

In the Line of Wit: A Response to Eleanor Cook*

ANCA ROSU

Eleanor Cook's article is about a poetic device which many are inclined to consider minor. Although some definitions of the word 'paronomasia'—Cook cites the *OED*—tend to minimize its importance, not only does the word-play, as we most often call it, illuminate connections between writers situated at different points in history, but it also has a history of its own. In antiquity, Cook tells us, Augustine saw profound philosophical implications in the accidents of language. The Renaissance, in turn, exemplified both a lighter use of paronomasia, in Metaphysical poets like Donne, and a more serious one, in poets like Spenser or Herbert. The nineteenth century shunned the word play, and punsters like Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear were never accepted as serious writers.

Modernists like Stevens and Bishop seem thus to revive a tradition as they inherit word-plays which have become commonplace and re-play them in full awareness of their history. This is why Cook sees in Stevens and Bishop a felicitous combination of the actions of both paronomasia and etymology. Bishop inherited a tradition of word-play different from that of Stevens—Cook places her in the line of Spenser and Herbert, whereas she thinks Stevens follows in the footsteps of Donne. However, Bishop seems to also have inherited Stevens and to meet with him in the domain where neologisms are played upon and integrated into a paronomastic treasury. The history of the words' usage enriches the meaning of the poems, lending them a depth and intricacy in which the educated reader can only delight.

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

Cook's article offers us a number of such delights, as she uses her own depth of literary knowledge to illuminate the poetic texts. However, the main import of the article lies, to my mind, in its implications regarding the nature and usage of language. On the one hand, these implications point to the history of words and their usages, to echoes from the past which persist in the present and influence our perceptions of nuance and allusion. This is the way in which etymology cooperates with paronomasia to create spectacular effects, which can be muted only by indifference to the language's past. On the other hand, Cook opens up an entire domain of signification which is normally obscured by the habit of concentrating on the semantic aspect of language at the expense of all other meaning. That domain includes not only word play but also sound effects, visual effects created by the arrangement on the page, as well as a whole rhetoric based on an awareness of the cultural context.

The argument has a quite evident, if barely acknowledged, historical dimension. At the end of her essay, Eleanor Cook foresees a historicist challenge to "older views of paronomasia" (49), but in fact, it is her argument which issues the challenge, since her use of history seems at once more appropriate and closer to the literary phenomenon as such. For while New Historicism seeks to relate literary works to contexts and events which have been deemed "historical" by historians, Cook searches for connections into the history of the language usage itself. As she declares her interest in poetics and in the quality of the word-plays as tropes, Cook actually evokes a history: "My own interest lies in the area of poetics. Here, I think that a simple pun, one without further reverberation, would be classified as a scheme rather than a trope. But schemes can move towards tropes when they begin to tell fables about themselves. It is these fables, including their use of etymology, that interest me especially in the poetics of paronomasia" (37). It is the history, or fable that a word can tell about itself, which gives it value as a trope. Rhetoric is therefore built on a common cultural heritage, and its understanding and appreciation depend on participation in that history. If the reader is not aware of the history of a word, the word cannot tell its fable.

In this perspective, awareness of linguistic and literary history seems to be essential for both reader and poet. In the case of tropes with a

history, the poet has the choice of ignoring it or including it in his poetic act, and Cook definitely appreciates the latter: "It takes great skill to extend the fabling history of such words. New puns are a delight, Stevens' on 'inarticulate' and 'artichoke,' for instance. But re-capturing or re-dressing altogether an old fable offers more challenges and more riches" (37).

In her article, Cook illustrates the interesting evolution through which cultural phenomena tend to become self-contained. Once poetic usage establishes a history for a certain word, that word acquires a specific meaning within that history. Thus reading a poem implies an awareness of all the history of poetry. Although she does not openly consider the possibility that a reader may come from outside a certain history, and, consequently, read Stevens without having read the *Metaphysicals* or Dante, or read Bishop without having read Stevens, for instance, Cook is aware that a shared cultural background is not always available. When she speaks about allusion, she quotes James Merrill, and she agrees with him that culture changes may limit the effect of word play: "The lucky 18th century reader—having read *tous les livres*—could be trusted to catch every possible allusion. This is no longer the case; some of us substitute word-play to make our texts resound" (47). In fact, it was the eighteenth century writer who was lucky to find an audience so well equipped to catch allusion, but "resounding" remains important even in a culture where readers are less prepared to foray in the past of literature. One may criticize Cook's emphasis on the history of word usage, on the echoes of other poetic and philosophical texts, etc., as elitist, since it limits the readership of poetry to the knowledgeable few, but one also has to admit that, when a critic like her comes along and fills us in on all the fables we might have missed, we can only grow richer in our understanding of poetry.

The emphasis on the historical dimension of poetry is also important because it gestures towards aspects of language which we usually tend to ignore. Such aspects play a crucial role in the kind of approach represented by Cook. From the start, she points out a distinction between "the line of wit" and "the line of vision." In her introduction to an issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* dedicated to sound, she made a similar distinction between two kinds of mimesis: mimesis as depiction and

mimesis as enactment. One may suspect here the kind of dichotomic thinking that flourished during the forties and fifties among the representatives of New Criticism. Even as early as 1925, I. A. Richards distinguished between two functions of language—a symbolic and an emotive one—in *Principles of Literary Criticism*. The distinction became in the hands of American New Critics like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, or Cleanth Brooks a tool for discriminating between poetic and non-poetic language. The same kind of desire for establishing distinctions between what is literary and what is ordinary language prompted the Russian formalists to form the notion of “literariness.” One can naturally ask whether Cook has inherited these distinctions together with the desire to define literature as an isolated and self-contained phenomenon.

Her practice suggests, however, the contrary: when she quotes from Bishop’s “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” she points out how the language of ornithological guides has found its way into the poem. This shows that Cook does not necessarily want to distinguish the language of poetry from other discourses. Her distinction is of another nature and concerns rather two ways of perceiving language which she called “the line of wit” and “the line of vision.” Why, one might ask, is the line of wit an opposite of the line of vision (or the conceptual)? The answer to such a question is pertinent not only to literature but to the way we perceive language in general. The line of vision, or the conceptual, implies that understanding anything written or spoken is a matter of decoding a message. The line of wit implies that language can signify beyond the message.

Poetry is far from being the unique occasion for the deployment of all the possibilities of language, but it is, nevertheless, the most inspiring in showing us the many ways in which language can function. Several such ways are amply illustrated by Cook in her essay. One wonders for instance, what could become of Stevens’ “Domination of Black” if we read it exclusively for what it says. Stevens himself urged us not to do so: “I am sorry that a poem of this sort has to contain any ideas at all, because its sole purpose is to fill the mind with the images & sounds it contains. A mind that examines such a poem for its prose contents gets absolutely nothing from it” (L 251). Cook manages to make us see even beyond the images and the sounds of the poem. The

"turning" passage is interesting to her because the typographic turns double the effects of sound repetition or turning.

Among the many other effects she discovers are the suggestive shape of a stanza in "Six Significant Landscapes," the play with punctuation in Stevens' letters, and the disguise of words like "maculate" and "immaculate" by their less religiously connotative synonyms in Bishop. She also points out the innovative steps taken by both Stevens and Bishop in creating a kind of paronomasia which "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). As it becomes evident here, Cook's work urges us towards a more complete understanding of language both in and outside poetry. She devises a kind of phenomenology of reading, by suggesting that we divest ourselves of the acquired habit of reading for semantic meaning in order to reach the deeper understanding of language's power to signify. Such phenomenology is useful, I believe, because it does not bar, but rather encourages further critical consideration.

I hope to demonstrate that usefulness by offering my own reading of a poem which Cook has subjected to her phenomenology of reading in her book *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*. I have selected "The Snow Man" from the book, rather than a poem cited in the article, because it is treated in full. One of the shortcomings of the article is the fact that, given its more theoretical purpose, it does not complete the consideration of any of the poems it includes. What follows aims to answer the question: what happens to a poem when we read it beyond its message?

Cook's reading of "The Snow Man" focuses on the effects of the paradox which "plays with, and thereby criticizes, the limits of things by being a self-contradiction" (49). Such a reading seems more accurate to me than those that emphasize the poem's symbolic meaning (Bloom, Bové, etc.), since Stevens himself was inclined to favor the non-semantic aspects of language. Such inclination becomes evident in "The Snow Man" even beyond its paradox. The poem opens with a description of landscape, but the success of the description is doubtful. The opposition set up at the start, between the sight and sound, dissolves soon thereafter. This dissolution is the more interesting as it is performed with the aid

of the poem's own sound scheme—another non-semantic aspect of language which acquires unexpected significance. The descriptive mode and the reference to sight occupy the first part of the poem:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; (CP 9-10)

Not only is the reference visual here, but there are a number of words indicating the activity of the eye: "regard," "behold." The careful composition of the images seems like the setting of a scene, where some event is going to take place, and the presence of the "mind" leads us to believe that this event may be of a cognitive nature: the landscape will help us find out something. This suspicion is confirmed by the poem's development in its second half, but a dissolution of semantics also begins to take place:

and not to think
Of any misery *in the sound of the wind,*
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is *the sound* of the land
Full of *the same wind*
That is blowing in *the same* bare place

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

(CP 10; italics mine)

"Any misery" seems to be the referent, the reality with which the landscape stands in a symbolic relation and, possibly, the target of our cognitive interest. But in the absence of a larger context, this human

feeling appears to be abstract and generalized. Its relation to a desolate winter landscape is at best conventional, at worst a cliché. The intelligibility of the poem, at this point, is rather a matter of recognizing the convention than decoding a message. In such a context, the "sound of the wind," which can also be construed as a conventional representation of the same feeling, acquires the same value as the landscape. The possible opposition between an aural element and a visual one is thus erased, since both are nothing but reminders of a conventional way to express "misery." Cook also observes a lapse in the logic of the poem at this point: "Why does Stevens say 'misery' after such a pretty-winter picture? The logic calls for an 'also': and also not to think of any misery in the sound of the wind, the sound of a few leaves, at some other time and in some other place" (48).

Cook finds that this faltering in logic is the beginning of the poem's paradox, but it is not only the logic of the poem that falters. The speaker begins to hesitate, and his hesitation is marked by repetitions. In the following development, however, what was first perceivable as a hesitation soon becomes a pattern, a deliberate design of the sound whose intelligibility does not seem to go beyond itself. The repetitions foreground "the sound," "same," and "nothing," without achieving emphasis, simply because the repeated words look more like recoils in the advancement of the description than elements meant to stress a statement. Repetition seems thus to work against the sense, and to signal a failure of speech. But because a pattern emerges, the intelligibility of the poem is restored in something akin to music. The words acquire thus the power to signify beyond semantics.

Rhetoric contributes in a subtle way to this transformation of the poem into music. In the context of the last line, the word "nothing" becomes a pun reminiscent of the grace of a Renaissance master, of Shakespeare or Donne. The punning not only attracts our attention to the many meanings of a word that we would think univocal, but maybe shows us that we "use" the words, that we attach their meaning to them to suit our purposes. Stevens' repetition of the word is perhaps the only way in which "nothing" acquires its proper sense. Cook proposes another interpretation of "nothing" in this poem: "One 'nothing that is' is obviously the word 'nothing' as it appears on 'the same bare place' that

is the place of listening and beholding for the reader" (49). The poem's sound scheme and its typographic presence join to create the same effect which at once deepens and makes accessible the word's meaning. Beyond its semantic and symbolic meaning, the poem says something about language, about the way we use it, and about the ways we perceive meaning or derive pleasure from a poem. Cook's approach represents thus an invitation to discover new meanings with every new reading without having to detract the previous readings.

Rutgers University
New Brunswick

WORKS CITED

- Bloom, Harold. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977.
- Bové, Paul A. *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.
- Cook, Eleanor. *Poetry, Word-Play and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988.
- . "Introduction." *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 15.2 (1991): 115-25.
- . "From Etymology to Paronomasia: Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and Others." *Connotations* 2 (1992): 34-51.
- Richards, I. A. *Principles of Literary Criticism*. 1925. London: Routledge, 1963.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems*. 1954. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- . *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Knopf, 1966.