

Gilbert Cannan and Bertrand Russell: an addition to the logic of a literary symbol

In writing of the symbolic significance that Bertrand Russell has been given in a number of literary works, I stated that Aldous Huxley's symbolization of Russell in *Crome Yellow* "is the most inclusive as well as the most extensive representation of him in literature".¹ Huxley's novel appeared in 1921, but some three months before it was published--while, in fact, Huxley was actually writing it--the English writer Gilbert Cannan (1884-1955) published a novel entitled *Pugs and Peacocks*, the very title of which alludes to two of the conspicuous species inhabiting Lady Ottoline Morrell's country house Garsington, which is also the slightly disguised setting for *Crome Yellow*.² *Pugs and Peacocks* opens with the following words:

Neat and precise in his habits, Melian Stokes had never been any trouble to anyone, not even to himself. In his twenties he had achieved that obscure but illustrious fame which is given to mathematicians and men of science, who, using a language understood by very few, find those few wherever there are universities. (P. 1)³

Melian's university is Cambridge; he has rooms in Nevile's Court, Trinity College, where he works on the mathematics of the spectrum. When not at Cambridge he lives at Stalbridge, the seat of his aristocratic family, which is known for its pugs and peacocks. Melian Stokes has be-

¹"Bertrand Russell: The Logic of a Literary Symbol", *Russell in Review*, ed. J.E. Thomas and K. Blackwell (Toronto, 1976), p. 80. This article was first published in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 42 (Summer, 1973).

²I am grateful to Kenneth Blackwell and Mrs. Diana Farr for bringing *Pugs and Peacocks* to my attention.

³Page references for all of Cannan's novels are to the English editions. *Pugs and Peacocks* and *Sembal* were published by Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., *The House of Prophecy* by Thornton Butterworth, Ltd.

come famous, Cannan goes on, but this has not resulted in his being well liked:

He was too disconcerting. He was as abrupt in upsetting a discussion as his curiously blunt, square fingers, which he always held close together as he gesticulated. Oddly inhuman those gestures: they might have been made by an isosceles triangle.... (P. 2)

Even from this brief account it is easy to see that Melian Stokes is related to that family of symbolic representations of Bertrand Russell created by Huxley, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Siegfried Sassoon, and others. And *Pugs and Peacocks* is only the first of a series of novels by Cannan that involve Melian, as a note at the end of the novel indicates:

This book is the first of a series dealing with the chaos revealed by the War of 1914 and the Peace of 1919, not from any political or sociological point of view, but to discover the light thrown upon human nature by abnormal events and conditions. The second volume will be called 'SEMBAL'. (P. 288)

In *Sembal*, which appeared in 1922, Melian Stokes plays a much smaller role. It was followed in 1924 by *The House of Prophecy*, in which Melian is again a central figure. A fourth novel in the series that Cannan described opposite the title page of *The House of Prophecy* as "Novels of the New Time" was to be entitled *The Soaring Bird*, but it was never published.

Clearly Huxley's *Crome Yellow* is not the most extensive representation of Russell in literature, though it still embodies a more inclusive use of Russell as a symbol than Cannan's novels, as a look at *Pugs and Peacocks*, *Sembal*, and *The House of Prophecy* will show. First, however, it is helpful to know a little about Gilbert Cannan.

By the time he began *Pugs and Peacocks* Cannan had published thirteen books of fiction, five plays, two volumes of poetry, and seven works of non-fiction⁴--all by the age of thirty-seven. One can understand why Virginia Woolf felt the need, in a review of one of his novels, to call him a professional writer rather than an artist.⁵ All of this was achieved in addition to going to King's College, Cambridge, reading for the bar, and then beginning his writing career as a drama critic. At one point Cannan was secretary to the creator of Peter Pan, and this led to a certain amount of literary attention when he ran off with Barrie's wife, whom Cannan married in 1917 and then separated from shortly afterwards. Cannan's fourth novel, *Round the Corner*, was pub-

⁴There is a bibliography of Cannan's writings in *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, 4: 1900-1950, ed. I.R. Willison (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 547-8. See also the obituary in the *London Times*, 2 July 1955, p. 8.

⁵"Mummery", *Contemporary Writers* (London, 1965), p. 117.

lished in 1913, had led Henry James to include Cannan among the younger generation of novelists, in the company of Hugh Walpole, Compton Mackenzie and D.H. Lawrence. James felt Cannan shared both the originality and the deficiency of these novelists' immersion in their material; their immersion revealed the "variety, intensity and plausibility" of their material but failed to bring out any real centre of interest in it. In particular, Cannan's "liveliest appeal to our attention belongs to the order of *constatations* pure and simple..."⁶ Today Cannan is known as a friend of D.H. Lawrence, whom he introduced to Lady Ottoline Morrell, and the author of *Mendel, A Story of Youth*--a novel about the youth of a Jewish painter in London. Cannan published *Mendel* in 1916 after his friend the painter Mark Gertler had sat to him for it. The novel gives an interesting view of its times, but Lawrence's complaint in a letter is just one:

It is, as Gertler says, journalism: statement, without creation. This is very sickening. If Gilbert had taken Gertler's story and re-created it into art, good. But to set down all these statements is a vulgarising of life itself.⁷

Though Cannan cannot be said to have recreated Russell's story into art, his use of Russell is not as "vulgar" as *Mendel* because *Pugs and Peacocks*, *Semba*, and *The House of Prophecy* are not centrally concerned with the outlines of Russell's life. Melian Stokes resembles Russell in his brilliant and witty mind, his awkward and priggish behaviour, and his opposition to the war. But in other respects Melian is quite unlike Russell. Stalbridge is like neither Russell's childhood home nor Lady Ottoline's Garsington. Melian is a sexual innocent. His attraction to Matty Boscawen, the Vicar's daughter from a nearby town, is described as an awakening. Cannan appears to be combining two quite different periods of Russell's life, making him middle-aged in years but an innocent in affairs of the heart. Matty Boscawen is too unrealized a figure to be usefully compared with any of Russell's women, though Cannan probably took a suggestion or two for her character from Lady Constance Malleston. Most importantly, the basic conflicts that Cannan is attempting to dramatize in his "Novels of the New Time" seem to have little connection with Russell's life. The interest, then, in Cannan's symbolization of Russell lies in the selection from the uses of Russell's experiences and personality traits. In order to show this it is worthwhile describing *Pugs and Peacocks*, *Semba*, and *The House of Prophecy* in a little detail, for it is unlikely that many students of modern

literature or philosophy have read or are going to read them.

In *Pugs and Peacocks* Cannan tries to show how first the war and then love change Melian Stokes from a don interested only in communicating with his aunt Lady Rusholme, his pupils, and other scholars into a reformer lecturing the country on the evils of the First World War, and a man fascinated by the independent spirit of a new kind of woman. All of the important characters in the novel appear to be in love with Matty Boscawen, including Penrose Kennedy, an Irishman who is Melian's best pupil. Melian discovered Penrose in 1912, and only he and a colleague Melian has eclipsed called Dr. Fleckhorn understand something of Melian's work. Fleckhorn's son is killed in the war and this turns him violently against the Germans; Penrose joins the army, is taken prisoner in Turkey and then sent to Egypt where he "continued on paper those diagrammatic studies of universal possibilities which he had begun in the sands of Asia Minor" (p. 168). Cannan's casual use of events from the biographies of Whitehead and Wittgenstein suggests that in his fictionalization of Russell's life as well he uses certain biographical aspects merely because they save the trouble of inventing them, rather than for some other significance that they might have in themselves or for readers who could be expected to recognize the sources of these aspects. Physically the war changes Melian. He becomes grayer, the bird-like alertness in his eyes turn to a smoulder. But as the novel proceeds there is less emphasis on such physical characteristics as his "long narrow face with its dry, wrinkled skin and the strange bony jutting brow over deep eyes, full always of a dark, restless light like that which comes up from the sea, [that] made him look ancient of race and of soul" (p. 26). Melian's laughter early in the novel seems to come from the bowels of the earth and surge through him while he flaps his arms like a bird, but later on it turns into a harsh cackling. These characteristics and the imagery in which they are described makes Melian resemble other symbolic representations of Russell, though they do not add up to the fundamentally ironic figure that Russell becomes in *Crome Yellow*, "Mr. Apollinax", *Women in Love*, and elsewhere. The final scenes of *Pugs and Peacocks* take place at Birch-End, a Garsington-like country home complete with a Lytton Stracheyesque character named Sopley who intends to treat Melian precisely in this kind of ironic mode, writing of him,

as a machine, disapproving of the irregularities of human beings, among whom he had descended in order to protest against being deprived of oil, the adulation of German professors. (P. 282)

The character of Sopley is quite explicitly based on Strachey; even his beard and voice are used. Matty and Penrose are also at Birch-End. Matty, in love with both Penrose and Melian, chooses to stand by Melian,

⁶"The New Novel", *Notes on Novelists* (New York, 1914), pp. 335-6.

⁷*The Collected Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. Harry T. Moore (New York, 1962), I, pp. 484-5.

who leaves her everything in his will as he awaits trial for evading censorship and communicating with the enemy. Melian's cousins have all been killed in the war and he is now heir to his uncle's Gladstonian peerage. The novel ends with Matty regarding Melian as a pathetic little man who needs her love, and with Melian seeing Matty as free of any concern with male prestige and therefore able to concentrate on the situation before her. This psychological fact, Melian realizes, will make chaos of the social system, a chaos that Cannan intends to depict in his "Novels of the New Time".

Melian Stokes does not enter *Semba*, the second of these novels, until the last third of the book. *Semba* takes its title from, and is mainly about, Francis Semba, another of Matty's admirers. Semba is an economic statistician who is obsessed with being Jewish. Judged even by the standards of pre-Second World War European literature, *Semba* is a crudely anti-semitic book, hardly what one would expect from the author of *Mendel*. Semba is a descendant of Shylock and Fagin, the monster-Jew, cunning, inhumane, physically loathsome, pathetic, and dangerous. Semba's love for the very English Matty is part of his reaction to the No Admittance signs he encounters in English society. Semba keeps company with the pacific socialists that have attracted Matty and Melian, but he is not a revolutionary; he claims that all he wants is the elimination of waste. Semba's own family life has been unhappy; motherless, he detests his father's Polish mistress and is more or less adopted by the very rich, sonless Mrs. Nathan, whose husband is a successful and sybaritic art dealer and whose daughter Thelma is tutored by Semba and then later becomes engaged to him after her first marriage fails. Semba is one of Cannan's principal symbols of the new time, and what he stands for is expounded by his creator as follows:

He had, transcendently, the imagination of a pawnbroker, which is so far the only effective imagination in human affairs, so much so that it has become deified and we pledge to-day for the sake of to-morrow, this life for the sake of the next. The result is cash, but what is the use of cash without commodities? (P. 101)

With the reappearance of Melian Stokes in Part III of *Semba* Cannan begins to plot the confrontation of Semba and Melian over Matty that his "Novels of the New Time" are aiming at. Melian enters the novel again with the familiar Russellian "funny little stiff trot as though his legs wanted to keep up with his thoughts". At his trial, which he loses, Melian pleads "guilty to an offence committed in defence of reason, sanity and a kind of patriotism for which there is at present no hearing" (p. 216). And although he goes to prison for six months, Melian realizes he is not being a martyr: "Nothing I ever did could ever appeal to the mob for it would be sterilised with scepticism before I

did it. On the other hand, I am inclined to believe that most of the martyrs became so out of spite" (p. 237). While Melian is in prison Semba continues to see Matty, who is very critical of his always making tragedies out of trifles while at the same time she admires him: he is "a great thing in her life, this little Jew, and hard rock where everything else was crumbling and treacherous ..." (p. 232). In the last scene of the novel Semba and Mrs. Nathan encounter Melian recuperating from prison in a park:

He sat stiffly like the Melian of old, was dressed as precisely with black coat and grey trousers and conspicuous white cuffs dropping over his square-fingered hands, but his eyes were changed. One eyelid had drooped until the eye was almost covered while the other seemed by contrast abnormally large, and it stared, stared deep into the picture of life that it had focussed, deep into it, without flinching or flickering, seeing, knowing, content to see and to know. (P. 308)

Melian remarks to Semba in an off-hand anti-semitism that contrasts with the more active kind of Melian's lawyer, "I am told that you have gone the way of all your tribe",⁸ alluding to Semba's decision to work at statistics and become financially successful. The novel concludes with Melian's observation that making money is "a pleasant if protracted form of suicide".

The House of Prophecy opens with the same scene that ended *Semba*. Melian sits in the park, brooding over his own situation and the world's before going to see Matty again:

Mathematicians said he might be a very fine philosopher but he was a poor mathematician: philosophers said he might be an inspired mathematician but as a philosopher he was no more than a nuisance, which demonstrates that you cannot both be and not be. (P. 11)

As for Semba, Melian sees him as a symptom of the awful things that were happening in the world underneath the heroic appearances of the war and the peace. Melian's reflections here are part of Cannan's assumption in these novels that the Jews are taking over everything. In the course of *The House of Prophecy* Melian's uncle dies and he becomes Lord Rusholme, master of Stalbridge, which Penrose describes as "a house of Prophecy, looking both ways, a thousand years into the past and God knows how many thousands of years into the future" (p. 112). The phrase is also used later in the novel by Semba in describing the Nathans' house, and then

⁸Russell's biographer Ronald Clark, commenting on Leonard Woolf's observation that Russell "disliked" Jews, admits that Russell "sometimes exhibited a personal allergy to Jews which is betrayed in his private correspondence from time to time ..." (*The Life of Bertrand Russell*, London, 1975, p. 380), but there is nothing in Cannan's trilogy to suggest that the blatant anti-semitism of those books was suggested by the model for Melian Stokes.

extended to apply to the body and then to love, both of which are called houses (p. 186). Though he is welcomed back to Cambridge and is more famous than ever as a savant, Melian as Lord Rusholme turns to world affairs, helped by Penrose who is now his secretary. The debts of Stalbridge distract him, however, and the famous Stalbridge painting by Constable is sold to Jews to provide money for Matty, whose doubts about marrying an aging Melian are increasing. Penrose observes the situation and finds something shoddy in Melian's Maeterlinckian imagination of love. Sembal meanwhile has become rich. He is indifferent to his fiancée, and it is clear that the real energy is in the mother-son relationship of Sembal and Mrs. Nathan. Sembal finds the power of the Jews to reside in their ability to love, to realize that the woman is the life-giver. This accords with Cannan's idea of Jewish love expressed in *Mendel*, where the hero is revolted by the soft, characterless worship of the mother's love for her child that vitiates Christian love by leaving the woman out of account except as a mother. When Sembal came across Melian in the park, he saw him as something ancient, dug out of a tomb, full of mystical life but having nothing to do with men and women and their passions. Now at a climactic dinner at Stalbridge Sembal confronts the Rusholmes in an ecstasy of hate and triumph. He attacks both Melian and Penrose, disrupting the dinner, but making Matty realize that she cares more for him than for either or them. It is not easy to understand what Sembal is saying because Cannan presents Sembal's speech somewhat incoherently, but the essence of the diatribe appears to be that one must either live or steal enough life from others to live. Melian has done the latter, Sembal implies, and Matty's mothering love for Melian, together with her regret that he has not given more into their relationship, bears this out. One must say yes or no to love, Sembal insists; for him love includes and is even increased by the horrible, the disgusting, as well as the beautiful. Sembal's peroration is delivered to Melian, "whose head seemed to hang in a helpless, pitiful grin", and to the whole house of prophecy:

All this is finished. This kind of life, this kind of love, this kind of death, this kind of love [sic] are finished, and what life has to give must be taken and no more. What life offers must be accepted and no more. It must be accepted without question, because life has been so outraged that there is an end. (Pp. 283-4)

After the dinner Matty decides not to marry Melian, Sembal not to marry Theima. Matty goes off to her villa in the Antibes, given to her by Melian, and Sembal is to join her there. As the novel ends Melian and Penrose are working at Stalbridge, trying to cope with the financial havoc Sembal and his tribe have wrought. Melian has an ideal of combating untruthfulness by sitting quietly and talking, finding out about

each other, until we discover "what we mean by love and justice, liberty, and all the words we use so easily..." But this will take work, and Melian sighs ironically "If one could work as surely as a woman loves!" (pp. 319-20).

What plans Cannan had for Sembal, Matty, Melian, and Penrose in *The Soaring Bird* have never been revealed. After several serious mental breakdowns, Cannan entered a mental home in 1924--the year that *The House of Prophecy*, his last novel, was published--and spent the last thirty years of his life there. According to his friend Middleton Murry he suffered from megalomania.⁹

The literary value of *Pugs and Peacocks*, *Sembal*, and *The House of Prophecy* is not very high, and therefore these novels do not contribute much to the logic of Russell as a literary symbol. All three lack the interest, vitality, and concentration of even so flawed a novel as *Mendel*. Cannan's use of Russell as a symbol of the new times is simply not imaginative enough to be interesting in its own right. This is true of the other characters as well. None of Matty's emotional involvements with Melian, Penrose, or Sembal is convincing, and it is difficult to tell what all the emotional fuss is about. We come back here to the kind of criticism made by James in his comment on Cannan's art of constataions and Lawrence in his description of *Mendel* as statement without creation. One can apply to Cannan's novels some of the criticism that Melian makes of recent fiction:

Melian returned to his room with three recent novels only to find that he had lost his taste for them. The form, the endless conversations, the casual psychology, the distortions necessary to make ends meet seemed to him rococo and insipid. They were so cautious and indirect, so lacking in frankness, above all, in character, and therefore in style. (*Pugs and Peacocks*, p. 282)

Cannan's trilogy is not rococo, insipid, cautious, or indirect. They would have been better novels perhaps if they had a little more of some of these qualities. But in their psychology and their plotting they are casual and distorted productions. Ultimately they are failures on Cannan's own terms; as "Novels of the New Time" they do not reveal the light that the times throw on human nature because the representation of that nature is artistically too feeble.

If they are insignificant as novels, the question remains of what interest Cannan's extended symbolization of Russell has when compared with the symbols of Eliot, Lawrence, and Huxley, to stop with those that might have influenced Cannan. In a number of ways Melian clearly resembles

⁹Harry T. Moore, *The Priest of Love: A Life of D.H. Lawrence* (London, 1974), p. 317. See also Compton Mackenzie's account of Cannan in *My Life and Times: Octave Four: 1907-1914* (London, 1965), pp. 221-2.

their Russellian figures. As some of the quotations given above reveal, Melian's prehistoric appearance, mechanical movements, brilliant intelligence, pointed wit, and political and philosophical concerns can all be recognized in other literary treatments of Russell. The differences are more interesting, two of them especially. First of all, the very extendedness of Cannan's use of Russell presents him as a portent--a new kind of man to be considered along with Sembal, Penrose Kennedy, and that new kind of woman, Matty Boscawen. The thinker-aristocrat has become a force in the new era, though he is defeated by a representative of "the Jewish menace". Melian's almost senile failure in love contrasts most with other symbolic embodiments of Russell. Cannan's treatment is completely Apollinian, the Dionysian role being taken over by Sembal. In this respect Cannan's symbol is closer to Lawrence's in "The Blind Man", though Melian is a very different creation than Bertie Reid. By depriving his symbol of sexual vitality, Cannan loses one of the principal sources of humour in the use of Russell by writers. This involves the second important difference between the character of Melian Stokes compared with Mr. R*ss*ll, Mr. Apollinax, Sir Joshua Malleston, Bertie Reid, Mr. Scogan, and Thornton Tyrrell: Cannan's approach is not fundamentally ironic; his novels are not anatomies. Cannan is not essentially a satirist in his trilogy. The chaos of the new time is expounded more than it is ridiculed, and thus there is not much of the double function of a symbolic Russell in satiric representations of him that both ridicules and is ridiculous. This is also one reason why Melian Stokes is not really very funny. He becomes less so as the novels proceed, and towards the end of the trilogy Melian's prototype has faded somewhat. The Melian at the end of *The House of Prophecy* is not as recognizable a symbolization of Russell as the Melian at the beginning of *Pugs and Peacocks*. And as he fades, the wonderland characteristics give way to the waste land ones that predominate at the end.

This change in the treatment of Russell may be the result of Cannan's confining his attention to the period of Russell's life when he switched from philosophy to social reform. Melian's wise old aunt says to him in *Pugs and Peacocks* as he begins to take an interest in the war,

You are the same Melian with the difference only that you are working at a subject which the rest of us can reach, and the philosophic method in politics is, to say the least, alarming. You see, in politics, there is nothing to be proved. It is purely a matter of falling dexterously out of one muddle into another, and, my dear, you have no practice in falling. At a time like this, how can you be either witty or logical? And if you are neither--where is Melian? (P. 166)

The answer by the time of *The House of Prophecy* is nowhere. By then Melian has lost a great deal of his logic and his laughter. This was not obviously the case with Bertrand Russell. But it is difficult to genera-

lize usefully here because Cannan's final intentions with regard to Melian Stokes were not realized. What *Pugs and Peacocks*, *Sembal*, and *The House of Prophecy* can show us, once again, is the extent to which Russell's genius and experiences interested writers who were his contemporaries. Even for such a limited novelist as Gilbert Cannan, Russell was a cultural portent, a philosopher-lord unable to cope personally or publicly, in love or in money, with what Cannan--perhaps because of his own madness--depicted as the megalomania of the Jews.

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