

Bertrand Russell speaks to Chicagoans

a 1929 interview

Bertrand Russell elaborated a very interesting theory in his lecture on "Literary Style and Social Psychology" the other day. He began by saying that Alexander Blok, one of the greater Russian poets, was detailed by the communist government to lecture on rhythms in poetry, but he was ordered to do so from a Marxian point of view, that is, from the point of view that economics influence rhythms.

While, as Mr. Russell said, such a premise seems at first slightly incongruous, there really is a great deal to be said for the influence of economics on style, both in prose and poetry. The literature of the Elizabethan era was free, flowing, aristocratic, self-assertive, blustering, and adventurous, just as the life of that day was all that. There was a government by a new and boisterous aristocracy. The literature of that day had all of the characteristics of the national consciousness.

The age of Queen Anne, was quite as aristocratic, but less adventurous. England of that day was governed by an established aristocracy of mind as well as of matter. The prose and poetry of that period were leisurely and graceful, although still filled with the consciousness of aristocratic power.

With the French revolution there arose the mob. Never since then has it been possible to disregard the mob.

Literature lost its aggrandizement. No one possibly could feel as important as an important person had felt before. Literature lost its flowing rhythms, its long sentences full of grand gestures. It became sadder. So, too, became the pens of a world growing in the consciousness of the lot of mankind as opposed to that of the fortunate few.

With the machine age, there came a new rhythm in literature. Only in America and (Mr. Russell believed) Russia is there a new style in writing, expressing that new rhythm.

It is, as much as anything, a rhythm of rage against man and his lot, and a fear (on the part of the author or the poet) of the herd and its passion for killing any one who does not conform.

Mr. Russell was impelled to these thoughts by reading Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms," which, he said, seemed to him superb in its method, although mid-Victorian in the point of view of the last third of the book.

The death of the heroine was exactly the death of Dora in "David Copperfield," he said afterwards at luncheon, when he was questioned. Hemingway, he said, had only added many obstetrical details to make that

death seem modern.

Only in America could one hope for the new rhythm - unless in Russia, perhaps - because English writers were the product of a more, fully established social and economic system, he said. He talked about the work of Virginia Woolf, who, he said, was the best the British have.

"Her writing is like incandescent death," (using the most striking phrase I ever had heard in describing a style), "It is so finished that there is nothing left for it to grow into. Lytton Strachey is the same. Hemingway and other American writers, even those who are adolescent, still are growing," was his comment.

Mr. Russell ended his lecture by an amusing elaboration of the theme that Hollywood is governing the world as no government in any time has ever done. He gave a picture of a future in which man and the machine may be so completely one that neither can be distinguishable one from the other. Then, he held, all art will cease to exist.

Mr. Russell's talk was a modern improvisation on a well known theme, brilliantly clarified by one of the best minds in the world...

Mary Borden who was a Chicagoan before she became the wife of Gen. Spears of London, and who is visiting in her home town, recalled the first time that she had ever heard her friend Bertrand Russell lecture. She had told him that she would like to hear some of his lectures at Cambridge if she thought she could understand them.

"Why, they're very simple," he replied. "I'm lecturing now on the philosophy of mathematics and it's elemental."

"So, she said, "I took a train to Cambridge. He met me at the station and took me to his rooms and gave me one of those large English teas. Thus fortified, I went with him to a lecture room that was filled with gray air and young men. I had taken a note book with me in which to put down the wisdom which I was to acquire and I held my pencil poised. But for half an hour he said not one single word that I could understand, not even such a word as 'properties' or 'meaning'.

"It was if he were talking in Sanskrit. Then suddenly I heard a phrase 'the meaning of the symbol alpha' and I thought 'at last,' but he said 'That is a subject which we have taken up before and we shall not resume it' and went on again frightfully learnedly. When it was all over and I told him that I had not understood one word of anything that he had said he was terribly hurt, really hurt. I suppose it never had occurred to him that there were people in the world who simply did not know the language of the philosophy of mathematics."

He is one of the most learned, really learned, men in England, we all agreed, and for that very reason he speaks with the greatest clarity and lucidity of thought.

"That was many years ago. He has long since forgiven me," she said. . . .

Mary Borden's latest book is "Jehovah Day," Bertrand Russell has published two books this fall, "Mysticism and Logic" and a firebrandish discussion of "Marriage and Morals."
