

## Counter Discourse: Advertising Technologies and Textual Impact

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In 1932, Wareham Smith published *Spilt Ink*, a memoir of his time as Advertisement Director at Associated Newspapers Limited. The book offers a fascinating insight into the period in which newspaper advertising was becoming consolidated as an industry, spurred on not only by a post-monopoly economy of surplus products, but by rapid technological change in paper production, printing and distribution. Smith charts his lengthy battle with his superiors to change the country's top-selling newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, from a medium of news-dissemination, to a typographically innovative organ trumpeting the joys of consumerism. An advertising evangelist, Smith saw the burgeoning advertising industry and its many forms and technologies as a force for civilisation. Making an explicit connection between consumption and moral development, he saw advertisements as symbolic of social progress.

Just four years later, George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* was to offer a very different perspective on the industry. The novel follows the misfortunes of Gordon Comstock, former copywriter at the New Albion advertising company, now a novelist manqué. Haunted by his low commercial past, Gordon views the advertising industry as a contemptible and corrupting power. Comstock sees advertisements, far from being the vectors and indicators of social improvement that Smith suggests, as representative of "The great death-wish of the modern world [. . .]. And the reverberation of future wars [. . .] the shattering thunder of the bombs" (Orwell 16). By looking at these two texts, poised between the wars, and at the point of the technologically facilitated expansion of advertising's scope and powers, this article aims to illuminate two instructively opposed views of advertising and its media. In a period when a "New Albion" was becoming a very real possibility, the connection between consumerism and either civilisation or apocalypse is a fundamental debate. From either perspective, it is text that feels the force of change, as the advertising industry bends it to new shapes, forms and purposes. Placing Orwell's text alongside Smith's makes greater sense of Comstock's rage in the face of contemporary commerce, and allows the social and political context of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* to regain its rightful place at the centre of any critical analysis of the novel.

In the early twentieth century, the newspaper interacts with the commercialised space of the modernist city, functioning as both guide to and reflector of its multitude of potential activities. At the same time, the newspaper undergoes an internal spatial transformation in terms of lay-out, itself driven by the rapid economic development of the modernist period. One of the primary contributors to the changing lay-out of the newspaper was an element with explicit relations to the pecuniary: the newspaper advertisement. The addition of advertisements, the increasing freedom of their colonization of newspaper space, and their developing use of display typography and illustrations, were all symptomatic of a progressive industry which was forming an increasingly close alignment with the press. The revenue gained from the sale of advertising space funded the expansion of press organisations, and aided the circulation of the newspapers. This increased circulation required new technological advances in printing, paper production and typographical design.

T. R. Nevett has suggested that it was the expense of technological innovation that ultimately resulted in the newspapers' financial dependence on advertisements as a source of revenue, further complicating the relationship between the press and ad industry. Yet these were the very clients for whom technological development was a priority, given their demands for increasingly experimental forms of textual and pictorial display. Nevett claims that "The increased cost of news-gathering, together with the higher production costs resulting from longer and faster printing runs on more elaborate and expensive machinery, meant that newspapers became even more financially dependent on advertising" (Nevett 75-76). The most significant threat to this source of income was the fact that advertisers could, potentially, select another medium to aid them in bringing their products to the attention of the public. As a result, by the end of the nineteenth century, the UK saw "publishers gradually giving way to pressure to run advertisements across more than one column, to permit the use of bold type and illustrations, and to provide accurate circulation figures" (Nevett 76).

Given the flexibility and innovation that advertisers found within the press, it is reasonable to doubt the threat to move to another medium. Yet the symbiotic relationship between the press and the advertisers is difficult to untangle. Without that threat of a loss of revenue, the newspapers might never have developed their technological capacities and become the perfect home for the ad. This relationship between the newspaper and its advertisers is obvious to the modern day reader. However, it was new and startling in the early twentieth century, and visible to all through its visual impact on the familiar and widely distributed quotidian texts of the newspaper.

The high degree of financial dependence on advertisement income resulted in more radical approaches to structure, lay-out and design within newspapers. These were innovations which, by the early twentieth century, had moved beyond the realm of advertisements and had begun to have an impact on news items. In fact, the difficulty in distinguishing between an article and an ad was a readerly

challenge exploited by the advertisers; the shift from news item (with a primary interest in informing the reader, albeit for a fee) to advertisement (with a primary interest in prompting a purchase) was not always clear. Richard Terdiman has claimed that such an intentional exploitation was at its most pronounced and systematic in the French press of the late nineteenth century, which was undergoing a parallel expansion to that experienced in Britain. He identifies a particular spatial practice at work within the French newspaper trade in the years following 1836, after the initial developments in the production of mass-circulation daily newspapers. Known only within the trade, a system of zoning was at work. The zoning process categorised all material within the newspaper according to four types, determining their spatial placing within the lay-out of the paper, and indicating the level of conspicuousness of their invitation to purchase. As Terdiman has it, this codification of textual material “annulled in secret the public code which ostensibly determined the position within the paper of the different modes of discourse which composed it” (Terdiman 123). As a result, conventions of textual orientation did not so much lead as *mislead* readers. The notion of space within the newspaper as purchasable by advertisers fundamentally affected the attitudes of advertising clients, advertisers themselves and newspaper writers, editors and managers towards the space held within their publications. This saleability of space leaked, conceptually, into all articles, all elements that went to construct the daily read. Once space is for sale in this way, orientation across the newspaper page, and guidance as to the objectivity or subjectivity of the textual voice, becomes a practical impossibility for the reader.

The four kinds of saleable space which Terdiman sees at work in the French press include the “English” advertisement or *annonce*, a textual element with an explicitly commercial intent, presented in columns, originally on the back pages of French dailies, and looking something like today’s classified advertisements (Terdiman 123-24); the *réclame*, costing considerably more than the *annonce*, with the potential for more innovative appeals via display typography; the paid “fait divers” item, appearing in the early pages of the newspaper and pretending to offer an item of information to the reader, although ultimately recommending a purchase of some sort; and “editorial publicity,” placed on the front page, and fully disguising the subjective, and financially rewarded, nature of its opinions (Terdiman 124). The impact of this four-part system for the sale of newspaper space induced, within the press itself, “a generalized cynicism concerning the interchangeability of facts, opinions and money” (Terdiman 124). While Terdiman identifies this zoning system as a French peculiarity, British newspaper publishers were also, by the early years of the twentieth century, establishing a system of zoning that affected the rates charged to advertisers. Those ads which were surrounded by editorial matter were, for example, among the most expensive, since the “traffic” of readers was highest amongst editorial articles (Nevett 84). Ads placed alongside them were also able to benefit from the unspoken implication they were written with as much authority as the editorial articles themselves. Readers were concerned about

the economic, rather than informative, drive behind the choice of news items with which they were presented. Cynicism regarding the motivations behind newspaper text inevitably followed the press when it was undergoing a rapid evolution, and Wareham Smith was among those who felt the need to state the honourable intentions of the advertisers in order to address these concerns.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the new capacities of the British press and its printers and typesetters facilitated the production of ads with greater visual impact and appeal, and the increased circulation of the newspapers aided the advertisers in establishing a spatial dominance, in the city and beyond, that reached an ever-increasing audience of potential consumers. Such a reach was essential because the UK's post-monopolisation productive capacities had created in this period, for the first time, a surplus of products. Companies selling similar products with minimal differences in quality or function, what may be termed "parity products," were forced to make distinctions that elevated their particular product above the competition.<sup>1</sup> Ads were therefore inherently attuned to creating distinction and desire, even where neither existed. This shift toward a post-monopoly economy also explains the importance of brand names, as companies able to suggest that their soap was *the* soap for the family home, i.e. that their soap was synonymous with household soap, would dismiss other companies' claims for their equivalent products. The complex interaction between the newspaper and advertising industries, driven by commercial impulses and new technological developments, made the reading experience in this period a radically new, and sometimes disorientating, one. Advertising's development in the preceding century had resulted in a three-fold significance for the ad in the modernist period. It functions as a site of the production of consumer knowledge, in its ostensibly educative or informative role of letting potential purchasers know about a product and its merits. It is the site and symptom of an economic shift, in that it is the result of a development in the nature of the economy toward a post-monopolisation surplus of equivalent products. In addition, it is a specific system of representing, illustrating and instantiating a peculiar relation between product, consumer, and the representational means of their mediation.

Wareham Smith's musings on the nature of the advertising industry, while focusing on his own pivotal role in revolutionising advertising within the British press, also deal with this three-fold operation of the ad. Paying particular attention to the first operation, the informative nature of advertising, he comes to neglect the arbitrary nature of distinctions made between equivalent products, and views the representational system of ads as a force for good in a way that contrasts absolutely with Gordon Comstock's glorious pessimism in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. Smith's motivations in writing his memoirs are clear from the opening of the text. He begins with a sarcastic retelling of the story in which his role as Advertisement Director is handed over to Robert Glover, whom he describes as the Head Hall Porter, with no previous experience in advertising (Smith 10-11). He goes on to recall the confrontation between him and his chief, Alfred Harmsworth, in which

Harmsworth forces his retirement on the grounds of ill health.<sup>2</sup> Smith suggests that the termination of his job is “not altogether unexpected, for a ‘freezing’ process had been going on for some time” (Smith 17). *Spilt Ink* is therefore a work marked by bitter resentment, and written as a form of revenge against those with whom Smith worked. This revenge is subtle, in that it is largely made up of an attempt to place Smith in the role of advertising pioneer and thoroughly modern man, and, as a consequence, to paint others at the *Daily Mail* as Luddites lacking a coherent vision of the potential of advertising. Self-aggrandisement is perhaps not unusual in an autobiographical work, but here it contributes significantly to Smith’s passionate defence of the advertising industry.

Smith was born in 1874, joining the *Daily Mail* as a young man upon its founding in 1896. He began as an advertising clerk (Ryan 9), and after working his way through the ranks of the organisation, became a director on the board of Associated Newspapers, the *Daily Mail*’s parent company, in 1907. Smith was responsible for establishing the Special Publicity Department, which, contrary to custom, canvassed for advertising content, rather than waiting to be approached by companies with products to promote. The Department retained a large staff including, tellingly in light of Terdiman’s foregoing observations, an editorial writer (Ryan 10). In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Department cost around seventy pounds a week to run, but generated an annual turnover of up to twenty-six thousand pounds (Ryan 10). Self-mythologising tendencies aside, Smith is therefore justified in claiming that “Going out to seek advertisements was not practiced to any apparent degree by the [former] advertisement department. [. . .] Advertising was not organised as it is today. It had to wait until I got under way with Northcliffe” (Smith 25).

In recalling his time as Advertisement Director, Smith observes that advertising is “a hardy plant—difficult to kill. It must kill the newspaper first” (247). Smith here makes clear the close relationship between the newspaper and its ad content. In looking back at the predominantly “classified”-format ads of the late nineteenth-century British press, Smith states that their unimaginative form made them a poor investment for advertisers. He notes that “Most papers would not admit display or illustrated advertisements, and advertisers themselves objected to them. Great industries [. . .] either did not use the press, or else published their announcements in such an unattractive form that many of them obtained no profitable return” (Smith 28). Yet by the time of penning his memoirs, Smith was able to attribute a shift in the country’s economy to the presence of ads in newspapers: “What has determined this great change in the purchasing habits of our country? It is, in great measure, a change in selling habits made possible by new facilities afforded to advertisers by the popular press, and a progressive improvement in the manner [. . .] of advertising itself” (249).

In the process of making the publications of the Associated Newspapers organisation amenable to the needs of the contemporary advertiser, Smith became engaged in a lengthy battle with Harmsworth. Smith championed the advertisers’

corner, through his belief in the informative nature of ads, and the great commercial benefits to be gained for the newspaper by their inclusion. Harmsworth, in contrast, adhered to the conception of the newspaper as, first and foremost, a news service. When Smith requests the use of sections of the *Daily Mail*'s front page for adverts boasting display type and illustrations, Harmsworth complains of the potential to "vulgarise" the paper (Smith 35). He ultimately grants Smith permission for the use of display typography, but continues to rail against the visual disruption of his newspaper at the hands of these ad-driven developments. Smith reports that "'type' offended him. And yet he plastered the sides of houses and railway bridges and the sky with hideous advertisements of the *Daily Mail*. He hated it, however, in his newspapers" (Smith 35). Smith sees this as a double standard; display text has been liberated in all reaches of the city, and yet the very product that prompted this urban colonisation by ad material must remain impermeable to such vulgar visual impact. Smith's instincts told him that the public appetite tended toward the advert in preference to news. By 1932, this suspicion was, he felt, confirmed: "lacking the full pages of miscellaneous retail announcements to which the front of the *Daily Mail* is now devoted on three days of every week, this journal would disappoint a goodly section of its readers and provoke a storm of protest from them and from the business community" (Smith 249).

The ongoing battle between Smith and Harmsworth is, in Smith's eyes, "virtually a fight for the birth of modern press advertising" (Smith 35). This fight at first seems to centre upon the inadequacy of relatively new technologies of paper production and printing: "Usually it was the size of the type. When it was not the type it was the illustrations. The type was too 'overwhelming' [. . .] or the illustrations were too black, or the block didn't print well, or a bit of it showed through and gave a society lady a moustache" (Smith 35). However, it seems that for Harmsworth the control of the space of his newspaper is a matter of propriety (hinted at in Smith's society lady image), and of the ideal gentlemanly attitude and informative role of the press. Eventually, Smith was to get his way, with permission to use illustrations anywhere on the page, over the whole paper, and on any day of the week (Smith 36). However, communiqués from Harmsworth while Smith was in post made clear that he still viewed these newly display-oriented and spatially voracious ads as vulgar, physically damaging, filled with visually offensive, ill-controlled and morally abhorrent typography. In June 1908 he wrote that "The front page of this morning's *Daily Mail* is a disgrace to the business. We debauch the whole of advertising" (Smith 36), while a telegram of November 1920 simply states that "Page two is a disgraceful piece of work. CHIEF" (Smith 36). A letter also came from Harmsworth's wife, Lady Northcliffe, while her husband was recovering from a bout of illness, stating: "The Chief says he suffered a severe relapse on seeing the horrible front page of the *Daily Mail* yesterday. He says he feels like a bird wounded with an arrow" (Smith 36). Yet during Smith's tenure as Advertising Director, this vulgar and offensive home for the ad became the daily newspaper with the largest net sale of any paper worldwide (Smith 18).

Allen Hutt, providing an overview of technological developments in the newspaper industry, views Harmsworth's contribution as that of a somewhat traditional newsman, rather than an innovator or celebrant of change. The *Daily Mail*, after its launch in May 1896, became the UK's first mass circulation daily. It made use of the latest innovations in news-gathering and paper printing, thus making possible the swift dissemination of the latest news. Yet Hutt claims that "the 'Northcliffe Revolution' [. . .] was journalistic, not typographical" (71), due to Harmsworth's reluctance to use innovative typography or lay-out designs, particularly when adapted to accommodate advertisements. Thus, while the *Daily Mail* had the technological capacity for innovations in graphic display, the sensibilities of its controlling founder hampered the exploitation of the full potential of such innovations. These sensibilities were perhaps evident in Harmsworth's choice of décor for his office in the paper's headquarters at Carmelite House, London, which were completed in 1902 at considerable cost. Harmsworth's office was "Wainscoted in mahogany, the lower door panels of the bookcase were decorated with a gilt pattern of ornate leaf and flower, and with a symbolic quill, and bore the gilded names of ancient writers and philosophers from Aristophanes to Xenophon" (S. J. Taylor 79). This office proclaimed an interest in the realms of great writing and abstract thought, and while such decorative decisions primarily illustrate the extravagance of an extremely wealthy and successful businessman, they can also reasonably be taken to indicate a value system that was at odds with the function of the *Daily Mail* as described by Smith.

In fact, Smith and Harmsworth saw the paper differently from its inception. While in the launch year of 1896 Smith was expending his energies in the advertising department, and quite possibly hatching the plans that transformed that department into a revenue-generating outfit, Harmsworth was boldly claiming that his newspaper would be distinguished from the already crowded field of daily papers by the reduced space it would give to advertising (S. J. Taylor 33). This anti-advertisement attitude, about which he was determined, had already caused friction between Harmsworth and his brother Harold, Lord Rothermere (S. J. Taylor 33). Harmsworth clung to the idea of a newspaper that followed the model of the publications of W. T. Stead, which he perceived to be not only informative but gentlemanly in terms of ethics and a sense of propriety (S. J. Taylor 52), even as others within the Associated Press dragged the *Daily Mail* towards the more contemporary model of the daily paper.

Harmsworth's determination to adhere to this gentlemanly code of journalism and to prevent the ruination of his paper in the name of visually striking advertisements did not, however, indicate a reluctance to engage with the capacities of the latest technologies. In the year of the move to Carmelite House, Harmsworth also established an office in the Deansgate, Manchester, which allowed the simultaneous printing of a "provincial" and London version of the *Daily Mail*. Harmsworth put established journalist Kennedy Jones in charge of the Manchester offices, and Jones was able to devise a coding system which permitted that office to receive precise

instructions from Carmelite House as to the letterpress, headings and positions of articles for that day's printing (S. J. Taylor 78). The Manchester office also made use of telephones for the gathering of information, and set up twelve linotype machines which removed the need for hand compositors to set text (S. J. Taylor 78). The *Daily Mail* and its sister paper the *Evening News* were early adopters of the latest technology, making use of telegraphic connections to other countries to gather news from New York and other cities, as well as ensuring the quick and efficient publication of this news through mechanised type-setting and rotary printing. In the London office of the *Daily Mail*, Harmsworth introduced machines which not only printed the paper, but folded and cut the pages as well, meaning that somewhere between 48,000 and 96,000 copies could be produced within an hour (S. J. Taylor 33). This bold use of the latest devices reflected Harmsworth's fascination with technology, which extended beyond his working life. He was an advocate of aeroplane and motorcar travel, a fan of the gramophone, and a tireless promoter of these inventions. His reluctance to fill the *Daily Mail* with advertising copy is not, then, attributable to a fear of the latest innovations. Advertising disturbed the look of his newspaper, and the way in which it was read by his large and much-treasured readership. For Smith to disrupt the text of the paper in this way was, in a manner that deeply wounded Harmsworth, morally and journalistically wrong. The transition toward a close relationship between the newspaper and the advertising industry was, then, far from smooth, demonstrating that Smith's evangelism was not only unusually vehement but absolutely essential; he had to justify not only himself and his abilities but his chosen career.

Smith knew that whoever was in charge of any developments in newspaper advertising, was in charge of the newspaper itself. While he saw himself as a pioneer and champion of the new methods, it was companies with products to promote that truly drove change: "The newspaper proprietors, in reaching out for larger papers, are offering more space than the advertiser can fill. Instead, therefore, of the advertiser asking for space, the papers are asking for advertisements. The advertiser gives them on his own terms as to type and very often as to price as well" (Smith 38). With the balance of power swayed toward the advertisers, the potential for grand claims and misrepresentations presumably increased. Despite this danger, Smith never revised his convictions about the positive nature of the advertising industry. Looking back to 1900, Smith notes that "The million had no guide to them [purchase possibilities] until they eventually arrived at the shop windows" (Smith 247). The newspaper's role as guide to city space is therefore developed through the inclusion of ads, for all their disruption of Harmsworth's tidy pages. This guiding process is one that clearly calibrates the reader to the rhythms of expenditure, yet Smith sees this as a vital process, in which the newspaper is a saviour for the masses lost in a sea of choices. Advertising, for Smith, offers the contemporary consumer the chance to be more discerning as to price, to subsequently demand more for their money, and to scrutinise in a more informed manner the quality of the products on offer: "It is certain that the householder obtains far more now for his



money than he did in, say, 1896. He obtains it because his markets are much wider and less obscure. Current prices are presented to him daily, and selling competition gives them stability” (Smith 251).

Smith’s description suggests that this new lack of obscurity in terms of production and price will result in more free and determined choices amongst consumers, although implicit within his description is the incitement of the desire to own or consume, which is *subsequently* satisfied by the purchase. This is further underlined when he refers to the comparatively minimal utility of the ads in the *Daily Mail*’s youth, which “yielded the trader an entirely different service. They were a directing, rather than the creative force which they have now become” (Smith 249). Thus the ad does act as a guide to purchase, but it also creates the desire for purchase, which may not exist prior to the viewing of the ad. It at once creates the need for and supplies the knowledge of a product, just as it subsequently creates the desire for and makes clear the means of acquiring the product depicted.<sup>3</sup> Again, to the modern day reader, this seems a reasonable and familiar description of the way in which advertising works in generating business. Yet Smith suggests that he has personally witnessed the shift from the informative ad to the persuasive ad, and that such a shift occurred between the founding of the *Daily Mail* in 1896 and the publication of his memoirs in 1932.

Despite his observations regarding the creation of consumer desire, Smith is convinced of the morality of the advertising industry. He believes that “it neither pays an advertiser to insert, nor a newspaper to admit, misrepresentations or exaggerated descriptions of merchandise” (Smith 249). Smith goes so far as to claim that ads have operated as a force for civilisation in the modern world:

if modern advertising, rendered possible by newspaper-circulation on a modern scale, has been of priceless benefit to commerce by opening to it markets of a previously undreamt-of magnitude, it has also served, no less loyally, the purchasing public. [. . .] It is therefore a vehicle for advancing civilisation. For if civilised man differs from the savage, it is [. . .] chiefly in the number and the beauty of his wants. (Smith 252)

Expanding the number of man’s wants, directing their kind, number and nature, and offering the miraculously tailored satiation of these desires, is, for Smith, the effort of advertising as it developed in the early twentieth century. Smith neatly side-steps the pecuniary motivation behind the increase of the public’s desire to purchase, implying that advertising seeks to serve and civilise, rather than to oil the wheels of a profit-making machine. This somewhat disingenuous position results from his dogged evangelism on the part of the contemporary advertising industry that he believes is, in large part, a product of his own endeavours.

*Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, published in 1936, challenges Smith’s suggestion that advertising is a force for civilisation with the unequivocal accusation that it is a barbarous, filthy and life-destroying industry. The book joins

its protagonist while he is a refugee from the business world with a prospect-free job in a second-hand book shop. Surrounded by the discarded and under-regarded works of literature that fill the shop, Gordon has plenty of time to consider the difference between the work of writing literary texts, in which he is engaged, and the multiply-authored anonymous speech of ads. He does not have far to go to see ads in action—in fact, there are several placed within his view from the shop, a position that facilitates their oppression of his delicate literary sensibilities. Gordon's situation has, of course, a resonance with Orwell's own life, and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* has often been read as the most baldly autobiographical of Orwell's fictional works (D. J. Taylor 163). Orwell had worked in a similar second-hand book shop, Booklover's Corner, in Hampstead, London, from 1934 to 1935, an experience that certainly shaped the writing of the novel. Yet his position in life at this time differed from Gordon's in terms of his level of literary success, meaning that whilst the staging of Gordon's book shop is lifted directly from Orwell's Hampstead experiences, the "acute sense of personal failure and pessimism that permeates the novel must refer back to the four or five previous years of Orwell's life," when he had found it difficult to place his work with a publisher (Crick 253). This level of publishing success, and the years that have passed in Orwell's life since he was in Gordon's precise situation, allow the author sufficient distance to establish an ironic tone that is crucial to the novel as a whole. Such a tone provides the sense of Gordon's inertia and barely controlled rage. It is this element of rage that has led critics to view Gordon as an Angry Young Man, a precursor to John Osborne's Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger* (Crick 253-54) and to Kingsley Amis's Jim Dixon in *Lucky Jim* (Hitchens 155).

Staring out of the book shop window, Gordon notices that:

Opposite, next to the Prince of Wales, were tall hoardings covered with ads for patent foods and patent medicines exhorting you to rot your guts with this or that synthetic garbage. [. . .] Of them all, the Bovex one oppressed [him] the most. A spectacled, rat-faced clerk, with patent-leather hair, sitting at a café table grinning over a white mug of Bovex. "Roland Butta enjoys his meal with Bovex" the legend ran. (Orwell 3-4)

Roland Butta haunts Gordon throughout the text, becoming, as his "patent" leather hair suggests, the embodiment of the advertising industry that Gordon has escaped. He pretends that he is immune to the appeal of such ads, and with a second glance out of the window, "He almost wanted to laugh at them, they were so feeble, so dead-alive, so unappetising. As though anybody could be tempted by *those!* [. . .] But they depressed him all the same" (Orwell 13). Yet it is Roland Butta that prompts a reverie about the end of the world, linking the empty appeals of the ads to the desolation of modern life:

The sense of disintegration, of decay, that is endemic in our time, was strong upon him. Somehow it was mixed

up with the ad-posters opposite. He looked now with more seeing eyes at those grinning yard-wide faces. After all, there was more there than silliness, greed and vulgarity. Roland Butta grins at you [. . .] but what is behind the grin? Desolation, emptiness, prophecies of doom. [. . .] The great death-wish of the modern world. Suicide pacts. Heads stuck in gas-ovens in lonely maisonettes. French letters and Amen pills. And the reverberations of future wars. [. . .] the shattering thunder of the bombs. It is all written in Roland Butta's face. (Orwell 16)

The terrors listed or implied here, and tied to the capitalist system behind the advertisement, are manifold. Greed, in Gordon's reading, is the least of society's worries. From desolation and emptiness, themes which he also tackles in his poetic efforts, we move to a mass death-wish and then suicide. Here the notion of choice, seen as central to advertising, is transmuted from a decision to enhance life with new products, to end life altogether. The mention of "lonely maisonettes" appears to be a reference to the suburbs typical of London's rapid expansion at this time, and the habitat of the aspidistra, as Gordon frequently observes. "French letters" also suggests choice leading to deathliness or lack of fecundity, an unnatural prevention of the life cycle. Finally, Gordon sees a vision of impending war written within the advert, and the "reverberations" and "shattering thunder" give the reader a visceral sense of this coming apocalypse.

The specific connection between *advertisements* and war may also be found in a newspaper context, in the history of the *Daily Mail*. Hutt notes, in connection with Harmsworth's traditional stance on the typography issue, that "As so often in the story of news display it took a war to shake the *Mail* out of its single-column whispers into something like a shout" (Hutt 73). By 1914, the *Mail* was the leading daily in terms of circulation, but had also been one of the slowest to use bold and eye-catching typography. Following the outbreak of the First World War, the *Mail* was obliged, along with other UK dailies, to use its resources to convey the shocking events of the unfolding conflict. For example, the first use of a full-page photograph within the paper appeared on the front page on 22 September 1914, and depicted the beauty of Rheims, which had just been all but destroyed by heavy bombardment.<sup>4</sup> The *Mail* was not alone; Hutt claims that *The Times*, previously rather conservative in its presentation of news items, "ransacked its advertising display cases for types with more colour and impact than the news-titlings" (93). Thus for Gordon, the Bovex ad and its equivalents contain the reverberations of future wars, whilst the newspapers seeking to describe the pan-European war for a home audience ransacked the technology of advertisement in order to convey the startling nature of events. Again the close relationship between newspapers and advertisements, and a possible connection with social decadence, is illustrated.

The language and imagery of the passage describing Gordon's response

to the Bovex ad is extreme in its pessimism, and the reader is aware here of being within the consciousness of a deeply eccentric character. In linguistic excess Orwell finds great humour, and yet Gordon also seems to speak to a genuine contemporary fear. Perhaps the key element of the terror brought about in Gordon by the sight of Roland Butta is an unwanted moment of self-recognition. His family bullies him constantly about the importance of a “‘good’ job” (Orwell 49), a job that, given the imagination of the Comstocks, could well be that of a Butta-esque clerk. When Gordon first spots Roland on the poster opposite, we are told that he “shortened the focus of his eyes. From the dust-dulled pane the reflection of his own face looked back at him” (Orwell 4). The ad works by representing a ubiquitous London dweller, one of what Gordon refers to as the “strap-hanging army” (Orwell 52) of city clerks, in order to make as wide an appeal as possible to potential consumers. They are asked to see themselves in the advertisement, an association that works all too well for Gordon.

Thus while Roland Butta and the industry he comes to stand in for are seen as a source of civilisation-destroying doom, the excrescence of an empty capitalist society, Roland’s appeal also narrows to a moment of self-identification for Gordon. Yet this is not a satisfying process of recognition, since Roland’s everyman status not only recalls the strap-hanging army of undifferentiated office workers, but also demonstrates the emptiness of the user-image within any ad. While a theoretical discourse reflecting on the advertising world was, in the 1930s, in its nascent stages, subsequent readings of advertisement tactics have unpacked the inherently meaningless subject position of the user-image. Today we can note that “in the same way that concrete goods are never part of an advertisement, so concrete users may never participate in it and only their surrogate may gain admittance” (Leymore 35). Roland Butta is Gordon’s surrogate, interpolated into the commercial world through his act of the consumption of Bovex. The moment of self-recognition that Gordon experiences when looking at Butta hits him particularly hard because he is avoiding the advertising life with difficulty, in the interest of pursuing his “art.” Gordon’s experience of the Bovex ad moves between identification and an extremely powerful revulsion.

The New Albion advertising organisation in which Gordon once worked embodies, in his eyes, the contemporary commercial spirit. “There was hardly a soul in the firm,” he explains, “who was not perfectly well aware that publicity—advertising—is the dirtiest ramp that capitalism has yet produced” (Orwell 55). While Gordon’s other former employees, a red lead firm, had retained “certain notions of commercial honour and usefulness,” he notes that “such things would have been laughed at in the New Albion. [. . .] They had their cynical code worked out. The public are swine; advertising is the rattling of a stick inside a swill-bucket” (Orwell 55). This selling of swill to the unquestioning masses eventually becomes Gordon’s occupation once more, as he re-joins the New Albion, but not before he has composed a poem, originally a depiction of the harsh wind of the city streets, but ultimately an homage to the “money-god” that he sees as inevitably structur-

ing his life:

*Who spies with jealous, watchful care,  
Our thoughts, our dreams, our secret ways,  
Who picks our words and cuts our clothes,  
And maps the pattern of our days.* (Orwell 168)

The phrase “watchful care” indicates surreptitious surveillance which purports to be in the best interests of society, a theme which of course resurfaces in Orwell’s subsequent novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The money-god has powers of observation that extend into the thoughts of members of society, again an issue raised in the later novel. Significantly, the money-god accesses the dreams of men and women and, through the manipulation of those dreams, comes to map “the pattern of our days.” Carefully mapped days would also be the experience of the worker in a mass production environment, meaning that reifying control occurs at the level of production and consumption. The effect of the money-god on language, in that it “picks our words” is of particular significance for Gordon, who desperately wants to be free from the language of advertising, and to write instead in his own poetic voice. Despite these manifold anxieties regarding the money-god, an accession into the material world from which Gordon had formerly attempted to hide removes the experience of unease from the appeals to buy. After receiving payment for the publication of a poem, Gordon reflects: “Roland Butta and the *Daily Mail!* It was a bone-deep truth when he walked the streets with a couple of coppers in his pocket; but it was a joke at this moment” (Orwell 179).

Having temporarily acquired the financial means to join the ranks of consumers, Gordon notes that Roland Butta and the related appeals of ads lose their apocalyptic implications, and become beneath his concern. This immersion in the consumer world is short-lived, however, as Gordon literally consumes his earnings, spending the entire cheque on one night’s food and drink, an orgy of consumption that ultimately lands him in jail. His temporary truce with the commercial world must, though, be of some significance. How is it that Roland Butta and his ilk are suddenly conceived of as a benign presence, even a joke? Once he has obtained the means to respond to the compulsion to consume propagated by advertisements, Gordon is able to set aside his sense of the coming apocalypse of the advertising industry in order to do its bidding. Once he obtains some money, he is at ease with the commercial world, which suggests that he rages against personal poverty as much as against the overall mechanism of the capitalist system.

The question of the novel’s political motivations is a puzzling one, particularly in view of Gordon’s tendency to focus on his own personal economic circumstances, apparently at the expense of a wider critique. While Crick claims that “The work as a whole is not political” (270), we do know that Orwell’s time at Booklover’s Corner was in part responsible for his growing interest in the socialist movement. The owners of the book shop, Francis and Myfanwy Westrope, were both politically active, associating with socialists and British Trotskyists; Myfanwy Westrope was a member of the Independent Labour Party. Hampstead, and the wider

city of London, provided opportunities for Orwell to meet and debate with many Leftist thinkers, a phase of ideological development that was crucial to his later writing. Crick maintains that *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, despite being written at a time when Orwell was exploring socialist ideals most extensively, retains a focus upon the personal struggles of Gordon. He states that the novel's true theme is "the familiar romantic one of an artist's attempt to maintain his integrity as he struggles with poverty and the temptation of a normal, salaried life" (Crick 277). Crick seems to suggest that a party political stance cannot be deduced from the novel, given the focus on the personal trials of Gordon, and his self-absorbed pursuit of literary glory. He does concede that in the novel "the social system stands condemned as exploitative and philistine," and yet it is not to be considered overtly political since "there is no suggestion that it can or should be changed by political action" (Crick 277). However, this lack of investment in the possibility of political intervention stems most obviously from Gordon's own fatalism and inertia, or what D. J. Taylor has described as "a terminally ground-down feeling," and does not rule out a fundamentally political message (D. J. Taylor 163). Reading Orwell's novel alongside *Spilt Ink* offers an opportunity to ascribe this pessimistic self-focus to the character of Gordon, rather than to Orwell himself. Thinking against Crick, it is possible to offer an account of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* which does allow for the political motivations of its author.

Christopher Hitchens concurs with Taylor's comment above, observing an "oppressive sense of futility" in the novel (155). This futility stems, he suggests, from "a context in which the knell-like words 'the war' might be a reference to the next one as well as the last one" (Hitchens 155), a sense of suspension between remembered and impending doom that is underscored by Gordon's statements connecting advertising to a coming apocalypse, crucially tied to the image of the bomb. Crick sees the novel's preoccupation with the bomb as part of a wider contemporary trend in literature, which incorporated the image of approaching bombers, "either in straightforward fear or as a desperate hope for the collapse and purgation of a rotten civilization" (Crick 270). A concern with impending war and the potential of bombing technology would also have circulated among the thinkers and activists whom Orwell met during his time in the Hampstead book shop. The bombs are, then, in addition to being the tools and symbols of war, a concern of the political environment in which Orwell was participating at the time of writing *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. In contrast to Crick, Orwell himself seems to acknowledge a political dimension to the novel, given that he instructed his executors to guard against its republication after his death, suggesting that this work, along with *A Clergyman's Daughter*, had the tone of the pamphlet, and was not to be considered fictional work of a high standard (Hitchens 153). Orwell's implication is that the political thrust of the novel is insufficiently couched in fictional scenarios for it to be considered a literary work of any distinction, a counter-claim to Crick's reading of the novel as an exploration of personal circumstance.

*Keep the Aspidistra Flying* was completed in January 1936, but publi-

cation was delayed until the April of that year, as a result of legal issues that illustrate the novel's close relationship to the commercial aspects of its contemporary culture. Orwell's parodies of current companies, products and ads were deemed too accurate, too close to their originals for comfort, and the author was asked to make changes in order to obscure the sources of his fictional advertisements. Victor Gollancz Limited, who first published the work, was obliged to ask its solicitors for advice on the matter (Crick 627). Orwell denied consciously parodying the ads of his day; perhaps the money-god had done its work, shaping Orwell's thoughts without his knowledge. The potential of the newspaper to saturate the daily life of the 1930s with ads may very well have played a role in implanting certain commercial images and turns of phrase in the writer's mind. Orwell was forbidden from making changes to the typescript that would necessitate the significant resetting of type before printing, and consequently he had to invent new companies, products and slogans with precisely the same number of letters as the old, legally dangerous parodies. The title page of the novel contains its own word-substitution game, in that it reproduces Corinthians 1:13, replacing all instances of the word "charity" with the word "money." This game is first suggested by Mr. Warburton in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, as Hitchens has observed (Hitchens 163). The revised biblical verse is peculiarly appropriate for *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, where the money-god is all-pervading, and where advertisements take on an almost religious, certainly apocalyptic, resonance. Gordon's intention to resist the return to the "New Albion" where words are exchanged for money is pre-empted by a title page on which words are exchanged for the *word* money.

The argument for a reading of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* as essentially a *Künstlerroman*, a reading that dominates Crick's analysis, is a flawed one. It is true that Gordon overcomes his anxieties in relation to the money-god as a result of gaining sufficient funds to pay his own commercial homage to that god, implying that his central concern is not to rail against the economic system which he sees embodied in the ads outside the book shop window. The narrow focus of his self-adsorption thrusts his concern for publishing success to the fore, and at root he objects to his old copywriting job because it is not the literary life, rather than because it takes place in the satanic mills of the money-god's ad industry. Yet the novel should not be seen as exclusively interested in the struggles of one individual who makes sacrifices and compromises in the interests of literary art. The novel's book shop setting is drawn from a time when Orwell was himself engaged in political debate, if not activism, with those who opposed the capitalist state. Gordon may ward off the terror of Roland Butta with the aid of some money, but the newly successful and comparatively financially solvent Orwell who created both Gordon and Roland was more keen than his central protagonist to retain a critical stance towards the economic system that had made the Bovex ad a possibility. While *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is now, post-Crick, customarily read as a novel of artistic struggle, placing it alongside Smith's *Spilt Ink* revitalises a more political reading. The debate regarding the civilising or apocalyptic force of advertising, its

status as an information source or a “swill-bucket,” was not only one about which passionate opinions were held, but one which can be seen as inherently political. Orwell’s attempted posthumous suppression of his novel, attributed to its “pamphleteer” tone, is confirmation of the political nature of the advertising question in the early twentieth century.

### Notes

1. This may perhaps be seen as an early stage in a process that ends, in late capitalist spectacular society, in what Guy Debord has termed “a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs” (33).
2. It should be noted that Alfred Harmsworth is known as Lord Northcliffe following his establishment as peer of the realm, 9 December 1905. His wife, Lady Northcliffe, takes her title accordingly.
3. It is perhaps worth noting here that Smith was responsible for establishing the Ideal Home Exhibition at Olympia in 1910, an event that purported to offer the home owner access to the products available to furnish their homes, rather than relying on the recommendations of the architect, as was traditional. For Smith, this liberation into a world of choice was valuable due to the increasing advertising needs of the companies whose wares were promoted at the show. See Smith 66.
4. See S. J. Taylor, un-numbered page.

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