It is perhaps a mere commonplace to point out that punning and sexuality have conventionally had very intimate relations, both within and outside literature. The term *double entendre* represents a special case of this relationship since it is a rhetorical figure in which ‘a word or phrase’, as *Webster’s World Dictionary* defines it, has ‘two meanings, especially when one of these is risqué or indecorous’. More generally, puns play with similar-sounding words, and very often, but not always, they do so for the sake of sexual suggestion: Shakespeare’s bawdry is a good example of that. Since the introduction of Freudian psychoanalytic theory this function of the pun even could be claimed to have become academically institutionalized. Characteristically, Freud designated wordplay as one of the prime ‘techniques’ of the dream, the joke and literature of obliquely alluding to repressed sexual meanings in a socially acceptable manner. In this light, it might seem that John Ashbery’s poetry inscribes itself in a theoretical and literary tradition in which punning is viewed as an epistemologically privileged means of expressing hidden meanings and truths.

Yet, as Jonathan Culler points out in his essay ‘The Call of the Phoneme’ (1988), there is also a ‘tradition [that] has thought the pun an excrescence of literature, an obnoxious obtrusion from the source of genius, or a rhetorical device of questionable taste’.¹ Similarly, in the introduction to her book on Wallace Stevens’ poetic use of

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wordplay, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*, Eleanor Cook mentions ‘the usual charges of triviality and frivolity’ made against punning.\(^2\) In Derek Attridge’s ‘Unpacking the Portmanteau; or, Who’s Afraid of *Finnegans Wake*?’ we find the following characterization of the bad name which the pun has retained:

> The pun remains an embarrassment to be excluded from ‘serious’ discourse, a linguistic anomaly to be controlled by relegation to the realms of the infantile, the jocular, the literary. It survives, tenaciously, as freak or accident, hindering what is taken to be the primary function of language: the clean transmission of a pre-existing, self-sufficient, unequivocal meaning. It is a characteristic mode of the dream, the witticism, the slip of the tongue: those irruptions of the disorderly world of childhood pleasures and unconscious desires into the clear, linear processes of practical and rational thought, those challenges to what Johnson precisely articulates as the domain of ‘reason, propriety and truth’.\(^3\)

The nineteenth century in particular relegated it to an inferior position by reducing it to ‘a vehicle of humor, separating it from other verbal structures and excluding scholarship from this realm where lightness is all’, as Culler has it.\(^4\)

The reason why the pun became one of the least respectable rhetorical figures, theorizes Culler, is that it disrupts the linguistic system in the Lockean and Saussurean understanding of it, where each sign constitutes a linguistic unit with its own meaning and characterized by its difference from all other signs in the system. The peculiarity of the pun is, indeed, to challenge the orderliness of this linguistic system by suggesting that the sign can be both itself and another sign at the same time, thus conveying two different meanings. It is Culler’s contention that punning represents an ‘urge’, be it literary or not, ‘to motivate’ language in that it introduces semantic relations and links between signs merely on the basis of their formal


\(^4\) Culler, ‘The Call of the Phoneme’, 5.