

1934

# Our Master's Voice: Advertising

## James Rorty

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edition

with a new  
introduction by  
Jefferson Pooley



*James Rorty*

OUR MASTER'S VOICE  
*ADVERTISING*

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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## 20 THE CARPENTER RE-CARPENTERED

ALTHOUGH Mr. Bruce Barton represents a logical projection of the rising curve along which we have traced the evolution of the American hero, he is, after Elbert Hubbard, rather an anti-climax. Mr. Barton's rôle in the war, as director of publicity for the Y.M.C.A. was comparable, in a way, to that of Jay Cooke in the Civil War. But Mr. Barton's rôle was much smaller and the techniques employed were much more impersonal and mechanized. Moreover, this mechanization and industrialization of sales publicity became even more pronounced during the period of advertising expansion that lasted from the Armistice to the fall of 1929. It would seem that Mr. Barton's distinctive contribution to the evolution of the American hero was the professionalization of advertising salesmanship and its sanctification in terms of a modernized version of the Protestant Ethic. The analysis is complicated by the fact that we are dealing here with a contemporary figure whose career is not completed; nor are the facts of his career readily available. This, however, is perhaps not so important as it might seem. Mr. Barton has been a prolific writer, and it is with the evolution of his thought that we are primarily concerned.<sup>1</sup>

*The Man Nobody Knows* was published in 1924, the year following the publication of Veblen's *Absentee Ownership*, which, in general, has supplied the framework of theory for this analysis.<sup>2</sup> It was only with the publication of this book that Mr. Barton became, in any sense, a national figure. In retrospect it is clear that the ad-man's pseudo-culture had already entered upon its period of decadence. The far flung radiance of advertising during this period was a false dawn; the fever-flush of a culture already doomed and dying at the roots. But it is precisely in such periods that the nature of the culture is most explicitly expressed and documented. *The Man Nobody Knows* is an almost perfect thing of its kind: more significant and revealing as a sociological document, I think, than either Barnum's autobiography or Hubbard's *Message to Garcia*. We see the same thing in the Athens of Pericles. As Euripides was to the more virile poets of the Athenian rise to power, Aeschylus and Sophocles, so Bruce Barton is to Barnum and Fra Elbertus.

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<sup>1</sup> [For a particularly perceptive treatment of Barton, see Lears, T. J. Jackson, "From Salvation To Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1920*, edited by Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, 1-38 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).]

<sup>2</sup> [Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1924); and Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times: The Case of America* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1923).]

When Mr. Barton published *The Man Nobody Knows* he had already achieved some standing as a writer of articles and fiction for the popular women's magazines and his lay sermonettes were appearing in the *Red Book*. The advertising agency in which he was senior partner was rapidly expanding and the chorus of applause which greeted *The Man Nobody Knows* was no small factor in enhancing the prestige and profits of its author's more strictly secular activities in promoting the sale of such products as Lysol, Hind's Honey and Almond Cream, *The Harvard Classics*, and a little later, the Gillette safety razor and blades.

In 1924 the writer was in California, employed at part time by a San Francisco advertising agency and for the rest, engaged in seeing the country, writing poetry and participating in indigenous cultural enterprises including the editing of an anthology of contemporary California poetry. In connection with this latter enterprise, conducted in collaboration with Miss Genevieve Taggard and the late George Sterling, I encountered the poetry of Robinson Jeffers, whose work was then almost unknown and who was living at Carmel on the California coast. Greatly excited, I went to the editor of a magazine published in San Francisco and devoted to the economic and cultural interests of the Pacific coast. I informed this editor that California had a great poet and that I should like to call attention to his work in the pages of the magazine.

It is at this point that Bruce Barton enters the picture. Shortly before, I had been approached by this editor, or his associate, with a practical proposition. The lay sermons of Mr. Barton in the *Red Book* were considered highly edifying by the ex-Kansans and ex-Iowans who had sold their farms and come to sun their declining years on the California littoral. The editor felt that if he was to increase his circulation, he must offer equivalent literary and philosophical merchandize. I was an advertising man. Mr. Barton was an advertising man. Couldn't I write something just as good as Mr. Barton's sermonettes?

I tried. As I studied my model it seemed a simple enough task. I, too, could quote Socrates, and Emerson, and Lincoln. I had the requisite theological background—my grandfather had been a shouting Methodist. And as for the style, I, too, I thought, could be simple though erudite, chaste though human, practical but portentous.

Well, I wore out one whole typewriter ribbon on that job and produced nothing but sour parodies. Some imp of perversity stood at my shoulder and whispered obscenities into my ear. I quoted Marx when I had intended to quote Napoleon or Benjamin Franklin. Desperately I tried to shake off this incubus. Once I started with a quotation from Louisa May Alcott, but when I pulled it out of the typewriter it read like a contribution to Captain Billy's Whizbang.

Some of the least awful of my efforts I submitted to my prospective employer. He shook his head. They lacked the human touch, he said. As a matter of fact, they were human, all too human. My spirit was willing but the flesh was weak.

The editor was kindly and told me to keep trying. I was still supposed to be trying when I came in to bring up the matter of Robinson Jeffers. As I recall it, there was some confusion on that occasion. The editor was still hot on the trail of a Bruce Barton *ersatz* and he couldn't get it through his head that I was talking about something else. When I finally managed to get within hailing distance of his attention, he consented reluctantly to print an unpaid review of Jeffers' privately printed *Tamar*. The magazine did print part of my review but the editor wrote a footnote in which he dissented strongly from my enthusiasm.

About two years later, I saw a copy of a magazine published at the Carmel artists' colony. The center spread was an advertisement of a Carmel realtor headed "Carmel, the Home of Jeffers." That gave me pause. If I had only gone to the realtors in the first place, I reflected, I might have made better headway with that Jeffers' promotion. Later, too, I came to understand why I had failed so miserably in my attempt to imitate those Barton sermonettes. The simple fact that they were advertisements had never occurred to me. They were and are advertisements, designed to sell the American pseudoculture to itself.

I was used to writing advertisements. Maybe, if I had tried, I could have written correct imitations of Mr. Barton's advertisements of obscure but contented earthworms, of the virtues of industry and diligence, of the vanity of fame. Also, maybe not. Mr. Barton may be only a minor artist, but I suspect that he is inimitable.

The digression is perhaps excusable in that it reveals the early spread of the Barton influence as compared with that of a major poet of the era whom the average American has never heard of. By the time I returned to New York, Mr. Barton had published *The Man Nobody Knows* and was soon a national figure comparable in influence to Henry Ward Beecher. Instead of preaching in Plymouth Church, he was the honored guest at luncheons of Rotary and Kiwanis clubs and Chambers of Commerce. Instead of editing a religious journal—early in his career he had edited the short-lived *Every Week*—his syndicated sermonettes were published in hundreds of newspapers. A professor of homiletics in a well-known seminary has assured me that the influence of Mr. Barton's writings upon the Protestant Church in America has been enormous. The son of a clergyman, brought up in a small Middle-Western city, not unlike the "Middletown" so ably described by the Lynds, he learned early the lessons of pious emulation and of "salesmanlike pusillanimity" which were the ineluctable

patterns of behavior for all young men of good family.<sup>3</sup> And Mr. Barton's family was excellent. His father was not merely a popular and respected preacher but a scholar of parts, author of a not undistinguished life of Lincoln. But this distinction, in the early years at least, brought no proportionate pecuniary rewards. So Bruce suffered the typical ordeal of the minister's son. He had the entree to the best houses in the community but no money with which to compete in the local arena of conspicuous waste, pecuniary snobbism, etc.

Here we have the two opposing absolutes which, in his later creative years, Mr. Barton undertook to reconcile: the quite genuine Christian piety, and enforced asceticism of the parsonage, and the "spirit of self-help and collusive cupidity that made and animated the country town at its best." The quotation is from Veblen's study of the country town in *Absentee Ownership*.<sup>4</sup> The neo-Calvinist ethical rationalizations described by Max Weber are brought into sharp relief by Veblen's analysis. In the following passage he seems almost to be laying down the ideological ground plan for Mr. Barton's subsequent career. Says Veblen:

Solvency not only puts a man in the way of acquiring merit, but it makes him over into a substantial citizen whose opinions and preferences have weight and who is, therefore, enabled to do much good for his fellow citizens—that is to say, shape them somewhat to his own pattern. To create mankind in one's own image is a work that partakes of the divine, and it is a high privilege which the substantial citizen commonly makes the most of. Evidently this salesmanlike pursuit of the net gain has a high cultural value at the same time that it is invaluable as a means to a competence.

One must not be misled into regarding Mr. Barton's specific contribution as of the iconoclastic or creative sort. He found ready to hand the ethical code and the theological rationalization of this code. His task was merely that of the continuer, the popularizer. Here in Veblen's words is a formulation, complete in all essentials, of the idealistic code of the advertising agency business, of which Mr. Barton was to become so distinguished an ornament:

The country town and the business of its substantial citizens are and have ever been an enterprise in salesmanship; and the beginning of wisdom in salesmanship is equivocation. There is a decent measure of equivocation which runs its course on the hither side of prevarication or duplicity, and an honest salesman—such "an honest man as will bear watching"—will endeavor to confine his best efforts to this highly moral zone where stands the upright man who is not under oath to tell the whole truth. But "self-preservation knows no moral law"; and it is not to be overlooked that there habitually enter into the retail trade of the country towns many competitors who do not falter at prevarication and who even do not hesitate at outright duplicity; and it will not do

<sup>3</sup> [Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929).]

<sup>4</sup> [Veblen, *Absentee Ownership*, 156.]

for an honest man to let the rogues get away with the best—or any—of the trade, at the risk of too narrow a margin of profit on his own business—that is to say a narrower margin than might be had in the absence of scruple. And then there is always the base line of what the law allows; and what the law allows can not be far wrong.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> [Veblen, *Absentee Ownership*, 157.]

When Mr. Barton was going to high school and Sunday school, one of the things he could scarcely help noticing was the characteristic red store front of the A. & P. Big Business was beginning to build the distributive counterpart of the emerging system of mass production. Veblen notes this transition as follows:

Toward the close of the century, and increasingly since the turn of the century, the trading community of the country towns has been losing its initiative as a maker of charges and has by degrees become tributary to the great vested interests that move in the background of the market. In a way the country towns have in an appreciable degree fallen into the position of tollgate keepers for the distribution of goods and collection of customs for the large absentee owners of the business.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [Veblen, *Absentee Ownership*, 152.]

Mr. Barton's eminence both as advertising man and as an author became established during the postwar decade. As most people realize by this time, the catastrophic economic and cultural effects of the war were deferred and postdated so far as America was concerned. This postdating was accomplished by salesmanship and promotion applied to new industries—notably automobiles, the movies and radio. It was without doubt the rankest period of financial and commercial thievery in our whole history. Salesmanship became a thing-in-itself, incorporated, watered, reorganized, re-watered, aided and abetted by the state, and then duly sanctified and validated under the Constitution. Veblen's concept of *Absentee Ownership* became less and less descriptive of the actual situation in which the going rule became: "never give a stockholder a break." The more realistic terms were no longer owners and managers but "insiders" and "outsiders." One has only to refer to the Insull affair, and to the exploits of Messrs. Mitchell and Wiggin of the financial oligarchy, to establish the justice of this description. The *reductio ad absurdum* of the capitalist economy was accomplished by the "profitless prosperity" of the New Era. It will remain Mr. Barton's undying distinction that, in *The Man Nobody Knows*, he accomplished the *reductio ad absurdum* of "the Protestant Ethic."

## 2

With this background we are now in a position to give Mr. Barton's masterpiece the sober and respectful attention which it should



long ago have received at the hands of sociologists and literary critics. It is worth recalling that Henry Ward Beecher, too, wrote a life of Christ and that Elbert Hubbard, albeit a free thinker, was also faithful after his fashion in that he did not fail to exploit such elements of the Christian tradition as suited his market. The Christs of Renan, of Nietzsche, of Henry Ward Beecher, of Elbert Hubbard, of Giovanni Papini, of Bruce Barton—these and other interpretations of the Christ figure should provide an interesting and instructive gallery for the student of human ecology. But in the space at our disposal here we must confine ourselves to Mr. Barton's Christ. Clearly Mr. Barton felt that if the Saviour was to live again in the mind and heart of the twentieth century American business man, a radical though reverent reconstruction of the legendary Christ was required.

The first point to note about *The Man Nobody Knows* is that the book is an advertisement. Mr. Barton is clearly engaged in "selling" the twentieth century American sales and advertising executive to the country at large and to *himself*. This secondary aspect of Mr. Barton's unique promotion enterprise is very important. It must be remembered that in terms of social prestige the big-time salesman, and especially the advertising man, was still, in 1924, an upstart and a parvenu; this in spite of the strategic, even crucial importance of the salesman, the promoter, the advertising man in the struggle of business to keep the disruptive force of applied science from destroying the capitalist economy. In 1924 we were already face to face with the tragi-comic social paradox which Stuart Chase describes in his *Economy of Abundance*. The only method of resolving that paradox open to the business man was to sell more goods at a profit and, when the "sales resistance" of a progressively dis-employed population couldn't be broken down, to sabotage industry by monopoly control of production and prices.

So Mr. Barton was the man of the hour on more than one count. Despite the stout labors of P. T. Barnum, Elbert Hubbard and others, advertising still bore the stigma of its patent medicine origins. In the callous view of the crowd, the adman still wore the rattlesnake belt and brandished the pills of the medicine man who, in the light of flaring gasoline torches, had for many decades been giving the admiring citizens of Veblen's "country town" practical lessons in the theory of business enterprise and the uses of salesmanlike duplicity.

But times had changed. Advertising on the grand scale had become an industry no less essential than coal or steel. It had become a profession endorsed, sanctified and subsidized by dozens of Greek-porticoed "Schools of Business Administration" in which a new priesthood of "business economists" translated the techniques of mass prevarication into suitable academic euphemisms.

Advertising—in other words, mass cozenage—had become a major function of business management. The ad-man had become the first lieutenant of the new Caesars of America's commercial imperium not merely on the economic front but also on the cultural front.

The rattlesnake belt and the gasoline torch were no longer appropriate for so eminent a functionary. They must be burned, buried, destroyed, forgotten. The ad-man needed glorification and needed it badly.

### 3

It was to this task that Mr. Barton addressed himself with an elan, an imaginative sweep and daring that can be adequately characterized only by the word "genius." Consider the magnitude of the enterprise. It was necessary not merely to reconcile the ways of the ad-man to God, but to redeem and rehabilitate a tedious and discredited Saviour in the eyes of a faithless and materialist generation. Mr. Barton accomplished both of these stupendous tasks in a single brief book. And he was able to do this because, as a true son of his father, he had not fallen from grace. Like a modern Sir Galahad, his strength was as the strength of ten because his heart was pure. He was sincere.

I am aware that certain readers, who have not had the benefits of Mr. Barton's strict upbringing, will probably question this statement. I can only invite them to consider the evidence.

In the best homiletic tradition, Mr. Barton starts with a scriptural text:

"Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's *Business*?" (The italics are Mr. Barton's.)

The people settle back in their pews, the little boy in the second row finds a safe cache for his gum, the rustle of garments ceases, and the little boy hears the preface of Mr. Barton's great book entitled "How it came to be written."

The little boy's body sat bolt upright in the rough wooden chair, but his mind was very busy.

This was his weekly hour of revolt.

The kindly lady who could never seem to find her glasses would have been terribly shocked if she had known what was going on inside the little boy's mind.

"You must love Jesus," she said every Sunday, "and God."

The little boy did not say anything. He was afraid to say anything; he was almost afraid that something would happen to him because of the things he thought.

Love God! Who was always picking on people for having a good time, and sending little boys to hell because they couldn't do better in a world which He had made so hard! Why didn't God take some one His own size?

Love Jesus! The little boy looked up at the picture which hung on the Sunday school wall. It showed a pale young man with flabby forearms and a sad expression. The young man had red whiskers.

Then the little boy looked across to the other wall. There was Daniel, good old Daniel, standing off the lions. The little boy liked Daniel. He liked David, too, with the trusty sling that landed a stone square on the forehead of Goliath. And Moses, with his rod and his big brass snake. They were winners—those three. He wondered if David could whip Jeffries. Samson could! Say, that would have been a fight!

But Jesus! Jesus was the "lamb of God." The little boy did not know what that meant, but it sounded like Mary's little lamb. Something for girls—sissified. Jesus was also "meek and lowly," a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." He went around for three years telling people not to do things.

Sunday was Jesus' day; it was wrong to feel comfortable or laugh on Sunday.

The little boy was glad when the superintendent thumped the bell and announced: "We will now sing the closing hymn." One more bad hour was over. For one more week the little boy had got rid of Jesus.

Years went by and the boy grew up and became a business man.

He began to wonder about Jesus.

He said to himself: "Only strong magnetic men inspire great enthusiasm and build great organizations. Yet Jesus built the greatest organization of all. It is extraordinary...."

He said, "I will read what the men who knew Jesus personally said about Him. I will read about Him as though He were a new historical character, about whom I had never heard anything at all."

The man was amazed.

A physical weakling! Where did they get that idea? Jesus pushed a plane and swung an adze; He was a successful carpenter. He slept outdoors and spent His days walking around His favorite lake. His muscles were so strong that when He drove the money-changers out, nobody dared to oppose Him!

A kill-joy! He was the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem! The criticism which proper people made was that he spent too much time with publicans and sinners (very good fellows, on the whole, the man thought) and enjoyed society too much. They called Him a "wine bibber and a gluttonous man."

A failure! He picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world.

When the man had finished his reading he exclaimed, "This is a man nobody knows."

"Some day," said he, "some one will write a book about Jesus. Every business man will read it and send it to his partners and his salesmen. For it will tell the story of the founder of modern business."

Note the "action pattern" suggested in the last sentence. It is a recognized device of advertising copy technique: "Mail the coupon today!" "Look for the trade-mark!" "Send no money," etc. Business men got the point and distributed thousands of copies of the book. In fact no other lay sermon, save only Elbert Hubbard's *Message to Garcia*, has been so generously subsidized in this way.

Note, too, the evocation of the "little boy" who is, of course, Mr. Barton himself. But he is also all the other little boys who had squirmed in those straight pews of the Protestant Communion and now ruled the church of business. Out of the mouths of babes. Mr. Barton, who is, in fact, a remarkable example of arrested development, didn't have to get down on his hands and knees to play church with these children. Standing upright and fearless, he saw eye to eye with every fourteen-year-old intelligence in the hierarchy of business.

The process of imaginative identification with the Saviour, suggested in the preface, is continued in a sequence of logical and reverent chapters: "The Executive," "The Outdoor Man," "The Sociable Man," "His Method," "His Advertisements," "The Founder of Modern Business," "The Master."

It is regrettable that space is lacking for extensive quotation. No paraphrase of Mr. Barton's remarkable chronicle can do more than faintly suggest the apostolic glow and conviction of the original. In the first chapter he notes that the great Nazarene, like all successful business executives, was above personal resentments and petty irritations. When the disciples, weary at the end of the day, were rebuffed by inhospitable villagers, they urged Jesus to call down fire from heaven and destroy them. Here is Mr. Barton's imaginative rendering of the Saviour's behavior on this occasion:

There are times when nothing a man can say is nearly so powerful as saying nothing. Every executive knows that instinctively. To argue brings him down to the level of those with whom he argues; silence convicts them of their folly; they wish they had not spoken so quickly; they wonder what he thinks. The lips of Jesus tightened; His fine features showed the strain of the preceding weeks and in His eyes there was a foreshadowing of the more bitter weeks to come.... He had so little time, and they were constantly wasting His time.... He had come to save mankind, and they wanted Him to gratify His personal resentment by burning up a village!

So, in later years, Mr. Barton, like Jesus, like Lincoln, knew how to ignore the jeers of captious critics. He was a personage and knew it. He had important work to do. He had to write with his own hand

the advertising message of important Christian advertisers, Jewish advertisers and—just advertisers. And he had to direct the work of others and endure, like Jesus, the stupidity and folly of his helpers; like Elbert Hubbard, he was sometimes moved to cry out against the “slipshod imbecility and heartless ingratitude which but for their enterprise would be both hungry and homeless.” Once in a symposium on what the advertising agency business most needed, he wrote, “God give us men.”

It would seem probable, too, that Mr. Barton was not unmindful of the career of his great predecessor, Fra Elbertus. Did Mr. Barton think of himself as playing Jesus to the Fra’s. John the Baptist? Probably not, but the following passage suggests the comparison:

Another young man had grown up near by and was beginning to be heard from in the larger world. His name was John. How much the two boys may have seen of each other we do not know; but certainly the younger, Jesus, looked up to and admired his handsome, fearless cousin. We can imagine with what eager interest he must have received the reports of John’s impressive success at the capital. He was the sensation of the season. The fashionable folk of the city were flocking out to the river to hear his denunciations; some of them even accepted his demand for repentance and were baptized.... A day came when he (Jesus) was missing from the carpenter shop; the sensational news spread through the streets that he had gone to Jerusalem, to John, to be baptized.

Why boys leave home. Another bright young man digs himself out of the sticks and goes to the big town to make his fortune.

In the chapter entitled “The Outdoor Man” Mr. Barton undertakes to prove that Jesus was what is known as a he-man, somewhat resembling Mr. Barton himself in stature and physique. In support of this contention he points out:

1. He was a carpenter and carpenters develop powerful forearms. No weakling could have wielded the whip that drove the money-changers from the temple.
2. He was attractive to women, including “Mary and Martha, two gentle maiden ladies who lived outside Jerusalem” and Mary Magdalene, whose sins he forgave.

In “The Sociable Man” Jesus is seen at the Marriage Feast of Cana. If not the life of the party He is at least genial and tactful. The wine gives out and Mr. Barton exclaims: “Picture if you will the poor woman’s chagrin. This was her daughter’s wedding—the one social event in the life of the family.” So Jesus, to uphold the family’s middle-class dignity turns the water into wine.

“His Method” describes the selling campaigns of the obscure Nazarene through which he climbed to the distinction of being the

"most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem." Paul, especially, impresses Mr. Barton—Paul, who was "all things to all men" and who became the hero of Mr. Barton's latest book, *He Upset The World*.<sup>7</sup>

"Surely," remarks Mr. Barton, "no one will consider us lacking in reverence if we say that every one of the 'principles of modern salesmanship' on which business men so much pride themselves, are brilliantly exemplified in Jesus' talk and work."

The final conference with the disciples is presented as a kind of "pep" talk similar to those by which, during the late New Era, the salesmen of South American bonds were nerved to go forth and gather in the savings of widows and orphans.

"His Advertisements" in Mr. Barton's view were the miracles. Here is the way one of them, according to Mr. Barton, might have been reported in the *Capernaum News*:

**PALSIED MAN HEALED  
JESUS OF NAZARETH CLAIMS RIGHT TO  
FORGIVE SINS  
PROMINENT SCRIBES OBJECT  
"BLASPHEMOUS," SAYS LEADING CITIZEN  
"BUT ANYWAY I CAN WALK," HEALED  
MAN RETORTS**

In the parables, especially, says Mr. Barton, the Master wrote admirable advertising copy, and laid the foundations of the profession to which Mr. Barton pays this eloquent tribute:

As a profession advertising is young; as a force it is as old as the world. The first four words uttered, "Let there be light," constitute its charter.

In "The Founder of Modern Business" Mr. Barton finds Jesus' recipe for success in the following scriptural quotation:

Whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister; and whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all.

Mr. Barton is quick to identify this as the modern "Service" creed of Rotary. He says:

... quite suddenly, Business woke up to a great discovery. You will hear that discovery proclaimed in every sales convention as something distinctly modern and up to date. It is emblazoned on the advertising pages of every magazine.

One gets fed up with this sort of thing rather easily. Addicts of the faith who find their appetite for the gospel according to Bruce Barton unappeased by the foregoing quotations, are urged to consult the original. The book ran into many editions and duly took its place on

<sup>7</sup> [Bruce Barton, *He Upset the World* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1932).]

the meagre bookshelves of the American Babbitry, alongside of the First Success Story—Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, the Second Success Story—P. T. Barnum's *Autobiography*, and a de luxe edition of Elbert Hubbard's *The Message to Garcia*.

In due course, Mr. Barton's great book was made into a movie, which enjoyed some success and further extended the popularity and influence of the author. So far as I know, no attempt has been made to sculpture Mr. Barton's re-carpentered Carpenter in wood, plaster or papier-maché. It would seem that the dissemination of the new icon might well have been put on a mass-production, mass-distribution basis, like that of the Kewpie doll, and Mickey Mouse. The neglect of this logical extension of business enterprise is possibly attributable to the jealous opposition of the vested interests concerned with the ancient Propagation of the Faith, to which Veblen refers in a passage already quoted.

*The Man Nobody Knows* was preceded by a relatively unsuccessful lay sermon entitled *What Can A Man Believe?* It was followed by *The Book Nobody Knows*, a volume of Old and New Testament exegesis, done with Mr. Barton's characteristic unconventional charm, which found much favor in church circles, and among Christian business men. A collection of Mr. Barton's syndicated sermonettes has been published under the title *On the Up and Up*. One finishes the reading of this volume convinced more than ever that Mr. Barton is sincere. Take, for example, the quite charming little essay entitled "Real Pleasures," in which the author describes his delight in "walking along Fifth Avenue, looking in the shop windows, and making a mental inventory of the things I don't want." This, from the head of one of America's largest advertising agencies, is sheer heresy. But Mr. Barton, being exempt from the "vice of little minds," is full of heresies. Elsewhere he praises the simple joys of primitive country living. And when asked by "Advertising and Selling" to contribute his professional credo to a running symposium which included the leading advertising men in America, Mr. Barton went much farther than any other contributor in recognizing, by implication at least, the inflated and exploitative nature of the business, and in predicting the present drive for government-determined standards and grades. It should be added that his firm has for many years been considered rather exceptionally "ethical" in its practice; that it has never used bought or paid-for testimonials; that it has declined much profitable business on ethical grounds; that it has doubtless tried to give its clients a fair break always, and the public as much of a break as considerations of practical business expediency permitted. There are a number of agencies of which this may be said, and it isn't saying much. Mr. Barton's firm, operating well within the existing code of commercial

morality, and even striving sincerely to advance and stiffen that code, has sponsored and produced huge quantities of advertising bunk, of expedient half-truths, etc.—that being the nature of the business.

It is clear that in Mr. Barton we have at least four personalities:

1. The Sunday School boy who hated the Calvinist Christ (the Beecher complex);
2. The infantile, extraverted, climbing American who created that grotesque ad-man Christ in his own image, as a kind of institutionalized, salesmanlike tailor's dummy, to serve as a kind of robot reception clerk for the front office of Big Business.
3. The timid but talented minor essayist and dilettante who, given different circumstances, and subjected to a different set of social compulsions, might have produced a considerable body of charming and more or less scholarly prose; who might even have come to understand something of the meaning of the Christ legend and of the ethical values by which a civilization lives or dies.
4. The intelligent, acquisitive, informed man of affairs who knows a little of what it is all about, but lacks the nerve to do anything about it, except by intermittently adult fits and starts. Good old Daniel! Just what lions has Mr. Barton ever fought honestly and fought to a finish?

An interesting figure, slighter on the whole than either Beecher or Hubbard, but more complex, perhaps, than either. It was the institutionalized and syndicated Barton that came to the fore again in his last book *He Upset the World*, which was excellently reviewed by Mr. Irving Fineman, the novelist, in the magazine *Opinion* for April 25, 1932. Mr. Fineman notes that Mr. Barton has become a little patronizing in his attitude toward The Man. He knows Him better now, perhaps; certainly he recognizes that St. Paul was a better business man. Says Mr. Fineman: "It is a bit shocking, no later than the twentieth page of this book, to find Bruce Barton censuring Jesus—however gently! 'He had no fixed method, no business-like program.... He came not to found a church or to formulate a creed; He came to lead a life.' So that, once having assigned to each his job—to Jesus, as it were, the divinely pure genius, and to Paul, the hustling, mundane *entrepreneur*—it becomes a simple matter for Mr. Barton to accept, indulgently, the impracticality of the one, who hadn't the sense apparently to syndicate his stuff, and the go-getting tactics of the other, who was frankly, 'all things to all men.'"

In his preface, Mr. Barton explains that he hadn't been interested in St. Paul at first, but was induced by his publisher to re-examine the scriptural sources and thereby converted to writing the book. Mr. Fineman's parting jibe deserves recording:



"He should be warned however against the wiles of publishers, lest one of them induce him to write a little book about Judas."

The implied analogy would be more just if, in Mr. Barton, we were dealing with an adult and fully integrated personality, but obviously this is not the case. One does not accuse a child of betraying anything or anybody. And Mr. Barton exhibits, more clearly, I think, than any other contemporary public figure, the characteristic infantilism of the American business man.

One suspects, however, that Mr. Barton has grown up sufficiently to regret his masterpiece; indeed, that it is beginning to haunt him, like a Frankenstein monster. The following episode, which I have slightly disguised, out of consideration for the organization involved, would appear to confirm this suspicion.

I was once visited in my office by a lady who represented a committee, organized to serve a worthy, sensible, and admirable philanthropic cause. The committee was getting out a new letterhead, of which she showed me a first proof. She explained that she wanted a pregnant sentence that would express the high aims of her movement. She had found that sentence in *The Man Nobody Knows*, by Bruce Barton, author and Christian advertising man. She had learned that I knew Mr. Barton. She knew that his books were copyrighted, but? Would I intercede for her and obtain Mr. Barton's permission to use as the motto of her society one of the most felicitous and beautiful sentences she had ever read?

Gladly, I replied, wondering what this was all about. But what was the sentence?

She opened the Book. She pointed to the underlined sentence. It read: "Let there be Light!"

I dictated a long memorandum urging Mr. Barton to grant her request. Mr. Barton was not amused.