley called him, and then to have him direct my dissertation (on George Herbert). In trying to decide whom to work with amid the embarrassment of early modern riches that was Berkeley in those days, I had read his book on Marvell with admiration, despite the fact it was not particularly trendy (and I was easily seduced in those years by things that radiated trendiness). But there was a kind of discernible capaciousness in his critical sensibility, and a palpable pleasure

in the effort to appreciate the artful language of others, and to find a vocabulary that might be adequate to express that appreciation. He refused to grind axes, even in territory littered with whetstones and dull blades. I felt very comfortable being in the presence of his mind, and I thought that his gentle, firm direction might allow me, somehow, to find my own voice and perspective.

I don't know whether I was right about the last, but I do know that the book is indeed a crystallization of a kind of carefully contextualized close reading that represents what we do at our best as a profession. It is such a pleasure, and a comfort, to be thinking through these riddlingly elusive texts with him. And although certainly never trendy, the book was in so many ways ahead of its time, managing to touch on some of the central problems of our current situation: the relations between humans and their environment; the pressures and challenges of a turbulent political world; and the frustrations of engagement and the subsequent temptations of retirement.

Throughout the book, Friedman offers a fascinating focus on the mind of the poet. As I read, I kept thinking how interesting it would be to see Friedman in dialog with our current fascination with cognitive studies. For Friedman, poetry was primarily a way of thinking about the world, of organizing the world, and revealing its implicit principles of organization and disorder. He understood well that the genre of pastoral supplied one of its most resonant and supple vocabularies. Friedman shows in detail how pastoral becomes for Marvell a way of describing the relationship between the poet's innermost mind—a mind he deliberately obscures as a strategy of self-protection—and the outside world. Inner and outer become correlates for each other in a profoundly extended act of cognition. The effect is sometimes dizzying, but invariably a revelation.

Indeed, as I reread the book, I thought that only a reader like Friedman, possessed of "such a vast expanse of mind," could take on the full poetic accomplishment of Andrew Marvell. Friedman is throughout attentive to the political nuances of Marvell's mind and allegiances. He refers vividly to "This ziggurat of confusion" as he describes the way "the poems move from the apparent Royalism of the complimentary verses to Lovelace ... through the moral and political complexities of the 'Horatian Ode' on Cromwell, to the unqualified admiration of the lines commemorating the

first anniversary of the Protectorate and Cromwell's death" (p. 2). He has an entirely coherent but resolutely unapologetic account of the political behavior that allowed Marvell, this rational amphibian, to survive on the dry land of the Protectorate as well as in the swamp of the Restoration. Marvell was indeed a political chameleon, in Nigel Smith's recent formulation, one who effectively changed colors with regimes; he almost certainly saved Milton, a poet who could not, and would not, change colors.

But even as his skin changed, Marvell's inner commitments did not. Friedman rightly admires Marvell's ability to praise and criticize in the same linguistic gesture. Repeatedly, he brilliantly catches all the mercurial moves within lines, and even within individual words. As Friedman argues in his wonderful reading of Marvell's massive country house poem, "To see 'Upon Appleton House' as a fanciful retreat from political reality into a world of rural mindlessness is to misread a poem which at almost every moment is torn between the divergent demands of the world and the self" (p. 228). Friedman does a wonderful job of showing how the poem's fraying fabric absorbs pressures and images from the world it ostensibly excludes.

Friedman's remarkable capacity to read the studied ambivalence of Marvell's poems is perhaps most on display in his dazzling discussion of "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland." He provides a truly brilliant reading of the twists and turns embedded in Marvell's most strategically elusive poem. Friedman demonstrates through fastidious close analysis informed by deep historical knowledge Marvell's remarkable ability to "look without illusion at the reality of Cromwell's rise to power and to perceive within its curve the marks of foredestined retribution for the sins of the monarchy and the promise of a greater 'Work' to be built upon its symbolic ruins" (p. 271).

Although it is John Donne who had called words "our subtillest and delicatest outward creatures,"¹ it was really Marvell who most successfully exploited their full potential for political subtlety and ethical delicacy. And Donald Friedman is certainly one of our most incisive interpreters of this subtle, mercurial poet. At our current

¹ John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour*, ed. Charles Edmund Merrill (New York, Sturgis & Walton Company, 1910), 110.

moment of profound political turbulence, one that infelicitously mirrors at once the chaos in which Marvell wrote and the unrest in which Friedman read Marvell, one could do far worse with one's COVID-imposed leisure than revisit this wonderful work.

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