
POETRY AND ADVERTISING

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POETRY AND ADVERTISING¹

S. I. HAYAKAWA

ONE does not often mention poetry and advertising in the same breath. Poetry is universally conceded to be the loftiest attainment of the verbal arts; its merits are attested to by the wise of all ages. Advertising, on the other hand, is not even an autonomous art; it is the handmaiden of commercial motives; its name carries connotations (well earned, one might add) of half-truths, deception, and outright fraud, of appeals to vanity, fear, snobbery, and false pride, of radio programs hideous with wheedling voices.

There are many more contrasts. The best poetry seems to be fully appreciated only by the few and to be beyond the comprehension of the many. Advertising, however, is considered best when it is laughed over, thought about, and acted upon by multitudes. Poetry is, in the general apprehension, something special, to be studied in schools, to be enjoyed by cultivated people who have time for that sort of thing, to be read on solemn or momentous occasions. Advertising is a part of everyday life.

But poetry and advertising have much in common. They both make every possible use of rhyme and rhythm, of words chosen for their connotative rather than their denotative values, of ambiguities

that strike the level of unconscious responses as well as the conscious. Furthermore, they both strive to give meaning and overtones to the innumerable data of everyday experience; they both attempt to make the objects of experience symbolic of something beyond themselves. A primrose by the river's brim ceases to be 'nothing more' because the poet invests it with meanings; it comes to symbolize the insensitiveness of Peter Bell, the benevolence of God, or anything else he wants it to symbolize. The advertiser is concerned with the primrose only if it happens to be for sale. Once it is on the national market, the advertiser can increase its saleability by making it thrillingly reminiscent of gaiety, romance, and aristocratic elegance, or symbolic of solid, traditional American virtues, or suggestive of glowing health and youth, depending upon his whim. This is what the writer of advertising does with breakfast food, toothpaste, laxatives, whisky, perfume, toilet bowl cleaners. Indeed almost all advertising directed to the general public is the *poeticizing of consumer goods*.

Poetry and advertising are similar too in that they invite the reader to put himself in a role other than his own. In reading poetry we identify ourselves with the characters that a poet creates or with the poet himself. In the course of the experiences that a poet puts us through during these identifications, we feel as others have felt, we see as others have seen, we

¹ Paper given at the Sixth Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, at the Men's Faculty Club, Columbia University, August 23-27, 1945. Reprinted from the January, 1946, issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.

POETRY AND ADVERTISING

discover new ways of looking upon ourselves in our relationships with fellow human beings. Advertisers also invite us to make identifications of ourselves in new roles, although the roles are simpler, pleasanter, and more easily within reach. Readers are invited to look upon themselves as 'smart housewives and hostesses' (who serve Spam), as 'men of distinction' (who drink Calvert's), as responsible and prudent fathers (who protect their dependents with Metropolitan insurance policies), as well-regulated families (who take Ex-Lax).

The identifications to which poets invite us require some imaginative strenuousness on the part of the reader; those to which advertisers invite us require no more than a disposition to day-dream and the ability to remember a brand-name that is repeated eight times in sixty-five seconds in spot announcements at half-hour intervals sixteen hours a day. In spite of this marked contrast in the demands made upon the audience, both have the common function of entering into our imaginations and shaping those idealizations of ourselves that determine, in large measure, our conduct. 'Life,' said Oscar Wilde, 'is an imitation of art,' and in so far as both poetry and advertising exact this tribute of imitation, they are both, in a real sense, 'creative.'

Let us call this use of verbal magic (or skullduggery) for the purpose of giving an imaginative, or symbolic, or 'ideal' dimension to life and all that is in it, *poetry*. If we speak separately of what are ordinarily called poetry and advertising, let us speak of the former as *disinterested poetry*, of the latter as *venal poetry*, the word *venal* being used in the sense of being available for hire.

Using our terms in this way, we see that our age is by no means deficient in poetry as is often charged. We have more

access to poetry (or perhaps we should say poetry has more access to us) than has been the case at any other time in history. One hundred and thirty out of the two hundred pages of each issue of *Harper's Bazaar* are devoted to venal poetry; a similar proportion of poetry to text occurs in most mass circulation magazines. This poetry is written by the highest paid writers in the country, organized into companies of poets, rhapsodists, sub-poets, and sub-rhapsodists, known as 'agencies.' It is supplemented and reinforced by vast amounts of illustration on which the most expensive and most advanced methods of color reproduction are lavished. It is chanted into national hook-ups night and day at the cost of thousands of dollars an hour, and there it is tied into drama, music, satire, humor, social and political discussion, and news. Product and producer it sings—in unending paeans of praise.

None of the corrupt and vain emperors of history exacted of the sycophant poets in their retinues anything like the discipline imposed upon the poets of Procter and Gamble and Ford Motors. The copy-writer is immeasurably more restricted in his choice of subject-matter than a court poet ever was. Moreover, the merit of his poetry is not measured by the pleasure it gives a single patron; it is measured by its influence on sales statistics. Like the court poet, the copy-writer must praise not only his patron, but also the entire socio-economic system which keeps his patron rich and powerful. Milton, attacking the system of literary patronage of his time, was eloquent in his contempt for the 'trencher fury of the riming parasite.' A contemporary prophet able to look into the twentieth century might well have said to him, 'You haven't seen anything yet. Wait until you see the institutional ads of the great corporations during World War II!'

II

Let us turn from venal poetry to disinterested poetry. Mr. Robert Hillyer in a recent article in *Saturday Review of Literature* entitled 'Modern Poetry versus the Common Reader' speaks of modern poets as being in a 'welter of confusion and frustration.' He is distressed by the obscurity of their language—the flight from clarity,' as he calls it. He is certain that both the unintelligibility and the general tone of despair characteristic of much modern verse are due to the moral defects of poets. 'Their confusion,' says he, 'is a sign of artistic effeminacy and egotism.'

Mr. Douglas Bush has said in his paper for the Sixth Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, that 'the modern poet is not altogether fulfilling his traditional function. From antiquity up through the nineteenth century, the poet was regarded as a teacher and leader of his age, and nearly all the greatest poets have been more or less popular; they have counted in the general spiritual life of their times.' 'Since the romantic age and the industrial revolution,' he adds, 'the artist has been given to conceiving of himself, not as a normal active member of society, but as a detached, lonely, and hostile observer; and the breach was never wider than it is today, in spite of the poet's concern with the world's ills.'

What is responsible for this condition? It is customary, I should say too customary, to blame the shortcomings of modern disinterested poetry on the poets. A great deal of the critical literature of our times is devoted to scolding poets for their excessive compression of images, their oddities of syntax, and their unhappy states of mind. They are constantly being told to buck up and be men, to utter brave and positive affirmations. Very few poets respond to the call, and those who do are

seldom praised, even by those who do the calling.

The difficulties of modern poetry, although often exaggerated, are real. As we have been told, it is due in part to the complexity of the modern consciousness; it is due in part to the lack of a widely accepted and recognized poetic tradition; it is no doubt due in part also to the special threats to individuality offered in an industrial age. In addition to the reasons others have given, I should like to add another, namely, that in a world so filled with the clamor of venal writing (of which venal poetry is only the most offensive example), all poetry has come to sound suspicious, so that disinterested poets are practically compelled not to sound poetic (as people ordinarily understand the term poetic) lest suggestions of venal purpose creep into their writing.

In other words, never in history has it been so difficult to say anything with enthusiasm or joy or conviction without running into the danger of sounding as if you were trying to sell something. I shall not say that it is impossible today to make affirmations in verse about the more or less universal facts of human experience that poetry has traditionally been concerned with. But of the vastly increased difficulty of doing so there can be no doubt, and the difficulty continues to increase with the increasing skill, talent, and ingenuity that are constantly being enlisted into advertising, publicity, and public relations as a result of the material rewards offered in those professions.

It is difficult to describe scenery without sounding as if you were promoting a summer-resort, although past ages have done it without compunction:

To one who has been long in city pent
'Tis very sweet to look into the fair
And open face of heaven,—to breathe in prayer
Full in the smile of the blue firmament. . . .

POETRY AND ADVERTISING

It is difficult to take delight in a woman's beauty without sounding like an advertisement, although it used to be possible:

When as in silks my Julia goes,
Then, then, methinks, how sweetly flows
The liquefaction of her clothes . . .

She was a Phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight. . . .

It is difficult to become inspired by those facets of American life familiar and dear to all of us without sounding as if you were leading into a message from the National Association of Manufacturers on the necessity of maintaining the free enterprise system. Indeed, it is even difficult to speak reverently of the courage of our soldiers and the debt we owe the dead without sounding as if you were shortly going to remind the reader how much he also owes to Nash-Kelvinator's contribution to the war effort.

In 1940, Mr. Archibald MacLeish in his controversial essay, 'Post-War Writers and Pre-War Readers' (*New Republic*, June 10, 1940), described the younger generation as being 'distrustful of all words, distrustful of all moral judgments of better and worse.' He continued, 'If all words are suspect, all judgments phony, all conviction of better and worse fake, then there is nothing real and permanent for which men are willing to fight, and the moral and spiritual unpreparedness of the country is worse than its unpreparedness in arms.' The condition he described was not as bad as he feared, but there is no denying that to a large degree it still exists—perhaps, after the experience of war, youthful cynicism is even more intense now than then.

But Mr. MacLeish was entirely wrong, it seems to me, in ascribing this youthful scepticism to the influence of the disillusioned authors who followed the first World War: such men as Dos Passos,

Hemingway, Barbusse, and Remarque. For every one person reached by such authors, advertisers and publicity men and economic propagandists with goods or ideas to sell reached tens of thousands. The distrust of words does not come from reading writers who honestly state their feelings and convictions, even if those feelings and convictions are extremely gloomy. The distrust arises from long experience with an unending stream of venal poetry, venal speech, venal writing. People are hardly to be blamed, when they encounter so much of it, if they begin to wonder if there is any other kind. The pre-emption by the venal poet of the common value-symbols of our culture, the symbols of courage, of beauty, of domesticity, of patriotism, of happiness, and even of religion, for the purposes of *selling*, that is, of *advantaging the speaker at the expense of the bearer*, has left the disinterested poet with practically no unsullied symbols to work with other than obscure ones hauled up out of *The Golden Bough* or the *Upanishads*, and practically nothing in common human experience to write about except those negative moods that the ghastly cheerfulness of the advertising pages of the *Ladies' Home Journal* has no use for.

The restoration of poetry to its traditional state as one of the most important of the communicators and creators of the values a civilization lives by awaits, therefore, a time when something less than 98 percent of radio time and 85 percent of space in mass-circulation magazines is devoted to selling something.¹ It awaits an

¹ Eighty-five percent is perhaps a conservative estimate of the amount of venal writing in many popular magazines, since advertising by no means stops with the advertising pages. Indeed, *Cosmopolitan*, a Hearst publication, appears quite proud of the fact that its editorial content, including its fiction, is as venal in its intent as its paid advertising. The following is

ETC.: A REVIEW OF GENERAL SEMANTICS

economic change profound enough to relieve advertisers of the necessity of invoking all the symbols of home, of mother, of the American way of life, of morality, and of the Christian religion in order to sell a box of soap-flakes. It awaits the dissemination of semantic wisdom, which can be equally well given by departments of history, political science,

quoted from *Cosmopolitan's* advertisement in a trade journal, *Advertising Age*: 'Paul Gallico has just told her a dramatic tale. Pepsi Cola is reaching her at the right moment! Because she's young—she's emotional! She responds easily, quickly, whole-heartedly. . . . And Gallico's fiction is just one example of the kind of brilliant entertainment that crowds the pages of *Cosmopolitan*. Great writing makes great reading. It exercises the emotions. It whets the appetite for gracious living. . . . Good going, Pepsi Cola! You've caught her in an emotional mood. She's just been through the make-believe world of Paul Gallico. She's been living the glamorous life so temptingly traced by Ursula Parrott, Sinclair Lewis and the other great *Cosmopolitan* writers. Emotion makes wars. Emotion makes marriages. Emotion makes SALES!'

chemistry, English, or home economics as by teachers of semantics, sufficient to restore insight into the often subtle differences between venal and disinterested utterances, between statements rich with meaning and other statements, equally resonant, containing only sound and fury. It awaits a vision large enough on the part of students of poetry to see that the problems of modern poetry are inextricably interwoven with the character of the *semantic environment* in which the disinterested poet is compelled to work, which in turn compels an examination of the technological, the sociological, the economic beliefs and practices that create that environment. In short, it waits the time when students of poetry cease to treat their subject as a separate and isolated discipline and begin to look about them at the worlds of science, of commerce, of journalism, of public affairs, and find out what is going on. Then they will be able to do something more than deplore the state of modern poetry.

A man missed a sum of money. It occurred to him that it might have been stolen by a son of his neighbor. Sure enough, the youth had a furtive manner of a thief, and his expression was sly. Indeed, all his actions and ways marked him as a thief. A little afterward the money was found where it had been washed into a drain. The owner took another good look at his neighbor's son. The youth had neither the manner nor the look of a thief.

LIEH-TSE, 4th Century, B.C.

Freedom to speak is dangerous when it is separated from the obligation to listen. The value of democracy, with its *ideal* of free speech and 'open-earedness,' lies fundamentally in the provision it makes for efficient communication—for talking *back* as well as down. In a peculiarly basic sense, democracy consists in listening without semantic blockages.

WENDELL JOHNSON, *People in Quandaries*