Bertrand Russell would imprison all writers of first books

The following interview, conducted by Louise Morgan, was first published in Everyman, *20 November 1930. The title is the original one. At one place in the original the word "stunt" was obviously a misprint for "stint", and has been corrected. The footnotes are new.*

"I think all writers of first novels should be given six months in jail," said Bertrand Russell. Then, as if the charm of his ironical proposal grew on him, he added, "The sentence might be extended to all writers whatsoever. If a law were passed giving six months in jail to every writer of a first book, only the good ones would think it worth their while to do it."

This flash of wit came out of a discussion of contemporary novelists. Mr. Russell reads a great many novels, and practically all the detective stories that are published. But he thinks they are rather a poor lot. I asked him whether there are any young writers he enjoys reading.

"Lionel Britton has written a remarkable book--*Hunger and Love*.[1] I like Aldous Huxley. It's the fashion to decry Huxley just now, but I think he's very good."

"Do you like American writers?" I asked.

"I like Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*. At present I am reading a big novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, Thomas Woolfe's book. I'm not altogether sure how good it is, but it impresses me. Ernest Hemingway I like for his style--not so much for his matter."

Perhaps Mr. Russell's lack of enthusiasm about the mass of contemporary novels is a reflection of his feeling about the younger generation. He spoke of re-reading André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, and wondering about the young people there revealed.

"They seem to me to be different--very different--from the young people of two or three generations ago," he said.

"Worse or better?" I was ill-enough inspired to ask.

"Different," he replied with a significant emphasis, but taking the sharpness out of his dissent with a quizzical smile. "Why always the ethical implication?"

"You think we can get away from the ethical implication?"

"One ought to practise getting away from it in one's bath! Things may be just different, not necessarily better or worse."

"In what then do you think the present generation is *different*?"

[1] London: Putnam; New York: Harper, 1931. *Hunger and Love* is a very unusual book, not least because it is one of the two novels for which Russell wrote an Introduction.

"In such things as not keeping promises, opening other people's letters, and telling what I call professional lies, and so on. All the dull workaday virtues which are so fundamentally important in a broad social sense seem to be ignored by young people to-day. In my youth we took it for granted that one observed these virtues."

"What do you mean by a professional lie?"

"Telling a lie to a child, if you are a teacher. I wouldn't tell a lie to a child even if it were very desirable. The child trusts me. Therefore I couldn't lie to him. I could tell a lie to a jealous woman because she doesn't trust me. But I couldn't tell a lie to a child who looks to me as the fountain of all knowledge. My only fanatical morality is not telling lies and still more not thinking lies."

His feeling for children and all that has to do with children is extraordinarily sure and profound. It is fascinating to see him among the children of his school on the Sussex downs. Two of them are his own, a boy of eight and a girl of six. The others range from three to nine years. As soon as he appears, one or another makes a dash at him, to ask him a question, to play a game with him, or just to trot along beside him. His patience and gentleness with them, his ability to join in their feeling of the moment, is nothing short of a miracle in a man who has spent the greater part of his life in abstract thinking.

We sat in his study, which is a square turret with huge windows on all sides. From every window one has a magnificent view of wood and down, and from two of the sea. He loves the sea and could not live away from it for any considerable time. He spends all his spare time at his house near Land's End, Cornwall. His first memories of the sea are associated with the Isle of Thanet, where his grandfather took the Archbishop of Canterbury's house for a season. He says he may end his days on an island in Connemara, in the extreme west. One could hardly get closer to the sea than that.

A cry and several shouts came from below, deadened by two floors, but still distinct enough to announce at least one infant in distress. I asked him whether he can work at the school even in his isolated eyrie.

"I go to London two days a week, and work there. I don't mind noise if I'm not responsible for it. I can manage a barrel organ, or anything. Here, of course, I feel responsible, and the sound of a child falling downstairs does keep me from work. Besides, I can get a stenographer easily in London."

"Do you mean you dictate?"

"I have hardly touched a pen since the School started, rather more than three years ago. I dictate at full speed, just as fast as the stenographer can go. I never revise a word. I'm not doing any really creative

work nowadays. I'm too old now. No good work is done after forty, or perhaps I should say thirty-five. I believe that experience of life and knowledge of men is inimical to the intellect. Human experience rubs down the edge of the mind. It should be as hard as a diamond. But the more you use it to cut through ordinary life the more blunt it becomes."

"You seriously believe this? What of the novelists and poets who have done some of their greatest creative work after forty?"

"I don't know about novelists and poets, I am thinking of mathematicians and philosophers in particular."

"You didn't dictate your *Principia Mathematica*!"

"No. I wrote that in collaboration with Professor Whitehead. We each used to write a part and send it to the other. In this way each part was written at least three times. I don't mean revised. I've never been any good at detailed revision. I sometimes keep a thing by me for a year, and then write it all over again. The meticulous process of polishing has never had any charm for me, though in my youth I was urged to employ it by people who recommended Pater to me as an example."

"Did you follow their advice?"

"I didn't really like Pater, but I was young, and people I respected said I ought to, that he was a great stylist. When I was quite young I didn't think about style, and then when I was twenty-one I got into a cultured set which was reading Flaubert and Pater. There were a great many different groups in the nineties, though to hear people talk to-day you would think nobody lived in the nineties but Oscar Wilde. I suppose I did allow Pater to influence my early style."

"How has your style changed?"

"I haven't thought much about it. Let's see."

He took down from the shelves his second work, *Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* (1897), and read a bit from the beginning. It was rhetorically impressive, full of balance, figures, and the other devices of the conscious stylist. This is part of the paragraph he read from:

> Geometry, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, remained, in the war against empiricism, an impregnable fortress of the idealists. Those who held--as was generally held on the Continent --that certain knowledge, independent of experience, was possible about the real world, had only to point to Geometry: none but a madman, they said, would throw doubt on its validity, and none but a fool would deny its objective reference.

"I wrote differently then," he said, and took down *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916). "Here I was in a transition stage. For the most part I was writing simply and directly, but there were moments when I wanted to write grandly. I know the purple patches in this book.

I usually ended chapters with a purple patch. Take this, for instance:[2]

> Devotion to the nation is perhaps the deepest and most widespread religion of the present age. Like the ancient religions, it demands its persecutions, its holocausts, its lurid heroic cruelties; like them, it is noble, primitive, brutal, and mad. Now, as in the past, religion, lagging behind private consciences through the weight of tradition, steels the hearts of men against mercy and their minds against truth. If the world is to be saved, men must learn to be noble without being cruel, to be filled with faith and yet open to truth, to be inspired by great purposes without hating those who try to thwart them. But before this can happen, men must first face the terrible realization that the gods before whom they have bowed down were false gods and the sacrifices they have made were vain.

"What caused the change in your style?"

"What changed me was the War. I grew to dislike pomposity of all sorts. To me it was associated with humbug."

"Could you give me an example of your present style?"

He found *Marriage and Morals* (1929) and read a passage from it offhand. There one got the same impression of emotional impact as in *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, but in a much more direct, unselfconscious style. It would be an excellent lesson in writing for an apprentice to compare passages from these books, choosing the beginning and ending paragraphs of chapters in each. *Marriage and Morals* was dictated from start to finish. Here is the passage he turned up, at the end of a chapter[3]:

> The essence of a good marriage is respect for each other's personality combined with that deep intimacy, physical, mental, and spiritual, which makes a serious love between man and woman the most fructifying of all human experiences. Such love, like everything that is great and precious, demands its own morality, and frequently entails a sacrifice of the less to the greater; but such sacrifice must be voluntary, for, where it is not, it will destroy the very basis of the love for the sake of which it is made.

"You must work very rapidly," I said.

"I do 3,000 words a day. I plan to work only in the morning. If I haven't done my stint, I sometimes go on working into the afternoon. I plan it all out in my head beforehand, so that before I start it it's all finished. I used to make elaborate notes because I couldn't hold as much in my head as I can now. When I have a book to write of 60,000 words, I start twenty days before it is due at the publisher's. If I can only work two days a week, that is, when I go to London, then it takes me ten weeks."

"Do you find time for reading poetry?"

"I don't read much poetry nowadays. The modern I don't get on

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[2]The end of Ch. III, "War as an Institution".

[3]Actually the end of the book.

with. The old I know by heart. I have a good verbal memory. I like best sixteenth and seventeenth century poetry."

I had brought with me a volume of verse published this month by one of the minor advanced poets. He read a short love lyric. "No, I don't follow him," he said, and returned the book.

"If you could be induced to give some advice to young writers, what would it be?"

"First of all, to the prospective novelists, I should say, 'Don't!' To the others I should say, 'Read good authors.' In my day they did read good books. As models of style for philosophers I would suggest Hume and Berkeley. Swift and Defoe had an absolutely perfect style. Sir Thomas Browne should be read for vocabulary, not style."

"What should you say is the weakness of modern style?"

"The modern writer writes for the eye, not the ear. Writing for the eye has ruined style. There's no rhythm in modern writing. All the old writers had it. One should read what one writes aloud in the imagination. In good style, one should be able to read aloud without losing one's breath between commas."

"Was your early reading unusual--I mean, before the age of ten?"

"Let me see. I haven't thought about my childhood reading. I read *Alice in Wonderland*, and most of Maria Edgworth, and *Tanglewood Tales*, and various German books, and Hans Andersen, and Grimm. I didn't like Grimm, I much preferred Andersen."

"Do you recommend fairy-tales for childhood reading?"

"Yes. I don't like the Montessori austerity about truth; it smacks too much of the school-ma'am. But fairy-tales may not be so good for girls as for boys--they encourage the idea of passive female excellence."

"Do you, by the way, read reviews of your books?"

"I used to when I was younger. Now I see them only by accident. I don't subscribe to a Press-cutting bureau. I can tell exactly what the reviewers are going to say about me."

"Do you mind adverse criticism?"

"The natural and wholesome reaction that any right-minded human being has towards anyone who criticises him adversely is to think him a fool. It's the instinct of self-preservation. I don't believe in meekness. I can pull myself together afterwards, of course."

He smiled over his pipe. Even in repose his face has a merry, amused-looking expression, with just the slightest touch of the sardonic. His brilliant, swiftly changing eyes seem to say, "I don't think much of the show, but anyway it's *amusing*." His face has the warm colour and firmness of youth, every rapid gesture suggests youth, so that the mass of snowy hair which crowns his head is incongruous with the rest of him.

Decoratively, however, it is very effective.

"What are you writing now?"

"Mainly pot-boilers. I'm writing entirely for money. I don't mind pot-boiling. I have no 'lofty feelings.'"

"If you hadn't to write for money, what would you do?"

"First of all, I'd like to show up all the scientists who talk about God, all those who make superstition a substitute for science. Then I'd like to write my autobiography, telling the truth about myself, to be published after my death."[4]

"And mathematics and philosophy?"

"As I've said before, I am too old for original thinking. In original work you get worse as you grow older. I now do the type of book that calls for experience of life. It's better as you grow older to utilize your experience of humanity by writing books that depend on it. I'd like to ignore human life altogether, and write about things that don't concern it. But I doubt whether I shall be able to."

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[4]Within a day or so of the appearance of this issue of *Everyman*, Russell's publisher, Stanley Unwin, wrote to him to say there "is not the slightest reason why you should not combine writing for money with writing the two books you mention." Russell replied by return that he already had plans to write *The Scientific Outlook* (published in 1931). As for the autobiography, the relevant part of the letter is quoted in Clark's *Life*, pp. 450-1.