



Metaphysical Concepts of Time and Space in Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*

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Keywords

Andrew Marvell,
metaphysical poetry,
space, time, To His Coy
Mistress.

Article History

Received

20 July, 2017

Revised

15 Aug, 2017

Accepted

16 Aug, 2017

Abstract

Was Andrew Marvell a poet of the Renaissance spirit? The rebirth movement of the philosophy and literature had a tardy entry to English literature with new forms and themes. Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* displays significant references to the metaphysical concepts of time and space, the discussions which date back to the ancient Greece and Rome. However, the poem manifests medieval way of considering time and space. The metaphysical poetry of Marvell combined with the *carpe diem* theme illustrates an ingenious argumentation with imagery related to the concept of time. The present paper examines Marvell's argumentation related to time and space in terms of medieval metaphysics.

1. Introduction

During the Renaissance Period in England in 17th century, Andrew Marvell appeared as one of the leading metaphysical poets with his well-known and discussed metaphysical poem entitled "To His Coy Mistress". Marvell's poetry displays the characteristics of metaphysical poetry such as the use of extended imagery, paradox and the references to metaphysical concepts. The present study examines one of the major problems in metaphysics, namely the problem of space and time and how the problem is handled in Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*. The discussions about the concepts of space and time date back to antiquity. Firstly, the characteristics of metaphysical poetry, the theme of *carpe diem* and Andrew Marvell as one of the major metaphysical poets are reviewed. Then, the concepts of space and time in the history of philosophy until Marvell's time are discussed. In the final section, Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* is examined in terms of conceits and paradoxes. The link between the metaphysical problems of space and time and Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* is established together with the *carpe diem* theme.

2. Marvell, Metaphysical Poetry and *Carpe Diem*

Although it was a political decline for the monarchy, the 17th century England was a setting for many inspiring and breathtaking novelty for men of letters. Among

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these changes was a new type of poetry entitled as metaphysical, which allowed for ingenious verse of conceit and paradox. Even the love poems of this type were intellectual rather than romantic (Pfordresher et all., 1999). Metaphysical poets drew a vision of the “whole” human being. The wholeness is described as “... that human beings are not just emotional or just intellectual, but are composed of body, mind, and soul (...) which are interrelated and interdependent (Van Emden, 1986). Metaphysical poetry emphasizes the capacity of human mind to recollect and to inquire. “The mind operates for recollection of or inquiry for either something already learned or something new to be learned.” Metaphysical poetry is a combination of emotion and intellectual ingenuity. However, it is less concerned with expression of emotions and more with analyzing them. Intellectual ingenuity is manifested through the use of conceit and paradox, which are the elements of the well-known figurative language of metaphysical poetry.

As mentioned above metaphysical verses are well-known with the poets’ use of two literary devices: conceit and paradox. In using a conceit, the poet establishes a connection of similarity by comparing two unlike things in an ingenious style. Bloom points out that “it is a device by which the extremes of abstraction and concreteness, the extremes of unlikeness, may be woven together into a fabric or argument unified by the prevailing force of wit” (Bloom, 2010). Similarly, Abrams (1991) describes conceit as a literary device which establishes “a striking parallel, usually ingeniously elaborate, between two very dissimilar things or situations”. The second literary device preferred by metaphysical poets is paradox which is a self-contradictory statement, which still seems to be true. “A paradox is a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes good sense” (Abrams, 1991: 201).

Metaphysical wit is defined by T.S. Eliot thus: “it implies a constant inspection and criticism of experience. It involves, probably, a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible”. The human intellect is capable of observing, viewing, analyzing and thinking. The experience of human mind is an important concept witnessed by metaphysical poets. The experience is later associated with the problem of man’s existence. The place of human beings in the universe, their place in time and space are typically explored in metaphysical poetry. Wit is manifested through combining dissimilar images and discovering unlikely resemblances in things. Metaphysical wit exhibits illustrations, comparisons, and allusions. Metaphysical poets do not copy others’ descriptions or imitations and no traditional imagery can be observed in their poetry. The use of conceit, for instance, is a particular form of wit. Conceit is an extended metaphor because the image is explored and developed at length.

In the 20th century Andrew Marvell was considered to be one of the most notable poets of his century. In the course of 17th century Andrew Marvell was a pioneer in the kind of bitter political verse satire that would be perfected later by his contemporaries. Marvell was the poet of a various lyrics that blend Cavalier grace with Metaphysical wit and complexity. As a bitter satirist and polemicist, he attacked the royal court and the established church in both prose and verse. Marvell's satires won him a reputation in his own day as a patriotic political writer who attacked the court corruption and who defended religious and political liberty

and the rights of the Parliament. However, his lyrical poems attracted serious attention in the 19th century with T. S. Eliot's classic essay on Marvell's poetic style and he attained recognition as one of the major lyric poets of his age. Today he is still well remembered with his classic metaphysical poem entitled *To His Coy Mistress*.

Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* is recognized with the metaphysical references to the concepts of time and space and the use of *carpe diem* theme which was popular during Marvell's era. *Carpe Diem* is a Latin phrase firstly uttered by the Roman poet Horace to express the idea that one should enjoy life and seize the moment. *Carpe Diem* theme is especially present in 16th- and 17th-century English poetry. Two prominent English poets associated with *carpe diem* theme are Robert Herrick with his *To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time* and Andrew Marvell with his *To His Coy Mistress*. In most of the renaissance poems on *carpe diem* theme, the speakers try to urge young ladies to live the moment while still they can. The speaker in a *carpe diem* poem, who is usually a young man, has to put forward certain reasons to support his argument. One reason is the swift passage of time which doesn't stop but hurries on. The next reason is an inevitable outcome of the first; with the swift passage of time, some of the qualities that people possess diminish. Associated with this loss of qualities, the speaker frequently refers to the reality of death which one can face at any time. That is why, it is important to make most of the moment that one experiences. Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* is a notable representative of *carpe diem* poetry as well as the metaphysical. Although on the surface *To His Coy Mistress* is a love poem with *carpe diem* theme, the references to time and space as metaphysical concepts in order to exaggerate the condition of the couple require exploration of the concepts in question.

3. Space and Time in Metaphysics

Metaphysics is a field of philosophy that investigates that which comes after physics. The source of metaphysical questions is the physical world. However, these questions go beyond the factual and scientific ones about the world. A major part of metaphysics is ontology which studies being. How the notions of being, existence, and subsistence are related together is a problem of ontology. The distinction between the body and the soul, the discussion about space and time, the problem of identity and causation, or the existence of individual and universal are some examples of topics discussed in metaphysics. For the purposes of the present study, it is important to focus on the conceptual discussions about space and time in metaphysics.

The concepts of space and time have been topics for discussion throughout the history of philosophy. Before the theory of relativity put forward by Albert Einstein in 1905, space and time had been considered as related aspects of a single entity and treated like philosophical pairs of abstraction. In his *Transcendental Aesthetics*, Kant's theory of these two concepts was a theory that regarded them as single and unified concepts. These concepts were addressed like "two members of a species and they certainly raise similar philosophical questions." The extension of time and space infinitely, the boundaries of space and time, spatial and temporal relations of objects and events to each other or the relation of space and time to the inhabitants have been possible issues of discussion (Inwagen & Sullivan, 2016).

Metaphysical discussions of these concepts gave rise to the issues of relation and order, the use of coordinates, magnitude and metric, and the status of entity. How relation and order are related constitute a basic problem for the theory of space and time. Events happen in time and things are located in space. When the temporality is considered the events happen in a special order. In case of spatiality, it is argued that things have a certain position when contrasted with each other. It is clear that events and things have certain basic relations in time and space. Temporal relations of events brings forth temporal order while spatial relations of things spatial order. In case of the use of coordinates it is observed that we sometimes rank certain things, people, or events by use of coordinates. It is possible that instead of saying "x is better than y" and "z is the best", we rank them with the use of numbers. Mathematical relations among the coordinates we use to rank them are reflections of relations among the entities that we describe. Additionally, events take place in a temporal order and sometimes we describe the events by referring to the temporal magnitude, in other words, the duration between the dates of their occurrences. The status of time and space as entities is another point of hot debate. Grammatically, they are singular terms which can be used as the subjects of singular verbs. However, singular terms refer to specific things and the question rises about the references of time and space. The question is whether space and time refer to certain entities and if so, what kind of entities they are (Van Fraassen, 2013).

The discussion about the concepts of space and time has a long history starting in Antiquity. Aristotle focuses on movement in his Physics, and relates the concept to that of change. Change involves three things: one thing that changes, the initial condition of that thing and the final condition of the thing. We attribute certain properties to things and change takes place as one thing changes from one property to another property. Aristotle's change is movement or process. "The movement may be a change with respect to quality, quantity, or place" (Van Fraassen, p. 20). Plato's view of time is an identification of time with process which was objected by Aristotle. Aristotle argued that "a change or process has a location in space, which time does not. Second, movement is fast or slow, but there is no literal sense in which time is fast or slow" (Van Fraassen, p. 22). Medieval philosophy formulates time as the measure of motion with respect to before and after. Local motion is measured with respect to spatial relations or with respect to temporal ones. Aristotle puts forward two arguments about time and movement. Firstly, the world, motion and time have no beginning and shall have no end. The beginning of time is inconceivable because we always conceive of a before and an after. Second argument is that time is an aspect of movement; so one cannot speak of time where there is no movement. Aristotle's arguments were challenge to the doctrine of creation for later philosophers. If the world is created by God, the movement would have a beginning. Aquinas, for instance, agreed that time is dependent on movement. However, ages later, Newton rejected the entire Aristotelian theory of time. Aristotle's theory of time was systematized in the middle ages and even the theory of time developed by the Cartesians was close to this systematized form. Scholastics asserted that there are two primary characteristics of substances: quality and quantity. The characteristic of quantity is of extension and number. The quantity of extension is either permanent which is

related to space or successive which is related to duration. However, the theory of time developed by Descartes focuses on the distinction between movement and time as a distinction of reason alone. For Descartes, time is only a mode of thinking. Descartes argued that the essence of material substance is a spatial extension in length, breadth and depth. The three-dimensional extension constitutes the space occupied by a body. Space and body cannot exist separate from each other. Descartes asserts that space is a kind of conceptual abstraction from bodily spatial extension and he calls it internal place. The body that fills in the space may change, however the extension of the space remain one and the same. Descartes argues that rest and motion are different bodily states (Hatfield, 2016).

Time, space and motion are basic forms of existence of matter, which cannot exist without the other. The interdependence of the concepts of time, space and motion had already been proposed by Aristotle centuries before Newton. The philosophers like Leibniz and Kant argued that time were nothing other than a mental representation. Bergson went one step further and claimed that man does not live in time, but, time is within man. The concepts of absolute time and absolute space was put forward by Newton who asserted that space and time are independent of matter as well as human beings. However, years later it was Einstein who demonstrated that time and space are relative. To sum up, all material objects occupy space and happen to be somewhere when compared to other objects. All material processes trace one another in a particular order and evolve in time. The philosophical discussions about space reflect the universal distribution of infinite and innumerable objects of existence and time, the universal distribution of infinite and innumerable facts happening after one another.

In Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*, while arguing that his mistress should abandon her unnecessary coyness, the impatient speaker refers to the metaphysical concepts of time and space in order to create a fictive world of love. Marvell's achievement is to blend the metaphysical references with the idea of *carpe diem* so that the metaphysical concepts of time and space could better be explored through the idea of swift passage of time. Time is an enemy to rob the couple of the opportunity to love because of the idea of finite time. As for the couple is jammed in a limited time and place, it appears that there is the conflict among love, time and space.

4. Time, Space and Love in *To His Coy Mistress*

On the surface, the poem appears to be on the theme of love which is explored through some references to the field of metaphysics and to the concept of *carpe diem*. The poem is in three extended stanzas, each of which is a step towards the speaker's target of persuading his mistress for a relationship. In order to seduce his mistress, he appeals to the main arguments emphasized by the *carpe diem* theme like swift passage of time, the inevitable death and time's being an enemy of our virtues. Each stanza begins with a three lettered word signifying the content of that stanza.

The first line of the first stanza begins with a three lettered word "Had" and Marvell says "Had we but world enough, and time," the inverted language form

signals that what the speaker is going to express is about unreal present. All through the first stanza, the speaker describes a world of infiniteness in terms of time and space. In such an imaginary world, the couple would have "enough world and time" in which they would spend ages, with her being coy and his being patient. If space and time permitted, her coyness would not be a crime. The idea of infinite space and time as something that can only be imagined but cannot be real is developed through some exaggerations. The first exaggeration is about space, which would allow them to go wherever they want no matter how far. She would then go and sit "by the Indian Ganges' side" with having various intentions like finding rubies. At the same time the space would permit the speaker to live in a far-away place and to miss her when sitting "by the tide of Humber". The second exaggeration is about time, permitting the mistress to be coy and refuse him for ages and the speaker loving and trying to persuade her from "the flood" until "the conversion of the Jews". The two events chosen by Marvell designate the recreation of man after Adam and the belief that the Jews will be converted to Christianity before the end of the world. The speaker's illusion of loving her is from the beginning till the end of the world and the mistress's refusing him until the last age. He imagines being given all the time and place in life, he would spend his life loving, praising and waiting for her. Marvell uses a conceit in order to compare their love to the growth of vegetable. If eternity and infinity permitted the lovers, they would grow and enrich their love and make it like a "vegetable love", growing slowly and becoming bigger than empires.

Marvell refers to the concepts of time and place as having a beginning and an end which is against Aristotle's arguments of time and place with no beginning or end. Aristotle argues that the world itself must be eternal; it did not come into existence but it has always been. As pointed before, Aristotle's idea of space and time does not accord with the Biblical account of Creation. Marvell's ideas about these concepts are closer to the doctrine of creation of medieval philosophers. If the world is created by God, the movement and time would have a beginning. Augustine is the first philosopher who presented an argument for the reality of Creation against Aristotle about the discussion of time, saying that knowledge of time depends on the knowledge of the movement of things. In this way, time cannot be unless there are no creatures to measure its passing. Marvell's discussion of time and space is similar to medieval philosophers' concept of the universe having a finite past with a beginning.

Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* manifests his idea of a created world, with a beginning and an appointed end. He refers to the Biblical story of the "Noah's Flood" as the recreation of men and "the conversion of the Jews" which was popularly believed to be the last event before the end of the world in Marvell's time. According to Marvell, time and universe have a beginning and an end. If there is no time prior to creation, then the existence of God to bring the universe into creation would be a problem. The solution is a perfect, unchanging, eternal God that is not subject to time. God is eternal, outside time and man is temporal. Time can only exist after God creates and initiates movement. Marvell's speaker and mistress in *To His Coy Mistress* are temporal beings even in his world of

imagination. The faerie world he describes in the first stanza allows the couple to live from after creation until the Last Judgement.

Marvell prefers to use exaggerated descriptions by referring to both concepts of time and place as if pointing the interdependence of them. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas argues that time and motion are always perceived in relation to one another. The occurrences of events follow one another; motion upon motion and the occurrence of each motion is realized in a different 'now'. Time is going on whenever we perceive one moving item is followed by another. In the fourteenth century, William of Ockham suggests that time is the measure of movements and the length of a movement is what we recognize as time. The consideration of time and space together does not only read in the Medieval Period. The whole history of philosophy discusses these two concepts as related to each other.

The second stanza in *To His Coy Mistress* opens with another three-lettered word "But" which wakes the reader up from his dream into the world of reality. The world of reality is a turn towards the carpe diem theme of the poem. The speaker describes the real world in which time is running fast like "a winged chariot". The movement is inevitable; it is impossible to stay out of flux. He points that what lies in the future is an unknown, the remark that signals the idea of death. The inevitable reality of death, the swift passage of time and the loss of qualities like passion, beauty or willingness are arguments of carpe diem theme. These arguments are put forward by the speaker in the second stanza. As time is flying, both the speaker and his mistress are getting older which is the loss of youth. The future may bring the reality of death at any now. The beauty possessed by the mistress can no longer be found in when her dead body is lying in her grave. The love songs of the speaker will then echo in her marble grave. His passion and desire for her will turn into dust after death. The speaker finishes the exploration of the carpe diem theme by reminding the grave as being the final private place for each in which it is impossible to embrace each other.

The third stanza is opens with another three-lettered word "now" suggesting that the speaker is going to conclude with what they should do at the moment. The carpe diem theme emphasizes that it is important to act now while still alive, beautiful, and passionate. Once the world is recognized as it is in the second stanza, now is the time to take an action. The speaker reminds his mistress that she has the "youthful hue" and that her "willing soul transpires at every pore with instant fires". The youth is the period of one's life during when she is healthy, passionate and willing. The third stanza treats time as an enemy to be feared. Time is like the antagonist waiting eagerly to oppose, to defeat and to eat them. Time is personified by Marvell and becomes a challenge for the speaker and an element used to invite his mistress to make love. The final lines of the poem "Thus, though we cannot make our sun stand still, yet we will make him run" are reference to mythological elements of the literature in Antiquity. The poem belongs to the Renaissance period during when the idea of rebirth swept English literature. The rebirth is of the ideas, styles, arts, sciences, philosophy and literature of the Greeks. The way Marvell handles the concepts of time and space is mostly contrary to Greek philosophers of nature; however, he refers to the myths favored by the Greeks at

the end of his poem. The speaker admits that “we cannot make our sun stand still”, but suggests that “we will make him run”. Here, once again Marvell refers to the Bible, specifically to Joshua 10 where Joshua prayed to God for sun to stand still. To stop the sun and the moon means to stop time. Marvell’s speaker knows for sure that unlike Joshua, he cannot stop time. What he suggests doing is to make best use of it.

5. Conclusion

The present study focused on the bridge constructed between the metaphysical conception of time and space and metaphysical poetry of the Renaissance literature in England. Specifically, Andrew Marvell’s poem entitled “To His Coy Mistress” is explored to point out the relation. The Renaissance literature in England was mostly under the influence of the rebirth spirit of the Antiquity. Renaissance has been defined as the rebirth of scholarship based on classical learning and philosophy in ancient Greece and Rome. The discussions about the metaphysical concepts of time and space date back to Antiquity. However, unlike most of the other Renaissance poems with references to Antiquity, Marvell’s conception of these two concepts in *To His Coy Mistress* is similar to that of medieval philosophy. Marvell’s poetry displayed traces of the medieval ideas of space and time most of which were contrary to Aristotle’s view of space and time.

The poem in question handles the everyday concepts of space and time in a metaphysical way of discussion. The time and space are two concepts considered to be interdependent and Marvell refers to both of the concepts as if recalling that they should be considered together. The illustrations and exaggerations pictured in the poem suggest that Marvell treats space and time as having a beginning and an end. Marvell receives support from the Bible while trying to argue against Aristotle’s idea of an eternal space and time. Marvell’s speaker points the beginning of time with reference to Biblical story of Noah’s Flood and the end of time with reference to the Conversion of the Jews. The rebirth spirit of the Renaissance can be observed in Marvell’s *To His Coy Mistress* in his logical progression in the logical argument stepping towards the target of the speaker. Marvell’s presentation of the situation and powerful analysis produces an intellectual scheme. He recalls Aristotle’s syllogism in his unique way by proposing two premises in stanza 1 beginning with “if” and stanza 2 beginning with “but” and a final stanza of a conclusion beginning with “therefore”. Marvell’s intellectual ingenuity when combined with imagination and power in logical argumentation displays the rebirth of Aristotle’s logic. The argumentation is used to support the *carpe diem* theme. The argumentation moves from the idea if the world were large enough and time long enough. The reader is embraced within a world going on from the beginning until the end of the world, in which one can move in every possible direction. However, the argument is followed with the real world which is indeed harsh. The description of the reality that time flies and robs us of youth is necessary to urge the mistress to submit to the speaker’s embraces before her beauty fades and before death. The reader is faced with the metaphysical enemy, time which keeps us pressing onward and prevents man from going back. The ingeniously constructed and presented argument ends with a natural conclusion to the two premises “if” and “but”. The third stanza of “therefore” concludes with a necessary solution. What should be done is to do one’s best to defeat the

metaphysical enemy of time. Before it is too late and before the enemy, time swallows the lovers, they should make good use of time. Marvell's powerful use of reasoning together with his ability to use language and his references to metaphysical concepts are the reasons that make the speaker's argumentation persuasive.

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