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Ungathering "Gather ye Rosebuds": Herrick's Misreading of Carpe Diem

If ever a poem addressed itself to the competent common reader, that poem would surely be Herrick's simple, quintessential *carpe diem* lyric, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time."¹ The pre-eminent interpretability of the poem is best confirmed by Laurence Perrine's use of it in his still standard textbook on poetry, *Sound and Sense: an Introduction to Poetry*.² Perrine frames several questions designed to teach the student how to read the poem's symbols ("How does the title help us interpret the meaning of the [rosebud] symbol?"), with the underlying assumption that the poem is, and thus ought to be read as, an organic unity, a text functioning as a context for encoding the poem's meanings which can in turn be correctly decoded by the reader. Herrick's poem offers a particularly easy interpretive task, its central motif having been established in the centuries-long persistence of the *carpe diem* idea in Proverbs, Wisdom of Solomon, Hellenistic and Roman lyric poetry, in medieval motifs such as *ubi sunt*, *ars moriendi*, *timor mortis*, *memento mori*, *memento temporis*, in Montaigne, Petrarchists, the Pléiade, Tasso, Spenser, Shakespeare, Burton, and Ben Jonson. And in contrast, say, to Marvell's complex, ironic "To His Coy Mistress," Herrick's poem hardly invites strenuous interpretive efforts. In a sense which this essay will explore, the poem may be said to defend itself, by its inviolable conventionality and obviousness, from such interpretation.

The poem presents in the first two quatrains a series of tropes (rosebuds, flower, sun) whose tenors are transparently readable because highly conventional, parallel to each other, and explicated by the discursive language of the second and third quatrains. Some of the central binary oppositions that establish the poem's conceptual structure are passive/active, innocence/experience, spend/use, virginity/sexuality, loss/gain, stillness/motion. The "deep structure" that both gives rise to these opposing pairs and that privileges the second term of each is the *carpe diem* formula itself. As concept, decision, and act, "seizing the day" transforms a state characterized as inactive, wasted, empty, meaningless into a state characterized as active, fulfilling, pur-

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positive, and self-actualizing. Meaning is thus consolidated by congruence between text and intertext, deep and surface structures, between each term of the first set of terms of the binary pairs (passive, spend, innocence, virginity, loss, stillness) and between each term of the second set of terms of the pairs (active, use, experience, sexuality, gain, motion). Equally important is the opposition between the terms of each binary couple. This system of congruence and opposition may be viewed as the poem's weaving together (L. *textus*, fabric, structure, text) of signs and concepts, form and content.

The poem achieves this wholeness, however, only by excluding disruptive, antithetical, or incongruous semantic material which is nevertheless covertly present both within the text and outside of it, in the literary and cultural texts of which this poem is part. The poem's structural integration of elements is violated at several key points and in several ways. The carpe diem poem generally presents itself as both analog and cause of the deeply experienced life, the poem's argument as urgent, irresistible, and intense as the life the argument recommends. Herrick's graceful, easily elegant poem contravenes the fearful urgency of its message. It is a call to action saturated with the virginal "coyness" it seeks to dispel. In incongruous parallel to the virgins' sexual laziness, the poem refuses to be goaded into verbal energy, figurative boldness, originality, or metrical variety or power. In the first quatrain, the initial "Gather ye rosebuds" is dactylic, imperative, abrupt, and a distillation of the carpe diem message. The line as a whole rings with the inevitability, the confident assertiveness of a proverb (and has indeed attained semi-proverbial status in English speech.) But the quatrain proceeds to dissipate its initial energy. The feminine endings of lines two and four produce falling rhythm and meaning; in line four, falling into "dying." The quatrain expends itself, recapitulating the course of every life in its loss of vitality. Each following quatrain exhibits a similar decline. In quatrain II, "glorious lamp of heaven" images radiant cosmic energy and virility, then proceeds through the declensions of "higher," "sooner," "nearer," to the final dying fall, "setting." In quatrain III, "That age is best" (positive assertion accentuated by monosyllables and by the superlative) proceeds to another declension ("first," "worse," "worst") until the extinction of "best" and "first" is achieved by "former." In the last quatrain, the conclusive "Then" and the direct monosyllabic urgings ("be not coy . . . use your time") dwindle into the euphemistic and even ambiguous warning, "ye may forever tarry." Carpe diem postulates a direction from inaction to action; each qua-

train of this poem here exhibits a contrary “entropic” movement, potential verbal energy reducing to a state of enervation or motionlessness (“tary”).

Further, the inefficacy of language and of the imagination as bulwarks against the ruins of time is suggested by the multiple clichés that make up the poem. The poem spends without renewing the verbal resources of its own genre. Thus, precisely those qualities that from the ideology of textual coherence appear to fix the meanings of the poem in a literary tradition, may be seen as weakening the poem’s force, as rendering its message merely perfunctory. The *carpe diem* poem implicitly accepts the humanist celebration of reason, will, and art as the ordering, shaping, orienting faculties. A *carpe diem* poem exists within an established literary subcategory, inhabits an enclosed ontological and signifiatory space. The golden fruits of the enclosed garden of the Hesperides, which names the collection in which Herrick’s poem is situated, are guarded from within by the nymphs and from without by a dragon, just as 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. *Hesperides* is a collection of poems viewed as a garden. The reader enters the garden and strolls (browses) through it.³ The garden’s flowers are the poems themselves. Their decor is dominated by floral imagery, and in H-336 (lines 97 and 99) Herrick calls two earlier poems (H-193 and H-580) flowers. “Gather ye rosebuds” becomes, then, a metaphor for the act of reading and interpreting (“gathering” a message). In this sense, the persuasion to pleasure of Herrick’s *carpe diem* may be read as a persuasion to seek signification: textuality replaces sexuality.

The *carpe diem* poem implies both the accessibility and inaccessibility of an unprocessed phenomenal realm, and thus points to the deceptive capacity of language to contain experience. The limits of cognition itself are both denied and confirmed; the *carpe diem* poem suggests that cognizance of mortality must precede, and lead to, the

enhanced life. But the end of consciousness is precisely what consciousness cannot encompass; human awareness of death can only be achieved by means of substitution: an image of death can be conceived, but not death itself. Carpe diem appears to offer the reader recognition (of death) and an improved, intensified, reality-bound mode of life based on such recognition; carpe diem simultaneously withholds, by substituting itself for, that recognition and that mode of life, the poem's images and arguments mediating both as pointers to and as barriers against real presences (both cognitive and experiential).⁴

In the first two quatrains, rosebuds, flower and sun are parallel embodiments of a single general idea, mortality, mutability, time as process. But the sententiousness of the tropes both reinforces the clarity of their meaning and masks incongruities. The sun is a magnified image of the flower, exhibiting in the "glory" of its rays the same "radiant" qualities seen in the flower's blossoming beauty ("smiling"). The sun as lamp also implies Apollonian wisdom, healing, enlightenment; as such it is an image of the carpe diem motif itself in its wisdom-imparting function. Elucidating the truth of the human condition to a conscious, receptive mind permits a reasoned response. Like nature, the cosmos itself is here implicated in temporal processes, whereas human cognition manifest in reason, judgment, will, and rhetoric serves as a self-generated source of human creativity. But the image of the setting sun is a movement to origins, sources, power, just as the poem itself moves towards clear, literal statements of its themes, and as the carpe diem argument urges return to the vital sources (pleasure, experience) of the fully lived life. The movements to the sun as the source of life, energy, growth, and to the poem's argumentative center, are countered in the entropic, apocalyptic image of fading light.

The movements of "smiling" to "dying" (quatrain I) and "higher" to "setting" (quatrain II) hint at the consequences of the achieved sex act: floral images symbolize both female and male genitalia, here primarily female in complement to the male sun as virility. The popular Renaissance double entendre on dying as orgasm here works against the carpe diem message, since solution and problem are contained in the same word, and turn out, further, to be different aspects of the same phenomenon. Refraining from sexual pleasure means, eventually, dying without having fully lived, dying unfulfilled; but engaging in sexual activity exhausts vitality and potency. Either alternative produces a similar emptying-out of energy. The sun getting higher as

phallic image (erection and "heat") serves as a warning against wasting time, but also, simultaneously, demonstrates the inevitable consequences of sexual use of time: "setting," that is, not gain but loss, not fulfillment but emptying, post-coital limpness, impotence.

In the third quatrain, the first best age is of course youth, the transient golden age of the greatest capacity to enjoy, the age of endowment with potential energy (blood, warmth). But the "first age" of potential which is not yet kinetic energy is also virginity or innocence: precisely that phase which the *carpe diem* message urges the addressee to relinquish. The addressee who follows the articulated *carpe diem* advice, will "spend" the first age, with its unused potentiality, and "succeed" to the "worse" and "worst" ages: the ages of experience. "Being spent," in a traditional reading of Herrick's poem, signifies the wasting, through unsatisfied desire, of the first age. But "spent," in its position in the quatrain, also refers to the loss of the chief attribute of youth, energy, desire, warm blood. The obvious sexual pun on "spent," like that on "dying" of quatrain I, here implies both loss of hymeneal blood and of semen. Again, the addressee is simultaneously urged to enjoy sexuality, and warned of the consequences of doing so. In the crucial distinction between "spend" (as waste) and "use" lies the *carpe diem* message: the addressee is asked to make that distinction, to evaluate the two modes of living in time, and to make the only rational choice between them. But the underlying logic of the poem again works against this distinction. Sexual use of one's time is "spending," and therefore loss (of blood, warmth, energy, life).

In the last quatrain, "go marry" translates into literal, discursive, expository language the "gather ye" of the first line ("while ye may, go marry" is a phrasal inversion, a mirror image, of the first line.) But the multiple pleasures suggested by the metaphor are reduced to a single possibility, the almost brutally flat, laconic, "go marry." The slightly unpleasant shock of that reduction can be rationalized away: the poem can be read as an epithalamium of sorts, the Christian sacrament of marriage as conflated with life's highest pleasures, the spiritual and the physical realms harmonized, and a hierogamy thereby achieved. But the sense of misreading remains. A bold plunging into unspecified delights ("gather ye rosebuds") becomes mere acquiescence to socio-biological necessity. The final argumentative thrust of the poem seemingly takes the form of a threat: to fail to use one's prime is to "tarry," to be left behind in the race toward fulfillment. But the second quatrain of the poem pictures the "race" as cognate

with the race toward death. If running the race is fatal, as it clearly is in the second quatrain, then the logical defense would be, precisely, "tarrying," coyness, refusing to collaborate with those temporary processes that hurry us to destruction.

Like other discourses, literature is context dependent, adequate performance or comprehension requiring knowledge of the given context, hence of the unspoken rules at play. The unspoken rule that determines the literary context is the suspension of normal illocutionary force (that is, functionality of speech, e.g., promising, warning, greeting, informing, commanding, asserting).⁵ Numerous signs indicating the literary status of a text permit us to consign it to a safe "game-space." Readers can thus play, without risk, the game of "verbal jeopardy," to explore "what is surely one of the most problematic and threatening experiences of all, the collapse of communication itself."⁶ Literary discourse, by virtue of its classification as play, game, or fiction, makes safe, non-threatening, the neutralization or violation of ordinary language functions and rules. As Jonathan Culler has noted, however, speech-act contexts, the frameworks in which meanings are specified, can never be fully bounded or defined. "An utterance that promised to do what the listener apparently wants but unconsciously dreads might thus cease to be a promise and become instead a threat."⁷ (As we have seen, the context of Herrick's poem is ambiguous in just this way, "tarry" as overt threat that may also be covert promise). Such ambiguity in the contextualization of meaning seems characteristic of certain literary modes which transgress the "safe-making" categorization of literary texts. Autobiography, the realist novel, and didactic literature, for example, are not easily contained within the safe literary area of suspended referentiality and illocutionary force. These modes are threatening because they interrogate our very ability to construct safely-bounded communicative areas: they are contained at least partly within the safety area, the enclosed realm of non-referentiality or non-illocution, but at the same time gesture toward the world beyond textual bounds. Autobiography and the realist novel seem to retain some illocutionary force: to assert, inform, describe; didactic literature, to assert, persuade, even command; yet they both retain verbal and generic playfulness and formal autonomy.

Similarly, the *carpe diem* poem eludes easy categorization, combining lyric exploration of subjective states with didactic persuasion: "*carpe diem*" names both that persuasion and a type of lyric love

poem. The *carpe diem* poem typically celebrates the classificatory power of language. The reduction of time or death to figures in an argument or to images asserts the (temporary) power of human speech and imagination over biological necessity. The *carpe diem* poem, like countless eternizing love lyrics, provides a safe verbal area in which the forces of life can triumph over the forces of death. But, simultaneously, the *carpe diem* poem violates its own safety-area by its didacticism and referentiality, its pointing to the realm of being outside of its protected bounds. It points to the area in which time and death always defeat the desire to enjoy, the area in which language itself is impotent.

The title of Herrick's poem addresses "the virgins" and not a single Lesbia, Julia, or Corinna, and the poem goes on to address "ye" or "you," which can be read as "they" (the virgins) but which is also read as a direct address to the reader. (The reader is, of course, always "virgin" in that she does not with sufficient zeal pursue the pleasures of life or comprehend the true brevity of life.) Herrick's generic *carpe diem* poem thus complicates by its very simplicity its own classification as speech act. Though still didactic, the symbolic drama of the seduction lyric (where a male usually older and wiser persuades to pleasure a reluctant mistress) is less threatening because an indirect mode of addressing the reader. The reader can, after all, adopt the perspective of the poem's speaker (who has mastered at least the concept of mortality and of the good life) rather than that of the unaware female victim either of time or of the speaker's predatory sexual intentions.

The speaker of a seduction poem voices our fears but asserts a controlled response to those fears. The speaker, then, embodies our desire to exert a form of mastery (verbal and cognitive) over the painful condition of human consciousness, awareness of its impending end. But verbal mastery compensates for (and thus, paradoxically, signals the absence of) actual mastery over mortality, and even over the concept of death. The desire to arrest (gather, seize) meaning is analogous to the desire to arrest time; the ritualistic assertion of established meanings ("*carpe diem*") is a form of arresting time by asserting the stability of meaning itself, and the verbal formulae in which meaning is contained. But this mastery over the meaning-producing potentialities of a text is never absolute, as we have seen above. The weakness of our authority over the text is only further evidenced by the text's own defensiveness, its suppression of incongruous meanings.

The traditionalism of Herrick's poem asserts the validity of forms and meanings established, almost sanctified, by the past and present communities of carpe diem poets and their readers, communities which may be conceived of as a "gathering" or collection of poets and readers bound together by certain texts. The community creates and authorizes the texts, and the texts, by being read and by exerting influence, preserve through successive generations the community. A closed economic system is thus created in which unity of poets, readers, texts, and meanings defeats time itself. Herrick was of course not only a son of Ben but of such classical precursors as Catullus, Horace, Ovid and Anacreon, whose authorship of immortal verses confers authority on their heir Herrick. In Herrick's "The Vision" (H-107), "Anacreon's failure to keep his mistress happy symbolizes the loss of his poetic powers, as his subsequent loss of his 'crown' makes clear. Angered at his inability to perform the part of a proper lover, his mistress snatches away his 'crown,' apparently the crown of laurel worn by poets, and gives it instead to Herrick."⁸ "To the Virgins" is a collage of allusions and borrowings. Martin, in his edition of *Hesperides*, lists Burton, Jonson, Tasso, Catullus, Horace, Philostratus, Ovid, Tibullus, Propertius, Seneca, Virgil—among others.⁹ The poem thus re-enacts its own multiple origins and history, and identifies itself as origin-bound: "gathering the rosebuds" defines Herrick's gathering together of the shards of precursor poems into an apparently coherent and seamless whole.¹⁰

The speaker thus absorbs the authority of his poetic fathers, and, further, himself adopts a parental stance, urging the addressees' transition from immaturity to maturity, from naiveté to adult cognizance of the human situation. But the implied attitude to the precursor poems and their poetic personae is equivocal. Herrick's own "gathering" of elements drawn from them is a recognition of literary community and continuity, yet is also an achieved victory over earlier poems and personae, a victory created by an aggressive breaking into fragments of the earlier works. H-432: "Putrefaction is the end / Of all that nature doth intend." Oddly, Herrick's persona mirrors temporal processes in that it too seeks decomposition of created (textual) entities. 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. Herrick's "The Vision" pictures the creation of Herrick's poetic self as a taking-in of poetic virility which has emptied out of his precursor, Anacreon. "Herrick" then becomes Ana-

creon, but in becoming his poetic forebear, does he inherit his power or his impotence? The Oedipal overtones of the scene are as striking as they are ambiguous, but the self as aggressive rival to and replacement of the poetic father and of his sexual/textual potency is unmistakably present in the poem's figuring of "Herrick." Does the wine-caused sexual failure enable the poetic virility? Does "Herrick" seek sexual impotence in order to purchase textual power (again, textuality replacing sexuality)?¹¹

The vision of Anacreon's poetic/sexual impotence is cognate with the acts of textual castration that create "To the Virgins" from the bits and pieces of precursor texts. Every new literary product acquires its validity, in part, by presenting itself as a repetition of a modal paradigm, by establishing itself within a recognizable generic category. In Herrick's "To the Virgins," "that age is best which is the first" is also the classical age which produces the literary genera Herrick follows; the "worse and worst times," Herrick's own belated poetic era. In that sense, "Gather ye rosebuds" is a ritual of repetition in which Herrick incorporates into his own literary corpus the bodies (texts) of his precursors. The creative force of these precursors is thus both affirmed and denied, celebrated and annihilated. Herrick's triumphant achievement—it is his poem, not Ausonius' or Catullus' that has become not only exemplary of but virtually synonymous with *carpe diem*—must also be understood as an agonistic victory by effacement of his sources. Herrick's poetic self is created and defended both by enclosing itself within and thus preserving a community of poets and their works, and by dissociating itself from, and fragmenting, that community. The last part of this essay will examine these paradoxical strategies in the defense of the poetic self, and the ways in which these strategies are mirrored in the *carpe diem* motif.

A *carpe diem* poem, whether seduction lyric or Herrick's generic poem, takes the shape of a rite of passage, a transition from a prior to a later state. "Virginity" names the prior state, and can symbolize any prior state which the community, speaking through the poem's "voice," has judged inadequate or obsolete. The poem explains and justifies the need for transition from one state to a higher and simultaneously serves as a means for bringing it about. The poem is both analog and cause, metaphor and metonym, of the transition. On the metaphoric/synchronic axis, the *carpe diem* poem articulates a paradigm, a timeless truth of the human situation; on the metonymic/diachronic axis, it serves—however fictionally—as catalyst for induc-

ing a temporal process, a change of state translating cause (acceptance of the validity of the paradigm) into effect (altered perceptions and behaviors).

This transition is at once a return to and celebration of natural impulses, sensual enjoyment as origin of pleasure and worth, and a transformation of nature into culture, a movement from innocence to sophistication. The diction of the poem mirrors this transition in moving from traditional ("younger") images and tropes to a "belated" modern discursive style, and in revealing the manifold possibilities of "gathering rosebuds" to be no more than the reality-bound "marry." In this movement in the direction of socialization, a floral nature image becomes institutional referent, and a pagan ritual (both poetic and seasonal) becomes a Christian one.

Yet the verbal structure of the poem subverts its presumption of transforming potentiality. The poem rather than establishing its meanings in a context and rule-bound textual enclosure, inhabits an unstable conceptual area; unable, despite its form, to be pagan; unable, despite its historical context, to be Christian; each conceptual framework disrupting, even negating, the other. The directional impulse of transition is in fact ambiguous: the coy reluctance to acknowledge mortality is not fully countered by the speaker's insistence on adult acceptance of mortality, for the poem's logical structure images the desire to repress such an awareness. The passivity of the "virgin" addresses can also be understood as a form of passive resistance to the ritual they are urged to undergo. The passenger in a ritual of transition, as Victor Turner points out, "must be a *tabula rasa* . . . on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group . . ." ¹² The virgins of the poem are similarly blank, anonymous, empty, to be inscribed by the speaker's meanings. (In the seduction poem variant of *carpe diem*, the coy mistress never answers back; by implication, the onslaught of the poem's rhetoric forces her to complete the transition, to accede both to the desire of the speaker and to the literary traditions behind him.) But Herrick's poem, its latent meanings justifying the virgins' reluctance, resists not only its own overt rhetoric but the collective rituals that authorize meaning itself.

Underlying that resistance is a complex of paradoxes: loss of virginity is presented in a *carpe diem* poem as gain in experience, as supplementing a lack (in experience) by a loss (of virginity). But only in retrospect does the prior virgin state seem incomplete—from the perspective of the speaker. From the virgin's viewpoint, that state

seems complete and protective. Kenneth Burke, summarizing the dynamics of transitional states, delineates "critical points . . . where the process of growth or change converts a previous circle of protection into a circle of confinement." In birth, the archetypal crisis of transition, the fetus "so outgrows its circle of protection that the benign protection becomes a malign circle of confinement, whereat it must burst forth into a different kind of world—a world of locomotion, aggression, competition, hunt"¹³—life itself here virtually equated with androcentrist values. But "virginity" can connote silent rebellion against a notion of selfhood—even, of society and of life—defined by aggression, acquisition, mastery: against the *carpe diem* speaker's ethos of mastery-seeking (mastery over experience, over rhetoric, over coy virgins).¹⁴

From the context of the prior virgin state, safety, wholeness, and familiarity may seem more attractive than risk, loss of autonomy, and change. The birth-myth as model for subsequent myths and ritualizations of transition contains within it the same ambiguity. Expulsion from a protecting paradisiac realm into a realm of generation is accomplished with fear and anxiety as well as with a sense of enhanced potentiality for self-actualization. Herrick's poem claims the latter sense, but only by suppressing the former. The movement to completion and fulfillment entails a covert encoding of fear of rupture, opening, risk.

Claude Lévi-Strauss noted, in *The Raw and the Cooked*, that in a set of myths dealing with a loss of immortality, the possibility of averting death or preventing untimely death depends upon self-containment. "The solution . . . is always formulated in negative terms: do not hear, do not feel, do not touch, do not see, do not taste . . ." The hero of a Caduveo myth "sets out to rejuvenate . . . old men and trees: but he himself dies sooner than he ought, because, by becoming a father, he has allowed himself to be caught up in the periodic cycle of the generations."¹⁵ The myth of Pandora's box similarly posits the opening up to, seeking, or ingesting ("gathering") of experience as inevitably breeding suffering, work, evil, mortality. The Christian myth of the fall, of course, identifies the desire for and in-taking of experience as that which disrupts and endangers the enclosed garden of the self. Superstitions surviving until modern times view individual life as a non-renewable energy-system, each expenditure of energy diminishing the life-force of that organism, e.g., the belief that an individual only has a certain allotment of words or breath. (A Renaissance variant viewed each sex act as costing a day of life.)

In a carpe diem poem, androgynous, undifferentiated wholeness and autonomy ("virginity") is asked to yield to fragmentation, multiplicity, disunity, mutability, despite the fact that in Western myth and superstition, devouring/absorbing experience immediately turns against the self: a gesture seeking to aggrandize the self only dismembers and weakens the self. In Mircea Eliade's distinction between Great Time and Profane Time, ritual accomplishes "the abolition of time through the imitation of archetypes and the repetition of paradigmatic gestures . . . [and] through the paradox of rite, profane time and duration are suspended."¹⁶ And thus the community's life is momentarily conflated with cosmic eternity. The carpe diem message, in a Christian context, subverts a similar Christian sacramental strategy for abolishing the ravages of time. "Go marry" is a reminder of Christian consecration of generational life, but here deprived of eternizing symbolism.

In both Platonic and Christian frameworks the historical process of becoming in time is inferior to the motionlessness of pure Being at the center of things, hence the *contemptus mundi* and corollary contempt for sensory experience. Christianity's view of "chastity as a containment of the soul's perimeters"¹⁷ is a strategy for attaining eternal life by refusing to expend vital force, thus obviating on one's own flesh the consequences of the fall from original wholeness and immortality. The reward is reunification with one's cosmic origins: the "eternal return." The prime, best, first age of Herrick's poem is a paradisiac realm preceding the "worse and worst" times characterized by endless successivity, each era, like a sexual act, completing and spending itself in order to generate the next. The ideal realm is the "first" age, which is pure potentiality without actualization, hence, without risk of loss of potentiality. Symbolic virginity is a golden age, enclosed womb life, or pre-existential or pre-conscious states, which both precede (in time) and supersede (in value) the succeeding stages. A belated carpe diem poem like Herrick's occupies an intertext which inevitably contains the complex of myths and superstitions counter to the carpe diem valorization of sensual experience. As Richmond remarks, "a Renaissance poet writing a 'carpe diem' admonition has to pretend he has no knowledge of the teaching of Christianity" Such a poem can "recognize the power of ethical or metaphysical arguments for chastity, but . . . vindicate a materialistic or sensual view of life by refuting them."¹⁸ Or, like Herrick's, it can adopt a defensive strategy of concealment, repression, and self-deception.

Herrick's poem seems to follow a simple two-part structure, the

images and tropes of the first two quatrains illustrating visually and through examples the more abstract ideas ("that age is best") and the specific conclusions and directives ("then be not coy") of the last two quatrains. The two-part structure parallels the basic binary opposition in language between synchronic (vertical, selective, paradigmatic, simultaneous, metaphoric) and diachronic (horizontal, combinative, syntagmatic, sequential, metonymic). This opposition can also be understood as descriptive of the human situation in time, the presentness of subjective experience traversing the flux of time which always dissolves that experience into past. Recent developments in psychology, anthropology, and neuro-physiology point to two modes of cognition which are roughly analogous to the two linguistic axes: the holistic and serialistic categories of mental competence.¹⁹ "Holists . . . learn, remember, and recapitulate as a whole: formally, in terms of 'high order relations.'" "Serialists learn, remember, and recapitulate a body of information in terms of string-like cognitive structures where items are related by simple data links: formally, by 'low order relations.'"²⁰ Holistic thinking is associated with right cerebral hemisphere functions, hence with Gestalt or global perception, spontaneous "flashes," and visualization. Serialistic thinking is associated with left hemisphericity, and thus with verbal reasoning and formal analysis.²¹

In the first two quatrains of Herrick's poem, Herrick reaches into the stores (both classical and Christian) of analogical images and tropes, but he foregoes them almost entirely in the second two quatrains. The poem shifts from "holist" image-making to "serialist" discursive analysis of mortality; from the timelessly traditional tropes of rose and flower and sun to spare, even blunt, plain speech. The analogical mode of the first quatrain provides a kind of verbal barrier against temporality, first, in the choice of traditional images—those that have survived the vicissitudes of literary fashion—and secondly, in its presentation of static images as (paradoxically) tropes of temporal processes. Old Time flying is "still" ("always" and, because always, oddly motionless in its permanency). The dying flower and setting sun are analogical illustrations of "Old Time" rather than a causal series. The third quatrain not only introduces the metonymic "blood" and "warmer," it illustrates metonymy itself, the multiple attributes of the horizontal linguistic, experiential, and cognitive axes: diachrony, contiguity, causality, sequentiality. The verbal mode, that is, becomes cognate with temporality itself conceived not as Time (a constant quasi-divine causal force at the center of things) but as

“times”: as mere secular, linear successiveness. Seriality (“best . . . first . . . worse . . . worst . . .”) “still succeeds.” The irrevocable one-way processes of time always “succeed.” The causal chains that characterize the language and thought of the third quatrain negate the possibility of rapprochement between temporal and divine that was at least implied in the analogical language of the first two quatrains. The poem may be marking the shift from analogical/metaphoric picturing of temporal phenomena to causal analysis and interpretation of them, and thus mirroring the historical shift in the individual’s mode of apprehending his relation to the cosmos—a shift well under way in the intellectual, political, and religious turmoil of seventeenth-century England—toward secular historicity itself, and away from ritualist/mythic access to eternity. The poem’s “fall” into direct, discursive speech (“be not coy . . . use your time . . . go marry”)—the change in language which seemed to clarify and thus strengthen its argument—actually implies submission to the power of temporality. In one sense, of course, the poem’s “entropic” aging-effects (the increasing seriousness, masterfulness, argumentativeness of its “voice,” and its literal dis/illusionment, the shearing away of visual imagery and of playful personifications like Old Time flying) reinforce the *carpe diem* argument. 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 the rosebuds, is not to defer death, the final gathering, the end of the race. Thus the poem simultaneously illustrates both the wisdom and the folly of heeding its message.

Not despite but by means of its *memento mori* theme, the insistence on the absolute inevitability of temporal processes leading to death, the *carpe diem* poem offers the reader access to a strategy against time and death by control of the immediate future (through will and decision to act according to the *carpe diem dictum*), of the past (through accumulated memory), and of the present (through heightening of experience, especially, sexual experience). But underlying and subverting this self-actualizing strategy is an essential ambiguity in human sexuality as a concept. As a drive or instinct, sexuality is an aspect of biological determinism, from which point of view the individual is important only as a factor in a process. Sexual activity is re-

garded not as experience but as the means by which the species perpetuates itself. Sexuality is also, in the realm of personality and subjective experience, an element in actualizing the self by enhancing awareness of the unique quality of personal experience. Some aspects of human sexuality may be instinctual, but others are learned behaviors and attitudes. 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. The only perfect defense against fear of death, against the paralyzing anxiety of the coy virgin, is death itself, the biological "eternal return," the final circumventing of temporal process, the return of the "first age" which is pre-organic life. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud considered the notion of consciousness itself as an irritant, and stimulus as a secondary pleasure compared to the pleasure of death, the ultimate removal of the burden of consciousness, of conflict, tension, anxiety. Herrick's "To the Virgins" covertly defines a type of pleasure as coyness, inertia, "tarry." "Gathering" can be read as a trope for the self-actualizing and stimulus-seeking drive which is in conflict with the drive to reduce stimuli and eliminate internal tension, the drive towards death. The overt *carpe diem* message is thus not only a defense against time, but against a drive, and the *carpe diem* poem thus becomes an internal dialogue between two drives competing for dominance within a single psyche, each defending itself against the other.

The very concept of the coherent self may be viewed as a defense against the various forces that dislocate, fragment, or weaken autonomous selfhood: internal psychic conflict, such as that outlined above, change through time, contradictory cultural directives. The *carpe diem* poem posits a coherent self based on desire as a unifying force, as that which causes experience which is in turn incorporated into the construct of the self. The self, then, is a "gathering," a plenitude of experiences filtered through conscious awareness, a unified, stable "vertical" structure resisting those "horizontal" forces that render the self protean, unstable, contingent. The coherent self can be understood as a force that gathers experience to fill the empty store of potential selfhood with individuality, intentionality, and memory. *Carpe diem* suggests that desire can be mastered, defined, controlled by conscious will, and thus used as a tool for minimizing the paralyzing

anxiety of "coyness," and for shoring up the boundaries of the self. But, like death, sexuality threatens, by exceeding, the sublimated, socialized, self-contained, self-mastered self.²³ Carpe diem urges a heightening of self-consciousness, of that which, in fear of its own mortality, turns to desire: to that very activity that threatens by its ungovernable force to fragment the self, to weaken its consciously chosen or socially-defined boundaries. Finally, carpe diem insists on repression of the awareness that, ultimately, desire is nature's strategy, not man's, a strategy by which the self finally can achieve only obliteration; and repression of the awareness of the self's own silent strategy against desire as irritant, against need. 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, the gathering that is simultaneously the un-gathering of the fragile structure of the self: the self as fabric, structure, narrative text is only fully woven, built, written, when "ended" by death. 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, and may therefore be understood as an accession in the form of self-repression to the death drive; the second is that impulse through which is created the replacement for the self in the next generation, making the self merely a cause in the generational chain—to seek desire is thus, paradoxically, a form of indirect suicide.

Both poetic and psychic selves depend for their solidity and worth on the act of "gathering," the poetic self gathering verbal material into an aesthetic whole as proof and image of the powers of that self; the psychic self gathering together its conscious life into a construct capable of persisting through time as a recognizable and stable entity. But Herrick's carpe diem poem, like so many seventeenth century lyrics, as a collage of allusions and borrowings is an obsessive seeking after an elusive prior authority, the textual aggressiveness implied by its dismemberment of precursor poems working to entrap it in a past which haunts it. The poetic self implied in "To the Virgins" creates its image through a work which represents a radical dismemberment of precursor texts (and thus, by extension, of precursor poetic personae). Herrick's poem as the quintessential carpe diem poem in English both fulfills and exhausts the potential of its genre, just as Herrick's poetic persona on the one hand completes, extends, supplements its precursors, and, on the other, vanquishes, annuls, slays them. The poet's pen is the magical generative instrument by which

immortality is secured, pleasure and life produced. The pen spends its ink on the virgin page, and a text is generated. But the text-creating act is accomplished only by means of an agonistic rage against earlier poetic "generators," whose own achieved immortality threatens that desired by the poetic self.

Anxiety over poetic impotence is suggested in the *Hesperides'* obsessive images of drooping, in the glorification of poetic "Lust" over sexual pleasure (H-336), in "The Vision" of "Herrick" as rival/replacement of an impotent Anacreon (H-1017) and in H-285, "Upon himself," which celebrates "Herrick's" self as sieve, that is, as empty ("What comes in, runnes quickly out"). "Herrick" is here not a contained, bounded, experience-gathering self, but a type of virgin ("Maides sho'd say, or Virgins sing,/ Herrick keeps, as holds nothing"). The agonistic urge to master and shape the self by mastering others (or prior "selves") or by acquiring experience is here relinquished, but the consequence is a self empty of experiential contents, a self as an inviolate essence which preserves its selfhood by not gathering—by letting experience, even the most extreme ("love," "jealousy," "fear," "hope") run off the slick impermeable outer surface of its being. It is a self antithetical to the self the speaker of "To the Virgins" urges the virgin addressees to become. The sieve-self is a self defended against time by a kind of lack of affectivity, an impenetrable immunity to experience; a self that preserves its identity by self-containment, not experiential expansion and acquisition.

The speaker of "To the Virgins" is the manifestation of the self-mastering defense network against psychic dispersion by time or by self-harming drives (such as the virgins' anxiety). But the self-mastering drive as defense is also aggression against the "virgin" self. The speaker presents himself as the virgins'/readers' ally against time, but, seen as an aggressor against the virgin self, the speaker is rather time's lackey, a verbal force subservient to nature as biological determinism, a force which delivers us into generation, to that process which expends the individual in the creation of new generations. This second speaker's self (the speaker as advocate for nature and time) indeed "makes much of time" in that he serves it and gains, for his betrayal of the virgins to time's desires, a constantly renewed crop of "virgin" readers. The poem's fragmented persona contains yet another component, that of the virgin, the narcissistic preserver of the self, the avoider of risk, experience, change. The first persona serves the human desire to use time, and thus defends itself against the second persona, who serves time or nature at the expense of the individ-

ual; the second persona defends itself against both first and third (who seek to enhance the self either by seeking experience—the first persona—or by avoiding it—the third); the third persona defends itself against both first and second. Only in the region of “tarry,” of death, is each fragment of the poetic persona triumphant, satisfied: the self completed, time served, and safety-permanence attained at last.

The longer the reader searches for the carpe diem message in Herrick’s obviously carpe diem poem, the greater difficulty she has in finding it. Herrick’s consoling offer of verbal/rhetorical mastery over time is also a textual substitute for riskier experience (“Gathering” as reading/ interpreting replacing sexuality); heightening consciousness by awareness of death and by seeking the satisfaction of desire entails expulsion from consciousness of desire’s role in the service of death; the poem demands that we think about what is normally unthinkable, but simultaneously, by its reassuring familiarity of topic, argument, and trope, enables us to displace death from awareness; strategies in defense of the self can be equated to strategies, on the part of time, nature, and the self, for attacking the self. The plenitude of meaning offered by Herrick’s poem disintegrates into a tangle of conflicting concepts, images, and tropes. The argument can be read as a convincing and successful victory over the “virgins” who read its irresistible message, but the terrified logic of the virgin is always at work in the text, silently subverting it. The reader’s mastery over the meanings of the text, like mastery over the self, proves transient, illusory, incomplete, the poem seductively inviting, while coyly forbidding, the interpretive impulse, the reader’s desire to gather the promised harvest of significance. Any analytical reading of Herrick’s poem, whether seeking to recuperate or to interrogate the carpe diem idea, must finally also take the shape of defense against the poem. A recuperative reading wards off or neutralizes into intentionalist irony or ambiguity the poem’s anti-carpe diem implications; an interrogative reading is equally defensive in that it carries 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.

Notes

1. H-208 in *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick*, ed. J. Max Patrick

(New York: New York Univ. Press, 1963). This numbered edition of Herrick's poems will be used throughout.

2. Laurence Perrine, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, 5th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 88.

3. Norman K. Farmer, Jr., "Herrick's Hesperidean Garden: *ut Pictura Poesis*," in *Trust to Good Verses: Herrick Tercentenary Essays*, eds. Roger B. Rollin and J. Max Patrick (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1978). Farmer points out that "for the seventeenth-century reader a book of poems was often the verbal equivalent of a garden" (p. 15) and that the engraved frontispiece to the 1648 edition of *Hesperides* depicts a memorial bust of the poet in a garden which is in fact "Hesperides," the collection of poems. Consequently, "as we walk about (i.e., 'read') the garden, we can understand that our experience is quite often to be the verbal equivalent to *seeing*, an understanding which rests squarely on the Horatian doctrine, *ut pictura poesis*" (p. 33).

4. William Oram, "Herrick's Use of Sacred Materials," in *Trust to Good Verses: Herrick Tercentenary Essays*. Oram notes that death in many of the poems in *Hesperides* is "'screened' or mediated," given "a playful, orderly, and hence an acceptable form" (p. 215). Death is "wrapped . . . in a covering of ordered language" (p. 217).

5. See John Searle's seminal article on illocutionary speech acts, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts," *Language in Society*, 5 (1976), 1-23.

6. See Mary Louise Pratt's imaginative and convincing application of speech-act theory to literature, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 215, 221.

7. Jonathan Culler, "Convention and Meaning: Derrida and Austin," *New Literary History*, 13 (1981), 15-30.

8. Achsah Guibbory, "'No Lust there's like to Poetry:' Herrick's Passion for Poetry," in *Trust to Good Verses: Herrick Tercentenary Essays*, p. 95.

9. Robert Herrick, *The Poetical Works of Robert Herrick*, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), pp. 517-19.

10. Gordon Braden observes, "the most famous line Herrick ever wrote is only the latest term in a clearly defined tradition that reaches back through four languages . . . 'gather therefore the Rose' (Spenser, FQ, 2.12.75), 'Cogliam la rosa' (Tasso, Gerusalemme Liberata 16.117), 'Cueillez des aujourdhuy les roses' (Ronsard, 2:287), 'Collige, uirgo, rosas' (De Rosis Nascentibus)" (p. 171). Braden frequently speaks of Herrick's "dismemberment" of precursor texts, but without special reference to *carpe diem*. *The Classics and English Renaissance Poetry: Three Case Studies* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978).

11. I am indebted to Braden's illuminating discussion of this poem as an example of "Anacreon's" provision for Herrick of "a model for a self-contained lyric world whose principal activity is the casual permutation of its own decor" (p. 220). Many of Braden's insights have useful implications for *carpe diem* (and anti-*carpe diem*), e.g.: "What is missing in *Hesperides* is aggressive, genital, in other words, 'adult' sexuality. The retreat from intercourse is pervasive, and especially notable in a poet whose concerns are so often explicitly sexual. Almost always when Herrick encounters the matter of actual intercourse, there is some buckling effect not explained by mere decorum The major consummation poems—the Epithalamia—dwell at extraordinary length on the psychology of delay" (p. 223).

Despite the repetition of carpe diem motifs throughout *Hesperides*, anti-carpe diem strains are evident in at least two types of poems: those that associate sexuality as defloration, birth, or impotence with disease, sadism, or death (examples are H-36, H-69, H-107, H-118, H-151, H-184, H-205, H-238, H-297, H-318, H-493) and those that ward off sexuality with textuality (with speech, visual imagery, or poetry—examples are H-43, H-56, H-74, H-336, H-681, H-1017).

12. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), p. 103.

13. Kenneth Burke, "Freud—and the Analysis of Poetry," *Freud: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Perry Meisel (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1981), p. 80.

14. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979).

In their discussion of Emily Dickinson: "the word *virginity*, because its root associates it with the word *vir*, meaning manliness or power, images a kind of self-enclosed armor, as the mythic moon-white figure of Diana the huntress tells us. For such a snow maiden, virginity, signifying power instead of weakness, is not a gift she gives her groom, but a boon she grants to herself: the boon of androgynous wholeness, autonomy, self-sufficiency" (pp. 616–17).

15. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. J. and P. Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp. 162–63.

16. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. W. R. Trask (Bollinger Series 46, pantheon, 1954), p. 35.

17. Harold E. Toliver, *Marvell's Ironic Vision* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965), p. 28.

18. H. M. Richmond, *The School of Love: The Evolution of the Stuart Love Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), p. 18.

19. Richardson, Nebes, and Torrance investigate different aspects of cerebral laterality: Allen Richardson, "Verbalizer/Visualizer: A Cognitive Style Dimension," *Journal of Mental Imagery* 1 (1977), 109–26. R. D. Nebes, "Hemispheric Specialization in Commissurotomed Man," *Psychological Bulletin*, 81 (1974), 1–14. E. Paul Torrance and Cecil Reynolds, *Preliminary Norms—Technical Manual for Your Style of Learning and Thinking: Form C* (Dept. of Educational Psychology, Univ. of Georgia, 1973).

Sequential processing and temporal analysis of data, serious and systematic problem-solving, logical/verbal thinking are associated with left hemisphericity (hence with right-sidedness and seriality); humor, analogizing, synthesizing, perception and memory of spatial, visual, and other non-verbal stimuli seem associated with right hemisphericity (hence with left-sidedness and holism).

Arthur J. Deikman ("Bimodal Consciousness," in *The Nature of Human Consciousness: A Book of Readings*, ed. Robert E. Ornstein [San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1973], pp. 481–89) posits two modes of biological/psychological organization in individuals, the "action" and "receptive" modes. The receptive mode takes in (gathers) the environment; the action mode manipulates the environment by means of object-based logic, heightened

boundary perception, and dominance of formal over sensory characteristics (pp. 68–69). In our culture, the receptive mode is gradually dominated, during the individual's maturation, by the action mode. The pleasures that a *carpe diem* poem persuades the addressee to seek belong to the receptive mode; but the persuasion itself, to the action mode. Receptivity, in Deikman's description, is characterized by "heightened sensory vividness . . . as well as timelessness, exaltation, strong affect, and a sense that the horizon of awareness has been greatly expanded" (p. 75). But relaxed satisfaction with the present moment—the truly seized day—characterizes the virgin's reluctance to "use," to "go," to "make much." Herrick's poem becomes progressively less present-centered, less pleasure-oriented, less receptive, even as it overly recommends receptiveness to the pleasures of the moment.

20. Gordon Pask and B. C. E. Scott, "Learning Strategies and Individual Competence," *International Journal of Man-Machine Studies*, 4 (1972), 218.

21. Toliver has noted a similar binary opposition as characteristic of the seventeenth-century poet's intellectual dilemma. "Once the habit of analogical or sacramental thought is broken by the causal method of empirical thought . . . the poet cannot employ without some discomfort the standard tropes and symbols that were traditionally used to associate the temporal with the divine through 'magical' means" (p. 34).

22. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Vol. 18, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis (London: Hogarth, 1955).

23. Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977). "Freud may be moving toward the position that the pleasureable excitement of sexuality occurs when the body's normal range of sensation is exceeded Sexuality would be that which is intolerable to the structured self" (p. 77). Here and in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), Bersani lucidly explores the literary consequences of the notions of the coherent and the unstructured self.