

## ADVERTISING GOD

EVERY reader of *Scrutiny* should remember that he is a parasite—in the eyes at least of the authors of *Advertising and Selling* (edited by Noble T. Praigg—Pitman). To hear the ‘admen’ talk, you might imagine that they were the lords of creation. And they are, in a sense. Advertising was once parasitic in dimensions as well as in function: but it has swollen so dropsically that its parent is dwarfed. A large part of the world won’t work even inefficiently without lubrication by advertising, for (as a *Criterion* commentary said) ‘the material prosperity of modern civilization depends upon inducing people to buy what they do not want, and to want what they should not buy. . . it seems a very flimsy structure. . . .’

This fact and its implications are apt to be forgotten. The neglect is not surprising. The channels for the diffusion of enlightened opinion are more tightly blocked in the case of advertising than in any other problem: periodicals can’t be expected to bite the hand that feeds them. Far from it. The cruder dailies and the more luxurious weeklies are explicit in their direction to buy advertised goods (in one case, at the foot of every page), while there is often a subtler relation between the reading and publicity matter, *e.g.* in evoking and exploiting similar undesirable attitudes. The more solemn organs, whose predecessors used to cater for the intelligent, are unhelpful; one of the pseudosophical quarterlies even published a Defence of Advertising which paraded a string of the usual hack sophistries. Once upon a time there was a Select Committee which made very suitable recommendations on patent medicines and their advertisements. But they were never effected. And the latest committee, on ‘skywriting,’ seems to have been remarkably gullible; from the fat phrases of its Report we gather that though at first it was ‘frankly apprehensive,’ its fears were ‘considerably allayed’ by the thought that this method of advertising was ‘far more pleasant than many of the permanent forms.’ It appears to think that ‘skywriting’ should be fostered as a new ‘industry.’ This year one of the brighter weeklies

reviewed advertising by means of a questionnaire. The more blatant fallacies were duly detected, but the sad significance of the answers is that those critics who excepted certain advertisements from their general condemnation of style chose for favourable notice those which do most damage, by debasing ideas and language and by promoting undesirable attitudes. Advertising's most hostile critics showed themselves gorged with the subtler baits.

*Advertising and Selling* consists of the speeches made by a hundred and fifty Advertising and Sales Executives at an International Convention held at Atlantic City. It offers a bird's-eye view of the advertising world, that is of the future to which we are Progressing. Anyone who believes that this country is putting up a sturdy resistance to 'Americanization' should read the account of how the British public was made 'raisin-conscious' (p. 322); or turn to p. 250, where we are told: 'This meeting of American and British advertising agents is one of those quiet, unassuming events, not uncommon in history, which give no outward sign of their real significance.' One outward sign is that the British speak the same idiom, emit the same noises, as the Americans. If England is less Americanized than America, it is in the discreditable sense that less resistance to the advance of civilization has been developed: no English university has produced a *Middletown*. This book provides useful hints of what to look for; there is much of the material necessary for producing an awareness that

the close

Of our long progress is hinted by the crass

Fogs creeping slow and darkly

From out the middle west.

Fogs which are terrifying because they are so vast and impersonal. But a book like this provides a focus, a target. If it induces nausea and depression, it provides some incitement to resist; it is as if one were eavesdropping at a meeting of gangsters plotting one's murder. Certainly no gangster turning informer could provide more damning evidence. If the 'admen' were not so stupid (this book shows that they are uniformly illiterate), they would never have let the cat out of the bag like this.

Of the backward British manufacturer we are told: 'For

generations he has held the belief that quality production was his first and only consideration.' And that advertising cheats the consumer by lowering the quality of the goods is only one of the many charges proved by Mr. Chase's books, especially *Your Money's Worth* (Cape, 8/6d.). But more pertinent here is its achievement in debasing the currency of living—its effects on language and ideas, art and religion. Where the business ethos has ousted rival codes, the church has only survived by competing with the same tactics, that is, by not competing at all. Organized religion in the United States stands square with Big Business, judging by the section devoted to advertising God, with such titles as 'Applying Business Standards to Church Advertising,' 'Advertising the Bible,' and 'Spirituality in Church Advertising.' Its fifty pages are pre-eminent in grossness. Churchmen and 'admen' use the same idiom. Where religion is 'sold,' when 'everyone likes to belong to a keen, alert, up-and-doing organization that is always on its toes,' God is worshipped as the Biggest Business Man:

'Above all I would make my church advertising prayed-over advertising. I would no more expect to put out an announcement of any kind which had not been individually submitted to the Sales Manager in prayer, than I would expect to preach a sermon or lead a prayer meeting without so doing.'

Though in the United States business has subverted religion, the religious attitudes are still useful to business, which canalizes them for its own purposes. The religious sanction is crudely invoked: 'Next to God and religion, the utilities are the most important thing in our lives'; and an invitation to use a certain elevator is supported by a list of the 'Very Biggest Businesses,' 'every one of which is headed by a religious man.' The more insidious damage caused by advertisers is the same as that done by certain novelists; by using emotional keywords, 'they call out the religious attitude to support an unworthy code.' 'Advertisement writers,' I once heard Sir William Crawford say, 'should read the Bible, Kipling, Stevenson and Burns, because they know how to touch the human heart, and because they know how to use words.' What this knowledge has done for the language may be realized from *Prose of Persuasion*, a recent anthology of adver-

tising copy; and similar decay may be noted in many places, from politicians' speeches to schoolboy essays, which are liable to talk about the 'big things of life.' It must be insisted 'that what is taking place is not something that effects only the environment of culture, stops short, as it were at the periphery.' Crude or empty language is inseparable from crude or empty living; and even a slight study of the material available for a comparison of the style and careers of politicians supplies evidence for Mr. Pound's dictum: 'When . . . the application of word to thing goes rotten, *i.e.*, becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought and order goes to pot.'

'It is more than a coincidence,' says an American on p. 210 of *Advertising and Selling*, 'that we lead the world in industrial advertising and journalism,' for it was in America first that there was 'no sharply drawn line between writing to entertain and writing to sell' (p. 102). And it is no coincidence that novelists and journalists are often copywriters; they use the same language, *i.e.*, promote the same attitudes, the same ways of living and thinking. What happens to creative talent spent in copywriting may be seen from *Prose of Persuasion*, especially the introduction. The late Arnold Bennett would have made a very efficient copywriter; his career is the type (increasingly exemplified) heralded by Mr. Dennis Bradley (Praigg, p. 74), who foresees 'the time—and that in the immediate future—when into the vortex of commerce, because of the fundamental instinct to live, will be swept our great writers.' All Mr. Bradley's orotundities are valuable evidence. A generation which understands only the advertisers' use of language and sees no pictures but posters, has no ears and eyes for literature and art, and will make no protest when it is told (p. 311) that 'outdoor advertising, honestly and skilfully designed, belongs to the modern landscape quite as much as the trees and flowers belong to it.' If some of Mr. Bradley's rosy prophecies are realized, at least one looks odd in the light of subsequent slumps: 'Advertising is the new world force lustily breeding progress. It is the clarion note of business principle. It is the bugle call to prosperity,' etc., etc. It was certainly a contributing cause to the 1929 Wall Street crash.

Most of the 'undesirable attitudes' referred to are covered

by the idea of Progress, announced with a Rotarian note of unctuous hypocrisy. It warrants, for instance, the disgusting optimism which damns as a croaker any critic of the *status quo*, while it provides the authority for any infliction the advertisers may think fit—the Higher Standard of Living, for example—or in other words, the substitution for normal human activities of second-hand amusement and deleterious habits, increasing in number almost daily. ‘Soap isn’t bought any more to keep one’s self clean, but to become beautiful.’ A truism the slump should enforce is that peoples with the Highest Standard suffer most from depressions; by being in the rearguard of Progress, the ‘backward nations’ are nearer a more satisfying human norm. But advertising ‘will do for the backward nations the things it has done for America, in raising the standard of living, in quickening the flow of wealth among all classes. . . .’<sup>1</sup> What it has done for America we know from *Middletown* and *Stardust in Hollywood*; and the process is not likely to be checked, even by political revolution—people conditioned by newspapers, films and the Higher Standard would not be more fulfilled than in the prosperity periods of capitalism. On p. 442 we read:

‘Appeal to reason in your advertising and you appeal to about 4 per cent. of the human race. Appeal to instinct and you touch everyone from the Australian aborigine to the most highly developed product of twentieth-century civilization.’

The ‘appeal to instinct’ has helped to reduce the victims of civilization to a plight which savages deplore; at this one dead

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<sup>1</sup>Advertising mission work in Africa:—‘EVENING DRESS FOR NEGROES—THEY LIKE THEIR CLOTHES FROM LONDON. African negroes prefer British evening clothes to any other garments.—This is what Mr. Lipos Tichin, a Greek by birth, whose home is in London, has to say about his trade in second-hand clothes with African negroes (reports Reuter).—If trade is moving slowly, he says a film is shown to the natives.—*They see white men parading in the very clothes which he is offering for sale. This rarely fails to clinch the business.*—Ivory, gold, diamonds and crocodile skins are given by the negroes for the clothes.’—From the *Evening Standard*, Monday, November 7th, 1932.

level, such victims are de-differentiated, to borrow the biologists' term, for as human beings they are losing faculties without compensation.

In this levelling-down process advertising (et cetera) has replaced education; it is significant that 'education' is one of the words most frequently abused by the advertisers' lingo. 'To educate a great public to think a certain thing about a product. . . ,' and (an English specimen, from *The Brewers' Journal*) 'a campaign of sufficient magnitude to influence public opinion and educate the coming generation in the merits of the brewery product could be effectively taken.' And if we are 'to put our wave of progress in its proper place,' some kind of counter-education is necessary. Education (in the form of schools) is at the moment very busy mass-producing interchangeable little components for the industrial machine; public and elementary schools are at the same point on the conveyor belt. For the average public school boy only differs from the 'board' school boy in that with his highly developed herd-instinct, his ready-made attitudes for the advertisers to play on, he is an easier victim of exploitation. Visitors to elementary schools note the dulness of the eldest pupils compared with the brightness and self-sufficiency of the infants; and the same contrast might be noted in other schools. In the interval they have been taught to write and spell, and their faculties over-taxed, until they are ejected, inarticulate and impercipient, and left to the mercies of the decreators. If the young must be taught the ABC, they should surely be taught something like Active Reading, to recognise a penny newspaper for what it is. And an Advertisement Defence period would do a great deal more for its pupils than the heading suggests at first; the saving of money would be the least benefit, for a full training in the subject would entail a knowledge of 'the difference between free and wasteful organization, between fullness and narrowness of life.' Some kind of training in critical reading would be useful in all subjects; economists might then be asked what they mean by 'human happiness,' when they say it is the goal of the 'economic process.' This book should have several uses, as a museum of fallacies and as a guide to the significance of advertising, in inducing a critical attitude to environment; for the concern of education should be to turn out 'misfits,' not spare parts.

DENYS THOMPSON.

# WILL TRAINING COLLEGES BEAR SCRUTINY?

THE defects of Training Colleges are so obvious to those (though, as we have to point out, not to all) who have passed through them that it is hard to realise that they are not equally obvious to Training College officials, the upper ranks of the educational hierarchy, or the world at large—as is clear from the increasing difficulty which ‘untrained’ men and women find in obtaining posts in schools. Nevertheless, amongst the ‘trained’—those at least who retain some critical independence after a systematic numbing of the faculties—the Training College has become a byword for futility, or worse. To mention it was, we found, to provoke outbursts of derision and indignation, the violence of which would surprise those who retain any illusions about the present system.

A digest of the information received in reply to a widely distributed questionnaire will suggest an answer to the query at the head of this article, and, perhaps, provoke a more complete investigation than we were able to carry out. The *Times Educational Supplement* or the *Journal of Education* will, perhaps, call attention to the problem more effectively.

Even in publishing these notes we shall incur animadversion and objection. We have not had replies from every Training College in England and Scotland; we have not discriminated sufficiently between elementary and post-graduate Training Colleges, between Training Colleges for men and those for women; we have not mentioned the one or two decent exceptions to the general rule; and so on. In short, we presume. Our reply is that we presume to make a start, since no one else seems likely to do so.

The problem of course cannot be isolated. The educational machine works in a round—School, University, Training College, School—and a study of the Training College in artificial isolation is only valuable if we remember that it gears on to the other two. The machine image comes naturally to mind, for the Training College, bent on justifying itself to the Board of Education,