

1934

# Our Master's Voice: Advertising

## James Rorty

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with a new  
introduction by  
Jefferson Pooley



*James Rorty*

OUR MASTER'S VOICE  
*ADVERTISING*

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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Published by MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS in the PUBLIC DOMAIN series

mediastudies.press | 414 W. Broad St., Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

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COVER DESIGN: Mark McGillivray

CREDIT FOR SCAN: Internet Archive, contributor Prelinger Library, 2006 upload

CREDIT FOR LATEX TEMPLATE: Book design inspired by Edward Tufte, by The Tufte-LaTeX Developers

ISBN 978-1-951399-00-9 (print) | ISBN 978-1-951399-01-6 (ebook)

DOI 10.21428/3f8575cb.dbb9917

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER 202094177

*Edition 1 published in October 2020*

## 10 CHAIN MUSIC: *The Truth About the Shavers*

SOME time during the decade following the Civil War, and for reasons unknown, whiskers began to go out in America. But this fashion mutation ran counter to the conservatism of nature, according to which whiskers continued to come in. Thus, by the mysterious power of fashion, a great new industry was created, giving employment to millions of people, and carrying the banner of progress to the most remote corners of the inhabited globe.

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It was the period during which the major vested interests of the American capitalist economy were being parceled out and consolidated. Railroads, coal, oil. And now, chins. Nude chins, or rather, the dynamic, progress-generating conflict between biology and creative myth, expressed in the man-made taboo on whiskers.

The ground-plan of this industry, as laid down by the founding fathers, bears the unmistakable mark of genius, combining as it does subtlety and a certain chaste and beautiful simplicity. The annual wheat harvest is worth so much, in plus or minus figures—mostly minus in recent years. The daily whisker harvest is worth so much—always plus, the market being certain and the crop utterly reliable and independent of the acts of God. Moreover, by an application on a grandiose scale of the Tom Sawyer theory of business enterprise, the harvest hands actually pay for bringing in a crop which in itself is worth nothing.

Nobody knows who started the taboo on whiskers. Not even a wooden cross marks the unknown grave of this unknown soldier. But greatness was indisputably his. He changed the face of the human race. He kept Satan at bay by furnishing work for idle hands to do—all male hands, every morning, three hundred and sixty-five days of the year. He mocked at natural law. He refashioned the civilized ideal of masculine beauty. He added uncounted millions to the wealth of this and other countries, expressed in stock and bond “securities,” and in deeds and titles to physical properties. The religion which he founded spread quickly into all lands; it brought light and leading to the wandering tribes of darkest Africa; the Igorrotes came

down out of their trees and rejoiced in the new gospel; even the Eskimos within the Arctic Circle ate less blubber and turned to higher things.

No other religion can claim an equal number of adherents. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Atheism have all slain their millions. But the Shavers are as the sands of the sea, and death would be too good for them. It would not be good business.

Moreover, as contrasted with the faltering faith of these other decadent sects, the Shavers prove their loyalty by the punctilious observance of a daily ritual and by regular tithes contributed to the coffers of the True Church.

As already noted, the founder of this church is unknown. Quite possibly, he died in poverty and obscurity. But the Great Apostle of the Shavers was King C. Gillette. He became famous and rich. Quite probably his portrait has been more widely disseminated than that of any other religious leader in the history of the world. When he died he left a large fortune, made out of nothing; made out of "such stuff as dreams are made on."

The writer is a Shaver and will probably die a Shaver. Why, he does not know. His father was a Shaver. The only whiskers in his immediate family environment adorned the chin of his maternal grandfather, who was some special kind of Shouting Methodist, I believe. At the age of ninety, he was still stroking those whiskers and singing lustily "There is a Green Hill Far Away." There was also old Maginnis, the Celery King, but he was a very dirty and eccentric old man, whom the Shavers used as a Horrible Example.

The myth had been invented some years before I was born, and during my childhood the taboo on whiskers became increasingly strict. The faces of the young men especially were vigilantly watched for signs of heresy. Whiskers were derided as a mark of effeminacy. Even mustaches were considered a dangerous deviation from the Pure Faith.

On my sixteenth birthday, my father presented me with a Gillette Safety Razor, and from that day on I observed the ritual punctiliously, although during the early months the harvest was meagre. The blades, I noted, were marked, "Not To Be Re-Sharpended." This I took to be an Article of the Faith, which I scrupulously obeyed, although it meant that, since money was scarce, a package of blades had to last at least a year. The first thirty days were the hardest. After that the frictional heat generated by repeated scraping was sufficient to cauterize my wounds.

I remember that my grandfather, observing the lamentable condition of my chin, once urged that I see if his knife hone wouldn't help those blades a bit. I repelled the suggestion with scorn. Grandfather

and I were in opposite camps. He was a Shouting Methodist and a bearded ancient. I was an atheist and a Young Shaver.

The effects of this early religious training still linger. At various times I have wondered what I would look like in my natural whiskered state. But what would people say? And what would happen to my job? And how would my best girl feel about it? So the next morning I would turn a deaf ear to those perverse curiosities, and perform again the ritual of the Gospel According to King C. Gillette.

I am reconciled now. Never while I live shall I look in the mirror and see the image of myself as nature intended me to be. I am not myself. I am not my own master. I am, like millions of my fellow men, a Shaver.

I remember that shortly before the war, there was a minor outcropping of heresy. The Spirit of Doubt was abroad in the land, and the morals of the young were being sapped by the insidious infection of a materialist culture. Once I recall seeing a young man under thirty, doubtless in a spirit of bravado, enter a public restaurant looking like the portraits of Alexander Dowie. Quietly but firmly the waiters, with stern, set, smooth-shaven faces, put him out into the night. Such devil's disciples were rare, but unquestionably the minds of the people were troubled. One shrinks from imagining what might have happened but that, just at the crucial moment, the President declared war. Force without stint. The Huns were at the gate. The whiskered Bolsheviks of Russia were attacking the very foundations of civilization.

In the tremendous outpouring of religious faith and devotion that followed, all doubts were swept aside. And the True Church did not fail to do its bit. Sitting in solemn conclave in Boston the synod of the Church decreed that not one American doughboy should lose his immortal soul for lack of proper equipment to perform the ritual.

I have reason to know that the Church made good on this patriotic commitment. Along with two million other Shavers I went, as a private soldier, to France. I knew what I was fighting for. Those whiskered Bolsheviks, and those bearded German professors who had signed the manifesto pledging science and scholarship to the aid of the Huns!

Before I sailed I was presented at various times with eight separate and complete shaving kits. Three of them were the official equipment of the True Church; the others were put out by various dissenting sects which, however, had made common cause with King C. Gillette in the Great Crusade. Since I regarded these gifts as church property I preserved them carefully, although the transportation problem was difficult for a private soldier. My pack had only limited capacity, and

in the aggregate this plethora of equipment added quite a bit to the load I staggered under on long hikes. With the best will in the world, I found that they tended to drop out of the pack, to fall into mess kettles, and otherwise disappear. But I still had six when I sailed.

Before I left the boat I was presented with three more. At the base hospital the Y.M.C.A. secretary insisted on giving me another pair. I attempted to protest, but his face froze, and I took them. This was getting a bit thick I felt. My face was o.k. I shaved every morning, in cold water at that. What was I expected to do with those eleven kits? Then a great idea occurred to me. I would give them away. Besides doing my bit at the front, I would enlist my services in the Propaganda of the Faith, using the materials with which the Church had provided me.

I gave one to a bearded priest who was serving as brancardier with a French ambulance section to which my unit was attached. He would only take one, and I was a little saddened later when I found him, still jolly and hirsute, using the blade as a nail cutter. Except for one bearded old peasant woman who chased me out of her bistro, I had better luck, curiously, with the women. I gave six separate shaving kits to six different marraines, chiefly laundresses and barmaids in French villages behind the lines. The women shaved too, it seemed. Obviously, the war was going better than I had thought it was.

However, I made no real headway, because more shaving kits kept coming in, from the Y.M.C.A. and through the mails from solicitous maiden aunts at home. I broke down gradually and took to leaving them in the pig pens where we occasionally lodged, and where, in the nature of things, they would be of no service to the Cause. Even so, I reflected, I was better off than the mules. The quartermaster's department, I was informed, had been supplied with 300,000 branding irons for the mules. I wondered what the mules would do with them. Provided there were any mules. In six months at the front I never saw one; nothing but a herd of Algerian donkeys, once, which rapidly disappeared into the French soupe. But if there had been mules doubtless they would have branded themselves thoroughly. The Church, I reflected, was not alone in its outpouring of patriotic service. With all this I can testify that the morale of the American troops was high. We shaved. We shaved almost every day. We shaved with ditch water. We shaved with luke warm coffee. After excusable omissions of the ritual, caused by duty at the front, we shaved twice. For God. For Country. For King C. Gillette.

What happened after the Armistice was a different matter. As I look back, it would seem that the whole magnificent structure of American idealism crumbled almost overnight.

It was a fact, a regrettable fact, but a fact, that the chins of the American doughboys were pretty sore. They started wagging. Some of the things they said I hesitate even now to repeat.

They said they had too damned many shaving kits. They regretted that the envelopes protecting the blades were not larger so that the paper might be used for purposes for which the quartermaster's department provided no regular supplies. They pointed out that whereas every soldier was equipped with a dozen or so of shaving kits of assorted brands, none of these kits was equipped with more than one blade. The Y.M.C.A. gave you razors but no blades. You had to buy the blades. And the blades were extraordinarily dull. I remember that one godless doughboy asserted in plain words that they were made dull on purpose. Nothing happened to him. In due time he was honorably discharged from the service and I met him later in civil life. The doughboys talked a good deal about those blades. Sometimes, in the evenings, there was enough chin music of this sort to drown out the regimental band. Always, in such sessions, the name of King C. Gillette would be intimately and often obscenely coupled with the Y.M.C.A.

It was probably just shell shock—the reaction from the hardships and dangers of the front. For myself, although a little disheartened, I could excuse the talk. It was the things they did. They took to shying shaving kits at truant pigs. The main street of a French village where we were quartered became littered with them and the Mayor protested. The lieutenant ordered out a detail, and a dozen men faced court-martial rather than move a step. Nothing happened. The lieutenant, it soon appeared, was growing a beard.

I am a good Shaver still, but naturally I did not go through this experience unscathed. And in the years that followed the Armistice I could not help observing that the Church seemed to be slipping. The phrase "not to be re-sharpened" was no longer engraved on the blades—a doctrinal concession to modernism for which the official church was to pay heavily, for innumerable re-sharpening contraptions were soon on the market and some of them were more or less effective. Meanwhile, the chin music increased in volume and shrillness until at last the Church was obliged openly to take the field against the growing heresy.

In 1926 the Gillette Safety Razor Company spent nearly a million dollars in newspaper and magazine advertising. The copy was moderate in tone, attempting to reason the children back into the fold. The blades had been improved. They were continually being improved. The mass production process by which they were produced was incredibly accurate and was checked by innumerable inspections of the finished product. The steel used was the best and most expen-



sive tool steel obtainable. True believers should understand, when they experienced pain and consequent doubt in connection with performing the daily ritual of the Faith, that it wasn't the blade's fault. It might be the weather. Or the stiffness of the communicant's bristles. Or the hardness of the water. Or the temporary and excusable hardness of the communicant's heart, induced by a late party the night before.

Reading this campaign I knew in my heart that it marked the beginning of the end. Not so would old King C. Gillette have spoken in the great days before that erratic genius sold out his interests to the bankers, and went gaga as amateur economist and world -saver. The Church had become rich and soft. Where the Great Apostle had once peddled his invention at ten dollars a kit from door to door, the degenerate princes of the Church now gave the razors away with a tube of shaving cream. True, the empire was now huge, and rich tribute in the form of profits on blades flowed in from every quarter of the globe. But godless men, actuated by motives of material gain and without license of the True Church, had actually ventured to manufacture blades suitable for the official razor and offer them for sale in the marts of trade. And to such a low ebb had the morale of the faithful sunk that more and more these blades were purchased and used. So that the prestige of the True Church was shaken and its tithes reduced.

Again the following year the Church struck out with a huge advertising campaign. But again the note of authority was missing from its pronouncements. The blades too, lacked edge, or at least the chins of the faithful continued wagging to that effect. This heresy was encouraged by a subversive organization known as Consumer's Research, which informed its subscribers that some of the competing blades were perhaps a little better than the official equipment—not much, but a little. Other insidious rumors went forth; one to the effect that the Church had even gone so far as to manufacture and sell, under a shameful disguise from which the face of the Great Apostle had been removed, cheap and inferior blades designed to compete both with the mavericks and with the official product.

Day after day this subversive chin music gained in volume and in ominousness. Meanwhile a major crisis approached in the internal economy of the church. By virtue of the original patents issued by the State, the gospel according to Gillette had become an Established Church and the Gillette Company enjoyed a monopoly in the sale of the patented razor. This greatly helped in keeping the ritual pure, as also in the collection of tithes. But within a year these patents would expire. Chaos, certainly would ensue unless somehow, somewhere, the officialdom of the Church could muster a little statesmanship.

Long conferences were held, and at last a decision was reached. The Church would apply for patents on an improved razor and an improved blade, which latter would fit the old razor also. But since it would be patented, the conscienceless mercenaries who already infested the market would be stopped from imitating it. Meanwhile, the Church would put forth huge quantities of the new razor, offered to the faithful free with a tube of shaving cream. In a short space of time the new razors would displace the old and since they required the new blades which only the official Church would be entitled to make and sell, the elders of the Church would once more sit at ease in Zion and further diversion of the tithes would be prevented.

Everything went through as scheduled except those essential iron clad patents. By some fluke or treachery, just before the Church's New Deal for the Shavers was announced the market was flooded with blades which fitted the new razor perfectly, as well as the old razor. And the State remained neutral. And the Elders rent their garments. And the Shavers? It is appalling to realize how little the Shavers cared about the whole matter except that, finding the heretical blades to be of reasonably good quality, they bought them in great quantities. So that the Elders were obliged to seek out the heretic, and purchase his business for a large, a very large sum of money. And a little later, after the stock market crash, the stockholders of the Church questioned the statesmanship of the elders—in fact raised hell. So did a hundred circumcised and uncircumcised owners of production machinery that could turn out blades, for countless new brands appeared on the market.

The later history of the Church is almost too melancholy to record. Remembering the genius of the Great Apostle, the Elders sought out one of the most famous Doctors of Advertising Homiletics in America and told him to launch a new advertising campaign. He did so. He gave the Faithful the old time religion plus a dash of Listerined Freud. "Am I losing my husband's love?" (Picture of weeping wife; copy plucks at the conscience of the husband who is forgetful of the morning ritual; the cheek you love to touch.)

Too late. It didn't work. So then what did those dumb elders do? The Truth! The Truth, no less, with the elders themselves beating their breasts and crying "Mea Culpa." The truth being a confession that for a while the official blades were not so good, but now they're much better, please, and we're honest men and need the money.

The truth, forsooth! Since when has a self-respecting church felt called upon to defend its divinely inspired truth against the hecklers of the market place?

The official blades *are* better now, they say. And they cost just about half what they formerly cost. I don't care. I am a Shaver, a

devout Shaver, if you like, but after all that has happened, I can no longer be a faithful churchman. I buy any old blades. A while back I bought a re-sharpening contraption and it worked more or less. And just the other day I got out grandfather's hone which he specifically bequeathed to me. It is a good hone. It has been a good hone since 1833. In fact it does a better job, with less trouble than the contraption. I suspect that there are by this time thousands like me. Ours is indeed a faithless generation. And the Church does so little for us. Beards are coming in again, I suspect. Some of my best friends are sporting mustaches. And one of them has a red beard a foot long—says it prevents colds.

Well, one man can't be expected to stand alone against these heresies. And the Church is impotent, or at least silent, while the evil grows. There is House of David, for example. And Senator J. Ham Lewis. And Chief Justice Hughes. Old King C. Gillette would have known how to meet that issue like a man and a Shaver. But if the Church has ever issued a bull against Justice Hughes I have no record of it.

Now that the Church has lost its grip, I suppose it's a matter for the NRA.

A great industry is at stake. The livelihoods of thousands of workers hang in the balance. Congress ought to pass a law.