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Surprised by Death, or How Andrew Marvell's Mower Confronts Death in Arcadia

Abstract

Death's crude statement: "Et in Arcadia ego," does not spring surprise on us, as it is a recognizable pastoral convention. But for the naïve and innocent inhabitant of any type of literary Arcadia this is a moment of wonder. Surprised by Death, the coarse Mower of Andrew Marvell's pastoral poems struggles with the unfamiliar. Unaware of the world of urbane manners and unschooled in the *ars moriendi*, he translates the new, puzzling and painful experience into the familiar concepts of his everyday labours. His mind displaced, he looks for the confirmation of his identity in the mirror of his scythe, and when the latter accidentally cuts into his own ankle, the moment of ostensibly naïve *anagnorisis* of the natural man turns into the revelation of the conventional symbol. "Death, thou art a mower too," concludes the clown in a way that may sound simple-minded, but at the same time, has an obvious, though on his part unconscious, reference to a well-known cultural myth. The aim of this paper is to trace the ways Marvellian pastoral personae cope with the wonder of Death by digesting the unfamiliar into the conventional and the aesthetic.

Andrew Marvell's so called Mower Poems have usually been interpreted as the poet's adaptation and transformation of the old bucolic tradition, and three of them, "Damon the Mower," "The Mower to the Glow-worms" and "The Mower's Song," can be regarded as pastoral love complaints provoked by the unrequited love and all-consuming passion for scornful Juliana, who throws into confusion the Mower's serene existence. However, as I am going to argue, what happens in the meadow is more than just a drama of spurned affection, because the Mower's falling in love figures a different fall, one which the naïve rustic can hardly discern at first in his grassy Arcadia, and which he then desperately struggles to name and assimilate.

We can call the Mower a natural man. The world he inhabits he perceives as natural, simple and innocent, albeit he shares it begrudgingly with a character apparently more suitable for a pastoral *locus amoenus* – "the piping shepherd." Yet, notwithstanding the vexatious neighbourhood, the Mower's naïve self-complacency about the special role he plays in the meadows seems unruffled:

What, though the piping shepherd stock
 The plains with an unnumbered flock,
 This scythe of mine discovers wide
 More ground than all his sheep do hide.
 With this the golden fleece I shear
 Of all these closes every year.
 And though in wool more poor than they,
 Yet am I richer far in hay. (Marvell 138)

A man who counts hay as his riches, may resemble the gullible horse-courser duped by Doctor Faustus and the devil into buying a horse which on the first ride turned into a bottle of worthless hay. But the naïve Mower boasts it is his hay, rather than the shepherd's wool, that may rightly be named the golden fleece. This mythological allusion seems to challenge the dominant impression of the Mower's unlearned simple-mindedness, as it subtly reminds us about a peculiar generic blend of cultural sophistication and primitive innocence characteristic of the pastoral mode. However, the implicit comparison of mowing with a heroic quest, rather than bestow signs of intellectual refinement upon the speaker, sounds a note of mild irony about his self-assumed ethos of greatness.

Indeed, the Mower flatters himself on being the hero of the meadow and the focus of particular courtesy of the natural world and its elvish dwellers:

I am the mower Damon, known
 Through all the meadows I have mown.
 On me the morn her dew distills
 Before her darling daffodils.
 And, if at noon my toil me heat,
 The sun himself licks off my sweat.
 While, going home, the ev'ning sweet
 In cowslip water bathes my feet.
 [...] The deathless fairies take me oft
 To lead them in their dances soft;
 And, when I tune myself to sing,
 About me they contract their ring. (Marvell 137–138)

The Mower's powerful assertion of the self within the realm of the meadow courting him with its natural pleasures and pastimes is, nevertheless, consolatory rather than affirmative. As the reader learns early in the poem, this outburst of self-pride was provoked by an event which had sown thistles of doubt as to the adequacy and sufficiency of what this world can offer and to the speaker's assumed importance – that was a sudden sting of desire for haughty and heartless Juliana.

The motif of amorous complications would situate three of the Mower poems within the tradition of pastoral love complaint, especially as Marvell's

indebtedness to Theocritus *Idylls* has been recognised by critics (cf. Smith 135). Indeed, Damon the Mower resembles in many ways one of Theocritus characters Polythemus, a Cyclops inflamed with a wild passion for the sea nymph Galatea. Just like Polythemus' love gifts are (as he believes) best things that his environment can offer: milk, cheese, fawns or bear cubs, so are Damon's presents for Juliana some natural offerings of the meadows:

To thee the harmless snake I bring,
 Disarmed of its teeth and sting;
 To thee chameleons changing hue,
 And oak leaves tipped with honey dew. (Marvell 137)

Predictably, just like Galatea, the Mower's beloved Juliana remains unmoved by the suitor's gifts and his clumsy courtship. However, the most intriguing similarity between the Mower and the Cyclops, albeit faintly implied in Marvell's poem, is the lover's repulsive appearance. In Theocritus version of the Cyclops' courtship, Polythemus demonstrates an acute and, at the same time, a matter-of-fact awareness of his monstrosity, which he frankly admits:

I know my beautiful girl, why you run from me
 A shaggy brow spreads right across my face
 From ear to ear in one unbroken line. Below is a
 Single eye, and above my lip is set a broad flat nose. (Theocritus 34)

The fact that the lover's ugliness is so openly stated in one of the ancient versions of the story, which Marvell must have had in mind when writing his poem, sheds a peculiar light on the Mower's perfunctory remark on his appearance. "Nor am I so deformed to sight, / If in my scythe I looked right" (Marvell 138), he cheers himself up. The odd idea of using the blade of his scythe as a mirror is enough to make one's flesh creep, but it is the implied, although never fully named or pictured, deformity of the speaker that seems most uncanny. Notably, the Mower's face may simply be distorted in a mocking grimace, because, as a homophone of his name suggests, he is also a "mower" – a jester, a mocker, one who mows, who makes mouths and grimaces (Sessions 189). However, if we may at first suspect just a reproachful scowl or mocking expression upon the face of the grumpy Mower, the conclusion of the poem leaves no doubt that the reflection he saw in the scythe must have been something grotesque, impossible to describe, because truly unspeakable – an anamorphic shape of the eternal Mower, the mocker of humanity. In a grim travesty of the Narcissus story, the Mower glances at the ghastly face of death. And as Narcissus could have lived happily, if he had not seen his beauty reflected in a fount, so could have the Mower still enjoyed the illusory Arcadia, if in his sorrow "sharp as his scythe," as the poet says, he had

not caught sight of his own mortality. For the Mower, that is the moment of wonder which unsettles his thoughts, displaces his mind, and almost literally cuts him down:

The edged steel by careless chance
Did into his own ankle glance;
And there among the grass fell down,
By his own scythe, the mower mown. (Marvell 139)

The Narcissus predicament is emphasised in these lines by what David Reid calls a “self-reflexive turn,” which in Marvell’s poetry, according to the critic, involves an “ironic consciousness of self” (Reid 406). However, in the case of the Mower, a *glance* at himself (as the ambiguous use of the word in the stanza implies) is self-destructive rather than truly self-reflective. By drawing our attention to an apparent misuse of the verb “to glance,” Marvell associates a look in the blade-mirror with the wound it inflicts; for the Latin-speaking poet, this rhetorical figure of cathacresis serves rather as an implied “silent” pun on the Latin word *acies*, which denotes both “sharp edge” and “sharpness of vision.” But the latter is not really granted to the Mower; his impediment seems to be that of the Cyclops Polythemus, whose single eye not only marks his deformity, but suggests some impairment of perception. Clearly, the myth seems to have provided the poet with more than just a story of unrequited love; there is yet another distant echo of the Latin word *acies* implied in the poem – the name of Polythemus’ rival, Galatea’s lover Acis, whom the disappointed and jealous Cyclops brutally murders.

However, even in his passionate rage and primitive self-appraisal, Polythemus, when compared to the Mower, is much more acutely aware of his shortcomings, although he may not perceive them as disqualifying from courtship. The Mower’s self-reflection seems closer to that of Narcissus, who, self-absorbed, rather than properly self-aware, does not realise that his self-love is a consequence of a curse (which to his mother seemed at first an innocuous prophecy) that has been upon him since his birth, eventually fulfilled by the inescapable Nemesis. Similarly, the Mower does not seem to realise that the deadly poison has always been running in his veins; even if we read that this is “with love of Juliana” that he was stung – the obvious biblical allusion shifts our focus to a broader context: the sting is that of death, and “the sting of death is sin” (1 Cor. 15:55–56). And the signs of sin, the signs of the Fall and death have always been present in the meadow. If only could the Mower discern them, he might have been better prepared for the blow. If he had “read” those signs, he would have realised the irrevocable truth pronounced by whole nature; the truth that is clearly seen, for example, by the speaker in George Herbert’s poem “Vertue”:

Sweet rose, whose hue angrie and brave
 Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye,
 Thy root is ever in its grave,
 And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
 A box where sweets compacted lie,
 My music shows ye have your closes,
 And all must die. (Herbert 78)

But the Mower cannot yet recognise the signs of death in the fallen nature, even when they invade the language and imagery of his own rueful songs; when to refer to the time of harvest he uses the seemingly innocuous phrase “grass’ fall,” or when he speaks about the thistles love sowed in his mind, how deaf and blind he seems to the significance of those biblical allusions to the fallen condition of earth and decay of human flesh. Nor can he associate the “foolish fires” that lead mowers astray with the fiery Juliana, who is his *ignis fatuus* of sin, the will-o’-the-wisp or puca as the folklore styles it, or the devil himself, the one that tempts and misleads and breeds distance between the Mower and his green Eden, showing him the mocking face of death – death, whose triumphant statement “Et in Arcadia ego” the self-absorbed pastoral Narcissus could not hear before.

But what if the Mower could not have been warned against or prepared for the encounter with death by ubiquitous signs of decay exactly because he did not see them first in himself? In his penetrating observation, Walter Benjamin makes meaning inseparable from death: “There is so much meaning as there is mortality, because it is death that cuts the deepest line of demarcation between physical phenomena and meaning. But if nature has always been mortal, so it must have always been allegorical” (Benjamin 218, trans. K. L.). It seems thus that to be able to see the world of phenomena as endowed with meaning, the Mower has to realise his own mortal condition, to cut his own flesh with the scythe. In other words, in order to see a scull in Arcadia, the Mower has to see first the scull beneath his self-complacent reflection in the mirror.

However, when all of a sudden meanings spring upon the astounded Mower, he tries to repress them by forcing them back into the physical and literal. This is where Marvell’s notorious tendency to literalise the figurative and emblematic, gains prominence (and, probably, a new interpretation). In the analysed passage from “Damon the Mower,” where the steel of the scythe is said to cut down the Mower himself, Nigel Smith recognises a well-known emblem of Time as a mower cutting human life short with his scythe, but in the poem, understood literally by the speaker (139). The Marvellian Mower seems to ignore the deeper

significance of the wound the scythe has inflicted, as he desperately tries to cling to the literal and physical qualities of nature, focusing on its healing and regenerative powers:

‘Alas!’ said he, ‘these hurts are slight
To those that die by Love despite.
With shepherd’s-purse and clown’s-all-heal,
The blood I staunch, and wound I seal.’ (Marvell 139)

True, if taken literally, the wound is slight, but there is a wound, which cuts into flesh like Benjamin’s “line of demarcation,” and which nature cannot heal:

‘Tis Death alone that this must do:
For Death thou art a mower too. (Marvell 139)

This naïve act of the Mower’s self-identification with death is probably one of the most puzzling passages in Marvell’s poetry. The mechanism and movement of figuration seems reversed in the statement. Typically, the world of phenomena is searched for metaphorical or symbolic rendering of what is abstract or impossible to name otherwise; at the same time what becomes a figure is never confused with what it figures – Benjamin’s “line of demarcation” allows no trespassing. But the Mower’s gesture is that of invitation of the emblematic back into the physical. The mower would not be thus an emblem of death, but this is death that becomes one of the mowers, a familiar companion. This is as if the speaker met his picture, his reflection, in the meadow, like Narcissus in the water, and took it for something corporeal, not seeing that it is just a shadow – as is death, which is the abyss, the wound itself, the division and the line of demarcation.

How shall we account for the Mower’s gesture? Is this a naïve misreading of a sign or rather a denial to read it at all, to accept it as signifying rather than simply physical? Or is it that particular emblem that the Mower cannot read, because he realises that what it stands for is actually the space of no-meaning, the threshold, the in-between which belongs neither to the physical nor to the meaning it produces? But what is certain is that, however desperately the Mower tried to escape from meaning into the world of phenomena, the breach affected by the scull he saw in his Arcadia is irreversible. It breeds distance between the Mower and the world; the world of which his mind was once “the true survey [...] / And in the greenness of the grass / Did see its hopes as in a glass” (Marvell 145). Now, he has been expelled from the paradise of unity and thrown into the wilderness of meaning overgrown with the thistles of doubt. As Judith Haber notices, the Mower’s sense of separation and that of doubt come to the surface in the final stanza of “The Mower to Glow-worms”:

[...] a gap has been opened between the physical nature and the realm of the mind that seems impossible to bridge. Thus, for the first time the Mower uses the word "I" distinguishing and isolating himself from the anonymous mowers in the first stanza. And, for the first time, he makes use of logical connectives [...], transforming this world into a series of hierarchical cause and effect relationships. (Haber 100)

This is a sign of the Fall and a mark of growing sophistry in the Mower's way of thinking about himself and the world. And the shift is clearly the same that over a century later William Blake ingeniously captured in one of his pairs of poems – the innocent and affirmative "Divine Image" juxtaposed with the experienced and sophisticated "Human Abstract."

As the breach is irreversible, and the attempted escape from meaning into the literal and the physical turns out impossible, is there any consolation or hope for the Mower? Hope, that he identified with and received from the greenness of the grass, and which now, like grass, has withered. Notably, the Mower does not express the confident Christian belief in and hope for the immortality of the soul that comes as a natural conclusion to George Herbert's initial meditation on nature's decay:

Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
 Like season'd timber, never gives;
 But though the whole world turn to coal,
 Then chiefly lives. (Herbert 78)

What is worth pointing out in Herbert's poem, is the fact that the immortality of the soul is expressed by signs borrowed from the world of nature (the soul is like "seasoned timber") but, at the same time, nature, which is a site of decay and death, is transcended by the significance of the image it provides for. If in Herbert's poem, death also cuts into the physical producing meaning, the movement of significance there is vertical, the meaning that grows from mortality is able to transcend it. This is clearly not the case when the meaning invades the Mower's world, even if he finally seems to accept his predicament. It may be difficult to read the final stanza of "The Mower's Song" as a statement of acceptance, because what precedes it is a violent expression of the Mower's rage and revenge in turning everything to "common ruin." However, when he decides that the "meadows, which have been / Companions of [his] thoughts more green, / Shall now the heraldry become / With which [he] shall adorn [his] tomb," this seems more like a recognition of the new function that the world would now assume – that of signification. Nevertheless, in the Mower poems, this signification never transcends the world of nature that provides for it. This seems to be the Mower's truly pastoral predicament: once an innocent creature of nature, now separated from it but un-

able to step beyond its fallen state. The meaning he now discerns in nature is to him the herald of mortality (just as in the first three stanzas of Herbert's poem), but it is never able to rise from the tomb, for which it serves as an epitaph.

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