

The Ondenotingiad
Michael Johnson

In “On Denoting” Russell tries
To establish his position
That unique existentials hide
In definite descriptions.

This 1905 paper starts
By criticizing Meinong
A guy whose non-subsistent smarts
Had led him rather wrong:

He thought that a denoting phrase
Could never fail to name;
The present king of France, he says,
Is as real as Charlemagne.

The reasoning that Russell faults
Is that the king is able
To be both bald and not—results
More suitable for Hegel.

Frege’s treatment of that great
Is crueler even yet:
He takes away his wigless pate
And equates him with a set!

Meaning comes in twos you see:
There’s “referent” or “denotation”
And on the other hand is the
Thing’s mode of presentation.

Sure, there is no fallacy—
Or none that I can tell—
But still there is that talk of C:
‘The curfew tolls the knell...’

We must distinguish ‘C’ and C:
The first denotes the second
But this it does mysteriously
Not by compositional method.

So, that “senses” are not sensible
Is the first insight of Russell’s,

An insight that makes tractable
Three philosophical puzzles.

The first of these is Leibniz's law
Where identicals may be switched
Salva veritate in all
Propositions they exist.

If we apply this logical rule
To the thoughts of George IV
In thinking of the author who
Wrote *Waverly* and so forth,

And switch him for himself, *viz* Scott,
We find that we have blundered:
For whether Walter Scott *is* Scott
Is not what George had wondered.

To exonerate the wise old king
Russell states his view
In notation where 'C(everything)'
Means 'C(x)' is always true.

An occurrence of the article 'the'
Indicates uniqueness;
So let 'author of *Waverly*'
Be our function C(x):

Then "it's not the case that C(no x)
"And it is that if C(y)
"It follows y is equal to x"
Renders 'C(the guy).'

So when King George IV once said
"Is Walter Scott the man?"
He had inside his singular head
A general proposition.

The logical law lets us switch names
Provided they co-denote;
It never said we could do the same
For improper parts of thoughts.

The second puzzle Russell solves
Is existence-claims' negations:

He shows us that the case revolves
Round the tilda-sign's location.

The claim that there's a round square
Doesn't name a thing
But says of at least one object there
It is round-squarizing.

When we say the king of France ain't bald
There's an ambiguity of note:
If we're saying there's no king at all
The 'not' must take wide scope;

But if we're saying that he does exist,
And has a hirsute head,
The 'not' precedes the predicate
To negate the 'bald' instead.

The final puzzle that I'll sing
May be stated as a riddle:
If neither 'bald' nor 'not' is the king
How to exclude the middle?

If thus far you've followed all,
You can see where this is leading:
'The king of France ain't bald'
Is false on the wide-scope reading!

O Musae, help me paint this
The grandeur of Russell's vision:
Sometimes your knowledge ain't acquaintance,
It's knowledge by description.