MARVELL'S 'THE DEFINITION OF LOVE'

By Dennis Davison

SOURCES for phrases in Marvell's poem have been found in Horace, Cowley, Sidney, Massinger, Montague, and George Herbert. I wish to offer further observations about some words and phrases.

It is often difficult to tell when Marvell is using stock images and vocabulary and when he is being startlingly original. Misses Bradbrook and Lloyd Thomas say that the title presents a paradox, since 'Love, the unruliest of the passions, is to receive a definition. This was a new noun, the earliest known use of it being that of Milton in 1645: it would sound much more technical to a contemporary of Marvell than it does to us.' As a matter of fact the O.E.D. (under 4) lists the use of this noun in its geometrical sense as early as 1571. We must also take into account the fact that Crashaw described Hope as 'Thou by whom/ Our Nothing hath a definition' and Herrick entitled one poem 'The Definition of Beauty'. We are still left wondering, therefore, just how sophisticated or original Marvell's title would have seemed. Miss Tuve has, of course, shown that Marvell's poem was quite a latecomer in the long line of verse definitions of love.

Commentary on the imagery used by Marvell to present Fate has been slight. How far are Marvell's images either original or precise? One must note that Crashaw's Fates also have a 'steely operation' and are associated with 'the Iron-pointed pen,/ That notes the Tragicke Doomes of men.' Again, whereas Thomas Stanley's 'unrelenting Destinies' issue 'mystic dark decrees' Marvell's 'Tyrannick pow'r' employs 'Decrees of Steel' and thereby 'enviously debarrs'. What exactly is the image Marvell has in mind? Is it the (rather inappropriate) shears of Fate, the sword of a tyrant, or the bars of a prison or fence? For Herbert, in the poem where a Marvell source has been located, 'barres' seem to refer to a fence. The same word

2 Andrew Marvell, p. 45.
4 Hesperides (1648). Works, ed. Saintsbury (London, 1905), i. 42.
6 'Another', ed. Martin, p. 171.
8 'The Search' (The Temple, 1633), st. 13.

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crops up in a play about Platonic Love together with other phrases which are near to Marvell’s:

... why should the lawes,
The Iron lawes of Ceremony, barre
Mutual embraces?¹

It would seem in fact that we cannot apprehend Marvell’s image unless we determine what he meant by ‘wedges’ in the lines:

But Fate does Iron wedges drive,
And alwaies crouds it self betwixt.

Misses Bradbrook and Lloyd Thomas suggest that ‘Iron wedges’ recall Horace’s ‘saeva Necessitas . . . cuneos manu gestans aena’: also that they ‘are perhaps meant to be magnetic’ and that ‘there is almost a feeling of crucifixion’.² Mr. Christopher Hill thinks the image comes from industry.³

I believe that a stanza in Herbert’s ‘The Search’ may have been Marvell’s initial source:

When Thou dost turn, and wilt be neare,
What edge so keen,
What point so piercing can appeare
To come between?

If ‘edge’ and ‘point’ (both common substitutes for ‘sword’) suggested Marvell’s ‘wedges’, this supports the notion that Marvell was thinking of some military instrument, and even that he was alluding to the civil war. But there are other possibilities. Spenser had used exactly the same phrase to describe unquiet thoughts or Care:

His name was Care; a blacksmith by his trade,
That neither day nor night, from working spared,
But to small purpose yron wedges made;
Those be vnquiet thoughts, that carefull minds inuade.⁴

After Spenser’s equation of ‘wedges’ and ‘vnquiet thoughts’ Marvell’s image of Fate driving iron wedges into his ‘extended Soul’ seems less bizarre than at first appears. Perhaps, after all, the wedge simply comes from tree-felling: this seems to be a frequent poetic figure.⁵

¹ Ford, Love’s Sacrifice (pub. 1633), v. i. 5–7.
² Andrew Marvell, pp. 45–46. (Mr. S. Whiteley, a classical scholar I have consulted, believes that Horace is drawing on imagery from carpentry or plumbing.)
⁴ Faerie Queene, Bk. iv, canto v, st. xxxv. This, and the references in the following footnote, were supplied by Mr. Gustav Cross.
⁵ Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, i. iii. 315 (Arden edn.). Kyd, The Spanish Tragedie, ii. i. 5. Marston, Antonios Revenge, iif. iii. (Works, ed. H. H. Wood, i. 115). See also O.E.D. under Wedge sb. 1.
The conceit about oblique and parallel lines has been traced to passages in Massinger and Sidney (see p. 141, n. 1). I have suggested a source in Herbert's 'The Search', in which the poet speaks of his distance from, and then his uniting with, God's will: the stanza expressing spiritual unity has already been quoted above, but the stanza which speaks of separation from God is relevant to Marvell's conceit:

Thy will such a strange distance is
As that to it
East and West touch, the poles do kisse,
And parallels meet.

Perhaps Herbert's rapid catalogue of three symbols of impossibility indicates that they are all stock images. Certainly, conceits referring to the meeting of parallel lines according to the laws of perspective do not seem uncommon. The Massinger source probably refers to perspective. Ford has 'lines of differing method/ Meeting in one full centre of delight' and William Fairfax has 'Till both our souls into one spirit run,/ So several lines are in their centre one' (as well as a similar image taken from optics: 'As in the crystal centre of the sight,/ Two subtle beams make but one cone of light.')

The imagery of Marvell's celebrated seventh stanza has always been thought of as geometrical. I wish to raise doubts about this by suggesting that stanzas 5, 6, 7, and 8 are all in fact astrological-astronomical, and therefore also have a unity which has not before been realized.

First of all, I believe that the 'distant Poles' of stanza 5 are the celestial, not the terrestrial, poles. 'Loves whole World', which revolves about these poles, does not refer to the terrestrial globe (which Marvell calls the 'Earth' in the next stanza) but is Marvell's version of the fanciful theory or metaphor often employed by the poets of the Platonic Love cult. This metaphor claimed that the pure spirits of lovers soared to a special celestial sphere of love: as Carew put it, speaking of 'those heavenly bowers',

Yet let our boundless spirits meet,
And in loves sphare each other greet.

The next stanza, with the conceit involving the planisphere, has always been taken to continue the image of the terrestrial poles and globe of the previous stanza: I would claim that it continues the image of the celestial

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1 R.E.S., o.s. xxiii (1947), 267.
3 'To my Mistresse in absence'. Rhodes Dunlap, in his edition of Carew's poems (Oxford, 1949), pp. 223–4, refers to passages in Lovelace's 'To Lucasta, Going beyond the Seas', Randolph's, 'A Platonick Elegie', and Montague's The Shepheard's Paradise, which express the same theory.
poles and sphere. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* the planispheric astrolabe of the seventeenth century was a flat, circular map of the stars, often with such accessories as lines and tables of use to astrologers, and magnetic compasses. Thus, if the 'giddy Heaven fall', the celestial 'World' (as distinct from the 'Earth') would become a planisphere and the celestial poles would coincide. At the same time, of course, this would cause, or be accompanied by, a convulsion in the earthly globe. The precise meaning of 'some new Convulsion' has not previously been recognized: Marvell is referring to the widely held theory of his day that the world had been created in harmoniously regular forms, and that some cataclysm had caused the present irregularity. Thomas Burnet's *Telluris Theoria Sacra* (1681) is perhaps the best-known exposition of this theory, but in another poem Marvell twice bases passages on it:

> The World when first created sure
> Was such a Table rase and pure . . .
> 'Tis not, what once it was, the *World*;
> But a rude heap together hurl'd . . .

Although the passage in Montague claimed as a source for the image of the planisphere deals with the notion of a flattening of the earthly globe, it does not employ the term 'planisphere'. Marvell probably took the suggestion of terrestrial polar coincidence from Montague but transformed it into a celestial image by the introduction of the technical term 'planisphere'.

I have shown that stanzas 5 and 6 are based on astrological-astronomical concepts: stanza 8 obviously is. I think that stanza 7, although it contains some geometrical notions connected with astronomy (which is, after all, celestial geometry), does not present a new and intruding conceit from the realm of Cartesian geometry, but draws still from the field of cosmic imagery. The terms 'lines', 'oblique', and 'angles', in:

> As Lines so Loves oblique may well
> Themselves in every Angle greet

all have specifically astrological-astronomical meanings, and the first two are found in a contemporary poet. The *O.E.D.* gives the following definitions. *Line* (sβ.2 10) 'A circle of the terrestrial or celestial sphere; e.g. *ecliptic, equinoctial, tropic line.*' *Oblique* (a. 2.b) 'Oblique sphere, the celestial or terrestrial sphere when its axis is oblique to the horizon of the place. . . . *Angle* (sβ.2 7) 'A name given to the four astrological 'houses', at the cardinal points of the compass.'

Now, in Herrick's 'The Eye', the expression 'oblique lines' is found as an explicitly astrological-astronomical term:

1 'Upon Appleton House', vv. 445–6, 761–2.
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Make me an heaven; and make me there
Many a lesser and greater sphere.
Make me the straight, and oblique lines;
The Motions, Lations, and the Signes.

Furthermore, Marvell’s next image of parallel lines may not come from geometry or perspective, but, more immediately, from astrology-astronomy. Drayton, in ‘To the New Yeare’, speaks of ‘Those Paralels so euen,/Drawne on the face of Heauen’. Parallel lines, in astrology-astronomy, refer especially to lines on the parallel sphere, ‘the celestial or terrestrial sphere in that position or aspect in which the equator is parallel to the horizon, i.e. at either of the poles: distinguished from oblique and right sphere’.1 In Marvell’s poem the lovers have been placed at the poles: they are thus in parallel spheres. Their lines, i.e. circles on their respective parallel spheres, are therefore both parallel and infinite. Marvell then adds the Euclidian dogma that they ‘can never meet’.

Since I have not at present access to works on astrology I cannot claim that my interpretation of the above lines makes astrological sense. ‘Angle’ may not refer to the cardinal houses or anguli. It may refer to the curvilinear angles formed by the crossing of circular lines on spheres. Even so, the conceit would remain basically astrological-astronomical and so the final four stanzas would form a logical sequence of related images. Astrology-astronomy is the most relevant source for images in a poem which employs the concepts of the Platonic Love cult.

The final stanza is obviously based on astrology-astronomy. The conceit belongs to the traditional idiom for describing star-crossed lovers, and play with technical terms is to be expected. Henry King has: ‘And the conjunction of our lips/Not kisses make, but an Eclipse.’2 Cowley, in ‘Friendship in Absence’ (Miscellanies), says that the souls of lovers are ‘Like loving Stars which oft combine,/Yet not themselves their own Conjunctions know.’ And in ‘The Distance’ (The Mistress) he expresses Marvell’s notion of the opposition of the stars in this lengthier version:

In this our Fortunes equal prove
To Stars, which govern them above;
Our Stars which move for ever round,
With the same Distance still betwixt them found.

I think that ‘The Definition of Love’ proves that a poet may accept

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1 O.E.D. under Parallel (A. 1. b).
fashionable themes and a current idiom and yet produce a poem which is essentially original. The theme of the alternation of Hope and Despair in the Lover was to be met frequently in Caroline verse.¹ For the poets of the Platonic Love cult Fate was particularly malevolent. This poem provides interesting testimony that Marvell was interested in this cult. His attitude no doubt had changed by the time he came to gibe at Parker with this mocking allusion to the cult: 'I do not hear, for all this, that he had ever practised upon the honour of the ladies, but that he preserved always the civility of a Platonick knight-errant.'²

¹ See Crashaw's 'On Hope'; Cowley's 'On Hope'; Stanley's 'Despair', 'Expostulation with Love in Despair', 'Expectation'; King's 'The Forlorn Hope'; Patrick Hannay's 'Sonnet V'; Drayton's 'Amour 37'.
² The Rehearsal Transpro'd (1672), ed. Grosart, iii. 49.