

Reward of the Tender Flesh

Scarecrow

1984

The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a vanity tossed to and fro of them that seek death.

—Proverbs XXI, 6

But of this he took little or no notice, continuing his odd smiles and gesticulations.

In the marketplace one convinces by gestures, but real reasons make the populace distrustful.

—Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

A friend of mine, who now resides in Arizona, has often chided me for my untrammelled fondness for those two essential American commodities, ketchup and toilet paper. He went so far as to assert, on one occasion years ago, (without verifiable evidence I might add), that my family used more of these products than any other family in our town. It was, of course, a small town and its native somnambulism had not yet been completely overwhelmed by that unblinking monocular (tele)vision that never sleeps. As a result I was neither shocked nor offended by this remark. I was perhaps even secretly delighted by his ingenuousness, but to this day have failed to determine, to my own satisfaction, whether it was envy or compassion which stirred him to formulate such an extravagant opinion.

The truth is that there is a certain unnaturalness about a supermarket which mortals find comforting. Let me explain. Anyone who has been following the 'Digests' is aware of the organic cycle by which our skin is continuously shedding old cells and replacing them with vigorous new ones; and undoubtedly finds this phenomenon interesting. This process, however, seems primitive when compared to the advanced technology and organization necessary to keep the aisles of a food store eternally swollen with merchandise garnered from the four corners of the globe. To realize that no matter how many bottles of ketchup or rolls of toilet paper are purchased today, that tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow (to quote the bard) there will be a replenished supply glaring down from the unscrupulously clean shelves puts the anguished heart, beating within its shopping cart rib cage, at ease. And the libido of progress further assures us that neither the fat purse of the corpulent gourmand nor the pallid furtiveness of a potential shoplifter can dent the can of this triumphant accomplishment. It is as if the goods we partake of are themselves an extension of the Good. As if when we cross that miraculous threshold thru a door that opens by itself we are, in a way, rubbing elbows with the epidermis of infinity.

A trip to the supermarket has taken on the joyous solemnity of a pilgrimage, where offerings are surrendered at the checkout counter in exchange for a taste of immortality. The nakedness of our ephemeral being, yearning to hide itself, rejects sackcloth in favor of brown paper bags bulging with bargain priced nectar and ambrosia. Succor from the cornucopia of the gods, hermetically sealed in a shiny cellophane wrapper which mirrors the supplicant visage of each and every patron. In this way identification with a higher power, a greater entity is established; a personal communion which transcends solitude. In reaching for the tartar sauce, a hand reaches back! But wait, look again. The reflected image is enhanced, it now wears vestments and brocade. Transformed itself, almost into a divine likeness, with high proud forehead and cruel lips. It is this inhuman aura which the consummate shopper

worships. This paradoxical ability of the goods to be always the latest breakthrough yet simultaneously venerable which metamorphoses a well stocked pantry or cupboard into a shrine.

Shopping has been elevated into the realm of 'Ideals'. It now reigns as the paramount expression of what is known as freedom. The ritual is even sanctified by the ringing of the liberty bell every time the cash register drawer opens. Indeed, if the Bill of Rights were to be drafted today, it would be drawn up on an aerial photograph of a shopping mall, with signatures filling the white lined parking spaces instead of cars. Like the big fish eating the little fish, variety devours choice, and the 'Rite to Shop' consumes all others.

Buying has become sacred, so lets get down on our knees, peek thru the keyhole and try to get a look at the ropes and pulleys that have hoisted it into heaven. Not surprisingly, its most pious exhortations are the revelations of none other than those abject devotees who indubitably have merchandise they want to be rid of. Buying as all the priests of wholesale and prophets of retail will be sure not to mention, shares in that mysterious quality which is the *raison d'être* of all 'Ideals' and deities. Their common secret being that none of them exist! Yes, buying is merely a *trompe l'oeil*, a phantasmagoria, a mirage created by the ubiquitous voice of the marketplace which saturates the psychosphere with its own peculiar brand of delusion. As the chameleon masquerades beneath its camouflage, so selling shrouds itself in buying. It is like that clever horse trader who uses the appellation 'donkey' as a means of covering his 'ass'.

Behind the mask, beyond the facade, there lurks the glowering countenance of selling. Buying is a protracted leaching away of self, a selling of time, the coin of memory, the irreplaceable blood of life. Erosion is its currency. Its specious image is worn smooth, except for an eye, frozen open full of inanition, and the universally acknowledged epithet 'ARBEIT MACHT FREI' which still remain discernible. The turbid vapors exuded by the swamps of advertising envelop it in mystique. Hypnotic suggestions triggered by the symbols on grocery coupons drown the thirst of its victims in induced frenzies. Subliminal mesmerization dons an evolutionary posture in order to ape free will.

Inside the walls of paradise, at the center of the supermarket labyrinth, a virulent beast with a horned head grafted onto the decapitated torso of the Piper of Hamelin. A textbook operation. A beast whose convulsive laughter has the carts rolling in the aisles.

Postscript

Some friends in Maine have an uncle who suffers the repercussions of 'shell shock' acquired in that great entrepreneurial bonanza, the Second World War. His detachment from earthly considerations is akin to that of a hot air balloon which is held from drifting irretrievably away into the void of an opaque sky by two slim guy wires. One is the routine he has developed of walking the two miles to the post office in order to mail a post card back to the very people he lives with telling them how much he is enjoying himself. The other is the intensity with which he composes grocery lists, meticulously specifying, in a careful hand, the exact brand of each item desired along with notations as to precisely which size, weight or volume is to be purchased.

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