

Sam Lumen: Russell's fictive voice?

by Sheila Turcon

Harvey Swados. *Celebration*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974. Pp. 348.
Paperback: New York: Dell, 1976. US\$1.95.

THIS NOVEL, PUBLISHED two years after the death of the American author, educator, and social critic, Harvey Swados, is supposed to be based, in part,

on characters who resemble Bertrand Russell and Ralph Schoenman.¹ Alan M. Wald in his *The New York Intellectuals* states that Swados "seems to have based the manipulative relationship between [Sam] Lumen and Rog [Girard] ... on the gossip in liberal circles that Bertrand Russell in the 1960s was manipulated by his young leftist aide, Ralph Schoenman."² The dust-jacket blurb of *Celebration* refers to Lumen as "a sort of American Bertrand Russell".

The novel is set in the summer of 1975 with Lumen's 90th birthday approaching. Pending honours include a TV special on his life, the naming of a national children's centre after him, and a meeting with the President. Its form is a series of diary entries by Lumen. From them we learn that Lumen has been married ten years to his third wife, Jenny (a beautiful photographer), who is approximately 50 years younger than he. His career has encompassed journalism, agitation, and education. Born in Italy to an American expatriate painter and his much younger Swedish-Russian wife, he came to America as a young child. He married his first wife, a Russian Jewess, Luba, who was pregnant (but opposed to marriage) in 1912. They had a daughter Sophia who died during the First World War while Lumen was in prison for opposing the war. Sam and Luba divorced in 1919. His second wife, Hester, was young, beautiful, rich and insane. While married to her, he founded and ran an experimental school. Sam and Hester had a son, Philip, who was educated at the school, and died during World War II. While running the school, Lumen had many affairs but none of a lasting, emotional nature. Readers familiar with Russell's life story will recognize some familiar echoes as well as many discordant notes in Lumen's life.

Characters in the book besides Rog Girard, his secretary, are Larry Brodie, a former student at the school and friend of Philip's, now a White House advisor; Walter and Lily Honing, old friends and neighbours; Seth Fox, Philip's (or quite possibly Sam's) son, and his girlfriend Susan; the Children of Liberty, a radical protest group; Dick Wells, the TV interviewer, and Gabriel Gibbons, his producer.

Conflict arises over whether Lumen should at last become respectable and accept the honours offered, or support the Children of Liberty (who are associated with Seth) in their quest for a new society and perhaps engage in civil disobedience with them. Thus the conflict between Lumen and Girard is different than any possible conflict between Russell and Schoenman. Russell had already garnered high honours (the Nobel prize, the Order of Merit) before Schoenman entered his life. And Russell did engage in civil disobedience in his nineties without any fear of endangering his status. Rog Girard never

emerges as a fully developed character. We know little of his background or motivation apart from the fact that he had a "career in the peace movement" (p. 30). He has been employed relatively recently as Lumen's secretary mainly to protect him (p. 134). Other characters see Girard as "power-hungry, using [Lumen] to satisfy his own political appetites" (p. 30). Yet Lumen regards him as "My falcon secretary ... [who] sees better than most" (p. 14). There is no doubt that Girard is doing some writing for Lumen, as demonstrated in the remarks "the answer he'd composed for me [Lumen]" (p. 91); and "signing [Sam's] name to things" (p. 117). Girard issues a press statement on Lumen's behalf regarding the Children of Liberty. Walter Honing (Clough Williams-Ellis?, Rupert Crawshay-Williams?, Michael Burn?) accuses Girard of exceeding his authority (p. 204). When Lumen questions Girard about the statement, Lumen notes "... some of the cynics are claiming that you're the author of my late works, my sharp letters, my radical statements, aren't they?" (p. 207). Later in the book Girard writes an article for Lumen, and Lumen quips, "I'm not sure about all that wittiness, but I suppose you know best, you speak for me better than I do myself" (p. 257). The issue of Girard writing for Lumen seems to hit closest to home; there can be little doubt that Schoenman and others (including Russell's wife Edith) did draft material for Russell in his old age.

Although a reader could see something of Russell's dark side in Lumen's character, for example "The cruelest thing about me is the pleasure I take from being cruel—sometimes even from thinking about how I am going to be cruel" (Lumen, p. 309; cf. "I often wish to give pain, and when I do, I find it pleasant for the moment", Russell, "Self-Appreciation", *Collected Papers*, 1: 73), I do not find Lumen a convincing portrayal of Russell.

Lumen is confused at the end of his life and feels alienated from his wife, family, friends and secretary and divorced from his life's work. He seems to care little for others or humanity in general. He finally sees a solution in running away from everyone to stay in a home for Indian children in Minnesota. This plan is foiled, and the book ends with Lumen's relationship to all of the main characters unresolved. He had earlier refused Girard's offer of resignation. What remains is only his realization that posterity will take care of itself.

Russell, on the other hand, was connected to his life's work until the end, happy with his wife, family and friends. The only conflict we know of was with his secretary who left his employ while Russell was still alive. Russell obtained from him the understanding that "he should not speak either as [Russell's] secretary or his representative except on such occasions as ... specifically agreed that he should do so."³

The fictional characterization of Sam Lumen is thinly realized, and ulti-

¹ Russell has appeared in various literary guises in the works of T.S. Eliot, Gilbert Cannan, Aldous Huxley, D.H. Lawrence and Siegfried Sassoon. Unlike these authors, Swados did not know Russell. For a listing of articles (chiefly by S.P. Rosenbaum) which discuss the fictive treatment of Russell, see fn. 3 of Margaret Moran's "Bertrand Russell's Early Approaches to Literature", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 54 (1984): 74.

² Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987, p. 342. Wald footnotes the controversy, hitherto unknown to Russell scholars, between Irving Howe and Schoenman in *New Politics*, 9, nos. 1 and 2 (1970, published 1971): 94-7 and 96-8, respectively.

³ From "Private Memorandum concerning Ralph Schoenman" in Ronald Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Jonathan Cape and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 648.

mately unconvincing. It holds little interest for readers desiring illumination of Russell's multifaceted character.

The Bertrand Russell Archives
