**English 15A**

**Hong**

**Essay 3 – The Incongruous Pastoral of *Paradise Lost***

from Herrick, “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,

Old time is still a-flying;

And this same flower that smiles today,

Tomorrow will be dying

. . . .

That age is best which is the first

When youth and blood are warmer;

But being spent, the worse, and worst

Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,

And while ye may, go marry;

For having lost but once your prime,

You may tarry forever.

from Marvell, “To His Coy Mistress”

Now therefore, while the youthful hue

Sits on thy skin like morning dew,

And while thy willing soul transpires

At every pore with instant fires,

Now let us sport while we may,

And now like amorous birds of prey,

Rather at once our time devour

Than languish in his slow-chapped power.

Let us roll all our strength and all

Our sweetness into one ball,

And tear our pleasures with rough strife

Thorough the iron gates of life:

Thus, though we cannot make our sun

Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Both poems above by Herrick and Marvell are ostensibly exercises in wit by speakers who would convince their paramours to engage in sexual relations. What is striking about both poems, however, is that upon closer inspection, they are more properly meditations on the effects of time and temporal / historical change; both speakers adduce the effects of time in order to persuade their female audience to abandon their coquettish ways. Where the two poems diverge, however, is in their respective perceptions of the effects of time. Herrick’s speaker sees time as the destroyer, that which brings to an end to an idealized world or order, and thus turns to marriage (and presumably procreation) as temporary but ultimately ineffective bulwarks against the ravages of historical change; Marvell’s speaker, on the hand, sees change as an occasion for an escape from a stultifying world / environment, and an opportunity for sexual and psychological transfiguration, and thus seeks to engage with the temporal process. One could conclude, then, that temporality in these poems becomes something like a psychological landscape where one’s experience of historical change depends on the attitude taken towards temporality. If the person embraces change, as does Marvell’s speaker, then the world becomes a New Eden; if one fears change, does the speaker in Herrick’s poem, then the world become desolate, a melancholy wilderness devoid of all good things.

The same doubleness or ambiguity appears in the literature written in and around the English Civil War, where one speaker may picture England as a pastoral, as a golden age swallowed up in chaos, and another depicts it as a false, artificial world about to be transfigured into a new Eden, a realm of truth. As always, the precipitating factor in losing or gaining the world yearned for is ***change***, understood as the mutability of all phenomenal things, which irresistibly come to be and pass away. The golden age evades change; the new Eden welcomes it.

The golden age and new Eden mindsets correspond, respectively, to a set of interpretive assumptions that will be referred to as the satanic and miltonic mindsets. The connection between the golden age / satanic and new Eden / Miltonic mindsets lies in the relationship between sign and meaning. The golden age speakers desire a stable political, interpretive, and linguistic order in which one can know or understand Nature / God / world through clear and evident signs. In the mind of the golden age speaker, the sovereign and the political order he represents mimic what is presumed to be a divine order, and any deviation must represent an interpretive holocaust, an evacuation of any coherence. But of course, part of the problem faced by golden age poets is that the magical order they seek is always and already lost; we have in golden poetry only the nostalgic yearning for a magical world in which the divine and earthly correspond to one another. The task for such poets, then, is to recreate through poetry this lost order so that some semblance of cohesion and coherence can return. Thus we often find in the golden age poetry the implicit desire for a magical model of language in which poetry or language can enact or revive the desired outcome.

Similarly, the satanic approach argues for a complete and direct correspondence between the sign that mediates the truth or deity to us, and the universal/absolute per se. In other words, the sign positively corresponds to the reality we cannot see, so that by knowing the figure/sign, we know the nature of truth or god (which is otherwise hidden). For example, consider Satan’s throne (2.1ff): for Satan, one’s rank or station can be known by visual markers, such as jewels, and the relative height of one’s seat. Thus the satanic model of interpretation assumes that there exists an essential connection between the sign and the thing signified (the meaning). Why? Because such a reader always assumes that his or her understanding, or ***picture***, of the world is adequate and valid. Note that an important corollary of this emphasis on direct correspondence means that certain and absolute knowledge are only one metaphor or comparison away. If one can find the proper set of symbols or signs that correspond to a greater and hidden reality, then one has immediate and unfettered access to the otherwise unattainable. Such a view of the world assumes that interpretive, philosophical and religious certainty is possible; absolute knowledge is not only desirable but attainable in this mode of interpretation. Consider, for example, Satan’s contention that the only thing that separates him from God – the very expression of the absolute – is military might (1.245-49). For Satan, the absolute and absolute knowledge are no more than similitude away. It follows, then, that any disruption of such a symbolic order, such as change or temporality, must be viewed as a tragedy, an injustice.

If, on the other hand, we read the world and value contingently (acc. to the miltonic / new Eden mindset) – that is, if we determine how things mean on a local, particular, and circumstantial basis – as the reader must when reading the description of Mulciber’s fall (1.740-748), or when evaluating the epic similes in PL – then there is a ***temporal and interpretive*** discrepancy between the apparent or immediate significance of a sign and what it actually or possibly means (dis – meaning separation or alienation, as in the opening of Book 9 of PL). This discrepancy, or incongruity, first of all indicates the ***mediated* and *ironic*** nature of our knowledge of truth or god, by emphasizing its interpretive character – that meaning (and to verge upon blasphemy, deity) emerges only through an act of interpretation. Second, the experience of incongruity means that we cannot assume a continuity of meaning in the use of any one sign: in other words, figures, images means different things on different occasions. Thus, we can ***never*** assume, for example:

* that a picture of pipe is congruent with an actual pipe
* that all women must conform to a particular beauty ideal, as does Strephon in “The Lady’s Dressing Room.”
* that one remove oneself from the world of circumstance and particularity and move to a transcendent realm, that one can canonize oneself, as do the speakers of the “The Canonization,” “The Sun Rising,” and Sonnet 18.

Thus, according to the miltonic / new Eden mindset, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, while regrettable, need not be viewed as a tragedy, but could also be viewed as an opportunity, an occasion for renewal and reconciliation with deity.

With these two modes of interpretation in mind, consider the following essay options:

1. Analyze at least two epic similes in *PL* and argue that they instruct the reader about how to read or interpret. What rules for interpretation do the similes implicitly reinforce?
2. Compare or contrast Satan to one the speakers of the lyric poems we’ve analyzed thus far.
3. Analyze Satan as a reader, and explain how his interpretive assumptions lead him to misinterpret the world, God, or even his own self.
4. Argue that Milton requires the readers of *PL* to read ***ironically***, and compare or contrast the implied interpretive protocols to those found in one or more of the poems by Herrick, Lovelace, or Marvell. In other words, argue that Milton requires his readers to adopt miltonic mindsets, and thus to read characters, expressions, descriptions circumstantially, contingently. Consider, for example, the experience of reading the epic similes in PL (or even the reader’s attitude towards Satan).
5. Argue that Milton requires the readers of *PL* to read ***ironically.***
6. Examine the role and representation of the feminine in Book 4 of *PL*. Be sure to consider that gender denotes not biological sex, but the set of characteristics associated with either term, masculine or feminine.
7. Argue that Eve is a figure of mediated knowledge and examine the consequences of such a connection.
8. Compare and / or contrast the descriptions of Eden and Eve in Book 4 of *PL* to one or more of the pastorals by Herrick, Lovelace, or Marvell that we’ve read thus far. Your mission, which you are obliged to accept, is to illustrate both the golden age and new Eden mindsets (and their corresponding characteristics) that are discussed above.
9. Use *Paradise Lost*, specifically what I've called the miltonic mindset, as an interpretive frame with which to analyze / criticize the speaker of one of the Renaissance lyric poems that we read earlier this semester (Donne, Shakespeare). In other words, treat the narrator of the poem / poet as a speaker or character in *Paradise Lost*. How would Milton ask that we interpret such a speaker?
10. Compare or contrast *Paradise Lost* to *Pulp Fiction*.
11. Analyze the representation of deity in Book 3 of *PL* and investigate the role of mediation and mediated knowledge.

**Writing Notes**

* You may choose any one of the following topics/questions below, or you may create a topic of your own. If you choose to create your own topic, I **require** that you run it by me first.
* On the other hand, you should keep in mind that paper topics are only intended to stimulate your interpretive and creative powers. These topics/questions are thus only meant as an **aid** to thought, a springboard for brainstorming, but not as a ready-made outline of your essay. An essay should never sound like a list of answers to a list of questions. Rather, it should be a coherent interpretation of the work based on the careful development of a complex argument. Thus, it is perfectly acceptable and expected for you to negotiate, manipulate, even to distort the topics below, as long as you are still engaged in an effort to interpret, to make sense, of the work(s) in question.

* Although the best interpretations of *Paradise Lost* will address the poem's complexity, it is especially important for you to focus on particular sections or passages (even if from different books). The danger of trying to cite too much is that you will only end up *paraphrasing* a passage as against *analyzing or interpreting* its significance. Thus, even if you are working with 4-6 different books, choose and analyze carefully passages from those books that best allow you to make your points. On the other hand, if you end up writing only on a very small passage from Book 1 of *PL*, there's a good chance that your interpretation will be reductive, or leave out incredibly crucial issues or questions (read the next point as well). Don't be daunted by the enormity of *PL*: once you treat it as a series of digestible chunks, you find it not only more manageable, but also extremely rewarding.
* Remember, we will begin with the assumption that the author/poet speaker – that is, that the speaker is a fictional persona constructed by Milton analyzed, understood, criticized.
* Insofar as this assignment requires interpretation, you should view it as an exercise in which you engage yourself intellectually and experientially with the poetry in question, rather than just a performance in which you display your rhetorical deftness. It is true that excellence of expression will be rewarded, but remember that the best essays are serious and substantial engagements. I'd much rather see partially flawed essay that takes on a challenging topic/question, than a polished essay that treats a relatively “safe” position. (This does not mean, however, that you are exempt from proofreading carefully).
* Remember that all your claims must be supported with ***analysis of the text***. Put otherwise, you must back up what you say (A.S.E.).

Due Dates: Final draft, **min 1200 words**: Wednesday, 10 June 2020

**Notes for Tutors:**

1. 1200+ word, thesis-driven, MLA-formatted essay.
2. At least 3 body paragraphs.
3. 2 quotations per paragraph.
4. Main idea should be established in each body paragraph.
5. Writers should introduce each quotation and provide significant explanation / analysis.
6. There are several comparison / contrast options. Writers should use a “block” or “step-by-step” method of organization.

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| Golden Age  Montaigne, “On the cannibals”  Herrick, “The Argument of his book”  “The Hock-Cart, or Harvest Home”  “Upon Julia’s Clothes”  “Delight in Disorder”  “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”  “The Bad Season Makes the Poet Sad”  Milton, Paradise Lost, Book 1-2, 4, 5-6, 8-9  Lovelace, “The Grasshopper”  “To Althea, from Prison”  “Song to Amarantha”  Marvell, “The Garden”  “The Nymph Complaining”  “The Mower to the Glo-Worms”  “On a Drop of Dew” | New Eden  Montaigne, “On the cannibals”  “On experience”  Milton, Areopagitica  Paradise Lost Books 3, 4-5, 7, 8-9, 11-12  Marvell, “An Horatian Ode”  “To His Coy Mistress”  “Bermudas” |

Richard Lovelace, “Song to Amarantha” / “That she would dishevel her hair”

AMARANTHA sweet and fair,

Ah, braid no more that shining hair!

As my curious hand or eye

Hovering round thee, let it fly!

Let it fly as unconfined

As its calm ravisher the wind,

Who hath left his darling, th' East,

To wanton o'er that spicy nest.

Every tress must be confest,

But neatly tangled at the best;

Like a clew of golden thread

Most excellently ravellèd.

Do not then wind up that light

In ribbands, and o'ercloud in night,

Like the Sun in 's early ray;

But shake your head, and scatter day!