The Principle of Measure in "To His Coy Mistress"
Author(s): Joan Hartwig
Source: College English, Vol. 25, No. 8 (May, 1964), pp. 572-575
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/373126
Accessed: 14-06-2016 04:33 UTC
Marvell’s curious phrase “vegetable love” in “To His Coy Mistress” has been pictured jokingly as a “monstrous and expanding cabbage,”1 or, more aesthetically perhaps, as “sequoia trees and other giant forms of plant life.”2 Either image, or indeed any image likely to be associated with the phrase, will prove embarrassing unless the reader considers Marvell’s lady to be the object of jest rather than of seduction. Few women, after all, choose even metaphoric cabbages for lovers.

A delightful jest undeniably enhances stanza one, but its humor depends upon philosophical knowledge rather than upon a comic picture of enlarging vegetables. As J. V. Cunningham points out: “Vegetable is no vegetable but an abstract and philosophical term, known as such to every educated man of Marvell’s day. Its context is the doctrine of the three souls: the rational . . . the sensitive . . . and, finally, the lowest of the three, the vegetable soul. . . . It is an intellectual image, and hence no image at all but a conceit. . . . It is a piece of wit.”3

Although Marvell was probably familiar with Robert Burton’s adaptation of the doctrine of the tripartite soul in The Anatomy of Melancholy,4 the intellectual play of his syllogistic poem suggests a direct knowledge of Aristotle’s presentation, which interweaves the doctrine of souls with ideas concerning potential and actual.

The “vegetable” whereof Marvell speaks is in Aristotle the least active of all the types of souls; its potential includes only the power to attain and retain existence by the process of nutrition (including reproduction), decay, and growth (De Anima, II.413a.24-25).5 Potential for “being” increases, first, with the sensitive soul, which may perceive and move locally, and, finally, with the rational soul, which possesses the additional capacity for calculation and thought (De Anima, II.415a.1-11).

Just as Aristotle uses these divisions to define a relationship—between matter, existing potentially, and soul, matter’s activator—so Marvell alludes to the philosophical divisions “vegetable,” not in order to describe a “sequoia tree” or even a “cedar of Lebanon,” but in order to distinguish between levels of potentiality.6 The vegetable state has potential only to grow, decay, and feed itself; and

3 Tradition and Poetic Structure, p. 45. Helen Gardner, The Metaphysical Poets (1959), p. 249, has also noted this to be a reference to “the vegetable soul [which] had only two powers: growth and reproduction.”

Miss Hartwig, who teaches English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, presented this paper at the South Atlantic Modern Language Association meeting in Atlanta, November 14-16, 1963.
when the vegetable soul activates these potentialities, the vegetable becomes actual, realizing to the fullest its capacities for being. Man, on the other hand, possesses the potentiality to grow, decay, feed himself, perceive through the senses, move himself, calculate, and think. To actualize only his lowest powers of being, as Marvell suggests in stanza one, is to reduce himself to a state of minimal existence. To activate all his powers, however, would be to achieve a state of almost complete actuality, and, in the Aristotelian scheme, actuality is ultimately synonymous with perfection.

One further point from Aristotle, intimately connected with the divisions of soul and the idea of potential and actual, and, not incidentally, with Marvell's poem, is the significance of motion. In Physica, Aristotle defines motion as "the fulfillment of what exists potentially" (III.201a.10), and further states that "not only do we measure the movement by the time, but also the time by the movement, because they define each other" (IV.220b.15). In "To His Coy Mistress" as well, motion is the fulfillment of potential, and time is the measurer and definer of such movement from potential to actual. Notice Marvell's use of motion (or lack of it) in stanza one:

We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, ................
My vegetable Love should grow
Vaster than Empires, and more slow....
Nor would I love at lower rate.7

Because the vegetable's potential is the least of the divisions of being, the motion of actualization is reduced in this stanza to its minimum. For man to actualize all of his potential at the minimum rate of vegetable motion, however, would require a maximum extension of space and time.

The equation between time and space and motion begins its determining operation with the opening lines of the poem: "Had we but World enough, and Time. . . ." The measure of vegetable motion, or "vegetable love," would be slower than the time which measures man's normal movement from potential to actual. In the first stanza, then, Marvell speculates upon a hypothetically extended time-space-motion equation; in the second stanza, he views the realistic negation of such a state; in the third, he suggests a reversal of the equation: speeded motion hurries time and compresses space.

Upon such a philosophical, abstract frame, Marvell builds his effective argument for seduction. Examination of the frame's embodiments will reveal how effective an argument it is.

The space required for "vegetable love" to complete its movement from potential to actual is defined in stanza one as the distance between the "Indian Ganges" and the "tide of Humber"—indeed, all the world. The vegetable love would eventually cover this space, growing "vaster than Empires," but its growth would require a "long Loves Day": all of the time from "before the Flood . . . till the Conversion of the Jews," a conversion that was to occur just before the world dissolved.8 As time expanded, "loves day" would lengthen, and the sun, which measures this duration, would slow its journey across the world until each minute equaled an age.

The vegetable process would thus spread from the beginning to the end of time and from one end of the world to the other, through the slow motion of the most passive state possible to man. The slowly-grown, carefully-nourished love would reach actualization only just at the end of the world, the end of space,
motion, and time. The consummation, the ultimate actuality, would then coincide with the dissolution of its constituents. What finer consummation could be wished? And this is the state the poet's lady deserves "Nor would I love at lower rate," he assures her. Yet, at the height of compliment the lover's hyperbole turns playfully upon itself: regardless of his will, he could not love at lower rate because the idealized vegetable state is the minimum state available to any type of soul.

"But," the poet says, no longer teasing, but voicing his realistic and proximate complaint, "at my back I alwaies hear/ Times winged Charriot hurrying near," pushing us not to vegetable vastness but to the "desarts of vast Eternity." The image of time's chariot reiterates, with increased speed, the association between time and its instrument of measure, the sun. In the vastness of eternity to which time pushes the lovers, there will be no motion to measure, and no time; no one will see the lady's beauty, nor will it exist; the poet will not sing, nor could his song be heard; appetite in the form of lust will cease; no embrace will satisfy the sense of touch. The powers of the sensitive soul will be reduced below the point of potential; in the grave only the worms may act.

This stanza, more sombre in tone than the first, has its level of jest as well; but like the first stanza, the humor includes, rather than excludes, the lady's perception of it. The grave would, indeed, make a fine lovers' bower, if the dead had being. But they do not, and, the poet says sternly, neither shall we. He forces her to recognize that they are caught in a vise: time's hurrying on one side, eternity's motionlessness on the other.

In a complexity of interrelated but unextended images, the final stanza ties together all of the lines of intellectual play hitherto suggested. The first four lines,

Now therefore, while the youthful hew
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing Soul transpires
At every pore with instant Fires,

draw attention to the lady's plantlike affinities—dew and transpiration—at the same time they suggest her human capacities for being, showing in effect that the highest category of soul subsumes all the other powers of soul. The image also may allude to the theory of Democritus (described in Aristotle's De Anima, I.404a.1-4) that the soul is composed of particles, or atoms of fire, which the body inhales and exhales. Nor is Aristotle's principle of potential and actual to be forgotten at this point. The soul, he states at the beginning of his classification, is the primary actualizing agent of the body, which is potential. The lady's soul is "willing" to act. Thus, her soul can be the actualizing agent for the body's potentiality—of both her and her lover—just as the poet's body and soul can actualize her. Becoming like each other at the point of actualization or transformation, the lovers will be potential no longer. Their sexual consummation, an act of both body and soul, will be for them a perfect state of actuality.

Thus far, Marvell has presented the processes of increase, decrease, and respiration (motions of the vegetable and sensitive souls), suggesting as well the potentialities of the rational soul. At this point he moves into an intensely active

---

3 Margoliouth suggests the dialectal word lew, meaning "warmth," as the correct reading here. "Dew" is a conjectural emendation adopted by most anthologists, including Miss Gardner, Summers, and Brooks, Purser, and Warren. The moisture of youth being burnt off by time's hurrying chariot, the progress of decay, as in Aristotle, from moisture to dryness, together with the suggested affinity to the vegetable state, are my reasons for adopting "dew" as the more likely reading.

---

image of the higher power of local motion, or self-movement:

Now let us sport us while we may;  
And now, like am'rous birds of prey,  
Rather at once our Time devour,  
Than languish in his slow-chapt pow'r.  
Let us roll all our Strength, and all  
Our sweetness, up into one Ball:  
And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,  
Thorough the Iron gates of Life.

The activation of images, verbs, and rhythm is perhaps too obvious to specify, but the reversal of roles which the poet advises is worth noting. Rather than allow time to devour us in his slow-moving, but powerful jaws (a further suggestion of the vise presented in stanza two), we can devour him in an instant of activity—just as birds of prey attack their food. The “birds of prey” image may be meant to intensify action even further. According to a long-standing myth, eagles, or hawks, when they copulate, soar high into the air, unite into a ball, and plummet through the air, breaking apart before colliding with the earth.11 The aesthetic connection between “am'rous birds of prey” and the lovers’ rolling themselves into a ball thus would reinforce both images. In any case, the poet urges that, having little space at best, we can compress our space into one ball, and by compression, we can intensify. We shall actualize all our potential for local motion and “tear our

Pleasures with rough strife”; we will wage intense and persistent sexual strife at the “Iron gates of Life,” the limitations of the temporal realm. We will tear from our limits the most complete actuality possible to us.

Not only can we intensify locomotion, but we can also perfect motion itself by making it circular.12 Our created and perfected motion will then become time’s measurer, as well as time’s measured.

Thus, though we cannot make our Sun Stand still, yet we will make him run. Complete actuality, or stasis, the all-perceiving moment of eternity, cannot be ours, but we can at least achieve analogical perfection by forcing our potential to its actuality.

Marvell’s final triumph, then, is a replacement of the instrument of time’s measure with the sun which the lovers form in their act of consummation (“our Sun”).13 No longer victims of time, but momentary masters, the poet and his mistress, if she concedes, will have won the greatest victory possible to man within the limitations of life. Whether the victory is enough, being limited by life, is now the lady’s question. But the argument could hardly be more persuasive.

11I have been unable to verify this theory of the birds’ copulation, but it seems to be a familiar concept to biologists as well as to Marvell’s literary critics.

12The highest form of motion, Aristotle says (Physica, VIII.216a.18), is locomotion, acquired in the course of becoming perfected, and the most perfect, most actual locomotion is circular.

13Lawrence W. Hyman, “Marvell’s ‘Coy Mistress’ and Desperate Lover,” MLN, 75 (January 1960), 10, likewise sees an equation between the lovers’ “Ball” and “our Sun.”