MATERIALS TO AID STUDY AND DISCUSSION

I.   FIGURES OF SPEECH

We begin our questions by introducing some terms that designate important feature of poetic language, all of which are departures from either literal expression or straightforward grammatical arrangement of words. The name given these features are traditional, sometimes dating back to antiquity. Do not let their strangeness put you off; they are merely conveniences of reference. The features to which they refer contribute powerfully to the effects of poetic utterance and will be at the focus of our attention from time to time as we analyze specific texts.

Metaphor: Refering to one sort of thing as if it were another.

Simile: Explicit comparison of one thing to another; sometimes omitted from the list of tropes on grounds that by stating the comparison it does not turn language oddly.

Synecdoche: A whole is represented by naming one of its parts, aspects or features, namely, the part, aspect or feature marking its distinction from others of its kind in the context of the speech-act–e.g. *He's got a new skirt* [girl-friend; context=gendered humanity]; *He lives three doors down* [house; context=entrances]; *They hired three hands at the factory* [workers; context=kinds of employee]; *The ham sandwich wants another coffee* [restaurant customer; context=selection from menu]. In addition to part for whole, synecdoche is sometimes held to include substitution of cause for effect or effect for cause, container for content [*Have another cup*], content for container [*I hit him with the milk*], and signifier for signified [*I pledge allegiance to the flag* . . .]. There is some debate whether to regard synecdoche as a basic figure or just a sub-class of metonymy.

Metonymy: Reference to something or someone by naming an attribute or something regularly associated with it in context. [*He is the power behind the throne*, *The White House refused to comment*, *The pen is mightier than the sword, She just adores Shakespeare, If you read this line/Remember not the hand that writ it*.]

Personification: Reference to abstractions or inanimate objects as though they had human qualities or abilities. (also called "Prosopoeia"): *Information wants to be free.*

Catachresis: Reference to one thing as another when no proper term for the thing exists *or* a metaphor that has lost its metaphoric character through long use and is taken as a proper term. *The leg of a table, the mouth of a river, the aftermath of war* [from the preterite of the Anglo-Saxen "mowen", to mow a field; the *mathe* was the stubble left over after the mowers had done their job.]

Onomatopoeia: Use of words whose sound correspond with their semantic value. *The buzzing of innumerable bees. The murmurous haunt of flies on summer's eves.*

Inversion: reversal of usual or conventional word order; in poetry, often used to deliberately suggest an alternative meaning. *Behold yon simpering dame/ Whose face between her forks presages snow* . . . (King Lear)

Chiasmus: Repetition of grammatical structures in reverse order or of words in successive clauses in reverse grammatical order. An example that includes both: *Forgive me, Father, for my sins, and for my mercies, bless me.*

II.   EXPOSITING A POEM

An essay in exposition of a lyric poem should aim at elucidating the text, offering paraphrases of its passages in some detail and a summary of the point made by the whole, as if the poem was an argument, a plea, a prayer—a piece of writing designed to have an effect on the reader. (Jacobson's short essay, *The Speech Event and the Functions of Language* offers a convenient summary of the effects that an utterance, written or spoken, can be expected to have upon its recipient by virtue of its linguistic character.)

Poetry's way with words is not straightforward, however; it deploys the figurative resources of language to produce effects that are not duplicated by paraphrase or even approximated by it. Hence paraphrase always serves the function of interpretation, and interpretation is always arguable—that is, it offers to suit the poem better than other interpretations, possible but (in your view) less plausible. An exposition is therefore a species of argument, and it is useful to keep in mind, when possible, alternative views about the meaning of the poem and how it works; this will help give an edge to your exposition.

A theme is a general sort of abbreviated argument, belief or opinion that characterizes the content of any piece of writing by paraphrasing it, saying what it is about. Single phrases, verses, stanzas or a poem as a whole may have a theme. A more general term is *motif* (also called a *topos*), which refers not only to themes, but also to parts of themes and also to devices, turns of phrase, or references to persons and agencies (such things as fate, chance, kings and desperate men) either simply repeated or developed through the work. (Any *motif* insistently repeated is called a *leitmotif*). While *motif* is more general, theme is more inclusive or "higher" in reference, designating the over-all argument or point that a work is making, but the two terms overlap in usage. For example, two common poetic themes in the tradition of Western poetry are the theme "ubi sunt" [Latin for "where are", as in "Where are the flowers of yesteryear?"] and the theme "carpe diem" [Latin for "seize the day", as in Herrick's *To the Virgins*]. They are also common motifs. Any expository account of a lyric poem will refer to themes and motifs in discussing the poem's *thematic development*.

Poems, like expository writings, develop in various ways according to the argument or thesis under consideration. They can pass from the general to the specific, from the specific to the general; they can enumerate a rapid series of statements to a conclusion or explore the variety of implication in a presiding metaphor; they can circle around their point or work progressively towards it, by building upon disparate examples or upon examples increasing in intensity. It would be a question calling for critical decision, for example, whether the quatrains of Donne's *Batter my Heart* call upon progressively more violence to resolve the difficulties of the situation from which the poetic voice speaks; discussion this point would be a likely element in an exposition of the poem.

In expositing a poem, it is often useful to mention the obvious, especially when the obvious may go unnoticed. For instance, the Donne sonnet, *If poisonous minerals*, turns from direct questions in the octet to a rhetorical question at the outset of the sestet, and this is important enough to call for explicit notice in any account of the poem. The example also raises two further issues–in discussing the poem's structure, it is important to note whether or not the poem has a *fulcrum*, a point of transition that is decisive for exacerbating or resolving the tensions set up by the thematic development up to that point, and whether it has an adequate resolution, that is, a pay-off statement (so to speak), in the form of a statement at or near its conclusion. Shakespeare's final couplets often surprise by providing only a commonplace at the end—the pay-off line comes earlier. It is often a question, too, in short lyrics, whether the fulcrum and the pay-off coincide.

Discussion of lyric poetry requires notice of metaphor—how it works, drawn from what domain of experience and applied easily, as a virtual commonplace, or unusually, to the domain of experience that is the subject-matter of the poem. A further question is whether the metaphors "add up"—that is, whether they have behind them a presiding metaphoric conception and if so, whether this perception is well-established in common speech or is somewhat unusual. Shakespeare's sonnet 73, for example, employs the commonplace notions (a) that the span of human life is a year and that it can be divided into seasons; (b) that the span of life is a day and can be divided into familiar periods, like, morning, noon, evening or twilight; and (c) that life

or vitality is heat or fire (or sometimes illumination). In the equation "Life is fire", the domain represented by "fire" is called the *source domain* or sometimes *the vehicle* (that which is used to talk about something else) and the time of life is called the *target domain* or sometimes *the tenor* (that which is actually the subject under consideration).   An analysis of the poem would try to explore the connections among its three commonplaces. Does the poem treat them quite independently? Does one provide easy transition to another? In contrast, the first two-thirds of Donne's *Hymn to God My God, in my Sickness* draws upon the unusual presiding metaphoric conceptions "a human being is a musical instrument" and "a human being is a map". These are variants upon the more commonplace conceptions "the soul is harmony" and "life is a journey" but not identical with them. Moreover, the nature of the relation between the two metaphoric ranges is not immediately clear, and neither is the range of metaphors occupying the last third of the poem.

In dealing with this poem, we labor under an added difficulty: the pay-off line is a paradox that would be accepted by Donne's contemporary readers as a commonplace—they might have trouble explaining it, but it would not have seemed to them an unexpected thing to say about God. Any account of this poem would have to elucidate this last line, and to do so in such a manner that what precedes the last line will fall into place behind it. Mention of paradox at this point may remind us of one more feature that should be noticed in analyzing a poem–its capacity to offer puzzles, sometimes not obviously. The last couplet of Shakespeare's first sonnet offers an obvious puzzle in sorting out the grammar. Donne's sonnet 14 offers a subtle puzzle in line 11 with the word "again"—when had the knot been broken before? And why "broken"; why not "untied"? Sometimes an odd word in a poem is just a convenience of speech, to fit out the rhythm or the meter, but sometimes the puzzle it poses is important. Part of the job of an elucidation is to note puzzles and tie their resolution to the general run of exposition.

III.   NOTES ON PROSODY

Meters are based upon stressed and unstressed syllables. Some prosodists argue that it is enough to distinguish four in order to derive the rest as combinations thereof, and so why clutter the mind with a number of odd-sounding names? But I add two more (spondee and amphibrach) to the initial four, because I find them useful:

              _ _ / _ _   / _   _   /   _ _   /
Anapest: In the heat of the night we drank beer and got tight.

          When you're lying awake, with a dismal headache, and repose is taboo'd by anxiety,
              I think you may use any language you choose to indulge in without impropriety . . .

   also: You're the top/ You're the Louvre museum;/ You're the top/ You're the Coluseum./ You're the nimble tread of dancing Fred Astaire,/ You're a Bendel bonnet [meiosis], A Shakespeare sonnet,/ You're Camembert

          / _ _   / _ _   / _   _ / _   _
Dactyl: Englebert Humperdink, he makes an awful stink

          / _ / _ / _   / _ / _   / _ / _   / _
Trochee: Mary, Mary, she's like candy; one should always have her handy.
   Often used to give the first foot of an iambic line a push, as in (see below) "Fills the wild vessel of the universe . . ."

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        _  /   _ / _  /  _   /  _ /
Iamb     I can't believe I wrote this ghastly stuff.
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        To be or not to be, [that is] the question . . .
        To be or not to be: a question for the mind . . .

Spondee: Two accented syllables in succession.

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               _  /_   _ /_   _    / _   [Dit-dah-dit, dit-dah-dit, dit-dah-dit]
Amphibrach:  Pajamas, bananas and Brooklyn/ Inspired her long-wished-for cook-in
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Stress is relative to its foot; an unstressed syllable in one foot can be more stressed than the stressed syllable in another foot, quite apart from changes in stress demanded by the meaning of the sentence. (e.g., "It *is not* growing like a tree/ In bulk, doth make man better be.") The stressed *is* bears less of an accent than the unstressed *not*.

Duration sometimes reinforces, sometimes contrasts with accent. It is independent of typographic length, e.g., "picked" vs "odd".   Try: Now entertain conjecture of a time/ When creeping murmur and the pouring dark/ Fills the wide vessel of the universe.

A caesura is a pause in the line when read aloud. Fulke Greville's *Elegy for Sydney*, whose caesuras in each pair of lines compare with those in the typical four-line stanza of Emily Dickinson:

        Silence augmenteth grief, —writing increaseth rage,/ Staled are my thoughts, which loved and lost —the wonder of our age;/ Yet quickened now with fire, —though dead with frost ere now,/ Enraged I write I know not what; —dead, quick, I know not how.

The Heart asks Pleasure—first—
And then—Excuse from Pain—
And then—those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering—

The word "enjambment" means "leg over", as in "I threw my leg over the fence" and refers to a relation between two consecutive lines of poetry the first of which has no punctuation at its end to indicate completion of a thought and whose meaning cannot be understood without the words that initiate the second line. The word "verse" refers to an individual line of poetry and has the same origin as the "verse" in "reverse"–it comes from the Latin for the turn the plowman makes at the end of each furrow. The word for a set of verses separated typographically from other sets in a form repeated in a poem is, of course,"stanza", which means *room* in Italian (hence Marvell's "we'll build in sonnets pretty rooms").