

1934

Our Master's Voice: Advertising

James Rorty

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edition

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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"I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him."

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

"A trading on that range of human infirmities that blossoms in devout observances and bears fruit in the psychopathic wards."

—THORSTEIN VEBLEN

"Business succeeds rather better than the state in imposing its restraints upon individuals, because its imperatives are disguised as choices."

—WALTON HAMILTON

PREFACE: *I Was an Ad-man Once*

IMAGINE, if you can, the New York of 1913. In that year a young man just out of college was laying siege to the city desks of the metropolitan papers. He had good legs, but his past record included nothing more substantial than having been fired out of college, and having worked before college, and during vacations, on a small-city paper upstate; also on a Munsey-owned Boston paper. It was the last count that did for him. He couldn't laugh that off anywhere, and funds were getting low.

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Finally, a relative got the young man a job as a copy writer in an advertising agency, housed near the Battery in an ancient loft building which has since been torn down. Perhaps it is time to drop the third person. The young man was myself. I remember him well, although at this distance both the person and his actions seem a little unreal.

The young man didn't know anybody, or anything much. At that time he hadn't even read H. G. Wells' *Tono-Bungay*. But he was full of fervor. His father was an Irish Fenian who believed to the end of his days that the world was just on the point of becoming decent and sensible, and the young man, to tell the truth, has had trouble in overcoming that paternal misapprehension.

In those days business had pretty well beaten the muckraking magazines by the painless process of seizing them through the business office. But the old *Masses* was going full blast, and the blond beasts of the *New Republic* were about to launch their forays upon the sheepfolds of the Faithful.

The young man was a Socialist already, in sympathy at least, although in the matter of fundamental economics and sociology he was as illiterate as most of his contemporaries. He was literary; that is to say, he knew Ibsen, and Hauptman [*sic*], and Shaw, and Jack London, and Samuel Butler—even a little Nietzsche. Not until some years later did he come to know Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen.

But life was real and landladies were earnest. The young man was hungry. He had a job now and he was taking no chances. He was

assured that at the end of the month he would be paid sixty dollars for his services, in negotiable currency. It was up to him to earn that sixty dollars. He was young and energetic. During the economy wave under which Mr. Munsey extinguished the *Boston Journal*, he, a cub reporter, had covered as many as three supposedly important assignments in one day, being obliged, of course, to steal or fake most of his facts.

The young man was given his first advertising-copy assignment: to write some forty advertisements commending a certain brand of agricultural machinery about which he knew nothing whatever. The young man took off his coat.

I wrote those forty advertisements in three days, with my eye on the clock. Three days is ten per cent of thirty days. Ten per cent of sixty dollars is six dollars. Were those forty advertisements a big enough stint to earn those six dollars? Trembling, I turned in my copy ... it was enough for a year.

The copy was fully up to current standards, too, as advertising copy, although of course it went through endless meaningless revisions. As news and information it didn't, at the time, seem to me to be worth the price. I still don't think so. But in those three days I learned all that any bright young man needed to know about the mysteries of advertising copy-writing in order to earn, in 1929, not sixty dollars a month, but a hundred and sixty dollars a week. I say this in the teeth of the Harvard School of Business Administration, the apprentice courses of all the agencies, Dr. John B. Watson, and the old sea lion in the Aquarium to whom, in my dazed and shaken condition, I turned for comfort and understanding.

The Aquarium was close at hand. During the noon hour I would sit on a bench in Battery Park, eating my necessarily frugal lunch of peanuts and chocolate, and then spend the remaining half-hour wandering among the glass cases and peering at the fishes, who peered back at me with their flat eyes and said nothing. Sometimes one of them would turn on his side, his gills waving faintly. Nothing to do, nowhere to go. We cried our eyes out over each other, I and the other poor fishes.

Then I discovered the sea lion, who occupied a big pool in the center of the main floor. The sea lion, I soon became convinced, had some kind of an idea. There was a slanting float at one end of the pool. He would start at the other end, dive, emerge halfway up the float with a tremendous rush, and whoosh! he would blow water on the mob of children and adults who crowded around the tank. Always they would shriek, giggle, and retreat. Then, gradually, they would come back; the sea lion would then repeat the performance with precisely the same effect.

It has taken me years to understand that sea lion. I know now that he was an advertising man. Recently, I became acquainted with his human reincarnation, one of the ablest, most philosophical, and best paid advertising men in New York. If there is a "science" of advertising, he has mastered it. Yet his formula is very simple. It is this: "Figure out what they want, promise 'em everything, and blow hard."

This philosophical ancient is greatly valued as an instructor of the young. His students are very promising, although some of them are not wholly literate. He is, however, indulgent of their cultural limitations, remarking kindly: "What are a few split infinitives between morons?"

In the annex to the Aquarium where I served my advertising apprenticeship there were many mansions, housing as varied a collection of the human species as I have ever encountered together in one place. Through a stroke of luck, the agency had started with a nucleus of important accounts and expanded rapidly. Its owner, a quiet Swede who never, to my knowledge while I was in his employ, wrote a single piece of advertising copy himself, became a millionaire in a few years. He was, then, an economist, a commercial engineer, an executive of tremendous driving power? Not so that anybody could notice it. His success is quite unexplainable in terms of logic or common sense. I think he was just a "natural." Also, he played golf well, but not too well. Puzzling over this phenomenon, I remembered hearing the Socialists tell me there is no sense in trying to make sense out of the people and institutions of our chaotic capitalist civilization.

Nevertheless, the boss was a natural. Either by shrewdness or by accident, he gathered into his organization a considerable number of able and interesting people. They didn't know much about advertising. Nobody did in those days. Six months after my initiation, the company moved to a neighboring skyscraper, and the expanded copy staff soon numbered eight people. We all sat in one large room. By right of priority, I had a desk next the window where I could look out and watch the ferry boats swimming about like water beetles, and the tugs pushing liners out to sea, as ants push big crumbs. They seemed so earnest, so determined. . . . Every now and then an office boy would stroll by and deposit in one of the desk baskets a yellow printed form with here and there a little typing on it. The form called for one, two, six or twelve advertisements about a certain product, to fit specified spaces in certain scheduled publications. Usually the form was destitute of other information or instruction.

I think, although I am not sure, that those forms were the bequest of an efficiency expert who functioned briefly during the early months of my employment. He was a tall, gangling man, with a high

white brow, a drooping forelock and a rapt and questing eye. He dictated inspirational talks to his stenographer. While so engaged, he would pace up and down his office and quite literally beat his breast. In fact, he had all the equipment of a medicine man except the buffalo horns and the rattlesnake belt. It was he, I think, who started the idea of timing and systematizing the copy production of the office. Years after he had left, unfortunate copy writers were still digging the splinters of that system out of their pants.

You got a yellow form, then, which required that you write so many pieces of copy and turn them in by a certain date. What kind of copy? The form was silent. The headline goes at the top, the slug at the bottom and what goes in between you rewrite from a booklet or make up out of your head. Sometimes an illustration was called for. In such cases you conferred with the art director, who was of the opinion that you, your words, and especially your ideas about pictures were a damned nuisance and so informed you.

I felt it necessary to resent such acerbities, but I could never do so with any great conviction. Privately, I suspected that he was right. Sometimes I was tempted to put my hands on my hips and retort stoutly, "You're another." But I never did so. That would have been to widen the field of discussion intolerably. And there were always closing dates to meet.

Feeling as I did about it, it frequently seemed to me that one advertisement would do exactly as well as six. But I always wrote six. Anything to keep busy. There were never enough yellow forms.

Sometimes, unable to control my restlessness, I would wander upstairs, knock on the door of the account executive's office, and ask mildly if anybody knew anything about that product and what it was supposed to be used for. I knew that many heavy conferences had preceded the planning of that campaign. But the decisions reached in those conferences never seemed to get typed on that yellow form. Usually I got nothing out of such interviews except the suggestion that I do some more like last year's, or that an ad was an ad, wasn't it, and I was to have six done by Friday. Such admonitions were heartbreaking. The ads were already done. Nothing to do now except to stew miserably in the juice of my frustrated energies.

In time, merciful nature came to my aid. I, who was normally facile, as even a cub reporter has to be, found that writing even a six-line tradepaper advertisement cost me intolerable effort. My brain wouldn't function. My fingers were paralyzed. I was fighting the cold wind of absurdity blowing off the waste lands of our American commercial chaos. The workman in me had been insulted. Very well, then, he would strike. I dawdled. I covered reams of paper with idiotic pencilings. I missed closing dates and didn't care. My

fellow copy writers, suffering the same tortures, would go out and get drunk. One of them, in fact, who had genuine literary talent, ultimately drank himself to death.

Since I was still a virtuous youth, I had no such escapes. Even my health, which had been excellent, was shaken. I began mumbling to myself on the street. Once, for three weeks, an office associate converted me to Christian Science.

The Truth and the Light, he said, were in Mrs. Eddy's *Science and Health*, which I accordingly undertook to read for several evenings. I do not think I ever got beyond page 38, although I tried very hard. The difficulty was that it didn't make sense at first reading, so that on resuming the book I was always obliged to start over again from the beginning. It was like driving a model T Ford uphill through sand. At the end of three weeks I was utterly exhausted, and sleeping soundly, but unable to bear another word of Mary Baker Eddy.

I cite the episode merely to indicate how acute was my condition. If my friend had been a Holy Roller, I think I would have rolled for him cheerfully.

The workman in me was paralyzed. Even when, outside the office, I tried to write poetry and plays the words and ideas stared coldly at me from the page.

But the reformer in me still lived and was shortly to have his inning. The house acquired as a client a company manufacturing a proprietary remedy. As it happened, it was an excellent product, which, minus its proprietary name, was much used and recommended by the medical profession. There was my chance. I would make the advertising of that product honest. I did make it honest, for a while. I had every word of my copy censored by representative medical men. I fought everybody in the office, singly and in groups. I was obsessed, invincible and absurd.

But the client became impatient—sales weren't growing as fast as he thought they should. He hired as advertising manager an experienced and entirely unscrupulous patent-medicine salesman—a leather-hided saurian who scrapped all my carefully censored copy and furnished as a model for future advertising an illiterate screed recommending the product, directly or by implication, as a cure for everything from tuberculosis to athlete's foot.

I threw him out of my office. I rushed over to the client and talked very crudely to a very eminent gentleman. Even that wasn't enough. I considered blowing the works to the organized medical profession, although I never actually did so. Instead, I wrote a furious and entirely unactable play about a patent medicine wage-slave who went straight and took a correspondence course in burglary.

I wasn't fired, although logically I should have been. The President

of the United States had just declared war, and in the confusion I escaped into the army as a buck private. Even the war, I thought, was more rational than the advertising business. I was wrong, but that is another story.

I was an ad-man once. Indeed, I am, in a small way, an ad-man still, although I no longer carry a spear in the monotonously hilarious spectacles which the orthodox priests continue sweatingly to produce in the Byzantine, Chino-Spanish and Dada-Gothic temples of advertising which crowd the Grand Central district of New York.

I still practice, however, after my fashion. My motto, "The Less Advertising the Better," appeals poignantly to certain eminent industrialists to whom I have talked. My sales argument goes something like this:

"Mr. Hoffsch Nagel, you and I are practical men. I don't need to tell you that advertising is not an end in itself. Neither is selling. The end, Mr. Hoffsch Nagel, the true objective of the manufacturer and dispenser of products and services, should be the efficient and economical delivery to the consumer of precisely what the consumer wants and needs: what the consumer needs to buy, I repeat, not what the manufacturer needs to sell him. In any functional relationship between producer and consumer, advertising and sales expenditures are just so much frictional loss; in the ideal setup, which of course we can't even approximate under present conditions, released buying energy would be substituted entirely for the selling energy which you now spend in breaking down 'sales resistance.' My task, therefore, is to redefine and reinterpret your relationship with your customers; not to pile up sales and advertising expenses"—Mr. Hoffsch Nagel nods energetically—"but to cut them. What do your customers want from you? Service! What do you want to give them? Service! Not advertising—the less advertising the better—that's just so much friction and loss. But service! The end, Mr. Hoffsch Nagel, the end is service!"

Mr. Hoffsch Nagel meditates, while as if unconsciously his hand strays to the right-hand drawer of his desk.

"Have a drink," says Mr. Hoffsch Nagel.

It is possible to get a good deal of hospitality in this way, and even some business. Sometimes, as I listen to myself talk, I sound like one of these newly spawned capitalist economic planners. I am not. I know, or think I know, that the advertising business, with all of its wastes and chicaneries intact, is woven into the very fabric of our competitive economic system; that the only equilibrium possible for such a system is the unstable equilibrium of accelerating change, with the ad-man's foot on the throttle, speeding up consumption, preaching emulative expenditure, "styling" clothes,

kitchens, automobiles—everything, in the interest of more rapid obsolescence and replacement. Up to a certain point it is possible to build, and after the inevitable crash, to rebuild such a system always with a progressive and cumulative intensification of wastes and conflicts. It is not possible to operate such a system sanely and permanently, because its underlying economic and social premises are obsolete in the modern world.

If this is so—even some advertising men apprehend that it may be so—then it would be, perhaps, not a bad idea, if ad-men removed their tongues from their long-swollen cheeks and tried talking approximate sense for a change. It wouldn't do much if any immediate good, of course, but it might provide a desirable mental discipline, a kind of intellectual preparation for the severer disciplines which the future may hold in store for the profession.

As a matter of fact, the abler people in advertising are becoming increasingly mature, realistic, and cynical. They don't believe in the racket themselves. But they insist that the guinea pigs, not merely the consumers outside the office, but the minor employees inside the office, *must* believe in it. The rôle of the advertising agency guinea pig—the minor copy writer, layout man, forwarding clerk or other carrier of messages to Garcia—is hard indeed. The outside guinea pig, the consumer, can't be fired. But the inside guinea pig can be and is fired unless he is utterly and sincerely credulous and faithful. A good, loyal guinea pig is a pearl without price in any agency. I am even told that in some of the larger agencies, eugenic experiments are being conducted with the idea ultimately of breeding advertising guinea pigs, or pearls—I admit the metaphor is hopelessly mixed—who will come into the world crying "It Pays To Advertise".

TO SUCH HEIGHTS of fantasy are we lifted by an attempt to examine the phenomenon of contemporary advertising in America. It is not, as contemporary liberal historians and social critics have tended to regard it, a superficial phenomenon: a carbuncular excrescence of our acquisitive society, curable by appropriate reformist treatment, or perhaps by a minor operation.

A book about advertising therefore becomes inevitably a critique of the society.

Much of the data presented in this book I have gathered in my personal experience as an employee of various advertising agencies. If some of this material seems absurd, even incredible to the lay reader, I can only reply, helplessly, that I did not make the advertising business; nobody made it; that is why it is so absurd. Whether one regards the advertising business as farce or as tragedy, one is convinced that the play is badly made; there are no heroes and the

villains have a way of turning into victims under one's eyes; none of them is consistently bad, consistently sad or even consistently funny.

As I shall try to show in a later section entitled "The Natural History of Advertising," the advertising business just grew. It is the economic and cultural causes, the economic and cultural consequences of this growth that I shall try to describe in this book.