The Persona in Marvell’s “On a Drop of Dew”

James J. Scott

In “The Voices of Marvell’s Lyrics,” Peter Berek suggests that “Andrew Marvell’s lyric poems articulate a complex and tentative vision of man’s fate by presenting us with a series of brilliantly drawn but limited speakers.”¹ Berek further suggests that “in a number of Marvell’s poems, ‘meaning’ emerges from a dialectic between the ‘ideas’ presented by the speaker and the reader’s own assessment of the credibility of that speaker” (p.151).

An approach similar to Berek’s can be usefully employed in studying Marvell’s “On a Drop of Dew.” The poem gains something if we read it as the statement of a persona created by Marvell rather than as a statement of Marvell himself.

Conventional criticism of “On a Drop of Dew” has not dealt with the possibility that the speaker in the poem is a flawed character created by Marvell, rather than Marvell himself. Most critics, whatever their disagreements about the inferences to be drawn from the poem, treat the poem as if it develops in the following fashion: In the first eighteen lines, Marvell describes a drop of dew. In the next eighteen lines, he shows how the human soul is like that drop of dew. In the last two couplets, he links the drop of dew and the human soul with the “manna’s sacred dew” referred to in Chapter 16 of Exodus and indicates that the goal of all three—the original drop of dew, the human soul, and the “sacred dew”—is to return to their original source.²

The conventional treatment of “On a Drop of Dew” described immediately above depends on the assumption that Marvell succeeds in drawing a close analogy among the original drop of dew, the human soul, and the “manna’s sacred dew.” However, a close analysis of the poem suggests that Marvell does not succeed in drawing such an analogy. Rather, in the early stages of the poem he creates the illusion that he is drawing such an analogy, and in the later stages of the poem he undercuts the very analogy that he seems to be making.

The first eighteen lines of the poem describe a drop of dew. The dewdrop shuns the rose on which it rests—its “mansion new”—and forms itself into a perfect sphere, in an effort to frame “as it can its native element.” It gazes back upon the skies and

Shines with a mournful light
Like its own tear,
Because so long divided from the sphere.³

That is, the dewdrop longs to return to its native element—the sun—and, unable to do so, does the next best thing: it forms into a shape that resembles that native element.

The dewdrop is afraid lest it be contaminated by the purple flower that it touches. “Restless
it rolls and unsecure, / Trembling lest it grow impure.” It continues in this rather neurotic state “Till the warm sun pity its pain,/ And to the skies exhale it back again.”

When Marvell introduces the soul at line 19, he does so in such a way as to imply that he is drawing an analogy between the dewdrop and the soul: “So the soul, that drop, that ray” (my italics). As Friedman points out, it is “as if we were to enter into an epic simile.” Indeed, for seven lines (19-26) the speaker does develop his analogy quite clearly. The dewdrop slightens the flower on which it rests. The soul “Shuns the sweet leaves and blossoms green” of the “human flower” in which it is found. The dewdrop “Frames as it can its native element. The soul “Does, in its pure and circling thoughts, express / The greater heaven in a heaven less.” At this point it appears that both the dewdrop and the soul long for their orginal homes and that each attempts to reconstruct that home within itself.

It is in the next ten lines that the analogy between the dewdrop and the soul breaks down.

In how coy a figure wound,
Every way it turns away;
So the world excluding round,
Yet receiving in the day;
Dark beneath but bright above,
Here disdaining, there in love;
How loose and easy hence to go,
How girt and ready to ascend;
Moving but on a point below,
It all about does upward bend (27-36).

It we juxtapose these lines (which constitute the last complete sentence about the human soul) with lines 15-18 (which constitute the last complete sentence about the drop of dew), a rather curious fact emerges: curious, at least, if we think that Marvell is establishing a close analogy between the dewdrop and the human soul.

The action of the dewdrop is described as follows:
“Restless it rolls and unsecure,/ Trembling lest it grow impure.” The words “restless,” “unsecure,” and “trembling” suggest something or someone that is almost helpless. The impression is reinforced by the lines that follow: “Till the warm sun pity its pain,/ And to the skies exhale it back again” (my italics).

The soul, on the other hand, seems far from helpless. Rather than merely trembling lest it be contaminated by the world around it, it actively succeeds in excluding that world. Instead of fearing its surroundings, the soul disdains them. It is “girt and ready to ascend” to the world from which it came.

With the soul, as with the dewdrop, the choice of adjectives is significant. “Coy,” “loose and easy,” “girt and ready” all suggest someone who is actively looking forward to a resolution to his problem, rather than someone (like the dewdrop) who is waiting for someone else to
pity him.

If we assume—as most critics have assumed—that Marvell was attempting to draw a clear analogy between the drop of dew and the human soul, then the above analysis suggests that he failed in his efforts. However, the above analysis is consistent with the view I put forth earlier—that Marvell creates a persona who tries to draw an analogy between the drop of dew and the human soul and that it is the persona, rather than Marvell, who fails. Structural evidence supports the hypothesis that Marvell—far from drawing such an analogy—is deliberately undercutting it.

There are structural similarities between the section on the drop of dew and the section on the soul. Each consists of eighteen lines. And each consist of two sentences. But these similarities pale in comparison with the structural differences between the two sections.

The section on the drop of dew is divided into sentences of fourteen lines and four lines, while the section on the soul is divided into sentences of eight lines and ten lines. That is, the first sentence on the drop of dew is more than twice as long as the second sentence, while the first sentence on the human soul is shorter than the second sentence. More important, only two lines of the second sentence about the drop of dew are devoted to describing it: “Restless it rolls and unsencure / Trembling lest it grows impure.” The last two lines describe an outside force (the sun) that may or may not choose to rescue the dewdrop from its plight. In contrast, the second sentence describing the human soul devotes all ten lines to depicting the activities and aspirations of that soul. In addition, the meter of the last sentence about the dewdrop is highly irregular, with lines of eight, seven, eight, and ten syllables. In contrast, the last sentence about the human soul is couched in a highly regular meter, with six lines of seven syllables each followed by four lines of eight syllables each. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the irregularity of the lines describing the drop of dew reflect the dewdrop’s feelings of uncertainty about its fate, while the regularity of the lines about the human soul reflect the soul’s conviction that it will eventually return to its original home.

The far I have suggested that in the first 36 lines a personna created by Marvell attempts to draw an analogy between a drop of dew and the human soul that Marvell (and the reader, on close inspection) realizes to be false. Similarly, in the last four lines the persona presents a relationship between the dewdrop and the human soul on the one hand, and the “manna’s sacred dew” from Exodus on the other, that does not stand up under close inspection. The lines read as follows:

> Such did the manna’s sacred dew distill,
> White and entire, though congealed and chill;
> Congealed on earth, but does, dissolving, run
> Into the glories of th’almighty sun. (37-40)

Probably the most tempting way to read the above lines is to see them as establishing an analogy between the “manna’s sacred dew” and the human soul. The human soul, like the “sacred dew,” is congealed (bound to a physical substance) while on earth, but will ultimately
dissolve (sever its ties with the body) and return to its heavenly source.

Another way to read the lines is to view the “sacred dew” as an intervening force, acting upon the soul in a way analogous to the way in which the sun acts upon the dew in lines 17-18. In such a reading, the manna’s sacred dew distills the human soul from its body—allowing the soul to dissolve and return to its original habitat. Berthoff may have had such a reading in mind when she suggested that the sacred dew “sacramentally unites the soul and the dewdrop by a prophesy which gathers up the narrative discourse, moving beyond time.”

However, either of the readings suggested immediately above is contradicted by what happens in Exodus—the source to which Marvell obviously alludes. It makes little sense to assume that the natural condition of the “sacred dew” is one in which it is severed from the physical world, if that dew’s principal function was to be the vehicle by which a physical substance (manna) could be furnished to the Israelites. Again, if the dew’s function was to provide physical nourishment, it is difficult to see how that dew could be the sacramental agent by which the human soul will sever its relationship with its physical environment (the body).

Thus far, I have suggested that the speaker in “On a Drop of Dew” appears to be drawing analogies between the drop of dew and the human soul and between the human soul and the “sacred dew” that delivered manna to the Israelites. I have further suggested that both the poem’s content and its structure serve to undercut those analogies. If what I have suggested is correct, then it is implausible that Marvell intended the poem to be read as his own expression of his view of the human soul. Rather, it is far more likely that Marvell intended the poem to be read as a representation of a flawed human’s flawed attempt to make sense out of his condition.

If we accept the idea that Marvell is presenting the thoughts of, in Berek’s phrase, a “brilliantly drawn but limited speaker,” the poem poses far fewer problems than it does if we assume that the poem presents Marvell’s own views. We can view the speaker as a human being who agonizes over the necessity for the soul to be joined to a body. He tries to find comfort by drawing an analogy between the condition of his own soul and that of a drop of dew. The train of thought that leads him to think about the drop of dew ultimately leads him to think about the “manna’s sacred dew” from Exodus. Shortcircuiting any logical path, he concludes that the manna will be the vehicle enabling him to sever the ties that bind him to his body—forgetting that the true function of manna is the opposite (to provide sustenance for the body). Ultimately, he (the speaker in the poem) slips into a train of thought that leads him to develop a series of analogies that, on close inspection, the reader (and Marvell) realize are false.

If we view the poem in the manner described above, we can see it as Marvell’s description of one human being’s attempt to reason his way out of a predicament in which we are all trapped. The very fact that this individual who desires to escape from his body encounters pitfalls when he attempts to do so suggests that Marvell realizes that our attempts to separate the soul from the body are doomed to failure.

Notes

2 See the following:


4 Friedman, p. 62.

5 Berthoff, p. 30.