

Introduction to Ambiguity in Culture and Literature

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**Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens,**  
**"Introduction to *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*"**  
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**Paolo BARTOLONI and Anthony STEPHENS**

**Introduction to *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature***

A simplistic approach to ambiguity might claim that it is negative when the context is day-to-day communication and positive when literature, especially poetry, is involved. The exigencies of everyday life dictate clarity and transparency, while those of poetic language allow for multiple meanings. The problem of such an approach is that it neglects history and excludes the sphere of cultural ambiguity. There have been periods in literature when ambiguity has been positively marked and striven for, others when clarity of expression carries most value. Ambiguity in literature was cultivated, for example, in Alexandrian Greece, as exemplified by Lycophron's canonical poem *Alexandra*. It enjoys another vogue in Elizabethan drama, with its relentless punning and word-plays. That ambiguity in literature is expected and esteemed in the early twenty-first century stems from the fact that the legacy of European Symbolism, which had its origins in late nineteenth-century France, is still the dominant influence on Western literary values.

Cultural ambiguity likewise goes through phases when it is stigmatized and when it receives approval. Cultural ambiguity often becomes most visible when a dominant, host culture protests against a real or imaginary "contamination" by minority cultures or when a culture that has been in subjection seeks to emancipate itself from cultural imperialism. The present debates in Europe and elsewhere about the meaning and desirability of "multiculturalism" and the rapidly growing literature on postcolonialism illustrate this point. Even in everyday life, the fascination of the exotic and the appropriation of aspects of one culture by another often go unnoticed until a nerve is struck and there is a programmatic movement to restore the imagined "purity" of a dominant or supposedly "pristine" culture. The burning in Nazi Germany of books and artworks deemed "decadent" and the marginal phenomenon of neo-nazism in Germany today both make cultural ambiguity visible by setting out to efface it. It thus seems that ambiguity, or its lack, may be the entrance to different domains, determining in turn the possibility — which is also our potentiality — to move at ease between modalities of discourse and being. When deliberate, ambiguity works alternatively to entertain, evoke, and stimulate thought or to distract and mystify. Can any distinction between ambiguity and its lack be adequate, and, assuming that the ambiguous works for literature in our time, how exactly does it work? Further, is ambiguity always deliberate, and if not, could we still call it ambiguity? The articles collected in this thematic issue approach ambiguity from different perspectives and with a variety of intentions, illuminating in the process several modalities of ambiguity and shedding light on ambiguity's historical phases as well as on specific instances in the history of the ambiguous. Ambiguity, as this collection demonstrates, is not simply a literary and philosophical phenomenon; it informs other artistic media, such as cinema and photography; but it also impinges on the theorization of labor in the global and post-industrial economy, the discourse on child pornography in the contemporary media and in academia, and the study of today's urban meeting spaces.

The first group of articles tackles the ambiguous from cross-disciplinary perspectives, combining philosophy, cultural studies and critical theory. Mario Perniola's article, "Silence, the Utmost of Ambiguity" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/2>>) provides a historical perspective on the meanings and development of the term "ambiguity" from ancient Greek to the modern age. Yet, Perniola's is not simply a review of different approaches and schools of thought. More specifically, he presents an alternative philosophical and aesthetic discourse that he counterposes to modern and contemporary cultural positions which, according to Perniola, may be also called to explain the state of today's art and intellectual discourse. And he does so by stressing the significance of silence as the aesthetic attitude that combines contemplation and action. Drawing on the work of Pascal, Gracián, and what Perniola terms the masters of modern rationalization, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, Perniola proposes an intellectual disposition that rejects immediate gratifications and the cacophony of today's deluge of information and reclaims attention, selection, and discretion as major aesthetic and ethical values.

Vrasidas Karalis also takes, in his article "Disambiguating the Sublime and the Historicity of the Concept" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/3>>), a wide-ranging historical approach to

the ambiguities of this important aesthetic category. He sees the sublime as occurring in philosophical and literary discourse when the collision between cultures is in chronological succession. The ambiguity of the sublime is inevitably bound up with the challenge to assimilate the new. As he says, "the sublime is always ambiguous since it encapsulates a moment in history when the present dominant perception is confronted with its own limitations, creating thus a cluster of meanings which can be interpreted in multiple ways." He looks first at the discourse on the sublime that originates in the writings of Burke and Kant, and then expands the field of his investigation to encompass non-European versions of the sublime. Finally he returns to Longinus's seminal text *Peri hypsous* and interrogates it in the light of contemporary aesthetics and philosophy. "Disambiguating" the sublime becomes tantamount to making it definitive of the human condition: "the sublime emerges when the fallen reclaim language and struggle to articulate, or indeed explain, the unknowable state of their fallenness."

In his article "The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/4>>) Paul Carter develops an intense and compelling discussion of interpersonal encounters by mobilizing a rich apparatus of references, ranging from Jean Genet to Lévinas, Derrida, Bachmann, Merleau-Ponty, and Arendt. Carter's fascinating hypothesis is that meeting another person entails and subsumes a non-meeting; a resistance and a refusal. Carter pursues the ambiguity at the heart of encountering the other through an investigation of the urban spaces that are allegedly designed to invite and facilitate meetings. The interesting argument put forward by Carter is that these spaces are paradoxically designed to avert encounters. This is especially true in the context of a "new social, economic, and institutional life that seems to call into question the very existence of the collectivities referred to as 'community' or 'society.'" Carter's proposition illustrates a space and a topography that are open, supple, and able of "mutual transformations." The Greek letter *Chi*, both in its meaning of chaos and *chora* ("a process of cleavage in its double meaning"), is employed as a theoretical example of a place that defies rigidity and closeness and that invites us to linger and pause in order to allow the other to meet and be met.

Catharine Lumby's article, "Ambiguity, Children, Representation, and Sexuality" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/5>>), is a considered and perceptive discussion of child sexuality and its representation and appropriation by the media and academe. The article engages this controversial issue by way of interrogating a book of photographs taken by photographers of the Victorian era, including Charles Dodgson and Julia Cameron. The book in question, *Victorian Children*, comprises a series of photos of young children in a variety of poses. Some of the subjects are dressed, others are undressed, and some are kissing. Lumby focuses on the gaze fixing the camera to theorize a possible relation between the photographer and the subject of the photos in an attempt to initiate reflection on the agency of children. Lumby chooses this course of action deliberately in order to problematize the discussion of child sexuality and pornography, which, she argues, is invariably characterized by adults' value systems, which are then superimposed on the world of children. The main issue that Lumby identifies is the ambiguity criss-crossing commentaries by both media personalities and academics who either treat children as innocent and pure or as "unnaturally corruptible." The same ambiguity, Lumby claims, is found in the literature on pedophilia: "on the one hand," she writes, "it is depicted as something so unthinkable and so outside the bounds of civilization that only the monstrous could consume or produce it. At the same time, we are told that even the most banal photos of children risk sexualizing them and that pedophilic instincts are ones you can literally 'catch' from contact with such material." The questions that this article asks and explores are: What draws us to children? What disturbs us about them? What is at stake in the gaze of the child?

In an essay published in 1909, Robert Hertz produced a fascinating and to some extent revolutionary account of the priority that the right hand has over the left in the history of humanity. This is the subject of Brett Neilson's article, "On Ambiguity and Ambidextrousness, Or, What Is an Innovative Action?" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/6>>). If Hertz provides the starting point, the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino and the philosopher Paolo Virno offer Neilson the theoretical framework for an illuminating account of labor and exchange value in the age of globalization and post-industrialism. The main question underpinning this article is whether the cultural pre-eminence of the right hand continues to have significant impacts and ramifications in the passage from the Fordist society of material production and labor to the global and post-Fordist world of immaterial production.

Since employment and exchange values are no longer based on physical productivity but on intellectual and creative ability, revolving around the use of technology but also "a mode of linguistic cooperation that moves the anthropogenesis to the centre of productive processes," what meaning and forms can innovative actions take? While De Martino alludes to a "cultural apocalypse," stripping "humanity back to its amorphous precariousness by demanding constant innovation, flexibility, and lifelong learning," Paolo Virno elaborates a theory, whose social and political consequences, as Nielson explains, are far-reaching.

What could "existence without being" mean? It is the enigmatic and ambiguous turn of this famous Blanchotian statement that Paolo Bartoloni studies in his article, "Blanchot and Ambiguity" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/7>>). Bartoloni's intention is to locate Blanchot's remark in the context of a discussion on history and its possible end, famously initiated by Alexandre Kojève in a lecture on 4 December 1937 at the College of Sociology in Paris. Bartoloni provides illuminating insights into the difference that distinguishes Kojève's reflection on the end of history, Bataille's subsequent interpretation of it, and Blanchot's original conceptualization of a state of being suspended between nature and culture, history and the end of history. What makes Bartoloni's article original and innovative is the relation that he draws between Blanchot's notion of "existence without Being" and one of Antonioni's most significant but also enigmatic films, *The Eclipse*. Bartoloni focuses his attention on *The Eclipse*'s last seven minutes, producing an interpretation which is simultaneously a concrete example of Blanchot's theory but also a significant contribution to Antonioni studies.

Encounters with the ambiguous are many, and they are not only limited to modern and contemporary writing, which, historically, are periods of ambiguity's greatest fortune and approbation; Symbolism, the cultivation of "decadence," the avant-gardes and postmodernism are emblematic of language's conscious attempts to break the strictures of everyday communication and of a poetic and philosophical attitude determined to undermine scientific reason and positivism through a renewed experience of the spiritual, the transcendent and the unconscious. It is in this sense that ambiguity appears strongly allied with contemporary aesthetics and Continental philosophy, and against science and analytical thought. It might be argued that the ambiguous is also significantly aligned with religious thought, especially if one considers the sacred texts as the work of thinkers poised to convey the unconveyable and to mould language to embrace notions such as faith, love and hope. Paul, for instance, turns to a paradox and an antinomy when, in Romans 4:18, he puts into words the *eschaton* and its relation to the death of Christ. Referring to Abraham as the embodiment of a faith that transcends and subsumes the Law, Paul writes: "Who against hope (*elpis*) believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be" (Bible, New Testament 193). How is it possible to believe in hope by going against it? The ambiguity of Paul's proposition encapsulates the complexity of a thought that confronts the event *par excellence*, Christ and his death, and that Paul attempts to elaborate and clarify throughout his letters. But he also mobilizes rhetoric and literary figures to provide his thought with a tone which is at once imperative and urgent, embracing and loving. In Paul's letter, ambiguity is present as a warning but also as a blessing, because the ambiguous will show the face of God to those who have faith. It is the stress on showing, the connotative element of language that prevails in modernity and in contemporary thought. Yet, as we saw with Paul, it goes a long way back. Statements such as the one Max Brod credited to Kafka "that there is an infinite amount of hope — only: not for us" ("unendlich viel Hoffnung —, nur nicht für uns" (Kafka qtd. in Benjamin 113), or Giorgio Agamben's "we can have hope only in what is without remedy" (Agamben, *The Coming Community* 101) ("possiamo avere speranza solo in ciò che è senza rimedio" *La comunità* [85]), not only echo Paul's thought, but they also employ the same rhetorical stratagems to articulate a condition that remains relevant today.

The second group of articles interrogates ambiguity as a literary trope by looking at specific literary and cinematic texts, but also by proposing fresh insights into the understanding of literary ambiguity and its rhetorical and poetic purposes. Martin Harrison's article, "Ambiguity Now" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/8>>), discusses with elegance and insight the significance of "the connotative range of poetic language," providing a fresh analysis of Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn*, where Brooks attributes a major role to ambiguity in the making of a poetic language that becomes increasingly aware of its own processes. But Harrison's is much more than a

mere exposition of Brooks's theory. He digs deep into the fabric of literary language and compares it with its experiential and phenomenological counterpart, producing innovative views not only on ambiguity as one of the prime makers of poetry, but also on the distinction between ambiguity and complexity both in ordinary parlance and in literature. Harrison's reflection concludes with examples from three contemporary poets and their work, Alex Selenetch's "Monotone," Lesley Scalapino's "New Time," and Frank Bidart's "Another Life."

"Ambiguity, the Literary, and Close Reading" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/9>>) by David G. Brooks provides a further perspective onto the world of poetry by presenting a fascinating question: what might we learn if we look at ambiguity not so much from the angle of the author as that of the reader? The question may appear obvious and inoffensive on the surface. It becomes intricate and captivating, as Brooks peels layer upon layer of commonsensical assumptions away from reading practice. Roman Jakobson is Brooks's main point of reference, and yet structuralism and deconstructive theory are implicitly summoned up by Brooks's re-reading of the relation between readers and work and, ultimately, of literature's values and functions.

Anthony Dracopoulos's analysis of the poem "Young Men of Sidon" by the Greek poet C.P. Cavafy (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/10>>) questions whether it is possible to reduce poetic ambiguity to a given meaning by applying a close critical reading. Deploying a different viewpoint from that developed by Brooks, Dracopoulos challenges a series of interpretations that have attempted to clarify the inherent ambiguity in Cavafy's poem by pointing out that the poems have a multiplicity of meanings, none of which takes priority. His hypothesis is significant, not so much because it reiterates the intrinsic polyphony and multifariousness of modern literature, but because it places ambiguity as the locus of a poetic threshold which is not meant to be trespassed upon. Dracopoulos argues that Cavafy's poem inhabits a zone in-between, and that ambiguity constructs a topography that remains suspended and refractory to attempts at resolution and reduction. This, as we saw earlier, is the house of modern poetic language, whose self-reflexivity does not simply result in an inward gaze. Poetry looks simultaneously within and without and travels, as the Italian poet Giorgio Caproni has written in one of his poems, "Return," back upon itself: "there / where I had never been" (81).

The interstices opened up by modern literature through an experience of language that critiques and challenges the limitations of language as communication may certainly be interpreted as a positive aesthetic resistance to the twentieth century's commodification of culture, and as an artistic attitude both hostile and in opposition to populist trends which, through the mass-media and the commodity market, have resulted in the transformation of society and art into a grand spectacle that, according to some intellectuals and thinkers, lacks depth, originality, and beauty. Interstices may, however, betray an elitist position entrenched in suspicion towards technology and popular culture. This is the argument of Elizabeth Rechniewski's article, "Ambiguity, the Artist, the Masses, and the 'Double Nature' of Language" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/11>>), which engages the function of the European intellectual elite through a close reading of two very different yet related books, John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1800-1939*, and Pierre Bourdieu's *Les Règles de l'art*. Rechniewski shows with clarity how Symbolist experiments, embodied by Symbolism's dominant figure, Stéphane Mallarmé, may actually be read as reactionist, defending art from the intrusion of the masses and detaching it from the reality of day-to-day life. In her reading of Carey's and Bourdieu's work, Rechniewski identifies a mode of criticism with regard to the celebration of art's independence and refinement, but also of remorse for a time in which the artist and the intellectual were able to ignore the pressure and the demands made on art from the outside. Rechniewski, in this sense, proposes a reflection that is still surprisingly relevant and current and that responds directly to recent studies on aesthetics and literary values.

The fine balance between aesthetic sophistication and popular culture, detached intellectual elitism and deep engagement with the society and politics of the time, is the subject of Andrea Bandhauer's reading of the Austrian author and Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/12>>). Bandhauer's article provides fresh insights into the work of this controversial author who continues to divide the professional and public audience both in Austria and abroad. If on the one hand, as Bandhauer emphasizes, Jelinek's use of language is highly experimental, her dealing with contemporary phenomena is uncompromising. The example that

Bandhauer studies, to bring Jelinek's constructive linguistic pastiches and her political commitment to the fore, is the play *Bambiland*, an original rendition of the war in Iraq, seen and filtered through central symbols of globalization and infotainment. Ambiguity is emblematic of Jelinek's literary work, as expressed by the very title of the play, *Bambiland*, which points at once to the reassuring and cuddly image of Bambi, but also, more ominously, at an amusement park built by the son of the former Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević.

The articles presented here cannot claim to exhaust or define the bounds of ambiguity. What they do show is a wide variety of the ways in which ambiguity works. Furthermore, by drawing on thinkers and writers from the author of *Peri hypsous* to the present, they demonstrate how it is possible to work fruitfully with the concept of ambiguity and how ambiguity itself remains of urgent relevance for thinking and writing in the twenty-first century.

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