

PROJECT PAPERS

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EVERYDAY OOPS

Slips in the Poetry of Everyday Life

A lecture delivered at the Poetry Project's 1988 Symposium, *Poetry of Everyday Life*

The Poetry of Everyday Life. What does that mean? Does it mean the poetic quality of everyday life, or poetry *about* everyday life? I don't know. So I'm going to sidestep this ambiguity by talking about something that happens in everyday life that can lead to poetry, and which in fact led to the subject of this talk. When I was invited to speak on the subject of the poetry of everyday life, my mind immediately slipped over to the psychopathology of everyday life, the title of Freud's essay that discusses the slip of the tongue.

According to Freud, the slip of the tongue is not just a simple mistake. Like dreams, it's a revelation of a repressed desire, a breakthrough of the unconscious. In other words, the slip of the tongue allows for a fuller expression of the whole self. Freud likens the slip of the tongue to mistakes in reading:

Both irritating and laughable is a lapse in reading to which I am frequently subject when I walk through the streets of a strange city during my vacation. I then read "antiquities" on every shop sign that shows the slightest resemblance to the word....(*The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, Random House, 1938, p. 88)

To the slip of the tongue and to misreading I would add mishearing (slip of the ear). Chronic mishearing is ascribed to partial deafness, but in some cases it is more than that. It is selective. My henpecked grandfather misheard my grandmother when he *wanted* to; that is, when he wanted to fend her off. For example, if she would say, "Noah, go to the store right now and buy a gallon of milk," he might answer, "You want me to buy a gal some milk? What gal?"

The novelist Henry Green seems to have had a similar penchant:

Interviewer

I've heard it remarked that your work is "too sophisticated" for American readers, in that it offers no scenes of violence — and "too subtle," in that its message is somewhat veiled. What do you say?

Mr. Green

Unlike the wilds of Texas, there is very little violence over here. A bit of child-killing of course, but no straight shootin'. [...]

Interviewer

And how about "subtle"?

Mr. Green

I don't follow. *Suttee*, as I understand it, is the suicide — now forbidden — of a Hindu wife on her husband's flaming bier. I don't want my wife to do that when my time comes — and with great respect, as I know her, she won't...

Interviewer

I'm sorry, you misheard me; I said, "subtle" — that the message was too subtle.

Mr. Green

Oh, *subtle*, how dull!

(*The Paris Review*, No. 19, Summer, 1958, pp. 64-5. Interviewer: Terry Southern)

I suspect that Green, who earlier in the interview had claimed to be "a trifle hard of hearing," used his disability selectively, in this case as a "veiled" response to a "dull" question.

To slips of the tongue, eye, and ear we might add those of the hand. Blaise Cendrars' poem "Misprints" begins: "Spelling errors and misprints make me happy / Some days I feel like making them on purpose." Cendrars takes a romantic poet's pleasure in the typographical error as renegade. Retyping this talk, instead of "slip of the tongue," I put "*lip* of the tongue" at one point and "slip of the *gongue*" at another, and I was tempted to leave them in. I have a particular weakness for typos that form a new and unexpected meaning. In one of my poems, I used this type of misprint in some of the lines:

A rib hung from the marble bust of Robert Burns.
Maurice and Edmund tramped many miles over muddy rods.
They went bathing in the other broth.
Edgar divided the dainties among the fiends.
Maples, hemlocks, and elms grew on Mr. Miller's forearms.

And so on. My taste for this type of word play comes partly from my being influenced by poets such as Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch.

When I started thinking about this talk, I was sure that the poetry of what is loosely called the New York School would yield abundant examples of these various types of slips, examples that had either "I mean" (as in "I fell like a god, I mean I *feel* like a god") or "oops" (as in "Hey, does Garcia Lorca have a hymen? — oops, I mean *hyphen*!") or some other form of self-correction. In Bill Berkson and Frank O'Hara's "St. Bridget's Hymn to Willem de Kooning," we find: "I think you are the nuts I mean I think you are nuts." In another poem, O'Hara wrote: "I hang from the mistletoe / of surprising indigestion, I mean indiscretion" ("3 Poems about Kenneth Koch"). An example from James Schuyler is: "The sky is pitiless. I beg / your pardon? OK then / the sky is pitted" ("The Dog Wants His Dinner"). In "A Dream," Ted Berrigan did it doubly:

Love came into my room
I mean my life
the shape of a Tomato
it took over everything

later:

Forgive me, René Magritte
I meant "a rose"

and he reversed the process in "so keep on the ball, buddy, i.e. / I mean 'the button'" ("Tambourine Life"). In "Chinese Creep," Kenward Elmslie wrote: "thought he said: attack of miasma. / Referring to my asthma." Elmslie calls this his "motor disturbance":

I can't control my current motor disturbance —
so clicky, soppy, so picky — like the one that led me to assume
"disfunction" was Brooklynese for "wedding"
(*"Motor Disturbance"*)

There are also unacknowledged variations on the idea of the slip. In John Ashbery's "Night," "We'll take sides" becomes "We'll make sides"; the word "shells" in "peanut shells" gets divided and expanded into "peanut ship well"; and what earlier might have been "Into the desert / Sand" becomes "Into the desert / The stand." In O'Hara's "Poem in January," the "battered bees" probably edged out "battered peas," and in his "Second Avenue" "the violet waves crested" becomes the violet waves crusted."

The difficulty of finding these — and other — examples led me to realize that they were only signposts leading to what I shall call *the deeper oops*. These deeper oops are part of an aesthetic stance, a level of diction, and an attitude about the self and the presentation of that self in poetry. The aesthetic stance came partly out of surrealism and surrealism's welcoming the unconscious into art. In the America of the 1940s and '50s, surrealism was translated most beautifully into Action Painting, where the controlled accident played such a large role. Poets such as O'Hara and Koch got the excitement of the controlled accident into their work — sometimes through intentional mistranslation — but they rejected many of surrealism's less attractive features: its doctrinaire stridency, its inflated self-importance, its spiderweb creepiness, and ultimately its humorlessness. The down-to-earth tone of some of O'Hara's poems (I'm marvelous and extraordinary but I do this I do that, too) reflected this humanized, everyday-Joe surrealism. O'Hara's poetry is often chatty, associative, bold, and fallible. Without being a confessional poet, he's willing to let the reader see when he goes awry, or, rather than erasing the mistake, he uses it to move the poem in a new direction.

Many of James Schuyler's poems are written from the point of view of a guy doing something ordinary like sitting at a window or strolling, and this dailiness is emphasized by sudden changes and veerings due to mistakes: "Smoke streaks, no, / cloud strokes" ("Growing Dark") or

Hamlin Garland rose up from the Oklahoma powow and declared with spirit,
"I will write The Red Pioneer. President 'Teddy' Roosevelt shall hear,
I mean, Great Chief, read of the travail of the Polished-Stone-Age
Aboriginals adapting to the White Man's way. How."

Kenneth Koch's long poem "When the Sun Tries to Go On" might be read as one massive slip of the tongue:

Oh yes, the golf-balls! "We were three golf-balls
Yesterday until pilgrim milkman rhododendron
Pansy of navy gorilla....

His "Taking a Walk with You" is a brilliant and funny catalog of errors: "I though 'muso bello' meant 'Bell Muse' " and "I thought Axel's Castle was a garage." He goes on:

I misunderstand Renaissance life; I misunderstand:
The Renaissance;
Ancient China;
The Middle Atlantic States and what they are like;
The tubes of London and what they mean;
Titian, Michaelangelo, Vermeer;
The origins of words;
What others are talking about;
Music from the beginnings to the present time....

Kenward Elmslie's poetry is replete with words that give you the feeling that, in a previous incarnation, they were other words, or that, like enchanted toys, they take on another life as soon as you aren't looking. As he says in "Another Island Groupage," "we ate the Spear People syrup pear / and listened for 'twin' words." By "twin words" he means not only words that rhyme, but also those that seem to have some deeper connection ("gismo" and "Quiz Mo' "). In "Pavilions" the "twin words" reverberate back and forth:

he who is split
 windows in June
 turn to mirrors in Jan

like milk in mid-air
 windows in Jan
 turn to mirrors in June

At this point the head begins to reel: the slips slipping on each other.

It is interesting that the only book by John Ashbery that openly uses mistakes (*The Tennis Court Oath*) is considered by some to be a mistake itself, the black sheep of his canon.

I realize that, in the course of this talk, the simple idea of the slip of the tongue has brought forth a certain amount of hot air. In such small compass, it's convenient to use abstractions — the New York School, surrealism, the self, aesthetic stance, etc. — without saying what one means by them, but I beg your indulgence on the grounds that even this talk is a part of everyday life, oops and all.