

Phillip Sterling

The Joke of Ambiguity
in Contemporary American Poetry:
Brand Names, Laundry Detergent, Cigarettes,
and Poems by Bishop and Jarrell

"Poetry is ambiguity — there's no
two ways about it"
M.B.¹

We begin in delight. For who among us would not recognize the playful irony in M.B.'s epigram. There *are* two ways about poetry, if it's ambiguous—even more than two, given William Empson's acclaimed *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. So the singular assertion of there being "no two ways about it" teases our recognition of what *ambiguity* means, even as it further qualifies the definition of poetry. The colloquialism itself engenders playfulness by demanding that no such ambiguity exists while leaving the pronoun *it* open to more than a single clear antecedent. All of which should strike some readers as funny.

Only for those unfamiliar with the meaning of *ambiguity*—or with the implied resoluteness of there being "no two ways about it"—would M.B.'s joke be lost. As one may well be reminded by Oscar Wilde's assertion "I can resist everything except temptation,"² humor is one offspring of connotation's naughty coupling.

¹ A remark made during a discussion of poetics at The Atlantic Center for the Arts, New Smyrna Beach, Florida, May 1997. For reasons that may become apparent later, the originator of the remark wishes to remain anonymous.

² See "Epigram," in *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, 2nd edition, ed. E.D. Hirsch, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

What's also funny about M.B.'s clever bit is the additional irony one finds reflected in the unambiguous tone, the certainty with which the speaker is claiming *absolute* truth, a concept the reader finds questionable. Either M.B. himself doesn't see the ambiguity of his statement, and therefore appears too simple-minded for anyone to pay him serious attention; or else M.B. is deliberately comic, which reduces his wisdom to self-mocking facetiousness. In either case, by posturing multiplicity in a condensed, metaphorical witicism, M.B. creates a kind of poem—albeit light verse—from which we may derive a corollary: *Poetry is Irony*.

Whether any kernels of wisdom can be husked from this corn remains to be seen, and I beg the reader's indulgence. I've taken to expounding on the joke with obvious intent: to prepare my audience for the argument that follows. Granted, the endeavor may be fruitless, for if any explanation is necessary, then it's likely the joke has already been lost. Seldom do we find humor in that which must be explained; more often, we find "you had to be there." Still, I labor the obvious because, it seems to me, a remarkable number of readers don't recognize ambiguities when they see them. They fail to get the joke. And yet, such failure exists not so much in any personal shortcoming as it does in the nature of the ambiguous. For even "an ambiguity, in ordinary speech," clarifies Empson, "means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or *deceitful*."³ (my emphasis). Its deception stems in large part from the simple fact that an understanding of intelligent puns depends upon knowledgeable readers, those familiar with various meanings of certain words or phrases—particularly idioms or colloquialisms—which may be culturally imprecise. Consequently, much of the humor arises from a reader's elitist identification with those-who-know at the cruel expense of those-who-don't. Moreover, as it is often "pronounced," ambiguity becomes a kind of *practical* joke, not unlike a Candid Camera set-up.

³ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 1.

By now I assume the reader understands that I'm using *ambiguity* to suggest "multiple meanings," and not to denote "unclear"; I mean to examine the metaphorical use of ambiguities in literary texts, particularly poetry—not to bemoan the inappropriate choice of pronouns in undergraduate compositions. Any more of a definition than this may be problematic, for semantics, especially in this case, is somewhat of a chameleon. "Ambiguity itself," writes Empson, "can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings."⁴

By its nature, ambiguity—uncertain meaning, intentional deception, probable multiple meanings—implies a kind of falsehood, a semantic amusement park or film studio, where what we know to be true may only be as true as we're convinced it is—may only be as real as the technology of special effects allows. In this regard, it seems to be a particularly American impulse. From the very conception of a nation of "united" states, our democratic urges have sought to rebel against the absolutism of a hierarchical (European) culture that loffed art and literature out of reach of the masses. The rejection of tradition and heritage—the idea instead that a New World should "Make it new"—promulgated the democratization of culture, which, in order to survive, had to be fitted to suit the diverse fashions and sizes of a majority of its constituents. Advocates of certain cultural ideals, then, began to promote what culture was, in the same way that prosperity and happiness were promoted in an effort to attract immigrants to the unlimited possibilities of individual success. And yet—not unlike the American Dream—a lush, rich, home-grown culture is not always what it's said to be. In many respects, it more closely resembles the advertisements in a *House Beautiful* magazine.

America is a culture of image, in which suggestion and implication is as substantive as truth. Consider, for example, the blatantly exaggerated pie chart or bar graph displayed as statistical evidence

⁴ Empson, pp. 5-6.

that pain reliever A is a faster or longer lasting drug than pain reliever B. Advertisements are "pronounced" deceptions, often witty, visually and rhetorically ambiguous, and meant to convince us of a truth that may in fact be questionable. If a product is said to have "good taste," it is not only meant to have a flavor we would find "tasty" but also one we'd find "tasteful"—suggesting that only "discriminating" consumers, those of an elite group, would want to buy it, let alone appreciate it. To bolster the economics of such a claim, however, an "elite" group must consist of as many people as can be convinced that they are in fact elite.

The consequences of promotion are fortuitous—in both senses of that word. On the one hand, things in America always seem to look better than what they are—simpler, in many respects, more straightforward—and we are lucky to be so blessed. On the other hand, there's a pervasive sadness to the fateful plasticity of our existence—something we can deal with only through humor. This is the culture—ambiguous, ironic, metaphoric—in which the American poet lives and writes. It should not be surprising, therefore, that ambiguity is prevalent in American poetry; nor that such ambiguity is best expressed in the metaphorical use of brand names.

Consider Randall Jarrell's poem "Next Day."⁵ It too begins in apparent delight, moving us "from Cheer to Joy, from Joy to All . . ." as we follow the speaker, a woman, down the aisles of a grocery store. At least, we get an initial *impression* of delight, suggested by the cheery, joyous names of things that most of us would hardly recognize as delightful—laundry detergents—and this, only if we are familiar with the American supermarket and its comprehensive display of choices. University students in Lublin, Poland, where I taught as a Fulbright scholar, had difficulty with this poem at first, reading it more esoterically, until the icons of brand names and the rituals of suburban shopping were explained to them. Without that

⁵ Randall Jarrell, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969). Subsequent references to poems by Jarrell are from this edition.

understanding, a reader may find the poem somewhat lacking, no more (or less) than a menopausal woman feeling sorry for herself after the death of a friend.

Knowledgeable readers, however, participate in the routine. We follow the woman up the detergent aisle (even questioning her choice of brand, perhaps), and then out to her station wagon in the parking lot—where she concludes "No one has anything. I'm anybody / I stand beside my grave / Confused with my life, that is commonplace and solitary"; in the process, we come to realize that the symbols of our initial delight are metaphorically deceptive and ambiguous, which is quite unsettling to our sense of complacency and identity. We recognize ourselves to be "products" of an ambiguous culture.

"By enrolling these names of detergents in his poem," writes Peter Lubin, "Jarrell helps the victims of advertising to overcome their lexical oppression."⁶ He means us, of course, readers who can identify with the shopping experience (though not necessarily with the implications of it). "For the woman narrator the names are used ironically," Lubin continues, "but they put a bounce in our step as we march down the same aisles."

In his essay "The Poetry of Brand Names," Lubin uses Jarrell's poem as one example of the metaphoric potential—the poetry—inherent in brand names, and for that I am grateful. I think "Next Day" is a poem well worthy of more critical attention. Still, I'm not ready to buy his final interpretation. The "bounce" he mentions (and he continues throughout with an overwrought series of brand name puns, to the detriment of his point) only occurs if we don't see the metaphoric irony of the brand name, if we ignore the semantic ambiguity of it. Frankly, as a New Age male with a record of domesticity that would scorch the no-bake cookies of many soccer moms, I've never felt any real *joy* or *cheer* in doing laundry. Maybe *all* has taken on a more substantive meaning over the years, given the cloth diaper stages of four children, and surely *tide* has a semantic

⁶ Peter Lubin, "The Poetry of Brand Names," *National Review* 16 (Nov. 1992), p. 72.

clarity I no longer associate with seaside experience (despite its relative *underrow*)—beyond that, the terms can *only* be ironic.

Nevertheless, a blindness to the metaphorical implication of brand names allows writers a useful ambiguity that is both witty and deceptive, depending upon whether or not one gets the joke. Foreign students unfamiliar with aspects of the popular or mass culture that Americans consume without thinking—or familiar with only those visible or audible manifestations meant to proffer certain beliefs about culture (movies, music, TV)—come up short when a text requires an understanding of more subtle allusions or ambiguities. Teach *Death of a Salesman* to a class of central European students and you'll see what I mean. Cultural familiarity needs to be explained.

At the same time, we assume wrongly if we assume that American students, products themselves of mass media and advertising, are by nature more aware of ambiguous allusions. They aren't. Many are too utilitarian to be able to approach a text in more than practical or superficial ways. With brand names in particular, which often are chosen or invented for their metaphorical implications (representing "the dual perspectives of value and identity," writes Allan J. Magrath⁷), readers who become familiar with them as products neglect their semantic nuances, reducing poetry to labeling. And when metaphor "ceases to be part of the 'foreground' and merges into the background", Jan Mukařovský argues, "then it is said to be 'dead.'"⁸ In this respect, many brand names have kicked Mr. Bucket, slipping with singular and practical superficiality into the foreground of consumer minds. To many American students, the woman in Jarrell's poem is simply pushing her shopping cart through the detergent aisle at Piggly Wiggly or Kroger—the irony is lost.

Jarrell well understood the limitations and possibilities of the ambiguous use of brand names, using them purposefully. In his essays—I'm thinking now of the collection appropriately titled *A Sad Heart at*

⁷ Allan Magrath, "Branding Strategy Choices for the 90's," *Editor & Publisher* (4 Dec. 1993), p. 9T.

⁸ Cited by Terence Hawkes, in *Metaphor* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 73.

the *Supermarket*—he railed against the "Medium"—which he felt was what commercialization and popularization was doing to High Culture—even as he participated in it. Yet, by using the images and icons of mass culture as intellectual puns, Jarrell was able to mediate through metaphor the harsh realities of the post-war poet's sad position in a superficial society, rejecting what he had to accept at the same time.

About metaphor, Thomas Owen claims: "Our comprehension of an idea fades in direct proportion to the loss of metaphorical effectiveness. In this sense, the metaphor *is* the meaning. To restore the fullness of meaning it is frequently necessary to conceptualize the metaphor again."⁹

Langdon Hammer, writing about Jarrell's "A Girl in the Library," draws from that poem a similar conclusion: "This moral about everyday life points to a moral about everyday language: the ways we fail to say what we mean *are* what we mean."¹⁰

By using the brand name for its inherent metaphorical implications, Jarrell was reconceptualizing metaphor as a culturally ambiguous manifestation. After all, America itself is culturally ambiguous. The substance of our lives—our Joys and Cheers and Tides—is for the most part more glitter and hype than reality, the consequence of a democratization of aesthetics. We are a culture that by the sheer volume of its production and economy must discard rather than value what cannot be practically and immediately consumed. Applied to language, such consumerism reduces meaning to catch-phrase. "Where's the beef?" for instance, does not send anyone looking.

Poetry, however, can reconceptualize language by turning it metaphorically back upon itself—much the way Andy Warhol used Campbell's soup cans. Peter Lubin gives a few examples of such reconceptualizations—from Pushkin, Baudelaire, and Mandelstam, in addition to Jarrell—before concluding that in much contemporary

⁹ Thomas Owen, *Metaphor and Related Subjects* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 69.

¹⁰ Langdon Hammer, "Who Was Randall Jarrell?" *Yale Review* 79 (Spring 1990), p. 404.

literature such poetry "is missing."¹¹ Brand names instead are used for their labels, nothing more. And when writers enlist brand names as simple cultural markers, not metaphors—if I may extend his argument—not only does the metaphor die but language as a whole takes to its death bed. We all know about the infection of dead metaphors, thanks to Donald Hall and his compulsive disparagement of them; reliance on dead metaphor is one feature of the McPoem.¹²

Language is a trove of artifacts, a village many people pass through but don't visit, where the poet may act as an anthropologist, if not an archeologist. To an archeologist, nothing is dead.

One need only think of the L.L. Bean reference in Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour" to understand what I mean. A "summer millionaire" leaping from a *Sears* catalogue wouldn't be the same (especially given the metaphorical imposition of the Sears Tower). Or consider "Sestina," by Elizabeth Bishop, in which the Little Marvel Stove—animate, a source of warmth and wonder (able to talk, even)—is nothing short of, well, "marvelous"! No generic stove would do.

A more pointed example may be found in Bishop's "At the Fishhouses," in which "The old man accepts a Lucky Strike."¹³ In the American literature anthology I used in Poland, there is a footnote to this line, which my students found intriguing but not very helpful; the footnote reads (in its entirety): "Brand of cigarettes."¹⁴ The note doesn't even begin to explain the metaphorical and ambiguous implication of Bishop's choice of brand. Since the poem takes place at the fishhouses near the shore, "down at the water's edge, at the place / where they haul up the boats . . ." it's not likely (I explained) that *strike* has anything to do with bowling, which, irrespective of the poem, is what comes to mind when I think of Lucky Strikes. I can

picture a shabby, smoky, noisy bowling alley of the 1950s, where on a fortuitous night my older brother could have helped his team win a league trophy—with a few lucky strikes. (He smoked them as well...)

But the poem has little to do with bowling. Or even with soldiers and war—another image often generated by that particular brand of cigarettes (ads interspersed with WW II pictures in *Life* magazine). Instead, I am returned to the profound associations that brand of cigarettes has with fishing, my father's favorite sport. It's obvious, of course. The poem enumerates all the accoutrements of fishing—lobster pots, fish tubs—and the old man who accepts the cigarette is a fisherman himself, a friend of the speaker's grandfather. The man is repairing "his net." They talk of the decline in the fish population "and of codfish and herring" as he waits for the herring boat to come in.

Fishing is one of those ventures that is iffy. There's no certainty for commercial fishermen that any one day will produce a catch worthy of the effort, just as there is no guarantee for a sport fisherman like my father that he will ever bring home a trophy (he never did). Instead, fishermen rely on their belief in a "lucky strike"—the "Big One," one like Santiago struggles with in *The Old Man and the Sea*, or the one that Bishop describes in her poem "The Fish." (Ironically, in that poem the fish is the lucky one, having been caught by a compassionate fisher and subsequently released, instead of mounted, lures and all...)

The old man at the fishhouses "accepts" the cigarette, something he may find a certain pleasure in because it was unexpected, a stroke of good fortune and happenstance, although for fishermen (it seems to me), not to believe in the likelihood of such fortuity would ultimately result in desperation or lost revenue. (Poets often refer to this extravagant faith as the "check in the mail.") Consider how different this poem would be if he'd been offered a Camel or a Pall-Mall. Or a Virginia Slims, for goodness sakes! The ambiguity—the metaphor—would not be found gasping and flopping in the bottom of a boat; rather, it would be packed on ice in a cooler. The only brand that comes to mind as a possible alternative to *Lucky Strike* would be *Salem*, a considerably different, though relevant metaphor . . .

¹¹ Lubin, p. 72.

¹² See "Hall's Index," *AWP Chronicle* 30.6 (May/Summer 1998), pp. 12-13.

¹³ Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969). Subsequent references to poems by Bishop are from this edition.

¹⁴ *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 4th ed., vol. II, ed. Nina Baym, et al. (New York: Norton, 1994).

Coleridge argued that imagination and reality are unified and expressed through metaphor.¹⁵ A reasonable assumption, admits Terence Hawkes: "Imagination stretches the mind . . . because it 'stretches' reality by the linguistic means of metaphor."¹⁶ Subsequently, poetry (and, by extension, ambiguity) is "language at full stretch."¹⁷

It is just this elasticity of language that M.B.'s epigram relies on for its humor and wisdom. And it's this wisdom with which I end.

Dorota Tomczuk

„Geld regiert die Welt“ – Das Weltbild in *Die Dreigroschenoper* von Bertolt Brecht

Die Dreigroschenoper bildet den abschließenden Höhepunkt der Richtung in Brechts dramatischem Werk, zu der auch die Dramen *Im Dickicht der Städte* und *Mann ist Mann* gehören. Alle diese Werke verspotten die klassische Idee des Helden, und durch die Verwendung von Brechts zentraler ästhetischer Kategorie des sog. V-Effekts zerstören sie die szenische Illusion. Dieser Effekt beruht auf dem Kennzeichnen der alltäglichen, gewohnten Erscheinungen durch „Vertfremdung“, was zu einem Erkenntnischock, zu einer kritischen Reflexion und folglich zu einer Veränderung führen soll. In diesem Sinne wird die Einsicht in das Werk als ein Unterricht des Denkens verstanden, der in Bezug auf die Welt Darstellung besonders wirksam ist. Mit Rühle gesprochen vervollständigt damit *Die Dreigroschenoper* „(. . .) das Arsenal der neuen darstellerischen Mittel und gibt die Grundlage zur ersten Formulierung der Theorie des epischen Theaters; sie bestätigte sogar die Unterhaltsamkeit dieses Verfahrens.“¹ Die neuen Mittel, deren sich Brecht bedient, haben nämlich nicht nur die Idee der intellektuellen Belehrung durchzuführen, sondern dank ihnen sollte das Stück gleichzeitig auch unterhaltend wirken. Dieses Anliegen des epischen Theaters wurde von Brecht mehrmals vorgebracht, auch in Bezug auf *Die Dreigroschenoper*: „Ich hoffe, daß die moralisierenden Partien der *Dreigroschenoper* und die lehrhaften Songs einigermaßen unterhaltend sind, aber es besteht doch kein Zweifel, daß diese Unterhaltung eine andere ist als diejenige, die man von den Spielszenen erfährt. Der Charakter dieses Stückes ist zwiespältig, Be-

¹⁵ As discussed by Terence Hawkes, in *Metaphor* (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 42-56.

¹⁶ Hawkes, p. 55.

¹⁷ Hawkes, p. 71.

¹ Günther Rühle, *Theater in unserer Zeit*, Frankfurt a. M. 1980, S. 34.