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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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12 SACRED AND PROFANE LOVE

IN TRACING the pattern of the ad-man's pseudoculture, we come next to the concept of love, which figures as an ingredient in most of the coercions of fear and emulation by which the ad-man's rule is administered and enforced. The theory and practice of this rule are clearly indicated in the title of a comparatively recent advertising text book by Mr. Kenneth M. Goode: *How to Turn People into Gold*.¹ As a practicing alchemist in his own right and also as an agent of that purest of art-for-art's-sake gold-diggers, the business man, the ad-man treats love pragmatically, using every device to extract pecuniary gain from the love dilemmas of the population. The raw ore of human need, desire and dream is carefully washed and filtered to eliminate all impurities of intelligence, will and self-respect, so that a deposit of pure gold may be precipitated into the pockets of the advertiser.

The enterprise of turning people, with their normal sexual desires and human affections, into gold, is greatly helped by the fact that our Puritan cultural heritage is peculiarly rich in the psychopathology of sex. This social condition is in itself highly exploitable, but it is not enough. The ad-man is in duty bound not merely to exploit the mores as he finds them, but further to pervert and debauch the emotional life of our literate masses and classes. He must not merely sell love-customers; he must also create love-customers, for, as we have seen, the advertising profession is nothing if not creative.

The dominance of the love appeal in contemporary advertising must be apparent to every reader of our mass and class magazines, as well as to the Great Radio Audience. Curiously enough, it would appear that the so-called "higher" manifestations of sex—its moral, ethical, spiritual and romantic derivatives and sublimations, the domestic affections and loyalties of husbands and wives, and of parents and children, are more exploitable than the grosser sexual appetites. Love rules the world, and the greatest triumph of modern advertising is the discovery that people may be induced to turn themselves into gold simply by a forthright appeal to their better natures, as a

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¹ [Kenneth M. Goode, *How to Turn People into Gold* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1929).]

kind of public duty, since it is recognized in all civilized communities that gold is more beautiful and more valuable than people. Today, therefore, many of our most successful advertisers stand, like John P. Wintergreen in "Of Thee I Sing," squarely upon the broad platform of Love, and when their campaigns are conducted with proper vigor, skill and enthusiasm, their election is almost automatic, as in the Third Reich. This, at least, is the contention of many eminent members of the advertising profession.

The distinction between sacred and profane love is difficult to maintain, and is in fact frequently blurred in current advertising practice. For convenience in examining the evidence, perhaps the following categories will serve:

Sacred Love. The affections and loyalties of husbands and wives. Maternal, paternal and filial affections. Religious and charitable impulses. Respect for the dead. Idealism in romantic love, this being closely related to the concepts of chastity and beauty.

Profane Love. The physical intimacies of adolescents, such as kissing, petting, etc. The problem created by sexual desire on the part of both the married and the unmarried, as complicated by the desire not to have children.

Illustrative material in both categories is so abundant that the specimens cited in this exposition will necessarily fail to include many of the most distinguished achievements of contemporary advertising. No slight is intended, and any reader who wishes to do so can easily correct the balance by a brief survey of the advertising pages of current mass and class magazines.

The sanctity of marriage is a major item in the Christian idealism of love. I quote at this point an advertisement by the Cadillac Motor Company which exploits this idealism with all the resources of modern advertising technique:

I DO

It may have been but a decade ago ... or it may have been in the beautiful 90's ... but sometime, somewhere, a young man stood in the soft light of a Junetime morning ... and repeated the words ... "I do." ... Since that time he has fought, without interruption, for the place in the world he wants his family to occupy.... And it may be that, out of the struggle, he has lost a bit of the sentiment that used to abide in his heart ... for success is a jealous master and exacts great servitude.... But not when the Junetime comes ... and, with it, that anniversary of *another* June! ... Then the work-a-day world, with its many tasks, is cast abruptly aside, and sentiment—pure and simple—rules in his heart once more.... And, because there are literally thousands of him, doorbells are ringing this June throughout America ... and smiling boys in uniform stand, hats in hand, with the proof of remembrance.... And along with the beautiful flowers, and the boxes of candy, and the other

tokens ... some of those brides of other Junes will receive the titles to new Cadillacs... and for them there will be no other June like this—save one alone.... There is a Cadillac dealer in your community—long practiced in the art of keeping a secret.... Why not go see him today? You can trust him not to tell!

Note the exquisite, hesitant style. The copy writer knows he is treading on sacred ground. Do not blame him for using the “three dots” device invented by that fleshly Broadway columnist, Walter Winchell. Rather, one should admire the catholicity of spirit by which profane techniques are converted to sacred uses. Note that this tender message to fond husbands, written not without awareness of its effect upon wives, focuses upon the *proof* that he has remembered his marriage anniversary. Ladies, by their works ye shall know them. The more costly the proof the more profound the sentiment. On that remembered June she got a husband. This June she gets a Cadillac. Clearly the one was a means to the other. Note too that only *some* wives will get Cadillacs, precious both in themselves and as emulative symbols in the endless race to keep up with the Joneses.

In the original advertisement the photograph of orange blossoms was reproduced in color. Beauty, sentiment, tact, effrontery—by means of these reagents the advertising alchemist converts the pure and beautiful devotion of husbands into something still more pure. Gold. Pure gold.

Advertisers believe enormously in children. They have lavished immense sums upon the education of parents in matters of infant care and feeding, the prevention of disease, etc. Much of that education is sound enough, much of it is irresponsible and misleading, and all of it, of course, is anything but gratuitous. I have before me an advertisement of Cream of Wheat which shows the familiar scare technique used in exploiting parental devotion. The headline, “At the Foot of My Baby’s Crib I Made a SOLEMN PROMISE” is melodramatic even as to typography. What’s it all about? The baby in the fable was shifted from milk to solid food not Cream of Wheat and got sick. The doctor, who judging from his photograph might well be a retired confidence man, tells the parents to feed the baby Cream of Wheat. The inference is that if he’d been fed Cream of Wheat from the beginning, he wouldn’t have become sick, which is itself an impudent enough non sequitur. Add the fact that semolina, a non-trade-marked wheat product used by macaroni manufacturers, is in the writer’s experience of baby-feeding, an entirely satisfactory equivalent for Cream of Wheat costing about a third as much, and you get a measure of the advertiser’s effrontery. Compute Cream of Wheat’s share in the huge annual levy of over-priced and de-natured breakfast cereals on American food budgets, and you get a measure

of the advertiser's service to the American Home and the American Kiddy. The writer might add, merely as his professional opinion, that without advertising the breakfast cereal business would wither in a year, with very considerable benefit to the health and wealth of American men, women and children.

Death. It is probable that but for the ineffable mortician and his confederate, the casket-maker, we might by this time have modified, in the direction of decency, taste and economy, some of the grotesque burial rites that we inherit from our savage ancestors. But no. It still costs a tired, poverty-stricken American laborer about as much to die and be buried as it does a high-caste Balinese, and the accompanying orgies are, of course, infinitely more hideous. It is scarcely worth it. Readers interested in this macabre traffic are referred to the study by John C. Gebhardt for the Russell Sage Foundation. Advertising plays its part, of course, and the appeal, in terms of menacing solemnity, is invariably to the love of the bereft ones for the departed. New York columnists still remember the maggoty eloquence of one // Dr. Berthold E. Baer in behalf of Campbell's Funeral Church, under such headlines as "Buried with her Canary Bird," "Skookum," etc. This series ran in New York newspapers during the winter of 1919-1920. The current advertising of the National Casket Company is scarcely less gruesome.

Romance. When we enter the starry fields of romance, the advertising lines begin to blur, and we can never be sure whether we are dealing with love in its sacred or in its profane aspects. Of one thing, however, we can always be sure. We are in the field of sex competition, and the advertiser, with his varied stock of cosmetics, soaps, gargles and deodorants, figures as Love's Armourer; also, perhaps, as schatchen; also—well, the Elizabethans had a word for it. The advertiser's sales patter runs somewhat as follows: "You want a lover. Very well, gargle with Blisterine, use such and such soaps and cosmetics, and let Cecilia Bilson teach you how to be charming without cost." The exploitation of love's young dream is by this time a huge industry in itself. Recently, advertisers of such remotely serviceable products as radios and razor blades have been trying to muscle in on it.

Profane Love. When we come to the "marriage hygiene"—nèe [*sic*] "feminine hygiene"—advertisers it becomes clear that we are dealing with the physical aspects of love. Physical love is taboo in our society except when legalized by the State; taboo also, if one were to take our various and tangled State and Federal statutes seriously (which practically nobody does) except when having procreation as its object. The débris of the law, reflecting as it does our obsolete mores, is ridiculous enough—in Connecticut, for example, it is legal for a drug

store to sell contraceptive devices but illegal for a man or woman to use them.

Very few people obey the law, of course. Birth control is today one of the facts of American life. It is practiced, or at least attempted in some form, almost universally.

But the laws remain on the statute books. The shadow of the taboo remains, and in this shadow the advertising profession operates what is probably the most flourishing racket in America, now that Capone is in jail and prohibition is no more.

In the files of Consumers' Research I counted leaflets advertising some fifty different antiseptics and other contraceptive products, and in the files of the National Committee on Maternal Health, some hundred and fifty more. Neither organization attempts to list them all; the total probably runs into thousands. Each is represented either directly or by implication to be a convenient, safe and reliable contraceptive. Meanwhile the gynecologists of the world have been searching for precisely such a thing and say they haven't yet found it. Meanwhile, the leaders of the English Birth Control movement, in despair, are demanding the legalization of abortion, and of sterilization as in Russia. Meanwhile Margaret Sanger and her lieutenants in the American Birth Control movement are pointing out that the existing legislation which prohibits the dissemination of birth control information is really class legislation. Upper and middle-class people whether married or not can get advice from their doctors and buy contraceptives at drug stores. The fifty per cent of the population which lives at or below a subsistence level can afford neither doctors nor rubber goods. Only a few thousand can be accommodated by the present capacity of the birth control clinics.

But gynecologists are merely scientists and Mrs. Sanger is merely the gallant and indomitable Mrs. Sanger. They scarcely rank with Doctor Sayle Taylor, LL.D., now, because of the querulousness of the American Medical Association. As the "Voice of Experience," Doctor Taylor comforts thousands of wounded hearts over the radio. In his personal appearances before Men Only and Women Only he details the mysteries of love and sells little booklets full of highly dangerous misinformation and not lacking the address of a contraceptive manufacturer.

But how about the respectable drug houses whose annual "take" from the contraceptive racket far surpasses that of the eloquent "Doctor"?

The hired ad-men of these drug houses perform miracles of delicacy in conveying to the magazine readers half-truths and outright deceptions.

Take Lysol, for example. In their monumental study "The Con-

trol of Conception," Dr. Robert L. Dickinson and Dr. Louise Stevens Bryant say flatly that Lysol should be banned as a contraceptive. Not that it isn't a good antiseptic. It is indeed, a powerful antiseptic—too powerful to be used for contraceptive purposes except in weak solutions which the average woman can scarcely be trusted to make with accuracy and not reliable in any case. Further, the clinical evidence to date both in England and in America, indicates that no antiseptic douche is at all dependable as a contraceptive in and of itself.

In the earlier stages of the feminine hygiene campaigns, the language of the ad-men was full of euphemisms, of indirection, of tender solicitude for the sad-eyed wives pictured above such captions as "The Very Women who supposed they knew, are grateful for these enlightening facts." But recently the pressure of competition has speeded up the style. "Now it Can be Told," they declaim, and "Why mince words?"

Some of them don't; for example, the ad-man for Pariogen tablets, who writes the following chaste communication, addressed presumably to the automobile trade:

"Pariogen tablets may be carried anywhere in a purse, making hygienic measures possible almost anywhere, no other accessories or water being required."

It has been argued that birth control education is a necessary social job, and that the ad-men are doing it. The answer to that is that they are doing it badly, irresponsibly and expensively, with a huge by-product of abortion and other human wreckage and suffering. Thus far birth control has been the obsession of a few honest crusaders like Mrs. Sanger, Dr. Dickinson, and Dr. W. J. Robinson. For support, it has had to let itself be made the plaything of philanthropic social registerites, and say "please" to an organized medical profession so divided in its counsels, so terrified of offending the mores, and so jealous of its emoluments that it has dragged on the skirts of the movement rather than assume the courageous leadership which is not merely its right but its obvious duty. The medical societies of Michigan and Connecticut are notable exceptions to this judgment.

Despite such handicaps, the labors of Mrs. Sanger, Dr. Dickinson and others, aided by the gradual relaxation of the taboo since the war, have achieved the following major results:

1. Some 144 clinics functioning in 43 States.
2. A technique, which while far from ideal or even completely reliable is successful in 96 to 98 percentage of cases.
3. An increasing penetration of the daily and periodical press with birth control propaganda. (Except for one or two liberal stations with negligible audiences, birth control is still barred from the air.)

4. Laboratory and clinical research at Yale, the Universities of London and Edinburgh, and elsewhere, which may at any moment yield revolutionary results. Russia, of course, has endowed such research heavily and may be first to solve the problem.
5. The establishment of birth control courses in practically all of the leading medical schools, and a considerable propagandizing of the profession through the *Birth Control Review* which, however, was discontinued in July, 1933.

What could be built now, on the foundations laid by the devotion of these pioneers? The answer runs in terms of economics, politics and sociology. A birth control clinic operated on a fairly large scale, such as the Sanger Clinic in New York, can provide instruction, equipment and clinical followup for about \$5.00 per year per patient. Multiply that \$5.00 by about twenty million and you get \$100,000,000 a year as the bill for a publicly administered contraceptive service of approximate adequacy. Would it be worth \$100,000,000? Of course. Will anything of the sort be done? Probably not. Why? The Pope and the Propaganda of the Faith, which still, to paraphrase Veblen, "ignores material facts with magisterial detachment"—one of these facts being that wherever birth control clinics have been opened they have been patronized by Catholics in full proportion to the percentage of Catholics in the populations served. The Fundamentalists are equally obstructive, although their magazines cheerfully publish contraceptive advertising. Alas, of course, the big drug houses, which doubtless would interpose objections on purely moral, ethical and spiritual grounds. Also the Fourth Estate, whose freedom to defend the sanctity of the home must not be impugned or calumniated by any suspicion of a material interest arising out of the advertising income received from the before-mentioned drug houses. Also the medical profession, a small part of which feels itself obliged, like the advertising profession, to turn human life into gold, a large part of which is plain stupid and timid, and a part of which—a small part—is magnificent and may be counted upon to go the limit at almost any cost to itself.

In contrast to what is being done by the birth control clinics and what might be done by an intelligent expenditure of public funds, let's have one more look at how the job is being done by business men and advertisers interested solely in "service" and "truth."

It is roughly estimated that the American people spend about \$25,000,000 a year for contraceptive devices and materials. Largely because of the failure of these commercially exploited hit-or-miss techniques, Prof. F. J. Taussig of Washington University estimates that there are about 700,000 abortions every year in this country. This

situation is, of course, highly exploitable, especially because of the bootleg nature of the traffic. The most popular contraceptive sells at a profit to the retail druggist of nearly 1000 per cent. According to Mr. Randolph Cautley of the National Committee on Maternal Hygiene, the advertising of abortifacients in the pulp magazines increased 2800 per cent in one year—between 1932 and 1933. It is, of course, a commonplace of medical knowledge that no abortifacient is effective and that all of them are highly dangerous as well as illegal. In his survey which was incomplete because of the limited funds at the disposal of his organization—the three major contraceptive advertisers spent a total of \$412,647 in 1933—Mr. Cautley counted 16 advertisers who were obviously selling abortifacients, 35 who were selling contraceptives and 20 classified as “uncertain.” The abortifacient copy is especially discreet. “Use it when nature fails you,” they advertise, and “For unnatural delay. Double strength. Rushed first class mail.” Now and then the Food and Drug Administration catches one of these rats, but it is difficult, and will continue to be difficult even under the strengthened provisions of the Copeland Bill.