

From Paronomasia to Politics in the Poetry of Stevens and Bishop: A Response to Eleanor Cook*

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Being asked to respond to Eleanor Cook, I would like to say at the outset that my overriding intent is to resound, affirmatively, both the general principles she lays out about the importance and the play of paronomasia and to their particular manifestations in the poetry of Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop (among others). For example, her meditation on the word “turn,” when it occurs at the beginning or the end of a poetic line, has altered my reading—or, rather, added a new dimension to my reading—of Yeats’ “Second Coming.” With the particular *aesthetic* troping with which the word “turn” may be engaged, the opening line, “Turning and turning in the widening gyre,” could well be speaking both to the chaotic world at the turn of the century *and* to the failure of modern poetics to accommodate or compose this chaos. Similarly, Cook’s sense of the visual “half-moon ellipse” (39) in Stevens’ “Six Significant Landscapes” has allowed me to “see” a crescent moon displayed visually at the end of Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Shampoo”:¹

The shooting stars in your black hair
in bright formation
are flocking where,
so straight, so soon?
Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,
battered and shiny like the moon. (EBCP 84)

In a somewhat similar vein, Cook’s discussion of the way poets can use periods and ellipses to approach an orthographically visual poetry has made me ponder at length the possible complexities of the dotted

*Reference: Eleanor Cook, “From Etymology to Paronomasia: Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and Others,” *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 33-51.

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/debate/paronomasia-in-the-poems-of-wallace-stevens-and-elizabeth-bishop/>.

"i's" and the visually more *open* "o's" in Eliot's well-known phrase from "Four Quartets"—"At the still point of the turning world." (Or, from the same poem, consider a related phenomenon in the way that the line-break in

Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence.

forces us visually and aurally to reach through a poetic silence on the page.) I have also been led to wonder whether the ellipsis following "We say God and the imagination are one . . ." (WSCP 524) in Stevens' "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" is intended to be a typographical subversion of the trinitarian unity evoked—a reminder that such communion occurs literally by way of our words, our signs, even our typography (and not by the Word). Even more intriguing are the visual possibilities of "The Worms at Heaven's Gate" (written during a period when Stevens was consciously flirting with visual poetry). Consider the following two lines:

Here is an eye. And here are, one by one,
The lashes of that eye and its white lid. (WSCP 49)

Is it possible that the first period, following the word "eye," is intended to be "seen" as the "eye"? If so, are those two commas, placed "one by one," the visual counterparts to the silhouetted eyelashes being described? More provocatively, are the seven dots which constitute the penultimate line of the poem intended to evoke the sight of emerging worms (suggesting that all there is of the "body" being exhumed is the worms themselves)?

Here are the lips,
The bundle of the body and the feet.
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.
Out of the tomb we bring Badroulbador. (WSCP 50)

However, if the latter speculations here threaten to move toward a kind of aesthetically detached self-indulgence, that fact points toward the supplement I want to add to Cook's otherwise rich reading of paronomasia in modern poetry. Stimulated by the intellectual and

linguistic pleasure Cook notes so well about the use of paronomasia in Stevens and Bishop, I would like to go a step further and try to comment the political implications of this apparently neutral formal wordplay. I should note, however, that in a different context, Cook does draw out some of the political implications of Stevens' wordplay,² and that at the end of the article to which I am responding, she does refer to the political situation Bishop is dealing with in "Brazil, January 1, 1502" (see 48-49). Nonetheless, Cook's meditations on paronomasia clearly emphasize the aesthetic rather than the political nuances possible in this trope.

To take, almost at random, one example—consider the paronomastic play at work in Bishop's "The Burglar of Babylon" when (among many other puns in the poem) she writes,

The yellow sun was ugly,
 Like a raw egg on a plate—
 Slick from the sea. He cursed it,
 For he knew it sealed his fate. (EBCP 115)
 ["He" is the character Micuçu discussed below]

Here Bishop draws upon the traditional connection between "eye" and "egg." For example, the flower we call daisy takes its name from an Old English kenning for the sun—the "day's eye" or *dæges eage*. And Bishop notably exploits this ancient pun in another poem of *Questions of Travel*, "Squatter's Children," when she writes that "The sun's suspended eye / blinks casually" (EBCP 95). As Micuçu (who will be hunted down and shot by the "army") "sees" the sun looking like an "egg," he also sees, with the etymological paronomasia at work in this word, an authoritative "eye"—even an "I"—which will not only see and silence Micuçu but also literally *con-script* him with the power to name him and then "erase" him as a criminal. It is much to the point of this ballad that the real "thief" in "The Burglar of Babylon" is the conflation of the so-called "moral majority" of society—the army, church, and government—rather than Micuçu, whose name, Bishop humorously informs us in a footnote to the text, means "the folk name of a deadly snake, in the north."³

Having chosen not so much the aesthetics of paronomasia or etymology, but rather the political implications of wordplay in general, I beg to add some considerations heading that way. In "Brazil, January 1, 1502" for example (in which Cook does find some appalling political and militaristic implications), I would argue that the word "fabric" resonates with the word "fabricate" with far more political consequences than with the musical pun Cook points to in her footnote to this word.⁴ To illustrate my point, I cite both the lines Cook includes in her article and the concluding four lines of the poem (which she does not):

Just so the Christians, hard as nails,
 tiny as nails, and glinting,
 in creaking armor, came and found it all
 Directly after Mass, humming perhaps
L'Homme armé or some such tune,
 they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
 each out to catch an Indian for himself—
 those maddening little women who kept calling,
 calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
 and retreating, always retreating, behind it. (EBCP 92)

This is the story of rape—of the violence European Christians imposed upon a culture, a landscape, and women (who notably lose any discernable voice), Christians who not only "fabricated" a map of their "exploration," but also their right to impose such a vision and such violence by "fabricating" the native peoples of this hemisphere as "Indians." The history of this mistaken "naming," which continued to be imposed long after the mistake was known, is paramount to what is being "fabricated" here and elsewhere, to who and what was being "con-textualized" in this fabrication, and to all that was forced into "retreating, always retreating, behind it." It is a fabrication, of course, that would extend over the entirety of the Southern and Northern American continents. (It is interesting to compare "Brazil" to Amy Clampitt's recently published "Brought from Beyond," which concludes with these lines:

O magpie, O bowerbird,
 O Marco Polo and Coronado, where do
 these things, these

fabrications come from—the holy places,
 ark and altarpiece, the aureoles,
 the seraphim—and underneath it all
 the howling?⁵)

Similarly, in his famous “Of Modern Poetry,” a poem which has been, quite typically for Stevens, read in an exclusively aesthetic way,⁶ Stevens uses the word “theatre” with a deft paronomastic turn to point out the devastating political and social reality of World War II. Like Bishop, Stevens is riveted by the power of language—to inscribe and conscript, as it were—and the poem begins with a meditation on “the script,” including a pun on “scriptures” which had, historically, been the governing words or reference point for art:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
 What will suffice. It has not always had
 To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
 Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed
 To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
 (WSCP 239)

This is not merely a poem about aesthetic change—about, let us say, either the loss of or freedom from fixed forms and genres. Written in 1940, this is also very much a poem about political change, about a fundamental change in the actual world view of the *cosmos-polis* during the world wars of this century—a change which is figured, paronomastically, with the expression coined in 1914, during World War I, when Winston Churchill for the first time referred to the “theatre of war.”⁷ (By World War II, we should remember, it had become common to refer to the Pacific theater, the Asian theater, and the like, with the implication that this new connotation for the word “theater” was simply assumed by then.) No wonder Stevens writes of modern poetry that “It has to think about war / And it has to find what will suffice” (WSCP 240). He means this “thinking” seriously in a way that few critics have recognized.

Bishop makes an even more pointed and passionate indictment of the politics of World War II in a poem written the same year (1940) entitled

"The Roosters," in which, given the imagery of the poem, the word "cock" is charged with three different, glaringly obvious meanings:

At four o'clock
in the gun-metal blue dark
we hear the first crow of the first cock

just below
the gun-metal blue window. . . . (EBCP 35)

This poem, which itself would require a very lengthy article to unpack fully the dense political indictments Bishop makes throughout, is built almost entirely upon traditional paronomastic tropes and associations, but from a distinctly critical, skeptical, and anti-aggressionist point of view. Thus, in a poem written in Key West, a key military base during World War II, these militaristic "roosters" are *not* so humorously married to "the many wives / who lead hens' lives / of being courted and despised." The cocks are then connected with St. Peter's, with the story of Peter's three-time denial before the cock crows, and with the emblematic scene Bishop creates, consisting of a cock "carved on a dim column in the travertine" and of Christ, who "stands amazed," and of "Peter, two fingers raised / to surprised lips, both as if dazed." Though not overtly stated, there is definitely the implied etymological pun on "petrified" at work here.

Cook writes that "a simple pun, one without further reverberation, would be classified as a scheme. . . . But schemes can move toward tropes when they begin to tell fables about themselves," adding that "it is these fables" which interest her (37). My point, at least thus far in this response, is that it is equally if not more interesting to attend to the fables puns tell about themselves when they also record the political histories made by those very "fables" in the real world. (As an aside, and from a political angle, we find similar "histories" of brutal possessiveness and aggression recorded in both Stevens and Bishop in their use of the word "Florida" and again in the etymological play between their use of "venerable" and/or "venereal.")

As the preceding should suggest, even if I read paronomasia in Bishop and Stevens with more political import than does Cook, her work here

(and elsewhere) has taught me to regard this trope as serious, intrinsic, even critical (in all senses of the word) to the poetics of these two poets in particular—and to poetics in general.

I would like to offer one final disagreement with—or, more accurately, to make a qualification of—one of Cook's broad statements about the differences between Bishop and Stevens. Toward the beginning of her essay, Cook writes that

one would want to begin by saying that Bishop's kind of word-play follows a Spenser-Herbert line (she was devoted to the work of George Herbert.) Stevens' kind of paronomasia occasionally does so But Stevens the witty and wicked paronomastic is the heir to Donne, to Byron, to Carroll, to Hopkins, and the like. (35)

While this may well be true of the overarching differences in what I believe ultimately amounts to tone, this generalization minimizes both the overt wit in Bishop and the rich mellowness of Stevens, in his later years in particular. In such poems as "The Gentleman of Shalott" (who has, notably, only half a body completed in a "mirrored reflection" [EBCP 9]), in "The Man-Moth" (footnoted as a newspaper misprint for "mammoth" [EBCP 14]), and in the sonnet appropriately entitled "The Wit" (which I cite in full below), Bishop, as daughter to "Donne . . . and the like," rather than daughter to Herbert, is reaping her poetic inheritance, but with a distinctly feminist over- or under-tone. Here is "The Wit":

"Wait. Let me think a minute," you said.
And in the minute we saw:
Eve and Newton with an apple apiece,
and Moses with the Law,
Socrates, who scratched his curly head,
and many more from Greece,
all coming hurrying up to now,
bid by your crinkled brow.

But then you made a brilliant pun.
We gave a thunderclap of laughter.
Flustered, your helpers vanished one by one;
and through the conversational spaces, after,

we caught, —back, back, far far—
the glinting birthday of a fractious star. (EBCP 199)

I leave it to Eleanor Cook's ear to hear all the puns and echoes at work in this poem, although we should note that from an ironic point of view, this new "fractious star" (when "fractious" carries a root meaning of "breaking bread") promises to tell a very different story of Eve and her apple from the "evil" one passed down, as it were, by the "Law" throughout the centuries.

On the other hand, despite the obvious wit in many of Stevens' lines, titles, and entire poems, I find a more "Spenser-Herbert" lineage to Stevens' "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (where he not only reworks the Dantean conflation of the lover, light, and the divine, but also recasts, perhaps, the Miltonic lines, "It was no season for her / To wanton with the Sun her lusty Paramour" from "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity"), especially in the opening and concluding unrhymed tercets:

Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.
...
Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough. (WSCP 524)

And, again, although "cock" and "cocks" appear wittily enough in Stevens' poetry, it would seem that Bishop's subversion of the biblical association of the cock and the divine in "The Roosters" exhibits a wit more nearly derived from Donne than from Herbert, especially when compared to Stevens' quieter subversion of that same association in "Montrachet-le-Jardin":

Item: The cocks crow and the birds cry and
The sun expands, like a repetition on
One string, an absolute, not varying

Toward an inaccessible, pure sound. (WSCP 263)

Not to see the “witty and wicked” Bishop, and *not* to see the “quieter” Stevens (a word Cook uses to describe Bishop [p. 41]) is implicitly to continue what I have argued elsewhere is an unfortunate and mistaken critical stereotype of these two poets.⁸

However, I would like to conclude by noting that despite my few disagreements with Cook, without her insights into the dynamics, even poetics, of the wordplay of paromonasia, we would fail to see, hear, or note how serious, fundamental, and pervasive this trope proves to be for both Bishop’s and Stevens’ keen abilities to resonate, even respond to, the world and words before them. In this regard I think Cook is mistaken to conclude that

A decade ago, we would be considering the deconstructionist challenge to older views of paronomasia. Now we are more likely to be considering a historicist challenge. Both concur in limiting the functions of word-play, as of all formal effects. (49)

Although I do not consider myself an “historicist,” *per se*, I hope the preceding response demonstrates how rich, rather than “limiting,” an historicist placement of paronomasia in a writer’s poetics can be. As Stevens says—and I agree—“It is a world of words to the end of it.” And, as Bishop notes, albeit in a very different context, “Well, we have come this far” (EBCP 31).

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NOTES

¹ Quotations from Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop will be taken from their standard editions of collected poems, respectively. I will use WSCP for Stevens’ *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1977) and EBCP for Bishop’s *Complete Poems, 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983) in the text above.

² See, for example, Cook’s *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988), particularly chap. 10.

³ I have discussed this point at length in “The Moral of the Story: Naming the Thief in Babylon,” *Ellipsis* 1.2 (1991): 277-86.

⁴Cook writes the following in her note 28: "To Professor Maria Elisabeth Brockhoff, I owe the persuasive argument that Bishop's word 'fabric' is punning musically, as in German *Gewebe* (fabric) in the musical sense" (51)—although Cook does also see a relation between a musical and militaristic meaning.

⁵Amy Clampitt, "Brought from Beyond," *New Yorker* 28 Dec. 1992 - 4 Jan. 1993.

⁶The overly-aestheticized Stevens, at least as he has been traditionally interpreted for years, has been recently challenged by a number of publications, among them the special issue on Stevens and politics of the *Wallace Stevens Journal* 13.2 (1989).

⁷Melita Schaum first discussed this meaning of the word "theatre" in "'Seemings of History': The Political Poetics of Wallace Stevens" (a paper delivered at the 1987 MLA Conference).

⁸See "Elizabeth Bishop: *Perversity* as Lyric Voice," *American Poetry* 7.2 (1990): 31-49, in which I discuss how Bishop has been erroneously read as an inferior Wallace Stevens, precisely because of her "reticence." I should clarify, however, that in no way does Cook imply that Bishop is inferior to Stevens.