

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam—
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
Leap, plashless as they swim.

[from "A Bird came down the Walk," in Sanders et al., II:16-17]

This, of course, is soft sell, and what is being sold, among other things, is softness. Dickinson, however, also shows us her bird biting a worm in two and eating, as she says "the fellow, raw," but that is in the earlier part of the poem, where its functions like the *concessio* in an argument, to bolster the ethos of the speaker and make the main point more believable. This is both a real bird and a beautiful bird—beautiful in its entire birdness and not merely as a velvet-headed creature who flies more softly than butterflies. We may say, I think, that Dickinson's circumspection—present even in many of her shortest poems—makes her appraisive vision especially powerful and pleasurable. In her understated way she could sell you a seat in heaven—or "Eden," as she calls it—without half trying:

Maybe—"Eden" a't so lonesome
As New England used to be!

[from "What is—'Paradise,'" in Sanders et al., II:14]

Start—

Most advertising rhetoric appraises things favorably, of course, but that is because advertisers talk mainly about their own products. The rhetoric of politics and propaganda, however, is extremely effective at negative evaluation. So is some poetry. When Adrienne Rich quietly observes (in "Amnesia") that "Becoming a man means leaving / someone, or something" she is offering us an interpretation of the snow scene in *Citizen Kane*, as she indicates, but she is also describing, and by describing it indicting, a whole cultural practice that constructs manhood in terms of moving on, lighting out for the territory: a practice that also constructs the female as what is left behind, what is stationary, what needs to be abandoned for the male to become himself. Her evaluation is presented through the analogy between someone and something, between the mother left behind, for instance, in

that major American film, and the sled, Rosebud, left out in the snow. "Why," she asks,

must the snow-scene blot itself out
the flakes come down so fast
so heavy, so unrevealing
over the something that gets left behind?

[Rich, 229-30]

The question is, as we say, rhetorical, asking us to perceive critically not just this or that person's behavior, but a whole cultural practice. This is a poem, to be sure, but it is also an interpretive essay and a cultural critique. To accept the pleasure of that lucid, thoughtful discourse is also to accept its feminist perspective, for at least the bewildering moment. But poetry, like advertising, is more likely to celebrate than to criticize. Joy is the force that drives much of our best poetry, as Coleridge noted when he struggled so painfully to make a poem out of his own dejection. Before turning to look at some avowed advertising discourse, let us consider briefly one more passage from a poem. Here is Mary Oliver, on a boat off Cape Cod, waiting for a glimpse of some humpback whales:

We wait, not knowing
just where it will happen; suddenly
they smash through the surface, someone begins
shouting for joy and you realize
it is yourself as they surge
upward and you see for the first time
how huge they are, as they breach,
and dive, and breach again
through the shining blue flowers
of the split water and you see them
for some unbelievable
part of a moment against the sky—
like nothing you've ever imagined—
like the myth of the fifth morning galloping
out of darkness, pouring
heavenward, spinning; then

they crash back under those black silks
and we all fall back
together into that wet fire, you
know what I mean

[from "Humpbacks," in Oliver, 60-62]

And we do know—after Mary Oliver has told us. Would you buy a used whale from Mary Oliver? Or a bird from Emily Dickinson? I would. I couldn't resist. Of course, there is always the danger that the actual thing would never achieve the beauty it has on the page—a phenomenon I learned early from the *F. A. O. Schwartz Catalogue*—but that is why some of us are poets or makers of catalogues, while others are consumers of poems and catalogues to use as fuel for our thoughts and dreams. The great trick, of course, would be to learn from Emily Dickinson how to "see" a bird, so that our birds might be more like hers. Poetry exists, as Viktor Shklovsky might have told us, to make the bird birdy and the whale whaley, or even, as in the case of Archibald MacLeish, to make the poem poem. But of course one makes the whale whaley by turning it into black silk in water that is first blue flowers and then wet fire, as one makes the bird birdy by constructing it out of velvet with a bead for an eye, flying through an ocean of air, and one makes the poem poem by asserting its necessary resemblance to globed fruit, old medallions, sleeve-worn stone, and the flight of birds. In just this way does advertising frequently sell its wares, as Leo Spitzer pointed out four decades ago in his pioneering essay on a Sunkist orange juice advertisement. Or, as a more recent semiotic critic like Umberto Eco might put it, poems and ads exploit the same metaphoric and metonymic pathways within the network of unlimited semiosis to achieve their similar ends. What, then, if anything, is left as the difference between poetry and advertising? Before attempting to answer this question, let us add to our set of examples some overtly commercial texts.

Magazine advertising, of course, privileges the visual over the verbal, but even the most powerful images, as we shall see, derive their rhetorical force from metaphoric and metonymic linkages. That is, whether the signs are visual or verbal matters less in this rhetorical

economy than the fact that they are signs used in an appraisive-valutive system. We can find this textual economy at work, for instance, in an ad for "Savvy" fashion jewelry that appeared in a recent issue of *Vanities Fair*. The name "Savvy" appears to be derived from the manufacturer's name—Swarovski—by a simple anagrammatic method that effectively turns a potential Polish joke into a lure for the woman who wants to be perceived as "knowing," "with it," or, in a word, "savvy." The verbal text of the ad appears at the bottom of the page, against a background of black, possibly velvet. It says, "Knowing who to lend an ear to is the mark of a Savvy woman." The phrase "lend an ear" comes, though at some remove, from the mouth of Shakespeare's master of rhetoric, Mark Antony. The visual image, however, revives this tired trope by taking it more literally than is usually the case. Above the black velvet we see part of the face of what appears to be a woman: an eye, part of an eyebrow, and an ear, connected by soft smooth skin, which we see so clearly that we can discern the almost invisible blond facial hair near the ear, coding the face as female. Attached to the earlobe is a large glittering jewel of an earring, presumably made by Swarovski. This bejeweled ear is being lent, apparently, to a male, part of whose face is also visible inside our picture frame. We see him slightly from the rear: a bit of chin, the curve of a cheek, most of a nose, pressing up against the woman's face at a point midway between eyebrow and top of the ear, a little brown hair at this man's temple, and just enough hint of an incipient beard to signal to us that this is indeed a male face. He may be whispering into the ear of the woman, whose head is at a reclining angle, but he appears to be almost eating the top of her ear, which ends abruptly where his mouth obscures our view of it.

The woman's eyeball has rolled all the way toward where the man is. She seems to be lending him an eye as well. A bit of her own brown hair extends from behind the man's face out above her ear and then curves away, where her facial hair, very light and delicate, begins. The most striking thing about the entire image is the way in which the man's most prominent part—his projecting, convex nose—and the woman's most prominently positioned part—her intricately whorled concave ear—combine to make an unmistakably sexual conjunction:

a conjunction, be it said, in which the jewel made by Savvy falls into place in precisely the spot which in late ancient Greek could be called a jewel. This Savvy woman has lent her ear first to the firm of Svarovski America Limited and then to the male who is nibbling at it or whispering in it, with his nose probing her temple, but an ear is not always, or only, an ear. In the metaphor of lending, the erotic and the economic blend nicely. We do not know whether the jewel has been exchanged for the ear, but we are certainly alerted to some sort of transaction taking place before our eyes. The woman has the jewel because she is "savvy"—or is she savvy, as the ad suggests, because she has the jewel. Poems and ads often like to blur the line between mere contiguity and matters of cause-and-effect. At any rate, the Savvy woman, presumably, doesn't lend her ear, or any other part of her anatomy, to just anybody—nor is lending to be confused with giving. The jewel in the ad, as we have noticed, has been positioned artfully for maximum effect.

Advertising frequently goes for the sexual jugular. So, of course, do religion and poetry. Let us recall, for instance, John Donne's comparison between arrival at his beloved's nether parts and the discovery of America—not to mention what are now Canada's Maritime Provinces—"O my America! my new-found-land"). Advertising, like poetry, is also highly intertextual. We have seen how even Savvy is not above brushing up our Shakespeare. In the case of Georges Marciano, however, the author in the background, somewhat more subtly invoked, is Ernest Hemingway. I am referring to an ad which, in its original context, was part of a ten-page spread in *Vanity Fair* magazine, February 1988, advertising Guess Jeans. Although these images do not tell a complete story, they make a sequence based on a single theme. In one of these ten pages, the visual text is dominated by the image of an attractive young woman, posed against a background of wall posters, holding just above her forehead a pair of horns like those of a cow or bull. The photograph is in black and white, with only the name of the advertiser, Georges Marciano, scrawled across the page in bright red. We cannot miss the name, but its color separates it from the other images. The name is on the picture, not in it, like the signature of an artist on a painting, only much more prominent: as if it were written in red lipstick. The wall posters in the

background are just clear enough for us to make out what they are about.

Since these ten pages of advertising are not directly available, let me summarize them briefly here. The same young woman appears in a number of them. She is in fact the only person we see, except for a bullfighter, whose images dominate three of the ten pages, dressed in his splendid costume, the brilliant, glittering "suit of lights." In the first of the ten pages the woman is part of a photomontage in which several images are printed together, so that we cannot tell exactly where she is or what we are seeing. She is partly clothed and her hair is disheveled. She appears to be standing, but the image also suggests that she might be lying in a bed. Behind her in the upper half of the page is a white background that might be sheets or newspapers or posters. The lower half of the page is dominated by the intermingled images of what appears to be a wrought-iron balcony and part of a suit of lights. The woman's eyes are open but lowered. Her arms appear to be crossed over her breasts in a protective gesture. In or near her hands is a string of beads, possibly a rosary.

The other pages carry out these motifs in various ways. In one two-page spread the same woman, in a black blouse and wearing shorts decorated on the sides to suggest the embroidery of a suit of lights, lies bent over a low bench or stool, as if to be spanked or whipped. Here she gazes straight into the camera. On another page, with her eyes closed and her lips slightly parted, she seems to swoon against a tattered wall poster of the bullfighter who appears on the other pages. A black shawl or mantilla hangs from her hand, which is pressed against the heart of the bullfighter on the poster. The other pages carry these motifs further. We are given a strong dose here of what Roland Barthes would have called "Latinicity"—that is, certain stereotypes or cultural codes that link things Hispanic with the erotic and the violent, as in Mérimée's or Bizet's *Carmen* and Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* or *The Sun Also Rises*. The young woman, with her black hair, her thick, straight eyebrows, her mantilla, and (in two of the pages) her black sombrero, is presented to us as a Hispanic or Latin beauty—though a very well scrubbed and well depilated one, to be sure, as the readers of *Vanity Fair* are presumed to be themselves.

One ad in this sequence combines all these motifs. Our young lady

manages to be wearing a white blouse like a schoolgirl, a cummerbund like a bullfighter (who always wears one under the suit of lights), and a bullfighter's black tie, while holding up a pair of horns in such way as to make her appear like the bull awaiting the sword of the matador with a certain sultry submissiveness—images which recall some of Picasso's late works as well as the literary texts we have mentioned. This female bull has a thing about bullfighters and is clearly waiting there in her striking Guess Jeans jacket for one to come along and put her out of her misery. Her downcast eyes (carefully made up, of course) proclaim her submission, and the dangerous points of those horns are outside the frame of the picture. She is only playing, after all, but you, too, can play if you will join her by encasing your own dangerous attractions in some jeans by Georges Marciano. That is the message—or at least one important message—conveyed by this rich and visually fascinating series of images, which function to make it harder than it ought to be for the reader to avoid going for this bull.

Before concluding this consideration of advertising rhetoric, we should at least glance at the way appraisive-valuative discourse works in a medium that combines the powers and pleasures of speech, visual images, and music. "Glance" is an unfortunate—and therefore revealing—metaphor for what we shall be undertaking, here, since it names precisely what we cannot do in this situation with respect to this kind of text. It is bad enough to discuss magazine advertisements without permission to reprint them, but even harder to discuss a multitrack medium like video in a discourse that is purely verbal. Nevertheless, we must at least consider the rhetoric of video, because it is so powerful, so ubiquitous in our culture, and because it brings into play the temporal or narrative dimension of evaluative discourse in a very vivid manner. Appealing, as it does, to a wide audience, it will also provide an appropriate occasion to consider the relation of specific texts to the cultural codes against which they must be read.

The moments of surrender proposed to us by video texts come in many forms, but all involve a complex dynamic of power and pleasure. We are, for instance, offered a kind of power through the enhancement of our vision. Close-ups position us where we could never stand.

Slow motion allows us an extraordinary penetration into the mechanics of movement, and, combined with music, lends a balletic grace to ordinary forms of locomotion. Filters and other devices cause us to see the world through jaundiced or rose-colored optics, coloring events with emotion more effectively than verbal pathetic fallacy and less obtrusively. These derangements of normal visual processing can be seen as either constraints or extensions of visual power—that is, as power over the viewer or as extensions of the viewer's own optical power, or both. Either way they offer us what is perhaps the greatest single virtue of art: change from the normal, a defense against the ever-present threat of boredom. Video texts, like all except the most utilitarian forms of textuality, are constructed upon a base of boredom, from which they promise us relief.

Visual fascination—and I have mentioned only a few of its obvious forms—is just one of the matrices of power and pleasure that are organized by video texts. Others include narrativity and what I should like to call, at least tentatively, cultural reinforcement. By narrativity, of course, I mean the pleasures and powers associated with the reception of stories presented in video texts. By cultural reinforcement, I mean the process through which video texts confirm viewers in their ideological positions and reassure them as to their membership in a collective cultural body. This function, which operates in the ethical-political realm, is an extremely important element of video textuality and, indeed, an extremely important dimension of all the mass media. This is a function performed throughout much of human history by literature and the other arts, but now, as the arts have become more estranged from their own culture and even opposed to it, the mass media have come to perform this role. What the epic poem did for ancient cultures, the romance for feudalism, and the novel for bourgeois society, the media—and especially television—now do for the commodified, bureaucratized world that is our present environment.

It is time, now, to look at these processes as they operate in some specific texts. Let us begin with a well-known Budweiser commercial, which tells—most frequently in a format of twenty-eight seconds, though a longer version also exists—the life story of a black man pursuing a career as a baseball umpire. In this brief period of time, we

are given enough information to construct an entire life story—provided we have the cultural knowledge upon which this construction depends. The story we construct is that of a young man from the provinces, who gets his “big break,” his chance to make it in the big city, to rise to the top of his profession. We see him working hard in the small-time, small-town atmosphere of the minor leagues, where the pace of events is slower and more relaxed than it is “at the top.” He gets his chance for success—the voice-over narrator says, “In the minors you got to make all the calls, and then one day you *get* the call”—after which we see him face his first real test. He must call an important and “close” play correctly and then withstand the pressure of dispute, neither giving ground by changing his mind (which would be fatal) nor reacting too vigorously to the challenge of his call by an offended manager. His passing of this test and being accepted is presented through a later scene in a bar, in which the manager who had staged the protest “toasts” the umpire with a bottle of Budweiser beer, with a chorus in the background singing, “You keep America working. This Bud’s for you.” From this scene we conclude that the ump has now “made it” and will live happily ever after. From a few scenes, then, aided by the voice-over narration and a music track, we construct an entire life. How do we do this? We draw upon a storehouse of cultural information that extends from fairy tales and other basic narrative structures to knowledge about the game and business of baseball.

In processing a narrative text we actually construct the story, bringing a vast repertoire of cultural knowledge to bear upon the text that we are contemplating. Our pleasure in the narrative is to some extent a constructive pleasure, based upon the sense of accomplishment we achieve by successfully completing this task. By “getting” the story, we prove our competence and demonstrate our membership in a cultural community. And what is the story that we “get”? It is the myth of America itself, of the racial melting pot, of upward mobility, of justice done without fear or favor. The corporate structure of baseball, with minor leagues offering a path for the talented to the celebrity and financial rewards of the majors, embodies values that we all possess, we Americans, as one of the deepest parts of our cultural

heritage or ideology. It is, of course, on the playing field that talent triumphs most easily over racial or social barriers. Every year in baseball new faces arrive. Young men, having proved themselves in the minors, get their chance to perform at the highest level. Yale graduates and high-school dropouts who speak little or no English are judged equally by how well they hit, run, throw, and react to game situations. If baseball is still the national pastime, it is because in it our cherished myths materialize—or appear to materialize.

The commercial we are considering is especially interesting because it shows us a black man competing not with his body but with his mind, his judgment and his emotions, in a cruelly testing public arena. Americans who attend to sports are aware that black athletes are just beginning to find acceptance at certain “leadership” positions, such as quarterback in professional football, and that there is still an active scandal over the slender representation of blacks at baseball’s managerial and corporate levels. The case of the black umpire reminds viewers of these problems, even as it suggests that here, too, talent will finally prevail. The system works, America works. We can take pride in this. The narrative reduces its story to the absolutely bare essentials, making a career turn, or seem to turn, on a single decision. The ump must make a close call, which will be fiercely contested by a manager who is deliberately testing him. This is a story of initiation, in that respect, an ordeal that the ump must meet successfully. The text ensures that we know this is a test, by showing us the manager plotting in his dugout, and it gives us a manager with one of those baseball faces (Irish? German?) that have the history of the game written on them. This is not just partisan versus impartial judge, it is old man against youth, and white against black. We root for the umpire because we want the system to work—not just baseball but the whole thing: America. For the story to work, of course, the ump must make the right call, and we must know it to be right. Here, the close-up and slow motion come into play—just as they would in a real instant replay—to let us see both how close the call is and that the umpire has indeed made the right call. The runner is out. The manager’s charge from the dugout is classic baseball protest, and the ump’s self-control and slow walk away from the angry manager are gestures in a ritual we all know. That’s

right, we think, that's the way it's done. We know these moves the way the contemporaries of Aeschylus and Sophocles knew the myths upon which the Greek tragedies were based. Baseball is already a ritual, and a ritual we partake of mostly through the medium of television. The commercial has only to organize these images in a certain way to create a powerful narrative.

At the bar after the game, we are off stage, outside that ritual of baseball, but we are still in the world of myth. The manager salutes the ump with his tilted bottle of beer; the old man acknowledges that youth has passed its test. The sword on the shoulder of knighthood, the laying on of hands, the tilted Bud—all these are ritual gestures in the same narrative structure of initiation. To the extent that we have wanted this to happen we are gratified by this closing scene of the narrative text, and many things, as I have suggested, conspire to make us want this ending. We are dealing with an archetypal narrative that has been adjusted for maximum effect within a particular political and social context, and all this has been deployed with a technical skill in casting, directing, acting, photographing, and editing that is of a high order. It is very hard to resist the pleasure of this text, and we cannot accept the pleasure without, for the bewildering minute at least, also accepting the ideology that is so richly and closely entangled with the story that we construct from the video text. To accept the pleasure of this text is to believe that America works; and this is a comforting belief, itself a pleasure of an even higher order—for as long as we can maintain it. Does the text also sell Budweiser? This is something only market research (if you believe it) can tell. But it surely sells the American way first and then seeks to sell its brand of beer by establishing a metonymic connection between the product and the nation: a national beer for the national pastime.

An audience that can understand this commercial, successfully constructing the ump's story from the scenes represented in the text and the comments of the narrative voice, is an audience that understands narrative structure and has a significant amount of cultural knowledge as well, including both data (how baseball leagues are organized, for instance, and how the game is played) and myth (what constitutes success, for example, and what initiation is). At a time when critics

such as William Bennett and E. D. Hirsch are bewailing our ignorance of culture, it is important to realize that many Americans are not without culture; they simply have a different culture from that of Bennett and Hirsch. What they really lack, for the most part, is any way of analyzing and criticizing the power of a text like the Budweiser commercial—not its power to sell beer, which is easily resisted, especially once you have tasted better beer—but its power to sell America. For the sort of analysis that I am suggesting, it is necessary to recover (as Eliot says) from the surrender to this text, and it is also necessary to have the tools of ideological criticism. Recovery, in fact, may depend upon critical analysis, which is why the analysis of video texts needs to be taught in all our schools.

Before moving on to the consideration of a more complex textual economy, we would do well to pause and consider the necessity of ideological criticism. One dimension of the conservative agenda for this country has been conspicuously anticritical. The proposals of William Bennett and E. D. Hirsch, for instance, different as they are in certain respects, are both recipes for the indoctrination of young people in certain cultural myths. The great books of past ages, in the eyes of Bennett, Hirsch, and Allan Bloom, are to be mythologized, turned into frozen monuments of Greatness in which our "cultural heritage" is embodied. This is precisely what Bloom does to Plato, for instance, turning the dialectical search for truth into a fixed recipe for "greatness of soul." The irony of this is that Plato can only die in this process. Plato's work can better be kept alive in our time by such irreverent critiques as that of Jacques Derrida, who takes Plato seriously as an opponent, which is to say, takes him dialectically. In this age of massive manipulation and disinformation, criticism is the only way we have of taking something seriously. The greatest patriots in our time will be those who explore our ideology critically, with particular attention to the gaps between mythology and practice. Above all, we must start with our most beloved icons, not the ones we profess allegiance to, but those that really have the power to move and shake us. I propose to conclude this discussion by examining such an icon, as it existed for my own generation, across the media of film, radio, phonograph, and television. More current icons I shall prudently