

## Palm Reading (A Response to Eleanor Cook)\*

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Paronomasia “as a general synonym for punning and word-play” (36), and etymology as one of its resources are the topics of Eleanor Cook’s searching and widely learned article. As words are drawn through their usages, borrowings, splices and grafts, so are their etymologies drawn through the words. What Ms. Cook says of Elizabeth Bishop’s work—“words tremble with the energy of their own histories, and the potential for paronomasia is always there” (46)—may be said more broadly of poetry, and of literature *tout court*. What she says of Wallace Stevens’ practice—

His play with neologisms . . . makes us listen for the paronomastic force of any unknown words as a way of defining them. . . . Such paronomastic testing of the unknown, together with the paronomastic history of the known, works to make us aware of the possible paronomasia in all our words—for all that, in our syllables, letters, and punctuation marks as well. (45)

—extends its force to language altogether.

With letters and punctuation marks, we are rapidly at the limits of what we hear and see of language. (Do we ever hear a letter, or rather only phonemes and morphemes? If we believe we hear a question mark intoned, how do we hear an ellipsis?) How clearly can we see paronomasia, or can it only be read? After quoting the sixth stanza of Stevens’ early “Six Significant Landscapes,” including the lines

If they tried rhomboids,  
Cones, waving lines, ellipses—

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\*Reference: Eleanor Cook, “From Etymology to Paronomasia: Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and Others,” *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 34-51.

As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon—  
Rationalists would bear sombreros.

Ms. Cook remarks: "If you look at Stevens' stanza [10 lines in full], you will see that he has curved the unjustified margin so that it is itself a half-moon ellipse or, it may be, a sombrero" (39-40). This is visual paronomasia, but we may not only see the unjustified margin as the half-moon ellipse (as the plane indicated by a rhomboid, cutting through a cone, yields precisely, geometrically, an ellipse), we may also read the semi-ellipsis of the word *eclipse* in "the ellipse of the half-moon," which in this case would indicate half of a lunar eclipse, or simply the half of the moon eclipsed in and by "the ellipse of the half-moon." The letter "c"—this comedian's favorite—is not seen nor heard except as read in its ellipsis. The sombrero that shades a head from the sun is the visual disguise obscuring and occulting the trope—the ellipsis—of *eclipse* written paronomastically within a reading of *ellipse*.

Like the moon, paronomasia is liminal, a threshold of mutabilities. There is more—"something evermore about to be"—to be read than meets the eye and its light of sense. Indeed, paronomasia may scarcely, sometimes never, meet the eye. Upon the lines from Bishop's poem, "Brazil, January 1, 1502,"

the big symbolic birds keep quiet,  
each showing only half his puffed and padded,  
pure-colored or spotted breast.  
Still in the foreground there is Sin . . . .

Ms. Cook impeccably comments that this "language of ornithological fieldguides" gives another sense as well: "it is, or should be, impossible to miss that history of 'immaculate' and 'maculate,' which enables us to read the symbolism of the big symbolic birds" (41). It is her litotes ("impossible to miss") which enables her exacting reading of the paronomasia that is everywhere to be missed. Segueing to Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar," she links etymology (*immaculate* as "unspotted") with paronomasia (a moon called "immaculate" can be "imbecile," lunatic, moony and loony) such that "word-play here enters an entire field of association" (42). But the enabling entry into the field

of metonymic association is the trope of denegation, the litotes that denies the denial—impossible to miss—of paronomastic troping. What if one can only read what others can scarcely see, “*debili sì, che perla in bianca fronte / non vien men tosto alle nostre pupille*” (*Paradiso* III.14-15)?

Stevens, it seems to me, is readable at just this limit of visibility, including the visibility of his letters. His sublimity is often readable in, or rather through, what he does not write. In his “The Snow Man,” for example, its first line requires “a mind of winter” that is then *not* to indulge in Shelleyan pathos: “not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind.” The sound of the wind, the poem concludes, blows

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Although I have argued elsewhere that the last line’s *the* (pursued in the last line of “The Man on the Dump”) is the point of this poem,<sup>1</sup> my point here is to observe that the negations of double negations are, after all, still readable as written: we read what we are *not* to think or see. The real threshold of the poem emerges as the last line refers to the first words that are the poem’s title. It is a small paronomasia to have “The Snow Man”—this “mind of winter,” “nothing himself”—be “This No Man.” But is it any smaller or larger a paronomastic troping to have “The Snow Man” be “This Know Man”? Unlike the elliptical *c* of the eclipse in the ellipse, which can be heard in its invisibility, the silent *k* of “this know man” is unheard, sweeter, and thus more veiled, obscure in its viewlessness: as if “Darkling I listen . . .” were echoed darkly, muffled, in this unseeing but knowing listening to the snow.

The threshold of readability upon that of the unseen and unheard is Stevens’ paronomastic power of silent and invisible speech. Ms. Cook notes that “The paradox of *fans atque infans* is listed in Lewis and Short, a dictionary in which Stevens said he delighted” (42). She adds that “he adapted the double pun in the paronomasia of a fan and an infans in the poem ‘Infanta Marina.’” In this poem, of the same year as “The Snow Man,” the first and second stanzas are:

Her terrace was the sand  
And the palms and the twilight.

She made of the motions of her wrist  
 The grandiose gestures  
 Of her thought.

Triply liminal—terrace, sand, twilight—“this creature of the evening” signals the language-as-gesture of her fanning. The poem concludes:

And thus she roamed  
 In the roamings of her fan,

Partaking of the sea,  
 And of the evening,  
 As they flowed around  
 And uttered their subsiding sound.

If the uncertain etymology of “roam” permits its association with “room,” this poem stanzas (Ms. Cook also notes what she calls “the standard pun on *stanza*, meaning ‘room,’” [38] which goes back at least to Petrarch) its fantastic speech across its thresholds—into the sea and the evening—or, in the two-way motion of its fanning, draws sea and evening across the threshold of utterance even as their audibility descends.

The reading of a palm’s fans as the writing of silent speech may unfold over thirty-four years to Stevens’ “Of Mere Being.” In this poem beyond last limits,

The palm at the end of the mind,  
 Beyond the last thought, rises  
 In the bronze decor,

A gold-feathered bird  
 Sings in the palm, without human meaning,  
 Without human feeling, a foreign song.

I say nothing of the Yeatsian bird. Rather, the palm’s rising responds to the “*Infanta Marina*”’s subsiding sound uttered by the sea and evening as the fan partook of them. This rising of the poem’s palm in turn subsides at its decline; the last stanza reads:

The palm stands on the edge of space.  
 The wind moves slowly in the branches.  
 The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

The feathers—recalling “the plumes” of the “Infanta Marina”’s third stanza (not quoted above)—dangle, which word itself recalls “fangled.” Perhaps foppish or foolish, also fastened or fixed, “fangled” says as well “fan”: it speaks the speech of the fan, its feathers, its palm, its poem.

If, in Eleanor Cook’s implicit argument, “the possible paronomasia in all our words” informs our poetic tradition, then paronomasia is to poetry, with its regulated reinvention of its own rules, as—following Lévi-Strauss—bricolage is to culture: each makes and remakes, from the smallest pieces lying around (syllables, letters, punctuation marks), the stuff and senses of the larger fabric, as poetry and culture in turn make and remake *their* stuffs, which are language and human being. That such tropaic poiesis involves what she calls “paronomastic undoing” (recalling Stevens’ “decreation”) is only another sign that deconstruction was never such a bad tool for reading poetry after all. A palm says a poem, a fan says speech. Each faintly, feignedly, fingering the palm, fabricating the fictions of our tongue.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>“End and Ending: On the Lyric Technique of Some Wallace Stevens Poems,” *MLN* 105 (1990): 1046-62; here 1053.