Paraphrase: Friend or Foe?

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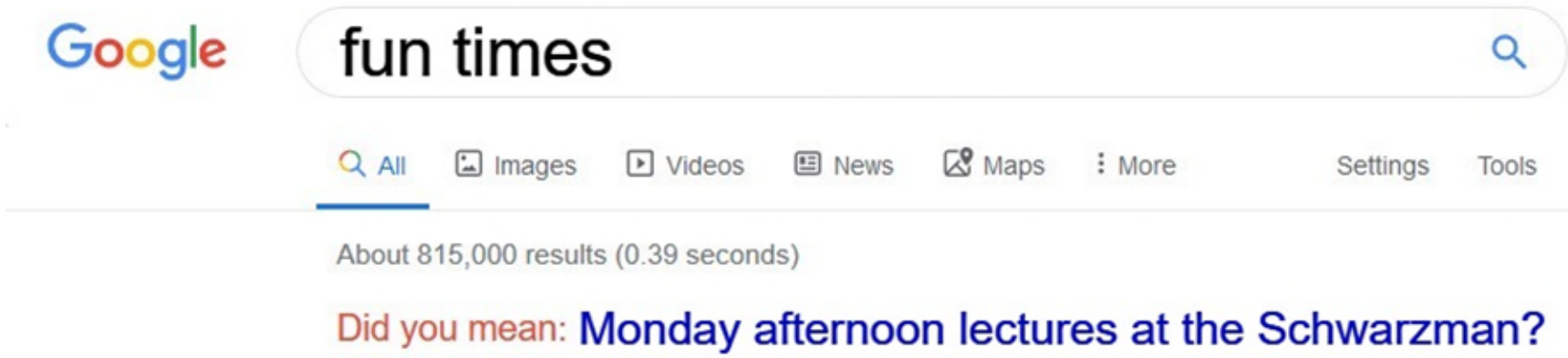
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‘The lofty inspiration of verse serves to elevate the orator’s style and the bold licence of poetic language does not preclude our attempting to render the same words in the language natural to prose. Nay, we may add the vigour of oratory to the thoughts expressed by the poet, make good his omissions, and prune his diffuseness.’

‘But I would not have paraphrase restrict itself to the bare interpretation of the original: its duty is rather to rival and vie with the original in the expression of the same thoughts.’

Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* (c. 95 AD)

‘For a paraphrase is a plain setting forth of a text or sentence more at large, with such circumstaunce of more and other wordes, as may make the sentence open, cleare, plaine, and familiar, whiche otherwise should perchaunce seme bare, unfruitful, harde, straunge, rough, obscure, and derke to be understanded of any that were either unlearned or but meanly entred. And what is this, but a kind of exposition, yea and that of the most piththie and effectual sorte?’

Nicholas Udall, ‘Preface’ to *The first tome or volume of the Paraphrase of Erasmus upon the newe testament* (1548)

‘the Tongue in general is so much refin’d since *Shakespear*’s time, that many of his Words, and more of his Phrases, are scarce intelligible. And of those which we understand, some are ungrammatical, others coarse; and his whole Style is so pester’d with Figurative Expressions, that it is as affected as it is obscure.’

‘Yet after all, because the Play was *Shakespear*’s, and that there appeared in some Places of it the admirable Genius of the Author; I undertook to remove that heap of Rubbish, under which many excellent Thoughts lay wholly bury’d.’

John Dryden, ‘Preface’ to *Troilus and Cressida; Or, Truth Found Too Late* (1679)

'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought'

'That's why our intelligence makes us all cowards, and why our determination – normally so healthy-looking – takes on a sickly pallor through thinking over-much about precise details.'

‘Al-Jurjani locates the source of beauty in speech in three elements: (a) the idea itself, (b) the individual words chosen in the phrase that expresses it, and (c) the way these words are strung together… All these elements come together to create a unique image or form of a given idea, something he calls *surat al-ma‘na* (the image or form of meaning).’

Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature* (2020)

‘It is a bold comparison in deede, to thinke to say better, than that is best. Soch turning of the best into worse, is much like the turning of good wine, out of a faire sweete flagon of siluer, into a foule mustie bottell of ledder: or, to turne pure gold and siluer, into foule brasse and copper.’

Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster* (1570)

‘it would be scarcely more difficult to push a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand than to alter a word, or the position of a word, in Milton or Shakespeare (in their most important works at least), without making the author say something else, or something worse, than he does say.’

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817)

I to my perils
Of cheat and charmer
Came clad in armour
By stars benign.
Hope lies to mortals
And most believe her,
But man's deceiver
Was never mine.

The thoughts of others
Were light and fleeting,
Of lovers' meeting
Or luck or fame.
Mine were of trouble,
And mine were steady,
So I was ready
When trouble came.

A. E. Housman, 'I to my perils', in *More Poems* (1936)

‘everyone seems to take it for granted that Housman’s poems unwaveringly endorse the pessimistic beliefs which they assert. To me his poems are remarkable for the ways in which rhythm and style temper or mitigate or criticise what in bald paraphrase the poem would be saying.’

Christopher Ricks, ‘A. E. Housman: The Nature of His Poetry’ (1964)

‘I include in the meaning of a word not only its correspondent object, but likewise all the associations which it recalls. For language is framed to convey not the object alone, but likewise the character, mood and intentions of the person who is representing it.’

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817)

‘Suppose … that the effort which has been again and again made to construct a universal language on a rational basis has at length succeeded, and that you have a language which has no uncertainty, no whims of idiom, no cumbrous forms, no fitful shimmer of many-hued significance, no hoary archaisms “familiar with forgotten years” – a patent deodorized and non-resonant language, which effects the purpose of communication as perfectly and rapidly as algebraic signs. Your language may be a perfect medium of expression to science, but will never express life, which is a great deal more than science.’

George Eliot, ‘The Natural History of German Life’ (1856)

‘it is … barely possible, to attain the ultimatum which I have ventured to propose as the infallible test of a blameless style: namely its *untranslateableness* in words of the same language, without injury to the meaning.’

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817)

‘where one finds commensurability with paraphrase, there the sheets have not been rumpled; there poetry has not, so to speak, spent the night.’

Osip Mandelstam, ‘Conversation about Dante’ (1933)

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Osip Mandelstam, ‘Conversation about Dante’ (1933)

‘the resistance which any good poem sets up against all attempts to paraphrase it’

Cleanth Brooks, ‘The Heresy of Paraphrase’ (1947)

Composed in Respectful Memory of Mrs. Yarker

'There is one glory of the Sun, and another glory of the Moon, and another glory of the Stars; for one Star differeth from another Star in glory.' – St. Paul

And have we lost another Friend?
    How sad the news to tell!
Alas! poor Mrs. Yarker's gone—
    Hark to the tolling bell!
Alas! how many now drop off—
    What numbers are unwell;
Another mortal borne away—
    Hark to the tolling bell!

John Close, 'And have we lost another Friend?' (1860)

‘No language can do justice to *The Prince of Panama* by Capt. Adderley Sleigh, but its own.’

‘Poetry of the Million’, *The Athenaeum*, 1063 (11 March 1848)

‘Specifications of what a poem is “about” come in degrees of finegrainedness according to the interests served in making the specification.’

Peter Lamarque, ‘Semantic Finegrainedness and Poetic Value’ (2015)

GUNNERS SLAUGHTER BLUES

MARESCA'S SQUAD OUTCLASSED BY ARSENAL

- What do we want from paraphrase? What are we using it to do?

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- What do we want from poetry? How much of what we want from poetry is served by the technique of paraphrase?

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

E. E. Cummings, 'anyone lived in a pretty how town' (1940)

‘how does the poem reorganize the very ways in which we might discover it?’

Angela Leighton, ‘About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase’ (2009)

‘There is, or there can be, a difference between reading something intelligible and reading something that has a powerful effect; between words as procurers of experiences and words as consolidators of knowledge.’

Adam Phillips, ‘On Not Getting It’ (2013)

‘Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.’

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (pubd. 1967)

‘you can get nothing from literature without in some degree enjoying it – it is no use treating it as a mere mass of information, because then you don’t get the essential information; every reader has to re-make it in his own feelings’

William Empson, ‘Teaching Literature’ (1934)

‘if the failure of paraphrase is ensured merely by changing the words in any way, then, by definition, paraphrase is doomed to failure, because it just is the process of reexpressing one sequence of words with a different sequence of words’

‘if the criterion of success… is reproduction of the poem’s total effect on the reader, it is… nonsensical, because it demands of paraphrase something that never was the object of the exercise in the first place’

Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (1997)

‘The point is surely not that we cannot describe adequately enough for many purposes what the poem in general is “about” … *The Rape of the Lock* is about the foibles of an eighteenth-century belle.’

Cleanth Brooks, ‘The Heresy of Paraphrase’ (1947)


The Wizard of Oz. (8-10 p.m., TCM) — Transported to a surreal landscape, a young girl kills the first person she meets and then teams up with three strangers to kill again.

‘We can very properly use paraphrases as pointers and as shorthand references provided that we know what we are doing. But it is highly important that we know what we are doing and that we see plainly that the paraphrase is not the real core of meaning which constitutes the essence of the poem.’

Cleanth Brooks, ‘The Heresy of Paraphrase’ (1947)

‘a unity in which you can no more separate a substance and a form than you can separate living blood and the life in the blood. This unity has, if you like, various “aspects” or “sides”, but they are not factors or parts; if you try to examine one, you find it is also the other.’

A. C. Bradley, ‘Poetry for Poetry’s Sake’ (1901)

‘the order of disclosure upon which the poem depends’

George Oppen, to Serge Fauchereau (25 July 1966)

‘the strange feeling that poems live … they are entities sponsoring life in their readers, emotional, cognitive and creative.’

John Wilkinson, *Lyric in Its Times* (2020)

‘when disciplines … marshal their “tools” to “interrogate” a work of art, we are right to wonder whether this commotion indeed serves a better, deeper, or more nuanced understanding of that work, as is repeatedly claimed, or whether what we call an “approach” is not in fact a manner of avoidance.’

Michel Chaouli, ‘Criticism and Style’ (2013)

‘A neoclassical poem which exploits the order, symmetry and equipoise of the heroic couplet; a naturalistic drama which is forced to gesture off-stage to realities it cannot credibly bring into view; a novel which garbles its time sequence or shifts dizzyingly from one character’s viewpoint to another: all these are instances of artistic form as itself the bearer of moral or ideological meaning.’

Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (2012)

Cupid is winged and doth range;
Her country so my love doth change.
But change she earth, or change she sky,
Yet I will love her till I die.

Anon.

‘I will love her though she moves from this part of the earth to one out of my reach; I will love her though she goes to live under different skies; I will love her though she moves from this earth and sky to another planet; I will love her though she moves into a social or intellectual sphere where I cannot follow; I will love her though she alters the earth and sky I have got now, though she destroys the bubble of worship in which I am now living by showing herself unworthy to be its object; I will love her though, being yet worthy of it, by going away she changes my earth into desire and unrest, and my heaven into despair; I will love her even if she has both power and will to upset both the orderly ideals of men in general (heaven) and the system of society in general (earth); she may alter the earth and sky she has now by abandoning her faith or in just punishment becoming outcast, and still I will love her; she may change my earth by killing me, but till it comes I will go on loving.’

William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930)

‘Abstract thought tends to be given the form of a conversational remark, structured around personal pronouns that imply speakers … Colloquial paraphrase offers a way in which to explain poems without falling into the discursive traps of explanation, and without forfeiting the possibilities for nuance, tone (including stridency), and swift social judgement that are inherent in the voice.’

Helen Thaventhiran, *Radical Empiricists* (2015)

Meanwhile the Mind, from pleasure less,
Withdraws into its happiness;

Andrew Marvell, ‘The Garden’ (1681)

'*From pleasure less*. Either 'from the lessening of pleasure' – 'we are quiet in the country, but our dullness gives a sober and self-knowing happiness, more intellectual than that of the over-stimulated pleasures of the town' or 'made less by this pleasure' – 'The pleasures of the country give a repose and intellectual release which make me less intellectual, make my mind less worrying and introspective.'

'the ambiguity gives two meanings to pleasure, corresponding to his Puritan ambivalence about it, and to the opposition between pleasure and happiness.'

William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935)

‘One cannot write a wink, or a nod, or a grin, or a purse of the Lips, or a *smile* – O *law!* One can-[not] put ones fingers to one’s nose, or yerk ye in the ribs, or lay hold your button in writing – but in all the most lively and titterly parts of my Letter you must not fail to imagine me as the epic poets say – now here, now there, now with one foot pointed at the ceiling, now with another – now with my pen on my ear, now with my elbow in my mouth – O my friends you loose the action – and attitude is every thing … And yet does not the word mum! go for ones finger beside the nose – I hope it does.’

John Keats, to George and Georgiana Keats (12 March 1819)

‘“What can *I* do, Tertius?” said Rosamund, turning her eyes on him again. That little speech of four words, like so many others in all languages, is capable by varied vocal inflections of expressing all states of mind from helpless dimness to exhaustive argumentative perception, from the completest self-devoting fellowship to the most neutral aloofness. Rosamund’s thin utterance threw into the words ‘What can *I* do?’ as much neutrality as they could hold. They fell like a mortal chill on Lydgate’s roused tenderness.’

George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-2)

‘because we don’t know exactly how he sounds, we can’t know exactly how he feels’

Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (1989)

Peace, let it be! for I loved him, and love him for ever: the dead are not dead but alive.

Alfred Tennyson, ‘Vastness’ (1885)

‘Imagining such an indicator of attitude is absurd but we need to make such an act of imagination to see why somebody who confidently opted for one of the possible indicators here would have missed the point of the poem. This is not because it does not matter which indicator is supplied, but because it is the absence of an indicator which needs to be precisely imagined.’

Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (1989)

‘We cannot say whether the poem concludes with an achieved serenity or whether the poet gets at last a surprise that may not be entirely pleasant. We can *speak* the line so that it will make up Tennyson’s mind and voice for him; indeed, it is impossible to say it without either some tonal indication or an evident and deliberate avoidance of such indication, whereas the written line neither drops hints nor maintains a poker-face. All this configuration of feeling is Tennyson’s.’

Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (1989)

‘we want to experience the sensation, the sound, of words leaping just beyond our capacity to know them certainly.’

James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* (2004)

‘Criticism is not a record of an experience that lies in the past and whose features await documentation; it is, rather, the arena for developing the experience.’

Michel Chaouli, ‘Criticism and Style’ (2013)