Of Horlicks and Heroism

by Theodore Dalrymple (May 2014)

When I was young there was a milky drink called Horlicks that some people took just before they went to bed to assure themselves a good night's sleep. I knew that it was disgusting even without ever having tried it—one was able in those days to know many such things without experience—and that it was consumed (at least in my opinion) mainly by middle aged, middle class insomniacs with indigestion. I believe that the drink is still sold today and is produced by a giant pharmaceutical company, one of the largest in the world.

In those days it was advertised with a slogan that stuck in my mind: 'Prevents night starvation.' I intuited from the first that this was balderdash: I didn't know much human physiology, but the concept of night starvation, of people going to bed well-fed and waking up skeletal, seemed to me intrinsically absurd. But clearly it was an effective slogan, at least in the sense of sticking in my mind if not that of selling me the product, for here I am, more than fifty years later, remembering it vividly, as pupils a century and a half ago remembered Latin tags.

At any rate, it was one of the advertising slogans that first alerted me to the fact that advertising was not intended to inform but to influence, and not necessarily to the advantage of the person influenced. I wouldn't go so far as to say that I have been completely uninfluenced by advertisements ever since—I vaguely remember reading Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* a few years later, and no man can claim to be utterly impervious to the wiles of publicists—but I think I am less influenced by them that average. No advertising campaign has caused me to buy something I would not otherwise have bought.

Actually the slogan about Horlicks was already old by the time I first heard it. It was devised (as I learned recently) in 1931 by a man called Norman Cameron. The latter was an advertising copywriter who, as it happened, was a poet, much admired by his contemporaries though he has never been accorded much popular recognition.

Cameron (1905–1953) was a distant relative of Lord Macaulay. His father was a military chaplain to a Scots regiment in India, who died at precisely the same age, 48, as his son was to do, and of precisely the same disease, hypertension leading to cerebral haemorrhage. At Oxford, where he scraped a degree, he knew Auden and others who were to become famous. For a time after graduation he went to live in Majorca, with Robert Graves and Laura Riding, whose disciple he was. On returning to England, having tired of discipleship, he found work with an

advertising agency, but kept up his literary friendships and acquaintances. He was a heavy drinker and counted as Dylan Thomas' best friend, though he wrote and published a scabrous poem about him called *The Dirty Little Accuser*:

> Who invited him in? What was he doing here,
>
> That insolent little ruffian, that crapulous lout?
>
> When he quitted a sofa, he left behind him a smear.
>
> My wife says he even tried to paw her about.

Why, then, the dirty little accuser? The next verse makes this clear:

> What was worse, if, as often happened, we caught him out
>
> Stealing or pinching the maid's backside, he would leer,
>
> With a cigarette on his lip and a shiny snout,
>
> With a hint: 'You and I are all in the same galère.'

In other words, cleanliness, honesty etc. are but a veneer thinly disguising our true nature, which is similar to Thomas's.

Even if this is the metaphysical message of the poem (that after all ends with the line that 'We shall never be able to answer his accusation'), I am not sure that I should be entirely pleased if my best friend described me as leaving a smear on a sofa when I got up from it, especially if I knew that there was some truth in it. I have seen it written that Cameron's poem was affectionate, but if so I should not have cared to be the butt of his contempt.

Cameron's fame, such as it is, rests upon about seventy published poems, none of them very long. He was also a translator from the French and German, including of Hitler's table talk: but no one remembers or long honours a translator, however good. His complete poems make a slender volume, my copy of which, bought second-hand, smells ferociously of smoked tobacco: I imagine it was previously owned by a pipe-man of considerable literary culture, who read it closely, always smoking, in his book-lined study. The tobacco must have done for him in the end, for no one who would buy such a book would sell it before his death.

No one, I suppose, would claim that Cameron was a major poet: apart from anything else, his oeuvre is far too slender. But Robert Graves said that many more of his lines stuck in the

mind than those of more celebrated poets: and surely part of the purpose of poetry (this is me, not Robert Graves, speaking) is to furnish the mind with allusions.

His poetry is relatively straightforward but not therefore shallow. *The Thespians at Thermopylae*, for example, raises an important question about the nature of courage, and no doubt by implication of other virtues. At the battle of Thermopylae, the Spartans, led by King Leonidas, fought a desperate rearguard action against the huge invading Persian army of Xerxes and were annihilated. The Spartans were not alone, however: they were assisted by the Thespians, not actors but citizens of the city of Thespiae. The poem begins:

> The honours that the people give always
>
> Pass to those use-besotted gentlemen
>
> Whose numskull courage is a kind of fear,
>
> A fear of thought and of the oafish mothers…
>
> … in their rear.

In other words, their bravery, if it deserves the name, is unreflecting and customary; it is habit rather than choice. The Spartans are brave because they are afraid to be anything else; it is little else but a different kind of cowardice. Only what is freely chosen can be a moral quality. The poem ends (conflating the hoplites of Thespiae with the followers of Thespis, allegedly the first actor:

> But we, actors and critics of one play,
>
> Of sober-witted judgment, who could see
>
> So many roads, and chose the Spartan way,
>
> What has the popular report to say
>
> Of us, the Thespians at Thermopylae?

Posterity does not always award its medals according to merit.

Cameron took part in the war in the North Africa theatre and also lived in Vienna during the first years after it, the Vienna of The Third Man. Cameron had been an anti-Nazi from an early date, travelling in Nazi Germany, an experience that persuaded him that the German populace

knew far more about the evils of Nazism than it claimed after the war was over. But unlike many anti-Nazis, he was not tempted by communism. He was suspicious of too-great attachment to abstract causes, which he accounted ‘hysterical,’ that is to say forced and false.

One of his poems was inspired by post-war Vienna in winter, when the city was still under four-power occupation, and is called Liberation in Vienna. Its first line is memorable:

Totalitarian Winter, Occupying Power!

Winter is made to stand for totalitarianism. Its effect is everywhere and inescapable, and the poem continues:

Like savage troops in grimy battledress

His piles of dirty snow sit there and glower,

Holding the streets in terror and duress.

But winter does not last forever, of course. Luckily the seasons change:

But now the glorious legions of the sun

Assault the roof-tops – their El Alamein!

The formed platoons of Winter break and run,

Their dingy corpses tumble down the drain.

But no victory of summer over winter is final, just as no political victory is final, no triumph over totalitarianism or other type of political pathology complete, no better political arrangement proof against degeneration back into something horrible. Cameron warns us that, celebrate the return of summer as we might, we cannot rest assured:

Heap grapes and roses high on Summer’s altar:

Winter is gone, with all his dreadful crew.

Yet still they have the words to make us falter:

‘Wait, citizens, till Winter comes anew.’

By all accounts Cameron was a modest man who did not obtrude himself upon the world by self-

advertisement (Horlicks he advertised, but not himself). He did not inflate the size of his corpus in order to impress it with his industry or the fecundity of his mind. When asked whether he intended his poetry to be useful to himself or others, he replied, ‘Neither: I write a poem because I think it wants to be written.’ It was almost as if something that existed was speaking through his mouth rather than originated with him. At any rather, this was not a boastful way to describe either his method of composition or his purposes. In this he was the polar opposite of the woman, Laura Riding, whose disciple he had once been. She thought that poetry would one day usher in the new heaven, the new earth. It is curious how sensible men may sometimes attach themselves to crazed gurus, as if immodesty were a hook to catch the modest.

Cameron was also asked what he thought distinguished him as a poet from the ordinary man. To this he replied that it was a: ‘Lack of interest in ordinary human, masculine activities, such as sport, learning and making a career.’ But ‘in so far as I am interested in these, the less I am a poet.’ In fact, Cameron was not completely uninterested in these; he liked good clothes and was not indifferent to good food, the kind of things with which only a tolerably successful worldly career could provide him. Moreover, he said that compassion was a finer quality, and more important to him, than any literary quality. I suppose that literary achievement of the highest level usually demands a certain ruthlessness, a willingness to sacrifice everything else on the altar of literary art, though the contrary examples of Shakespeare and Chekhov come to mind. So cool a character as Cameron could not, therefore, have been a major poet.

But advertising? Surely nothing could be more antithetical to poesy, or indeed compassion, than that. Nothing could be less poetical than to sell a sweetened, fattening drink to the gullible (though did any of them truly believe in night *starvation*?), a sales pitch that involved more or less persuading them to go to bed on a full stomach.

Yet there are elective affinities, perhaps, between publicity and poetry. In the first place, the copy writer must be a master of concision. He must imply, connote, as much as possible in very few words. Perhaps there is no finer training in concision than copy-writing. Hegel, for example, would never have made it in the advertising world, and that is not necessarily a compliment to him.

Advertising slogans must be rhythmical as well as concise. And no copy writer can afford to ignore euphony, as so many prose writers can or at any rate do. I remember, for example, a slogan for an analgesic called Anadin: Nothing acts faster than Anadin. (The wits among us responded, ‘Take nothing, then. It’s cheaper.’) Rhythm and euphony: perfection of its type.

If the poet wants to furnish us with allusions, so does the advertising man. He wants his slogan to explode in our minds and then remain there, like shrapnel. I remember—and have never forgotten—an advertisement for the beer called Guinness: ‘I’ve never tried it because I don’t like it.’ It is a brilliant line, worthy of a great poet.

Adverts are such stuff as dreams are made on: Come to Marlboro country, We are the world. The poet-copy-writer must at least be *au fait* with the dreams of his fellows even if, in his poetry, he does not subscribe to them, indeed punctures them.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *here*.