

# REVIEW AND COMMENT

## Advertising as Literature

THE earliest advertisements discovered, according to the editor of this volume,\* are the cave drawings in France which are dated around 23,000 B.C. In Mr. Frederick's interpretation these drawings advertised the hunting prowess of the artists, hunting being the major industry of the period. Fortunately he does not pursue too far this line which has led others into awarding posthumous doctorates of advertising to Jesus, Dante, Shakespeare, etc., and even inscriptions upon tombstones advertising copy. The bulk of Mr. Frederick's editorial introduction is devoted to a history and a defense of advertising as we know it today. The history is brief but impressive: the defense is specious, evading the chief issues.

Modern display advertising is about thirty years old. Before then the patent-medicine manufacturers were almost the sole users of display space, and gave advertising a traditional and not exactly antiseptic odor. How the industry progressed may be seen in these comparative figures: In 1880 the advertising industry did a business of thirty million dollars; in 1925 it turned over one billion, two hundred million dollars.

At this point Mr. Frederick leaves his role as historian to take the stand as defense attorney. This billion, two hundred thousand dollars, he insists, is not an extra charge on American industry. It is only a part of the selling costs, the total of which has gone down in proportion to other costs in spite of the huge outlay for advertising. And advertising has been a good salesman fully earning its pay. It has increased American desires and demands until the whole American standard of living has been raised to a point never achieved before in human history and unknown as yet to any other people on the globe. "Advertising," Mr. Frederick says, "is the only efficient tool available to accomplish the much needed purpose of raising the buying power and consumption standards of the world to the level of the rapidly mounting capacity for production." Mr. Frederick's gaze, apparently, was on more transcendental things when this tool, along with other tools of the capitalist system, stopped working in 1929.

To counter the accusation that advertising raises luxuries to the status of necessities, and turns people into spendthrifts, Mr. Frederick asks first, what is wrong with wanting and getting silk stockings? and almost persuades you that the desire for silk stockings is a

token of moral grandeur; and he adds that the vast, substitute window-shopping for the masses, made possible by advertising, especially for those in isolated communities, renders people market wise, discriminating, independent, gives them "character." It enables them to share in civilization.

We know the civilization Mr. Frederick is thinking of, the civilization of big business of which advertising is a notable part, being, among other things, its court minstrel. Few of the processes of this capitalist order have contributed so effectively toward establishing in the American mind the prestige, the power, the success of big business. When the *Saturday Evening Post* thinned down, through loss of advertising, when such a big advertising carrier as the *New York Times* went down to twenty-odd pages, people became alarmed. The giant, they saw, was tottering.

Mr. Frederick never once mentions the depression. One would assume that in a brief thirty-year history such a major event would have had a profound effect, even from a narrow professional viewpoint, upon markets, copy attitudes, buying and selling habits, etc. But Mr. Frederick and his twenty-four companions in the volume dutifully shut eyes, ears, and mouths upon it, refusing to acknowledge the evil. We are told about the average per capita wealth of \$3,000 but not a word about the millions unemployed, about the nearly sixty millions living below the health bureau's subsistence standard, about the declining standard of living not only of workers but of the formerly well off. Not one of the twenty-five—even those who dilate upon the importance of research—apparently has read the most recent census findings which show that 60 percent of the independent business men of America have been reduced to an annual turnover of \$10,000 or less which means an annual income of \$1,000 or less. Instead the system is seen with the same uncritical rhetoric that Mr. Robert H. Davis uses in speaking of the printing press in the motto page which opens the book.

I am the printing press, born of the mother earth. My heart is of steel, my limbs are of iron, and my fingers are of brass.

I sing the songs of the world, the oratorios of history, the symphonies of all time.

I inspire the midnight toiler weary at his loom to lift his head again and gaze with fearlessness into the vast beyond, seeking the consolation of a hope eternal.

I am light, knowledge, power. I epitomize the conquests of mind over matter.

Etc., etc., etc.

Into this heavenly printing press Mr. Frederick somehow manages to fit Mr. Hearst, Mr. Macfadden, and their col-

leagues. He writes: "The prestige of genius like Shakespeare and others; the men of letters, the periodicals of wide circulation, Hearst, or the late Mr. Campbell, Wrigley, Armour—all of them are word masters. To call one a writer and the other an advertiser; one a statesman and the other a seller of merchandise, is after all, a very faint distinction without a difference."

Insensitiveness to these distinctions may be the secret of the success of these twenty-five big shots in the advertising game, but it does not make for clear thinking.

## II

These twenty-five advertising copy writers write on the whole well and, within the restricted field of their subjects, speak sense. A few are too clever; a few are rather sentimental. Mr. Frederick, writing upon "The Research Basis of Copy," offers perhaps, to practising copywriters, the most useful piece; Helen Woodward, writing on "The Sales Power of Good Copy as Demonstrated in Book Advertising," offers the most stimulating ideas. Yet there is a disappointing lack of speculation regarding the social function of advertising, regarding its relation to literature. From the formal point of view such discussion might be considered irrelevant to the subjects assigned to or chosen by them, yet there is space given up to less relevant and less useful speculation regarding humanity, man's eternal quests, etc. Yet by indirection and unconsciously most of these writers give a social judgment. They show plainly enough that they are uncomfortable in their relationship with the public; uncomfortable in their relation to literature, and that they sense artificiality in their role.

There is an almost hysterical emphasis on truthfulness by these writers who can seldom write the truth; on simplicity by writers who must rack their brains working out new tricks, and new turns in old tricks, to attract reader attention; on humanity, by writers who must forget the common interest of humanity in the service of dividend hunters. In almost every one of the twenty-five articles the sincerity-simplicity-humanity note is sounded—seem sincere, be human, be simple and direct. There is even an article listing ways in which an impression of truth ("building up believability") can be given. These include the use of exact figures (figures don't lie), proper names, localisms, guarantees, and a cultured, dignified tone in the copy on the theory that the masses have faith in people with an air of culture and breeding.

From all this stress on sincerity, one gath-

\* *Masters of Advertising Copy, Principles and Practice of Copy Writing According to its Leading Practitioners. Edited by J. George Frederick. New York. The Business Bourse, Publisher. \$3.*

ers that the advertising copywriter is in no very secure frame of mind. This is further borne out by frequent references to religion and to the Bible. One writer satisfies his conscience over having to rhapsodize over "things" by saying, "I find thousands of references in the Bible to the commonest things of life." Bruce Barton, as usual, solves the problem at once by inducting Jesus into the American Advertisers' Association. Another cites the twenty-third psalm as a perfect specimen of advertising copy. One of the reasons offered for its excellence is that it promises so much. Throughout, this religious justification is caught at. One would imagine that science would offer more realistic, more progressive sanctions. One would expect that the example of the Soviet Union where sanitation, education, the advantage of modern industry are "sold" to the people by the use of modern advertising techniques, would furnish the justifications they so obviously crave. These successful copywriters, however, are apparently too closely tied to this system even to eye another. We therefore have the irony of seeing religious consolation grasped at where scientific sense would serve, by men and women who belong to a group notorious for their sophistication.

### III

Here and there another curious inferiority complex crops out. There is approving comment, for instance, on an anonymous article published some time ago in the *Atlantic Monthly* which stated that some of the best writing of our time appeared in advertising columns. Some time ago a big advertising agency held an exhibition called, I think, "Art of the Word," in which the literary values in advertising copy were demonstrated both in specimens of advertising copy and through comparison with other traditional literary forms. I myself recall a good deal of advertising copy with admiration, especially a booklet to advertisers issued by the New York *Daily News*, captioned, "Tell It to Sweeney—The Vanderbilts Don't Care," which had as much persuasion in it as the most dulcet piece of prose I can think of. But advertising copywriters know that one necessary literary element is lacking in their craft—the same sincerity so yearningly referred to in this book.

In a society where advertising would be a social function sincerity would come naturally. But advertising is a social function in this society only at second hand. It is first an instrument for profit making. At best an advertising man is a good ghost-writer for a good business man—and ghost-writing has not, that I know of, in spite of varied and extensive practice, produced much literature. Nevertheless the advertising writer does not give up literature without a qualm. There was pathos, for me, in an admiring comment in one of the articles, upon a successful advertising writer who had also just signed a contract for his second novel. Very likely

the novels were inconsequential, but in the eyes of the average advertising man, that was *writing*; advertising copy was not writing. Yet there is no question that in a society where advertising will perform a social service, sincerity and true—not manufactured—fervor will be possible to it, and it will be a recognized branch of literature.

But writers have more than personal frustration at copy desks to charge against advertising. Advertising, by becoming the principal revenue of publications, has changed the whole function of newspapers and magazines. The former are no longer in any real sense organs of public opinion; the latter no longer are literary mediums. The sale of circulation to advertisers rather than of literature to readers has become the business motive of magazines. The effect has been to professionalize and standardize popular writing, leaving the genuinely creative writer without a public, and driving him into the constricted and too frequently dead-end bypaths of the "little" magazines.

The trouble was not so much that literature became a business, but that it was abandoned as a business. When it became more profitable for magazines to sell advertising rather than literature, the work it published was regarded as filler, and the principal qualities required of it were that it offend nobody and say nothing that might break down the reader's buying mood. Obviously, writing

produced to fit such psychological limitations can only by rare accident be literature.

The damage to literature has been great. For a long time, before the development of large-scale advertising, the magazine was the traditional nursery of talent. The great prose masters of the last century and a half were developed and supported by the magazines, getting through the magazines, audience and income. Contemporary creative writers are deprived of both. Book publishing has somewhat filled the gap, but book publishing reaches only a tiny minority and does not support more than a handful of writers. To make their living, writers are driven from creative work to Broadway and Hollywood hack-writing, to advertising, newspaper and copy desks.

In a socialist society there is no bar to any of these becoming branches of literature. But in America they become graveyards of talent. They produce dead matter and their practitioners gasp for "sincerity" as drowning men gasp for air. Mr. Frederick explains the exclusion of specimen pieces of copy by his masters of advertising copy by saying that, "like hats, advertisements go out of style." What he may mean, if I can take the liberty of interpreting, is that the advertising tricks used to simulate sincerity need constant changing and in old advertisements the trickery becomes embarrassingly apparent.

ISIDOR SCHNEIDER.

## The Revolutionary Fringe

*THE BEAUTIES AND FURIES*, by Christina Stead. Appleton-Century Company. \$2.

A NOVEL of the intensity and fascination of *The Beauties and Furies* humbles a reviewer. If Christina Stead is a master of English prose, she is also a fugitive from ready interpretation; and if her novel is a stunning reading experience, it is largely inexplicable without solid penetration during a general time-perspective. One may review *The Beauties and Furies* as briefly or as fully as possible, recording simply the presence of its major components or attempting to analyze the complexities of its style, philosophy, intellectual flights, patterns of language and character construction; relating them to Miss Stead's previous books (*Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, *The Salzburg Tales*); her childhood and maturity in Australia; her commercial experiences in Europe; her functions as secretary of the British delegation to the recent World Congress in Defense of Culture; and the pattern of her philosophic evolution as implied in the sequence of her publications and of this novel, partly composed in 1929 and re-adapted to the changed French political landscape of 1934. The present reviewer takes the method of brevity, certain that criticism must soon accept the challenge of extended discussion which Miss Stead's writings quietly build.

Without fanfare or sheer bulk of pages

with which certain writers nowadays assault the public into attention, Miss Stead places four simple sets of Europeans before the reader, and proceeds to make them collide. A British petty-bourgeois triangle: Dr. Weston's comely, lumpish, runaway wife, her "quasi-Marxist" lover Fenton and their Paris entourage; the triangle of French business—the lace-jobbers, Fuseaux Brothers, and their employes, Marpurg, of the suavely filthy tongue; actress-and-fille de joie Blanche and her coteries of corrosive boulevard wastrels; the Coromandel antiquarian-household on the frontier between wisdom and insanity. Four representative and usual worlds, their futures fairly predictable, collide, interpenetrate and emerge individually unchanged but confirmed in their courses and definitively illuminated. Obviously, the significance of a book of such construction depends upon the set of principles from which the illuminations derive; and it is here that Miss Stead invites the penalties of delayed appreciation. For, unless the reader is continuously alert, he may wake up to find himself sidetracked from the main course of the novel: the series of carefully integrated observations through which the novelist sends her message.

Her method is often a form of intellectual teasing. In a given incident the reader finds that he has been unawaresly lifted off realistic ground, soaring in a realm of ideas that suggest improbable vistas, but possible and provocative ones—when suddenly the novelist pulls