

A war on wit

by Margaret Moran

Mary Louise Jackson. *Style and Rhetoric in Bertrand Russell's Work*. (European University Studies, Series XIV: Anglo-Saxon Language and Literature, Vol. 116.) Frankfurt am Main and Bern: Peter Lang, 1983. Pp. 234. sFr. 53.

TO ALLOW HIS content to show forth with complete clarity, Russell adopted a style that draws so little attention to itself as to be virtually invisible. Anyone who sets out to analyze that style must feel rather like the way Wittgenstein would had he been obliged to describe in full zoological detail the rhinoceros that seemed not to be present in the room. The effort to make Russell's techniques manifest receives only minimal encouragement from the limited amount of commentary he was prepared to offer about his manner of expression. Russell voiced regret about his florid phase at the beginning of the century, and he claimed never to have depended very much upon revision. But beyond such remarks he was generally silent. A further challenge is created by the scope and multiformity of Russell's writing. When an author has mastered a range that includes polemical tracts and formal treatises, love letters and letters to editors, autobiography and histories of western thought, potboilers and reviews, then several styles surely require consideration. Of course, certain passages (or even works) might accommodate themselves readily to more than one category. For example, the juxtaposition of two allusions from widely separated cultural levels creates the wit in the assertion: "I have gathered from the works of Bulldog Drummond that the contact of a fist with the eye enables people to see the starry heavens as well as the moral law."¹ Presented out of its context, this extract might seem to belong in a number of different places.

The author of *Style and Rhetoric in Bertrand Russell's Work* begins to acknowledge the formidable nature of her topic by determining to exclude all mathematical works, private correspondences and short stories. In itself, this (or even further) selectivity seems reasonable, although it might have suggested the need for a restricting title. Confidence in the implementation of this basic principle is undermined, however, with the citation of passages from these very areas shortly

¹ *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1940), p. 151.

thereafter. Straining to judge style by its suitability for subject and audience, Jackson complains about Russell's use of Latinate words, like "prurience", in his popular books (p. 24). Yet she makes no assessment of the effect of the Latin phrases in this sentence from *Marriage and Morals*: "Let me not be told that some one has collected statistics of the number of sexual acts *per diem* (or shall we say *per noctem*?) performed in the United States...."² Jackson's charge may simply show that Russell gave greater credit to the intelligence of the common reader than she allows. Further attempts to distinguish among Russell's various styles give rise to generalizations based on equally limited samples. In practice, most of Jackson's attention is devoted to books written for a wide audience. About this choice there would be no reason for criticism, if it were clearly articulated and the works within the class studied thoroughly and judiciously.

Although Jackson assures us that her approach is "systematic", we cannot trust that description. We need to know the method used to find and to organize the various examples. Otherwise, suspicions inevitably arise that a completely random sample is being presented in order to draw debatable conclusions about his ideas and opinions. Some support might have been derived for the assumed connection between language and attitudes from Russell's remark in *An Outline of Philosophy* following an "explication" of a passage from Shakespeare: "So a man's verbal associations may afford a key to his emotional reactions, for often what connects two words in his mind is the fact that they rouse similar emotions."³ But this statement scarcely means that he would endorse all inferences drawn from an isolated analysis of diction. If I were to pretend that the frequency of their occurrence in his illustrations indicates an unwarranted and subliminal favouritism for the Waverley novels, Hamlet, Napoleon, Caesar, lying Cretans, dogs, tables and chairs, and "x" and "y", the absurdity of my complaint would be immediately apparent. To argue, as Jackson does from a few quotations, that Russell unconsciously believed in stereotyped roles for women seems hardly less odd. If anyone were so minded, the accusation itself might be either contested or supported, but the manner of reaching it here cannot be defended. The other conclusions set forth at the end of the book seldom give any better cause for encouragement.

For reasons that are completely mysterious, Jackson orders Russell's figurative language under five headings: household, travel, nature, war, and animals. While the classification creates initial bewilderment about

how animals came to be separated from the natural realm, other problems soon appear. The category called "war" differs from all the rest because, in this instance, war is the subject to which images from a variety of fields are compared. No allowance is made for all the comparisons that cannot be forced into the five categories. All that can be said in praise is that the method results in an interesting collection of quotations never before assembled in this way.

This complex tangle of difficulties reinforces the impression that the emphasis given to Russell's figurative language might be inappropriate. Although no author can ever write so austere as to avoid imagery entirely, Russell was quite capable of covering many pages without the use of any striking comparisons. He often lacked compelling motives for metaphor because he believed that at least certain kinds of writing demanded that the evocative and the unverifiable be eschewed in so far as possible. In *Marriage and Morals*, he noted: "We must therefore remember the emotionally coloured terms, and we may employ them on occasion; but we must do so sparingly, and, in the main, we must content ourselves with neutral and scientifically accurate phraseology."⁴ A great deal remains to be said about the effect of such self-imposed restrictions, the arrangement of his arguments, the cleverness of his allusions, and similar issues.

Style and Rhetoric in Bertrand Russell's Work introduces its readers to a chaotic world where "he is" can be alleged to be "a verb" (p. 43), and normal sentence order is called "subject-object-verb" (p. 52). Invented words like "rehear" (p. 191) and new categories like "metaphorical symbolism" (p. 74) attest to further confusion. Language is forced to perform in such odd ways that we are asked to "identify" with a cupboard (p. 59) and to think of a focal point as "twofold" (p. 113). Russell's indisputable statement that there are no references to H-bombs in the Bible is declared "hyperbolic" (p. 173), and words like "literal" or "logical" are sometimes employed with no less idiosyncratic definitions. Very peculiar distinctions are made when, for instance, "to my mind" is judged to be informal compared to "I think" (p. 204), or when an "intellectual appeal" is contrasted to "sound argumentation involving details and facts" (p. 188). Generalizations about imagery are just as unsettling as other remarks concerning diction. Excessive rigidity is obvious in the claim that comparisons to light and dark are appropriate only for comments about enlightenment and ignorance (p. 72). Even stranger is the assertion: "... the more specific one becomes, the more ineffective and inappropriate figurative language is, since it is suggestive

² (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), p. 231.

³ (London: Allen & Unwin, 1927), p. 201.

⁴ (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), p. 52.

of too many things at once, hindering the reader from understanding precisely what the writer wishes to communicate" (*ibid.*). By defying elementary principles of grammar and word choice, Jackson has effectively hindered communication. With annoying frequency, her infinitives split, clauses dangle, metaphors mix and numbers disagree. Her statements are often ambiguous, but they are rarely quite so misleading as this one: "Concerning the sexes, Russell's mind and interests are clearly directed far more towards the male than towards the female" (p. 221). To encounter such lapses in a book on any subject would be disconcerting, but to find writing of this sort in a study of style is alarming indeed. Though in a way that was never intended, this book demonstrates that thought and style are one.

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