

deceptively simple poem challenges *everything*. In the absence of an afterlife (and the irony must be noted that Herrick was an Anglican minister, having been ordained at the age of 32 in 1623), *life must be lived now*, and time lost will never be regained. Thus it is absolutely vital to “use your time,” because no one is getting any more of it. Those who choose to be “coy,” or choose to hold back out of fear of consequences for “sin” or disobedience will be punished by the only authority that matters: death. The sun may be rising now, the rosebuds may be blooming now, but time is on no one’s side, and no one gets any extra days, hours, or even minutes as a reward for having obeyed the demands of fathers, churches, or moral precepts.

Shakespeare, in his own way, teaches this lesson in *Macbeth*. Having left his wife and children unprotected while he leaves Scotland to try to persuade the prince Malcolm to lead an army against Macbeth, MacDuff is given the darkly predictable news that his wife, his children, and every other living thing that could be found in his castle have been murdered by the bloody king’s henchmen. As he cries, he asks “Did heaven look on, / And would not take their part?”⁹⁴ to which question the play’s answer could be *yes* (heaven watched the murders, but did nothing to prevent the slaughter of innocents), or perhaps more radically, *no* (heaven did not look on, because there is no one there). In either case, the innocent are killed. By the play’s end, Macbeth himself is killed as well, leading to the conclusion that for the innocent and the monstrous, the murdered and the murderer, the end is the same: death. Death does not discriminate between children and tyrants, between the young and the old, or between those who have used their time and those who have wasted it out of fear of the disapproval and anger of other people who are themselves going to meet the very same end. In the context of that kind of universe, one in which there very well may be no heaven that looks on and takes *anyone’s* part, Herrick’s famous exhortation is no mere literary cliché, no mere exercise in convention. It is a statement, both powerful and beautiful, of the outrageous, sad, and ultimately fatal predicament we all find ourselves in.

And yet, for some critics, Herrick’s most famous poem is curiously *removed* from life, and as Sarah Gilead argues, incapable of anything other than pointing to “the deceptive capacity of language to contain experience.”⁹⁵ The intellectual genealogy of this idea is clear enough, partaking, as it does, of the flavor of Paul de Man’s dubious assertion that “Language always occurs within a range of deceptive appearances which it created itself; for that reason, it always endangers its own innermost being, that is, the authentic act of saying.”⁹⁶ Consistent with the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” the idea Gilead shares with de

⁹⁴ *Macbeth* 4.3.230-31.

⁹⁵ Sarah Gilead. “Ungathering ‘Gather ye Rosebuds’: Herrick’s Misreading of *Carpe Diem*.” *Criticism*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Spring, 1985), 135.

⁹⁶ Paul de Man. *The Paul de Man Notebooks*. Edited by Martin McQuillan. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 174.

Man is that language conceals what it merely pretends to reveal, and thus poetic language does not actually say what it merely seems to say. This idea that language conceals, that language is an unstable and untrustworthy medium, is widely shared in mid-to-late twentieth-century continental (and continentally-influenced) thought. In a discussion of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, Martin Dillon argues that for such thinkers “it is in language that the unconcealment of things happens. Yet every disclosure, every revelation, is, at the same time, a concealment; language covers things over in the very process of thematization or unconcealment.”⁹⁷ It appears in Jacques Derrida’s observation that we have reached a point in which “the simple signifying nature of language well appears uncertain, partial, or inessential.”⁹⁸ Literary criticism that takes ideas like these as a starting point will regard poetry as a lie that needs to be uncovered, a mask that needs to be stripped off, or a pretense of meaning that needs to be exposed as meaningless, in order that the machinations of language and ideology might be revealed.

Making use of these ideas with enough ingenuity and determination, a remorselessly skilled critical practitioner can quite nearly *destroy* any sense of life-affirmation in Herrick’s poem, rewriting it to the point of turning it into a verse tract on suicide. The first step is to assert and then emphasize the contradictory nature of Herrick’s theme:

A carpe diem poem exists within an established literary subcategory, inhabits an enclosed ontological and signifiatory space. [...] the meanings of the poem are secured by both external traditions (conventional motifs, arguments, moods and tropes) and by the poem’s internal patterning. And yet the carpe diem theme itself celebrates not the rule-bound realms of art, conventionality, contextualization, but rather pure sensory experience. That is, it recommends that which by its form it denies. Pure experience is precisely what language does not offer; experience is always processed, mediated by the cultural forms (including language and art) through which we apprehend it. The carpe diem poem seems to point to, even provide access to, a mysteriously life-enhancing realm of experience but simultaneously substitutes a highly artificial construct—*itself*—for such experience.⁹⁹

Let’s break that last sentence down. In order to do that, we will move from direct statements to indirect statements, and as Polonius would say, “by indirections find directions out.” First, let’s look at the simplest and most direct level of meaning available: “The carpe diem poem point[s] to [...] a [...] life-enhancing realm of experience.” That would be a direct, straightforward, and relatively uncontroversial statement. But note how the critic builds (or tears

⁹⁷ Martin C. Dillon. *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 179.

⁹⁸ “la nature simplement signifiative du langage paraît bien incertaine, partielle ou inessentielle” (Jacques Derrida. *L’Écriture et la Différence*. [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967], 9-10).

⁹⁹ Gilead, 135.

down) from that basis. The simple suggestion of *seeming* is added: “The carpe diem poem *seems* to point to [...] a life-enhancing realm of experience.” Though still quite straightforward, this version introduces the smallest of doubts. Herrick’s poem *seems* to point to something that it might not *actually* be pointing to. So far, so good for our critic. Next, the critic adds an absurd-on-its-face claim about the poem’s power, a kind of strawman that can easily be knocked down: “The carpe diem poem *seems* to point to, *even provide access to*, a [...] life-enhancing realm of experience.” It is easy to see how a poem might *point* to such a thing, but how could a poem *provide access* thereto? The easy, knocking-down-the-strawman answer is that it cannot do such a thing. Through the sly suggestion that a poem might *seem* to have powers that it *cannot* have, our critic establishes a “sensible” or “common sense” doubt about the poem’s *seeming* in general. From here, the critic adds more doubt: “The carpe diem poem *seems* to point to, *even provide access to*, a *mysteriously* life-enhancing realm of experience.” Now the “life-enhancing realm of experience” is *mysteriously* so—this brings in the idea that the *seeming* is not limited to the poem, but to the world of experience that the poem only *seems* to point to (and with each move, Herrick’s verse recedes nearer and nearer to invisibility). Finally, the finishing touch is added: “The carpe diem poem *seems* to point to, *even provide access to*, a *mysteriously* life-enhancing realm of experience *but simultaneously substitutes a highly artificial construct—itsself—for such experience.*” Even this last move relies on meaningless inflation of its terms. What is “a highly artificial construct”? As all constructs (things constructed/things made) are “artificial” (made by and through art and artifice), how is it possible for such a construct to be *highly* artificial, as opposed to merely and plainly artificial? The effect looked for, however, is not precision of definition, so much as it is the enhancement—through rhetorical drama—of an already threadbare line of reasoning. Here we are presented with the idea that a poem is somehow offering itself as a replacement for the experience of life. What “sensible” reader would not fail to object to such a notion? But that, of course, is the intended effect. This last assertion—for that is what we have here, since no evidence whatsoever is introduced to support the idea that the poem offers itself as any kind of substitute for experience—completes the trick, the magician’s illusion whereby Herrick’s poem is made to disappear, replaced by an absurd version written by the critic, for the critic, with the express purpose of being deconstructed by the critic.

Rewritten in this way, Herrick’s “To the Virgins” is merely a familiar rehearsal of “established” literary forms and ideas (*move along—nothing to see here*), and it exists within an old-fashioned and no-longer-negotiable set of conventions regarding life and the communication of emotions and ideas. For the critic, the “meaning” that “naive” readers take from this poem is a kind of philosophical version of fast food: it comes prepackaged in familiar wrapping (the “conventional motifs, arguments, moods and tropes”) and with standardized cooking and presentation techniques (“the poem’s internal patterning”). As

rewritten by the critic, the product does not deliver on its promises: the poem merely “seems to point to” a genuine realm of experience, while actually replacing that realm of experience with “a highly artificial construct.”

With the first, and most critical step now taken (the construction of an unchallenged parody or strawman of the poem), the second step is to distance the poem from any aspect of life that does not somehow refer to poetry itself, and is not somehow about the acts of writing and meaning. For Gilead, Herrick’s poem can be reduced to “a metaphor for the act of reading and interpreting (‘gathering’ a message).” For the critic, “the persuasion to pleasure of Herrick’s *carpe diem* may be read as a persuasion to seek signification: textuality replaces sexuality.”¹⁰⁰ This then opens up the way to make the claim that Herrick’s lyric is an artifact of ruthless and violent competitiveness, a kind of testament to the demands of the male poet’s ego (a move borrowed from T.S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and Harold Bloom’s book *The Anxiety of Influence*): “Herrick’s ‘To the Virgins’ is compensatorily self-effacing, quiet, small, innocent, easy, almost anonymous-seeming. But its modesty, its virginal unaggressiveness conceals, perhaps, a kind of textual ruthlessness.”¹⁰¹ This critical template/recipe relies heavily on the use of “shocking” reversals and combinations of ideas, images, and even sound patterns. “Textual” is relied upon to remind the reader of “sexual,” and “virginal [...] ruthlessness” is designed to raise the spectre of violence, even rape. Naturally, what else would we expect to find concealed behind “virginal unaggressiveness,” other than “textual ruthlessness”? That “ruthlessness” reveals itself in a kind of Oedipal competition, in which, as Gilead argues, Herrick establishes his poetic persona as an “aggressive rival to and replacement of the poetic father” through the “acts of textual castration that create ‘To the Virgins’ from the bits and pieces of precursor texts” from “the classical age which produces the literary genera Herrick follows.”¹⁰²

The third step is to start the engines on the Ricoeurian “hermeneutics of suspicion” machine by arguing that the poem does not mean what it merely *seems* to mean, and may, in fact, mean quite the *opposite* of that suggested by its surface:

By illustrating the unstoppable rush of time, the need to seize the day is made manifest. But the poem’s “aging” also undermines the *carpe diem* assertion, for if the linear succession from “best” to “worst” is absolutely impervious to human will, action, or decision, then the choice between seizing the day or letting it pass is no choice at all. Not to tarry, not to defer the gathering of rosebuds, is not to defer death, the final gathering, the end of the race. Thus the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 140.

¹⁰² Gilead, 141.

poem simultaneously illustrates both the wisdom and the folly of heeding its message.¹⁰³

Again, the argument relies on unsubstantiated, even unargued-for, claims that present themselves as authoritative critical judgments. It is true, of course, that “not to defer” gathering rosebuds “is not to defer” death itself. But that is not what the poem claims. What the poem claims is that to defer gathering rosebuds is to defer (possibly until it is too late) the all-too-short experience of the most pleasurable aspects of life. These two claims are *not* the same. And no evidence at all is supplied for the “shocking” conclusion that “the poem simultaneously illustrates both the wisdom and the folly of heeding its message.” Nor does that statement follow in any necessary, or even tenuous way from the prior statement. Herrick’s poem does not claim that “not to defer gathering”¹⁰⁴ rosebuds will defer death. Neither does it claim that not gathering rosebuds at all (or, to use the critic’s preferred manner of indirection, to defer gathering rosebuds) is to hasten death. Death will come, on its own schedule, either way. Death is not the question of the poem—the question is what each of us will do with the time left *before* death. To be able to argue seriously that there is “no choice at all” between grabbing experience and allowing it to pass by, that there is “no choice at all” between living actively in the face of inevitable death and simply waiting passively and obediently for that death to arrive, is to reveal oneself as incapable of (or uninterested in) coherent argument. Only a critic who cannot or will not see past his or her ideological commitments could possibly expect to be taken seriously when arguing that there is no difference between gathering the rosebuds of life, or passing them by. But this is the kind of argument about this poem that is required by the step-by-step, paint-by-numbers process of a rather crudely applied hermeneutics of suspicion method of reading.

Finally, the fourth and most crucial step is to reveal the “hidden” meaning of the poem, which in this case means transforming the *carpe diem* motif itself into one that, far from urging that life be lived to the fullest while there is yet time, actually rushes headlong toward death, driven by its own desire into a form of suicide:

The *carpe diem* strategy posits sexual pleasure as life-intensifying, and thus a defense against mortality; intense pleasure, whether in anticipation, experience, or memory, in a sense displaces the consciousness or fear of death. But sexuality viewed not as pleasure but as reproduction makes the individual, his experiences, his consciousness, and his very existence, superfluous, expendable.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁰⁴ Note how the critic uses the negation, the inversion there to add the *appearance* of complexity: “not to defer gathering,” rather than merely “gathering.” *Gathering* rosebuds does not defer death—this is a simple, straightforward statement. *Not to defer gathering* rosebuds *is not to defer* death—this statement says the same thing, but cloaks itself, through its negations and convolutions, in an appearance of profundity, which lends (to the credulous) a kind of thinly-weaved authority to the statement that follows.

The only perfect defense against fear of death, against the paralyzing anxiety of the coy virgin, is death itself. [...] Carpe diem urges “satisfaction” of desire, the feeding of it, but to satisfy desire is to get rid of desire, to destroy desire in the total discharge of need that is accomplished by death. The final rosebud to be gathered is death itself [...]. Aggression against the self thus occurs both in rejecting desire and in seeking it; the first denies to the self a range of possible experiences [...]; the second is that impulse through which is created the replacement for the self in the next generation [...]—to seek desire is thus, paradoxically, a form of indirect suicide.¹⁰⁵

And here we have a veritable *tour de force* of reversals and unsupported assertions dressing themselves up as arguments. Sexuality makes its practitioners expendable. Proof? None is offered. The best defense against the fear of death is death itself. Proof? None. Living life fully, seeking desire, is a form of “indirect suicide.” Proof? Of course not. The point of that final statement lies, not in any actual truth claim, but in its rhetorical effect. Dress up a series of counter-intuitive reversals in negations and inverted syntax, repeat those reversals in forceful language, backed up by the “authority” lent by the reputable journal or publishing house which has printed the article/chapter/book in which the reversals appear, and wait for properly-compliant, graduate-school-trained readers to fall in line, and start repeating your formulae in their presentations, papers, and other “intellectual” product. The recipe is quite nearly fool-proof. After being put through this process, the poem that generations of readers thought they had read has completely disappeared into thin air,¹⁰⁶ and the most famous of *carpe diem* poems has been transformed into a *carpe mortem* poem. From the critical point of view offered by Gilead, there is apparently no call to life and love in “To the Virgins,” rather, there is only *obedience*—submission to literary convention, to the remorseless progress of time, and to the inevitability of death.

As we have remarked earlier, one of the astonishing realizations that comes while reading the poetry of love (from the *Song of Songs* through Shakespeare and beyond) alongside of the critical analyses produced by the theological and academic critics and interpreters of poetry, is that all too many of the critics of love poetry are part of the very system of repressive authority that the poems rail against. Inherent in much of the criticism we are dealing with here are the twin ideas that not only does literature inevitably serve the interests of the powerful, but that resistance is impossible. From this point of view, criticism like Gilead’s ends up arguing that the *appearance* of a radically life-affirming spirit in Herrick’s poem actually undermines itself, and ends up affirming death. Seen

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 147-48.

¹⁰⁶ This is perfectly consistent with the “nothingness” De Man claims is at the heart of literature: “Here the human self has experienced the void within itself, and the invented fiction, far from filling the void, asserts itself as a pure nothingness, *our* nothingness stated and restated by a subject that is the agent of its own instability” (*Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1971], 19).

through the even more radical conceptual lens of Jacques Lacan, for whom resistance always traps one inside the discourse of that tyrannical power one is resisting, Herrick's poem would end up being seen speaking the language of death. In Lacan's formulation, "the revolutionary aspiration has only one possible outcome, always, the discourse of the master. This is what experience proves. What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a Master. You will have one."¹⁰⁷ What is perhaps even more astonishing than these oddly authoritarian ideas is how little thought seems necessary to put them to use in an interpretive process whose template-driven results are determined in advance of the reading: follow the steps, complete the formula, and *voilà*, the critic has "revealed" that a poem long-thought to say "X" actually says "not-X." Lather. Rinse. Repeat. Gilead's article is an artifact of its time—the mid 1980's—and its place—a Ph.D. done at Northwestern University in 1980, during the peak of the fascination with deconstruction that swept through English departments in American academia. But it—and the deconstructive trend itself—is part of a much longer story in literary criticism and interpretation, one that stretches back all the way to Akiba and Origen and their insistence that the *Song of Songs* be read against its own text. This is not to claim that the two are identical, or even similar beyond the emphasis on reading in a way that assumes (and attempts to demonstrate) that the surface of a text and its language are "unreliable" or even deceptive. But it is to "know them by their fruits," as it were, as these different threshing techniques lead to very similar harvests.

The point bears repeating and expanding: all too many of the interpreters of the poetry of love over the centuries since the *Song of Songs* (with the notable exception of Rashi and his *Pesbat* school of interpretation discussed in chapter one) have dedicated themselves—maliciously or otherwise—to the destruction of that poetry. Arguably, in fact, this hostile relationship of critic to poetry goes back to the very beginnings of what we define as the Western tradition. As G.R.F. Ferrari notes:

Philosophy has long had a need to keep poetry in its place—as Plato, alluding to the 'ancient quarrel' between the two, was among the first to tell us (Rep. 10.607b). But what is striking in Plato's attitude is that [...] he regards poetry at all times and in all its uses with suspicion, as a substance inherently volatile. He recognises that human society is not possible without some form of poetry, but discerns in this fact a mark, so to speak, of our fallen state. Many philosophers have measured their distance from the poets; but Plato would put them beyond

¹⁰⁷ "l'aspiration révolutionnaire, ça n'a qu'une chance d'aboutir, toujours, au discours du maître. C'est ce que l'expérience en a fait la preuve. Ce à quoi vous aspirez comme révolutionnaire, c'est à un Maître. Vous l'aurez" (Jacques Lacan. *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVII: L'envers de la Psychanalyse*. Edited by Jacques Alain Miller. [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991], 239).

hierarchy altogether; would banish them—at least, would banish those he confesses to represent poetry at its greatest—from his ideal society.¹⁰⁸

Such hostile criticism reduces poetry to mere “convention,” or it reduces poetry to a kind of secret code which plays “hide and seek” with its readers, as critics argue that the “real” meaning (the *latent content*, to borrow from the terms of Freudian analysis) of the poetry is either wildly different from the apparent meaning (the *manifest content*), or is so lost in textual, contextual, and linguistic tangles as to be wholly undiscoverable. In Paul DeMan’s view, such criticism has a quasi-theological function that is akin to unmasking idolatry:

Criticism [...] functions more and more as a demystification of the belief that literature is a privileged language. The dominant strategy consists of showing that certain claims to authenticity attributed to literature are in fact expressions of a desire that, like all desires, falls prey to the duplicities of expression. The so-called “idealism” of literature is then shown to be an idolatry, a fascination with a false image that mimics the presumed attributes of authenticity when it is in fact just the hollow mask with which a frustrated, defined consciousness tries to cover up its own negativity.¹⁰⁹

Theological interpreters of the *Song of Songs* take great care in telling us that the poem’s frankly erotic treatment of love between a man and a woman, is really a metaphor for something else. Modern academic criticism of the troubadours is at pains to assure us that the poetry does not *actually* mean what it *merely appears* to mean. Much New Historicist/Cultural Materialist criticism of Shakespeare works to convince us that despite their anti-authoritarian appearances, Shakespeare’s plays are part of the apparatus of Elizabethan and Jacobean state control.¹¹⁰ Many (though not all) John Donne scholars are particularly concerned with separating the poet’s life (with its enactment of *fin’amor* in the marriage between John Donne and Anne More, each chosen by the other in the face of the opposition of what must have seemed to them to be the entire world) from the poet’s written work, as part of a strategy of larger claims that insist that the poems are either misogynist, imperialist, or *even worse*—brazenly masculine (with the specter of rape accusations always in the background). And a critic like Gilead tells us that the message of the *carpe diem* motif of Robert Herrick’s “To the Virgins” is impossible to find: “The longer the reader searches for the *carpe diem* message in Herrick’s obviously *carpe diem*

¹⁰⁸ G.R.F. Ferrari. “Plato and Poetry.” In *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 1: Classical Criticism*, edited by Gerooge Alexander Kennedy. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 92.

¹⁰⁹ Paul DeMan. *Blindness and Insight*, 12.

¹¹⁰ One notable exception to this trend has been Alexander Leggatt, who regrets what he calls “a current tendency to see society as a structure of oppression and exploitation, and to read Shakespeare accordingly” (Alexander Leggatt. *Shakespeare’s Political Drama: The History Plays and the Roman Plays*. [New York: Routledge, 2003], viii).

poem, the greater difficulty she has in finding it. [...] Herrick's poem disintegrates into a tangle of conflicting concepts, images, and tropes."¹¹¹

Not to put too fine a point on it, but this is *violence* done in the name, not of education or enlightenment or the expansion of the possibilities of thought and perception, but in the name of *control*—control of thought, control of the possibilities of perception (through mockery and obfuscation), and an evisceration of even the slightest hint of poetry's potential for encouraging resistance to authority (by people who often claim to be politically liberal, and occasionally radical). Such criticism establishes terms of analysis that are antithetical to any sense that poetry is something that might be enjoyed, and it is often written in such needlessly obtuse language that it seems to illustrate Montaigne's maxim: "Difficulty is the currency that the learned employ, like tricksters, in order not to reveal the vanity of their art, and which human stupidity is easily led to take as payment."¹¹² In Rita Felski's cogent description, this kind of work's "sheer difficulty accentuated its allure to a certain kind of critic, convinced, akin to Burke commenting on the sublime, that the obscure is inherently more affecting and awe-inspiring than the clear."¹¹³ There is, as Felski notes, "a fannish dimension" to this kind of work, "evidenced in a cult of exclusiveness and intense attachment to charismatic figures."¹¹⁴ What this kind of literary criticism reveals is a hostility toward poetry, or as Derrida describes it—with an eye on the tradition stretching back to Plato—an intolerance for poetry as a threat to the dominance of the philosopher, who thinks and speaks in prose:

¹¹¹ Gilead, 150.

¹¹² "La difficulté est une monoye que les sçavans employent, comme les joueurs de passe-passe, pour ne découvrir la vanité de leur art, et de la quelle l'humaine bestise se paye aysément" (Michel de Montaigne. "Apologie de Raimond de Sebonde." In *Les Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, Vol.2. Edited by Fortunat Strowski. [Bordeaux: Pech, 1906], 234). Montaigne goes on to quote from Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* 1.639, 641-42, speaking of the famously obscure Heraclitus, who was:

Clarus, ob obscurum linguam, magis inter inanes,	Celebrated for his obscurity, especially among the inane,
Omnia enim stolidi magis admirantur amantque	For all the stupid greatly admire and love
Inversis quae sub verbis latitantia cernunt.	That which is concealed beneath inverted words.

In writing of the Paul de Man affair, Robert Alter sounds like a contemporary (if somewhat angrier) Montaigne, as he describes the situation as one in which "to his American admirers, with their cultural inferiority complex, it seemed that if things were difficult to grasp, something profound was being said," and that De Man "got away with it because of the gullibility of American scholars" ("Paul de Man Was a Total Fraud." *New Republic*. April 5, 2014. <https://newrepublic.com/article/117020/paul-de-man-was-total-fraud-evelyn-barish-reviewed>).

¹¹³ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 27. This kind of devotion to the difficult can be seen in the almost *de rigueur* political contempt for the idea of clarity expressed (with ironic clarity) by Trink T. Minh-ha: "Clarity is a means of subjection, a quality both of official taught language and of correct writing, two old mates of power: together they flow, together they flower, vertically, to impose an order" (Trink T. Minh-ha. *Woman, Native, Other*. [Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989, 16-17).

¹¹⁴ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 27.

the history of philosophy is the history of prose; or, if you will, the *prosifying* of the world. Philosophy is the invention of prose. Philosophy speaks in prose. [...] Before writing, verse served as a kind of spontaneous engraving, a writing *before* the letter. Intolerant of poetry, philosophy took writing to *be* the letter. (emphasis added)¹¹⁵

As De Man approvingly defines it, such criticism is “a methodologically motivated attack on the notion that a literary or poetic consciousness is in any way a privileged consciousness, whose use of language can pretend to escape, to some degree, from the duplicity, the confusion, the untruth that we take for granted in the everyday use of language.”¹¹⁶ In the critic’s roundabout language, the old claim of the English Puritan William Prynne is revived, that *poetry is a lie*, and a dangerous one at that.

This form of criticism treats poetry as if it were the kind of deliberately manipulative Ideological State Apparatus described by the French Neo-Marxist Louis Althusser as controlling, even producing, not only all forms of thought, but the very material conditions that make thought possible: “ideas are material actions inserted into material practices, regulated by their own material rituals which are defined by the material ideological apparatus.”¹¹⁷ For Althusser, the “ideas” of the “subject” or “individual” derive from the ideological apparatuses of society (State, Church, School, etc.). Ideology appears here as a perfectly circular system, self-contained, and self-maintaining. The subject gets his/her “ideas” from the very apparatus in which these ideas are realized and expressed through material actions in a context of material practice (the writing and reading of poetry, for example). Althusser sums up this vicious circle of ideology by maintaining that “the subject acts as it is acted by the system.”¹¹⁸ Althusser’s notion of the workings of ideology is a model with no beginning, no progressive movement, no final goal, and from which there appears to be no escape.

Similarly, criticism that is dedicated to a “hermeneutics of suspicion” gives us no exit, no recourse as it treats poetry as just another kind of ideological apparatus—poetry is thus continually rewritten by such criticism as compliant with authority (a move the critic couches in the guise of “unmasking” or “revealing” poetry’s hidden ideological nature). And in transforming or rewriting such poetry as appears to offer even the slightest glimmer of resistant possibility, *the critic makes him or herself into an agent of the apparatus of ideology and authority*. He or

¹¹⁵ “l’histoire de la philosophie est l’histoire de la prose; ou plutôt du devenir-prose du monde. La philosophie est l’invention de la prose. Le philosophe parle en prose. [...] Avant l’écriture, le vers serait en quelque sorte une gravure spontanée, une écriture avant la lettre. Intolérant à la poésie, le philosophe aurait pris l’écriture à la lettre” (Jacques Derrida. *De la Grammatologie*, 406).

¹¹⁶ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 9.

¹¹⁷ “*idées sont ses actes matériels insérés dans des pratiques matérielles, réglées par des rituels matériels eux-mêmes définis par l’appareil idéologique matériel*” (Louis Althusser. “Idéologie et Appareils Idéologiques d’État,” (1970). *Les Classiques des Sciences Sociales*. [Quebec: Université du Québec à Chicoutimi], 44). http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/althusser_louis/ideologie_et_AIE/ideologie_et_AIE.pdf

¹¹⁸ “le sujet agit en tant qu’il est agi par le système” (Ibid., 45).

she does this through a criticism that is tinged with both compulsion and violence in a project which seems to disdain the very poetry it works with: witness the critic's *celebration* of violence in her reading of Herrick: "an interrogative reading [of Herrick's poem] parries with its anti-textual analytical violence the poem's assertion of its own innocence, and of the reader's innocent desire to preserve inviolate the simplicity, integrity, and obvious good sense of *carpe diem*."¹¹⁹

But a poem like "To the Virgins" is innocent, in the etymological sense of *harmless*. No actual virgins are being oppressed, subjugated, or ideologically interpellated by being encouraged to live a little before they die; not even if the poem is interpreted as a seduction lyric is its advice *harmful* to anyone except to the extent to which they are locked within the systems of control of a society in which female sexuality is regarded as a valuable commodity to be bought and sold by fathers and (father-chosen) husbands. This almost laughably-paranoid insistence on reading *suspiciously* tells us more about the critics than about the poems, as John Roberts remarks in the case of Donne's critics. A short, epigrammatic poem like "To Live Freely," condenses "To the Virgins" into two lines which only a critic near-religiously devoted to suspicion could read with interrogative violence:

Let's live in hast; use pleasures while we may:
Co'd life return, 'twod never lose a day.¹²⁰

"Let's" (let us) is directed toward all, male and female, young and old alike. "Pleasures" may, of course, be *sexual* pleasures, but they needn't be limited thereto (unless a critic has a particular ideological point to hammer home). A considerable effort will have to be invested in this short lyric to ensure that it "disintegrates into a tangle of conflicting concepts, images, and tropes" or becomes intelligible primarily as "a form of indirect suicide." Here, perhaps, the reading method of Rashi is what best serves: the plain meaning of this text is an exhortation to enjoy each day, each moment, because we are all running out of time. And could "life return," were we given, after the diagnosis of an immediately-fatal illness, a short reprieve, an extra week or month, or even year of life, how many of us would waste even a day on drudgery, obedience, and ascetic self-denial?¹²¹ Perhaps those who read the poetry of life and love as being actually about a desire for death, but not many others.

¹¹⁹ Gilead, 150.

¹²⁰ ll.1-2, Herrick, vol.2, 115.

¹²¹ These are the same kinds of questions that Dostoevsky's novel *Идиот* (*The Idiot*) poses as Prince Myshkin tells the story (based on Dostoevsky's own experience of a narrowly-averted execution) of a man who faced what he believed would be the last moments of his life, and suddenly thought of how precious time would be to him, if only he were spared:

"Что, если бы не умирать! Что, если бы воротить жизнь, - какая бесконечность! И всё это было бы мое! Я бы тогда каждую минуту в целый век обратил, ничего бы не потерял, каждую бы минуту счетом отсчитывал, уж ничего бы даром не