

ROBERT FINLEY

The Riddle's Charm

Habit is evil, all habit, even speech
And promises prefigure their own breach.

—John Wheelwright (W.S. Merwin,
Epigraph to *A Mask for Janus*)

LET ME BEGIN by posing you a riddle, an old one once posed to Homer by a group of boys, and which, apparently, stumped him. The boys have been hunting, or so they say, and they say to Homer where he sits in the olive shade of the town's central square, "What we have caught and what we have killed we have left behind; what has escaped us we bring with us. What, wise Homer, have we been hunting for?" Here we have a text (what the boys say to Homer), an interpreter (Homer himself), and a difficulty (what the boys say doesn't seem to make sense: nobody goes hunting and leaves behind what they catch and brings along what escapes them).

While you are finding or remembering the solution to this riddle, let me distract you with a few words about some of the peculiar characteristics of riddles in general. First, riddles are engaging. Perhaps you are a little tired, feeling a bit lazy, not really like thinking about anything at all, and then somebody says to you, "How is the letter A like a honeysuckle?" or, "It runs up the hill and down the hill, but in spite of all it still stands still," or "What we have caught and what we have killed we have left behind, what has escaped us we bring with us," — and that's it. You have got to figure it out. Your peace of mind is disrupted until you find a solution. Why are riddles so powerfully engaging? They are engaging because they cause in the interpreter a kind of anxiety which

is not relieved until a solution is found. That exclamation "I've got it!" stems not only from the happy recognition of one's own cleverness at finding a solution, but from genuine relief as well. Why is the letter A like a honeysuckle? Because a B follows it. What runs up the hill and down the hill but still stands still? A road. What have the boys been hunting?... Let's have a quick look at the nature of that relief, at how the riddle works first to generate anxiety and then to resolve that anxiety.

How does the riddle work? Put yourself in Homer's place. Homer has been told something the truth value of which he accepts. This is part of the convention of the riddle: what is posed by the boys is true, and Homer, to whom it has been posed, accepts that it is true. But while accepting the truth value of what the boys tell him, Homer cannot, even as the wisest man in Greece, find a context in the world as he knows it within which the statement makes sense. Homer knows about things, and about the names for things. He knows what things are habitually called and how they are spoken of. He knows that the boys are speaking in the language of the hunt, but he cannot fit what they say into any real, sensible context of hunting. The anxiety that Homer suffers at this point can be expressed in this way: Homer says to himself, "If what the boys say is true, and if, in all my knowledge I cannot see how it can be true in the world as I know it, then my knowledge of the world must be flawed. I have a choice: either I accept that their statement is true, and also accept that what I know about the world and the ways of speaking about it is untrue, or I find a solution to the riddle which will make the boys' statement a comprehensible one within the world as I know it."

So the desire to solve the riddle is a strong one for good reason. Until a solution is found, the world view of the interpreter is disrupted, and the interpreter, in a very real sense, is lost in an unknown land. What seemed familiar and reliable knowledge is suddenly not as it appears. All of the usual reference points (like the proper progress of the hunt, and the language in which the hunt is discussed, and the meaning of words) are compromised by the sudden possibility of a usually impossible situation or action. Before I give you the full passage about Homer with the riddle's solution, I want to isolate and name this moment of anxiety—the moment between when the riddle first takes effect and when the

solution is found. I am going to call it “the nonsense moment,” because it is the space of time in which, if you are engaged in the riddle, everything that has habitually made sense to you must flip over into non-sense. If you believe that what the boys tell you is true, but you cannot see how it is true in your world as you understand it and speak of it, then it is your world which is untrue until a solution to the riddle is found. The full import of that solution, then, is nothing less than to set the world aright again. The nonsense moment is the moment when the interpreter is at the middle of the riddle, the moment before a solution has been found but after whatever the riddle proposes has been accepted as true. As Susan Stewart says in her fine book on nonsense, it is the moment between domains of knowing.¹ When you enter the nonsense moment, you enter the country of that which eludes you, and in it you are freed from being sure of anything. This moment is brought about by the difficulty of the text, by its nonsense.

And the riddle's solution? Here is the whole passage. It is a fragment from Heraclitus, and also the epigraph to W.S. Merwin's sixth book of poems, *The Lice*:

All men are deceived by the appearances of things, even
Homer himself, who was the wisest man in Greece; for
he was deceived by boys catching lice: they said to him,
“What we have caught and what we have killed we have
left behind, but what has escaped us we bring with us.”²

So there it is—the boys were hunting lice on themselves, and acting perfectly appropriately in leaving behind those that they had caught and killed, and, without any choice in the matter, bringing with them those that had escaped them. For Homer, and for us, the world is set back on its feet again. The solution has given us a way of accepting the truth value of the boys' statement within the limits of our knowledge of the world and the ways of speaking about it.

¹ Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979) 202.

² This quotation, and the poems quoted on the following pages, are taken from W.S. Merwin, *The Second Four Books of Poems* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1993).

We have made our exit from the nonsense moment, and find ourselves back in the sensible and familiar world in which our habitual perspective on things holds sway.

Now let us look at some poems by W.S. Merwin, and at what they share with the riddle, and how they differ from it. Like the riddle, they are engaging, and, again like the riddle, they are engaging at least partly because they are disturbing: they are difficult to make sense of, they court nonsense. Once you take them up, once they have posed their questions to you, you find yourself trying to “make sense” of them. But unlike the riddle, the difficulties the reader experiences in these poems may not be resolvable. The riddle that the boys pose to Homer disrupts his thinking, but only temporarily. Here, in the poems, the difficulties may have no solutions, and the nonsense moment may, consequently, cast a longer shadow.

All of the difficulties we are concerned with in the following poems are formal difficulties, and all work toward disrupting conventional (habitual) expectations for language. The first and most obvious difficulty that the poems present is in their lack of punctuation. In these poems, the line endings serve as the main syntactic marker. But line endings are a much more ambiguous marker than is conventional punctuation and can be used in many ways, and many subversive ways, against the possibility of a single reading of a text. In the first poem “On the Mountain,” for example, the word “clouds” in the second last line functions as a noun in one clause: “it carries deep reflections of birds and of sunrise clouds,” and as a verb in the next: “clouds / thoughts into the sea of day.”

On the Mountain

A wind at first light
 comes out of one
 waving pine tree
 air river too deep to be seen
 current with no surface
 then can be seen and felt
 it carries deep reflections of birds
 and of sunrise clouds
 thoughts into the sea of day

But you see what this does to the reading process. There is no way to settle on one reading or the other; as a reader you need to keep both suspended simultaneously—as you read.

Probably the next most obvious difficulty in these poems is the vagueness of the references. In “When the Horizon is Gone,” a series of actions takes place in a world which is insistently incomplete:

When the Horizon is Gone

When the horizon is gone
the body remains horizontal
the earth remains horizontal
but everything else
is vertical

the soles of the feet are vertical
so they can't climb
and they wait

the veins are vertical
so the blood can't flow
so it sinks
and there is no centre to sink toward

what the hands hold is vertical
so they can't feel it
and they let go

what the eyes see is vertical
and always was
and they still don't recognize it

the sound is vertical
so they don't hear
anything

at first
calling

To begin with, consider “what the hands hold is vertical / so they can’t feel it / and they let go.” Well, what do the hands hold? There is no completion of the reference in the poem, no antecedent. The poem falls just short of making sense. Similarly, in “The Current,” a true riddle poem, who or what is that speaker?

The Current

For a long time some of us
 lie in the marshes like dark coats
 forgetting that we are water

dust gathers all day on our closed lids
 weeds grow up through us

but the eels keep trying to tell us
 writing over and over in our mud
 our heavenly names

and through us a thin cold current
 never sleeps

its glassy feet move on until they find stones

then cloud fish call to it again
 your heart is safe with us

bright fish flock to it again touch it
 with their mouths say yes
 have vanished

yes and black flukes wave to it
 from the Lethe of the whales

A third difficulty is found in the manipulation of figurative contexts. Figures are usually contained within a text of literal language. In this setting they make sense. Here is an example from Susan Stewart’s book, *Nonsense*: If I tell you that “for him the sun rose and set on her. It wasn’t long before he told her that he loved her,” you will have no objection to the sense of it. Here the metaphor is “closed down” by the return to the ordinary literal context in which he will say what he will say. If the metaphor is not closed

down, but allowed to overlap with that literal world and its language, we might be left with something like this: "For him the sun rose and set on her; she suffered terrible sunburn as a result . . ." Here the figurative world has been allowed to invade the literal one with clearly nonsensical, and distinctly unpleasant results.³ In the poem "Finally," keep an eye on the final verse with its simile describing the speaker's attitude of anticipation and attention:

Finally

My dread, my ignorance, my
 Self, it is time. Your imminence
 Prowls the palms of my hands like sweat.
 Do not now, if I rise to welcome you,
 Make off like roads into the deep night.
 The dogs are dead at last, the locks toothless,
 The habits out of reach.
 I will not be false to you tonight.

Come, no longer unthinkable. Let us share
 Understanding like a family name. Bring
 Integrity as a gift, something
 Which I had lost, which you found on the way.
 I will lay it beside us, the old knife,
 While we reach our conclusions.

Come. As a man who hears a sound at the gate
 Opens the widow and puts out the light
 The better to see out into the dark,
 Look, I put it out.

"As a man who hears a sound at the gate / Opens the window and puts out the light / The better to see out into the dark / Look, I put it out." Instead of being closed down, the figurative world of the simile is opened up at the end. Instead of ending with a reassertion of the literal, sensible world, the poem ends with the speaker stepping into the figurative world he has created, and literally turning off the, until then, figurative light.

³ Stewart, *Nonsense* 35.

A fourth form of difficulty, present to a degree in all of the examples, is the way in which opposed or exclusive concepts are drawn together. In “When the Horizon is Gone,” the concepts of presence and absence are forced together in the apparently smooth and undivided ‘sentence’ which ends the poem: the vertical sound is both absent, that is, unheard, and present, that is, calling—simultaneously. Its absence and strange presence are both acknowledged within the same sentence or verse. And in “On Each Journey,” companionship and solitude are drawn together: “let us travel together,” says the poem, “though we travel alone”:

On Each Journey

As on each journey there is
 a silence that goes with it
 to its end let us go
 with each other
 though the sun with its choirs of distance
 rises between us though it
 were to hang there the past like a day
 that would burn unmoved forever
 and only we went on
 each alone each with nothing
 but a silence

In the reading of each of these poems, we have a text, an interpreter, and a difficulty. A reading of the poem may begin simply enough, but it is soon disrupted by the absence of punctuation, by unclear or ambiguous references, by the unconventional use of similes, or by blatant and unresolved paradoxes. As interpreters, we are left with what the poems say, or almost say. While the poems approach nonsense as a result of these difficulties, it is through these same disruptive effects that they promote a locus, an unconventional locus, of meaning. They draw the reader into a world where presence and absence are joined without apology or paradox in a single statement, where companionship and solitude are not differentiated, where the barriers between the figurative and the literal dissolve, and, finally and most centrally, where the way we know the world, the instrument of our knowing, our language itself, is ambiguous, unstable, plural, dia-bolic. The poems draw the reader into the nonsense moment.

If the nonsense of these poems is meaningful, how is it meaningful? Let's go back just for a moment to Homer and his dilemma with the boys' words. What is it that prevents him from understanding what the boys say to him? Well, Homer, in the tradition of wise men, is physically blind. But he is blind in another sense as well. Homer is deceived by what he knows about the world and how the world is spoken of. Although what the boys say to him is an accurate enough description of what they have been doing, and makes sense within the context of their doing it, in the larger context of "the hunt," it is paradoxical. Homer is confined to this larger context, ironically, by his great knowledge of the world of things and the ways of describing them in language: by the habit of his knowledge. He recognizes that the boys are speaking in the language of the hunt, and sets against their words his knowledge of it: of what is appropriate to the hunt, and of how it can be spoken of. It is the fixed quality of Homer's knowledge which misleads him. Only when he overcomes his predisposition to view the boys' behaviour within the context of what he knows, will he be able to solve the riddle and set his world to rights again.

What the boys tell Homer remains a mystery to him until he becomes conscious of the way in which he is trying to understand what they say: that is, until he becomes conscious of the habit of his thought and speech and of how his knowledge of the hunt and the ways of speaking about it limits and directs his understanding. It is the process of the riddle which shows him this. For ourselves, our reading of the poems with all their difficulties also shows us, at every turn, how our knowledge of the world, and our ways of speaking about it, can shape and limit what we see. It is in the context of this instructive process that the poems, even as they approach nonsense, begin to make sense. In reading this difficult poetry we are forced to let go of what we think we know about things, about presence and absence, about solitude and companionship, about the ways of seeing things and the ways of speaking about them. For Homer, the riddle's disruption of his knowledge of the hunt brings with it the eternal possibility of the disruption of what he knows (at any moment) by what he does not yet know. The old knowledge is accompanied, after the advent of the riddle, by some new knowing about itself. Similarly, the world of doubt, of ambiguity, of vague or multiple reference which these poems

draw us into, a domain between domains of knowing, casts a shadow across all domains of knowing, and it is here that we find the importance and the meaning of the nonsense moment. Our reading of the poems with all their difficulties engages and disrupts our habits of thought and speech about the world. By doing so, it frees us to a serious consideration of what the world is, opening again and again onto a broad plain of possibility.