

Bertrand Russell's Conversion of 1901 or the Benefits of a Creative Illness

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1 *The Background of Pacifism*

When nuclear weapons were used in 1945, it became apparent that mankind one day might destroy itself through warfare of unprecedented terror. Bertrand Russell was among the first to insist that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki announced a world entirely different from any previously known and that a new geo-politics would have to be devised to sustain life on earth. The Russell–Einstein Manifesto (1955) states that the dangers of nuclear weaponry far exceed the ideological split of capitalist from communist which gave rise to the Cold War. The preservation of any ideology could not justify the levels of destruction predictable in a nuclear war. Russell's magnificent essay, "Man's Peril" (1954), contains the words: "I appeal, as a human being to human beings: remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, nothing lies before you but universal death".¹ He had moved far from the mathematical logician of the turn of the century. Russell the philosopher–statesman came onto the world scene with a clear message about human survival: "If mankind survives, my work on behalf of [nuclear disarmament] will be the most important thing I have done. What is the truth on logic does not matter two pins if there is no one alive to know it."²

Simple though it may seem, Russell's concern with the survival of mankind has a complex history. His view of war changed with circumstances. During the First World War Russell was a powerful advocate of conscientious objection, and he spent time in prison for his anti-war views. The courage of his pacifism was perhaps greatest then. The Second World War found him reluctantly convinced that the Nazi tyranny had to be resisted by armed force, though he saw in Stalin a menace as great as Hitler. In an

uncharacteristic moment in 1948, Russell suggested war against Russia to prevent her becoming a nuclear power. To those who objected that he was being inconsistent with his pacifist principles, Russell replied, "I believe that some wars, a very few, are justified, even necessary".³ This no doubt his *head* told him at one of the more major junctures in our era of dangerous politics, but his *impulses* remained pacifist. His ideal was to avoid armed combat, but not at the price of almost certain tyranny. Russell's most spectacular campaign on behalf of peace was his last—that culminating in non-violent direct action in the 1960s to promote British unilateral nuclear disarmament. Although not strictly a pacifist campaign, this one drew from Russell all that he could derive from his "unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind".⁴ He became a prophet of peace in a world addicted through fear to re-armament on even more terrifying levels than had occurred prior to two world wars. He ended life as a moral pathfinder in unmapped territory, trying to bring perspective where political leaders worried only over the next moves in the chess game of power. By his stand on the immorality of nuclear weapons, Russell introduced the moral imperative by which alone man has the possibility of surviving his technology.

What lay behind Russell's repeated endeavours to resolve political conflicts by peaceful means, to remove reliance on weaponry and to live by reason and sensitivity to suffering? Surely the root of his pacifism is found in his "conversion" of early 1901, that experience of personal re-orientation lying enigmatically at the heart of the first volume of his *Autobiography*. This turning-point in Russell's young manhood, this reorganization of his personality, has not been fully explained. Told matter-of-factly in the narrative, the conversion can be seen as part of all later initiatives in social reform; but Russell himself seems to have been unable, or unwilling, to explain its full meaning in the context of his life. It is worth being reminded of exactly what he wrote:

One day, Gilbert Murray came to Newnham to read part of his translation of *The Hippolytus*, then unpublished. Alys and I went to hear him, and I was profoundly stirred by the beauty of the poetry. When we came home, we found Mrs. Whitehead undergoing an unusually severe bout of pain. She seemed cut off from everyone and everything by walls of agony, and the sense of the solitude of each human soul suddenly overwhelmed me. Ever since my marriage, my emotional life had been calm and superficial. I had forgotten all the deeper issues, and had been content with flippant cleverness. Suddenly the ground seemed to give way beneath me, and I found myself in quite another region. Within five minutes I went through some such reflections as the following: the loneliness of the human soul is unendurable; nothing can penetrate it except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers

have preached; whatever does not spring from this motive is harmful, or at best useless; it follows that war is wrong, that a public school education is abominable, that the use of force is to be deprecated, and that in human relations one should penetrate to the core of loneliness in each person and speak to that. The Whiteheads' youngest boy, aged three, was in the room. I had previously taken no notice of him, nor he of me. He had to be prevented from troubling his mother in the middle of her paroxysms of pain. I took his hand and led him away. He came willingly, and felt at home with me. From that day to his death in the war in 1918, we were close friends.

At the end of those five minutes, I had become a completely different person. For a time, a sort of mystic illumination possessed me. I felt that I knew the inmost thoughts of everybody that I met in the street, and though this was, no doubt, a delusion, I did in actual fact find myself in far closer touch than previously with all my friends, and many of my acquaintances. Having been an imperialist, I became during those five minutes a pro-Boer and a pacifist. Having for years cared only for exactness and analysis, I found myself filled with semi-mystical feelings about beauty, with an intense interest in children, and with a desire almost as profound as that of the Buddha to find some philosophy which should make human life endurable. A strange excitement possessed me, containing intense pain but also some element of triumph through the fact that I could dominate pain, and make it, as I thought, a gateway to wisdom. The mystic insight which I then imagined myself to possess has largely faded, and the habit of analysis has reasserted itself. But something of what I thought I saw in that moment has remained always with me, causing my attitude during the first war, my interest in children, my indifference to minor misfortunes, and a certain emotional tone in all my human relations.⁵

The circumstance surrounding this extraordinary event are explained in a letter of 22 February 1912 (#354) to Lady Ottoline Morrell:

I had just finished my greatest outburst of work, after the Congress in Paris at which I met Peano and began to know his writings [on notation]. I was feeling very triumphant, extraordinarily happy in work done, having been for months utterly oblivious of anything else. It was about six weeks after this that I had my first "conversion"; ever since then I have felt my technical work unsatisfying, not expressing the things I thought really important.

The meaning of Russell's first "conversion" was not interpreted by him much beyond this. I want to suggest that it came as the partial resolution of

neurotic conflict, taking the form of what Henri Ellenberger calls a “creative illness”. Ellenberger offers the concept of “creative illness” in *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970) to explain some of this century’s leading psychological discoveries, chief among them Freud’s discovery of the Oedipus complex and Jung’s discovery of the archetypes of the unconscious. I believe that the concept “creative illness” also helps to explain Russell’s acceptance of humanistic pacifism, which had for him the authenticity of a revelation. According to Ellenberger the main stages of a creative illness are as follows:

- (1.) The beginning phase appears generally right after a period of intense intellectual effort, long reflection, meditations, or perhaps, too, after some work of a more technical nature, such as the research and accumulation of intellectual material.
- (2.) During the illness, the subject is generally obsessed with a preoccupation that is dominant, which he will sometimes allow to appear, but which he often hides. He is preoccupied with the search for a thing or an idea, the importance of which he sets above everything.
- (3.) The termination of the illness is experienced not only as the liberation from a long period of suffering, but as an illumination. The mind ... is possessed by a new idea which he regards as a revelation, or a series of revelations. The cure is often so sudden that the subject cannot give the exact date of the occurrence. It is generally followed by a feeling of exultation, euphoria, enthusiasm, so intense that he may feel compensated in one stroke for his past suffering.
- (4.) The cured illness is followed by a lasting transformation of personality. The subject has the impression of entering on a new life. He has made an intellectual or spiritual discovery which he will try hard to put to advantage: he has discovered a new world which during the rest of his life he will hardly be able to explore. If it is an idea, he will tend to present it as a universal truth; he will do so with so much conviction that he will succeed in having it accepted by others in spite of all difficulties.⁶

Ellenberger’s idea of the self-healing creative illness is a distinctive secular rethinking of the idea of religious “conversion”. It is consonant with the findings of Bennett and Nancy Simon.⁷ According to the Simons, Russell affirmed pacifism—the doctrine of non-killing, of love toward all life and of doing good in evil situations—after an illumination of the meaning of human suffering. They rightly relate his deepened sense of human suffering to identification with the three-year-old Whitehead son at the time of his

mother’s angina attack—the immediate stimulus to Russell’s transforming experience. The Simons point to Russell’s actual loss of parents at about this age, but they do not use the term “creative illness” for the empathetic reaction which followed. His empathetic reaction was no doubt the dramatic manifestation of tensions that had been long incubated, as the psychologist William James described incubation. Russell’s mystic illumination was probably the reparative phase of a long-incubated wish for integration of childhood feelings of loss and grief; the illumination made less disturbing the actualities of everyday living in which new instances of loss and grief occurred, or at least threatened to occur as in the case of Mrs. Whitehead.

This merging by “conversion” of inner and outer reality prepared the way for an eventual easing of the urgency of Russell’s longing for a Platonic realm apart from ordinary life, a realm of pure number, of logical relations, untouched by the perturbations of life. The conversion humanized an escapist longing for mystical self-transcendence, the ecstatic moment paradoxically turning Russell back from the realm of pure logical and mathematical relations to that of human relations where the motivation arose in the first place. The illumination made him see the need to return to the world with a clearer sense of what needs doing here to heal the wounds of fate. Indeed, it put him into the reforming frame of mind which, he reports in the *Autobiography*, had characterized the lives of his long-lost parents, especially that of his mother. Russell generally re-affirmed their call for social justice, and when he speaks of wanting to base life on a philosophy as profound as that of the Buddha, it may be significant that his father had been a student of Buddhism. Russell’s programme of social reform, first fully elaborated in *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916), is thus deeply founded in his conversion and in awareness of his parents’ social aims. With Russell’s asceticism diminishing, with his retreat from Pythagorean mysticism, a new social consciousness arose based on humanistic pacifism. Coinciding with the end of the Boer War, his conversion did not have its fullest testing until the First World War when, to take a pacifist stand as Russell did, was to invite the scornful disapproval of the great majority of the British nation. Thus the conversion’s durability was proved in action. As Russell wrote of his mathematical mysticism, “The non-human world remained as an occasional refuge, but not as a country in which to build one’s permanent habitation.”⁸ The turn to pacifism was indeed the “spiritual discovery” which Russell’s illumination of 1901 brought, his prophetic “new idea” with profound implications for his social involvement in two world wars and into the age of nuclear weaponry with its danger of global destruction.

2 *The Hippolytus*

Let us look with more care at the factors which affected the secular form of Russell's conversion. What bearing did Gilbert Murray's reading of his translation of the *Hippolytus* have on it? As Russell says, he was stirred by the beauty of the poetry, an aesthetic reaction which led to a moral one. For Russell, aesthetic reactions were not enough; there had to be an overriding moral component before he could receive the consolation of beauty. The aesthetic force of the Greek play—its power to harmonize terrifying emotion—was a factor not to be underestimated in relation to Russell's marital tensions with Alys and difficulties in his technical work which prefigured the conversion. Murray, the humanitarian and pacifist, was himself exemplary in the situation, but it was the content of his translation which prepared Russell to be deeply and constructively unsettled by Mrs. Whitehead's ordeal of the angina attack. To summarize, the *Hippolytus* concerns a fateful family imbroglio in which the malign goddess Aphrodite causes Phaedra, step-mother of Hippolytus, to fall in love with him because he is so innocent of sexuality. Phaedra resists the passion and is wrongly denounced by Hippolytus who believes his step-mother has designs on him. Shocked, Phaedra accuses Hippolytus of trying to violate her and hangs herself in despair. Cursed by his father, Hippolytus is dragged to death by runaway horses, but his innocence is revealed by Artemis, whose purity of motive contrasts with Aphrodite's malign sexuality.

Russell does not tell us exactly what he saw in this play, but it may be surmised that he identified with the wronged Hippolytus, innocent plaything of fate and subject to the will of a treacherous woman. Of the precise effect he wrote to Murray on 26 February 1901 only to say that he had "felt [the play's] power most keenly" and that Murray's poetry was "completely worthy of its theme". As to clues concerning what part, or parts, of the *Hippolytus* had most moved him, Russell remarks only that "I like best of all the lyric with which you ended your reading at Newnham. I learnt it by heart immediately, and it has been in my head ever since. There is only one word in it which I do not wholly like, and that is the word *bird-droves*." This word, he says, spoils the "peacefulness of the idea to my mind".⁹ Murray's translation of the lyric spoken by the Chorus is as follows:

Could I take me to some cavern for mine hiding,
In the hill-tops where the Sun scarce hath trod;
Or a cloud make the home of mine abiding,
As a bird among the bird-droves of God!
Could I wing me to my rest amid the roar
Of the deep Adriatic on the shore,
Where the waters of Eridanus are clear,

And Phaëton's sad sisters by his grave
Weep into the river, and each tear
Gleams, a drop of amber, in the wave.¹⁰

But was this the only passage which stirred Russell to the depths? We do not know how much of the play Murray actually read, but we can guess that there were other more powerfully unsettling passages, such as Artemis's closing speech on vengeance (p. 72), which are likely to have touched Russell in the way he describes. The role of good and bad women in the play would certainly have been significant. The step-mother, tricked by a goddess's vicious whim may have set up associations to his grandmother and Aunt Agatha, dominant women in his life, though no special sexual threat is attributable to them. However this may be, the dismaying sense of uncontrolled family breakdown would have matched his feelings about the tragedy of his own family—that "gradual discovery, one by one, of the tragedies, hopeless and unalleviated, which have made up the lives of most of my family".¹¹ A sense of meaningless loss and disintegration was aroused by the play just prior to Mrs. Whitehead's ordeal of the angina attack witnessed by her three-year-old son with whom Russell probably identified. But most important, in the legend of Hippolytus, the hero, torn apart by terrified horses on the sea shore at Corinth, is restored to life and wholeness by Asclepius and renamed *vir bis*, or "twice a man". While not part of the play's action, Hippolytus's rebirth would not have escaped Murray. For Russell a cluster of isolated and confused feelings must have organized themselves into what may be called the "tragic view of life"—the view that sees heroic strivings laid waste by pride, or less explicably by fate, but yet redeemable in extremity even as Hippolytus was restored to life after unmerited suffering.

As the play gave formal containment to Hippolytus's tragedy, so Russell's conversion gave formal meaning to anguish over loss. (Conversion is as much a convention as is dramatic tragedy, with a form just as capable of leaving one with the feeling of "all passion spent".) Russell wrote to Murray of the play's effect: "Your tragedy fulfils perfectly—so it seems to me—the purpose of bringing out whatever is noble and beautiful in sorrow; and to those of us who are without a religion, this is the only consolation of which the spectacle of the world cannot deprive us".¹² Russell was without Christian consolation at least partly because he could not feel that justice prevails in a universe which wastes young lives such as those of his parents. But by realizing the hegemony of sorrow in his conversion, Russell acquired a new and deeply humane sort of religious feeling. Psychologically, the conversion put him in touch with his own depression, "converting" its pain, sadness and anger into a world view which rendered these emotions less dangerous to his inner balance.

Unfortunately, Russell never found a fully satisfactory vehicle for the humanistic religion of sorrow, and feelings about it fluctuated through his life. A literary vehicle was attempted but proved inadequate in *The Pilgrimage of Life*, the brief meditations written in 1902–03 in which he tried to conjure back and reconcile himself to a personal past suffused with a sense of loss and sorrow.¹³ Something of what he hoped to achieve in literary meditation on the past may be gathered from a remark to G. Lowes Dickinson in a letter of 26 August 1902:

Yes, one must learn to live in the Past, and so to dominate it that it is not a disquieting ghost or a horrible gibbering spectre stalking through the vast bare halls that once were full of life, but a gentle soothing companion, reminding one of the possibility of good things, and rebuking cynicism and cruelty.¹⁴

Russell's failure to effect "symbolic repair" in *The Pilgrimage of Life* meditations issued in the existential despair of "The Free Man's Worship" (1903)—one of this century's most profound literary statements of cosmic aloneness. To some readers the essay may verge on fatalism, but there is no doubt that it articulates Russell's pacifist revulsion against the cruelty of armed conflict, the position to which his conversion brought him. As Russell's statement of the pacifist position when it was new, "The Free Man's Worship" carries the imperative of looking on our fellow human beings as each alone and tragic.

One by one, as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent Death. Very brief is the time in which we can help them, in which their happiness or misery is decided. Be it ours to shed sunshine on their path, to lighten their sorrows by the balm of sympathy, to give them the pure joy of a never-tiring affection, to strengthen failing courage, to instil faith in hours of despair.¹⁵

This view as applied to war and peace was consistently held through the First World War. As to doing good actively through personal love, that was an area where much of Russell's confusion remained; but we are concerned here only with his public witness in time of political strife as it followed from his conversion.

3 Conversion: the Nineteenth Century and After

Let us look further into the reasons why Russell's conversion took the secular, aesthetic and moral form it did—setting aside the hope of help from

Christianity. From adolescence Russell's thought about ultimate questions had undergone secularization, influenced by physics and the new biology. His loss of belief in the Christian account of creation and of human destiny (particularly in the doctrine of immortality of the soul) is chronicled in "Greek Exercises" (1888) and in "'A Locked Diary'" (1890–94). The entry for 31 August 1890 makes clear that Russell had been convinced by Mill's argument of the futility of asking "who made God?" It is evident this early that Russell could not alternatively accept creative evolution, and that he was headed toward agnosticism if not atheism, despite the inducement of ontological insecurity to believe otherwise. As he continues on 31 August 1890,

To feel that the universe may be hurrying blindly towards all that is bad, that humanity may any day cease its progressive development and may continually lose all its fine qualities, that Evolution has no necessary progressive principle prompting it; these are thoughts which render life almost intolerable.¹⁶

We begin to see why it was that Russell's conversion preserved only the form not the content of the seventeenth-to-nineteenth-century Puritan tradition to which he belonged. The theistic content had already been bled away in the spiritual autobiographies of several of Russell's Victorian predecessors.

John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold and Mark Rutherford, for instance, all went through crises of losing belief with which Russell was familiar from reading their works. Mill was particularly close to Russell, having been a friend of his parents and becoming his "godfather" in a secular sense. The very upsurge of Victorian spiritual autobiography, seen at its best in that of Mill (1873), shows the self-help urge felt by those dispossessed of religion. Mill underwent a reparative experience when reading, in particular, Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality". Mill notes that Wordsworth also

had felt that the first freshness of youthful enjoyment of life was not lasting; but that he had sought for compensation, and found it, in the way in which he was now teaching me to find it. The result was that I gradually, but completely, emerged from my habitual depression, and was never again subject to it.¹⁷

As Russell wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell on 6 April 1911 (#19a), "Mill influenced me greatly and I lived on his autobiography for a time", although Wordsworth's pantheism was not as decisive for Russell as it had been for Mill.

A rebirth similar to Mill's also occurred in the life of Mark Rutherford, whose parents had been "rigid Calvinistic Independents". Rutherford (whom Russell noted to Lady Ottoline was "even better than I remembered ... quite wonderfully sincere, and showing such a lovable man")¹⁸ was converted to a sort of naturalistic pantheism by reading Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. Of this transformation Rutherford wrote:

it excited a movement and a growth which went on till, by degrees, all the systems which enveloped me like a body gradually decayed from me and fell away into nothing. Of more importance, too, than the decay of systems was the birth of a habit of inner reference and a dislike to occupy myself with anything which did not in some way or other touch the soul.¹⁹

It is possible that Russell also read of Richard Jeffries's pantheistic enlargement of soul in *The Story of My Heart* (1883), and that his acquaintance with Count Tolstoy's conversion may have been influential. Under Victorian pressure of striving for purity of life, despite the breakdown of belief in revealed religion, and in the presence of a probable neurotic conflict, Russell's impetus to dramatic, non-theistic conversion became strong. Its aesthetic component is not as strange as at first might seem. In his chapter on ecstasy in *Journey Through Despair 1880–1914*, John A. Lester points out that turn-of-the-century spiritual despair often resolved itself by aesthetically induced ecstasy. Taking as their model the Romantics' most cherished spiritual moments, as in the poetic ecstasies of Wordsworth and Keats, writers as various as W. H. Hudson, Richard Jefferies, Walter Pater and Walt Whitman sought and found aesthetic moments through nature and art which helped to reconcile them to loss of orthodox belief. Lester points out that the ecstatic aesthetic moment became the focal point of fictional art for such moderns as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster and W. B. Yeats. While Russell's gift as an imaginative writer cannot be compared to theirs, his desire for ecstatic experience can be assimilated to that found in their writings.

Immediate to Russell's conversion of 1901 was the aesthetic conversion of his brother-in-law and companion in Italy, Bernard Berenson. It may be surprising to learn that Berenson, the hard-driving art critic and dealer, should have undergone a spontaneous and lastingly beneficial mental reorganization much as Mill and Rutherford had known. Berenson's background was of course not Christian but Jewish; yet the phenomenon of conversion is the same: "a lasting and substantial mental reorganization, spontaneously achieved and accepted as beneficial" as Marghanita Laski defines it.²⁰ Berenson's biographers have neglected a profoundly important statement he makes in his essay on "Value" referring to a mystical experi-

ence which occurred before 1900. After years of feeling that his aesthetic reactions were lacking in attentiveness and depth,

one morning as I was gazing at the leafy scrolls carved on the door jambs of S. Pietro outside Spoleto, suddenly stem, tendril, and foliage became alive and, in becoming alive, made me feel as if I had emerged into the light after long groping in the darkness of an initiation. I felt as one illumined, and beheld a world where every outline, every edge, and every surface was in a living relation to me and not, as hitherto, in a merely cognitive one. Since that morning, nothing visible has been indifferent or even dull. Everywhere I feel the ideated pulsation of vitality, I mean energy and radiance as if it all served to enhance my own functioning.²¹

This may be the fullest and most striking aesthetic ecstasy on record in the period, and it would be surprising if Russell had not heard it verbatim.

Russell first met Berenson at Friday's Hill (the Pearsall Smith's Sussex house) in the 1890s, and after their marriage he and Alys stayed with Berenson and his future wife, Alys's sister Mary, near Florence. This was in the spring of 1895; they were there subsequently when, for example, Russell began "The Free Man's Worship" at the Berenson villa, I Tatti, in December 1902. It is possible that Berenson communicated his aesthetically induced mystical experience on one or more of these occasions, and it may even have been discussed between them before Russell's own transformation of 1901.

Reinforcing these exposures to transformational spiritual and aesthetic experiences was Russell's probable awareness of William James's psychological studies of conversion. (We do not know for certain about this until 1 September 1902 when Russell wrote to Lucy Donnelly: "We have all been reading with great pleasure James on Religious Experience—everything good about the book except the conclusions."²² James's theistic implications in the conclusions may have upset Russell—he does not tell us nor does he remark on whether he had had previous acquaintance with James's theories about religious experience.) In any case, James's Gifford Lectures of 1901 and 1902, entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, touch on the main topics at issue in the experiences we have been looking at in creative illness: the sick soul, the divided self, incubation and the soul's reunification by conversion. James's discussion is more specifically religious than the aesthetically induced experiences of Mill, Rutherford and Berenson, but the processes he describes are similar. In Lecture IX on Conversion James outlines what occurs in the transformation:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience

religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.²³

Russell kept up with James (having stayed with him in America in 1896) through Alys's family, the American Pearsall Smiths, with whom James was friendly. James's ideas about religion were discussed in the Pearsall Smith circle which dwelt upon conversion as part of experiential religion, as would be expected of such active late-Victorian Quaker evangelicals. It is possible that Russell was aware of these discussions. James is known to have admired the evangelical writer Hannah Pearsall Smith, Russell's mother-in-law, as "healthy-souled" and "realistic in her attitude to religion".²⁴

That Russell came to intensely dislike Hannah Pearsall Smith does not imply that he ignored her views on religion, which were not as simple as one might suppose, thinking only of her evangelical activities. Indeed, Russell's critical attitude toward the mysticism to which he was inclined may well have been strengthened by her. Although she was brought up a Philadelphia Quaker, inured to the mystical expectations of silent worship, Hannah Pearsall Smith was not temperamentally attuned to listening for the still small voice of God. She confessed spending meetings for worship in childhood "building air castles" and entertaining grandiose fantasies about becoming "something very wonderful and grand", a preacher, inventor or singer.²⁵ *My Spiritual Autobiography* makes clear that Hannah was no mystic, and that she was in fact resistant to the religious elevation which makes for any sort of conversion: her mind got in the way. Hannah responded with feeling, however, to the "blessings of sanctification" claimed by Methodists when she and her husband Robert were converted from Quakerism during the evangelical revival of the 1870s. Before their removal to England, where as preachers they promoted "The Higher Life Movement", Hannah and Robert were converted by a "Baptism of the Spirit" in Methodist holiness meetings, but their conversions were very different.

Hannah experienced unaccustomed emotion in a prayer meeting when "the fountains of my being seemed to be broken up, and floods of delicious tears poured from my eyes", but by her own account she never enjoyed the full measure of "blessings" enjoyed by others. "I am not of an emotional nature, and none of the overpowering emotions I heard described, as constituting the 'blessing' ever fell to my portion", she wrote.²⁶ More depressive in temperament, Robert Pearsall Smith experienced the full effect of a camp meeting conversion and "came home full of a divine glow that seemed to affect everybody he met". He "had been shaken with what seemed like a magnetic thrill of heavenly delight, and floods of glory seemed

to pour through him, soul and body, with the inward assurance that this was the longed-for Baptism of the Holy Spirit."²⁷ The ecstasy lasted several weeks, giving him charismatic power which in 1874 he took to England as an evangelist. Robert's eventual fall from grace into the seductions of "free love" which ruined his reputation is told by his son Logan in *Unforgotten Years* and by Barbara Strachey in *Remarkable Relations*. He never completely recovered equilibrium, and the taint remains still in the Pearsall Smith family mythology.

It was undoubtedly Robert's sexual disgrace in 1875 which led Hannah to write against all forms of fanatical religious conversion. His father's misadventure certainly led Logan to write sneeringly in his autobiography of his own childhood conversion at age four, brought about by his sister Mary, age six. His mother however set about correcting matters more systematically. Between 1890 and 1900 Hannah gathered a series of cautionary biographies showing that delusions frequently underlie claims of sanctification. The collection, remarkable for its time, is a genuinely sceptical reaction against the excesses of religious emotion; its wry look at human behaviour is not unlike that found in some of Russell's later witty essays such as "Nice People" (1931). Although Hannah's collection was not published until 1928, Russell is known to have heard some of these cautionary tales from her. He remarks in an autobiographical passage which seems to reach back to 1896: "I remember an account written by my mother-in-law of various cranks that she had known, in which there was one chapter entitled 'Divine Guidance'. On reading the chapter one discovered that this was a synonym for fornication."²⁸ Russell was therefore aware of Hannah's sceptical view of what she called mysticism—she was thinking of the fanatical sorts of conversion, not of the great western mystics, Ruysbroeck, Tauler or St. John of the Cross of whose devotion she appears to have known little. Hannah wrote:

I would place at the entrance into the pathway of mysticism this danger signal: Beware of impressions, beware of emotions, beware of physical thrills, beware of voices, beware of everything, in short, that is not according to the strict Bible standard and to your own highest reason.²⁹

We would need to know the exact timing of Russell's exposure to Hannah's anti-mystical opinions to be sure what effect they had on his aesthetic and moral rather than religious conversion. It may be that his already tempered mysticism was deflected into secular channels by these stories, and that his trend toward anti-religion altogether was stimulated, not just by Hannah's cautionary tales, but by her forwardness as a religious writer whose powers of manipulation of persons were all too apparent to him. Russell came to think of her as "one of the wickedest people I had ever

known", perhaps the cruellest words in his *Autobiography* (I: 148). She no doubt awakened antagonistic feelings toward his grandmother's religious and moral manipulations, fresh to recollection from the attempts Lady Russell had made to prevent his marriage to Alys. Russell's psychological *bête noir* was the controlling woman; yet the issue with which Hannah was concerned—reason protecting against excesses of religious emotion—was exactly the issue Russell developed in his later writings on religion. Russell's humanistic conversion would hardly have been that of a fanatic, so he could not fall under the severest of her strictures. It was an event of its time, coming between a dying evangelicalism and the rise of secular society whose artists and intellectuals were to discredit all but the immediate reference of creative insights, and whose psychologists would insist on studying creative insights. Russell was probably both excited and dismayed by Hannah's opinion of conversion, leading him to a quicker sceptical reaction than might have otherwise set in, the return of "the habit of analysis" as he put it. That Russell was an unwilling mystic at the far end of a once vigorous Puritan tradition, we may thus in part attribute to Hannah Pearsall Smith; but I do not want to say that her influence was anything more than a nudge to his already sceptical intellect. Probably the pressure of Russell's creative illness was curbed and directed by Hannah's cautions, but he was in any case on guard against "enthusiasm", already that living paradox the "passionate sceptic".

William James ended his lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* feeling "almost appalled at the amount of emotionality which I find in it", having offered much "sentimental" and "extravagant" material which he studied rationally.³⁰ But Hannah Pearsall Smith had still more severe reservations than had James, as it is well to remember when speculating about the promptings to Russell's conversion. James was basically sympathetic to how the sick-divided soul is healed and reunified, and he gave the study of conversion intellectual respectability. It may not only be coincidence that Russell's humanistic transformation occurred just as the phenomenon of being "twice born" was under analysis by James in his Gifford Lectures. The matter deserves further study and should be placed in the still earlier context favourable to mysticism of the neo-Hegelianism of J. M. E. McTaggart and F. H. Bradley to whose teachings Russell subscribed in the 1890s. The neo-Hegelian idealistic doctrine of the Absolute could well have encouraged mystical experience of at-oneness with the universe, a possibility which Russell could still entertain in *Prisons* and the "The Essence of Religion" (1912). It was not until two years later in "Mysticism and Logic" that he criticized mysticism as distorting our view of the non-human world and as being unfit for the scientific philosophy he wanted. Thus Russell's changing view of mysticism, from his formal repudiation of neo-Hegelianism in 1898, needs to be considered along with

the psychology of conversion.

Worth mention as a possible inducement to Russell's conversion is R. M. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* published in 1901 and perhaps known to Russell through the Pearsall Smiths. Bucke, a Canadian psychiatrist, was Walt Whitman's chief spokesman, and being on good terms with Whitman, it is likely that the Pearsall Smiths knew and discussed Bucke's advocacy of Cosmic Consciousness whose highest exemplar was said to be the American poet. Bucke's book studies visionary ecstasies of famous and ordinary people from the Buddha, Plotinus and Spinoza to recent persons identified only by initials. Pride of place is given to Whitman whom Russell had admired since the early 1890s, then as a sexual liberator but perhaps later as a seer and nature mystic.

Russell's enactment (however tempered) of the ecstatic experiences of which James and Bucke were talking complements the fact that typically conversions occur at about age thirty, the age of Christ at his baptism, of St. Augustine at his conversion and of many seventeenth-century Puritans at theirs. So it is the catalysing readiness in Russell that is at issue, not only direct influences. A set of factors, some of them deeply personal and hidden from Russell at the time, are involved. It would be misleading to pretend that influences alone tell the story of what seems to have been a "creative illness" which brought to the surface a regressive longing to re-experience the feelings of loss and grief that had been suppressed since Russell's childhood and became the sources of his "religion of sorrow", as he termed it to Lady Ottoline Morrell (June 1911 #98). His conversion was thus probably a final common pathway for stressful feelings before it was religious in the sense understood by Hannah Pearsall Smith, or James when they wrote of conversion. Russell's conversion was a health-giving reorganization of psychological contents occasioned by the experience of literary tragedy and threatened actual loss in the lives of friends. Mrs. Whitehead's angina attack did more than awaken Russell to the apprehension of suffering and death which is the human lot; it broke what seems to have been an amnesia surrounding his feelings about the premature (and probably inadequately mourned) deaths of his parents and sister before he was four. Russell termed the crisis in his creative illness a "conversion" in the best language available in 1901. In making a humanistic pacifist of Russell, his spiritual crisis helped to open a moral pathway much needed by us as we contemplate far greater political perils of warfare than he did when in 1954 he warned of "man's peril".

Notes

- 1 "Man's Peril from the Hydrogen Bomb", *The Listener*, 52 (30 Dec. 1954): 1136.
- 2 "Earl Russell [Interviewed]", *Compass & Fleet*, no. 10 (Dec. 1964): 15.
- 3 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 3 vols. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967–9), 3: 18.
- 4 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 13.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 146–7. This account appears first on p. 83 of the dictated typescript of the *Autobiography*, dated May and June 1931. The holograph corrections to the typescript are few and do not change meaning. As far as is known, Russell did not record the conversion when it was fresh in 1901 but selected and pieced together the experience from memory thirty years later. This does not make the account suspect, but it does raise the problem as to whether all of the conversion's social implications fell together as neatly as they are made to seem to do in the later account. The experience of conversion was fictionalized in "The Perplexities of John Forstice" (1912), but Russell seems not to have imparted it otherwise unless by mention to Lady Ottoline Morrell. See Russell to Ottoline, 27 Dec. 1911 #300. In a letter of 13 Feb. 1912 to G. Lowes Dickinson Russell says that he has had just two mystical experiences, the first about ten years ago and another at the time of his "summer crises" with Lady Ottoline, which would have been mid- to late-July 1911. Russell's second conversion, not mentioned in the *Autobiography*, was the less dramatic, yet profoundly romantic and aesthetic change wrought by the love affair with Lady Ottoline. Its mysticism found expression in *Prisons*, a book Russell was unable to complete. *Prisons* bears the same relation to the second conversion as *The Pilgrimage of Life* bears to the first; both try to examine the implications of mystical experiences.
- 6 Henri F. Ellenberger, "The Concept of Creative Illness", *Psychoanalytic Review*, 55 (1968): 444. For a fuller discussion, see his *Discovery of the Unconscious* (London: Allen Lane, 1970).
- 7 Bennett and Nancy Simon, "The Pacifist Turn: an Episode of Mystic Illumination in Russell's Life", *Russell*, no. 13 (Spring 1974): 11–24. Originally published as "The Pacifist Turn: An Episode of Mystic Illumination in the Autobiography of Bertrand Russell", *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 20 (Jan. 1972): 109–21.
- 8 *My Philosophical Development* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), p. 212.
- 9 Russell's letter to Murray is published in *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 156.
- 10 *The Hippolytus of Euripides*, trans. Gilbert Murray. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1902), p. 39.
- 11 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 85.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 156. It is noteworthy that when Russell wrote to Lady Ottoline about his conversion (12 May 1911 #49), he commented that his wife, Alys, had not understood how meaningful it had been.
- 13 See my "Bertrand Russell's *The Pilgrimage of Life* and Mourning", *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 10 (Winter 1983): 311–31.
- 14 Published in *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 186.
- 15 "The Free Man's Worship" in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 12, eds. Andrew Brink, Margaret Moran and Richard A. Rempel (London: George Allen & Unwin, forthcoming), pp. 71–2.
- 16 "Locked Diary" in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1, eds. Kenneth Blackwell, Andrew Brink, Nicholas Griffin, Richard A. Rempel, and John Slater (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 56.
- 17 John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 126.
- 18 Russell to Morrell, April 1913 #744. See Mark Rutherford, *Autobiography* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896), p. 5, for the rigid Calvinistic parents.
- 19 Rutherford, *Autobiography*, pp. 18–19.
- 20 Marghanita Laski, *Ecstasy: A Study of Some Secular and Religious Experiences* (London: Cresset, 1961), p. 290. She discusses Berenson's experience.
- 21 Berenson, *Aesthetics and History in the Visual Arts* (New York: Pantheon, 1948), p. 72.
- 22 Published in *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 165–7. James's comments on acceptance of God's will are used in an admonitory way in a letter of 14 September 1902 Russell wrote to the depressed Alys.
- 23 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Longmans, 1952), p. 186.
- 24 Quoted in Barbara Strachey, *Remarkable Relations* (London: Gollancz, 1980), pp. 72–3.
- 25 H. W. S. [Hannah Whitall Smith], *My Spiritual Autobiography or How I Discovered the Unselfishness of God* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1903), pp. 76–7.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 286.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 288.
- 28 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 132–3.
- 29 Hannah Whitall Smith, *Religious Fanaticism*, ed. Ray Strachey (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928), p. 164.
- 30 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 476.