

Marvell's Dewdrop: Two Possibilities for the Soul

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The body-soul conflict as delineated by Plato is a topic repeatedly examined in Andrew Marvell's poetry. In his *Phaedrus*, Plato describes the soul as a purely spiritual, disembodied entity existing beyond the physical world, but capable of corporeality.¹ For Plato, the body imprisons the soul, which unrelentingly seeks to capture its incorporeal existence. The point to carry forward here is Plato's presumption that during its bodily occupation, the soul is diminished by its translocation. Though Marvell wrote predominantly in English, throughout his life he occasionally wrote in Latin as well, and he paired several of his Latin poems with English versions treating the same subject. Marvell's Latin "Ros," or "Dew," and its English companion "On a Drop of Dew" are particularly intriguing for they examine the body-soul experience in contrasting ways.²

The English rendering is true to Plato, for the soul is not enhanced by its earthly prison. In "On a Drop of Dew," the soul's earthly arrival is made analogous to dew landing upon a rose. The dewdrop shines like a tear and gazes longingly at the skies from which it departed. It rejects what the earth has to proffer and refuses to conjoin with the rose. Scarcely touching the flower petal and in pain over its condition, the dewdrop trembles "lest it grow impure" (l. 16).³ "So the soul . . .," claims the poem, can "within the human flow'r be seen" (ll. 19, 21). This soul disdains the "Dark beneath," preferring instead the "bright above" (l. 31). It remains in perpetual hope of escape. Here too, in the Platonic sense, the soul is "congealed" and "chill[ed]" (l. 38), suggesting that an earthly existence arrests its energy and deadens its capacities.

Most critics underemphasize Marvell's Latin poetry, and those commenting on "On a Drop of Dew" are no exception.⁴ Chiefly their readings support a strict, Platonic interpretation of the soul's earthly passage in Marvell's English poem. Donald Friedman, for example, notes that the dewdrop is "careless of its mansion new" and "Round itself incloses." This behavior indicates, according to Friedman, that the dewdrop is "self-contained, content, and sustained and, therefore, does not desire to draw sustenance from the earth."⁵ Similarly, J. B. Leishman explains that the dewdrop "tries to create . . . within itself the closest possible resemblance to the celestial sphere from

which it came."⁶ In both readings, the dewdrop and, by association, the soul presume the earth can offer them little. Additionally, J. E. Saveson claims that the poem consistently stresses "the reluctance of the soul toward union with the body," a reluctance Saveson sees as conformable to "a more 'Platonic' view of the relationship between body and soul."⁷ Clearly, then, the English poem emphasizes the soul's aloof separateness and its attitude that earthly life is simply to be endured.

Significantly, a different perspective on the soul is to be found in Marvell's other version of "On a Drop of Dew," his Latin "Ros." Though the events of both poems follow basically parallel patterns,⁸ Elizabeth S. Donno describes the Latin text as "more expansive," and gives the example of the English "blowing roses" becoming the Latin flowers which "stand opened in solicitous desire."⁹ Interestingly, the Latin version creates both more eroticism and more opportunity for the soul. What renders "Ros" remarkable is that Marvell alters the soul's experience by creating a world that first tempts the soul and then *raises* it to an even loftier existence when the soul resists these temptations.

In "Ros" the soul is improved in the course of its earthly passage for "it returns, purer, to the stars whence it fell" (*Ad sua qua cecidit purior astra redit*) (l. 46).¹⁰ The colorful and "solicitous" flowers (l. 3), enticing leaves, "odorous purple" (l. 9) and "soft resting place" (l. 10) create a sensual and tantalizing setting for the dewdrop's arrival, but the dew refuses to intermingle. These earthly charms, rejected by the dewdrop, and by analogy the soul, function as tests to strengthen the soul's resolve and make it even more qualified and entitled to return to the universal.

This significant difference, between the purer soul in "Ros," and the enduring soul in "On a Drop of Dew," points to Marvell's dualistic treatment of the same dewdrop image, one within a Latin poem lacking religious references and the other within an English counterpart ending in Christian overtones. Specifically, in "On a Drop of Dew," the dewdrop returns to "the glories of th'almighty sun" (l. 40), a punning reference to Christ the heavenly Son, who suffered for man and redeemed man by His sacrifice. In the English poem, the soul is elevated not only by its ascendance, but also by its reunification with its Christian source. The earthly experience is trying, but looking to Christ's known purity as a model, the soul endures and ultimately rises.¹¹

Contrastingly, Marvell's Latin companion poem contains no religious references. Reunification with the divine being, therefore, inappropriate in "Ros," it seems logical to anticipate that Marvell will elevate the soul in some other manner, and he does just that. After the dewdrop faces its earthly tests and rejects the enticements offered there, it ascends, but not simply by returning "to the stars whence it fell" (l. 46). Rather, the soul of "Ros" does more than endure its earthly passage; it becomes "purer." Reasonable speculation suggests that Marvell created an ascending and improved soul in the Latin poem as an apt

parallel to the ascending and reunified soul in his English poem. Additionally, "Ros" departs from "On a Drop of Dew" by presenting temptation as a vehicle by which the soul can earn and garner higher glory, making man's fall more fortunate than lamentable and suggesting that the time spent on earth can actually be advantageous, even necessary.

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Notes

¹ Plato, *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters*, trans. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1973), pp. 50-57.

² Dating these paired poems has been a challenge for scholars, and opinions differ as to which came first—the Latin or the English. The dominant view, however, is that Marvell wrote in Latin first and then developed his English companion poems. For critics who argue that the Latin poems were written first, see H. J. C. Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of The Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1921) pp. 239-40; Geraldine Hodgson, "Andrew Marvell, 1621-1678," *Poetry R* 13 (1922), 179-83; Pierre Legouis, *Andrew Marvell: Poet, Puritan, Patriot* (1928; Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), p. 80; and H. M. Margoliouth, *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), I, 219. For arguments favoring the appearance of the English versions first, see Carl E. Bain, "The Latin Poetry of Andrew Marvell," *PQ* 38 (1959), 436-49.

³ All references to poems and line citations refer to *Andrew Marvell: The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth S. Donno (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972).

⁴ Translators William McQueen and Kiffin Rockwell, in *The Latin Poetry of Andrew Marvell* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), p. 2, suggest that though the Latin poems have been treated with "relative silence" which might constitute a "negative judgment on the quality of the . . . poems," it is more probable that "few people have taken the time to sit down and read Marvell's Latin poetry carefully."

⁵ Donald Friedman, *Marvell's Pastoral Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), p. 58.

⁶ J. B. Leishman, *The Art of Marvell's Poetry*, ed. John Butt (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1966), p. 197.

⁷ J. E. Saveson, "Marvell's 'On a Drop of Dew,'" *N&Q* 7 (1958), 289-90.

⁸ McQueen and Rockwell suggest Marvell's intent in the companion poems is to "present a deliberate emulation of the poet by himself in bi-lingual versions of the same subject," p. 12.

⁹ Donno, p. 258.

¹⁰ The generally accepted translation is that of McQueen and Rockwell. For example in her own text, Elizabeth S. Donno relies on McQueen and Rockwell's work.

¹¹ For interpretations of the poem according to Christian theology, see Bruce King, *Marvell's Allegorical Poetry* (New York: Oleander Press, 1977), p. 35, and Richard Giles, "Marvell's 'On a Drop of Dew,'" *Explicator* 39 (1980-81), 14-18.