

A Note on Eleanor Cook, "From Etymology to Paronomasia"^{*}

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Professor Cook's brilliant paper prompts so much in the way of delighted response that I could go on almost endlessly. But I will only make a few observations here, hoping that there will be another occasion to do proper homage to the power and elegance of the way she opens up the vast seriousness of her subject.

1) Underlying this discussion there may be a general matter of one of the governing tropes of poetry, namely that word-play is world-play: that by an intellectual sympathetic magic (a) submorphemic syllables become momentarily significant and then (b) what is done to and with words momentarily gets done to what the words designate and thereby to nature.

2) Word-play is an antidote to word-labor, the way in which we all need most of the time to use words as reliable utensils that will not bend ("strain, crack or sometimes break") or capriciously point somewhere else. But when we play with them, they come alive. They are most alive in true wit and, beyond that, in more-than-witty poetry. In bad punning the words come alive only as lower beasts; in imaginative, pointed and resonant punning, they almost become persons. The difference is the rhetorical context of presentation.

The irrelevant pun that impedes discourse is annoying and crazy—those of the wretched, unfunny obsessive, or those tabled with an inane flourish, like those at which in childhood we are trained appropriately to groan. Often these seduce, we know, even the rebuke (I remember the outrage of my children when, in response to a bad pun

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

made at the symposium of the dinner-table, I said that it deserved punishment). The most anti-poetical way of framing a pun is to present the two homophones in one sentence in sequence—Richard III is made in his celebrated opening lines to push this matter to its limit (“Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this son of York,” where the homophone *sun* almost lurks in *summer*). Also dreadful—more annoying but not quite so anti-poetical—is the horrible deformation of a syllable into a homophone to provide a pun. I say less anti-poetical because—as with the *sun* / *summer* just mentioned, the insinuation of the family resemblance, rather than the insistence that the fraternal twins are identical, can be most effective.

3) Query: is bad punning ever redeemed slightly when it enters a rebus-like (we might call it an iconolexic) domain—medieval and renaissance devices, etc.? Or in dream-work?

4) A dimension of punning I have been observing involves an implicit framework of grammatical description. For example, the possibility that “I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought” (Shakespeare, Sonnet 30) is given more power by an overtone of “*sought* is preterite of *sigh*”; or, again given the resonance of *sigh*, Keats’ “the sigh that silence heaves”), where the imputation of morphemic kinship might also be considered diachronic (*sighlence* is derived from *sigh*). (Ben Jonson’s “To Fool, or Knave,” “Thy praise, or dispraise, are to me alike: / One cannot stroke me, nor the other strike,” however, chooses not to exploit a possible *stroke-as-preterite-of-strike* possibility.) Perhaps likewise (as I have mentioned elsewhere) with Geoffrey Hill’s unflinching acknowledgment of grammar as a trope of the relation of moral concepts, not merely through the pun on declines here, but on lexical morphology as the (here) fictional source of the particular hetero-homophonic of two words which we would certainly ordinarily pass over even less easily than if they rhymed: “The patience hardens to a pittance, courage / unflinchingly declines into sour rage.”

5) What about sequences, in which the order of presentation of the homophones is itself significant (e.g. Christopher Fry’s “Te Deum / tedium / tiddy-um, tiddy-um, tiddy-um”)? Or is this so rare as not to be really interesting?

6) Does punning include ambiguity of syntax? Consider the rhetorical scheme usually called *zeugma*, for example: in Alexander Pope's "Or stain her honour, or her new brocade" critics have traditionally talked about the pun on the literal and figurative sense of "stain," with the latter so reinforced by a traditional Christian trope that it almost qualifies for another "literal," or extended sense. But what about Dickens' "She arrived in a flood of tears and a sedan chair": would we want to speak here of two senses of "in"? One of these generates phrases expressing literal containment; another is more generally used for "in a state of, condition of . . ." This last one in fact reverses containment: the state of despair, or whatever, the reservoir of tears—these are within the subject, not he or she "in" them. (I have discussed some of this matter, with respect to another preposition in English, elsewhere.¹) What, too, of verbs used both intransitively and transitively, as frequently deployed across enjambments by Milton? And what of phrases which could be syntactically connected either to a literal proposition or a figure? "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang" of Shakespeare's sonnet 73 is a familiar example: the last clause can depend as used literally on the "boughs," or, figuratively, to the appositive trope of those boughs as "bare ruined choirs," in which case they seem to invoke—as I think Empson first suggested—choir-boys. A similar case is one in *Twelfth Night*, Viola's "She sat like Patience on a monument, / Smiling at Grief." Does this mean: "she sat like a figure of Patience on a tomb, smiling at the actuality or prospect of her own or someone else's grief, etc." or, rather, "she sat like a figure of Patience on a tomb smiling across at the inevitably complementary figure of Grief"? The syntactical choices here would determine whether "grief" is a personification or not, and whether "Smiling" is literal or perhaps figurative also. In any event, there is no punning morpheme or word here. Alternative or simultaneous meanings are established not through homophony or some allusive partial homophony, but by an open clausal relation. Is this part of the agenda of punning?

7) A final note: the punning styles of English and French may differ interestingly not only because of the confusedly rich diachronic sources and channels (not just Germanic/Romance but so many Latin/French,

OE/Dutch or Norse doublets, etc.) and graphological anomalies. But I feel also that the lack of wordstress in French privileges longer strings of syllables, and more punning across word-boundaries (even as trisyllabic rhymes call attention to themselves so much in English that they're funny until proved solemn), so that "Je me délivre de l'amour mourant des livres," or the ludicrous strings of some of the rhétoriciens, seem so un-English (and in this matter, un-German as well).

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NOTE

¹"Of 'of': The Romance of a Preposition," *Addressing Frank Kermode*, ed. Margaret Tudeau-Clayton and Martin Warner (London: Macmillan, 1991) 189-204.