

Editorial: Boomerangs at Dawn

You thought he was a major philosopher, but he is only a minor poet:

Yet, as a work of poetry, it will live. It deserves to stand on the shelf next to the poetic works of T. S. Eliot. It has the same pessimism, portentousness, pretentiousness, and fringe mysticism. But above all, it belongs to the same period and employs the very same stylistic devices. Eliot had taken themes, allusions, symbols which had, by the then stale conventions of Victorian or Georgian lyricism, been conspicuously un-poetic, and welded them into a literary unity with poetic and 'deep' elements. These thereby acquired or regained a freshness and impact which, on their own, they could no longer command. And precisely this mix, the same reinforcement of the mystico-poetic by the prosaic elements dredged from the daily life of an industrial and scientific age, is also found in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.

The verdict is that of Professor Ernest Gellner, whose *Words and Things: An Examination of, and an Attack on, Linguistic Philosophy* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, £7.95, £4.50 paper) is famous for not being reviewed in *Mind*, for being the subject of acrimonious correspondence in *The Times*, and for being decorated with a Foreword in which Bertrand Russell accused Oxford philosophers of condemning 'everything discovered since the time of Homer or the time of Adam and Eve'.

Neither the message nor the medium has changed since 1959. The long new Introduction, 'The Saltmines of Salzburg, or Wittgensteinianism Reconsidered in Historical Context', will not soothe those who were ruffled in 1959. Like the body of the book, it is a dome of many-coloured glass, staining the white radiance of the author's passion for clarity, honesty and truth. The rainbow-coloured prose is matched by the high rate of striking of attitudes in the section headings: The Cult of the Fox, The Bait and the Trap, The Turn of the Screw, The Prayer-wheel, Philosophy by Filibuster, Saladin's Fork, The Indian Rope Trick, The Narodniks of North Oxford.

This Aristophanic extravaganza was directed against a Linguistic Philosophy and a Wittgensteinianism that were about as recognizable as the Socrates of the *Clouds*. It is easy to remember, looking at the book again in this revised edition, what caused offence in 1959: the not fully explicit accusations of bad faith, the findings of guilt by association, the production of composite pictures and theories from the writings of various and often mutually opposed philosophers; the whole presented with a mixture of high-mindedness and journalistic knockabout calculated to combine the maximum of self-indulgence with the minimum of self-reproach.

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It goes without saying—and could have gone without shouting, too—that there are serious philosophical issues on which Wittgenstein and Moore, Austin and Ryle and Wisdom, can be criticized. But these are five different targets and not the head and limbs of a single Aunt Sally, even if the missiles had included more well-aimed pistol shots and fewer custard pies. The positive message that does emerge from behind the footlights is a traditional blend of relativism and scepticism: philosophy consists in doing something that is at the same time necessary and impossible: the choosing on rational grounds between conceptual schemes and world pictures which will be question-begging if they support themselves by their own bootstraps and which cannot be supported by anything else:

The problem of validation is absolutely central, and is beset by a number of profound difficulties. In fact, the number and awkwardness of these difficulties has increased under modern conditions. One difficulty is that of regress. Where and how can you stop in the chain of justifications? Either you are willing to give reasons for your premises—in which case they are *ipso facto* not final, and the argument goes on—or you are not willing to give reasons—in which case you are being dogmatic and arbitrary.

Philosophy did not ignore the book at its first appearance. Mr. P. L. Heath's review in April 1962 was sympathetic but questioning:

This is the book that appeared in the same week as *Lolita* and created an even greater fuss. Mr. Gellner deserves the notice he has had. He is forthright and entertaining, which is more than can be said of most of his opponents; he is familiar with his target, which is more than can be said of many who are on his side; above all, he is serious, if somewhat vague, about what philosophy is, and ought to be. The charges he makes, and the questions he raises, are sufficiently important to be worth a serious answer; it is very much to be hoped that he will get one.

He has still not had it, but that is largely for a reason implicit in the quiet riposte once given by a Cabinet Minister in an excited House of Commons: 'I cannot help it if, every time I give the Opposition the choice of weapons, they choose boomerangs'.