

From Etymology to Paronomasia: Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and Others

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Wallace Stevens was a paronomastic¹ by second nature, as well as by family custom and the accident of historical timing. Age fifteen, he punned on “condescension,” complaining to his mother of condescension from fellows in their twenties but surmising that eleven- to fourteen-year-olds regarded his company as an “ascension.”² Age fifty-six, he invented a pun on the word “inarticulate”: “. . . a dream they never had, / Like a word in the mind that sticks at artichoke / And remains inarticulate” (OP 78). He allowed himself a comment on this: “rather an heroic pun” (L 366, 27 August 1940). And age seventy-two, he wrote to a friend about Reinhold Niebuhr: “an admirable thinker . . . but a dull writer.” “Notwithstanding his name, he is far from being Rhine Wein.”³ He was born to paronomasia. His father was a punster: “Dear Wallace—just what election to the Signet signifies I have no sign. It is significant . . .” and so on to a total of eleven puns (L 26, 21 May 1899). It was part of the times. Stevens’ father was named Garrett Stevens, his mother’s maiden name was Zeller, and, yes, when they married in 1876, a local Pennsylvania newspaper commented that Stevens’ father had “furnished his house complete from ‘Zeller’ to ‘Garrett’” (SP 6).

Yet in the nineteenth century, though puns were immensely popular, their presence in poetry was another matter. Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear perhaps, but poetry properly so called? It was a time when the line of wit was less favoured than the line of vision, when the claims of charm poetry were paramount as against the claims of riddle poetry. As Northrop Frye observes in his essay, “Charms and Riddles,” “Charm poetry . . . dominated taste until about 1915, after which a mental attitude more closely related to the riddle began to supersede it, one more preoccupied with the visual and the conceptual.”⁴ Paronomasia is related

to charm verse, to follow Frye's argument, and also Andrew Welsh's in his *Roots of Lyric*,⁵ but charm verse does not generate, does not display, obvious word-play—quips, quibbles, riddles—as in the metaphysical poets or Christopher Smart, let alone James Joyce. The paronomasia of Donne is (to offer a generalization) more spectacular than the paronomasia of Spenser, even though some techniques and functions are similar.

So also, some techniques and functions are similar in the work of Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop. (Bishop lived a generation after the high Moderns, including Stevens; he was born in 1879 and she in 1911.) But one would want to begin by saying that Bishop's kind of word-play follows a Spenser-Herbert line (she was devoted to the work of George Herbert.) Stevens' kind of paronomasia occasionally does so (for example, in his visionary poems). But Stevens the witty and wicked paronomastic is the heir to Donne, to Byron, to Carroll, to Hopkins, and the like.

The *Oxford English Dictionary*, in good nineteenth century fashion, takes a low view of word-play. Definitions of pun and of paronomasia are more neutral, though, as it happens, they were published earlier (1909 and 1904 respectively; see the Introduction to the *OED*). The section including the term "word-play" was not published until 1928 but despite Eliot and Pound and Joyce and Stevens—perhaps because of them—it is very stern: "a playing or trifling with words; the use of words merely or mainly for the purpose of producing a rhetorical or fantastic effect," etc. ("play" *sb.* 7.b.) The three definitions are not altered in the second edition of the *OED*.

It is true that paronomasia has often excited warnings in rhetorical handbooks, chiefly about its overuse or its low status. "Marry, we must not play, or riot too much with them [i.e. words], as in *Paronomasies*," as Ben Jonson says (*Timber; or Discoveries*). Or, 1593, Peacham: "This figure [paronomasia] ought to be sparingly used"; antanaclasis "may fall easily into excesse" (*The Garden of Eloquence*). Or, 1730, Dumarsais: "On doit éviter les jeux de mots qui sont vides de sens." For him, Augustine provides a proper pattern (*Traité des tropes*). To which Fontanier later adds that paronomasia is better in Latin than in French ("ces jeux de mots ont en général moins de grâce dans notre langue que

dans celle des Latins"; *Des figures du discours*, 1827). Quintilian, referring to Cicero, says that word-play is "non ingratae, nisi copia redundet" ("not unattractive save when carried to excess," as the Loeb translation has it; IX.iii.74). At the other end of a scale of significance, paronomasia might be built into the language by divine decree in order to teach us. As Augustine says: "it happened not by human design but perhaps by divine decision [etsi non humana industria, iudicio fortasse divino] that the grammarians have not been able to decline (or conjugate) the Latin verb *moritur* (he dies) by the same rule as other verbs of this form The verb cannot be declined in speech just as the reality which it signifies cannot be declined (that is, avoided) by any action" (*De civitate Dei* XIII.11⁶). Ernst Robert Curtius offers more examples in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*.⁷ And, to leap forward to an English poet who admired Augustine, Coleridge delighted in word-play of every type and purpose.⁸ The mid- to late-nineteenth century could not plead precedence for its low view of this rhetorical device.

I have used the term "paronomasia" throughout as a general synonym for punning and for word-play. That is, I have not distinguished such categories as, say antanaclasis. Nor do I distinguish the pun (low humour, below the salt) from word-play (a superior wit), as, for example, Freud distinguishes them.⁹ Leo Spitzer noted in 1950 how the later term "pun" (used from 1662, says the *OED*) has come to include a whole series of earlier rhetorical figures for word-play.¹⁰ Similarly with the modern use of "paronomasia," which has become an umbrella for word-play in general.

In treating paronomasia, it is possible to analyse types of puns, the most familiar division being between homonymic and semantic puns. It is possible to place paronomasia in a generic context as Frye and Welsh do, where it is associated with very early forms of writing, both charm and riddle. It is possible to consider paronomasia in relation to non-literary contexts, for example, logical or linguistic or psychological or, I dare say, neurological contexts. How is punning related to logical thought or, more widely, to rational thought? The answer, I suppose, would be: as Homer to Plato, to take that ancient quarrel as a pattern. How is paronomasia related to linguistic skills as they develop in an

individual or in the practise of a society? Roman Jakobson observes: "In a sequence in which similarity is superimposed on contiguity, two similar phonemic sequences near to each other are prone to assume a paronomastic function."¹¹ How is paronomasia revealing psychologically? Freud, of course, is very fond of interpreting it. As for a neurological context, I am thinking of Oliver Sacks and the workings of memory, since punning develops very early in children and has mnemonic force. I am assuming that I don't need to spend time over the various types of argument that defend word-play.

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 toward 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.

I want to begin with one aspect of such fabling, and how it helps us to read twentieth-century poetry. The following question seems to me a useful one for reader and writer both. What words come with so venerable a history of paronomasia that no self-respecting modern poet can use them without making choices? That is, poets may use these words if they wish, but they must decide what to do about the standard paronomasia—whether to distance it, or merely to acknowledge it, or to carry on with it. I'm not, of course, talking about entire huge classes of possible puns, but rather about certain words where specific paronomasies (Jonson's handy word) have been used so often and/or so memorably that the words carry a punning sense. 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-capping or re-dressing altogether an old fable offers more challenge and more riches.

Let me start with the common word "turn" and the suggestion that a poet cannot use the word at the beginning or end of a line without thinking about the original descriptive energy of the word. Consider the following stanza from Bishop's poem, "Twelfth Morning; or What You Will":

The fence, three-strand, barbed-wire, all pure rust,
 three dotted lines, comes forward hopefully
 across the lots; thinks better of it; turns
 a sort of corner . . .¹²

Bishop has, in fact, given us not just one but a whole family of etymological connotations. The fence turns, turns the corner of a lot and those "lots" offer a variation of the standard pun on *stanza*, meaning "room," of which more in a moment. Those are fenced lots, so that the fence can turn with the line: "turns / a sort of corner." Well, so it is, there on the page, a sort of corner. And there it is, I think: this word that cannot be used at the beginning or end of a line, without remembering the tradition of word-play on "turn." "Turn," which is what "verse" means etymologically. "Turn," which is what "trope" means etymologically. "Turn," which in enjambment describes what the reader is doing, albeit with an eye rather than the etymological leg of enjambment, as it walks the line, and strides or limps or hops over the end of the line, and back, westward, to the start of the next line.

Stevens uses the word repeatedly at the beginning of a line in his well-known 1916 poem, "Domination of Black":

I heard them cry—the peacocks.
 Was it a cry against the twilight
 Or against the leaves themselves
 Turning in the wind,
 Turning as the flames
 Turned in the fire,
 Turning as the tails of the peacocks
 Turned in the loud fire,
 Loud as the hemlocks
 Full of the cry of the peacocks?

If the word "turn" appears in mid-line, that, I think, is another matter. We should need a stronger signal for our paronomastic antennae to start waving.

Are there other such common words? I should think so. The word, "leaves," for example, also has an extended paronomastic family: (1) leaves of a tree (the common topos links them with the dead: Homer through Vergil through (in English) Milton and Shelley and so on;

(2) leaves of a book; and (3) that which is left or leavings. These are standard and a poet can go on from there. Or a poet may decline the paronomasia on "leaves" but never in ignorance. An uninvited paronomasia is apt to commit a solecism.

In a stanzaic poem, the word "room" anywhere in the line wants testing, just in case the old pun on the Italian *stanza* is at work. Thus in Stevens, 1916, "Six Significant Landscapes," no. 6:

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
 Think, in square rooms,
 Looking at the floor,
 Looking at the ceiling.
 They confine themselves
 To right-angled triangles.
 If they tried rhomboids,
 Cones, waving lines, ellipses—
 As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon—
 Rationalists would wear sombreros.

"Square rooms"? We first read a conceptual analogy, then see that Stevens has not written a "square-room" stanza. That is, his stanza doesn't look square on the page, nor is it schematically square, for I suppose a square stanza is symmetrical, say four-by-four, a tetrameter quatrain. At least, that's what John Hollander suggests:

Why have I locked myself inside
 This narrow cell of four-by-four,
 Pacing the shined, reflecting floor
 Instead of running free and wide?¹³

Modern poets are not the only ones to play on the word "room" in this standard manner. Hollander's "narrow cell" compacts two of Wordsworth's punning tropes for *stanza*, here a sonnet stanza: "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room; / And hermits are contented with their cells." Wordsworth's sonnet also speaks of "the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground."¹⁴ (Lewis Carroll might say of it: "I measured it from side to side, / Fourteen lines long and five feet wide.") These are figures of right-angled rooms or plots, whether square or rectangular. If you look at Stevens' stanza, you will see that he has curved the unjustified right margin so that it is itself a half-moon ellipse or, it may be, a

sombrero. This kind of punning on *stanza* belongs also to a class of visual word-play; Stevens' poem is almost a shape poem.

But then, so is Bishop's stanza or fenced lot. Look again, and you will see a visual mimesis. The fence or "three dotted lines" comes forward as if in an optical illusion such as Wittgenstein's famous example of the duck and the rabbit. Here are three lines of print, and behold, a mimesis of the fence and a prolepsis of what Bishop's own lines will turn into at the end: an ellipsis, three dots, a kind of fence at the end of the stanza.

Stevens also punned on the marks for ellipsis in several letters to his wife: ". . . (Notice my Frenchy way of punctuating? Très chic, n'est-ce pas?) . . ." (16 August 1911).¹⁵ Then, four days later: "I fell asleep over a French book and had the most delightful dream . . . [sic]."¹⁶ The next pause offers five dots, a progression of points (L 171). Two years later, "The cats have grown very large!!!" (7 July 1913, L 179). Stevens implied they'd been eating birds, so that the nine dots may have to do with the nine lives of felines. This, by the way, is before Beckett's punctuating pun in his title, "Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce" where each dot (not counting the period) stands for a century. For word-play on the two dots that constitute an umlaut, here is James Merrill in his poem, "Lost in Translation":

The owlet umlaut peeps and hoots
Above the open vowel.¹⁷

I've been speaking of common words charged with a history of etymological suggestiveness ("turn," "leaves," "room") and also of visual paronomasia. Are there some less common words that require etymological or paronomastic awareness when we read twentieth-century poetry? I think so. Take the words "immaculate" and "maculate."

Here is the opening of Bishop's poem, "Seascape":

This celestial seascape, with white herons got up as angels,
flying as high as they want and as far as they want sidewise
in tiers and tiers of immaculate reflections;
the whole region, from the highest heron
down to the weightless mangrove island
with bright green leaves edged neatly with bird-droppings
like illumination in silver . . .
it does look like heaven.

I pass by the ambiguity of “got up” meaning both “costumed” and “ascended.” This pun opens up, in the most delicate way, the argument for a naturalistic origin for angels (like white birds, like swans, as Stevens suggests in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*). Bishop like Stevens is not a believer but she is usually quieter about her skeptical strain. “Got up,” then, so that they can fly “in tiers and tiers of immaculate reflections,” up to the highest heaven, if that echo sounds faintly in “the highest heron.” “Immaculate” is here used in an etymologically pure way (from *macula*, or spot) meaning perfectly unspotted. Bishop delicately evokes older doctrinal uses, again as with “got up,” setting them aside. (I’m also reminded of Dante’s heaven in Bishop’s “tiers and tiers of immaculate reflections”—of his “di bianco in bianco” [from tier to tier] playing against his “tanto bianco” [so white] in a flying passage in the *Paradiso* [XXXI.16, 14].)

And this is surely the point of the line about the “pure-colored or spotted breasts” of the “big symbolic birds” in her later, powerful poem, “Brazil, January 1, 1502”:

A blue-white sky, a simple web . . .
 And perching there in profile, beaks agape,
 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

“Pure-colored or spotted”: this is the language of ornithological field-guides. It would sound peculiar to describe a song-sparrow or a wood-thrush as having a maculate breast. But 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.

As for Stevens, he was more irritated than Bishop with the language of whiteness, perhaps because he was more vulnerable. Pure poetry, if not doctrinally immaculate poetry, appealed strongly to him when he was young, and he reacted with proportionate bitterness later. See especially *The Man with the Blue Guitar*:

The pale intrusions into blue
 Are corrupting pallors
 The unspotted imbecile reverie (xiii)

"Unspotted" is the Germanic word corresponding to "immaculate." Stevens earlier in this sequence calls the moon "immaculate," which may just make us smile when we recall its spots. In *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, many a kind of whiteness is punningly evoked and dismissed. Words like "immaculate," Stevens implies, can themselves be lunatic ("imbecile") or even "corrupting." Word-play here enters an entire field of association, reminding us to test our whitest, unspotted, immaculate, moony, candid, pure ideals and idealization. We need to remember this when we read Stevens' canto on whiteness in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (I.iii). The word "immaculate" does not itself remain immaculate in Stevens.

Eliot also liked the punning possibilities of the word, "immaculate," at least in the form of "maculate," which he used for "apeneck Sweeney":

The zebra stripes along his jaw
Swelling to maculate giraffe.

Stripes to spots, that is, and also distinctly spotted. "Still," as Bishop would observe, "Still in the foreground there is Sin," perhaps a shade relentlessly in this 1918 poem ("Sweeney among the Nightingales").

Another example of paronomasia may owe its modern prominence to Eliot, and that is the pun on Latin *infans* (unspeaking) and English "infant." Here is Eliot in 1919, in *Gerontion*:

The word within a word, unable to speak a word.

Eliot's allusion to a sermon by Lancelot Andrewes is well known, as is Andrewes' punning paradox that the infant Christ is the Word who is "infans" or unable to speak.¹⁸ The paradox of *fans atque infans* is listed in Lewis and Short, a dictionary in which Stevens said he delighted.¹⁹ He adapted the double pun in the paronomasia of a fan and an infans in the poem "Infanta Marina." The lovely infanta is appropriately one of his muse-figures, that is, one who enables him to speak even if she herself is "infans," waving her fan, some palm-tree metamorphosed into a Florida infanta. Later infans in Stevens may also carry this paronomasia: "It is the infant A standing on infant legs" (1949, CP 469). "Infant, it is enough in life / To speak of what you see" (1946, CP 365).

Bishop is too good a word-smith not to be aware of such histories. She acknowledges this at the end of her poem, "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" (the reference is to a large Bible):

Open the heavy book. Why couldn't we have seen
 this old Nativity while we were at it?
 —the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
 an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
 colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
 and, lulled within, a family with pets,
 —and looked and looked our infant sight away.

"Infant" first because of the Nativity scene that is seen and not seen. Bishop once saw it in the old Bible, but has not seen it in her actual travel in biblical lands. "Our infant sight": a sight of an infant, of the infant. But sight itself is also infant in the sense that sight is always "infans" or unspeaking. We translate it into words. Yet how can we look and look our infant sight away? In different senses. As when we look away to our heart's content (Bishop's repeated "look" works to prolong this moment of looking). Or "look away" in the sense of removing "infant sight," averting our eyes? And if removing sight, then what follows? Speech, words? Or grown-up sight, and what would that grown-up sight be? In this simply worded but intricate paronomasia, Bishop has laid out our possible responses to the Nativity scene. It's remembered from a book. It's not to be seen by travelling to the area where it happened. It's desired. It might fulfil desire and at the same time necessarily translate desire into something ordinary and familiar, so that we would be back where we started in one way if not another.

Have the moderns invented new types of puns, as distinct from extending the repertoires of older types? If a portmanteau word is Lewis Carroll's invention, then the answer is yes. A portmanteau word is a paronomasia that presents the technique and the result all at once. Here is how puns work, it seems to say, and here is a new one, a neologism. "'Twas brillig and the slithy toves . . ." etc. "Slithy"? "Slimy" and "lithe" come into our minds, thanks to Humpty Dumpty. They came into Stevens' mind too, but he decided to take Lewis Carroll one step back. Why not simply say "ithy"? As in "Analysis of a Theme":

We enjoy the ithy oonts and long-haired
Plomets, as the Herr Gott
Enjoys his comets.

"Ithy" as in "slithy"? Or is it "ithy" with a short "i"? The short "i" seems to invite words like "mythy" and "pithy," words that are more serious than "slithy-ithy" words, portentous words, comets as omens. We recall Jove's "mythy mind" in Stevens' well-known 1915 poem, "Sunday Morning." And we recall E. H. Gombrich's persuasive play on the associations of "pong" and "ping" in his *Art and Illusion*.²⁰ A long-i'd "ithy" seems to call for more squiggly or whooshing Lewis-Carroll words: slithy, slimy, writhing, scything. (Though there are, to be sure, "lithe" and "blithe.") But then there is the prefix "ithy," from Greek *ithus* or straight, and not at all squiggly, as in "ithyphallic" (the only example in the Oxford Concise), which described the phallus carried in festivals of Bacchus as well as the metre used for Bacchic hymns or generally for licentious poems (the trochaic dimeter brachycatalectic). An "oont," by the way, is a camel.

There is a similar phenomenon in Stevens' late poem, "Long and Sluggish Lines":

... Could it be that yellow patch, the side
Of a house, that makes one think the house is laughing;

Or these—escent—issant pre-personae: first fly,
A comic infanta among the tragic drapings,

Babyishness of forsythia, a snatch of belief,
The spook and makings of the nude magnolia?

....

Wanderer, this is the pre-history of February,
The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun.

Stevens' syntax tells us how to read the suffixes, "-escent" and "-issant." So does the Oxford Concise Dictionary, at least for one of them: "-escent," "forming adjs. denoting onset of a state or variation of colour etc. (deliquescent, effervescent, florescent, iridescent) . . . pres. part. . . . of vbs. in -escere." The suffix "-issant" on the other hand makes no appearance in any Oxford dictionary or in Webster either. But then, I

have not been able to find any word at all with this suffix, apart from one coined by Stevens himself: "The grackles sing avant the spring / Most spiss—oh! Yes, most spissantly. / They sing right puissantly" ("Snow and Stars"). This is also from a pre-spring poem, a rather ill-tempered one (grackles are not happy birds in Stevens). Stevens' seemingly invented suffix is itself a pre-history of words, if we accept his own coinage as the first blooming "-issant" word that we have in English. "Spiss," though obsolete, is listed in Oxford and Webster; it means "thick, dense, close," including close intervals in music. Florio gives a form of it. But then we might hear a long "i" in "-issant," and hence a family of French words in this Ur-paronomasia.²¹

Paronomasia through neologism: this is one type of paronomasia that Bishop does not use, for she is not given to neologisms, whereas Stevens delights in them. His play with neologisms and with unusual words ("oonts") makes us listen for the paronomastic force of any unknown words as a way of defining them. It's a useful training. 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. Letters? Stevens' Alpha and Omega in his *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven*, for example. Or Anthony Hecht's recent brilliant pun on the "voiceless thorn," both the plant protuberance that breaks your skin and the Anglo-Saxon letter for a breathed rather than voiced "th" sound ("thorn" not "the"):

And the wind, a voiceless thorn
goes over the details,
making a soft promise
to take our breath away.²²

An audible paronomasia may be noticed here: try sounding out "th," as in a soft wind, then stopping, as directed in the breath-taking pun of the enjambed last line. Hecht's crows are morticians; they do not "caw" but call out *cras* or "tomorrow," as Latin crows did. Language so tested and so paronomastic displays its own vitality. Words do have a life of their own, and paronomasia makes us acutely aware of this.

Stevens' instinct for word-play was part of his general delight in the history of words. Bishop also delighted in the diachronic life of words,

their etymological family history, their various cognate relatives, and so on. In her work, words tremble with the energy of their own histories, and the potential for paronomasia is always there. Sometimes her word-play is made obvious, laid out for us. Sometimes it is hidden but it will rarely if ever be riddling. The subtleties and challenges are not combative, and the poems can be read without realizing how rich they are. Riddling paronomasia stops you short.

Nor does Bishop experiment with the limits of word-play. At least, this is what I think Stevens is doing in his poem, *The Comedian as the Letter C*, that difficult personal Bildungsroman. Yet her fewer and quieter examples of paronomasia are as remarkable as Stevens' own.

Stevens' paronomasia, especially in his early work, was also part of his revolt against the gentility and piety of the times, what he sardonically called "the grand ideas of the villages" in "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad." In the last fifteen or twenty years of his life, this shifted, as he centered his work increasingly on "the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfilment" (L 820, 1954). The supreme fiction was to be, in effect, the heir and successor to Christianity. Bishop stays away from such questions. But she is like Stevens in working paronomastically to undo some effects of her religious heritage.

Andrew Welsh in his *Roots of Lyric* writes that "If Hopkins' oracle [in the poem, "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves"] is one form of poetry particularly suited to the play of language through various kinds of punning, perhaps the richest development of all the powers in the poet's language is the poetry of religious paradox."²³ We know this also from Herbert, and many a writer before and after Herbert. But if a word-play can affirm religious paradox, it can also undo religious paradox. Stevens knows this full well, and a whole taxonomy of paronomastic undoing (or what he would call "decreation") could be deduced from his work.

Yet another type of word-play is at work in Bishop's poem, "Twelfth Morning; or What You Will," a particularly interesting type which might be called allusive, though older readers would have found the term redundant, since one meaning of the word "allusion" used to be "a play upon words, a pun" (OED 2.; the illustrative quotations range from 1556 to 1731). James Merrill, by the way, has remarked that modern poets

may sometimes even substitute word-play for allusion: "The lucky 18th century reader—having read literally *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."²⁴

In Bishop's poem, allusive paronomasia allows her to speak back to Eliot, and to extend the fabling paronomastic history of the word "turn." For consider Eliot's use of the verb "turn," notably in *Ash Wednesday*, where "turn" at the end of a line comes close to being an Eliot signature. ("Because I do not hope to turn again . . ." etc.) Consider Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," the best-known twentieth-century poem in English on the subject of the Three Kings. And then consider Bishop's poem, set on the Feast of the Epiphany or the Three Kings, and centered on a black boy called Balthazár. Eliot: "three trees on the low sky, / And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow." Bishop: "the black boy Balthazár, a fence, a horse." "The fence, three-strand . . . the big white horse." If this were Eliot's poem, the number three in the three-strand fence would work differently. It would turn triune, perhaps trinitarian, an emblematic numerological punning. And Bishop's later question would sound much different:

Don't ask the big white horse, *Are you supposed*
to be inside the fence or out? He's still
 asleep. Even awake, he probably
 remains in doubt.

If this were Eliot's poem, you would know for sure whether the horse were inside the fence or out, or, worse, sitting on the fence. Bishop does not foreground any of these effects. She keeps doctrinal and political matters peripheral to the main matter, which is song on this day of the epiphany, and a poor child in a small town in a remote area—rather like the original epiphany, we are given to understand. But her different paronomasia on "turn" itself turns Eliot's many turnings, alerting us to the different uses of the number three and of the white horse in her poem.

Bishop carries on other examples of word-play from Eliot and Stevens, both of whom are gifted allusive paronomastics.²⁵ Bishop has heard what they are doing, and signals that she wishes to do something

different. To make such a challenge is easy but to live up to it is extraordinary. Bishop does so.

I want to end with an example from Stevens that I heard only recently, thanks to Bishop, who herself heard and repeated and enlarged this pun, speaking back to Stevens. Here is the opening stanza of Part III of Stevens' 1942 masterpiece, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*:

To sing jubilas at exact, accustomed times,
To be crested and wear the mane of a multitude
And so, as part, to exult with its great throat

"Crested?" I previously recognized the metaphor of the multitude as a lion and the intricate word-play on *tuba-jubilate*, for one meaning of *juba* is "crest."²⁶ But I had not considered etymology sufficiently. The etymon for "crest" is Latin, *crista*, a crest, as on a bird or animal. Stevens thereby suggests another origin for the word "Christian" than the actual Greek origin, where Christ signifies "the anointed one," the equivalent of the Hebrew Messiah. He is using false etymology to suggest what is for him a true origin of the word "Christian," that is, a naturalistic origin. False etymology can be just as useful for poetic fables as true etymology.²⁷ Stevens' punning is genial enough; he is now past the satires of the twenties and early thirties. And he is writing on the third note to the supreme fiction, "It Must Give Pleasure." Bishop heard all this, I think. In her poem, "Brazil, January 1, 1502," she enlarges the etymological pun, and she is much sharper than Stevens.

Just so the Christians, hard as nails,
tiny as nails, and glinting,
in creaking armor, came and found it all
Directly after Mass, humming perhaps
L'Homme armé or some such tune,
they ripped away into the hanging fabric

Bishop has overgone Stevens, a rare feat. Here, not just one but all three Latin meanings of *crista* are at work: crest, as on a helmet, for Bishop is at pains to emphasize the armor;²⁸ crest, as on a bird, by analogy with the bird-women at the end; and crest, as in sexual use. Nor is Bishop's word-play genial. It sets all the Latinate uses against the Greek

origin for the name of Christ, as Brazilian history itself would do, all too often, false etymology here becoming a true fable of false dealing.

A decade ago, we would be considering the deconstructionist challenge to older views of paronomasia. Now we are more likely to be considering a historicist challenge. Both concur in limiting the functions of word-play, as of all formal effects. It is the writers themselves who know the true seriousness in which paronomasia may partake, the true sense of *serio ludere*, the sense in which North Africans listened to Augustine's sermons, some sixteen hundred years ago.

The African, particularly, had a Baroque love of subtlety. They had always loved playing with words; they excelled in writing elaborate acrostics; *hilaritas*—a mixture of intellectual excitement and sheer aesthetic pleasure at a notable display of wit—was an emotion they greatly appreciated. Augustine would give them just this.²⁹

We who seem to have so much trouble with the space between *serio* and *ludere* have something to learn from these ancient Africans, as from our modern poets.

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NOTES

¹I have made a noun out of the *OED*'s adjective, "paronomastic." Or should I say "paronomasian"?

²*The Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966) 5 (23 July 1895); abbreviated in the text as L. Other abbreviations are: OP, *Opus Posthumous*, rev. ed., ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Knopf, 1989), SP, *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*, by Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1977). Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the poetry are from Stevens' *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954) and may be located through the title index.

³Unpublished Letter, 13 August 1952, to Barbara Church, Huntington Library. Quoted by permission of the Huntington Library.

⁴Northrop Frye, *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1976) 142.

⁵Andrew Welsh, *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978).

⁶*De civitate Dei* . . . , trans. Henry Bettenson, ed. David Knowles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 521.

⁷*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask from the 1948 *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953, 1973) 299-301.

⁸Cf. Owen Barfield, "Coleridge's Enjoyment of Words," in *Coleridge's Variety: Bicentenary Studies*, ed. John Beer (London: Macmillan, 1974) 204-18.

⁹Freud's "puns" are "Kalauer," though James Strachey says the term is wider than in English. "Calembourgs" is offered in brackets. From *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* ("The Technique of Jokes"), vol. 8 of *The Standard Edition of . . . Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1905, 1960) 45.

¹⁰"Puns," *JEGP* 49 (1950): 952-54.

¹¹"Linguistics as Poetics," in his *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1987) 86.

¹²Quotations from Elizabeth Bishop are taken from *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983).

¹³"Others Who Have Lived in This Room," in his *In Time and Place* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986) 37. The allusion works both schematically and thematically.

¹⁴William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977, 1981) 586-87.

¹⁵Unpublished letter, Huntington Library. Quoted by permission of the Huntington Library.

¹⁶Unpublished portion of a letter, 20 August 1911 (L 171), Huntington Library. Quoted by permission of the Huntington Library.

¹⁷James Merrill, *From the First Nine: Poems 1946-1976* (New York: Atheneum, 1984) 352.

¹⁸See T. S. Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) 349-50. See also K. K. Ruthven, "The Poet as Etymologist," *CQ* 11 (1969): 9-37, esp. 18.

¹⁹See my *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988) 40n24. See also Richard Howard's richly paronomastic and allusive and funny poem on Stevens and Frost and the Lewis and Short Latin lexicon, ". . . Et Dona Ferentes," *Raritan* 8 (1989): 30-33.

²⁰E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969) 370-71.

²¹This French alternative was suggested by members of the Symposium on Paronomasia, chaired by Professor Inge Leimberg, Münster, July 6-8, 1992. Given Stevens' pleasure in the French language, it is very likely.

²²Anthony Hecht, "Crows in Winter," from his *The Transparent Man* (New York: Knopf, 1990) 65.

²³*Roots of Lyric* 251.

²⁴James Merrill, under "Comments," *UTQ* 61 (1992): 390.

²⁵See, for example, my "The Senses of Eliot's Salvages," *EinC* 34 (1984): 309-18. For Stevens, see my *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War*, chap. 4 and *passim*.

²⁶"Riddles, Charms, and Fictions in Wallace Stevens," in *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye*, eds. Eleanor Cook et al. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1983) 229-30.

²⁷Cf. the numerous examples given by Ruthven.

²⁸To Professor Inge Leimberg, I owe the observation that the "arma Christi" would include those very "nails" figuring in Bishop's description of tapestry and her metaphor of armor. The connection with the nails of the crucifixion is made by Bonnie Costello in her *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1991) 148; Leimberg's suggestion helps to confirm this. To Professor Maria Elisabeth Brockhoff, I owe the persuasive argument that Bishop's word "fabric" is punning musically, as in German *Gewebe* (fabric) in the musical sense. The soldiers also "ripped away into the hanging fabric" of the Mass, tearing out from its entire *Tongewebe* the original secular song, "L'Homme armé"—tearing out not simply the melody, but, tragically, the militarism.

²⁹Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1967) 254.