Reviews

Hacks & thinkers

by Nicholas Griffin

Paul Johnson. *Intellectuals.* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988. Pp. x, 385. £14.95.

PAUL JOHNSON'S BOOK has exactly those characteristics which have made mainstream British journalism world famous: it is salacious, moralizing, inaccurate, and malicious. The book is a collection of eleven essays on thinkers and writers whom Johnson dislikes; they are followed by a further chapter consisting of brief notes on another seven people whom he likes no better. His main targets, to which he devotes a chapter each, are Rousseau, Shelley, Marx, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Hemingway, Brecht, Russell, Sartre, Edmund Wilson, Victor Gollancz and Lillian Hellman; the final chapter deals with Chomsky, Fassbinder, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, Ken Tynan, Cyril Connolly and George Orwell. To the last group should be added Evelyn Waugh —a man doubtfully qualified, one would have thought, for inclusion in a book under this title. Johnson himself seems to recognize the incongruity of including Waugh, but seems to think the problem will be solved by labelling him "the Anti-Intellectual" (p. 306), as if anti-intellectuals were merely a subspecies of intellectuals. At all events, Waugh is the only one of his subjects Johnson warms to (although he has some kind words to say for the reformed, post-war Orwell and Wilson).

This crew of villains is revealing. All Johnson's targets are, broadly speaking, on the left: Waugh is the only conservative in the book. Among the list of those thereby excluded—one might mention Thomas Carlyle, Herbert Spencer, Milton Friedman, Hermann Kahn, and Heidegger among pundits; Dostoevsky, Yeats, Pound, Claudel, and Céline among writers—there are egregious examples of the follies and weaknesses Johnson condemns. Further, with the exception of Lillian Hellman, Johnson's intellectuals are all men.[1] We are thus spared Johnson's opinions on George Eliot, Rosa Luxemburg, Margaret Mead, or even Ayn Rand (to stretch the title somewhat). It speaks well of the strength of the feminist movement that it scares off even a pachydermous conservative like Johnson. Finally, Johnson's intellectuals are all non-religious, with the exception of Tolstoy whose iconoclastic religiosity Johnson deplores. Thus Johnson omits Cardinal Newman, T.S. Eliot, Chesterton, Martin Buber, and (to stretch the

1 Though Dora Russell and Simone de Beauvoir make cameo appearances in their now stereotyped roles as victims of Russell and Sartre, respectively.

title still further) Malcolm Muggeridge.

The result is that Johnson's book is not like Emerson's *Representative Men*, in which the titles outline Emerson's simple-minded programme. Johnson's intellectuals are not representative, even in Emerson's wishy-washy sense, of anything except his own aversions. And yet the blurb and, indeed, occasionally Johnson himself, give the impression that these twelve chapters add up in some way to something of wider significance, perhaps even to a book. In the last chapter, for example, Johnson complains that intellectuals are apt to abandon the claims of reason and the defence of civilized values, urging people to "follow their emotions" rather than "trust their reason" (p. 333). He calls this "the flight of Reason". Yet this, though it ends the book, is hardly Johnson's general conclusion. For Russell is criticized for believing that "the ills of the world could be largely solved by logic, reason and moderation" (p. 203), and Marx is dismissed as a scholar (p. 53) and an academic (p. 56) who failed to realize that his philosophy had "nothing whatever" to do with "the politics and economics of the real world" (p. 57). Indeed, a belief in the power of "unaided intellect" is taken at the outset to define the class of intellectuals with whom Johnson purports to be concerned (p. 1).

Johnson rarely tackles the question of definition, but finds himself forced to when dealing with Orwell and Wilson. Both are thinkers for whom he has some occasional sympathy. The question therefore arises as to whether they are rightly to be called intellectuals at all. Wilson, he thinks, was originally an intellectual but ceased to be one because he was interested in people (p. 258); he became a "man of letters" instead (p. 263). For Orwell the verdict is less kind, though Johnson concedes that had he lived longer he might have turned out well. Johnson's grounds for including Orwell are interesting: "he believed, at any rate when young, that the world could be reshaped by the power of intellect" (p. 307) and, since he "never wholly abandoned" this belief, "he remained an intellectual" (p. 309).

But this cannot be taken seriously as Johnson's definition of an intellectual. For one thing, contrary to appearances, it is a belief which, on occasion, he subscribes to himself. For example, Cyril Connolly, in a single editorial in his magazine *Horizon* (June 1946), is said to have "laid the egg of permissiveness in rather the same way that Erasmus laid the egg of the Reformation" (p. 318), thereby setting in train "changes affecting almost every aspect of social, cultural and sexual life" (p. 317). I had no idea he was such an important and valuable thinker. Nor is Connolly an isolated example in Johnson's view: there is a clear implication that Mailer's essay *The White Negro* (1957) was largely responsible for the youth revolt of the 1960s and that Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) led to riots in America's urban ghettoes. On a larger scale, "social engineering", "the creation of millenarian intellectuals", is held to have "killed scores of millions of innocent people" (p. 340). The power of ideas would seem to be no mean thing. Moreover, if the defining feature of an intellectual for Johnson is the belief that the world can be changed by the force of ideas alone, it is hard to see why he should have included Marx among his targets. For it was a characteristic belief of Marx's that the world could not be reshaped by the power of intellect alone, but by changes in the forces of production.

The blurb, by contrast, suggests that Johnson's book asks the questions: By what right do intellectuals presume to give their advice on practical matters? and How good are their credentials? It is not clear to me whether Johnson is opposed to any individuals holding opinions or only to intellectuals holding them or merely to intellectuals making public the opinions they do hold. At all events, there is something odd about a book advising people not to listen to the advice of intellectuals. It is not, I hasten to add, paradoxical advice, for Johnson would hardly count as an intellectual even on the most generous definition of the term. Rather, we are advised to ignore the advice of the intelligent and well informed by someone who is evidently neither. What is odd is that we should be expected to heed the meta-advice.

Johnson uses the two questions, not so much to tie his denunciations together, but as an excuse for his methodology, such as it is. In deciding whether the advice of intellectuals is to be heeded one should apparently pay attention, not to the advice itself, but to the character of the person giving it as revealed, in particular, by their sexual relations and attitudes to money. Johnson by no means restricts himself to these areas, however. Indeed, it seems that just about anything will do as grist to his mill. Several authors didn't wash frequently enough for Johnson's liking and most of them were ugly and didn't dress well and drank too much.

Johnson's book, in short, does little to live up to its pretensions: nothing, in the end, will hold this collection of prurient stories and moralizing together. Nonetheless, it might survive as a collection of lightweight, jaundiced biographical essays if only Johnson were capable of getting his facts straight. In this regard, his essay on Russell will have to serve as our main example—though his treatment of Sartre is certainly no better.

To begin with, it is clear that Johnson has little familiarity with any genre of Russell's writings. We are told that Russell "never believed that the populace could or should be encouraged to penetrate the frontiers of knowledge ... he was a high priest of the intellect, forbidding outsiders to penetrate the arcana" (p. 199). In this, amazingly enough, he is contrasted unfavourably with G.E. Moore! On the same page, however, Johnson concedes that Russell was "a gifted expositor"—citing his book on Leibniz as an example. (Evidently Johnson's knowledge of the book runs to its title, but not beyond.) Johnson doesn't pause to ask himself why someone who believed "the populace" should be forbidden to penetrate the frontiers of knowledge, should bother to write expository books for them. Nor did Russell draw a sharp distinction between his philosophical research (the arcana) and works of popular exposition. *Human Knowledge*, he tells us in the Preface, is "addressed not only or primarily to professional philosophers but to that much larger public which is interested in philosophical questions." Johnson is not unaware of *Human Knowledge*. He is happy to cite[2] Norman Malcolm's superficial dismissal of it (p. 200). It's just that he has not got as far as the first line of the Preface. Nor can Johnson defend his charges on the ground that for Russell the arcanum was mathematical logic, for there too Russell offered a popular account in *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*.

Johnson's fabrication about Russell's "hieratic" view of philosophy (p. 199) is designed to serve another purpose, more subtly insinuated. Johnson, after all, does not

2 Second-hand from Rupert Crawshay-Williams, *Russell Remembered* (London: Oxford U.P.), p. 46n.

care two hoots about the populace "penetrating the frontiers" of philosophic knowledge: had he done so he would have taken more pains to explain the ideas of the thinkers he attacks. What Johnson is concerned about is the influence these thinkers have on the populace. Since Johnson is unable or unwilling to combat this influence on intellectual grounds he tries to do so by showing that the thinkers are out of touch with reality, immured in their ivory towers, ignorant of human life, barely functioning as human beings themselves. In Russell's case, Johnson's efforts amount to a sustained attempt at character assassination based, in almost every particular, upon a falsification or other abuse of documentary evidence.

At times, the results are merely baffling and amusing, as when Johnson talks of Russell's "love of the abstract intellect and his suspicion of the bodily motions" (*sic*, p. 199). Elsewhere, they are infuriating. Russell, we are told, never "acquired extensive experience of the lives most people lead" (p. 198). The only evidence Johnson cites for this is the isolation of Russell's upbringing in Pembroke Lodge, as if he had had no opportunity for correcting it in the remaining seventy years of his life.[3]

As part of the same general charge, Johnson asserts "no one was more detached from physical reality than Russell. He could not work the simplest mechanical device or perform any of the routine tasks which even the most pampered man does without thinking. He loved tea but could not make it" (p. 202). Now it is true that, even by debased middle-class standards, Russell was not a physically practical man.[4] Yet there is plenty of evidence that he could make tea. The story to the contrary, as Johnson has it, is that on one occasion Russell's third wife Peter had to be away at tea time. Despite the fact that she left exaggeratedly detailed, written instructions for making tea, Russell "failed dismally" to carry out the operation and she arrived home to find Russell miserable and the tea unmade (p. 202). The provenance of this tale, we are told, is Crawshay-Williams in *Russell Remembered*, p. 41. But the reference is wrong. Moreover, index references to Peter also fail to locate the story. In fact, the story turns up on p. 33 and has undergone some modification in Johnson's hands. It was not Peter who was away, but the Crawshay-Williamses, leaving Russell alone at their home. Moreover, the implication from Crawshay-Williams account is that Russell did not attempt to make tea. The change of locale from Russell's home to the Crawshay-Williamses' is important and readily suggests a different explanation: Russell would likely not feel comfortable using someone else's kitchen, even when invited. I don't know whether this was part of the Victorian social code, but I knew people of roughly Russell's generation who had the same reluctance.

Another incident is also falsified from Crawshay-Williams, this time in order to insinuate that Russell was avaricious. The financial results of his writing, we are told, "were recorded in a little notebook, in which he listed the fees he had received for

3 The injustice of Johnson's remark is even more evident when compared with his treatment of one of his heroes, Evelyn Waugh, against whom the same charge could be laid with far greater justice. But Waugh, Johnson protests, "was an inveterate traveller" who "had seen a great deal of men and events" (p. 311): a fair description of Russell, one would have thought.

4 He was, however, extremely practical in managing what might be termed the social machinery of life—travel arrangements and the like.

everything he had published or broadcast in the whole of his life" (p. 198). Since Johnson has already noted the vast extent of Russell's writing, a moment's reflection would have convinced him that "a little notebook" would hardly be adequate for this purpose. The fact is that Russell, at various times in his life, did keep a record of his earnings in various little notebooks.[5] This fact is hardly surprising since Russell was self-employed, had no agent, and was responsible for paying his taxes. I assume that Johnson himself keeps a record of his earnings or employs an agent to do it for him. If not, I would commend his affairs to the attention of the British tax authorities. (Johnson, incidentally, is very much concerned by the attitude of his intellectuals to money. Sartre, unlike Russell, kept no little notebook and gave money away lavishly, with the result that he had serious tax problems. Johnson admits the generosity but calls it "irresponsible" [p. 250].)

What is worse than Johnson's trivial falsification of the story is the use to which he puts it. He snidely insinuates that Russell was primarily concerned about making money. The fact is that Russell was exceptionally generous where money was concerned. As a young man, when he lived off inherited money the range of his benefactions was astonishing. He gave, or lent, money repeatedly and over a period of years to virtually all of Alys's relations living in England and to many of her friends. He supported the Whiteheads during the writing of *Principia Mathematica*, despite the fact that they lived in much grander style than he did. Many of the children of his and Alys's friends were educated at his expense. In addition, the LSE, Newnham College and the University of Cambridge received very large donations from him. It is not surprising, therefore, that by the time *Principia* was finished so was his capital and he was dependent upon earning his living. This restricted, but did not stop, his generosity.

In the case of the notebook, one cannot infer simply from the account in Crawshay-Williams that what Johnson says is false; in the case of the tea, one can. Is it a coincidence that in the first case we are given the correct page number, and in the second we are not? One might think not, yet given the sloppiness of the entire book, one wonders if Johnson is capable of the attention to detail that such systematic falsification would require.[6] The first three citations in the piece on Sartre, e.g., all contain mistakes, though Johnson can hardly be accused of extracting ideological mileage out of the sort of carelessness involved there. Nor, for example, when he says that T.S. Eliot was Russell's pupil at Cambridge (p. 215): a confusion of Cambridge, Mass. with Cambridge, England. And we can only be amused when Johnson tells us that Russell got into Cambridge (England) with the help of "an army of crammers" (p. 199)! And one's jaw drops in blank incredulity when we're told "Russell's attention-span was brief" (p. 211). Anyone who believes *that* should be made to count the theorems in *Principia Mathematica*.

But when Johnson says Russell thought it "scandalous that inferior men like Ed-

5 Crawshay-Williams refers to one, *Russell Remembered*, p. 122.

6 The most charitable explanation of Johnson's inaccuracy would seem to be that his reading was done for him by a research assistant whose handwriting he couldn't read. At all events some translucent veil seems to have intruded between Johnson and the printed page, making it impossible for him to read, understand or even copy what was before him.

dington and Whitehead" should have got the OM before he did (p. 224), a more sinister purpose is afoot. The information (no reference given this time) is again from Crawshay-Williams (p. 55). In Johnson's transmutation Russell's irony is lost, the words "scandalous" and "inferior" are added, and the fact that the names of Eddington and Whitehead were apparently supplied by Crawshay-Williams is passed over without mention. Johnson is not, however, limited to the distortion of texts. He can also invent them, covering his tracks well in the process. He does not like Russell's *obiter dicta* and cites as an example: "The scientific attitude to life can scarcely be learned from women" (p. 212). The source for this remark is given as "*Manners and Morals* (London, 1929)". No page number is given and there is no book of that title by Russell. One suspects that *Marriage and Morals* is intended, but the remark does not appear there either. Johnson gives four other examples of Russell's *obiter dicta*: one is not where Johnson says it is (nor anywhere else for all I can tell); two are Johnson's own fabrications from words and phrases supplied by Russell (neither preserves Russell's meaning). Only one is accurate—"A gentleman is a man whose grandfather had more than £1,000 a year"—and that is not bad for an off-the-cuff definition on the *Brains Trust* in 1946.

This catalogue of distortions could be continued at length, and would embrace all the main themes of Johnson's piece on Russell and most of the details. Lighter scrutiny revealed much similar garbage in the piece on Sartre. Finding a book on intellectuals written by Johnson is as unlikely as finding that Dracula had written a garlic cookbook. After this astonishing performance, one wonders what Weidenfeld and Nicolson's next list will offer: the Ayatollah Khomeini on the modern English novel or Margaret Thatcher on civilization?

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