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Our Master's Voice: Advertising

James Rorty

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with a new
introduction by
Jefferson Pooley



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OUR MASTER'S VOICE
ADVERTISING

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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5 *AS ADVERTISED: The Product of Advertising*

THE foregoing fictionized account of what happens in a large advertising agency will doubtless strike the lay reader as exaggerated. It will be denounced, more or less sincerely, by advertising men who have lived and toiled so long on the other side of the Advertising Looking Glass that the barbarous farce-as-usual of advertising practice has become for them the only reality, the only “sanity” with which their minds are equipped to deal.

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The account is nevertheless true in every essential respect. The fiction is no stranger than many of the sober facts set forth elsewhere in this volume.

We have now to consider what sort of product this advertising mill turns out. Again, the writer’s inclusions may seem at first thought too sweeping.

The advertisement itself is the least significant part of this product. The advertisement is an instrument, a tool, and the ad-man is a toolmaker. In using these tools the newspapers, magazines and radio broadcasters become something other than what they are commonly supposed to be; that is one result. By operating as they must operate, not as they are supposed to operate, these major instruments of social communication in turn manufacture products, and these products are the true end products of the advertising industry.

The most significant product, or result, is the effective dissolution of practically all local or regional, autonomous or semi-autonomous cultures based economically on functional processes of production and exchange and culturally on the ethical, moral and aesthetic content of such processes. The advertising-manufactured substitute for these organic cultures is a national, standardized, more or less automatic mechanism, galvanized chiefly by pecuniary motivations and applying emulative pressures to all classes of the population.

In England, where the organic culture was older, richer and more resistant, publicists and educators are more keenly aware of the significance and potency of advertising, although there the business is still relatively embryonic, lacking either the scale or the intensity of

the American phenomenon. *Culture and Environment*, by F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, best exhibits the 1933 English awareness of what is happening, and this excellent book, representing the collaboration of a literary critic and a schoolmaster will be referred to again in later chapters.¹ Among English creative writers, D. H. Lawrence seems to have grasped intuitively almost from the beginning, the nature and causes of the disintegrative process.

In America, the most impressive testimony, both conscious and unconscious, to the progressive disintegration of the organic American culture is contained in the work of Sherwood Anderson. Anderson grew up in a small Middle Western town during the period when the organic relation between agriculture and small town craft-industry was being shattered by the emergent forces of mass production, mass distribution, and by the pseudoculture which the rapidly expanding apparatus of advertising manufacture as a mechanical substitute for what it destroyed. First as a manufacturer and later as an advertising man, Anderson participated unwillingly in this dual process of destruction and substitution.

This experience, in the view of the writer, provides the essential clue to an understanding of Anderson's verse, short stories and novels. Much of the brilliant early work was written on the marginal time of an advertising copy writer employed by a large Chicago agency. It has a single theme: the passionate rejection of the ad-man's pseudoculture and the nostalgic search for the organic culture that was already dead or dying. Anderson saw that the disintegration and sterilization of the culture is reflected in the fragmentation and neutering of the individual. In novel after novel, story after story, we see him separating the quick from the dead and driving first backward, then forward, into some terrain more habitable for the human spirit.

The reader will perhaps have been struck by the inhuman, hysterical, phantasmagoric quality of advertising agency practice as described in the preceding chapter. This is inevitable. The prime mover of the advertising mill, the drive for profits, has no concern whatever for human life. Without organic life itself, the advertising mill is fueled by the organic cultural life which it disintegrates and consumes, but does not restore or replace. On cultural as well as on economic grounds it may be said that this organic social heritage is not inexhaustible. Hence the advertising mill not only disintegrates and destroys all the humanity that comes within the sphere of its influence but is ultimately, like the modern capitalist economy of which it is a part, self-destructive.

One sees this advertising mill as a coldly whirring turbine whose hum is so loud, so continuous, so omnipresent that we no longer hear it. Its force is centrifugal: all warm human life is expelled into

¹ [F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1933).]

the peripheral darkness where it continues to revolve although the machine can no longer use this nebula of burned-out dead and dying matter.

At the heart of the machine we see dim figures moving: the sort of people whom the writer has tried to make real and credible in the preceding chapter. They rush here and there, fiddling with levers, filling the grease cups.... They are dead men. Against the blue light their hands are lifted in queer, stylized gestures. They speak, but what they say is without human meaning. It is the machine speaking through them and the sound comes to us like the sound of a phonograph playing a cracked record, hugely and hoarsely amplified. The lips of the robots move and we hear: ... "Advertising is the new world force lustily breeding progress. It is the clarion note of business principle. It is the bugle call to prosperity. But great force as it is, advertising must seek all aid from literature and art in order that it may assume that dignity which is its rightful heritage. Advertising is ... oom-pah! oom-pah! Under the New Deal good advertising will become more essential than ever. It will be in a position to help the business executive to avoid those wasteful and excessive practices in selling which so often add needless costs to needed products. Good advertising is opposed to senseless price cutting and to unfair competition. Constructive sell ... oom-pah! oom-pah! No sales policy is permanently beneficial that has its roots in deception ... oom-pah! oompah! It costs a lot of money when a community is to be attacked ... oom-pah! oom-pah! Remember that while a shot-gun makes a lot more noise than a rifle it just messes things up. Aim the rifle well and you get a nice clean hole ... oom-pah! oom-pah! The most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem ... oom-pah! oom-pah! Every occupation has its special satisfactions. The architect and the builder see the product of their planning take shape in steel and stone. The surgeon snatches life from the jaws of death. The teacher and the minister give conviction and power to the things that are unseen. Our calling is not less significant. We build of imperishable materials, we who work with words.... All things perish, but the word remains ... oom-pah! oompah! oom-pah! oom-pah! oom-pah! ..."

They are dead men. Their bones are bakelite. Their blood is water, their flesh is pallid—yes, prick them and they do not bleed. Their eyes are veiled and sad or staring and a little mad. From them comes an acrid odor—they do not notice it, it may be only the ozone discharge of the machine itself. When you ask them to tell you what they are doing, they do not know, or at least they cannot tell you. They are voiceless, indeed, self-less only the machine speaks through them.... Dead men tell no tales.

Most are like that. But here and there among those dim wraiths is one who still keeps some semblance of life. An artist, or perhaps one who would have been a scholar or a scientist but that he has suffered the spleen of an ill fate. Art and science are strong passions. Most of these exceptional ones become in time like the others. But they are the stronger spirits and now and then one of them escapes. They do not like to talk of what they have seen and done there at the heart of the machine. They like to pretend that it never happened; that it was a kind of nightmare, as indeed it was. But when tales are told it is they who tell them. From time to time Sherwood Anderson has told such tales. Recently he has begun to tell more of them. They are quite horrible tales. Artists find it difficult to use this material. The advertising business is harder to write about than the war. It would perhaps bring some of the dead back to life if more of such tales were told.

But the machine tenders are not the only dead. Great waves of force shudder outward from the machine, and more and more this cold electric force substitutes for the life-force of the people whom the waves surround and penetrate. They too seem to lose the color and movement of natural human life. They twitch with little fears and itch with little greeds. They become nervous, jittery, mechanical. They can no longer weep with spontaneous tears or rock with spontaneous laughter. They too become in a sense self-less so that one cannot expect them to be true to themselves or true to others. The waves which increasingly substitute for their flagging organic will-to-live—the waves have indeed not heard of this truth. For the prime mover from which the waves come is beyond good and evil, truth and untruth, and the waves are everywhere. They speak, these creatures, their lips move, but again it is the machine speaking through them:

... "He invented the foods shot from guns at the skin you love to touch but your best friends won't tell you for three out of five are facing calendar fear another day of suspense learn to be charming the smart point of view without cost grandpa said I'll let you know my health to Quaker Oats I owe upon my face came long ago the smile that won't come off for skin eruptions need not worry you guard your dresses spare your friends perspiration may cost you both who'd believe they called me skinny 4 months ago I should think she'd notice it herself in closeups you can trust Blick's Velvasheen a better mouthwash at a big saving isn't it wonderful how Mary Ellen won the \$ 5,000 beauty contest and Mrs. Jones wins her husband back at the foot of my baby's crib I made a solemn promise the girl of his dreams but she almost lost him in a month she didn't have a trace of constipation reports Dr. David of Paris what color nails

at Newport all shades I'll lose my job if this keeps up can't make a sale can't even get people to see me I'd better ask the sales manager what's holding me back couldn't take on that man you just sent me seemed competent but careless about B. O. what a fool she is takes pains washing a sweater gives no care to her teeth and gums and she has pink toothbrush Mae West and the big hat she wore in "She Done Him Wrong" who will be the first to wear it in Chicago if Mona Lisa could have used these 4 Rosaleen eye beauty aids let's take a look at the record toasting frees Lucky Strike cigarettes from throat irritation William T. Tilden II steady smokers turn to Camels William T. Tilden II did you hear the French nation decorates Campbell's soup chef for sending the finest cooking throughout the civilized world Yeow! let's run away to sea travel has its niceties...."

This sub-human or un-human jabberwocky saturates the terrestrial atmosphere. It pours out of hundreds of thousands of loud speakers from eight o'clock in the morning until midnight. Doubtless the biologists will shortly inform us that this transformation of the auditory environment has caused definite degeneration and malformation of the average American ear. Certainly the eyes must have been affected, for the same jabberwocky in print glares from the pages of billions of copies of magazines and newspapers and other billions of posters, carcards and mail communications. Is it any wonder that the American population tends increasingly to speak, think, feel in terms of this jabberwocky? That the stimuli of art, science, religion are progressively expelled to the periphery of American life to become marginal values, cultivated by marginal people on marginal time? That these marginal people are prevented from exercising their proper and necessary social functions except by permission of the jabberwock? That many of them indeed compromise fatally with the creature and translate what they have to say into its obscene jabberwocky?

Let us not forget that the jabberwock feeds on what it destroys and that it restores and replaces nothing. It is fueled by the organic will-to-live of the population, which it calls "buying power." This buying power is progressively exhausted—advertising as Veblen pointed out, is a form of sabotage on production—just as our inorganic resources of coal, oil and minerals are progressively exhausted. After four depression years the jabberwock is hungry. It has devoured large sections of the lower and lower middle classes and expelled their dry bones, burned clean of their buying power, into the outer darkness. There the electric breath of the jabberwock still plays on them, but they are ash and slag. They cannot burn, they cannot feed the machine. Fifteen million of them are dependent upon relief. Another thirty million are so lean that they can fuel the jabberwock scarcely at all. You see them dumped like mail sacks on park benches. You

see them fluttering like autumn leaves, magnetized into thin wavering lines job lines, bread lines. They sit in chilly rooms listening as before to the voice of the jabberwock, unwilling to believe that they have been consumed, discarded. The waves still pulsate and the ash of the great radio audience still glows a little—there is so little other food. What is the jabberwock saying now? ... “I will share.... Don’t sell America short.... Forward, America....”