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Myriam Boucharenc, *L'Écrivain et la publicité: Histoire d'une tentation*. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2022. 334 pp. €29.00 (pb). ISBN 979-10-267-1055-4.

Review by Seth Armus, St. Joseph's University (Brooklyn, New York).

Myriam Boucharenc closes this delightful book by recounting an emblematic event. In the winter of 2017 France's most prestigious publishing house, Gallimard, released a book called *Lady*.[1] The subject was a literary celebration of the eponymous Christian Dior handbag, an iconic piece of haute couture that sells for over €5000. The book featured young stars of French literature (and a few Americans as well) in various paeans to the handbag, from the pretentious to the ridiculous (Adam Gopnik offered a particularly cloying contribution). The actress Audrey Vernon (on the *5/7* program on France Inter) said (p. 305) that Bernard Arnault had caused the death of literature, referring to the CEO whose impending acquisition of "Dior Luxe" placed the entire Dior line under the control of LVMH. Elite literature, then, was now just another French luxury commodity, which, like the handbag, presents a cultural capital that inflates its value. The partnership also hints at the large role LVMH now plays in publishing in general and in the floating of Gallimard's parent company (Groupe Madrigall) in particular.

By this point in the book the reader is well aware of the longstanding relationship between literature and advertising--something the author describes as a complex intermingling--a porousness whose tangle goes back to the origins of advertising itself. Throughout the book the author returns to this point: French writers have manipulated commerce as much as they have been manipulated by it, and that even the word *publicité* contains an obvious ambiguity. In fact, Boucharenc takes the argument further, suggesting that there is no easy distinction between the writer lending themself to advertising, and the writer-as-brand, indeed as embodiment of "brand content" (p. 316)--that is to say, today's mediatized writer (deeply embedded in self-promotion and advertisement) is far from new.

At first blush the argument may sound forced. Is Victor Hugo lending his name to a bottle of ink (p. 314) really comparable to today's complete cultural commodification? But Boucharenc builds her argument carefully. While the book occasionally reaches into more theoretical musing, it generally remains grounded in a single idea: many of the greatest figures in modern French literature lent their names and talents to that embodiment of modernity: advertising. And that fact is far more important than we might imagine.

While its title might make Boucharenc's book sound like a specialized monograph, the text is an accessible one, full of surprises. From the start Boucharenc (a professor of French literature at

Nanterre who has previously written on surrealism and the writer-as-reporter during the 1930s) demonstrates the pervasiveness of writers in advertising. She published a similar, less strictly academic, book in 2018, and, while this retains the fascinating illustrations of her earlier work, its argument is more fleshed out.[2] The result is a sort of social history of the interaction between literature and commerce, as well as more complex social dynamics involved in the appropriation and expropriation of one's status as "writer."

The book begins with a barrage of examples from the Belle Epoque and the interwar period, a forgotten genealogy or "histoire occultée" (p. 17). From the start, then, writers lent their words, reputations, and even images to every product imaginable. The ubiquity of it all is likely the most striking aspect. The first chapter expands on this simple notion: Jean Cocteau wrote ads for stockings (pp. 184-85), Paul Valéry for Perrier (pp. 122-23), among the many examples. But Boucharenc does not merely catalog; she also argues that our contemporary jeremiads about artistic commercialization are misplaced. Advertising has always used the fame and talent of writers, and writers have, for their part, used advertisers' wealth for self-promotion and profit. Writers have also been complicit in this collective forgetting. Most dealt with some variety of shame at being bought off by capitalists, and the charge certainly has power. But that original accusation (selling out) has been rhetorically amplified post-1968 to the extent that writers now face much harsher charges. Contemporary critics (from Naomi Klein to Gilles Lipovetsky) see advertisement as a critical element in the mass destruction of culture, civilization, the environment, etc. (p. 57). No wonder writers have been reluctant to include commissioned writing in their collective works. For that reason it can be difficult to remember that, a century ago, it was a more appealing pairing. Boucharenc takes us back to a moment when the magic of literature seemed compatible with the new world of mass advertisement.

In the second chapter the author takes on the interwar period, when writers, and in particular poets, were enlisted in advertising, especially in romantic and sensual appeals. In that era, she reminds us, it was the right more than the left that vilified advertising as a contemptible form of "Americanization."[3] The brilliant and reactionary Georges Bernanos called advertising "le cancer de la civilisation" (p. 64). In contrast, then, writers like the emblematic modernist Blaise Cendrars embraced it as "la fleur de la vie contemporaine" (p. 68), taking its phrases and images as inspiration for his own literature. There was, in fact, a lively debate among modernists, some seeing only the corrupting effect of filthy lucre, while others saw it as means of participating in a more democratic culture. The dispute eventually settled on the "Grand Prix Beaumarchais de littérature publicitaire," a prize announced in 1927 for advertising writing, an event that would divide *bien-pensant* opinion.

The third chapter attempts a more generational approach to the division, arguing that writers raised in the shadow of Belle Epoque advertising were more comfortable with advertising regardless of their politics. Thus Thierry Maulnier, on the far right, lent his poetic voice to wine, while Andre Maurois, of the humanist left, did the same for Ford. Boucharenc rejects, however, much of a distinction in this regard between varieties of writers. The appeal of advertising spoke to high and low--thus the surprising presence of these *académiciens*. The relationships developed by elite writers with their occasional employers present some equally surprising outcomes. Paul Claudel's son, for example, ended up marrying into the Cartier family following the elder Claudel's series of advertisements (p. 141). Yet, unlike today, celebrities were not well compensated; a writer stood to make much more in occasional journalism (as so many of them did) than in advertising. Moreover, this sort of reportage carried little of the artistic discomfort

associated with commercial writing. This leads, logically, to the next chapter's question. If authors did not stand to make that much money lending their words to advertisements, why did so many of them do it?

In chapter four Boucharenc identifies three writers who exemplify the appeal of advertising. The careers of these "trois C" (p. 161)--Colette, Cendrars, and Cocteau--make the strongest argument for her thesis, and it is by far the most focused chapter. Blaise Cendrars, a modernist experimenter par excellence, saw advertising in terms of the equivalence "publicité = poésie" (p. 161). His own work sought to imitate advertising, to draw its energy from the modern "magic" it embodied. Rather than producing copy to promote products, Cendrars created a literature that is, in itself, *publicité*. Jean Cocteau, for his part, threw himself wholeheartedly into the production of copy--copy that included menus, labels, posters, and industrial products. He presents a truly remarkable case, both in length (over forty years) and in the poetic variety of his achievement. His name appeared in advertising everywhere from Fiat to Air France to Pernod to his most notorious endorsement, for Kayser ladies' stockings. For the latter he composed a series of epigrams, including "Vos jambes sont des poèmes, faites-les relier par Kayser," and "Il n'est pas des rimes plus riches que deux jambes en basse Kayser" (pp. 184-185). Cocteau, the author argues, was driven by the desire to see his work everywhere, but also something slightly higher, a surrealist idea even, of the mingling of art and the embrace of the capitalist parade.

It is, however, Colette, the third "C" in this bestiary, who truly fascinates the author. And we cannot blame her, for Boucharenc sees Colette as--and for once the contemporary term fits perfectly--an "influenceuse" (p. 189). This means that Colette created an image and effectively marketed it, so that companies approached her for her endorsement. The name and image were enough--she became a brand, and an international one at that. Some of the examples Boucharenc reprints are nearly shocking, such as a slim silhouette of Colette accompanying a Lucky Strike ad that, not too subtly, suggests smoking will make you as slim as the writer. But what truly makes Colette an influencer *avant la lettre* is the manner in which she marketed herself as an idea of femininity. The products she wrote for, or otherwise endorsed, had to conform to her image. That image was entirely her own creation: it evoked a late-night cup of coffee, a gentle whiff of perfume, an eyelash seductively mascaraed. And even when she strayed from luxury goods (as in her advertisement for Ford Motors) she refused to do anything other than to meet it on her own terms:

"Un front qui défie le vent, une certaine insolence, du mordant,
Un penchant vif pour ce qui est net, dépouillé de poids superflu,
de camouflage, le goût des matériaux nobles….
C'est bien commode pour moi qui peux les louer toutes trois avec les mêmes mots
La mode, La Ford, la femme" (p. 195).

Chapter five deals with the *livre publicitaire*. The term may not be immediately obvious, but for French readers around the fin de siècle it would evoke these albums--books that (sponsored by anyone from liquor to biscuit makers) mixed cultural essays with advertisements. Wisely, she focuses on the truly remarkable story--that of the "Mariani Albums." For those unfamiliar, the author provides some (although not quite enough) context. Briefly, in the mid-1860s a Corsican chemist, Angelo Mariani, devised a way to market a cocaine-infused Bordeaux. The ethanol present in wine extracted the drug from the coca leaves, thus creating, presumably, an effect that mixed depressive and stimulant. The mixture marketed as "Vin Tonique Mariani a la Coca du

Pérou." predated (and directly inspired) America's Coca-Cola. Mariani, a marketing genius, came up with a number of ploys to promote his product, including sending bottles to great figures of European and indeed American society from whom he then collected countless testimonials--a total, he claimed, of over 4,000. The fans of the product included many impressive figures, from Émile Zola to Ulysses S. Grant and from Pope Leo XII to Thomas Edison. But the real innovation was the way Mariani marketed testimonials, first in newspapers and magazines but later in a series of "albums"--published books on important figures of the day, with biographical details, beautiful illustrations and, as it happens, testimonials on the wonderful effects of his drink.[4] Thus, ambitious French writers were anxious to be included, and Mariani was thrilled by the free publicity. Boucharenc sees this as more than a revealing anecdote. Rather, it represents a starting point for advertising's interconnectedness with literary figures. But, more importantly for Boucharenc's thesis, it establishes how the manner in which famous writers have been entangled with the world of advertising goes back to the origins of modernity.

In chapter six she takes us back to the story of the shame writers felt at their commercial work, and how, in some cases, this caused such work to be subject to "pertes" (p. 300)--that is, deliberately left out of collected works or Pléiade editions. In the case of Paul Valéry and Perrier, we have a substantial work, a carefully composed three-page elegy to water, history, and life that belongs with, and eventually found a place in, the poet's work.[5] Boucharenc follows with other questions about the interplay between commissioned writing and literature and how, occasionally, a commissioned or commercial work leads to a new literary project (as was the case with Claude Simon's work on Finland, which began as a travel brochure). An interesting corollary to this is her notion that working on advertisements actually empowered writers--that is to say, the commercial origin of the works can sometimes free authors, allowing them a less serious approach to their own material (pp. 296-304).

By the time the book reaches its conclusion, we are well prepared to put the "Gallimard-Dior" book in its proper historical context. Writers, even the most respected and politically engaged, have learned to position themselves within a thoroughly mediatized France. Marc Lévy, for example, made a deal with McDonald's to provide short books rather than toys in Happy Meals and 15 percent of children actually chose the book (p. 310)! Yet the Cassandras are still with us, and some surprising ones, such as Frédéric Beigbeder, whose path was opposite--coming to literature from the world of advertising. He called advertising the biggest threat to literature in 2,000 years (p. 313). Yet the same Beigbeder posed shirtless (and holding Jean Baudrillard's *La Société de consommation* in his hand) for the Galeries Lafayette catalog (p. 312). Myriam Boucharenc concludes that, while we do not know the direction of this relationship in the future, our critiques have always been based on an "effacement," some of it "stratégique" (p. 316). French writers have long been brands and literature and advertising are inextricably entangled. Whatever the future brings, that story is sure to continue.

NOTES

[1] Camille Laurens et al., *Lady. Nouvelles* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

[2] *Portraits de l'écrivain en publicitaire*, ed. by Myriam Boucharenc and Laurence Guellec (Presses Universitaires de Rennes) , 2018.

[3] See Seth Armus, *French Anti-Americanism 1930-1948: Critical Moments in a Complex History* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007).

[4] For more on this fascinating story see Aymon de Lestrange, *Coca Wine: Angelo Mariani's Miraculous Elixir and the Birth of Modern Advertising* (Rochester, Vt.: Park Street Press, 2018).

[5] Jacques Derrida addressed this work while all but ignoring its context in "Les sources de Valéry. Qual, Quelle," *Modern Language Notes* 87 (1972): 564.

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