Genius in retrospection

by Margaret Moran

A. O. J. Cockshut. *The Art of Autobiography in 19th and 20th Century England.* New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1984. Pp. x, 222. C$27.40.

IN "ON HISTORY", Russell argued amusingly about the need for the study of documents in that discipline: "And a history written after the event can hardly make us realize that the actors were ignorant of the future; it is difficult to believe that the late Romans did not know that their empire was about to fall, or Charles I was unaware of so notorious a fact as his own execution."[1] When it came to the understanding of his own life, he anticipated comparable constraints. After his publisher, Stanley Unwin, proposed in 1930 that his next undertaking might be his autobiography, Russell demurred, though he soon embarked on the project: "I have a certain hesitation in starting my biography too soon for fear of something important having not yet happened. Suppose I should end my days as President of Mexico; the biography would seem incomplete if it did not mention this fact."[2] Eventually, Russell solved the challenge of creating a sense of immediacy by including a large quantity of material that had been written to the moment. Extracts from his journals and representative selections from his private correspondence provide an indication of the uncertainties and the fluctuations in the life as it was lived, without the softening effect that comes from a long passage of time. These letters and journals also help to compensate for the "emotional unreliability of memory", as Russell termed it.[3] Gradually, he satisfied his desire to tell virtually his whole story by making minor revisions and vast additions to the draft he had written in 1931 and by delaying publication until the three volumes appeared year by year late in the 'sixties. While this prolonged process of composition had undeniable advantages, it led to unavoidable variations in style and approach. The document produced in 1931, "My First Fifty Years", formed the basis

[1] *Philosophical Essays*, new ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 61.
[2] Quoted by Ronald W. Clark in *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Jonathan Cape and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 451.
[3] *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 3 vols. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967–69), II: 97.

of Volume I and a substantial part of Volume II. And it set a standard of excellence that could not be maintained in some later portions composed in extreme old age.

Notwithstanding the decline in quality of Volume III, Russell's *Autobiography* figures as the prize exhibit, "one of the finest and most satisfying of this century" (p. 135), in A. O. J. Cockshut's *The Art of Autobiography*. Since Russell's work is one among fifty discussed or mentioned by Cockshut, detailed study could not be given exclusively to it. Cockshut requires a large sample to further his argument that autobiographies must be accepted as rich and diversified, like the lives they record. Respecting the uniqueness of each self-portrait, Cockshut insists on the resistance of this genre to the formulation of theories which other literary forms might more readily allow. He begins by imposing some limits on the subject through a consideration of authors whom he judges to have lacked a sufficiently powerful sense of their own development to qualify as authentic autobiographers. Then, the longest section of the book treats the importance of childhood for writers ranging from Edwin Muir to Augustus Hare and from John Ruskin to Stephen Spender. Russell finds himself accompanied by Beatrice Webb and H. G. Wells in a chapter titled "Defined by the World". There follows "The Quest", a section devoted to writers, like DeQuincey and John Cowper Powys, who were idiosyncratic enough to imagine their inner search impervious to external measurement. Cockshut's own religious convictions come clearly into focus in the penultimate chapter. Called "Conversion", it analyzes Newman, Ronald Knox, Dom Bede Griffiths and others. But since the concern with autobiography rather than theology always predominates, Cockshut's Catholicism presents no impediments to his carefully judged appreciation of the writings of a person as heretical as Bertrand Russell. Cockshut's pleasure in Russell's *Autobiography* itself does not, of course, require a wholehearted commendation of the life behind it, as his references to the perspectives of Russell's second wife and daughter[4] amply demonstrate.

Admittedly, Cockshut's discussion of Russell may give rise to a few quibbles. The implication that Russell was rich (p. 116) overlooks the economic insecurity that he suffered over extended periods. The claim that his passions were "uncontrollable" (*ibid.*) is an exaggeration that

[4] Cockshut seems unduly severe in his criticism that Katharine Tait's *My Father Bertrand Russell* betrays a limited capacity for self-knowledge (p. 114). Since, as the title indicates, Tait's book combines biography with autobiography, it should be evaluated by special standards.

overcorrects the outmoded stereotype of the bloodless logician. Similarly, the allegation that his daughter was subjected to a "bewildering series of stepmothers" (p. 115) must be read as hyperbole. And the description of him as "an heir, before he left the nursery, to an earldom" (p. 137) glosses over the fact that he was then only third in line to that title. Yet, my voicing of such trivial complaints seems no more than an exercise in pedantry against a commentator characterized by humanity, erudition and eloquence.

Cockshut wisely regards Russell as one of those who "found themselves engaged in public arguments, in causes, in rhetorical outbursts, which led them gradually to a deeper and more exact sense of what they really were" (p. 120). The notion of writing an autobiography dawned on Bertrand Russell as early as 1901, when he dictated his reflections to his wife.[5] Eleven years later, he attempted a "spiritual autobiography" through the use of a pseudonym. Neither of these documents has apparently survived, although some parts of the second were incorporated into "The Perplexities of John Forstice". These early impulses to self-disclosure do nothing to undermine Cockshut's view that Russell must be numbered among those who grew increasingly to feel the need to define themselves through the reaction of the world. Long before Russell became a public personage, he foresaw his importance well enough to wish to describe himself. But the desire did not become so strong as to overcome deterrents, like accusations of egotism, until his name had become a household word. When he began again in 1931 to tell his own story, he fully expected that posthumous publication would prove necessary. But by then the exercise had come to seem so essential that concerns about immediate glory or notoriety could carry no weight. In its inception, Russell's *Autobiography* was addressed exclusively to posterity.

Cockshut praises Russell's *Autobiography* as "one of the few which, while following the wandering, unpredictable course of experience, does justice to a grand and simple idea" (p. 135). The fundamental disparity Russell perceived between truth and emotion forms the governing theme, an opposition which Cockshut finds revealed both consciously and unintentionally. In only ten pages, he conveys admirably Russell's tendency to juxtapose passages of intimate disclosure with amusing anecdotes, or lyrical descriptions of unattainable longings with detached, and even cynical, observations. "He is offering us, as it

[5] See his letter to Helen Thomas, 3 July 1901 (American Philosophical Society, copy in RA).

were, the heart of Shelley, the brain of Newton and the irony of Gibbon; and he will go on ringing the changes so that we are never able to mistake one aspect for the whole" (p. 139).

Russell's skill in anticipating his readers' reactions and in transmuting, by various other means, raw experience into art earns Cockshut's appreciation. Without being sentimental or self-pitying, Russell portrayed his acute vulnerability to suffering. Yet if he could make merciless sketches of others, he could also be equally harsh with himself. But Cockshut's recognition of the control required to evoke the multidimensional response Russell elicits does not interfere with alertness to the uncalculated moments of exposure. The argument that the *Autobiography* is an artistic achievement cannot, therefore, be misconstrued to make it the result of an entirely artful performance. It is Russell's single most important contribution to literature because he took advantage of the unique opportunity to present the one protagonist who could fully capture his imagination. Cockshut sees Russell's *Autobiography* rightly as an intricate combination of confession, justification and discovery. The insights of Cockshut's book, valuable and impressive though they are in themselves, will also have the virtue of exciting other analyses of this complex self-portrait.

The Bertrand Russell Editorial Project, and
Department of English
McMaster University