OUR MASTER'S VOICE

ADVERTISING

BY JAMES RORTY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 21

A GALLERY OF PORTRAITS

NO DESCRIPTION of the ad-man's pseudoculture can be considered complete without some notation of the curious atrophies, distortions and perversions of mind and spirit which the ad-man himself suffers as a consequence of his professional practice.

I have heard it said of So-and-so and So-and-so in the profession: "They are born advertising men." Obviously this cannot be true. Even if one assumes the inheritance of acquired characteristics, the phenomenon of advertising is too recent in biological time to have brought about any substantial modification of human genes. Moreover, although I have known many perverse and diabolical little boys, none of these creatures was sufficiently monstrous to prompt the suspicion: "This will grow up and be an advertising man."

No, the ad-man is born not of woman, but of the society. He is the subhuman or pseudohuman product of an inhuman culture. His insanities are not congenital. They are the insanities of a society which, having failed to embody in its growth process any valid economic, ethical or moral concepts, is moronic in these respects. The ad-man seems exceptional and terrifying merely because his whole being is given over to the expression and dissemination of this moronism.

The ad-man is not necessarily an intellectual prostitute. As already pointed out, if one accepts the economic and social premises of American capitalism, the ad-man plays a logical

and necessary rôle. The production of customers, and the control of factory production in the direction of profit-motivated obsolescence—these are functions in a profit economy no less essential than the production of coal or steel. Most advertising men feel this very strongly. It gives them confidence and conviction, so that they are the more easily reconciled to their habitual and necessary violation of the principles of truth, beauty, intelligence and ordinary decency. They are profit-motivated producers of customers, and they have the producer's psychology. It is right and beautiful to make a customer out of a woman, even though this involves making her into a fool, a slave and a greedy neurotic. *It is so right and so beautiful that the ad-man tends to make the same sort of thing out of himself, his family and his friends.* I have had many friends in the advertising business who have been solicitous about me, because of my unorthodox views. At various times I have been put to some embarrassment to keep them from trying, for the good of my soul, to make me also a fool, a slave and a greedy neurotic. Your run of the mill ad-man has no inferiority complex; indeed he is positively messianic about his profession—there isn't a doubt in a carload of these fellows.

This sounds quite mad, but it is also quite true. The inference, also true, is that the society is mad; the ad-man is exceptional only in that he carries more than his share of the burden of this madness.

Hence it is easy to absolve the ad-man on the ground that he knows not what he does. This, I think, is a just acquittal for the vast majority of the profession. But there are, of course, many exceptions. There are many men and women in the profession who have explored worlds of the mind and the spirit lying beyond this Alice-in-Wonderland world of the advertising business. They are perhaps somewhat to be blamed, especially those fallen angels who use their exceptional qualities of mind and imagination actively to promote

what they know to be a very dirty and anti-social traffic. The distinction, while tenuous, is, I think, genuine. It is between the intellectually sophisticated ad-man who sells a part of himself to make a living, and the greedy cynic, often with a will-to-power obsession, who sells *all* of himself. I and most of my friends in the business belonged to the first category, which is fairly numerous. The will-to-power cynic is quite exceptional, and, incidentally, he usually goes mad, too; he tends to believe in and justify this acquired, distorted self; so that in the end we see this ex-literary man or ex-artist as a Captain of Advertising, frothing at the mouth at advertising conventions, or leading his hosts of devout, iron-skulled ad-men into battle for God, for country and for Wet Smack chocolate bars.

In the portrait studies which follow I have tried to include proportionate representation of all three basic types. While these studies are based on the writer's observation of real people, they are all composite portraits; names, places and incidents have been disguised. The writer is not interested in attacking individuals; rather he permits himself the faint hope that some very likable ad-men who may read this book may be freed from the coils of the "systematized illusions" in which they have become entangled along with their victims. When, as now, we are faced with the necessity of building a civilization to replace the self-destroying barbarism which has hitherto contented us, it is well to have as many people as possible know what they are doing, even though what they are doing happens to be a mean and dirty job. Most jobs are like that in our society, if that is any comfort.

Economics

Pete Sykes is the American University's great gift to ad-

vertising, and perhaps the most typical advertising man I know.

In both the smaller and larger American colleges and universities, during the period just before the war, the mindset of the average bright young man was determined by the time he became a sophomore. Pete was above the average as to energy and charm, but in all other respects he was the perfect stereotype of the extraverted, emulative, career man in his undergraduate phase.

He had some literary talent and made the staff of the college newspaper. He had some executive ability and became assistant manager of the football team. He was personable, his family was good enough, and he made one of the snootiest fraternities. All this happened during his first two years. As to his studies: in a moment of confidence he once confessed to me that he could make nothing of Professor Ely's economics, although he had studied hard in that course. He had determined to make a million dollars after graduating, and he had been given to understand that economics was the science of making a million dollars.

When Pete made this confession he was the managing head of a large Middle Western agency. Although then only in his early forties he had already made about half that million dollars. Without benefit of Ely, however. I tried to explain. I cited the correspondence of a radical editor with an engineer, exiled in Alaska, whose grown sons were in college in Seattle and also studying Ely. The engineer became curious and read Ely himself. He wrote: "I think Professor Ely should have married Mary Baker Eddy, for they are manifestly agreed as to the non-existence of matter. And if they had married, I am confident that their child would have been a bubble."

Pete laughed and asked me what book he could read that did make sense. I suggested Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of Business Enterprise*. Fine! After lunch he stepped into a book store and ordered the book; also a new detective novel.

I wasn't horsing Pete. He was and is a good fellow, with enough salt in his nature to make him worth taking seriously, which is more than can be said for most advertising men. After graduating he had been a newspaper reporter, and he understood the surfaces of American life very well. He was tolerant, too, if realistic. A year later he fired a friend of mine on the ground that my friend's insistence on giving no more than half time to the "business nobody knows" implied a lack of unmitigated devotion to his profession, although in all other respects he was o.k. My friend thought his point well taken and departed gracefully.

Pete had to fire over a third of his staff as the depression deepened, and it bothered him. The civilization had put him on the spot, and it wasn't fair, because he was still only a bright sophomore. His ambition, his emulative obligation to himself, to his parents, to his classmates, and later to a growing family, had never permitted him to achieve the intellectual maturity which he secretly craved. What was he to do with these stock-market-ruined surplus executives, these debt-burdened copy writers—Smith's wife was going to have a baby, Robinson had tuberculosis, etc., etc. Pete stalled, compromised, whittled, made private unadvertised loans out of his own pocket, and in the end had to fire most of them anyway.

Pete fought hard. To hold the business. To get new business. But he was on the spot there, too. Pete was ethical, a power for "truth in advertising," and as sincere about it as practical business considerations would permit. His agency turned out quantities of bunk, of course. But respectable bunk. No bought-and-paid-for testimonials. None of the gaudier and dirtier patent medicine accounts. His fastidiousness cost him money and work. He had to prove that it was possible to match the achievements of the testimonial advertisers by using other, more ethical advertising methods. It wasn't easy, and sometimes the ethical distinction between

Pete's methods and those of the testimonial racketeers seemed a bit tenuous. Particularly now that the depression had forced advertisers to become increasingly hard-boiled.

So Pete wasn't happy. He had worked terribly hard all his life. He was moral. He had even cut out liquor so that he could work harder. After failing and succeeding, failing and succeeding, half a dozen times, that million dollars which he desired with such naïve emotional abandon was, in 1929, almost within his grasp. But the stock market crash had postponed the realization of that ambition indefinitely. And now the iron collar of economics—Ely's, Veblen's, somebody's economics—was not only choking him, driving down his standard of living, brushing aside his pecuniary ambitions, but forcing him to be an advertising faker, a slave driver, a hard-boiled executant of decisions written in red ink and passed by vote of his board of directors.

It wasn't fair and Pete suffered. There he was, grimacing like the gargoyle outside his skyscraper office, chilled by the winds of panic that swept the country, watching the waters of prosperity recede, taking with them first his profits, and now threatening the very continuance of his profession. A tough spot. Out on the end of a limb. The buzz of the Brain Trust in Washington worried him. Would they saw off the limb on which he was sitting? But that would be outrageous! He was a hard, competent worker. And a good fellow. He had fought like hell in behalf of his employees. He had resisted the onslaughts of the advertising vandals who were destroying reader-confidence. Economics? Damn economics! Where did he get off in this beautiful American economic scheme of things? And when would he get a little sleep?

You can see how hard it is to find effigies to burn, bad men to drive out of office. I don't blame Pete. I blame the American university for spawning so many sophomores, telling them that advertising was a respectable career for an honest, intelligent person, and then walking out on them as soon as

the depression proved that the reverend professors of "economics" were just as imbecile as any village socialist had always said they were. . . . No, it's no use blaming the university either. Let's blame Alexander Hamilton a good deal and Thomas Jefferson, too. And John Calvin. And Daniel Shays for not being as good a revolutionary engineer as Lenin. . . .

I guess that let's Pete out. If I were Commissar in a Soviet America—and I can think of few people less competent for the job—I should want Pete at a desk around the corner. I'd have to watch him for a while because he has a considerable will-to-power. But he's a good fellow, and, given something serious to do, a good workman. The depression has matured him. He isn't a sophomore any more. But there he is, holding the bag for a staff of two hundred people, underpaying them and overworking them because he has to, and occasionally obliged, for business reasons, to strike those sophomoric attitudes he no longer believes in. Pete is still one of the Kings of Bedlam. I think some nights he prays for a revolution.

Broadway is Shocked

A few years ago there came into an agency where I was working a tall Westerner who had got himself a job in the publicity department. (Yes, advertising agencies have publicity departments. They are quite legitimate, although the newspapers don't like them much.)

His name was—call him Buck McMaster. He looked like a cowboy and had been one in his youth in Oklahoma. He was a competent, facile newspaperman and likable. The job paid more than most newspaper jobs and it was easy. The smaller newspapers had to like the stuff and even the desk men on the big ones were trained to say maybe, without meaning maybe. The stuff had to tie up with the news, of course, and

it had to be competently written. But Big Business is news, and that agency was doing jobs for Big Business. It was pap for Buck, even though they loaded his desk with plenty of assignments.

He was happy as a lark at first. But within a couple of weeks that cowboy was riding high and grabbing for the carriage of his typewriter. Looking through the glass of my cubicle I could see him scowling. And from time to time I would hear him rip spoiled drafts out of his machine and crunch them into the waste basket.

"Jesus Christ," he would bleat. "Holy Mother, what next?"

At that time some of my signed writings were appearing in radical magazines. He must have read something of mine and decided I was safe.

Late one afternoon he came into my cubicle and sat down.

"I'm going gaga," he said. "This stuff is terrible. Do you mind telling me—" he leaned forward and whispered—"is this a racket, too?"

I was startled. Newspapermen are supposed to be hard-boiled. And this one was an ex-cowboy to boot, who looked tough enough for anything.

"Do you mind telling me," I asked, "What was your last job?"

"Sure," he said. "I was publicity man for——." He named one of the most salacious of the Broadway producers. "It was a lousy job—you know, cheap and nasty. I'd heard about the advertising business and decided to get into something decent."

He seemed hurt when I laughed.

"Well," he said morosely. "Then I guess it's back to the bright lights for me. I suppose you don't happen to know of anything in this town a man can do and keep his self-respect?"

Buck got out finally by writing cheap fiction for the pulps. He was and is a lot better than that. He has written honest, sensitive fiction stories which he hasn't been able to sell. So

he writes more pulp fiction and is forever spoiling his business by writing it too well. He lives in the country now, and has got himself elected justice of the peace in his township. He's an honest judge, although he tells me the local political pressures are considerable. He has a considerable local reputation among the young people. When a couple arrives at his house, wanting to get married, he first strives earnestly to dissuade them. If he is over-ruled, he then leads them to an idyllic spot beside a brook and reads them the Song of Solomon. Finally, he refuses to accept a fee.

Pure Gold

There is a very scared man huddled back of his desk in a big Western agency. He is one of the most gifted literary craftsmen I know. He is something of a sophisticate, and I am confident has never believed a word of the millions of words of advertising copy he must have written. But he rarely says anything like that, even when drunk.

He is very scared. He is in his late fifties now, and has six children. He is very eminent and successful, but he is scared just the same. As the depression deepened, he saw to it that the people in his department who stayed could be counted upon to protect his job. Just before the bank holiday he put ten thousand dollars in gold coins in his safe deposit box. Every now and then he would go in and make sure that the gold was still there.

Mr. Gentroy. The brilliant Gentroy. Once he had literary ambitions. But he was scared. And he is old now. A little of his light red hair is still left. His face is red, too. When you ask him something he never commits himself. And when you listen to him, you wonder who or what is speaking.

There was something there once. A person. Possibly an artist. It is gone now. For years he has been following Mr. Goode's prescription: he has been turning people into gold.

Now he is gold himself. Pure gold. Only occasionally, when he is drunk, does a small bubble of laughter or anger rise to the surface. The refining process is never quite complete. But Gentroy, because he was so scared, has carried it farther than most. Gold. Pure gold.

Posture

Bodfish had asked the doctor about liquor, and the doctor had shrugged. Bodfish had a leaky heart—the diagnosis was positive on that point. Yet when Bodfish had asked him about liquor, the very Jewish, very eminent and very expensive diagnostician had looked out of the window, lowered his Oriental eyelids, and shrugged.

So Bodfish had gone directly from the doctor's office to the speakeasy. In half an hour he was jolly. An hour later the Good Kid came in and told him cheerfully that he was tight. He hadn't felt tight. On the contrary, he felt himself to be the center of an immense, serene and sober clarity. The experience was not unknown to him. The creative moment. It was his ability to experience such moments that made him a great advertising man. He had felt this way the night he had thought of the Blisterine idea, which had revolutionized the advertising of proprietary medicines. A sense of power, of marching analysis, of kaleidoscopic syllogisms resolving into simple, original and utterly right conclusions.

The sensation was similar, but this time his relaxed, athletic mind was exploring strange territory. Himself. His life. The curious, strained, phantasmagoric pattern of his days.

There was something he had wanted to tell the Good Kid, but she wouldn't listen. He had felt a beautiful, paternal pity for the Good Kid. It wasn't her fault, he had tried to tell her. It wasn't his fault, either. They were both victims. As he said it, he had put forth a hand, the wrist hairy, the flesh around the knuckles showing the first withering of age,

and attempted to lay it upon her brow in a gesture of chaste absolution.

The Good Kid had laughed at him. "You're drunk, B. J." she had assured him briskly. And a little later she had gone off with the art director, leaving him alone in the speakeasy in a corner facing the mirror.

The lamps of the speakeasy were heavily shaded. But there was light—the mood of revelation persisted. It was as if his flashing mind played against the mirror, and in that clear illumination the face of Bodfish stared out at him in sharp relief. There were two Bodfishes now. There was Bodfish, the ad-man, posing, gesticulating in the mirror. And there was a new, masterful, illuminated Bodfish who smiled sardonically, fingered his cigar, and continued the inquisition of that Mephistophelian physician.

"Do you want the truth?" the physician had asked, and Bodfish had said he did.

Now, with the patient caught in the relentless reflection of the mirror, Bodfish repeated the question.

"Do you want the truth?"

The lips in the mirror smiled. The head nodded. Yes, it was to be the truth.

"Your posture is bad, Bodfish. Stand up!"

Bodfish stood up.

"Your nose is six inches ahead of your body. You're ahead of yourself."

The face in the mirror smiled deprecatingly. Bodfish's associates had frequently made that flattering complaint. Bodfish was too bright. He thought too fast. His mind was so active that——

"Nonsense, Bodfish. I doubt very much that you have ever in your life experienced the discipline of honest thought. That head and shoulder posture—what does it remind you of?"

The face in the mirror smirked.

"A hawk? Really, if I am to do anything for you, we'll have to dispense with a few of these bizarre illusions. There are hawks in your business, but not many of them. As it happens a number of my patients are advertising men. Most of them are like yourself. Have you ever watched a mechanical rabbit run around a race track pursued by whippets?"

The doctor hadn't said that—not quite. But being something of a histrion, as well as a good deal of a masochist, Bodfish enjoyed exaggerating and refining the cruelties of the diagnosis.

"Posture, Bodfish, is not merely a physical thing. Yours is a moral, a spiritual disequilibrium. Moreover, you embody, in your own psychic and physiological predicament, the dilemma of the civilization. Its acquisitive nose is ahead of its economic body. It is wobbling, stumbling, about to fall on its face. Throw your chin in, Bodfish. Think! Do you remember when you first got into the advertising business?"

Bodfish remembered.

"You were an average youth, Bodfish; perhaps a little more sensitive than the average, and with a frail talent for writing—not much, but a little. You had an idea of yourself. It was that idea that held you together—that kept your shoulders back and your chin in. Posture, Bodfish, is largely a matter of taking thought. You thought a good deal of yourself in those days. Everything that happened to you mattered. It mattered to the degree that it affected, favorably or unfavorably, your idea of yourself. Tell me, Bodfish, in those days did you think of yourself as a charlatan, a cheat and a liar? Did you think of yourself as a commissioned maker and wholesaler of half-truths of outright deceptions; a degraded clown costumed in the burlesque tatters of fake science, fake art, and fake education, leering, cozening, bullying the crowd into an obscene tent show that you don't even own yourself—that by this time nobody owns?"

The reflected face became distorted as Bodfish advanced upon the mirror.

"Answer me, Bodfish! You wanted me to explain to you why you've got a leaky heart, why your back hurts so you can't sleep, why none of your office wives takes you seriously —not after the first week anyway. The answer is that you've not only lost the idea of a society—you've lost the idea of yourself. It's silly to speak to you as a sick person. As a person you've practically ceased to exist. Long ago you stuffed yourself into the waste paper basket along with all the other refuse of your dismal trade. You went down the freight elevator in a big bale, back to the pulp mill. What's left is make-believe. Why, you need three gin fizzes before you can even take yourself seriously. You flap and rattle like a prewar tin lizzie. And you come to me for repairs! Tell me, Bodfish, why should any intelligent man waste his time rehabilitating *you*? Why, you're as obsolete as a Silurian lizard! . . . Be sensible, Bodfish, have a drink."

Bodfish had a drink.

"To your great profession, Bodfish! To your billion dollar essential industry! Fill up, Bodfish!"

Bodfish filled his glass.

"To your historic mission, Bodfish, the *reductio ad absurdum* of a whole era. Drink, Bodfish!"

Bodfish drank.

"To the 40,000 ewe lambs of American advertising, who, as the crisis deepened, poured out their last full measure of devotion on the altar of business as usual. To the vicarious sacrifice which history exacts of the knave, the weakling, and the fantast. Drink, Bodfish!"

At three o'clock in the morning the push-broom of the negro roustabout encountered an obstruction under the table next the mirror.

"Mistah Tony!"

The proprietor wiped the last glass, placed it carefully on the shelf, and leisurely emerged from behind the bar.

"Get Joe and put him in the back room," instructed the proprietor briefly.

His partner, the ex-chorus girl, returned from padlocking the front door.

"They tell me he's lost the Universal Founders account."

"Yes. His gal friend's quitting—told me so this evening."

The proprietor frowned, opened the cash drawer and examined a check.

"Better take him off the list, Clara."

It was late afternoon of the next day before Bodfish awoke.

He lay quietly staring at the painting of Lake Como on the opposite wall. Then he closed his eyes. There was something he wanted to remember—something that had happened in the night. What was it? Oh, yes, posture! That was the word, posture. Marvellous. A big idea. Never been used in advertising before. Nine out of ten have posture defects.

Sitting up in bed he extracted pencil and an envelope and made hasty notes. That was it. A cinch. That Universal Founders' account wasn't lost. Not by a damn sight.

He rose, scrubbed briefly at the dirty sink, and inspected himself in the mirror. Eyes clear. Face rested. Cured!

Great thing, posture. What the doctor ordered.

Bodfish straightened himself. That's it. Head up. Chin in. Posture.