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## Marvell Against Mourning

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Andrew Marvell has several poems about “mourning” to his credit, most notably his funeral elegies for Francis Villiers, Henry Hastings, and Oliver Cromwell, which memorialize the deceased by deploying tropes of bereavement, grief, and consolation—that is, the stuff of elegy. Curiously, his short lyric “Mourning,” while likewise steeped in elegiac signifiers, scarcely traffics in the work of mourning. Instead, the poem acknowledges an alternative paradigm of mourning, shaped not by a psychoanalytic narrative of loss and restitution but by visually arresting permutations of the tear. The work of “Mourning,” thus rendered, is to measure the sincerity of a woman’s grief based on the quality of her tears, the volume and opacity of which make this work often seem a fool’s errand. In this paper I suggest that modern and contemporary discourses of memorial and elegy, which are marked chiefly by resistance to the consolatory imperative, may serve as a useful framework for seeing how Marvell treats the situation of grief in “Mourning.” Specifically, I look to the concept of “anti-mourning” as developed by the art historian Margaret Iversen, who in turn bases her formulation on Roland Barthes’s photographic theory of the *studium* and *punctum*. Anti-mourning, in its stress on leaving open the wound of melancholia, on resisting figurative and compensatory consolations, has useful implications for Marvell’s poem. It can help us understand the poem not as a case study in hermeneutic futility—or worse, casual misogyny—but rather as a pointed, elegant critique of the symbolic order of elegy.



Marvell's "Mourning," like the poem with which it is inexorably twinned, "Eyes and Tears," announces its subject with disarming transparency in its title: the work is, nominally, *about* mourning. Yet the poem has a curious relationship to elegy, the verse mode traditionally tasked to perform the work of mourning. Work, in Peter Sacks's Freudian-cum-Ovidian formulation of mourning, is axiomatic to the elegiac mode; elegy works through the event of loss and, in due course, presents a figurative compensation for the lost object.<sup>1</sup> "Mourning" operates partly within this vein, mining the aesthetics and symbolics of bereavement, but not in the standard elegiac sense of translating grief into consolation. The poem's speaker is an observer of grief, not a sufferer or a sympathizer, and the grief he observes, writ large in the form of the weeper's enigmatic tears, confounds interpretation:

You, that decipher out the fate  
Of human offsprings from the skies,  
What mean these infants which of late  
Spring from the stars of Chlora's eyes? (1-4)<sup>2</sup>

The speculation offered in response, by turns idle and salacious, runs counter to elegy's goal of construing meaning from mourning. In the end the speaker declines to answer the question he has posed. On the sincerity of Chlora's tears, and of women's grief in general, he concludes:

I yet my silent judgement keep,  
Disputing not what they believe:  
But sure as oft as women weep,  
It is to be supposed they grieve. (33-36)

The last stanza, with its refusal to close the loop of signification, typifies the poem's pattern of evasion and circumlocution, a pattern widely attributed to Marvell's embrace of philosophical skepticism.<sup>3</sup> L.E. Semler reads "Mourning" as an example of

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 1-37.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Marvell, *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, rev. ed., ed. Nigel Smith (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2007). All references to Marvell's poems are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by line number.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, L. E. Semler, *The English Mannerist Poets and the Visual Arts* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1998), 202-208; and Takashi Yoshinaka, *Marvell's Ambivalence: Religion and the Politics of Imagination in Mid-Seventeenth Century England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), 61-66. More generally on Marvell and skepticism, see Anita Gilman Sherman, *Skepticism in Early Modern English Literature: The Problems and Pleasures of Doubt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 176-224.

mannerist skepticism, in which the form of the poem—a series of subtly interlocked judgments that cast doubt on the correctness of any one—mimics the process by which the skeptic achieves *ataraxia*, or tranquility of mind: “‘Mourning’ ends with suspension of judgment and *ataraxia* magically follows, pervading the whole poetic artifact which is a record of the logical and aesthetic road to that ataraxic state.”<sup>4</sup> Maybe inevitably, the care with which the poem maps the skeptic’s progress highlights its corresponding inattention to the business of mourning; Marvell’s speaker finds peace of mind, while Chlora’s grief remains untranslated. Mourning seems oddly decentered from the poem that is its namesake.

If the poem is indifferent to the work of mourning, it is keenly invested in the play of signs that proceeds from the twofold mystery of “eyes confused and doubled o’er, / With tears suspended ere they flow” (5–6). “Eyes and Tears” may seem a more apt title for a poem whose work is to survey the range of interpretations generated by these two signs. But mourning implies something more than the play of signs; it implies the creation of new signs that take the place of what is lost. A narrative of successful mourning, in its most basic iteration, might have Chlora slowly undo her affective attachment to Strephon and adopt a surrogate object to occupy her interest. “Mourning” burlesques this narrative by supposing that Chlora’s consolation is more cheaply bought. Her profuse weeping, weakly troped as “am’rous rain” in line nineteen, rouses familiar suspicions of women as leaky vessels, prone to moral and sexual incontinence.<sup>5</sup> Her tears are imagined not to grieve Strephon but rather to serve her proclivities as serial amorist (stanza four), narcissist (stanza five), and hedonist (stanza six). In the seventh stanza, those tears become the very currency by which she angles to replace her deceased love:

Nor that she pays, while she survives,  
To her dead love this tribute due,  
But casts abroad these donatives,  
At the installing of a new. (25–28)

The aspersions accumulate without closing in on the truth behind Chlora’s tears, underscoring the gap between the astral wisdom the speaker had pleaded for and the barrenness of earthbound judgments. Incredulous and possibly exasperated, he halts

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<sup>4</sup> Semler, *English Mannerist Poets*, 208.

<sup>5</sup> See Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 23–63.

further speculation—“How wide they dream!” (29)—before conceding the futility of the interpretive enterprise at hand.

Marvell’s subversion of the elegiac master narrative of mourning and consolation is, in some sense, a manifestation of elegy’s inherent ironic capacity. According to R. Clifton Spargo, ambivalence toward the resolution of grief—failed mourning, we might call it—is built into the elegiac mode. “[E]ven as it enacts a cessation of grief in its immediate exigency,” Spargo writes, “the elegy refuses to give to this end a permanence that would exhaust the meaning of grief and with it the value of the other who is lyrically maintained through the phenomenon of grief.”<sup>6</sup> In Marvell’s poem, the inexhaustibility of grief’s meanings is writ large in the spectacular indeterminacy of Chlora’s tears, opaque in form and oceanic in scope. Notably, this display does little to lyrically maintain Strephon, whose presence barely registers; he is Chlora’s “dead love,” no more, no less. The poem’s apparent disinterest in the object being mourned adumbrates the more confrontational postures of anti-elegy, anti-monument, and anti-memorial, modes that treat loss by interrogating the commemorative and preservationist logics of mourning. Although these modes are chiefly the province of modern and contemporary literature, architecture, and art, they share with Marvell’s “Mourning” a wariness of remedial and restorative consolations, particularly as they stunt the radical potentials of grief and loss.<sup>7</sup> The turn to “resistant mourning,” as Patricia Rae explains,

might be characterized, in general, as a resistance to reconciliation, full stop: a refusal to accept the acceptance of loss, whether through the severing and transference of libidinal ties or through the successful expansion of identity through introjection, or through any other kind of compensatory process.<sup>8</sup>

Marvell’s most overt gesture of resistance to the compensatory machinery of mourning occurs in his epitaph on Frances Jones, who died unmarried at the age of 39 in 1672. The poem begins with a preemptive indictment of attempts to capture her memory in verse:

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<sup>6</sup> R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 133.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to Spargo’s *The Ethics of Mourning*, other important studies on anti-elegy, anti-monument, and anti-memorial include Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); Melissa F. Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Patricia Rae, ed., *Modernism and Mourning* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2007); James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); and Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the American Landscape* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Rae, introduction to *Modernism and Mourning*, 16–17.

Enough: and leave the rest to Fame.  
 'Tis to commend her but to name.  
 Courtship, which living she declined,  
 When dead to offer were unkind. (1–4)

Marvell's speaker preserves the force of Jones's chastity—a rarity “[i]n this age loose and all unlaced” (10)—by refusing to gloss it with speech. Elegy, thus implicated, turns into something like courting the dead, equal parts futile and unnatural. The speaker cannot sit long with the paradox of giving even brief utterance to her memory, and so concludes by deflating the poem's modest elegiac pretensions: “'Tis true: but all so weakly said; / 'Twere more significant, 'She's dead'” (19–20).

If “Mourning” lacks the bitter defeatism of the Jones epitaph, or the political and ethical urgency of modernist reimaginings of mourning, it is no less vigorous in its defamiliarization of grief and loss. For this reason, the conceptual apparatuses of resistant mourning provide a useful point of entry for observing and understanding Marvell's departure from the conventions of elegy. A simple yet instructive model can be found in the work of the art historian Margaret Iversen, who, in *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*, suggests a pathway for navigating aesthetic representations of grief that disrupt the Freudian mourning/melancholy binary. For Iversen, “anti-mourning” signifies the work of denying, rather than facilitating, detachment from the lost object. Using the example of Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial, a touchstone of anti-monument and anti-memorial aesthetics, Iversen cites the reflections of dead soldiers or “shadowy revenants” in the glossy surfaces of the wall to illustrate how loss is rendered permanent and visible. “Instead of severing attachments,” Iversen writes, the wall “establishes a cathexis by reopening an archaic psychic wound.”<sup>9</sup> Passing through the memorial, the spectator is forced to inhabit the pains and losses suffered by the soldiers but largely erased from collective memory in the decades after the war. Iversen draws from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, which describes how emotional reactions are shaped by what he calls the *punctum*—that is, in the shadowy, presumably accidental details of a photograph that unexpectedly prick or bruise the viewer. This effect occurs independently of what Barthes calls the *studium*, or the element of the photograph that engages the viewer by evoking a recognizable logic, knowledge, or symbolic system.<sup>10</sup> The *punctum* effect, according to Iversen, is analogous to how visitors

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<sup>9</sup> Margaret Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 105.

<sup>10</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 25–60.

experience the Vietnam Memorial. Through seemingly incidental reflections produced by the wall, the spectator is compelled into what she calls a state of “perpetual memory held in active consciousness,” analogous to melancholia but not without respite, since the wall “suggests itself as an object that will do some remembering for you, allowing you to take your leave.”<sup>11</sup>

Iversen’s application of Barthesian photographic theory, informed in equal measure by aesthetics and psychoanalysis, helps to illuminate the peculiar case of mourning in Marvell’s poem: and it is doubly apt for a poet whose preoccupation with the visual and psychic registers recurs across his body of work. “Mourning” is a reflection on the dynamics of signification, but more than that, it is a showcase in the art of physiognomy, of searching one’s outward appearance (facial features in particular) for indications of their character. The complaint against Chlora is that her mourning is not genuine, that her profuse weeping conceals a deficit of grief, and hence, of character. What will validate her grief is a physiognomic reading that grants the sincerity of her mournful gaze. The figure she cuts on her first appearance complicates that goal:

Her eyes confused, and doubled o’er,  
With tears suspended ere they flow,  
Seem bending upwards, to restore  
To heaven, whence it came, their woe. (5–8)

The description is the most photographic in the poem, in its capture of a physically and kinetically improbable moment that both crystallizes and mystifies Chlora’s grief. The welling of tears in her eyes, redolent of human sorrow and Christian piety, effectively *presents* as mourning. Yet the mystique of the image is overbearing. It threatens to eclipse the event of loss by redoubling focus on the spectacle of weeping, making a Magdalene of the anonymous pastoral mourner. The image of “eyes confused, and doubled o’er,” of “tears suspended ere they flow,” presents weeping as an undisciplined and multivalent act, answerable to no master narrative of mourning. Chlora’s heavenward gaze substitutes for the figurative economy of elegy a circuit of objectless sorrow, wherein the raw material of grief is restored to its divine source, not refined into tropes of consolation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure*, 107.

<sup>12</sup> In another essay in this special issue, Stephen Spencer reads Marvell’s destabilizing of the tear trope as evidence of the poem’s “reconfiguration of Cavalier eroticism,” wherein the image of the weeping Chlora serves as a site for the projection and sustainment of courtly love ideals amid declining royalist fortunes in 1648. For Spencer, Marvell’s subtle critique of cavalier gender politics in “Mourning” anticipates the more radical experiments with gender and tear tropes he would take up in his Commonwealth verse. See Stephen Spencer, “‘Mourning’ and the Gender Politics of Cavalier Joy,” *Marvell Studies* 7, no. 1 (2022): 5.

In stanza three, Chlora assumes a more familiar expression of earthly lament: effusive weeping. With the flow of her tears, the still image of her grief is eased gently to life:

When, moulding of the wat'ry spheres,  
 Slow drops untie themselves away;  
 As if she, with those precious tears,  
 Would strow the ground where Strephon lay. (9–12)

For the first time in the poem, the event of loss is confirmed; the lost object is named; and the titular premise of mourning is set to be realized. Chlora appears to “strow the ground where Strephon lay” with her “precious tears,” as if rampant weeping will redress the conflicted gestures—that is, the stealth anti-mourning—conveyed by the still image. These incitements notwithstanding, there is no reinstating of the elegiac narrative; the uncanniness of the second stanza lingers into the third. Mourning is evoked by the reference to “moulding” in line nine, the slant rhyme betraying a distinct but ineffable slippage. “Moulding of the wat'ry spheres” imagines the formation of tears as analogous to but separate from weeping. Where the tears of John Donne’s valedictory weeper, for instance, are coined by the image of his beloved, Chlora’s tears simply replicate the substance and form from which they came.<sup>13</sup> They are presumed to flow copiously, as with Donne’s speaker, but also seem to possess a motive agency that exists independent of physical and emotional gravity. The tears are perhaps “precious” for their vitalist essence, for being able to “untie themselves away” from their source—not for carrying the stamp of the deceased. As Stanley Fish puts it, “They are ‘away’ from everything, unrelated, stand-alone, entities that repel the effort to understand them.”<sup>14</sup>

In Barthesian terms, we might say that the *punctum* of doubled eyes and stilled tears has unsettled the *studium* of elegiac mourning. The radical unreadability of Chlora’s tears recalls a moment in *Camera Lucida* when Barthes, describing the shifting *punctum*

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<sup>13</sup> See Donne’s “A Valediction of Weeping,” in *John Donne’s Poetry*, ed. Donald R. Dickson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 96–97:

Let me pour forth  
 My tears before thy face, whilst I stay here,  
 For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear;  
 And by this mintage they are something worth. (1–4)

<sup>14</sup> Stanley Fish, “Marvell’s ‘Mourning,’” in *Shakespeare Up Close: Reading Early Modern Texts*, ed. Russ McDonald, Nicholas D. Nace, and Travis D. Williams (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 116.

in a family portrait by James Van der Zee, suggests the faultiness of direct vision—and in so doing, questions the wisdom of the hermeneutic gaze:

Nothing surprising, then, if sometimes, despite its clarity, the *punctum* should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it. I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly, engaging it in an effort of description which will always miss its point of effect, the *punctum*.<sup>15</sup>

Barthes's belated recognition of the *punctum* comes by way of remembering his aunt's braided gold necklace and marking its resemblance to that worn by one of the women in the photograph. On drawing this connection, Barthes revises his earlier claim that the woman's strapped pumps comprise the photo's *punctum*. "I had just realized," he concludes, "that however immediate and incisive it was, the *punctum* could accommodate a certain latency (but never any scrutiny)."<sup>16</sup> The experience is mirrored in Marvell's speaker's dawning recognition that, despite the suggestiveness of Chlora's features, their chief capacity is to withstand the scrutiny of the gaze. Following the defamiliarizing of her eyes and tears, there is no recourse to the privileged semiotic frame that the speaker had invoked in the first stanza. There he had trusted the astrologers to divine the mystery of Chlora's tears. He had signaled his faith in substitutions and signs through the interwoven Petrarchisms of "human offsprings" (2), "infants" (3), and "stars" (4), all of which trace back to a source that he spells out in the stanza's final two words: "Chlora's eyes" (4). After that first stanza, when her features cease to comply with semiotic logic, the poem's focus shifts from their visual suggestiveness to their latent force, which, as Barthes notes, "shows no preference for morality or good taste: the *punctum* can be ill-bred."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, all further attempts to read her are based on broad, at times lurid speculation, none of it based in empirical evidence. Beyond the photographic image, which fades rapidly into memory as the poem moves along, there is nothing to indicate what she does behind closed doors.

In the end, Marvell's poem thwarts the expectation that Chlora's eyes may serve as a window into her soul, as it does the notion that men's eyes are ordained to make sense, or art, of women's grief. This is perhaps the poem's most robust expression of anti-mourning, its dismantling of the symbolic order of elegy. When the speaker resigns himself to the fact of Chlora's inscrutability, it is not because he cannot crack

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<sup>15</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 53.

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 53

<sup>17</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 43.



the code. It is because the code is irrelevant; her tears, it appears, are always already overdetermined. Rather than join the chorus of detractors who deem her grief false, he bravely declares it might *not* be:

How wide they dream! The Indian slaves  
That dive for pearl through seas profound,  
Would find her tears yet deeper waves,  
And not one of the bottom sound. (29–32)

The troping of Chlora's tears as waves deeper than those assayed by the pearl divers does nothing to make those tears more intelligible. On the contrary, it reinforces their remoteness from common understanding. The question of whether Chlora's feelings are genuine is subsumed by the larger issue of the poem's refusal to assemble erstwhile reliable tropes of grief into something resembling mourning. This refusal is punctuated by the anodyne conclusion the speaker arrives at in the poem's closing lines: "But sure as oft as women weep, / It is to be supposed they grieve" (35–36). In opting out of signifying logic altogether, and instead pointing up a vague synchronicity between weeping and grieving, the speaker completes his transformation from would-be elegist to consummate anti-mourner. He is content, at last, to leave the mystery of women's grief perfectly unresolved.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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