

Fly and the Fly-Bottle
Encounters with British Intellectuals

1963

C H A P T E R O N E

A Battle Against the Bewitchment
of Our Intelligence

I've spent some happy years in Oxford, and to keep in touch with England I read her newspapers. I am most at home with the *Guardian*, but I also like to look at the correspondence columns of the *Times*, where, in an exception to the *Times* tradition of anonymity, the writers are identified by name and speak directly to the reader. I relish a contest of words, and the *Times* page of letters becomes for me a street where I can stroll each morning and see the people of England — lords and commoners — shake hands, spit at each other, and set off verbal barrages. I began taking this engaging daily walk during my undergraduate years at Balliol College, Oxford, and I've kept up the habit, whether I have found myself in Paris, Damascus, New Delhi, or New York. One autumn day in 1959, as I was taking my intellectual promenade, I met Bertrand Russell, under a signboard

reading "Review Refused." "Messrs. Gollancz have recently published a book by Ernest Gellner called 'Words and Things,'" he said as he hailed me. "I read this book before it was published and considered it a careful and accurate analysis of a certain school of philosophy, an opinion which I expressed in a preface. I now learn that Professor Ryle, the editor of *Mind*, has written to Messrs. Gollancz refusing to have this book reviewed in *Mind*, on the ground that it is abusive and cannot therefore be treated as a contribution to an academic subject. Such a partisan view of the duties of an editor is deeply shocking. The merit of a work of philosophy is always a matter of opinion, and I am not surprised that Professor Ryle disagrees with my estimate of the work, but *Mind* has hitherto, ever since its foundation, offered a forum for the discussion of all serious and competent philosophical work. Mr. Gellner's book is not 'abusive' except in the sense of not agreeing with the opinions which he discusses. If all books that do not endorse Professor Ryle's opinions are to be boycotted in the pages of *Mind*, that hitherto respected periodical will sink to the level of the mutual-admiration organ of a coterie. All who care for the repute of British philosophy will regret this."

I did care for the repute of British philosophy. It is, in a sense, a dominant philosophy, with Existentialism, in the present-day world. I had gone up to Oxford with the idea of studying it — British philosophy has its home there and indeed is known generally as "Oxford phi-

losophy," even though its detractors, taking their cue from its so-considered petty linguistic concerns, insist on calling it linguistic philosophy. However, just reading a few essays on philosophical subjects to my tutor made me realize that the linguistic inquiries then being undertaken at Oxford had little connection with what I understood by philosophy, so I immediately abandoned it and took up history instead. Now I recalled that Gellner was a Reader in Sociology at the London School of Economics, a home for angry intellectual orphans, while Gilbert Ryle was Wayneflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford, from which he edited the extremely influential, eighty-five-year-old philosophical journal *Mind*. The notion of an attack on Oxford thinkers interested me, and I dashed off a letter to Blackwell's, my favorite bookshop, for Gellner's book. While I waited for it to arrive, I impatiently read the subsequent issues of the *Times*, eager to see Earl Russell's gauntlet taken up, preferably by Ryle. It was. This important spokesman of the philosophical Establishment replied four days after Russell's challenge. His communication was terse, to the point, and full of references for diligent readers: "In the book referred to by Earl Russell . . . about 100 imputations of disingenuousness are made against a number of identifiable teachers of philosophy; about half of these occur on pages 159-192 and 237-265."