

SECOND ASSIGNMENT (due November 6th)

The second paper will be six to seven pages long, that is to say, from 2,100 to 2400 words in length. This number may include quotations essential to your discussion but not extensive quotations of stanzas or of entire poems. Use the word-counting feature on your word-processing program to obtain the number of words and print the number on your title page. One further requirement. Please number the pages of your essay—it will make it easier for me to refer to your work in writing my commentary.

Last time, I requested that a paraphrase of the poem analyzed be included in your submission and that it not be considered as contributing to the length of the assignment. In this case I want a paraphrase of at least one of the poems discussed to precede the essay, and once again, I do not want you to count the length of the paraphrase as part of the length of the assignment. But this time the paraphrase may be briefer than before—I do not insist upon the clause by clause requirement. The paraphrase, as before, should adopt the voice of the poem. (I.e., there should be no indirect discourse, of the sort “The poem says that . . .”)

I exemplify by using a stanza from Marvell’s *The Garden*:

When we have run our passion’s heat,
Love hither makes its best retreat.
The gods that mortal beauty chase,
Still in a tree did end their race.
Apollo hunted Daphne so,
Only that she might laurel grow;
And Pan did after Syrinx speed,
Not as a Nymph, but for a reed.

After human beings have exhausted their energies in seeking to gratify their passions, they turn for relief to the enjoyment of gardens; just so, the gods in ancient myths, such as Apollo and Pan, who chased after beautiful mortals, did not desire sexual gratification but rather the calm enjoyment of the plants into which these mortals were magically transformed at the moment the gods caught them. You can see from this example that making a concise paraphrase is not easy, even when you have footnotes to tell you about Daphne and Syrinx. The point of paraphrase is, in part, to produce an awareness of what paraphrase omits: in this case (1) the “we” of the first line may not refer to the human race but simply to the speaker and the reader, (2) there is a pun in “passion’s heat”, which refers ahead to one element of the word “race”, (3) a race that ends in a tree might turn the athletic metaphor into a reference to genealogy, (4) “Love” is personified as seeking a respite from erotic desire, (5) “Still” might mean “unchangingly—with the same result every time” or “yet, nonetheless; despite their intention”, (6) “Only” might mean “with the sole purpose” or “with the disappointing result”, and (7) the last-two ambiguities are resolved in each case in favor of the first alternative only by the last line of the stanza, with the alternation of “not as/for” rather than “not as/as”, which raises the question whether Marvell meant the delay to mean something about how the moral of the stanza should be taken. Marvell is particularly useful for such an exercise because one can be confident that he is sensitive to multiple meanings and that he has struggled to get them in and get them right. In our struggle to get a paraphrase right, we should notice how much we cannot get into it: paraphrase necessarily relies upon a good deal of interpretation, even when the meaning of the text is fairly clear, and a function of paraphrase is bring to awareness some of the assumptions behind interpretation—in this case, for example, that both metaphors and ambiguities are drawn from the domain of foot-racing. (*Life is a journey* develops into *life is a competitive event*.) Of particular interest here is that the pun in “heat” (a segment of a foot-race competition and a rise in body-temperature) is carried by a phrase (“passion’s heat”) suggestive of sexuality, a connotation borne out by the reference to

the passions of the gods that follows; but since the general topic so far has had to do with worldly achievement (the “laurel, oak, and bays” of the first stanza), we may infer that a transition has been effected here, in which sexual desire is being taken as emblematic of human ambition generally. The turn to erotic desire poses a question about the second line: what does it mean to say that erotic desire refreshes itself by giving itself over to non-erotic enjoyments? The fact that the word “Love” is first in the line endows it with a capital letter, and this typographical feature enables a suggestion that it is the god of love (Cupid, usually portrayed as a beautiful young man) who does the retreating. The suggestion is just a hint, not part of the meaning, but it prompts an association to “the gods” of the next line, and it enables the line about erotic love refreshing itself with non-erotic enjoyments to escape close questioning—after all, there’s nothing odd about the god of love enjoying garden scenery. The reader is left with the idea that love is a master-passion, possibly fueling the others, and that this passion recovers its strength (treading water, so to speak) when it lends its force to other pursuits. (Hence, the idea of “retreat”: both a place of leisure and also a strategic withdrawal to recoup energies.) In the next stanza, the poem will regard the retreat as fulfilling the real purpose of our desires, to which the worldly ambitions and sexual appetites both take a poor second place. The joke about the gods not really wanting erotic consummation anticipates this move. In my view, what the stanza says about human desire is (roughly) what someone like me, who hates skiing, might say about skiing holidays: “The only point to getting so wet and so cold for such a length of miserable time is to experience the enjoyment of the *apres-ski*—the dry clothing, the warm fire, the whiskey and the relaxation at the end of the day.”

I do not offer all this as a model for you to follow in fulfilling the assignment. My purpose is to exhibit what passed through my mind as I struggled to produce the paraphrase at the start of the last paragraph. (You will note that I have said nothing about the genealogical pun; I did not know quite what to make of it, and so I simply left it out of the paraphrase.) So far as making good sense of a poem is concerned, things often click into place eventually as one reads and re-reads a poem; actually doing a paraphrase has the advantage of bringing to the surface of consciousness a wealth of implications that might otherwise go unregarded as one tries to analyze it. The work that goes into paraphrase need not be exhausted by this purpose, however: if it suits your exposition, you may reproduce portions of the paraphrase and comment upon it in the body of the essay.

THE ASSIGNMENT:

The assignment may be satisfied in one of three ways:

I. Discuss any two poems, at least one of which will be a poem that we have read after the poems of Shakespeare and Donne, which you will compare and contrast in point of theme and execution.

Here are a few suggestions: Compare Marvell's *Dialogue between the Soul and the Body* with Shakespeare's Sonnet 146; compare Johnson's *To Penshurst* with Marvell's *On Appleton House*; compare Donne's sonnet 9 with Milton's "When I consider how my light is spent"; compare Jonson's "Still to be Neat" with Herrick's "Delight in Disorder"; compare Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* with Herrick's *Corinna's Going A-Maying* or *To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time*; compare Herbert's *The Forerunners* with Marvell's *The Coronet*; compare Marvell's play of imagery in *The Definition of Love* with any poem of Donne's, but particularly with *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning*; compare Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* with Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight*; compare Milton's *Methought I saw my* with Wordsworth's *Surprised by Joy*; compare Marvell's *The Garden* or the Woods section of *Appleton House* with *Tintern Abbey*; compare Wordsworth's sonnet *Upon Westminster Bridge* with Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight*; compare Wordsworth's *Three Years She Grew* with Shakespeare's Sonnet 20; if the use of pagan and Christian materials intrigues you, a good choice (despite the length of the poems involved) would be Herrick's *Corinna* and Milton's *Lycidas*. You are, of course, not limited to this list.

In drawing comparisons, you might do so from the standpoint of theme, a consideration governing the choice of most of these examples; or you might want to attend to the self-referential or paradoxical quality of some poems, like Herbert's *The Forerunners* and Marvell's *The Coronet*, which seem to deny or rebuke their own achievement; or you might want to compare and contrast two poems from the standpoint of their reliance upon metaphor and metonymy, as with Shakespeare's "No longer mourn for me," which is heavy on metonymy and "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day", which relies mostly on metaphor.

II. These standpoints apply to the second alternative and to the third as well. The second is to write about the characteristic style or thematic concerns of any one poet, using two or more poems as examples. In this case, you may write about any that we have read so far this term, including Shakespeare and Donne.

III. The third alternative is to write an essay on one poem, but it should be a poem of some length. In this case you must confine yourself entirely to poems read after Shakespeare and Donne.