

## In Reply to Eleanor Cook, "From Etymology to Paronomasia"\*

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Eleanor Cook's fine essay on paronomasia pleased me enormously. It covers a great deal of ground, under the modest pretext of writing only about Stevens and Bishop. Stevens, it may parenthetically be observed, is often a multi-lingual punster, especially where French and English words coincide. Take, for example, his ingeniously varied use of the word "machine" in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." As the inventor of the metrical form of the Double Dactyl, I have taken special notice of paronomastic matters as they relate to Eliot:

Higgledy-Piggledy  
Thomas Sterns Eliot  
Wrote dirty limericks  
Under the rose,

Using synechdoches,  
Paronomasias,  
Zeugmas and rhymes he de-  
plored in his prose.<sup>1</sup>

Richard Wilbur seems to me one of the most elegant and seemingly effortless employers of paronomasia among poets now writing. His work is filled with subtle and delicate examples of the sort of double-meaning too often dismissed as "trifling quibbles," especially when they crop up, as they so frequently do, in Shakespeare, and cause impossible problems for translators, especially the French ones. In Wilbur's "Altitudes" he describes a "race" of people (or possibly angels) inhabiting

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

the lit dome of a baroque church, and looking down upon the worshipers below. One stanza, referring to those glamorous persons aloft, goes,

For all they cannot share,  
All that the world cannot in fact afford,  
Their lofty premises are floored  
With the massed voices of continual prayer.<sup>2</sup>

“Premises” here means both a proposition on which an argument is based, and a building, its lands and foundation. “Floored” means both grounded and non-plussed. “Massed” means both assembled and partakers of a liturgy. The poem ends with a description of a man who does not happen to see the reflected brilliance of the sun in a dormer window in Amherst, Massachusetts. Of him it is said that he “no doubt, / Will before long be coming out / To pace about his garden, lost in thought.” There is enormous and wonderful compression here. “Lost in thought” is a common idiom for one who is preoccupied. But this man is lost in failing to see the light, his own subjective thoughts distracting him from the brilliance of the visible world. Moreover, he is pacing about “his garden, lost in thought,” which means the garden itself is lost upon him, and we are thus reminded of *Paradise Lost*. What so delights about this verbal density is that it is accomplished without any show of ostentatious cleverness or violent word-play.

I was made suspiciously alert by Ms. Cook’s claim that “. . . in the nineteenth century, though puns were immensely popular, their presence in poetry was another matter” (34). One is immediately prompted to search for exceptions (over and above the obvious ones of Lear and Carroll that Ms. Cook acknowledges). In fact, in the course of her article she goes on to mention a few others, Coleridge and Byron among them. I would want to add, famously (or infamously) Thomas Hood. But far more seriously, Blake, Emily Dickinson (a very great and important riddler) and Hardy. In a fine, short poem written from the point of view of a rabbit, Hardy writes in the last stanza of “The Milestone by the Rabbit-Burrow,”

Do signs on its face  
 Declare how far  
 Feet have to trace  
 Before they gain  
 Some blest champaign  
 Where no gins are?<sup>3</sup>

This is full of charm. The two beverages represent two social classes, which in turn represent salvation (the rabbit-heaven of an open field) and damnation (an animal trap). I think it could plausibly be argued that Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is in some ways nothing more than an extended survey of paronomasia, with examples drawn from (to confine myself simply to the nineteenth century) Tennyson, Shelley, Keats and Swinburne.

As for more or less contemporary poets, Empson cannot be solely responsible for making the pun more "respectable" than is usually allowed. Hopkins and Wilbur both delight in them; and they are buried in many Shakespeare passages that employ words which, though now pronounced quite differently from one another, were homonyms in Elizabethan times. Apparently, for example, "goats" and "Goths" were indistinguishable, as when, in *As You Like It*, Touchstone says to Audrey, "I am here with thee and thy goats, as the most capricious poet, honest Ovid, was among the Goths" (3.3.5-6). (There is, of course, the nice addition of "capricious" to link the goats and Goths.) Finally, let me note that Auden, who is himself a cunning employer of paronomasia, provides the following in his *A Certain World*.

M. Denis de Rougemont told me of this dedication by a French authoress to her publisher. I have, unfortunately, forgotten her name.

*Je méditerai,  
 Tu m'éditeras.*<sup>4</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Anthony Hecht and John Hollander, eds., *Jiggery Pokery: A Compendium of Double Dactyls* (New York: Atheneum, 1967).

<sup>2</sup>"Altitudes" I, ll.13-16, *Poems 1943-1956* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957) 89.

<sup>3</sup>"The Milestone by the Rabbit-Burrow" ll.13-18, *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Samuel Hynes, vol.2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 456.

<sup>4</sup>"Puns," *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971) 312.