

## Paronomasia Once More\*

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I am most grateful to Anthony Hecht for his generosity in taking time to comment on my essay and for his superb amplifying of the matter of paronomasia. He offers so many memorable examples of punning that the reader wishes him to go on and on. The suggestion about Hood and about Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* struck me especially. And I do wish I had remembered the fine double dactyl on "paronomasias." (Is it worth saying that I intended some irony in the remark on the nineteenth century and punning? Only *sotto voce*. I had in mind the parody of Browning entitled "Riddle Redundant," and the like.)

I am also grateful to Jacqueline Vaught Brogan for her generous response to my thoughts on poetics. She is quite right about Bishop's wit. The line of vision is hardly without wit, and if this is not clear in my early remarks, it should be.

I appreciate Brogan's interest in the relations of poetry and politics, and of poetry and history. This is to introduce another subject than poetics (the study of the formal causes of art), and a very large subject indeed. A brief comment only. For myself, aesthetics is never "neutral," "apparently" or otherwise. (I should use a word like "isolated" rather than "neutral.") To quote Northrop Frye: "No discussion of beauty can

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\*Reference: Eleanor Cook, "From Etymology to Paronomasia: Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and Others," *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 34-51; Anthony Hecht, "In Reply to Eleanor Cook, 'From Etymology to Paronomasia,'" *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 201-04; Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, "From Paronomasia to Politics in the Poetry of Stevens and Bishop: A Response to Eleanor Cook," *Connotations* 2.3 (1992): 295-304; Anca Rosu, "In the Line of Wit: A Response to Eleanor Cook," *Connotations* 2.3 (1992): 305-12; Timothy Bahti, "Palm Reading (A Response to Eleanor Cook)," *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 90-94; John Hollander, "A Note on Eleanor Cook, 'From Etymology to Paronomasia,'" *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 95-98.

confine itself to the formal relations of the isolated work of art; it must consider, too, the participation of the work of art in the vision of the goal of social effort" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 348). But equally (Frye again): "All dominant ideologies are structures of authority, and, unless they are merely tyrannies enforced by terror, they are aesthetic structures as well" (*Times Literary Supplement*, 17 Jan. 1986). This means that good poetry and poetics have something to say to history that history cannot say for itself (either history as event or history as writing). One example may be found in Bishop's act of juxtaposing two contrary fables in "Roosters," one of war and one of forgiveness. Bishop's scruple challenges and chastens us all.

Anca Rosu offers an indispensable reminder to historicism: history includes the history of words, nor can the craft of history be well practised in ignorance of the life of words. Rosu's remarks should be blazoned across all historicist studies. As for the line of wit and the line of vision, a third crow means a summons, and I think I'm being summoned to a little tinkering with my opening generalizations. (This one, a seventeenth-century division, was made to an audience knowledgeable in the period as a starting-point for comparison.) On "mimesis": the two meanings of *mimēsthai* (mimic and depict) are loosely parallel to the twofold nature of poetry, its sound and its sense. So they have to do with all poetry, not just some. Nor is the poetry of vision confined to the conceptual. That said, we might develop further Rosu's comments on the functions of sight and sound, and of repetition, in *re* paronomasia—especially striking in the suggestive reading of "The Snow Man."

I cannot but think that Stevens would have delighted in Timothy Bahti's hearing of the "semi-ellipsis of the word *eclipse* in 'the ellipse of the half-moon.'" I'd enjoy hearing what he has to say about the odor of the pineapple in that "It is that which is distilled / In the prolific ellipses that we know . . ." ("Someone Puts a Pineapple Together"). Bahti's remarks on limits and thresholds seem to me very well taken, and his own word-play a true pleasure. The hearing of a "fan" in "fire-fangled," given the context, is very acute. My one question would be where to place this echo. Somewhere, I think, after we have worked out Stevens' crossing of "new-fangled" and "fire-fang," of "inclined to

take fire" and "singed, scorched," of one derisory word and one obsolete word in a new word that sounds neither. A phoenix word.

John Hollander's comments advance this whole discussion wonderfully, both grounding it and extending its categories. To take up his points in order:

(1) Word-play as world-play approaches the heart of the matter, I think. Such a "governing trope of poetry" would govern both tropes and schemes, including punning. The pun would feel less an outsider, less a fatal Cleopatra in the empire of signs. What happens when the magic is inferior? That's the point of point 2, I guess.

(2) "Word-play is an antidote to word-labor." Yes, yes, and yes, plus a category of forced labor, plus a note that true work and true play at their best become indistinguishable. (Watch Roberto Alomar playing baseball.) It looks as if the "bad" of bad punning may indeed vary according to the rhetorical context of presentation. When I said that punning developed very early in children, I had in mind my daughter, who, age two, said of a neighbor, "Mrs. Wright write-y," then collapsed with laughter and delight at her own discovery. The rhetorical presentation from a twelve-year-old would perforce be quite different.

(3) On bad punning in a rebus-like or other domain. Does punning in an iconolexic domain approach allegory, and do we tolerate simpler puns in allegory? I think we may. Do we even care about the badness of bad puns in dream-work any more than in the detective story? Here again, the rhetorical context of presentation may govern. In allegory, dream-work or detective story, the pun may be less intent on its own play than on its work as a signpost in a quest narrative.

(4) On punning that involves an implicit framework of grammatical description. Yes, indeed. The examples would share the "as if" class of false etymology. Are explicit examples, as against implicit ones, usually comic or crude? There's the well-known rude pun on Boston scrod.

(5) On the sequence of homophones, and (7) on the punning differences inherent in the French and English languages. I hadn't thought of either of these, the second being of special interest. It would be fun to compare Beckett's French and English versions of his own puns.

(6) On the large question of punning and ambiguity of syntax. I see that I slipped in a pun involving some awkward syntax as an ambiguity (p. 41, on "got up"). Hm. And I note that all my examples of single words were nouns or verbs or their modifiers. How exactly do we pun on prepositions other than by syntactical ambiguity? This suggests an overlap of categories. Yet Empson includes puns within the wider categories of ambiguity, moving them up an down the scales of his various types. That's my instinct too, though so far it's no more than an instinct. Empson works chiefly with "the degree of logical or grammatical disorder . . . . My seven types . . . are intended as stages of advancing logical disorder" (ch. 2, opening paragraph). Ambiguity of grammar, he notes, cannot be brought to the pitch of ambiguity of single words, so that he judges the effect to be different. Empson is certainly the place to start, in mapping the relation of punning and ambiguity. And Empson's name, first introduced by Anthony Hecht, is a most fitting one on which to close.

But not without some sapphics:

One of those dark butterflies called a Mourning  
 Cloak clung to a trumpet of morning glory,  
 Draping it with something of afternoon, a  
                   Palpable shadow

. . . .

It was far too late in the day to think that  
 Some sharp arbitrator of settlements had  
 Known the name of butterfly and of flower  
                   And, for an hour,

Played with them and planted the somber insect's  
 Name in blue—a dawning of darkness—just as  
 If there were a species of creature labeled  
                   Paronomasia.

(John Hollander, "A Thing So Small," *Harp Lake*)