STEPHEN D. WINICK

FALL INTO THE (INTERTEXTUAL) GAP: PROVERBS, ADVERTISEMENTS AND INTERTEXTUAL STRATEGIES

Abstract: This paper is an analysis of the specific ways in which American advertisements use proverbs and proverbial phrases to persuade. It proceeds from an understanding of the proverb as an essentially intertextual phenomenon: an entextualized utterance, based on previous similar utterances, which can in turn be quoted, imitated, or manipulated to produce specific instances of proverbial communication. It employs the idea of the "intertextual gap," theorized by Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman, and postulates that proverbial advertisements create and manipulate intertextual gaps to make meaning. It demonstrates that, through the use of the intertextual gap, proverbial ads can use the authority inherent in the proverb, they can challenge the authority of particular proverbs, or they can challenge the authority of the whole proverb tradition. In all of these cases, the ad claims as its own either the wisdom of the proverb, or a wisdom greater than that of the proverb, in the hopes of persuading audiences. It shows that some ads create fictive worlds, and inside those fictive worlds, coin proverbs, which then have a chance to emerge into everyday speech. It further shows that the language play demonstrated by clever proverb ads gives audiences pleasure, fulfilling a societal need for public poetry, and that this enhances the ad's selling power.

Keywords: Advertisement, American, Authority, Context, Fictive World, Innovation, Intertextual Gap, Intertextuality, Language Play, Pleasure, Poetry, Proverb, Recurring Social Situation, Wisdom, Wit.

Often a Bridesmaid, Never a Bride
(Listerine Antiseptic)

When it Rains, it Pours
(Morton's Salt)

Think Small.
(Volkswagen)

It Takes a Tough Man to Make a Tender Chicken
(Perdue Chicken)

Where's the Beef?
(Wendy's Restaurant)

As the examples above attest, advertising copywriters draw on and contribute to the proverb tradition in a variety of ways. Some advertisers use old proverbs as ad copy, while others alter old saws to suit their own needs. Still others create new slogans that are themselves proverbial. And to be sure, advertisers have a motive beyond the need to create realistic-sounding dialogue for their characters. They want to create phrases that are not only memorable and repeatable, but persuasive to the audience; they want to sell their products or services, or sell customers on their ideas.

Proverbs are an ideal tool for advertisers to use in this effort, because the goals of an ad and the goals of a proverb are fundamentally the same. Guy Cook has pointed out that all ads, be they for products, services or charities, against drunk driving, child abuse or cigarette smoking, have one basic feature in common. All ads, he says, are "discourse advocating a change in behavior" (Cook 1992:223). It might be added that a small number of ads, like those from church groups or political parties, advocate a change in belief or attitude. Similarly, as I once noted: "Proverbs are attempts on the part of a speaker to elicit a response from a hearer. This response is at times external, as when a proverb is used to persuade someone to do something, and at times internal, as when it serves to change the way someone feels" (Winick 1994:264).

Both proverbs and ads, then, are strategic verbal actions designed to affect the beliefs, feelings and behavior of hearers.[1] Since the proverb has existed for thousands of years as a device to accomplish this goal, it is only natural that advertisers, who have risen to prominence as creators of culture only in the last few hundred years, should seize on the proverb as raw material for their copy.

Before looking at specific ways in which proverbs are used to persuade, it is worth asking whether proverbs in advertisements really can be used to persuade buyers to make certain purchasing choices. If it could be shown that proverbial ads actually accom-

plished this goal better than other ads, we would be in a position to celebrate the proverb's economic power.

Unfortunately, it turns out to be very difficult to prove whether individual ads have measurable marketing effects at all. For one thing, ads almost always exist in a climate rich with other complementary and competing ads; as Leo Bogart (1984:362) puts it, "under ordinary circumstances, with an existing product, we cannot trace sales back to any one of a particular series of advertising messages." Moreover, as Bogart also shows, there are many other factors that affect sales, even in tightly controlled test markets. This circumstance led Rance Crain, Editor-in-Chief of Advertising Age, Electronic Media, and Crain's New York Business, to point out that nobody even knows if advertising works at all. Criticizing a study that found advertising effective in boosting sales, Crain (1994:21) writes:

> We don't even know if advertising had anything to do with the sales increases because the companies involved—Procter & Gamble, General Motors and AT&T—were presumably doing all sorts of things to boost sales.…You could substitute any other marketing tool and still get the same result.

However, despite the fact that persuasiveness to the consumer can rarely be measured, persuasiveness is the tool that ads use to justify their continued existence. It is important to remember that the advertising agency's job is to satisfy their customers: companies with items to sell. Persuasiveness is still a primary criterion used to judge ads within the industry. Therefore, copywriters need to convince their account managers that an ad is persuasive. The account managers need to convince marketing directors and shareholders in companies that advertise. To do so, they frequently show them the ad and allow them to judge for themselves. In other words, the ad's true work of persuasion is often accomplished within the industry, not between the industry and the public.

Some ads are tested with consumers before they are run in the national media. Typically, consumers view the ads and then answer questions about them. In these cases, the ads judged to be successful are those that convince consumers that they would persuade them to buy—which is not the same thing as actually persuading them to buy! In almost all cases, then, the measurable

persuasion of advertising is meta-persuasion. We can't be sure whether proverbs really convince consumers to buy a certain product. But the fact that proverb ads have been popular for so long means that proverbs do convince advertisers and consumers of their ability to persuade.

The efficacy of the proverb as a persuasive tool, then, is the most basic reason for its presence in advertising. More specific reasons, all of them subsidiary to this one, have been discussed by Barbara and Wolfgang Mieder (1981), and by Wolfgang Mieder (1978, 1989:293-315) in the most extensive treatments to date of proverbs in advertising. Quoting various authorities on advertising, the Mieders point out that the proverb's brevity, familiarity and clarity help it to "telegraph [the ad's message] in plain language" (cf. Ogilvy 1963:107) making it useful for brief, quickly comprehensible ad headlines. They show that the proverb's memorability makes it a good model upon which to build a slogan, since slogans are "designed to be repeated over and over again word for word" (cf. Kleppner, 1948:40). Finally, they point out that the general authority accorded the proverb may be carried over into the advertisement, making the ad appear trustworthy and self-evidently true.

Most importantly, the Mieders discuss the variation of proverbs in ads. Indeed, their essentially textual scholarship is mainly concerned with demonstrating that proverbs are not only quoted, but consciously varied and manipulated, by advertising copywriters. They do an excellent job of showing the different ways a proverb text may be varied from its standard form when it is incorporated into an advertisement. However, they confine their theoretical comments on the variation process to an observation that "a twisted proverb will serve even better than the original as an attention-getter, since the new wording increases the interest in reading the following copy" (Mieder and Mieder 1977:312). In other words, the Mieders suggest that the manipulation of proverbs serves primarily as a device for attracting attention.

In making this assumption, the Mieders follow generations of advertisers and critics who have seen the ad's purpose to be, in Cook's (1992:225) words, "to attract readers' attention, then trick them into buying the product." While this classic view is partly correct, it is too simple to describe the whole of advertising dis-

course. In the years since the Mieders' paper, scholarship on advertising has examined ads as communication, from linguistic, rhetorical and cultural perspectives (e.g. Andren et. al. 1978, Williamson 1978, Burli-Storz 1980, Dyer 1982, Cook 1992, Twitchell 1996). This body of work suggests that we can build on the Mieders' analyses by examining how different uses of proverbs affect the meanings of the resulting texts.

The Mieders' focus on variation also suggests that the "intertextual gap" can be an enlightening concept for the discussion of proverbs in advertising. Briggs and Bauman (1992:149) defined the intertextual gap essentially as an imperfection in "the fit between a particular text and its generic model—as well as other tokens of the same genre." Proverbs consciously varied would naturally create and manipulate such intertextual gaps.

As Briggs and Bauman's work makes clear, the manipulation of intertextual gaps is usually engaged in with an eye to affecting the social power of the discourse at hand. In the case of proverbial discourse in ads, copywriters manipulate intertextual gaps in order to give their ads persuasive power through a claim to authority. A minimal intertextual gap accesses the seemingly communal authority of the proverb tradition itself; this is the strategy of citing canonical wisdom, of bowing to ancient authority. Maximizing the gap, on the other hand, claims authority by demonstrating individual creativity, cleverness and intelligence; it even sometimes claims an authoritative voice through resistance to or rejection of the hegemonic ideological force generally carried by proverbs.

It is in evaluating the ways in which a given proverbial ad manipulates these gaps to claim authority, and thus persuades a reader of the truth in the ad's message, that an intertextual approach can be the most helpful in supplementing the work of textually-oriented scholars. As an example, take the Mieders' comment on an Avis ad that changed "to err is human" to "to err is humam": "Only the exchange of the final 'n' with an incorrect 'm' makes this advertisement striking enough to get the attention of the reader" (Mieder and Mieder 1977:318). This point is entirely valid, but there are other consequences of the change that deserve analysis as well. Most important is the observation that in creating "to err is humam," the copywriter not only quoted a proverb, accessing its inherent and traditional authority, but also created an

obvious and meaningful intertextual gap, thereby foregrounding his own verbal skill.

The first step in recognizing this is realizing that the change from "human" to "humam" is neither a real error nor an intentionally random change. On the contrary, it is a poetic device aimed at intensifying the message of the proverb text; by simulating an error while citing a proverb about erring, the copywriter has made the form of the proverb mirror its meaning. Furthermore, this ad playfully makes the proverb text not only a statement of an apparent truth, but also a piece of "evidence" in support of its own claim! This phonetic and semantic manipulation is precisely the type of verbal prowess that can convince the hearer of the speaker's cleverness. Thus, the ad makes a bid for the respect and admiration of its readers.

To see this more clearly, consider that in some contexts, a switch like this would be neither poetic nor clever, but foolish. While "a stitch in time saves nire" would be a similar phonetic and orthographic change, and would certainly serve to grab a reader's attention, it would not add anything to the semantic load of the proverb, enhance the message, or appear clever. On the contrary, it would seem to be a genuine mistake. On the other hand, "a stitch in time saves Nike" could easily be used in an ad that stressed the superior workmanship of Nike shoes; as in "to err is humam," the orthographic change here has a clear function and meaning.

Cook (1992:226) documents quite extensively that ads indulge in code play, "focusing attention on the substance and means of communication, rather than using these only to refer to the world." Viewing the conscious manipulation of proverbs as an aspect of this code play suggests an important rule that is implicitly observed by those who create proverbial advertisements: any change in the text must be perceived as deliberate, playful and poetic. To do this the change must add something to the meaning of the proverb, or at least reconcile the proverb to the context of the ad. If a change fails to do so, it remains meaningless and becomes merely an error.

A focus on code play also suggests that ads are meant to be enjoyed. In fact, Pateman (1985), Thompson (1990) and Cook (1992) all state that part of the function of advertisements is to give pleasure. In doing so, they argue, the ad encourages the read-

er to associate the pleasure taken in the ad with the product being sold. This is certainly one effect of playful slogans like "to err is humam." There are also other ways in which pleasure informs our readings; it is our pleasure at the poetry of the change, for example, that allows us to perceive the ad as clever. This perception of cleverness, as I argued above, lends authority to the altered proverb text. Furthermore, since no "credits" tell us who wrote the slogan, we give credit and respect for cleverness not to Harry Bates the copywriter, but to the product itself.

In all these general ways, then, the manipulation of intertextual gaps in the creation of proverbial ads can affect our understandings of the texts and the effectiveness of their messages. It remains to be seen exactly how such gaps are established and played with, and what effects they have on different proverbial advertising slogans.

Briggs and Bauman's formulation of the intertextual gap specifies that it can exist between an utterance and its generic model "*as well as* other tokens of the same genre." This suggests that there are two distinct types of intertextual gaps that a generically-framed utterance may activate. On the one hand, there is the gap between the individual text and the genre (or ideal mental model of discourse production) that spawned it. On the other hand, there may be a gap between a given text and another specific text, especially when a new text is created based on an older one.[2]

To put this in proverbial terms, when "ugly is as ugly does" was first spoken, it used an established proverbial pattern and summed up a recurrent life problem—that good people are sometimes judged to be bad (and vice versa) because of their looks.[3] These two features helped the speaker to make it maximally interpretable as proverbial, to minimize to almost nothing the gap between the text and the proverb genre. However, "ugly is as ugly does" was obviously created to contrast with the common proverb "handsome is as handsome does" and its variants; this gap, between one text and another, is readily perceptible to most hearers of the proverb. "Ugly is as ugly does" thus managed to emerge both as a parodic imitation of a proverb (through a recognizable text-text gap) and as a proverb in its own right (through a practically imperceptible text-genre gap)[4].

Because there are two types of intertextual gaps, each of which is subject to manipulation, advertisers who use proverbs

have many strategies at their disposal. They may, of course, quote a proverb in its traditional sense, minimizing all the gaps created by their text. They may also choose to ignore canonical proverbs in favor of brand-new slogans using such proverbial features as repetition, parallelism, rhyme and unconventional syntax; this minimizes the gap between genre and text, and avoids encouraging specific text-text comparisons that might lead to the perception of gaps. Or, they may alter an existing proverb in an obviously perceptible way, highlighting the gap between their text and the individual proverb text. As the Mieders and others[5] have shown, advertisers use all of these strategies liberally in creating new proverbial slogans, headlines, and copy.

Traditional Proverbs, "Twisted Proverbs" and Proverbial Authority in Advertisements

Citing a canonical proverb in an advertisement necessarily creates what we have called a "text-text" gap; that is, an imperfect fit between this instance of a proverb and other, previously-heard instances of it. Some ads attempt to minimize the text-text gap by quoting proverbs in their traditional senses. Thus, a 1915 ad for Fels-Naptha soap (GH, Dec. 1915:25)[6] begins with the headline, "Accidents Will Happen." It takes the traditional stance of the proverb, that accidents are unavoidable and therefore not worth fretting about; it extends this idea in several vignettes, such as "poor little kiddie, he didn't mean to spill Daddy's coffee-but it's not serious. Fels-Naptha Soap will take out the stains in a jiffy, so there's no harm done." Similarly, a 1924 campaign for Post's Bran Flakes (GH Aug 1924:12) begins with the headline:

> "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure"
> —Old Adage

The ad goes on to explain that the fiber in bran acts to keep the body free of disease; in stating its case, the ad repeats the entire proverb once, and the phrase "ounce of prevention" five more times. (The "ounce of prevention" slogan was so popular it was painted on the sides of Post delivery vans as well.) Like the Fels-Naptha ad, this one uses the traditional sense of the proverb and applies it to the product being sold; it takes its authority directly from the proverb tradition. In case the reader misses this connec-

tion, it supplies the ascription "old adage" to the proverb, attempting to insure the recognition of its traditional authority. This general way of making ad copy has continued, with ads bearing headlines like "home is where the heart is" (GH Aug 1997: 80), "no pain, no gain,"[7] and "living well is the best revenge" (NY Mar 7 1983). Clearly, copywriters still feel that a time-tested proverb with no fancy wordplay will sell some products.

More often, however, copywriters consciously manipulate proverbs to create and control clearly perceptible intertextual gaps. This manipulation can come in several different forms. On one extreme, there are purely phonetic (and orthographic) differences that can be created between texts; "to Err is Humam" is an example. Differences can also be created at the lexical level, by substitution of words; "different strokes for different folks" can thus become "different Volks for different folks" in a Volkswagen ad (Mieder 1989:328). Thirdly, syntactical changes can be made, so that "it never rains but it pours" becomes "when it rains, it pours" in the famous Morton's Salt slogan.

Most important of all are changes on the semantic level. These are, by definition, changes in the meaning of the proverb. As we have seen, changes that do not somehow add to the proverb's meaning, such as "money dalks," seem foolish and nonsensical. Therefore, it is the semantic gaps that are primarily responsible for the perception of cleverness and creativity. In addition, the semantic gap allows the copywriter to alter the proverb's message to fit his product.

Semantic gaps are created by all changes in the proverb text. But they can also be created with no recourse to changing or twisting a proverb. This is because the proverb is already extremely susceptible to manifold interpretations. Arvo Krikmann (1984/1974, 1985/1974) has called this characteristic of proverbs "denotative indefiniteness," and has gone on to discuss it at some length. For our purposes, it is most important to note that proverbs may easily be quoted in ways that produce new meanings; if the text is kept the same, but contextualized in an unusual way, an entirely new and unexpected meaning may emerge. This type of gap, because it is not represented by a textual change, is difficult to spot using a textual approach.

"To err is humam" is an example of a phonetic gap accompanied by a semantic gap. It also indicates how such semantic gaps

can be missed using a largely textual approach. In his 1989 article on ads, Wolfgang Mieder comments further on this text:

> With a classical understatement in proverbial form the company admits that its service is not always perfect, but the additional statement 'That's why we invented the Wizard of Avis' immediately stresses that Avis is a company which is trying to do everything to keep problems to an absolute minimum (Mieder 1989:295).

Mieder takes "to err is human" as an admission that Avis makes mistakes, because that is the standard social meaning of the proverb.[8] In its common usage, the proverb asks forgiveness for the speaker or for someone else; its longer form, "to err is human, to forgive divine" makes this more explicit. In strategic terms, the proverb suggests forgiveness as a course of action by claiming that on the one hand, error is a perfectly normal state of affairs, and that on the other, forgiveness is a behavioral ideal.

The ad, on the other hand, uses the proverb in a completely different way. It does not admit that Avis errs, or ask forgiveness for anyone. Instead, the text of the ad states:

> To err is humam.
> That's why we invented the Wizard of Avis.
> […]
> that rental agreement you get has 14 different trouble spots on it where someone can easily make a mathematical error
> […]
> Why it's enough to drive a pretty young girl with a pen up the wall. Give her a break. Rent from the pretty young girl in red. She's the only one backed by the Wizard of Avis, a super-efficient computer that neatly types out your entire rental agreement without making mathematical errors. (Mieder 1989:302)

In other words, the ad claims that since "to err is human," Avis has eliminated errors by preventing humans from doing its calculations. Rather than commenting on error, normalizing it as a trait all humans possess, this ad comments on humans (and particularly "a pretty young girl with a pen") and subtly stigmatizes them as be-

ings who routinely commit errors! This semantic difference is primarily created through contextualization, but the use of the poetic device "humam" to intensify and demonstrate the proverb's meaning is also a contributing factor.

One of the most successful slogans of all time, Morton's Salt's "when it rains, it pours," [Figure 1] uses syntactical changes in a proverb to create a new and startling instance of "denotative indefiniteness"; it maintains its old meaning intact, while simultaneously adding an entirely new meaning that refers directly to the product being advertised. It is thus a fascinating example of the double-voiced quality that proverbs can add to discourse.

Figure 1

The original proverb, "it never rains but it pours" means literally "it never rains without pouring." Metaphorically, it means that bad things happen in quantity or not at all; either nothing bad is happening to you, or you are beset on all sides with adversity. By changing primarily the proverb's syntax, the copywriter created "when it rains, it pours," which is capable of the same literal and

figurative interpretations as the original proverb. Moreover, the new wording is clearer, having lost the archaic grammar and the archaic sense of "but." This makes the new proverb easier for contemporary Americans to understand and remember than its predecessor.[9] For these reasons, as Mac E. Barrick (1986:45n2) has pointed out, the new wording has almost completely supplanted the old proverb "it never rains but it pours" in American usage; "when it rains, it pours" is now a canonical proverb, having taken on the meaning of the original.

The meaning of the saying as an ad slogan, however, is very different. To achieve this new meaning, the slogan exploits the inherent ambiguity of the pronoun "it." In the proverbial form, both instances of "it" are non-referential; the "it" in "it's raining" or "it's pouring" is entirely idiomatic, and there is no noun being replaced. In the slogan, however, the second "it" has shifted in meaning, and now refers the product, Morton's Salt. "When it rains, it pours" becomes a clever way of observing that Morton's Salt will continue to pour freely (i.e., will not cake or clump) no matter how wet the weather.

This second meaning, created solely for the advertisement, depends upon the new syntax. "It never rains but it pours" could not have meant that Morton's Salt remains granular in damp weather.[10] Thus, the syntactical changes in the proverb text allowed the generation of a new meaning. This meaning refers directly to the product, but because the text is also already a canonical proverb, the slogan seems proverbial and thus irrefutable even when it is referring to salt.

In many ways, then, "when it rains, it pours" is the ideal proverbial slogan; it has maintained its status as a canonical proverb while also remaining firmly attached to a product. It has been successful on several levels: its creators were obviously quite proud of it, because in most ads for Morton's salt from the 1910s through the 1930s it appears in three or four different places.[11] It has lasted for over eight decades as a symbol of its product, and remains on the Morton's package to this day. Furthermore, other companies were so convinced of the slogan's value that they attempted to imitate it; a 1926 ad campaign for Worcester Iodized Salt introduced the shamelessly derivative but comparatively flaccid slogan "when it's wet, it's dry" [Figure 2] (GH Feb.

1926:113). Morton's pride and Worcester's envy are due at least in part to the assumption that the obvious cleverness and seemingly effortless authority of the slogan persuade people to buy Morton's.

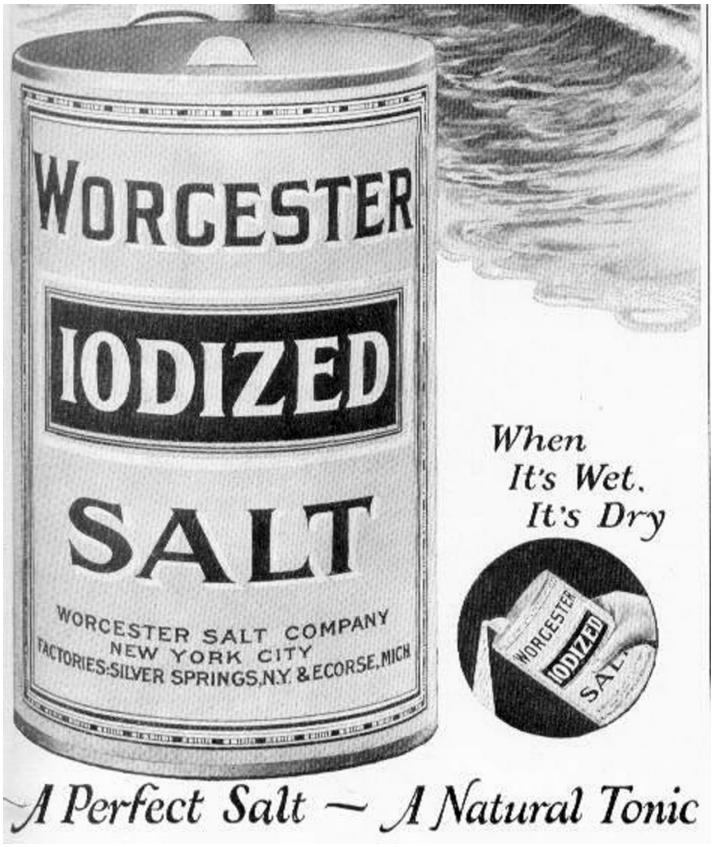

Figure 2

Complexities of meaning on the order of "when it rains it pours" generally do not occur in ads that use lexical substitution as a means of playing with the intertextual gap. The proverb tends to keep close to its original meaning, applying that meaning somehow to the product. The earliest such ad I have found is in the third issue of Good Housekeeping (1896:iii). It introduces Dr. T.

Felix Gouraud's Oriental Cream or Magical Beautifier with the headline "A Skin of Beauty is a Joy Forever." The replacement of "thing" in the proverb[12] by the new word "skin" has a relatively mild and predictable effect on the meaning of the new headline; it takes the proverb's basic idea that beauty is a source of joy, and applies it to a woman's skin.

Similarly, Mieder's (1989:328) favorite slogan, "different Volks for different folks," was able to take the proverb's original message, that different people have different needs and preferences, and adapt it to selling cars. The slogan succinctly stated that Volkswagen made more than just one kind of car for one kind of person, that their vans, for example, were perfect for larger families. More recently, Healthy Choice advertised its low fat ice cream with the slogan "wake up and smell the Cappuccino Chocolate Chunk" (WD Oct. 7, 1997:135), suggesting through the proverb "wake up and smell the coffee" that their product should make you sit up and take notice. And Crest offers "More bang for your Brush" (GH May 1998: 29), suggesting not only a more effective toothpaste, but also, through association with the proverbial phrase "more bang for your buck," a better value. Substitutions of this type can even be essentially meaningless, relying on phonetic similarities to create recognizable but nonsensical slogans, as for instance "the end must justify the creams" (GH Mar 1935:229), which was used by Harriet Hubbard Ayer for its skin creams in 1935.

Sometimes, however, lexical substitutions are accompanied by significant and interesting semantic gaps. Mr. Clean household cleanser used the slogan, "go ahead—make my spray" (GH May 1998:219) which borrows the traditional meaning of the proverbial movie catchphrase: the bald muscleman fears nothing, not even baked-on grime.[13] It also, however, adds a secondary meaning: Mr. Clean is inviting you to mix his full-strength form with water, thereby "making his spray." (One also wonders whether the semantic contrast between the names of the line's original speaker, Dirty Harry, and its new speaker, Mr. Clean, was an intentional joke by the creator of this clever ad.)

More strikingly, a recent ad for Arm & Hammer cat litter deodorizer asks the question "cat got your nose?" [Figure 3] (GH May 1998:215) The substitution of "nose" for "tongue" applies

the proverb's original meaning—that the hearer seems unable to speak—to a new situation that evokes the oppressiveness of the smelly catbox; it suggests that the reader is unable to smell anything else. However, while the proverbial question is essentially a dead metaphor, the new version makes the image of the cat relevant and concrete, reenergizing the metaphor and making it fresh. And to drive the point home, the text is accompanied by a photo of a cat who is licking his nose with his tongue, thus suggesting both the old proverb and the new slogan simultaneously.

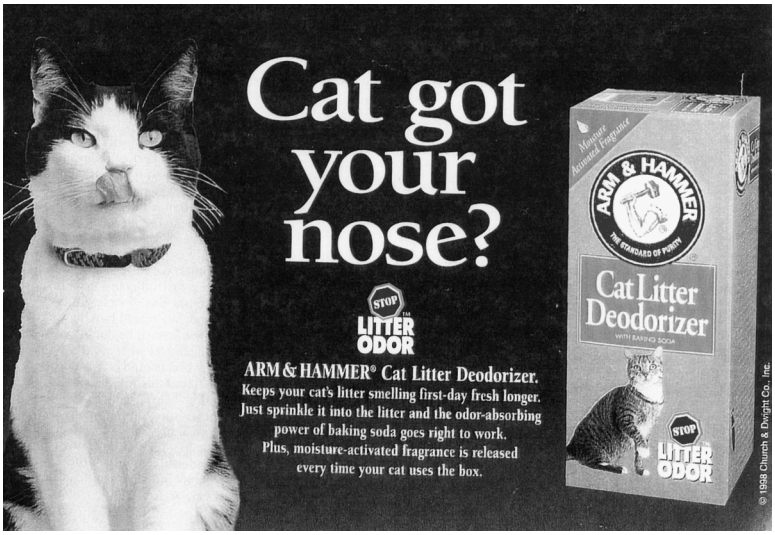

Figure 3

Both "cat got your nose" and "make my spray" thus introduce surprising new meanings to familiar proverb texts, and make the reader aware of the potentially double-voiced nature of all figurative or metaphorical speech. In Powers's (1923:24) words, these proverbs "leave behind something for the mind to chew upon," fulfilling the mission of clever copy.

In the effort to create startling new meanings, changes in a proverb's contextualization can be as powerful as changes in the text. One of the most obvious devices used in the contextualization of proverbs, for example, is an ascription: "as my father used to say," "a wise woman once said," or even, in some African

countries, "we have a proverb for that." Proverbial advertisements also use the quotative ascription as a contextualization device, which can add an important element of meaning to the final copy. An ad for Clopay Garage Doors [Figure 4] (GH May 1998:51) featured a photo of a two-door garage floating in the clouds, with the headline:

> The Legendary Architect Mies Van Der Rohe said, "God Is In The Details."
> If That's So, Could These Be The Pearly Gates?

The claim that "God is in the Details" is a generally popular saying; it is only one of several proverbs using this pattern, for "the devil," "the truth" and "governing" are all also said to be in the details.[14] Taken together, these four proverbs had by 1998 been used over 6,000 times in the newspapers catalogued by Lexis/Nexis.[15] They have also caught the notice of the editor of at least one proverb dictionary (Titelman 1996) and one dictionary of quotations (Kaplan 1992).[16]

Interestingly, however, the copywriter has gone to the trouble of ascribing this version to a specific individual. And despite the fact that this anonymous saying is often attributed to the more famous Gustave Flaubert (as "Le bon dieu est dans le détail"), and also occasionally to Michaelangelo, the copywriter has chosen a comparatively obscure figure, the architect Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, presumably since, as an architect, Mies Van Der Rohe can claim authority over architectural features like garage doors. Since Mies van Der Rohe is far from a household name among Americans, however, the writer has helpfully attached an explanation, telling us he is a "legendary [i.e. famous] architect."

James B. Twitchell (1996:132) has pointed out of celebrity endorsements that "the ability to quickly generate celebrity and then link that value to a product is a hallmark of [advertising culture]."[17] Furthermore, as Twitchell (1996:136) has also commented, "the safest human celebrity is certainly a dead one.... No one questions the inappropriateness of an impossible endorsement." This ad, then, is following two common tricks of advertisers when it links the product to the name of a dead person whose celebrity is partly established by the ad itself.

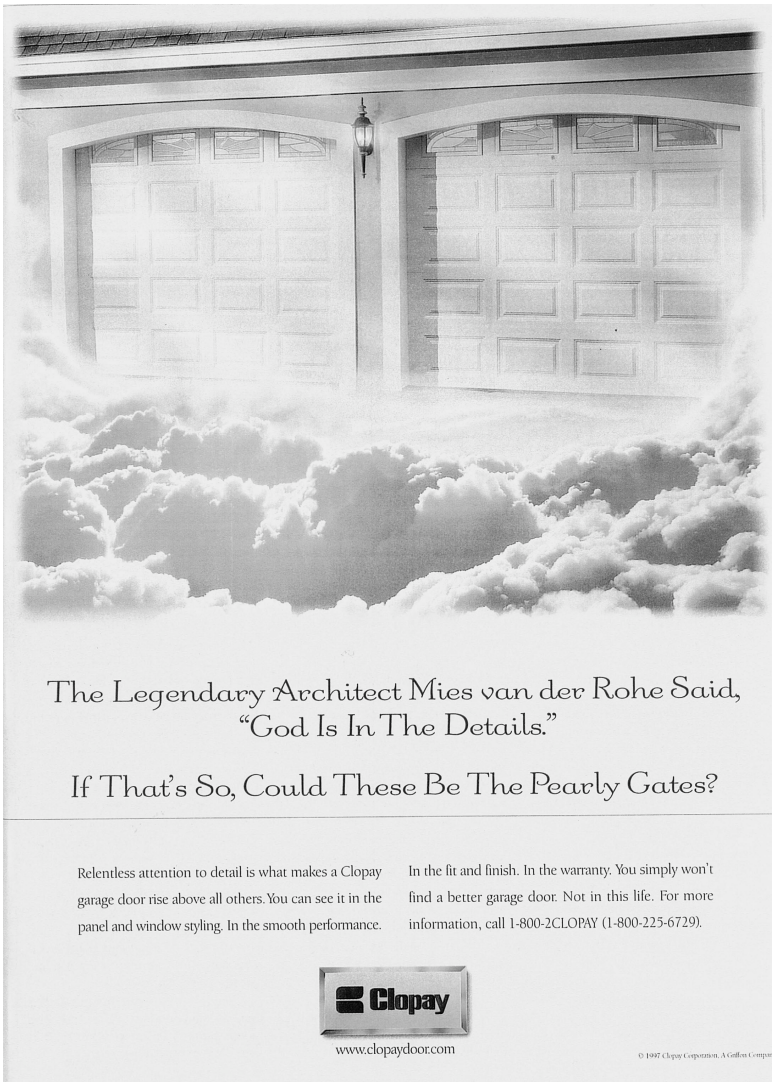
The Legendary Architect Mies van der Rohe Said,
"God Is In The Details."
If That's So, Could These Be The Pearly Gates?
Relentless attention to detail is what makes a Clopay garage door rise above all others. You can see it in the panel and window styling. In the smooth performance. In the fit and finish. In the warranty. You simply won't find a better garage door. Not in this life. For more information, call 1-800-2CLOPAY (1-800-225-6729).
Clopay
www.clopaydoor.com

Figure 4

If the Clopay ad is run-of-the-mill for the adman, however, it is a wonderful piece of proverbial discourse, and a fascinating use of quotative shifting. It begins by foregrounding someone of whom the reader may never have heard. It tells the reader that this figure is a famous architect, which in turn establishes his expertise in judging an architectural feature like a garage door. By ascribing the proverb to him, it suggests that he authored the saying, adding to our sense of him as a clever and intelligent man. Finally, by putting Mies Van Der Rohe's name and a quotation from him in the ad, the writer suggests that he endorses the product being advertised. The result is that even a reader who had never heard of Mies Van Der Rohe is left with the impression that a famous architect who was clever enough to originate a common proverb endorses the Clopay garage door. Moreover, despite the fact that Mies Van Der Rohe never heard of the Clopay garage door, the ad never tells an outright lie, for the architect is known to have been fond of this proverb.

For all its cleverness, the above example did not show a strong "semantic gap" created by the proverb's contextualization; in the ad "God is in the details" means the same thing it usually means. However, semantic changes in the proverb are also a possible effect of playing with contextualization. As an example, consider a 1962 Maidenform ad showing a woman wearing a slip, a bra and a boa, gently cradling the tip of a bull's horn in her white-gloved hand. "I dreamed I took the bull by the horns ..." the copy says, "in my *Maidenform* bra" [Figure 5] (Sivulka 1998: 327). Here, the product name is foregrounded by being italicized, as well as by being added, somewhat incongruously, to the proverbial phrase "to take the bull by the horns." The photo makes the idea seem even stranger, and the reader's imagination is set in motion.

Juliann Sivulka (1998:266-267) has shown that the Maidenform "I dreamed" campaign was inspired by motivational research suggesting that American women had subconscious exhibitionist tendencies; in other words, these ads were designed to carry subtextual (not to say subliminal) sexual messages. "Bull" and "horn" are both images with strong, masculine sexual connotations in western cultures, but these connotations are usually not an important part of the meaning of "to take the bull by the horns." In this case, however, the image of the woman in her underclothes

and the suggestive way in which she holds the horn are both calculated to appeal to sex drives. The traditional associations of bulls and horns with sexuality are thus activated by the phrase's contextualization, and a very strong suggestion results that "taking the bull by the horns" is meant here in a sexual sense.

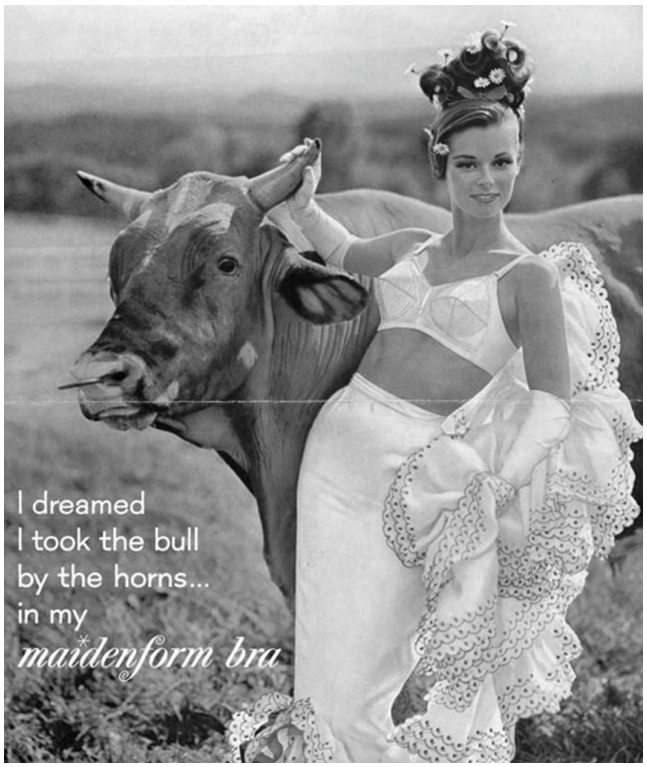

Figure 5

A more subtle semantic gap was achieved by Listerine with its famous "Often a Bridesmaid, Never a Bride" ad in 1925 [Figure 6] (Watkins 1949:72).[18] The original proverb suggests that serving often as a bridesmaid prevents a girl from becoming a bride; it seems to have sprung from a belief that if a girl acted as a bridesmaid three times she would never be married (Addy 1895; Bergen 1896). Later, the proverb came to mean that, if a girl was not competitive by nature, she would be popular with other girls

(hence often a bridesmaid) but would lose her boyfriends to more aggressive young women (hence never a bride).

Figure 6

The advertisement explains the proverb differently: as a perfectly wonderful person, Edna has no trouble making friends, but her bad breath prevents her from getting close to a man. Unlike the canonical proverb, there is no relationship in the slogan be-

tween her often being a bridesmaid and her never being a bride. Insofar as that relationship is central to most meanings of the canonical proverb, the new slogan is semantically quite different. Indeed, the recurrent social situation to which the ad refers is subtly different; it includes bad breath. Still, by using the exact wording of the proverb, with no mention of halitosis until later, the ad suggests that the recurrent social situation described in the proverb (the inability to find a husband) can be changed by using Listerine.

An ad for Perma Soft Shampoo [Figure 7] (WD Sept. 1 1997:27) achieves a similar effect, picturing a curly lock of permed hair and bottles of Perma Soft, with the slogan "use it or lose it"; the implication is that you must use the Perma Soft or you

Figure 7

will lose the curl. "Use it or lose it" is also, of course, a generally popular proverb spoken in situations where constant practice is necessary to maintain form, such as athletics and bodybuilding, and is also used to refer to sex drive. Since the proverb can refer to sex drives, muscularity, and other physical qualities, the ad subtly suggests that Perma Soft is good for these areas as well as for your hair.

Like "when it rains, it pours," the Perma Soft slogan achieves its double meaning by the inherent ambiguity of "it"; in the proverb, both instances of "it" refer to the same skill, while in the ad they refer to shampoo and curl respectively. Also reminiscent of "When it rains, it pours" are slogans that manage to achieve a double meaning through contextualization alone. For example, an ad for Hershey's cocoa powder is nothing but a recipe for an easy-to-make cake, printed over a very close-up photo of a slice of the same cake. The headline, "it's a piece of cake," simultaneously evokes the obvious-but-appropriate meaning of the literal statement and the serious-but-appropriate meaning of the proverbial phrase (GH May 1998:155). As in many of the previous examples, the point of this double meaning seems to be that it allows the ad to claim authority twice; once through the forces of community and tradition, and again through the forces of code play and creativity.

I am suggesting here that both older proverbial elements and innovative touches serve to reinforce the authority and power of the speaker (and so, by extension, of the product). I should add that I am not the first to observe this dual claim to authority, nor is this way of claiming authority unique to mass-mediated forms of proverbial discourse. Kwesi Yankah (1989:178-179) points out of his people, the Akan of Ghana:

> Akan speakers do not quote the proverb. They delete, elaborate and transpose elements of the proverb; speakers indeed subject the proverb to creative deconstruction. In this creative process, the competent speaker kills two birds with one stone: he demonstrates his creative skills while preserving the traditional identity of the proverb he echoes. As he relies on the traditionality of the proverb to persuade, the witty speaker also relies on his own compository skills to reinforce, modify and transform proverb meaning.[19]

It seems that American advertisements are only one example of a wider cultural pattern of proverbial discourse that makes use of the rhetorical power of intertextual gaps to add personal prestige to the culturally shared authority of proverbial speech.

Mind the (Intertextual) Gap: Challenging Proverbial Authority

If the above examples all flirt with both traditional community wisdom and individual cleverness and insight as devices of authoritative speech, some ads use text-text gaps to flout the authority of proverbs. Another Volkswagen ad, this one for the "Beetle," advised people to "think small" (Sivulka 1998:288). In the proverb "think big," a "big" thought is an important thought; paradoxically, a designer might refer to reducing the size of a car as "a big idea," even though it is concerned with smallness![20] In the context of the proverb tradition, then, this text seems anomalous; why would anyone advise you have "small," unimportant thoughts? Because of this intertextual anomaly, "small" is foregrounded in the altered proverb; it is what catches the attention of the reader and makes her wonder, "why think small?" The rest of the text explains, by introducing some of the Beetle's assets: small energy needs, small oil consumption, small insurance premiums, small repair costs, small parking space requirements, and, of course, small price. Thus, the foregrounded element, the semantic reversal of the proverb, is exploited not once, but many times throughout the text of the ad.

The Volkswagen ad shows the shortcomings of "big" as a metaphor for "important," and thus challenges the internal dynamics of the proverb "think big." This is a relatively common way for ads to challenge proverbial wisdom; they point out that a new, opposite perspective on common proverbs suits their product best. Thus, both Mark Cross[21] and Frigidaire (*Sunset* Oct. 1982:205) claimed their products are "here today, here tomorrow." The Teleram, the first portable computer, argued that "you can take it with you" (NY Sept. 27, 1982) going so far as to show an angel carrying a Teleram, suggesting that the proverb's usual meaning is false. These examples all reverse and thus challenge the wisdom of individual proverbs. By inventing their own opposite proverbs, however, they reinforce the general usefulness of proverbiality in persuasion and decision-making.

Such proverb reversals can also be used more radically, to show the general shortcomings of proverbs as decision-making tools, challenging the way proverbs relate to the world. As an example, consider an ad for a health care corporation which pictures a mother trying to deal with her son's illness. The headline runs: "Feed a fever, starve a cold. Or was it feed a cold? Uhh, starve a fever? Feed a starver?" (FC Aug 5, 1997:64). As in the ads above, the mother's adage is a reversal of an established proverb, "feed a cold and starve a fever." But in this case, it is not the proverb's message that is being questioned. Instead, the ad ridicules proverbs as sources of information, showing them to be hard to remember and easy to scramble. Later in the ad, the copy tells us that "you need access to good information ...so if you need healthcare answers, look to Columbia"; clearly, they imply, "good information" and "healthcare answers" are not to be found in old saws.

The usefulness of proverbs can be challenged without textually altering a proverb, once again through novel contextualizations. Ads may tell you that "whoever said 'no pain, no gain' never got stuck in a 45-minute aerobics class with a bra that quit after 5 minutes" [Figure 8] (GH May 1998:209), or they may follow "it's been said a woman's work is never done" with "maybe so, but our cookware reduces it significantly" (WD Oct. 7, 1997:197). Campbell's soup can claim to be "better than an apple a day," by quoting the proverb "an apple a day keeps the doctor away," but then saying, "take Campbell's Bean with Bacon Soup. Calorie for calorie, it's more nutritious than an apple."[22] In all of these cases, the proverb is quoted, but its traditional wisdom is shown to be inadequate, inapplicable, or otherwise undesirable.

How do these ads, which openly challenge proverbial wisdom, relate to those in the previous section, which drew their wisdom from the proverb tradition? Fundamentally, both make use of the proverb's reputation as a wise saying. In both cases, the wisdom of the new slogan is produced in dialogue with the wisdom of the old proverb through the conscious manipulation of intertextual gaps. Ads that more or less agree with proverbs incorporate that wisdom into their own messages, while at the same time displaying verbal cleverness through small adjustments and novel contextualizations. Ads that challenge proverbs make use of the proverb's reputation by showing themselves to be even wiser than

the old saws they draw upon. "'No pain, no gain' may be smart," they say, "but I'm even smarter; I have a sports bra."

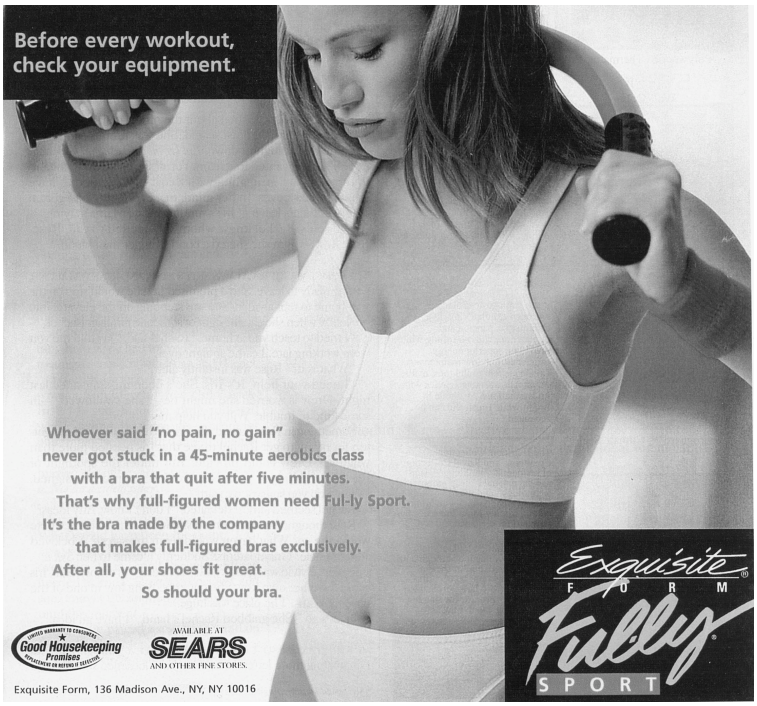

Figure 8

New Proverbs in Ad Copy: Minimizing the Text-Genre Gap

As we have seen above, ads use phonetic, syntactic and semantic manipulations of canonical proverbs to play with the intertextual differences between received proverbial wisdom and current situations. But advertising writers also excel at another form of proverbial ad. In a 1933 article in the trade journal Printers' Ink, seasoned adman Marsh K. Powers (1933:24) describes and recommends this genre of ad, asking the question "why haven't copy-beginners been advised to use as copy-patterns the proverbs that have persisted down the ages?" Powers continues:

> In suggesting this I am not recommending parodies of old adages. They are already the instinctive and all-too-easy first refuge of the copy-cub and novice writer. What I have in mind are fresh, new phrasings coined to crystallize and dramatize selected sales-points….When the Insurance Company of North America said, "if you can't afford a premium, you can't afford a loss," it coined a clean-cut sales proverb. (Powers 1933:24)

Clearly, those ads discussed above, which incorporate traditional proverbs either directly or with perceptible changes, are not what Powers has in mind. Instead, he advocates using the poetic features of the proverb, which he identifies as rhyme, alliteration, balanced phrasing and repetition, to create new slogans that carry some of the proverb's "pungency and brevity." A similar approach is suggested in a 1948 piece by Otto Kleppner, who mentions both "proverbs" and "maxims" as worthy of emulation,[23] and adds rhythm, grammatical parallelism and figurative imagery to the list of poetic traits that can help a slogan sell products.[24]

Even before these articles, ads were using proverbial speech as a model for new slogans. In 1915, Mennen advertised its "borated talcum" with the slogan "best for everybody's baby, best for every baby's body" (GH Jun. 1915:46). In the same year, 3-in-one oil, a combination furniture polish, machine lubricant and rust protector (!) told its consumers that "little drops do big things" (GH Jun. 1915:105). Perhaps most tellingly, a 1914 ad [Figure 9] tells us:

> if you want to economize use—"Diamond Dyes." (GH Nov. 1914:7)

Most of the poetic features mentioned by Kleppner and Powers are clearly evident in these ads: repetition and parallelism (best for ...best for), alliteration (best ...baby's body), rhyme (economize ...Diamond dyes), balance (little drops, big things) and figurative language (drops "doing things" is an example of personification). Most interesting to me is the use of the dash and quotation marks to suggest a pause in the Diamond Dyes ad. Just as we insert pauses before and after the word "saves" in "a stitch in time saves nine," this ad suggests a long pause between "use" and "Diamond Dyes," to help the rhythm scan and create a rhyming couplet.

Good Housekeeping Magazine November 1914 Moneyback Advertisements

If You Want to Economize Use—"Diamond Dyes"

YOU can economize on your fall clothes without depriving yourself of anything. Give a last season's suit or gown a new color—make a few alterations in the cut and the trimming—the result will be a garment just as satisfying as a new one.

Miss Margaret Sampson, of Yonkers, New York, writes:

"I wanted a new dress for school as the fall term was beginning and all the rest of the girls had new clothes, but father said he could not afford one just then. I didn't want to wait so I looked over the closet and trunks to see if there was anything I could possibly use by making some changes in it. I found a rose color silk dress which I had stopped wearing because it was soiled.

"Some hints on economy which I had cut out of a magazine mentioned the dyeing of old clothes. Our druggist recommended DIAMOND DYES, and said that he knew they gave splendid results. I bought some dark brown dye and, as a result I have a dandy dress to start school with. With a cream lace collar and ruffle at the wrist, I look as well as any girl in school."

Mrs. J. A. Roper, of Detroit, Michigan, writes:

"Recently my husband suffered severe business reverses, and it was necessary for me to economize in every way possible.

"I have always been very fond of nice clothes and bought the very best for myself and the children.

"We have never lived extravagantly and it seemed to me the best way to make immediate saving was on my own clothes. I happened to read an article in a magazine which said that any woman could save money by dyeing their old clothes. I must confess that I bought some DIAMOND DYE feeling that I was making a great sacrifice and that my last year's clothes redyed would look far from pretty. With a feeling of misgiving, I undertook the work of recoloring several last year's gowns, but now that they are remodeled and retrimmed, and dyed in bright solid new colors, they are just as stylish and fashionable as any new clothes I could have bought.

"I send you my photograph showing one of my costumes (green dyed black), which was particularly successful. I earnestly advise all women to use DIAMOND DYES whether they must economize or not."

Rose color dyed brown

Green suit dyed black

Diamond Dyes

A child can use them.
Simply dissolve the dye and boil the material in the colored water.

Truth About Dyes for Home Use

There are two classes of fabrics:—Animal Fibre Fabrics and Vegetable Fibre Fabrics. Wool and Silk are animal fibre fabrics. Cotton and Linen are vegetable fibre fabrics. "Union" or "Mixed" goods are usually 60% to 80% Cotton—so must be treated as vegetable fibre fabrics.

It is a chemical impossibility to get perfect color results on all classes of fabrics with any dye that claims to color animal fibre fabrics and vegetable fibre fabrics equally well in one bath.

We manufacture two classes of Diamond Dyes, namely:—Diamond Dyes for Wool or Silk to color Animal Fibre Fabrics, and Diamond Dyes for Cotton, Linen, or Mixed Goods to Color Vegetable Fibre Fabrics, so that you may obtain the Very Best results on EVERY fabric.

Diamond Dyes sell at 10 Cents per package.

Valuable Book and Samples Free Send us your dealer's name and address—tell us whether or not he sells Diamond Dyes. We will then send you that famous book of helps, the Diamond Dye Annual and Direction Book, also 36 samples of Dyed Cloth—Free.

WELLS & RICHARDSON COMPANY, BURLINGTON, VERMONT
AND 200 MOUNTAIN STREET, MONTREAL, CANADA

The ★ marking indicates technical analysis of household apparatus, foods and toilet accessories only

7

Figure 9

In addition to these poetic features, the three ads above are examples of another poetic tendency in American advertising discourse. Two of them clearly divide up their slogans into distichs; the two halves of the Mennen slogan are actually depicted on two separate signs being carried by babies marching in a military band,[25] and the Diamond Dyes ad is divided into two lines. The

third slogan, "little drops do big things" is clearly quadripartite in structure. These poetic features have been described as typical of proverbs, explicitly by Milner (1969a, 1969b) and implicitly by Dundes (1981/1975).

Milner was particularly interested in quadripartite structure. He developed a classification scheme based on interpreting each quarter of the quadripartite wisdom saying to carry a positive (good, useful, desirable) or negative value (Milner 1969b). By adding these values together, the proverb itself can be judged to have an overall positive or negative value. Brian Moeran (1985) shows that many English-language ad slogans follow quadripartite patterns ("Less smoke, more heat," "if it isn't smooth, it isn't Smirnoff," "if you're not getting More, you're getting less," etc.), and that Milner's proverb classification scheme works just as well with ads. He demonstrates that ad slogans are far more likely to have positive overall value than negative; most ads work by accentuating the positive aspects of products.

As an example from recent times of all these trends in advertising poetics, consider Perdue's "it takes a tough man to make a tender chicken" (Sivulka 1998:340). Since Americans generally value toughness in their men and tenderness in their chickens, this quadripartite saying has a positive value for each of its quarters. It features rhythm, alliteration (tough-tender), internal rhyme (take-make), semantic opposition (tough-tender), semantic contrast (man-chicken), and grammatical parallelism (tough man-tender chicken). It is, in fact, a tightly-packed, perfectly proverbial poem.

Given that so many sayings like these circulate in the world of advertising, is it fair to say that all such advertising slogans are proverbs? Probably not, for although many of them satisfy some of the requirements for proverbiality (explicit and intentional intertextual reference to previous proverbs), most of them lack sufficient generality to seem proverbial to most people. Proverbs sum up and evaluate recurrent or typical social situations, and most ad slogans, no matter how infused they are with proverb poetry, cannot make this claim. In other words, since most people have never thought or cared about the toughness required to produce tender birds, the slogan above has little chance to apply to our everyday lives.

I do not mean to suggest here that an ad slogan would have to be repeated in another context to qualify as a proverb; unlike many other proverb scholars, I do not think it would need to become proverbial over time. My own definition of the proverb, discussed most fully in Winick 2003, is that proverbs are brief (sentence-length) strategic utterances that derive a sense of wisdom, wit and authority from explicit and intentional intertextual reference to a tradition of previous similar utterances. This intertextual reference may take many forms, including replication (i.e. repetition from previous contexts), imitation (i.e. modeling a new utterance on a previous utterance), or the use of features associated with previous wisdom sayings, such as rhyme, alliteration, meter, metaphor, or ascription to the elders. Finally, proverbs address recurrent social situations in a strategic way. (For a fuller discussion of this proverb theory, see Winick 1998 and Winick 2003.)

Thus, to truly be a proverb, a new slogan would not only have to seem proverbial at the moment of encounter through a successful use of proverbial features, it would also have to sum up a recurrent social situation and solve it or judge it with wisdom and wit. This is how proverbial meaning is communicated. Of course, this means that the proverbiality of a slogan is not constant; it will be a proverb for some readers and not for others. It could be argued that this is a theoretical weakness, but in fact this situation obtains for most other definitions of the proverb as well. For those definitions based on "traditionality" or "currency" (i.e. Mieder 1993, Dundes 1981/1975) the group boundary makes the proverbiality variable; "you can't kill shit" (cf. Winick 2004) is a proverb only among doctors and nurses, not among truck drivers. Any definition that relies on the "apparent truth" model (e.g. Whiting 1994/1932, Gallacher 1959, Mieder 1993) also makes proverbiality variable; "look before you leap" might be apparently true to some, but apparently false to others. My own definition, because it is based on the communication of wisdom and wit, makes proverbiality always an emergent quality in discourse, subject to interpretation.

It is not always easy to predict whether an ad slogan will apply somehow to social life. However, I can offer a few general remarks. Slogans that contain product brand names are generally too specific to be experienced as proverbs; "motorists wise Simoniz" (GH Jan. 1935:96) cannot help but sound like a plug for a

product rather than a piece of generally applicable wisdom. Slogans that are mere descriptions of an item can't be perceived as wise; "tastes great, less filling,"[26] "long on resources, short on red tape," (Moeran 1985:38) or "the instrument of the immortals" (Kleppner 1948:42) have some poetic features, but no wisdom.

The slogans that are best at seeming proverbial, on the other hand, are the ones that seem to offer a general rule of thumb that applies to real-life situations, without harping on a product name. "If you can't afford a premium, you can't afford a loss," given above by Powers, is an excellent example; others are the rhythmically appealing and extremely general Sapolio slogan "time is the real test of merit" (GH Jan. 1907) and Victrola's "the better the music, the better the dancing" (LHJ Jul. 1925:1), which suggests many possible metaphorical applications. Even "it takes a tough man to make a tender chicken" is sufficiently general to be an occupational proverb within the poultry world, although without some novel metaphorical insight it cannot be experienced proverbially by the rest of us.

Although I do not think a slogan has to become canonical in order to be a proverb (I agree with Powers, for example, that "if you can't afford a premium, you can't afford a loss" is a proverb regardless of its position in any canon), canonical proverbs do sometimes begin as advertising slogans. Mieder showed this, for example, in his paper on the slogan "One picture is worth a thousand words" (Mieder 1993: 135-151).[27] When we think of this common proverb, or of "when it rains, it pours," we may think of the product that first used the statement as a slogan. More likely, however, we think of a typical social situation; these are proverbs that sum up and comment on the events of our daily lives.

As a recent example of this phenomenon, consider the Wendy's slogan "where's the beef?" In the context of the television commercial, "where's the beef?" was entirely literal, and referred to a hamburger with a large bun and a small patty. What makes it a proverb, however, is that it generates meaning on a more general level. There is a typical, recurrent social situation to which it was matched by hearers: the feeling that one is being flummoxed by fancy salesmanship without any real substance behind it. Because it was perceived to carry this general meaning, it was instantly a proverb addressing the daily lives of ordinary people. As a result

of its perceived proverbiality, it was absorbed into vernacular discourse, particularly the discourse of political campaigns, and became canonical (cf. Barrick 1986).

The fact that slogans must refer somehow to real-life situations in order to be proverbial is recognized by some advertisers. Some show their slogans applying to everyday life through a powerful tool: the fictive world of advertising. As Judith Williamson points out in strong terms, ads create a realistic fictive world through a web of intertextual signs:

> [Advertisements] are ubiquitous, an inevitable part of everyone's lives: even if you do not read a newspaper or watch television, the images posted over our urban surroundings are inescapable. Pervading all the media, but limited to none, advertising forms a vast superstructure with an apparently autonomous existence.... Their very existence in more than one medium gives them a sort of independent reality that links them to our own lives; since both share a continuity they constitute a world constantly experienced as real. The ad 'world' becomes seemingly separate from the material medium—whether screen, page, etc.—which carries it. (Williamson 1978:11)

The fictive world of advertising has conventions of behavior that differ somewhat from those of the world outside; as Linda Dégh (1994:45-47) has pointed out, for example, people are often absurdly helpful in ads, arriving just in time with dishwashing liquid or fat-free salad dressing.[28] For the most part, however, the fictive world of ads mimics our own. Within this setting, ads are able to show slogans operating as general statements, applicable to daily life, and therefore wise. This ability makes the 'ad world' an ideal place to create new proverbs.

The importance of the ad's fictive world to manufacturing proverbiality is perhaps most evident in the "wider is better" campaign for the Pontiac WideTrack Grand Prix, which began with three television spots in the late 1990s, and then moved to print outlets. The slogan's first claim to proverbiality is its own structure and composition. "Wider is better" is clearly modeled on older proverbs: short and pithy, poetic in a homey way, tightly packed with parallelism. The two concepts that are being equated, "wider" and "better," are expressed in words that themselves are

obviously similar: identical in rhythm, the two words both have two syllables with the stress on the first. Moreover, the second syllables are virtually identical, so that the words are the sort of near rhymes that turn up in proverbs all the time, like "honesty" and "policy," "time" and "nine." Both words are comparative adjectives, which adds to their similarity, to the phrase's grammatical parallelism and to the slogan's general symmetry. The slogan's unusual grammatical structure, using an adjective as the subject of a sentence, is another feature of many proverbs (handsome is as handsome does, the more the merrier, etc.). Finally, we can point out its relation to the proverbial pattern "the xer, the better," in which most adjectives can be placed in the x slot.

Equally important as these markers, however, is the suggestion that the slogan is generalizable to refer to many individual social situations, and to two typical, recurrent situations: poor performance in sports due to overly narrow equipment, or good performance due to unusually wide equipment. In one of the original TV commercials, for example, a man with a Scottish accent recounts the story of his grandfather, who invented a wider golf club which allowed him to win all the important tournaments. Toward the end of the ad, the narrator, a youngish man in a kilt, appears on screen. "To this day," he claims, "the family crest still bears the proverb.... " As the proverb is spoken in Gaelic, a subtitle appears on the screen, proclaiming, "Wider is Better."

The other TV ads feature "wider is better" spoken by different people in different languages and situations. A Hawaiian surfboard designer tells us of his grandfather, who designed a new board using the principle of "E Aho La'ula," which the subtitle informs us means "Wider is Better." An Italian high-wire walker laments the death of his father, who died because he let the crowd's desire for the excitement of "thin rope" override his belief in the old adage "piu largo e piu meglio." Clearly, "Wider is Better" is being framed as a general rule of thumb for sporting equipment; the Scotsman even uses the word "proverb" to describe it.

The fictive world of advertisements employs other techniques to suggest the proverbiality of new phrases. In each "wider is better" ad, for example, the saying is repeated several times and written on the screen as a subtitle, suggesting its existence as an item

separate from free-flowing discourse, that is, subject to various acts of recontextualization. In each, it is presented as "quoting behavior," spoken both in the same language as the surrounding discourse and in a different language; it is ascribed to an ancestor, calling attention to previous (fictive) contexts in which it was spoken, and thus further suggesting its existence long prior to the moment of the ad.[29] Finally, the ads together as an intertextual package suggest that "wider is better" exists as a linguistic and conceptual resource not only in English, but in Italian, Scots Gaelic and Hawaiian. Exploiting both folk and academic ideas about proverbs, these ads suggest that the statement has a long history and a wide geographic dispersion, both of which add to our perception of the slogan as proverbial.

Because of its introduction in TV spots, the slogan was able to seem like a proverb in print outlets as well. Print ads, in fact, continued to suggest the slogan's generalizable nature by using it as the basis of more specific sports proverbs; several ads featured "wider is better" along with such other statements as "the wider the ski, the quicker the cut" (GH May 1998:18-19). All of them, however, continue to draw on the set of meanings established for the proverb in the early TV ads.

These ads, and others of the same kind, use their fictive world to create a believable environment for their proverbs. The motive for this is clear: by minimizing the intertextual gap between a new slogan and the tradition of canonical proverbs, ad writers create new proverbs. New proverbs, like their canonical counterparts, speak with authority and carry the elusive ring of proverbial truth. These qualities, transferred onto a message advocating a change in behavior, increase the odds of an ad making a sale. As Mieder points out in his 1978 article, this is indeed "the name of the game" in the world of advertising.

Parasitism, Play and Public Poetry: More Functions of Proverbial Ads

The proverb is not the only genre that is incorporated and transformed by ads. Cartoons, rebuses, poems, limericks, songs, games, conundrums, and all manner of short verbal, visual and musical genres have been absorbed wholesale into advertisements. Even relatively long forms like märchen and legends have left their mark on advertising, as many folklorists have shown (see

especially Dégh 1994, Röhrich 1980, Denby 1971, Mason 1954). Indeed, Cook (1992:29) considers advertisements to be "parasitic discourse," a term he uses in two ways. Ads, he argues, both incorporate and imitate the forms, themes and structures of other discourses such as songs, cartoons, and (as we have seen) proverbs, feeding upon their communicative strategies and structures. At the same time, he says, ads are parasites within such discourses as magazines and television, feeding off their audiences.

Many of Cook's observations are valid, but the use of the term "parasitic" to refer to the intertextual relationships among discourse forms seems biased. It might appear to us that ads are "parasites" on TV sitcoms, for example, but given both the history and the current corporate structure of television, it would be more accurate to say that the sitcom exists entirely on the revenue generated by ads, and that its reason for existence is to deliver viewers to advertisers. This is equally true, though in more covert ways, of many mainstream press outlets.[30] Therefore, if anything, advertising is the host, and such parasites as the TV news broadcast and the mainstream music magazine thrive by feeding off the profits ads generate. More accurately and sympathetically, ads and accompanying discourses can be seen as symbiotic, each contributing something to the survival of the other.

More importantly, Cook's second sense of "parasitic" obscures the relationship between ads and other discourses. It is true that ads sometimes absorb or mimic cartoons, songs, proverbs and other speech forms. But it is equally true that proverbs, cartoons and songs rework material taken from advertising; borrowing goes both ways (cf. Dundes 1963). Moreover, the judgment that ads are parasitic is based on the same observation that Bakhtin (1981:301) made about English comic novels: that in them "we find a ...reprocessing of almost all the levels of literary language, both conversational and written." Abrahams (1968a) has pointed out that many of these genres infuse our everyday conversations as well. In other words, ads are participants in an enormous system of intertextual reference, the same web of meanings occupied by all verbal art, including both the proverb and the novel. Unless we want to consider all discourse parasitic upon other discourse, the concept seems to be inapplicable.

If ads are not parasites on expressive culture, but rather participants in our system of verbal arts, they should fulfill functions and play roles similar to those of other verbal arts. One of the most important of these functions, as I mentioned in passing above, is to give pleasure, to entertain. This pleasure-giving aspect of ads is seen as an important part of their function within the industry; not only does the pleasure taken in the ad come to be associated with the product, enjoyable or entertaining ads are looked at longer and thought about more, as Sean Brierly (1994:200) argues. Brierly (1994:200) also points out that "intertextual references are meant to involve consumers in the advertising more. It is part of a game; spot the reference." The pleasure-giving aspect of ads is also central to Sw. Anand Prahlad's (2004) analysis of proverb ads; he finds that proverbs are frequently juxtaposed with fetishes in advertisements, and serve to negotiate between fears and desires. Fear and desire are the anticipation of pain and pleasure, respectively, and the giving of pleasure is thus a way for the ad to suggest that the product will also give pleasure. The kind of code play indulged in by ads that use proverbs thus has important functions within the industry's stated agenda.

However, there is also a broader view of function: proverbial ads do not function solely in the world of advertising, they also operate in the culture at large. How do the artistic and pleasure-giving aspects of the proverbial advertisement contribute to our culture? Cook has been particularly eloquent in pointing out that ads may fulfill an important cultural need for public poetry:

> Some ads may answer a need for light-hearted code play in the public domain, which, though once provided by poetry, is now no longer available to many people, either because they do not come into contact with poetry or because, when they do, they are encouraged to focus only upon its more serious aspects. (Cook 1992:226)

Furthermore, he recognizes that these needs, met in some social strata by "high culture" genres like literary poetry, are the same needs met by genres normally associated with folklore and with pop culture:

> Play with language is ...reminiscent of public discourses of a kind associated with very different times and places

> in our own—riddles, rituals, spells and incantations.... Though there are other such discourses, such as graffiti, stand-up comedy and pop songs, which bring code play into the public domain, they are often marginalized. Graffiti are regarded as irresponsible and criminal; stand-up comedy and pop songs are denied the status of poetry or drama. Ads' apparently trivial uses of language...are given high status through their association with big business, trade and prosperity. (Cook 1992:226)

Cook's distinction between "marginalized" stand-up comedy and pop music on the one hand, and "high status" advertising on the other, seems odd in the era of Jerry Seinfeld and Tina Fey, Bono and Lady Gaga; as artistic expression, pop songs and stand-up comedy are valued far more highly than advertising. Even graffiti, perhaps the most marginalized of all expressive poetry today, are esteemed in some circles as vibrant vernacular art. Furthermore, Cook's belief that rituals, riddles, and public poetry in general are vanishing is not well-founded, as any introductory work on folklore will confirm. However, Cook's central premise holds: whether "folk" or "pop," "oral" or "mass-mediated," vernacular verbal art, public poetry, is crucial to the experience of contemporary culture.

Although Cook does not mention proverbs as one of the oral folklore forms whose role in society is being filled by advertising, he certainly might have done so without surprising anyone; highly public oral displays of proverbial speech, as of riddles and rituals, are rare. But the advertisement has not "usurped" the role of proverbs and other forms of public poetry, as Cook (1992:230) maintains. Instead, it has provided a new medium for proverbs, riddles, rhymes and songs to continue amusing and entertaining.

Cook seems concerned by advertising's overtly economic motives, writing that "if there is some need for code-play and display in our society, there is reason to regret the fulfillment of this need in a commercial arena" (Cook 1992:230). But if the amusement afforded by proverbial speech-play in advertisements comes with an ulterior motive of selling, this alone does not make it significantly different from folkloric communication in other eras or other places. Economic motivations have often accompanied folklore

performances in marketplace contexts; we need only to think of the melodic street cries of vendors, or the singing of wandering ballad-mongers out to sell broadsides in European towns during the past few centuries. The proverb is no stranger to the marketplace, either; in contemporary Ghana, proverb custodians are paid a direct fee for reciting and explaining proverbs (Yankah 1989:202). Deborah Kapchan (1993:307) points out that folklorists have been reluctant to accept the marketplace as a locus of folklore performance due to "disciplinary boundaries that nostalgize the homogenous," and Cook shows that this tendency transcends disciplinary boundaries as well.[31]

The proverb's position as an important part of advertising discourse, then, shows that it can adapt itself not only to fulfill new functions, but more importantly to fulfill its old functions in new ways. Just as its context-specific function of persuasion has been absorbed by advertisers—our professional public persuaders—so has its more general cultural function of fulfilling a deep need for poetry. It is because proverbs have been here for so long, reliably meeting social and cultural needs for persuasion, poetry and play, that they are called upon again and again when these ancient but eternal needs arise in our contemporary world.

Notes

[1] The often-repeated charge that ads "manipulate" people, particularly when it comes from proverb scholars, needs to be interrogated. Why is it perfectly all right for a proverb to manipulate us, but somehow wrong when the manipulator is an advertisement?

[2] Although Briggs and Bauman do not make the distinction explicitly (treating both types of gap as the same phenomenon), their work supports the observation that there are two kinds of intertextual gap; in their 1992 article, they are primarily concerned with the gap between individual text and generic abstraction, while in his later work Bauman (1998) has concentrated on the intertextual gap between a source text and a target text in mediational or quotative performances.

[3] While this has not been recognized by many dictionaries as a proverb, it fits my own criteria (Winick 1998), as well as those expressed by such scholars as Dundes (1981/1975) and Mieder (1994). A quick google search shows that it has been used 106,000 times on the World Wide Web, suggesting that it meets most scholars' requirements for currency.

[4] Kapchan (1993:311) has pointed out that utterances may simultaneously minimize and maximize intertextual gaps; parody, for example, must minimize gaps in some places while maximizing them in others.

[5] The Mieders' work concentrates on the first and third strategies mentioned here: the quoting of proverbs verbatim and the quoting of altered proverbs. For a discussion of the ways in which proverb poetics may be used to create brand-new copy, see Moeran 1985.

[6] In citing ads from magazines, I will use the following abbreviations: GH for Good Housekeeping, WD for Woman's Day, NY for The New Yorker, LHJ for Ladies' Home Journal, FC for Family Circle.

[7] I do not have a specific citation for this famous Soloflex ad, which ran in the 1980s. It was so popular that it became a poster that adorned many college dorm rooms of the era. My own copy was photocopied by Regina Bendix from an unspecified magazine.

[8] Mieder was probably also influenced by his knowledge of Avis' famous "we're number two, we try harder" campaign, in which they did admit their shortcomings.

[9] The fact that this proverb is hard to understand and thus to remember for contemporary Americans was driven home to me by Mac E. Barrick (1986), who misquoted it as "it never rains but what it pours."

[10] At best, "it never rains but it pours" could mean that Morton's Salt begins pouring from its container whenever rain begins to fall—clearly this is not the intended meaning!

[11] Ads in Good Housekeeping in Dec. 1914 (p.25), Aug 1924 (p.111), Feb. 1926 (p.117) and Feb. 1935 (p.145) all contain at least three instances of the slogan.

[12] Some will object that this is a line of poetry from Keats, not a proverb. I consider this to be one of those lines of poetry that has emerged to become proverbial through replication or repetition.

[13] For a discussion of movie catchphrases that have become proverbial, see Winick 1998:

[14] "Governing" was added to this list by journalist William Safire. More recently, Howard Chua-Eoan (1998:74) remade this proverb into "Godzilla is in the details"; given the right circumstances, this proverb, like any other, acts as a proverbial pattern.

[15] "The Devil is in the details" was by far the most popular of the four, with 5,094 citations on May 4, 1998. "God is in the details" itself had been quoted 915 times on that date. More recent searches using the world wide web as a text base, rather than Lexis-Nexis newspapers, suggest that "God is in the details" may now be more popular than its devilish counterpart.

[16] In the sixteenth edition of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, Justin Kaplan lists it as an anonymous saying.

[17] Some famous actors, like Dallas's Jim Davis and Buffy the Vampire Slayer's Anthony Stewart Head, first became celebrities by endorsing products; Davis was the beef butcher character for the Winn Dixie grocery chain, while Head was half of the couple whose soap opera of thirty-second spots sexily sold Maxwell

House. In these cases, the ads both established them as celebrities and reaped the benefits of their celebrity by showcasing their endorsements.

[18] It has often been asserted (e.g. Sivulka 1998:161; Watkins 1949:73; Rees 1995:146) that "Often a Bridesmaid, Never a Bride" was invented for Listerine by Milton Feasley of Lambert & Feasley. It was, however, already a canonical proverb by Feasley's time; it seems to have appeared in 1882 as "always a maiden, never a wife" (with maiden being meant in its archaic sense as a bridal attendant). In 1896, it existed on both sides of the Atlantic as the superstition "three times a bridesmaid, never a bride" (Addy 1895, Bergen 1896) and by 1917 was popular enough to be featured in a popular British Music-Hall song as "why am I always the bridesmaid, never the blushing bride?"

[19] The remarkable similarity in the ways in which proverbs are used in Akan society and American ads makes me wonder about the often-repeated assertion that such proverbial manipulation is a recent phenomenon among people of European descent.

[20] "Think Big" has not generally been considered proverbial, but it fits most definitions of the proverb, including Dundes's, Mieder's and my own. Like "go ahead," it is paradoxically so common that we tend to overlook its metaphorical nature and thus miss its pithy wisdom. The other paradox of "think big," that "big" thinking can lead to small results, is touched on in an ad for the low-calorie popcorn flavoring Molly McButter: "watching your weight doesn't mean you can't think big" (FC Aug 5 1997:116).

[21] The 1981 Mark Cross ad was salvaged from an unspecified magazine by Regina Bendix.

[22] This ad was photocopied from an unspecified magazine by Regina Bendix.

[23] Clearly, Kleppner is no folklorist. He says that "the ballads of the 14th century were proverbs," and then cites several "maxims," all of which are genuine proverbs.

[24] Kleppner's and Powers's works were brought to my attention, and to the attention of proverb scholars generally, by the work of Wolfgang and Barbara Mieder (1977).

[25] The body of the copy of this rather weird ad begins "The militant baby says..."

[26] This ad slogan for Miller Lite ran on TV throughout the late 1980s.

[27] Mieder's work in turn was based on that of the lexicographer Burton Stevenson, who in his 1948 dictionary noted the first two occurrences of this proverb in ads written by Fred Barnard.

[28] Dégh sees these characters, like Mrs. Olson of Folger's Coffee, as magical helpers from Fairy Tales, disguised as ordinary people.

[29] A fourth TV spot, added to the campaign later, had "wider is better" turning up on an ancient Egyptian inscription, another move in this direction.

[30] In the mainstream music press, for example, writers are instructed to write "glowing reviews of whoever bought a full-page ad" (Takiff 1998:54). I have myself been told that I could not write about a group or artist because they had

not recently released an album that could be advertised alongside my article. In other words, articles are assigned and content prescribed based on the available advertising, not the other way around!

[31] Despite Cook's (1992:230) claim, there is no reason to think that verbal art is always corrupted by patronage; for example, Shakespeare's history plays, which served to legitimize the regime in power, and Chaucer's "Book of the Duchess," which eulogized the deceased wife of Chaucer's patron John of Gaunt, stand centuries later as major masterpieces of poetry and drama. While the authors' political and economic motives may be productively questioned, and while knowledge of those motives may be integrated into informed criticism of the works, one should not dismiss them as inferior to other works of art, which in any case may have hidden motives of which we are unaware.

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Stephen D. Winick
American Folklife Center
Library of Congress
101 Independence Ave., SE
Washington, DC 20540
USA
Email: swinick@loc.gov