

Our knowledge of "Our Knowledge"

Everyone knows that Russell was an extraordinary writer. Not - least remarkable among the qualities of his writing were speed and fluency of composition. An example, which he himself offered, is the way he wrote *Our Knowledge of the External World* in 1914. This is his description, first published 37 years later, in the article "How I Write":

I had undertaken to give the Lowell Lectures at Boston, and had chosen as my subject "Our Knowledge of the External World". Throughout 1913 I thought about this topic. In term time in my rooms at Cambridge, in vacations in a quiet inn on the upper reaches of the Thames, I concentrated with such intensity that I sometimes forgot to breathe and emerged panting as from a trance. But all to no avail. To every theory that I could think of I could perceive fatal objections. At last, in despair, I went off to Rome for Christmas, hoping that a holiday would revive my flagging energy. I got back to Cambridge on the last day of 1913, and although my difficulties were still completely unresolved I arranged, because the remaining time was short, to dictate as best as I could to a stenographer. Next morning, as she came in at the door, I suddenly saw exactly what I had to say, and proceeded to dictate the whole book without a moment's hesitation. (*Portraits from Memory*, 1956, pp. 195-6)

As a result of research at the University of Texas, I believe this account is a mass of confusions and that the way Russell really wrote *Our Knowledge* was altogether different.

Russell's letters to Lady Ottoline Morrell for September, October and early November, 1913, show him hard at work writing and then revising a series of lectures he identifies (letters 835, 813) as the Lowell Lectures on "scientific method in philosophy" (# 735). The first draft was finished on September 25, in just 25 days (#859, 876), at the rate of 10 manuscript pages a day (#868). Russell then decided to change the order of the lectures and group them around the problem of the external world (#891). Revision and expansion - not to mention taking down Wittgenstein's first extant philosophical writing and reading Norbert Wiener's Ph.D. thesis - occupied Russell to November 8 (#909). By December 2 he is correcting "typed lectures" (#927). On January 14, 1914, he tells Ottoline that he is getting an advance of £100 for publication of the Lowell Lectures (#967).

Several of the individual lectures are easily identified. They are Lectures II, III and VI, originally VI, VII and II, respectively. When II was numbered "VI", Russell remarked that "all that about the bad logic produced by fading of the mystic vision was good, wasn't it?" (# 879). A passage in II echoes this remark: "While the mystic mood is dominant, the need of logic is not felt; as the mood fades, the impulse to logic reasserts itself ..." (p. 46).¹ When III was "VII", Russell told

¹Of the first edition (Chicago and London: Open Court, 1914).

Ottoline that it concerned the external world, hallucinations, and "reality" (#874); III does concern these topics. In revising VI (formerly "II"), Russell became interested in a question of "pure erudition" concerning Zeno (#899). Two weeks later, on November 2, he refers to it as "the only erudite [lecture] of the lot" (#904). As Russell had an easily quantifiable conception of "erudition", it is obvious from the number of citations in VI that it is the most "erudite" lecture of the book. The fact that he credits Philip Jourdain for help in regard to Zeno (p. 165 n.1) and that there is in the Russell Archives a letter from Jourdain dated 18 November 1913 concerning such a topic makes it virtually certain that this lecture, too, was written before Russell claimed it was.

So much for the actual composition of *Our Knowledge*. Did Russell do anything in the early days of 1914 that might have led to his later confusion? The answer is definitely "Yes". The letters to Ottoline at this time show him involved in an extraordinary spurt of writing. But he identifies the writing as the two essays, "The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics" and "Mysticism and Logic", the preparation of his Harvard lectures on Theory of Knowledge (see "Russell's American Lecture Courses" in *Russell 6*), and the preface to Poincaré's *Science and Method*. There is no mention of a book. As Russell had, from 1911 to 1914, told Lady Ottoline of almost everything we have a record of him writing in that period, it would be very odd if he had failed to mention the writing of a whole book under the circumstances he claims in the *Autobiography*, vol. I (London, 1967, p. 210) and in "How I Write". In the *Autobiography* (ibid.) Russell claims that he "used to sit in the parlour of 'The Beetle and Wedge' at Moultsford, wondering what there was to say about our knowledge of the external world, on which before long I had to deliver a course of lectures." The letters show that he was at Moultsford (which is on "the upper reaches of the Thames") a year earlier, during December, 1912 to January, 1913. A minor inconsistency in Russell's accounts, pointed out to me by Donald Brown, is that the *Autobiography* has him starting to dictate *Our Knowledge* on New Year's Day, 1914, whereas in *Portraits from Memory* it is a day later.

Let us turn now to the philosophical content of what Russell wrote at the time. In *My Philosophical Development* Russell states that "the several novelties in the theory as to our knowledge of the external world which burst upon me on New Year's Day, 1914" had their "first exposition" in "The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics," and that the theory had a second exposition in *Our Knowledge*. The major novelty was the theory of perspectives and perspective-space. Now, Chapter III of *Our Knowledge* is about eight pages longer than the average of the other seven chapters, none of which deviates from the average more than five pages. In Chapter

III there is a passage of six pages explaining this theory. It begins on p. 87 (of the first edition) with "We will now make a new start, adopting a different method" and ends on p. 93 with "... in terms of our construction." In letter #976 to Lady Ottoline, which appears to have been posted on 27 January, 1914, Russell tells her that he re-wrote one of his popular lectures that day. Since he throughout referred to the Lowell Lectures as his "popular" lectures, we know he revised one of them after he had (on 17 January 1914) got back from his typist the paper on "The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics". Although there is no way of being sure that it was Chapter III which he then revised, I suggest that Russell revised the typescript of the book to incorporate the theory, but that the book was, for the most part, written some months earlier. Perhaps the mistake in Russell's recollection of the event was partly due to his remembering *Our Knowledge* for the "novelties in the theory" he seems to have inserted in it after writing "The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics". Certainly the tone of his contemporary account of the composition of the latter matches up with later accounts of how he wrote *Our Knowledge*. In the letter to Lady Ottoline postmarked 8 January, 1914, Russell writes that he "dictated" to Jourdain's secretary part of a paper identified as that on sense-data and physics. In the letter dated 17 January, Russell writes: "My paper on sense-data and physics has come from the typist. It is very good! I don't believe I have ever done anything better, at any rate as regards clearness and manner of exposition."

Russell was not in error in remembering an unusually fertile period of writing; but, nearly 40 years later, he confused a long and important article with the book, no doubt because of similarity of content. It would be of both philosophical and literary interest to discover the manuscript of *Our Knowledge*.

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