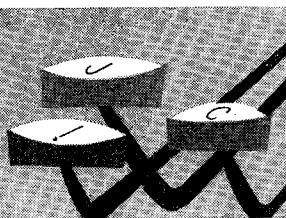


Manner of Speaking



From the *Journal of Lazarus Smith* (or, No Subject Again, except—vaguely—New York): I came out of the Crazy Cafeteria and floated along the avenue as lost and as wavering as everyone else there. Because it cost me no more to be lost in a sidestreet, I turned at random and found myself in a *bolgia* of pushcarts, all of which seemed to be selling dried cod, in the fullest aroma of southern Italy fertilized by Greek myth.

Southern Italy, as the traveler may learn if he insists on eating off the tourist lanes, is the land of *baccala*, that sun-baked betrayal of protein that begins as cod and ends up looking like great chunks of ripped pasteboard, and tasting about as pasteboard might taste, though there are lost souls who will call it a delicacy. The fact is that *baccala* is not even a comestible but a social disaster in which cod is perverted in order to sustain that perversion we call poverty. It is, I am sure, what the damned are served in the mess halls of Hell, and at the moment, except for the humidity, I was sure I had stumbled into Hell's own commissary just as the souls of all cod had risen in rebellion.

For the humidity was so high that a waft of air was enough to reconstitute the salted flesh, and the heat so generative that it fermented life into the re-swollen bodies. One by one the ragged pasteboards sucked back their mother-wet and became fish again, flopping in their pails, flapping out on the sidewalks and into the gutters, slithering down into the sewers, and so back to the harbor and the main deep again.

The pushcart men chased them in panic, slithering after them on all fours, diving even into the sewers, from which, now and then, one of them would crawl back like a soiled crab, dragging strings of squirming cod that he would then place between two manhole covers to bake flat and saleable again, only to have to leave them at once to go chasing after a fresh cascade of reincarnated fish. It was a miracle like spontaneous combustion, but this was from the Book of Poseidon and its creed was spontaneous humidity.

And in or out of the sewers, slithering along the gutters, or occasionally on their feet beside their steaming pushcarts, the peddlers kept shouting their wares—*Ba - cca - laaa!*—in their long Calabrian and Sicilian and Neapolitan voices. (For part of their damnation was to be forever active to no end.) And the

local ladies, half enmeshed in their own string bags (that being part of their damnation) would pause, sniff, and soon pass on.

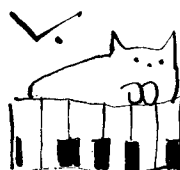
Moved by example, I tested the air myself with the tiniest sniff and went back instantly to not breathing. Life was at least bearable in suspension.

But the uproar of it confused my senses. One sniff and I found it impossible to get back to being dead. It was worse than insomnia: this was insomnia made eternal. I began to think I could hear the stench of it: the salted fish like a low bass throb, the agony of the softening and swelling flesh like an electronic squeak and waver growing into a wild whine as of an approaching bomb, and then a sonic boom of stench as the skin popped back around each reincarnation, and the flopping began. While from the sewers, like the ripest corruption, the sounds of everyone's radios called up from the bilge ducts to the sea.

Even in suspension, I decided, I could not walk all the way through it. Nor could I find my way out. Ahead of me a surf of dark, wild as the combers off the Pipeline, was breaking and flinging a spume of salted cod. And when I turned, the pushcarts had closed in behind me, and from them the reborn cod kept cascading at my feet.

It was just then I was struck by—of all things—a jonquil. It hit me just at the right temple and fell at my feet, where it instantly gathered about itself a mossy bank of violets about six feet long and about three wide. There was no way of imagining such violets, nor the air that breathed cool from them around that one jonquil lying on its side, its yellow, fringed bell and its light stem and leaves seeming actually to flicker in the green of the moss and the purple-studded ears of the violet leaves.

It takes longer to speak a springtime than to see one. It would be true to say I stared down at that mossy bank for all of a lifetime. It would be just as true to say I looked up instantly to see where the jonquil had come from. And whether at the end of my life or instantly here beyond it, I saw an old, shawled woman nodding and smiling at me from her



second-story fire escape, her remaining jonquil still in her hand, its bell touching the side of her nose, and all this world's jonquils still in her eyes, which were benignly flirtatious for my own good.

It was, of course, Beatrice. Isn't all poetry the curse of Tithonus?

And there I stood without a soul to send her.

There were, however, the violets and, therefore, there was soul enough. I knelt and picked a whole flowerdom for her, leaving another for its own sake.

When my left hand was as full as I could make it without crushing anything, I stopped one of the urchins who were running about kicking at the fish that flopped everywhere. Handing him a \$5 bill, I gave him the flowers and pointed to Beatrice on her balcony.

And she saw what I did and thanked me by touching her lips with her last jonquil.

The urchin nodded, put my money in his pocket, and started for what must have been her doorway. But he was no sooner out of reach than he made an evil gesture at me and ran off, flinging the violets into the street where they exploded, clearing a path for traffic all the way to Central Park. Ladies in air-conditioned furs stepped out of cabs on long, naked legs to walk around the scars my violets had left on the pavement.

Immediately my jonquil began to wilt and my bank of violets to shrivel. Frantic as the fish peddlers, I knelt and snatched what I could, crushing as much as I salvaged.

It was a thinner handful I ended with by the time my plot had mouldered, but when I looked up again Beatrice smiled them bright with understanding, her eyes eternal.

I stopped another urchin and showed him another \$5 bill but did not give it to him. It would be his, I told him, when he had delivered the violets. He disappeared at once into the doorway, and Beatrice, understanding, turned away to enter her flat and to receive them at the door to which my messenger was already mounting.

But once her eyes were off me—the old hag—I was not to be caught again. I popped into a cab with one of the ladies in air-conditioned fur and told the cab-driver to take us to the Four Seasons or to any other eternity.

My urchin could find his fellow thief and split with him.

The old hag could buy jonquils enough cheap enough. Some other fool would always be coming by to be caught by her eyes, and even to believe them.

And if it was not really the world I was going back to, I could go expectantly and without fear: all its airs would be conditioned, the fur would peel, and nothing would really come back to life.

—JOHN CIARDI.

MASS MAN AND MASS MEDIA

A veteran newspaper editor asks whether the nation's free press, once a basic guarantee against despotism, is itself becoming despotic

By HERBERT BRUCKER

THIS IS the day of the mass man. Already our population nears 200,000,000. But even if we shrank back to the 100,000,000 we were during World War I our contemporary society would still be a single, interrelated whole. We used to live on farms, or at most in villages, towns, or cities that were clusters of individuals. Now everything in our lives, from what we eat and wear almost to what we think, comes prepackaged from some distant, impersonal source.

This is true of much that we read in our newspapers, hear on the radio, and see on TV. But if mass society is thus swallowing up the individual, why has not journalism in particular come to his rescue? The free press was established to articulate the yearnings of the individual. It was not written into the Constitution for the benefit of the million-circulation newspaper or the multi-million-circulation magazine, still less for the network that on occasion speaks to the nation. When the First Amendment was written, freedom of the press was a civil liberty of the individual, guaranteeing him the right to present his facts or his views to his fellow citizens by the use of a simple, hand-operated printing press. But the lone pamphleteer, the contributor to *Common Sense* or the *Federalist Papers*, to the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary weeklies, has long since vanished. He has been swallowed up in the mass media.

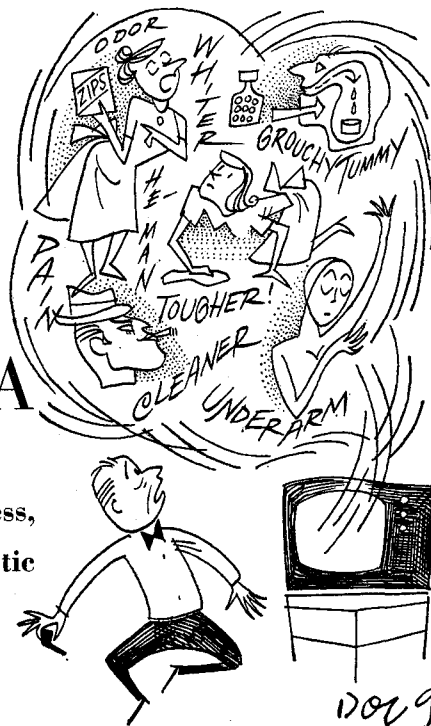
Listen to what the sociologist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann had to say about this a few years ago: "To many, the publishing world appears to be an inde-

pendent, autonomous power that does not reproduce public opinion: formed elsewhere, but manufactures them. The press was once regarded as the decisive instrument for the liberation of the individual from absolute government, and nowadays we are more inclined to ask ourselves how we can liberate the individual from the spiritual despotism of mass communication media."

NOT only that, but there is occasion to wonder whether the mass media are adequately doing their job of informing the citizen about the world he lives in. The trouble is that we can never put the genie back in the bottle. We cannot dismantle today's *Daily News*, or *Life*, or the networks, and turn them back into the hand-set newspaper out of which they all grew.

We can most readily see how difficult it is to get variety and flavor and depth and meaning into our mass media if we look at television.

In one sense, of course, television is the ultimate ideal of journalism. For journalism is reporting—and how can you report better than by transporting the citizen to the scene of action, so that he may see the news for himself as it happens? This is precisely what television often does—when it is journalism. Any football game, or speech by a President, or other event covered live is an example. Even more memorable is the TV reporting of great moments in history like the assassination of President Kennedy and its aftermath, or the funeral of Winston Churchill. Finally, the news-background documentaries are often journalism of the highest quality. But, alas, television is but one-fifth journalism and four-fifths show business.



In broadcasting circles it is fashionable to say that in this country we have free television. But it isn't free at all. It is 100 per cent bought and paid for because American commercial TV and radio, alone among all the world's broadcasters, live exclusively on advertising. Therefore, whether programming is done by an advertising agency or by a network, the result is identical. It must be, because he who pays the piper calls the tune, and no one pays for programming but the sponsor. His one concern, naturally enough, is to reach the widest possible audience. In this way our system of broadcasting puts a premium on appealing to the lowest possible common denominator among the mass of men.

If this pressure worked its remorseless way on but a single network at a time it might not be bad. But inevitably each competing station or network strives to capture a rating that is higher (which often means through standards that are lower) than its rivals. Small wonder that last year our three networks were in a dead heat in the ratings' verdict on their success in mesmerizing the mass. And small wonder that our TV screens, most of the time, do not remotely come near tapping the brilliant possibilities of the medium.

Whatever is done to put economic nourishment into more individuality and quality in programming will have to be done by law. But if it is true that one-third of Congress (and even the President) has a financial stake in some piece of the broadcasting business, then changing our system even modestly will not be easy.

Let us therefore turn to printed journalism, which promises to remain our