



# Profit from poetry: Bards, brands, and burnished bottom lines



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**Abstract** A poet, Wallace Stevens once said, makes silk dresses out of worms. What the great American modernist didn't reveal is the *brand* of silk dresses that worms weave so well. This article takes up where Stevens left off. It identifies the ways in which corporations can profit from poetry. It examines the fractious yet fruitful relationship between bards and brands. It notes the business background of several big, brand-name poets. And, illuminated by a recent instance of haiku hacktivism, it argues that poetry is an apt metaphor for branding in today's texting, tweeting, crowdsourced, co-created, there's-an-app-for-that world. Despite Stevens' subsequent contention that money is a kind of poetry, the article concludes that marketing's case is stronger still.

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## 1. Introduction

*The first victim of  
Retail customer service  
Is sincerity*

Haiku have their place, most lovers of poetry agree. However, that place is rarely the grocery store, or in brands of freshly-baked cookies. Yet haiku are what customers of Sainsbury's confectionary found when they opened their packets of Taste the Difference (Williams, 2014). A disgruntled employee of the British supermarket chain, who toiled in an in-store

bakery, relieved the tedium of his occupation by penning a selection of poems and slipping them into the packages:

*Enjoy your cookies  
Every bite is a minute  
I'll never get back*

Understandably surprised by the free gifts inside, some consumers of Taste the Difference were worried about contamination; some were amused by the bored baker's world-weary words of wisdom; some wrote about their Sainsbury experience on social media. Their posts were picked up by newspapers and television, the poems were reprinted and parsed for metrical precision, and the "haiku hacktivist" was tracked down by Sainsbury's thought police then reprimanded for damaging the brand:

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*Taste the Difference  
I can't taste the difference  
Maybe it's my fault*

If Sainsbury's reaction is in any way representative, it's clear that retailing and rhyming don't mix. As *The Economist* (2011, p. 70) observed about the chasm between culture and commerce, "businesspeople seldom take the arts seriously. . . many assume that artists are a bunch of pretentious wastrels." Literary types, conversely, have little or no time for corporate fat-cats, much less bottom line-minded bean counters (Timberg, 2015). Granted, the so-called Great Divide (Huysen, 1986) between art and mart has diminished of late, as self-employed artists become more marketing savvy and businesspeople appreciate what creative types bring to the table (Aspden, 2012). But more than a modicum of mutual suspicion remains (Morgan, Lange, & Buswick, 2010; Sherry & Schouten, 2002). For many brand managers and marketing researchers, poetry is less of a treat than a threat. They can't taste the difference that bards add to brands.

This article places a plea for poetry among the cookies of marketing understanding. It goes beyond the standard therapeutic claim that great art is good for business—poems edify, enlighten, elevate, educate, etc. (Coleman, 2012)—by contending that poetry is profitable too. It posits that the arts in general and poetry in particular are more than mere icing on the cake of commerce, something that's nice but unnecessary (Prendergast, 2009). It shows that verse is a source of competitive branding advantage in a world of sound-bites, text messages, and elevator pitches, many of which, Johnson (2011, p. 22) claims, "feature the formal traits of poetry: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, structural parallelism."

We begin with brief definitions of our key terms, noting several salient parallels between the two; then consider poetry from a branding perspective, arguing that bards are brands, as are iconic odes, epics, and ballads. We continue with the contention that poetry is not only a powerful metaphor for brand management, but that it is superior to established concepts predicated on pyramids, prisms, and positioning. The prospects for, and problems facing, our Brands-Are-Poems premise are thereafter considered in a conciliatory conclusion, which reiterates that poetry is profitable in *literal*, *figurative*, and *instrumental* senses.

## 2. The broadening of branding

Brands, like most components of marketing, have been defined in all sorts of different ways. A brand is a promise, Geller (2012) says. A brand is a

relationship, Schultz and Schultz (2004) proclaim. A brand is a corner of someone's mind, according to Hegarty (2011). A brand is a set of ideas that people live by (Grant, 1999), any label that carries meaning and associations (Kotler, 2003), and a set of symbolic values which form a chain of associations (Anker, Kappel, Eadie, & Sandøe, 2012). Brands, in short, are hard to grasp. Like bars of soap in the bath, they are slippery when wet.

Rather drier is the official definition of the American Marketing Association. A brand, the AMA intones, is "a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (de Chernatony, 2001, p. 21). Little wonder some observers try to come up with something more punchy, more pungent, more poetic. A brand is a mark of distinction (Thompson, 2010). A brand is the packaging of emotion (Davis, 2006). A brand is a commodity with personality (Olins, 2003). A brand is a product so desired that a customer will leave a supermarket if it isn't in stock and go elsewhere instead (Hall, 2012).

Irrespective of which definition is adopted, three things are clear. The first of these is branding's ever-broadening scope (Moore & Reid, 2008). When our modern understanding of branding emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the word was largely associated with fast moving consumer goods (Heinz, Wrigley's, Lipton, et al.), as well as luxury items like jewelry (Tiffany), furniture (Roycroft), motor cars (Mercedes-Benz), and haute couture (Charles Frederick Worth). Nowadays, just about everything is regarded as a brand or considered brandable: political parties, police forces, public libraries, utility suppliers, university colleges, charitable organizations, sports stars, rock stars, movie stars, towns, cities, regions, nations, and any number of professional service providers from doctors to divorce lawyers (Bastos & Levy, 2012). Even the physical sciences haven't escaped:

After the Second World War, science was given a makeover. It was turned into a brand—in the same way that Coca-Cola, Apple Computers, Disney and McDonald's are brands. . . . The creation and protection of this brand—the perpetuation of the myth of the rational, logical scientist who follows a clearly understood scientific method—has colored everything in science. It affects the way it is done, the way we teach it, the way we fund it, its presentation in the media. (Brooks, 2011, p. 2)

The second salient point is that our understanding of branding has shifted through time. As Heding,

Knudtzen, and Bjerre (2009) recount in their history of brand management, the center of attention has moved more than once. Early interpretations were company-centric, characterized by a focus on product features, brand benefits, and the communication of unique selling propositions (USPs). This was followed by an era of consumer-centricity, where the receiver rather than the pitcher occupied pride of place. Of late, brands tend to be seen in cultural terms, as a commercial expression of the ever-changing societal context. The upshot of these developments is that the locus of control is less clear-cut than before. Managers remain the principal creators, curators, and caretakers of brands, but as a consequence of greater consumer interest, involvement, and input, their freedom of movement is more constrained than it used to be.

This dilution and diffusion of branding is central to the third secular trend: its mounting conceptual ambiguity (Brown, 2006). Until comparatively recently, brands were construed as solid, concrete, tangible things—as cogs, as wheels, as buildings, as pyramids, as machines made up of multiple parts which, when put together with care, prove popular with the consuming public (Aaker, 2010; Brasel, 2012; Kapferer, 2012). Although such representations are still found in many introductory textbooks, 21<sup>st</sup> century thinkers are more inclined to describe brands as *gestalts*, as collages, as clouds, as essences, as assemblages, as experiences, as misty mashed-up myths (Diamond et al., 2009; Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). And while this intangible turn can't be divorced from today's digitized, cyberspaced, crowdsourced, smart-phoned, Facebooked, Instagrammed, iTuned, app-for-that cultural context, there's no denying that branding's dominant metaphors are more hazy than hitherto.

### 3. The parallels with poetry

A poem, in the words of leading literary critic Terry Eagleton (2007, p. 25), is “a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author rather than the printer or word processor who decides where the lines should end.” Such a definition hardly does justice to one of the greatest and most venerable art forms invented by humankind (Wainwright, 2011). Eagleton's encapsulation makes no mention of rhyme, rhythm, syntax, symbolism, imagery, or figurative language, let alone creativity, imagination, innovation, memorability, and flights of linguistic fancy, the sorts of things ordinary people associate with verse (Fry, 2005). As he also points out, however, plenty of poems don't rhyme, deploy rhythm, contain symbols, coin figures of speech,

rely on alliteration, resort to assonance, or play fast and loose with words, whereas many pieces of published prose do.

Indeed, just as mass market brands burst from their bespoke cocoon in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, so too poetry was changed, changed utterly, during the Gilded Age (Gay, 2007). The longstanding notion that poems must rhyme in time and employ established metrical units like iambic pentameter, was hurled aside as *vers libre* (free verse) took hold (Cottington, 2013). The modernist movement, promulgated by Ezra Pound, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), T.S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams in particular, broke with the Great Tradition of formal poetic accomplishment that extended from Emily Dickinson, through Lord Tennyson, past Pushkin, via Keats, Shelley, Goethe, Ronsard, and Dante, all the way back to Homer himself, the first and greatest of the Ancient Greek rhymesters (Carr, 2009).

There's no consensus on Eagleton's paraphrase, of course. Poetry is little different from branding in that regard (see Morner & Rausch, 1995), having been variously defined as “a speaking picture” (Sir Philip Sidney), “a criticism of life” (Matthew Arnold), “saying one thing and meaning another” (Robert Frost), and “imaginary gardens with real toads” (Marianne Moore). True, these *précis* tend to be more poetic than those that pertain to the b-word, but insofar as branding is beset by bewildering definitions full of abstract nouns, non-sequiturs, and management jargon, poetry's explicators tend to suffer from a surfeit of overstatement. Poetry, for noted novelist Nicolson Baker (2014, pp. 1, 39, 55), is nothing less than “prose in slow motion,” “a glimmering finger in memory,” “a controlled refinement of sobbing.”

Upscale weeping notwithstanding, the key point about poetry's paradigm shift from regular meter to free verse is that it is analogous to branding's broadening. The basic principle of *vers libre*—that it doesn't have to rhyme—widened the scope of what constitutes a poem (Fry, 2005). More importantly, the tectonic shift from fixed forms to free form is the poetic equivalent of the shift from management-commanded to consumer-controlled branding. Traditional poets may not like it—Wallace Stevens infamously observed that writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net—but traditionalists are no longer in charge. Poetry is as popular as it ever was in the days of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Paxman, 2014), only it's predominantly found in pop songs, sound-bites, domain names, text messages, status updates, rap music, one-liners, and brand mantras (Johnson, 2011).

Although the courses of poetry and branding run in rough parallel, cross-currents are evident too.

Conventionally, brands are conceptualized as crisp, clear, consistent, coherent, decidedly singular *things*, characterized by precise positioning, careful targeting, and distinctive identities (Keller, 1999). Poetry, conversely, is ordinarily associated with ambiguity, with indeterminacy, with multiple meanings, with semantic superabundance (Wainwright, 2011). Ambiguity, for some, is the distinguishing feature of successful poems, in that every reader is free to interpret the wonderfully equivocal words in their own rewarding ways. As Graff (1995, p. 164) observes about the basic difference between the language of business and the language of poetry, “whereas ambiguity may be a fatal defect in a laboratory report or an accounting ledger, it is a necessary and valuable attribute in a literary work.” However, just as branding is becoming increasingly ambiguous, so too the poetry of branding is ever more evident, not least for eager consumers of Taste the Difference cookies:

*Seven pound an hour  
Is the price of my labour  
Loyalty costs more*

#### 4. Branding bards, vibrant verses

Commerce, for many culture vultures, is a bird of prey, a carrion crow that devours artistic integrity (Timberg, 2015). Capitalism, according to Nealon’s (2011, 2012) recent critiques, is the curse of the Roethke-reading classes, with few redeeming features. Greasy till fumlbers, in W. B. Yeats’s withering words, have no place on Parnassus and poets who pander to plutocrats forfeit their place in the pantheon (O’Reilly, Rentschler, & Kirchner, 2014).

Yet Yeats, of all people, can reasonably be described as a brand. If celebrities like Beyoncé, Oprah Winfrey, and Kim Kardashian are brands; if sports stars like Tiger Woods, Maria Sharapova, and David Beckham are brands; if novelists like Stephen King, James Patterson, and J. K. Rowling are brands, then poets like Seamus Heaney, Maya Angelou, and William Butler Yeats surely qualify. Yeats, in truth, was a very canny operator (Aherne, 2000). For all his condemnation of commercial cupidity, he promoted himself assiduously. He dressed in an attention-grabbing manner. He networked and glad-handled with gusto. He was partial to preposterous publicity stunts. His most famous poem, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, was inspired by a shop window display in London. And, it goes without saying that his literary legacy is the basis of a lucrative tourist industry in the west of Ireland, a.k.a. Yeats Country.

The great man pandered to plutocrats, aristocrats, and despotic autocrats for good measure, but his standing in poetry’s pantheon is secure.

Much the same thing could be said about Gabriele D’Annunzio, the self-publicizing warrior poet of Italy; Charles Baudelaire, the controversy-stirring marketer maudit of France’s Second Empire; Edgar Allan Poe, the stunt-pulling, sensation-inciting, trickster figure who went to great lengths to impress the ante-bellum American public; Oscar Wilde, the dandy of decadent dandies, who began as a showy poet, turned his hand to stupendous stage plays, then crashed and burned spectacularly; Aleksandr Pushkin, Russia’s flamboyant national poet, whose escapades were being monetized even before his untimely death in a duel; Ern Malley, Australia’s foremost exponent of free verse, who owed his undying fame to the fact that he didn’t exist; Walt Whitman, the wild and woolly laureate of Camden, who hyped, puffed, ballyhooed (and reviewed) his own books with bluster worthy of Barnum; and, latterly, Katy Lederer, who worked for a private equity firm at the height of the 2008 financial meltdown and thereafter found fame as the “Hedge Fund Poet” (Nealon, 2011).

Lederer isn’t the only literati to toil in the coils of Wall Street. More than a few poets have been blessed with real-world business experience (see Gioia, 1992). W. B. Yeats was a highly successful theatre manager, Archibald MacLeish edited *Fortune* for the best part of a decade, Dr. Seuss was an award-winning ad man before he turned his hand to humorous verse, Wallace Stevens spent his entire career in an insurance office, though it made little impact on his output, T. S. Eliot was gainfully employed by Lloyd’s Bank of London, which promoted him more than once, Arthur Rimbaud quit poetry after a few explosive years then sought his misbegotten fortune among the gun runners and slave traders of North Africa, L. E. Sissman, a poetic child prodigy, sold vacuum cleaners door-to-door only to wind up in advertising, which he considered an apt outlet for his “verbal dexterity.” Meanwhile Marianne Moore, the wonderfully witty, tricorne hat-wearing wordsmith, was famously employed by Ford to formulate a name for its top secret automobile. But they rejected her rich and resonant suggestions including Resilient Bullet, Mongoose Civiue, Utopian Turtletop, and Ford Silver Sword; then went for Edsel instead.

Poets are not poems, admittedly. Yet even within the confines of the canon, branding has made—and is making—its mark. Many notable poems, James (2014) explains in detail, are sprinkled with sparkling brand names, like fairy lights on a Christmas tree. E.E. Cummings’ squibs are engorged with



branded goods, for example, as are the works of Hart Crane, John Dos Passos, Frederick Seidel, John Betjeman, and the bard of the millennial dotcom boom, Claudia Rankine, whose prose poems are dotted with corporate logos and advertising images and PR pabulum, interspersed with rebranded Shakespearean soliloquies:

To roll over or not roll over that IRA? To have a new iMac or not to have it? To eTrade or not to eTrade? Again and again these were Kodak moments, full of individuation; we were all on our way to our personal best. America was seemingly a meritocracy. I, I, I and Tiger Woods. (Quoted in Nealon, 2011, p. 147)

More than that, though, it is arguable that *entire poems* can become brands. As Ackroyd (1988) shows, a brand community of bright young things sprang up around Eliot's *Waste Land*, the anarchic Jazz Age masterpiece. The lyrical ballads of Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott invented a tradition that still forms the basis of Scotland's national brand (Dinnie, 2015). Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* triggered a madcap consumer fad for yellow waistcoats, blue tail coats, Werther porcelain, Werther portraits, Werther parodies, Werther pop songs, Werther tourist trails, and all sorts of weird and wonderful Werther collectibles (Friedenthal, 1993). The much-loved poems of Dr. Seuss, Lewis Carroll, Rudyard Kipling, and Xu Wei have been turned into blockbuster Hollywood movies, complete with tie-in merchandise, theme park rides, and nearly nutritious Happy Meals. The classic works of Homer, Virgil, and Shakespeare haven't done too badly at the box office either.

## 5. Reconfiguring figures of speech

It has often been said that marketing is more of an art than a science (Brown, 1996). Rather less frequently discussed is what *kind* of art marketing is, or aspires to be. Unlike astronomy, comedy, tragedy, epic poetry, lyric poetry, dance, music, and history, marketing doesn't have a dedicated Muse. Marketing, rather, is a multi-talented, multi-tasking, multi-functional polymath, an artistic all-rounder where different arts dominate its diverse domains. Personal selling, to all intents and purposes, is a form of performance art, as are customer care and after-sales service (Pink, 2013). Retailing is essentially sculptural, especially in the monumental form of flagship stores (Sherry, 2003). Public relations and marcomms more generally are narrative arts, where compelling storytelling is the be all and end all, and then some (Smith, 2012). Advertising is an

overwhelmingly visual art, though it wasn't in the early days of newspapers, when agate-and-no-display rules prevailed (Sivulka, 2011).

Branding, by contrast, is poetry in motion. Literally. Figuratively. Instrumentally. *Literally*, the "poetry of commerce" (Wells, 1909, p. 145) is evident in several spheres of activity. *Figuratively*, the brand-as-poem metaphor competes with many other imaginative analogies, from brand-as-iceberg (de Chernatony, 2001) to brand-as-manifold (Berthon, Holbrook, Hulbert, & Pitt, 2007). *Instrumentally*, poetry can be successfully employed in executive education programs devoted to strategic brand management (Morgan et al., 2010).

### 5.1. Literal elements

Let's begin with brand names. Nothing is more elemental than a brand name (Danesi, 2006). Not only are names important in and of themselves, but the more poetic they are, the more memorable, impactful, and powerful they prove to be (Gabler, 2015). Kodak, Kindle, Kinkos, Kickers, Kit-Kat, Coca-Cola, Calvin Klein, Krispy Kreme, Kimberly-Clark, Kellogg's Corn Flakes, the Kardashian Kollection—to name but a few voiceless velar plosives—catch the ear, trigger the synapses, and tumble off the tongue, not unlike Pentium, Amazon, Airbus, Oreo, Twitter, Tumblr, Swiffer, Under Armor, Dunkin Donuts, Reese's Pieces, Black & Decker, I Can't Believe It's Not Butter.

Poetic resonance is equally apparent in slogans, taglines, and jingles, the last of which hark back to the earliest days of poetry when odes were sung and epics chanted (Stern, 1998). Syncopated slogans sell well, what's more: I Like Ike, J'Adore Dior, Intel Inside, Must See TV, Beanz Meanz Heinz, Less Flower More Power, Loose Lips Sink Ships, Winston Tastes Good Like a Cigarette Should, Chocolate Heaven Since 1911, Let the Train Take the Strain, Tetley Makes Teabags Makes Tea, A Mars a Day Helps You Work, Rest and Play, You Can't Fit Quicker than a Quik-Fit Fitter.

Longer-form advertising copy also adheres, on occasion, to the rules of poetic rhetoric (Marchand, 1986). Doggerel was de rigueur in the ad campaigns of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when H. G. Wells was waxing lyrical about the poetry of commerce and consumer behavior both (Richards, 1990, p. 233):

*Once Beauty bore a sunshade large  
To shield her soft white skin  
And o'er her charming features fair  
An envious veil did pin.*

*But now in old Sol's burning rays  
She dares to sweetly slumber  
For Beetham puts her all to rights  
With Glyc'rine and Cucumber!*

Twitchell (2004) likewise reveals that Cadillac's 1915 print ad, "The Penalty of Leadership," was a massively popular preachment in its day, as were "Somewhere West of Laramie," "The Kid in Upper 4," and Phoebe Snow's adventures in verse on the Lackawanna railroad. Rosser Reeves, the resonantly named, repetition reliant, hard-hard-hard sell inventor of the USP, hung out with the Beats, published poetry with the best of them, and came up with several deathless slogans, most notably M&Ms Melt in Your Mouth, Not in Your Hands (Cracknell, 2011). He was no patch on W. H. Auden, though, who wrote *The Night Mail*, much employed by later advertisers, for Britain's LMS railway brand. Even Auden, however, must bow before the anonymous bard behind Doublemint's once-heard-never-forgotten classic (Sivulka, 2011, p. 274):

*Double your pleasure, double your fun  
With double good, double good, Doublemint  
Gum.  
Double delicious, double smooth too,  
Doublemint's double delightful to chew.  
So double your pleasure, double your fun  
Get double everything rolled into one.  
Oh, double your pleasure, double your fun  
With double good, double good, Doublemint  
Gum.*

Pedagogy can be poetic as well. Apart from eminent educators with a flair for clever coinages—"marketing myopia" (Theodore Levitt), "niches are riches" (Philip Kotler), "tales make sales" (Sidney Levy)—poetry can communicate meaningful marketing messages (and research findings) in an expressive, invigorating manner (Canniford, 2012). The field's fondness for acronyms, acrostics, and alliterative aides-mémoire is similarly indicative of its poetic inclination. SWOT, PEST, STP, USP, the 3Cs, the 4Ps—5Ps? 6Ps?—the 7 Ss, the 8 Es, the 30 Rs of relationship marketing that riddle student textbooks and research reports both, may have become ridiculous and risible through overuse. But that doesn't diminish their undoubted poetic power. And, although only the most sensitive aesthetes can detect the presiding spirit of Polyhymnia (the Muse of sacred poetry) in pedagogues' penchant for lists and bullet points, their layout on the page (or PowerPoint slide) is akin to light verse. As Brown (2015, p. 34) rightly observes about the art of writing lists, "with their uneven, chopped-up lines, lists tend, at first glance, to look just like poems. But, unlike the

poet, the list-maker pares the world down to what is strictly necessary, discarding anything remotely airy-fairy."

## 5.2. Figurative aspects

The alleged airy-fairyness of poetry is, for many marketing researchers and brand managers, its single biggest shortcoming (Stern, 1998). Otherworldliness is fairly rare, however. Realism is the norm nowadays (Baker, 2014) and even at its most poetic, most is no more unreal than, say, cosmologists' concept of multiple universes, quantum physicists' belief in the God particle, or economists' much-maligned model of economic man. As a root metaphor for branding, poetry has four things in its favor.

First and foremost, if the essence of branding is differentiation—making customers an offer they can't confuse (Moon, 2010)—then poetry passes metaphorical muster. In the vast desert of discourse, poetry appears like a verdant oasis. With their ragged edges, irregular layout, unorthodox lineation, broken stanzas and so forth, poems are instantly recognizable on the page. Offset in their own special space, they scream "look at me":

You can tell it's a poem because it's swimming in a little gel pack of white space. That shows that it's a poem. All the typography on all sides has drawn back. The words are making room, they're saying, Rumble, rumble, stand back now, this is going to be good. Here the magician will do his thing. Here's the guy who's going to eat razor blades. Or pour gasoline in his mouth and spout it out. Or lie on a bed of broken glass. So, stand back, you crowded onlookers of prose. This is not prose. This is the blank white playing field of Eton. (Baker, 2014, p. 21)

Poems, secondly, are brilliantly visual, much like brands (Schroeder, 1998). Sometimes this ocular aspect is made apparent typographically, as in the case of "concrete" poems (Fry, 2005). Also known as pattern poems, these are laid out on the page in striking shapes—triangles, circles, diamond formations, etc.—similar to print advertising in the early days of newspapers and periodicals (Fox, 1997). More often than not, though, it's poetry's fabulous imagery that focuses the mind's inner eye. This is especially true of Ezra Pound's Imagists, an influential school of modernist poetry which maintained that poems should consist of a single, intensely visual, almost hallucinogenic image (Carr, 2009). However, imagery is evident in a great deal of poetry. A couple of well-chosen words, such as Spencer's "sea-shouldering whales" (which changed the life of the young John Keats), can

captivate more completely than any oil painting or corporate logo. Poetry, [Eagleton \(2007, p. 140\)](#) avers, can create impressions of real things more powerfully than the visual arts. Not in all cases, of course, but as [Sutherland \(2010, p. 97\)](#) cogently comments, “The image crystallizes. It makes the linear spatial and can, when used by a great writer, enrich rather than impoverish meaning.”

Poems, thirdly, are sequential as well as spatial. They possess the narrative component that’s integral to the “brands are stories” school of thought ([Holt, 2004](#)). But poems’ rhythm and rhyme can impart additional momentum that drives the narrative along. Great poems, as with great brands ([Kotler, 2003](#)), tend to be dynamic, zestful, forceful, energetic and, compared to most prose, comparatively compact. They are pocket rockets, pithy yet potent. They pack a lot into a little, as do classic logos, slogans, brand names, mission statements: Just Do It, Does She or Doesn’t She, Diamonds Are Forever, Call For a Carlsberg, The World’s Favorite Airline, Red Bull Gives You Wings, GE Brings Good Things to Life, The Man Your Man Could Smell Like, Wonderbra for the Woman You Are. As such, poems are more in keeping with today’s short-form, socially-mediated, user-generated modes of marketing communication than the encyclopedic brand books of yore ([Parks, 2014](#)). True, micro-poetry is still awaiting its iPlath, iPound, iPope, iPoe, to say nothing of iPrufrock ([Cripps, 2013](#)). However, Sainsbury’s haiku-writing employee probably said more about emotional branding—the daily demands of delivering in-store experiences—than any number of learned articles:

*Too shy to complain  
Express my displeasure by  
Writing these haikus*

If, fourthly, our disconsolate confectioner is an embodiment of branding understanding—which is seriously out of sync, conceptually, with contemporary consumer culture—his recourse to poetry points the way forward. Insofar as it meets a need. As noted above, the traditional notion that brands are crisp, clear, cogent, coherent—tangible *things* that managers command and control ([Brasel, 2012](#))—is giving way to the realization that brands are less controllable and more intangible than before ([Fournier & Avery, 2011](#)). Time-tested models of branding understanding, the cogs, wheels, onions, prisms, pyramids, icebergs et al. are being supplanted by gestalts, by collages, by manifolds, by assemblages, by diaphanous ghosts in the marketing machine. Ambiguity, increasingly, is the order of the day ([Slater, 2014](#)). Vagueness is a hard sell, however. What self-respecting manager would aspire to

uncertainty, ambivalence, equivocation, the indefinite? Textbooks, accordingly, tend to stick with the tangible, tried-and-tested templates, as do how-to handbooks that promise to build a brand in seven easy steps, or over a long weekend, or for those who belong to the Dummies demographic.

The beauty of the Brands-Are-Poems (BAP) idea is that it is simultaneously tangible—poems are things, punchy, powerful, pungent, plangent—and intangible, inasmuch as poems are typically packed with a plethora of meanings. Ambiguity is regarded as an advantage rather than a disadvantage, not least because it encourages individual consumers to read poems in their own way, to go back to them again and again and again in order to unearth ever more insights ([Wainwright, 2011](#)). Great poems are inexhaustible. They engage consumers’ emotions. They bring comfort, consolation, tears, and laughter. They are experiential. They are unforgettable. They express the human condition. And the same is true of iconic brands like Apple, IKEA, Lego, Gucci, Guinness. . . .

### 5.3. Instrumental observations

A compelling case can be made for BAP, but will it fly with hard-headed, hard-pressed, hard-to-impress executives? Poetry, [Timberg \(2015\)](#) recounts, isn’t easy to sell at the best of times, but selling “free” verse on the basis of its inherent ambiguity is tougher than tough. After 60 years of textbook rhetoric concerning crisp, clear, iceberg-alike brands, making the case for equivocal, evocative odes and idylls is easier said than done. However, as [Morgan et al. \(2010\)](#) point out, ambiguity is unavoidable in business life and presuming it doesn’t exist is foolhardy, to put it mildly.

At the same time, it is far from foolhardy to envisage a far from far-fetched situation where jaded brand managers forego outward-bound weekends of fire-walking, paint-balling, and assault courses for what *The Economist* calls inward-bound retreats devoted to reading uplifting works of literature. Most companies “that pose as thought leaders are often ‘thought laggards’: risk analysts who recycle yesterday’s newspapers, and management consultants who champion yesterday’s successes just as they are about to go out of business” (*The Economist*, 2014, p. 80). Hence the need to read the classics, poetry included.

But why stop at reading? Why not workshops devoted to writing poetry about the brands they control and compete against? Workshops that debate which form of poem is most appropriate—limerick, sonnet, sestina, ballad—for the brands and sub-brands under consideration? Workshops

which ask whether the brands concerned are rhymed, unrhymed, consonant, dissonant, free flowing, or strictly metrical? Workshops where the poetic outcomes are conveyed to current and potential customers to see if they can identify the (anonymized) brands from the couplets and, if not, why not?

Consider Ireland's preeminent brand, the largest low-cost airline in Europe. Irreverent and irascible, Ryanair is notorious for its appalling customer service, its couldn't-care-less attitude, and its chief executive's refusal to apologize for his belligerent brand's misbehavior (Brown, 2006). People get what they pay for, says Michael O'Leary, and if passengers pay peanuts they can't expect free peanuts en route (Hyde, 2013). If ever a brand were a limerick, that brand is Ryanair:

*The Irish airline ruled by O'Leary  
Treats customers unusually cruelly  
They're herded like sheep  
Their kids wail and weep  
But at least it gets them there safely*

O'Leary's branded leopard, admittedly, is attempting to change its spots, though many customers suspect that his new and improved, warm and fuzzy, cuddly and caring Ryanair is a ruse (Barber, 2014). At least they knew where they stood before:

*A masochist once flew Ryanair  
Then said it was very unfair  
He'd been hoping for hell  
But they treated him well  
Whatever happened to customer care?*

IKEA is another brand that is ripe for poetic appraisal. It too has been known to maltreat customers (see Stenebo, 2010). Its retail stores are baffling to the uninitiated. Its combination of secretive behavior and stupendous commercial success is intriguing. Assembling its self-assembly furniture is challenging, to put it politely. Haiku seem appropriate somehow. Or should that be Haiketa?

*IKEA's idea  
Flat-pack Swedish furniture  
Assembled in anguish*

*Bright blue retail store  
Linger in the labyrinth  
Allen key agony*

Chanel ranks among the most romantic brands on earth, alongside Tiffany and Fabergé (Baxter-Wright, 2012). Released in the same year as *The Waste Land* was written, Number 5 is the olfactory equivalent of Eliot's modern epic. The world's first synthetic perfume, with a minimalist modernist

bottle that remains unchanged since its launch, Number 5 is still the bestselling brand of fragrance bar none. It owes at least some of its latter-day allure to money-is-no-object advertising featuring movie stars like Nicole Kidman, Audrey Tautou, and Brad Pitt, though the last of these was much mocked. However, if Brad Pitt's bewildering brand babble is treated as a modernist love poem, a sonnet in vers libre, then it begins to make sense:

*It's not a journey  
Every journey ends  
But we go on  
The world turns  
And we turn with it  
Plans disappear  
Dreams take over  
But wherever I go  
There you are  
My luck  
My fate  
My fortune  
Chanel No. 5  
Inevitable.*

## 6. Not with a Bing but a Twitter

While we're waiting for apothegms to supplant abseiling, it's worth recalling that this year is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of T. S. Eliot's first published poem. Promptly dismissed as disgusting, deviant, and downright demented, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is nowadays acknowledged as one of the landmark artworks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the breakout moment of the modernist movement (Gay, 2007). Although just about everyone is familiar with Prufrock's unforgettable opening image of a personified hospitalized catatonic sunset—as well as later sublimine lines involving rolled trousers, eating peaches, singing mermaids, calibrated coffee spoons, and women who go to and fro talking of Michelangelo—most ordinary readers are unaware that Prufrock is a brand name. Eliot named his path-breaking poem after an upmarket retail store in his home town of St. Louis, a prestigious product placement that the brand boasted about for decades.

Some readers, admittedly, may be surprised by the great poet's brand name-dropping. Eliot is often portrayed as the absolute epitome of the elitist, art-for-art's-sake aesthete pouring scorn on the benighted bourgeoisie. The reality, however, is that he was a very canny operator, a commercially minded "authorpreneur" (*The Economist*, 2015), with business in his blood. He was the youngest son of a successful midwestern industrialist, who built the



Hydraulic-Press Brick Company into a thriving regional brand. He began his first business venture at the age of eleven, a self-published magazine called *Fireside*, which contained spoof advertisements for popular brands of patent medicine, including the poetically named Dr. Pearce's Pleasant Pellets for Pink People. He was salting his sophomore stanzas with deluxe brands of liquor, and waxing lyrical about Boston's upscale department stores, while still an undergraduate student at Harvard University. His later oeuvre is replete with matters mercantile—to say nothing of ample brand name-dropping (James, 2014)—and, as observed earlier, a proto brand community arose around *The Waste Land*. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, he was aptly described by his most recent biographer as “a poet with a business brain” (Crawford, 2015, p. 42).

Epitomized by the Eliot exemplar, profitable fusions of art and mart are readily apparent. They go back a very long way, what's more. According to Fenton's (2003) overview of literature's historical trajectory, poetry began with the ear-catching cries of street vendors and hawkers, who had to make themselves heard above the marketplace hubbub. Yet, despite their ancestral co-dependency—poets plied their trade in ancient Greek agoras—and notwithstanding their mounting intimacy, if only because today's self-reliant creative artist has little choice but to “become his or her own producer, promoter and publicist” (Timberg, 2015, p. 7), the relationship between culture and commerce remains fraught (Sansom, 2014). As Sainsbury's response to its in-house haiku writer bears witness, bards and brands are somewhat reluctant bedfellows. They sleep in separate rooms for the most part. Often with good reason, it has to be said:

*Been sneezing all day  
Good thing HIV cannot  
Be passed on like that*

At the same time, there's no doubt that poetry is profitable for brand managers and marketing researchers both. Poetry improves our prose (Stern, 1998). Poetry stimulates our synapses (Sherry & Schouten, 2002). Poetry transports us to the secluded bower of creativity, imagination, management by wandering lonely as a cloud (Wijland, 2011). Not everyone appreciates poetry's potentially profitable contribution, admittedly. Poets, for some, have too high an opinion of themselves, though no more so than ennobled economists. Poetry, for others, is way too difficult for words, though no more so than structural equation modelling. Poetry, for yet others, is far, far, far too fanciful, though big data-driven literary theorists like Franco Moretti (2013) would surely beg to differ. Poetry, for one

and all, is nothing if not polysemic—like Walt Whitman it contains multitudes—though that is equally true of branding in today's tumultuous world of texts, tweets, hashtags, and twihaiku (Cripps, 2013).

This article has endeavored to steer a course between the Scylla of poetry's elitist stigma and the Charybdis of managers' utilitarian taint. It argues that versifying has its uses—plentiful uses, practical uses, profitable uses. It posits a rich and fruitful metaphor for branding at a time when old-established models like onions, icebergs, and pyramids are decomposing, melting, and crumbling respectively. It's a metaphor that's more in tune with the tenets of personal branding, celebrity branding, cultural branding than those typically found in traditional textbooks. It's an approach that offers ample opportunities for arts-led academic research and inward-bound executive education. It's an idea that literary types can buy into, once they accept that bards and brands have much in common. As T. S. Eliot almost observed in *The Love Song of J. Sainsbury PLC*: Let us go then you and I/ When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like Taste the Difference cookies on a table.

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