EFFECTIVE PORTRAYAL OF THE DESTRUCTIVENESS OF TIME IN “TO HIS COY MISTRESS”

Andrew Marvell’s metaphysical lyric poem, “To his Coy Mistress”, effectively portrays the destructive nature of time. The narrator’s manipulation of time is central to the carpe diem argument: he conjectures that were there enough time, his lady’s refusal of his amorous advances would be “no crime” but, as time destroys all things, they must take advantage of the time they have to indulge their desire for each other.

The actual imagery of the destructiveness of time is concentrated in the second stanza and in particular in the image which appears in the middle of this stanza, when speaking of what will happen to his mistress, and to him, after death:

…; then worms shall try

That long preserv’d virginity,

And your quaint honour turn to dust,

And into ashes all my lust.

This image shows the horror of decay but in a particularly shocking and graphic way. Worm imagery in poems on the contemplation of the transience of life is nothing new, but what is new is the explicit sexual referencing Marvell engages in. The metaphysical conceit, setting the phallic association of the worm against the virginity of the woman, creates a very destructive and invasive image far beyond any sense of propriety. Further adding to the power of the destructive image, is the continuation of the conceit, revealing the complete annihilation the worms will wreak: the funereal lexicon of “dust” and “ashes” adds weight to the completeness of the destruction of all their wishes and desires – hers as well as his.

It is not only the imagery that lends power to this destructiveness; as implied above, the sentiments also, because central to the poem, adds force to the picture. The long preserved virginity has always been at the centre of the poem: it reflects both, her notion of honour which he finds “quaint”, or overly fastidious and a “crime”, as well as his own motivation in “lust”. Time, then, destroys not only their physical beings but also their thoughts and desires; it destroys everything that this poem is about.

What makes this conceit even more forceful is how it works in contrast and juxtaposition to other elements in the poem. Up till this point, all references to the deleterious aspects of time have been veiled, but growing in strength. The opening stanza’s exploration of the limitless possibilities in life is only held back by the use of the conditional tense: “Had we but world enough, and time,/ This coyness, lady, were no crime.” But at the start of the second stanza, time becomes much more menacing:

But at my back I always hear

Time’s winged chariot hurrying near;

And yonder all before us lie

Deserts of vast eternity.

Here, the narrator sees time as something which runs us down and traps us: time is gaining behind, and death is all that lies before us. Though, initially, creating a sense of growing anxiety, the imagery thus far, while it does reveal the destructive effect of time ending in oblivion, is not in itself that destructive, and Marvell creates more of a solemn wistful tone in elaborating what will be lost to time in death:

Thy beauty shall no more be found,

Nor, in thy marble vault shall sound

My echoing song;

The “beauty” he praised ad nauseam, along with his poetry in which he praised it, in the first stanza, will both be the victims of time. Again the imagery reflects the destructiveness of time, yet expressed not in the action of time but in the absence of life when time for us has come to an end. It is into this vacuum of absence that the startling, physically destructive, contrasting image of the worms is injected in a brilliantly kinetic way. To provide the strongest contrast possible, it is not only the nature of the image which changes; Marvell also exploits enjambment to make the difference jump at the reader. First he continues the sentiment and sound of the gentleness of “My echoing song” beyond its originating couplet to reflect the length of the echo beyond its source and to slow the line, sadly stressing what will be lost to time; then he strikes with the worms in the second half of the line to bring the contrast in tone and imagery together as tightly as he can. And it is this that really creates the energy behind the destructiveness of the image of time and what it can do.

Adding further to the effectiveness of the imagery is the accompanying feeling of claustrophobia which is apparent throughout the stanza. The worms become much more frightening because of the sense of being trapped – not just by time pursuing but also by the imagery of the grave, being stuck in a “marble vault” from which there is no escaping the predatory worms. Though the stanza finishes with an ironic couplet: “The grave’s a fine and private place,/ But none I think do there embrace”, the irony is unsettling because of all that has gone before: there is the sense again of inescapable restriction but, also, the likening of the grave to a place of amorous pursuits, connects back uncomfortably to the worms and adds a reverberating power to the image.

Though the narrator goes on then to his carpe diem argument, which saps the destructive power of time, one might argue that its destructiveness is again ever-present because of the urgency with which the argument is pursued:

Now let us sport us while we may;

And now, like amorous birds of prey,

Rather at once our time devour,

Than languish in his slow-chapp’d power.

Marvell has set he and his lover against time, using the same kind of imagery: just like the “worms” he uses natural imagery of “the birds of prey” and rather than being eaten up by time in his slow chewing, they will their “time devour”. Continuing this imagery, they will “Tear our pleasures with rough strife/ Thorough the iron gates of life.” The destructive energy set against the restriction of time’s “iron gates” is placed as a counter to the effects of time throughout the poem, but in echoing the imagery it also reinforces the earlier sense of destructiveness.

In this poem, Marvell has taken on a conventional topic and, through powerful sentiment, imagery and structure, has breathed new life into the carpe diem argument. By making time such a relentless, destructive force in the poem, Marvell causes the reader to feel that there is a human condition we all share, in our struggle against a common enemy. This makes us look beyond the playful or distancing ironic tone and even beyond the mundane carnal desire, to the essential, enhancing life force which we agree must be cherished and grasped with all we have.