Grappling With Both Sides

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The Polish word *obojętny* "indifferent" has quite an interesting – and even edifying – history. As recently as the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the adjective described something that could be grabbed or handled from both sides. Although many Poles might not notice it, this is still visible in the form of the word today: *obo-* (a form of *oba* "both") and *-jęty* (a form of *jąć* "take"). And so back then a pot or a sword, for instance, might have been described as *obojętny* (here: "two-handled" or "two-handed"). The adjective could also express the more abstract meaning of something two-sided, ambiguous – an unclear statement or word, for instance. Someone unable to maintain an upright posture might be described as *chwiejący się obojętnie* ("teetering from one side to the other"), and the priest Dawid Pilchowski penned an appeal in the late seventeenth century for the country's laws to be *jasne, wyrozumiałe, nietrudne i nieobojętne* ("clear, comprehensible, simple and not variously interpretable"). And so, from things that could be grabbed on two different sides, speakers began to apply the word to things that could interpreted in two different ways. With time, this twofold interpretation – begin able to swing one way or the other, so to speak – began to be perceived as a lack of any distinctiveness. And so, until quite recently *obojętny* could describe something lackluster, indistinct, bland (e.g. *obojętna potrawa* "a tasteless dish").

From such duality to the point of indistinctness, it was only a short step to another shift in meaning – whereby an *obojętny* person was someone who sought to serve two different masters, who was duplicitous and deceitful (the kind of person who "wishes to please everyone"; is "two-sided; both hair-cutter and beard-shaver; is hard to understand; is affable to everyone and knows how to fawn up to anyone" – as the seventeenth-century lexicographer Grzegorz Knapski explained). Next, being able to take both sides came to be interpreted as not being in favor of either of them – and so in modern Polish, we use *obojętny* to describe someone dispassionate, who doesn't care, who does not react vibrantly to what is happening. Interestingly, we also use it to describe issues we are not passionate about.

The chain of semantic shifts from "able to be grabbed from both sides" through "leaning to one side or the other" to "favoring neither side, lacking any distinctiveness" could be seen as carrying a warning: that trying to have things both ways ultimately might leave one considered uninspiring and lackluster by others. In other words, the approach summed up in the Polish idiom *Panu Bogu świeczkę i diabłu ogarek* "give the candle to God, but the candle-end to the devil" (roughly equivalent to the English "trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds") just might leave you indifferent to others, and others indifferent to you. ■

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Marco Carlone, Vestigia delle Terme di Tito. *Abduction of Hippodamia*, Quadro from the vault decorations of room 27, 1776

PIOTR LIGIER, FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM IN WARSAW