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Russell's Literary Fervour: Traversing Through His Literary Contacts

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Abstract

Besides being a British thinker, mathematician, philosopher, logician, educational innovator, campaigner of peace and social critic, Bertrand Russell possessed an acute literary mindset too. While referring to his literary mind, attention to Russell's acquaintance with various philosophical as well as literary contacts deserves special mention. The present paper picks up few great litterateurs like George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, T. S. Eliot, and George Santayana with whom Russell use to be in literary contacts thereby seeks to emphasize Russell's literary fervour as being reflected through the contacts.

Keywords: Bertrand Russell, Literary Fervour, George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, T. S. Eliot, George Santayana.

Introduction

Besides being a British thinker, mathematician, philosopher, logician, educational innovator, campaigner of peace and social critic, Bertrand Russell possessed an acute literary mindset too. While referring to his literary mind, attention to Russell's acquaintance with various philosophical as well as literary contacts deserves special mention. Among such great litterateurs, the names of George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, T. S. Eliot, and George Santayana with whom Russell use to be in literary contacts are to be mentioned worthily. Hence, these literary contacts can be understood as a potential *lens* through which Russell's literary brilliance can be appreciated.

Aim of the Study

Over the years Russell's mathematical brilliance remained unparallel and hence his contribution towards analytic philosophy received well recognition. However, his literary caliber is yet to receive due recognition because Russell's non-technical spirit does not seem to have been rated properly. As such, Russell's place as a litterateur is a subject-matter for future research. The present paper, by initiating a discussion on Russell's literary contacts with five litterateurs, tries to explore fragments of the former's literary fervour.

Review of Literature

Literature regarding Russell's literary contacts with the literary geniuses is available in several texts. The present paper depends chiefly on Bertrand Russell's *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1956). Another book, i.e., philosophical autobiography of Russell, entitled *My Philosophical Development* (Routledge, London & New York, 1997) has been influential in deciphering Russell's views about his relationship with the literary giants. Alan Wood's book entitled *Bertrand Russell: The Passionate Sceptic* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957) is a significant source for carrying out the present research work. Moreover, Russell's autobiography entitled *Autobiography* (London & New York, 2008) remained crucial for the present work.

Main Article

Russell: A Stylistic Genius

From the age of sixteen or seventeen Russell took interest in poetry. He started reading Milton's poetry, most of Byron, a great of Shakespeare, Tennyson and Shelly. Russell found Shelly's *Alastor* to be the most beautiful poem that he had ever read. Admiring Shelly, Russell stated:

He [Shelly] was congenial to me not only in his merits, but also in his faults. His self-pity and atheism, alike, consoled me.[1]

The present paper, however, does not take up Russell's contacts with any of the poets mentioned above for discussion; because the paper sticks its limit to those litterateurs as mentioned in his book *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays.*

Literature is an art in itself. Command over language is an essential point to be inculcated for a prospective litterateur because it is only through the carefully chosen words strong literary impact on the readers can be expected to have implanted.

Russell's powerful grip over language is unique since his skill of *playing* with words brought about lucidity in style as well as freshness to his write ups. In the 'Introduction' to Russell's *Autobiography* Michael Foot comments:

A particular, persistent reason why Bertrand Russell had such appeal, throughout his ninety old years, especially to the young, was the trouble he took to write plain English…Was it just a gift from the gods in whom he never believed, or was it not rather a deliberate design to carry forward the tradition of inte llectual integrity in which he was reared? [2]

These words of Foot may inspire any inquisitive mind to get to know more about Russell's style of writing. In his celebrated autobiographical essay 'How I Write' Russell says that until the age of twenty one Russell wished to write more or less in the style of John Stuart Mill.[3] Mill's structure of sentences and the manner of developing a subject fascinated Russell much. But at the age of twenty he came across a different style of writing under the influence of his future brother-in-law Logan Pearsall Smith. Writes Russell:

His [Logan Pearsall Smith] most emphatic advice was that one must always rewrite. I conscientiously tried this, but found that my first draft was almost always better than my second. This discovery has saved an immense amount of time. I do not, of course, apply it to the substance, but only to the form. When I discover an error of an important kind, I rewrite the whole. What I do not find is that I can improve a sentence when I am satisfied with what it means.[4]

Russell's proclamation that a rhythmic prose must be "an intimate and involuntary expression of the personality of the reader and then only the writer's personality is worth expressing"[5] clearly suggests Russell's denouncement of one's habit of imitating others while cultivating one's own style of writing. His proposal for three simple maxims for the cultivation of good prose style runs as follows: first, 'never use a long word if a short will do.' In other words, a long word should not be used if a short word does. This Russellian proposal reminds one of his adoption of the famous principle known as Occam's razor, which is named after the medieval logician William of Ockham. The principle states that entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity. Alan Wood, one of the ablest commentators on Russell's philosophy says that the use of Occam's Razor, for Russell, is not just a kind of philosophical economy campaign.[6] In other words, Russell's adoption of the principle depicts his passion for brevity. Secondly, 'if you want to make a statement with a great many qualifications, put some of the qualifications in separate sentences.' Thirdly, 'do not let the beginning of your sentence lead the reader to an expectation which is contradicted by the end.' For writing good prose, one may adopt these maxims as rules to be set for the style of writing good prose.

Russell and George Bernard Shaw

Russell possessed an admirably witty intellect. As readers could be long captivated by his Wit[7], wit became one of the formidable features of his writings. Russell emphatically claims wit to be a strong weapon for one who knows how to *weapon* it. His recognition of wit gets reflected through the following words which he wrote in great appreciation for George Bernard Shaw:

Shaw, like many witty men, considered wit an adequate substitute for wisdom. He could defend any idea, however silly, so cleverly as to make those who did not accept it look like fools.[8]

In his *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* Russell devoted a chapter on some literary figures with whom he had occasional association. In 1896 Russell and Shaw met in an International Socialist Congress in London. The following incident, which Russell encountered with Shaw, is a clear example of the former's stylistic witty prose:

He [Shaw] was only just learning to ride a bicycle, and he ran into my machine with such force that he was hurled through the air and landed on his back twenty feet from the place of the collision. However, he got up completely unhurt and continued his ride; whereas my bicycle was smashed, and I had to return by train. It was a very slow train, and at every station Shaw with his bicycle appeared on the platform, put his head into the carriage and jeered. I suspect that he regarded the whole incident as proof of the virtues of vegetarianism.[9]

The narration of the above incident is a clear example of the magnetic readability of Russell's prose which would captivate a reader till s/he finishes reading it. Russell's *Autobiography,* which includes few significant letters which he communicated with Shaw, brings to light their reciprocal influence.

Russell and Joseph Conrad

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), a Polish-British writer and one of the greatest novelists met Russell in September 1913, through their common friend Lady Ottoline Morrell. In Russell's own words, Conrad and he were found to have influenced each other in a very 'fundamental' way. Russell traces this 'fundamental' as the reason for their being 'extra-ordinarily at one'. He says: 'We shared a certain outlook on human life and human destiny, which, from the very first, made a bond of extreme strength'.[10]

Russell discerned Conrad's capacity of noble endurance of acute suffering. Like Conrad, Russell, throughout his life, was governed by the same overwhelmingly great passion, the passion for unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.[11] Russell's acute sense of loneliness is hinted at in the poem he wrote 'To Edith'. The first few lines of the poem he wrote in the *Autobiography* read:

Through the long years
I sought peace,
I found ecstasy, I found anguish,
I found madness,
I found the solitary pain
that gnaws the heart,
But peace I did not find…

Admiring Conrad's beautiful portrayal of loneliness in *The Heart of Darkness* Russell writes:

Of all that he had written I admired most the terrible story called *The Heart of Darkness*, in which a rather weak idealist is driven mad by horror of the tropical forest and loneliness among savages. This story expresses, I think, most completely his philosophy of life. I felt, though I do not know whether he would have accepted such an image, that he thought of civilized and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava which at any moment might break and let the unwary sink into fiery depths.[12]

Russell and H. G. Wells

H.G. Wells (1866 –1946), an English writer, historian, a science-fiction novelist was another literary figure with whom Russell had social as well as personal contact. Russell first met H. G. Wells in 1902 at a small discussion society created by Sidney Webb. The earlier part of Wells' bestselling two-volume work *The Outline of History* (1920) was greatly admired by Russell. Russell can be seen to be in agreement with great many subjects of Wells. Wells, according to Russell, a great organizer of masses of material, a vivacious and amusing talker, was good in imagining mass behaviour in unusual circumstances, e.g. *The War of the Worlds* instances the fact. Wells' extensive knowledge as well as his scientific mind is greatly appreciated by Russell:

His [Wells] *Country of the Blind* is a somewhat pessimistic restatement in modern language of Plato's *allegory of the cave*. His various Utopias, though perhaps not in themselves very solid, are calculated to start trains of thought which may prove fruitful. He is always rational, and avoids various forms of superstition to which modern minds are prone. His belief in scientific method is healthful and invigorating.[13]

By comparing Wells with Plato, Russell performed a significant job, i.e., the job of identifying an insightful philosophical mind in a poet (Wells). Plato's allegory of cave is one of the often cited allegories in the history of western thought. Plato, by means of his famous allegory of cave, in the beginning of book VII of the *Republic,* illustrates his dualistic theory of reality[14].

Russell and T. S. Eliot

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), one of the twentieth century's major poets, is another litterateur who had a significant voice in Russell's dialogue with the world and its inhabitants. The close communication between these two men of letters was mentioned by Alan Wood, a biographer of Russell's life in the following words:

Sometimes Eliot read his poems aloud to Russell, and it is fair to say that Russell was one of the first to see their merits. Some ideas in them may possibly have been

suggested by the talks Russell and Eliot had together. They certainly have points of affinity with Russell's writings...[15]

The literary bonding between Russell and Eliot gets reflected through their dialogues. Eliot's celebrated poem *The Waste Land* (1922) earned him the title of spokesman for our twentieth century malaise. Eliot was renowned as *The Waste Land Poet*. Similarly Russell's *A Free Man's Worship*, *Mysticism and Logic* are laudatory creations. It is said that *A Free Man's Worship* is a lyrical outcry against "cosmic loneliness*." The Waste Land, A Free Man's Worship* and *Mysticism of Logic* exhibit unity as well as points of difference between Russell and Eliot.

Russell's creative endeavour in a new field was found to have ventured into only after 1950. It is interesting at this point to mention that Russell was awarded noble prize in Literature for his humanistic books and essays in 1950. The Nobel Prize committee declared that the prize was awarded in recognition of his [Russell] varied and significant writings in which he champions humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought. In 1953, Russell got published his first collection of short stories named *Satan in the Suburbs and Other Stories*. The title story represents in a fictional setting the interest that drew Russell and Eliot together in early years, the interest of exploring the nature of good and evil. The second collection of short stories titled *Nightmares of Eminent Persons and Other Stories* reflects Russell's use of 'nightmare' as a creative weapon for expressing his views of the contemporary society.

Russell and George Santayana

George Santayana (1863-1952), an American man of letter, philosopher, essayist, novelist, and poet met Russell for the first time on a roof in *Temple Gardens* one very warm evening in June 1893. Though Santayana spent his active life as a teacher in Harvard, Russell found him to be more important from a literary than the philosophic point of view. In spite of being critical about Santayana's position as a philosopher, Russell greatly expresses his philosophical debts to the latter. With G. E. Moore, Russell came to believe in the objectivity of good and evil. But Santayana's criticisms put in his *Winds of Doctrine* made Russell revise his early views. Santayana's *Three Philosophical Poets,* an excellent piece containing literary criticism, was greatly admired by Russell. Moreover, Russell expresses Santayana's considerable affection for England which was expressed through the latter's work *Soliloquies in England.* In the same vein, Santayana also expresses his great affection for Russell:

Even when Russell's insight is keenest, the very intensity of his vision concentrates it too much. The focus is microscopic; he sees one thing at a time with extraordinary clearness, or one strain in history or politics; and the vivid realization of that element blinds him to the rest.[16]
And

…you will never expect to agree with you in everything, but, whatever you may think of my ideas, I always feel that yours, and Moore's too, make for the sort of reconstruction in philosophy which I should welcome. It is a great bond to dislike the same things, and dislike is perhaps a deeper I ndication of our real nature than explicit, since the latter may be effects of circumstances, while dislike is a reaction against them.[17]

Conclusion

Russell's extra-ordinarily great life, characterized by vivacity and clarity of writings, became iconic for his literary admirers. Discussion about his contacts with the literary giants in the present paper reveals that his literary fervour deserves a unique place as a giant litterateur. Russell's wit, which is present also in Shaw, deserves to find a formidable room to account for in the domain of literature. Again, Russell and Conrad—both epitomize *noble endurance of acute suffering,* and the epitomic reflection is a reflection of humanistic ideals. Literature, in fact, must be capable of carrying forward humanistic ideals for the ages to come. Russell's comparison of Wells with Plato is an exhibition of an exemplary literary fervour which is coupled with philosophical bent of mind. As regards to Russell's relation with Eliot goes, Alan Wood's comment that 'sometimes Eliot read his poems aloud to Russell, and it is fair to say that Russell was one of the first to see their merits. They certainly have points of affinity with Russell's writings...' (the point is being cited in the beginning of the present paper) brings to the fore the mutual influence between the two litterateurs.

Russell's admiration of Santayana's *Three Philosophical Poets* containing literary criticism is also an indication of the close literary influence between these two giants. What these literary contacts demonstrate is not the presence of mere literary fervour in Russell—these contacts fairly provide room for recognizing Russell as an inventive litterateur.

References

1. *Russell, B. My Philosophical Development, Routledge, London & New York, 1997, p. 27*
2. *Foot, Michael, 'Introduction' in Bertrand Russell's Autobiography, London & New York, 2008.*
3. *John Stuart Mill was the godfather to Bertrand Russell.*
4. *Russell, B. Portraits from Memory and Other Essays, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1956, pp. 210-11*
5. *Russell, B. Portraits from Memory and Other Essays, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1956, p. 211*
6. *Wood, A. 'Russell's Philosophy and Its Development', in A. D. Irvine (ed.), Bertrand Russell: Critical Assessments, volume I-Life, Work and Influence, Routledge, London & New York, 1999, p.86*
7. *Wit is generally defined as natural aptitude for using words and ideas in a quick and inventive way to create humour.*
8. *Russell, B. Portraits from Memory and Other Essays, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1956, p. 78*
9. *Russell, B. Portraits from Memory and Other Essays, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1956, p. 76*
10. *Russell, B. Portraits from Memory and Other Essays, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1956, p. 87*
11. *The 'Prologue', What I Have Lived For, to his Autobiography Russell provides the clue to the understanding of his richly varied life: "Three passions simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair."*
12. *Russell, B. Portraits from Memory and Other Essays, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1956, p. 87*
13. *Russell, B. Portraits from Memory and Other Essays, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1956, p. 85*
14. *Plato, one of the great Greek philosopher was an idealist. Reality, for Plato, can be grasped only through reason. The world of sense experience is a mere appearance for Plato. Thus in Plato's philosophy two worlds appear, namely, the world of reason and the world of sense-experience. Man, for Plato, is a representative of the concept called manness. Here is Plato's famous dictum: 'Man may come and man may go, but the concept of manness remains as it is forever'.*
15. *Wood, A. Bertrand Russell: The Passionate Sceptic , London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957, p. 94*
16. *Russell, B. Portraits from Memory and Other Essays, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1956, p. 98*
17. *Russell, B. Autobiography, London & New York, 2008, p. 223*