

How Russell Wrote

In his eighties Russell wrote twice on the subject of "How I Write". One essay is reprinted in *Portraits from Memory*. The other, in *The Writer* (14: Sept. 1954, 4-5), is not substantially different. But from time to time, in obscurer sources, one comes upon passages that augment what is commonly known. For example, in a letter to Gilbert Murray, dated 9 November 1911, Russell complains that the printers of *The Problems of Philosophy*

...have altered my paragraphing in printing. In some cases it didn't seem to matter much, but in others it destroyed the style. I generally put quite a different sort of sentence at the end of a paragraph from any that I should put in the middle - I make the ones in the middle obviously incomplete. I hope Perris [the house editor] or whoever it is won't insist.

Thus we learn how Russell regarded both the construction of paragraphs and interference by house editors. Concerning the formation of his style, and especially the influences of which he was conscious, there is no better source than a letter written in 1925 in response to an academic questionnaire. The letter was published, but not completely, in a book which, however widespread its use in the decade following publication, has been out of print for many years, and which has never been listed in any bibliography of Russell's writings. The book is *Modern Writers at Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), compiled by Josephine K. Piercy. It contains many other good things besides Russell's letter. Professor Piercy has kindly allowed us to reprint the letter *in toto* from the original held in the Manuscripts Department, Lilly Library, Indiana University. The letter follows. - K.B.

CARN VOEL, Porthcurno, Penzance.

6 August 1925.

Dear Madam

I feel highly honoured that you should think my writing worthy of such an inquiry as you have addressed to me, and I will do my best to reply. But I am afraid that the methods by which I learnt whatever I know of English composition are hardly capable of being applied in a systematic manner.

I spent my youth in a cultivated old-fashioned atmosphere: Shakespeare and Scott were read to me till I was about 12, and after that I had to read them out loud. Poets such as Cowper were still admired, and I read the whole of his *Task* aloud. Shelley and Keats I discovered for myself at the age of 16, and from then until I was 21 I read English poetry constantly, and learnt a great deal by heart. Most of my time, until I went to Cambridge, was spent alone in my grandfather's library. There I read Gibbon, Mill, Swift, Goethe,

Heine, Racine, Corneille (I had been taught French and German in infancy); I taught myself Italian, and read Dante and Machiavelli - all before the age of 18. Milton's prose influenced me greatly. After 21, I was influenced by those who admired Flaubert and Walter Pater - the artistic gods of that period. But my natural taste in style, as regards prose, was always seventeenth century. I liked such men as Jeremy Taylor and Isaak Walton, and of course Sir Thomas Browne. You will see the seventeenth century influences in my "Free Man's Worship", written in 1902. From the practice of reading aloud, I became sensitive to prose rhythms; I believe this practice to be invaluable for forming style. Gradually, as a result of a complex development, I have come to prefer the eighteenth century to the seventeenth; but it is still the early eighteenth century that I like best - Swift, and (in his way) Defoe. From the age of about 16 onwards, I formed the habit, in thought, of turning a sentence over and over in my mind, until I had a combination of brevity, clarity, and rhythm. I would do this with every idea that came into my head. Brevity, especially, I always greatly desired. I wrote very carefully, with many corrections, until I had passed the age of 30, i.e. down to and including the year 1902. After that, I felt that my style was formed, for good or evil. I now hardly ever make any corrections in a MS, beyond altering a word where there is an unintentional repetition. I think over a book before beginning to write, and when I begin the real work is finished. Of course I always compose each sentence fully in my head before beginning to write it out.

As to what I think best in my own writing, "The Free Man's Worship" is the best in one style, but it is a style which I have deliberately abandoned as too rhetorical. *Why Men Fight* (as it is called, without my consent, in America) is, I suppose, the best example of my newer style, though it still has echoes of the old manner, for instance the passage about thought near the end of the chapter on Education. I still think this passage rather good. I wrote it after being stuck for an hour, and sitting all that time before a blank page. I think also that there is a rather good bit of writing at the beginning of my book *The Problem of China*. It is the end of the first chapter, beginning "It was on the Volga in 1920", or something like that.

No one can doubt the importance of style who has ever had to explain difficult ideas or make propaganda for unpopular opinions. In France, this is generally recognized, with the result that French mathematical books, for instance, are vastly more intelligible than books of equal profundity written by Englishmen or Germans. Style consists, fundamentally, not in ornament, but in following the

reader's natural development - his breathing, as regards rhythm; his thoughts, as regards ideas. To ignore style is to make of life a succession of jolts and jars, a football scrimmage instead of a dance.

As for reading, prose style can only be formed by reading good prose, but for modern use it should not be too ornate. Jeremy Taylor may still be read, but hardly Milton's prose or Sir T. Browne. Swift is admirable; Lamb is good, but a trifle affected, owing to his passion for the seventeenth century. The Book of Common Prayer is perfect in its way - better even than the Authorised Version. Shakespeare's prose - for instance "what a piece of work is Man, etc." - is perfect. I think some really good things should be learnt by heart. My experience was, when I was younger, that one unconsciously reproduced the rhythms of what one was reading.

I hope this more or less meets your requirements.

Yours sincerely

Bertrand Russell.