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Review of "Autobiography"

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Book Review

Autobiography, Bertrand Russell. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. Introduction, index. 750pp. ISBN: 041522862x. \$16.95.

Michael Foot's introduction to this new edition of Bertrand Russell's autobiography locates it in a controversy with Ray Monk's biographical study (the first volume of which appeared in 1996, the second in 2001). Foot takes note of Monk's claim to deal with "philosophical questions overlooked or bowdlerized by previous biographers or by Russell himself" (ix) but sees his study as an attack on Russell's reputation. He introduces the autobiography as evidence that Russell took "the precaution of speaking for himself" (x). Foot goes on to discuss some of the risks involved in autobiography, particularly the dual risk of falling victim to *hubris* or appearing to do so. It is a tribute to Russell that Foot believes the best response to Monk's attack is not to defend him but rather to let him speak for himself—not to publish another new biography but to republish Russell's account of his own life.

Russell's autobiography appeared in three volumes, beginning in 1967 and ending just before he died in 1970. Foot describes it as "one of the truly great autobiographies in our language"—worthy of study as a work of English literature regardless of its value as an historical record or a work of philosophy. But he also describes it as an "epic," a description that imparts heroic stature to Russell at the same time that it imparts potentially foundational significance to his story. Russell's life and work embodied themes central to the twentieth century, and one of the central struggles of his life—the campaign for nuclear disarmament—loomed large at the moment of his death. It is hard to think of the twentieth century apart from the emergence of weapons of mass destruction, and the extent to which Russell's life was entangled with opposition to such weapons and the violence of war in which their development and use was embedded makes accounts of his life—including his own—timely as we begin a new century still dominated by those weapons.

Russell's prologue lends credence to the "epic" characterization: "Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair" (9). This is Homeric language, and, coming as it does at the beginning of Russell's construction of his own life, it invites us to speculate with the author on the shape and the end of this storm-tossed journey: will Russell play Odysseus coming home or Aeneas founding Rome?

Kierkegaard said that history must be lived forward but understood backward. Russell offers compelling evidence of the importance of doing both at the same time. It is not possible to stop and look back, nor is it easy to move forward by dancing backward. Russell, however, proves himself adept; and the

opportunity to watch his performance is reason enough to return to his autobiography. But apart from the sheer enjoyment of a virtuoso performance, watching such a performance can be instructive for performers—a category that, in the matter of living (and constructing) our lives, includes us all.

The first volume of Russell's autobiography (through page 236 in this edition) includes brief accounts of his childhood and adolescence, then turns to the Cambridge undergraduate experience that formed the intellectual foundation of his adult work. He chose Cambridge over Oxford, he says, because of his interest in mathematics (53). That interest quickly connected him with Alfred North Whitehead, a connection that would have a profound impact on his work and the way it has been read over the years. Russell notes that things went well for him from the moment he first arrived at Cambridge in 1890: "All the people then in residence who subsequently became my intimate friends called on me during the first week of term. At the time I did not know why they did so, but I discovered afterwards that Whitehead, who had examined for scholarships, had told people to look out for Sanger and me" (53). In the midst of describing these friendships, Russell speaks of John McTaggart, under whose influence he says he was a Hegelian "for two or three years": "McTaggart was a Hegelian and at that time still young and enthusiastic. He had a great intellectual influence upon my generation, though in retrospect I do not think it was a very good one" (60). Russell anticipates a more painful moment in his relationship with Cambridge when he notes that "Although after 1898 I no longer accepted McTaggart's philosophy, I remained fond of him until an occasion during the first war, when he asked me no longer to come and see him because he could not bear my opinions. He followed this up by taking a leading part in having me turned out of my lectureship" (60). Among his Cambridge friends, Russell includes G.E. Moore, who was also influenced by McTaggart "and was for a short time a Hegelian. But he emerged more quickly than I did, and it was largely his conversation that led me to abandon both Kant and Hegel. In spite of his being two years younger than me, he greatly influenced my philosophical outlook" (61). Apart from the description of friends, the sequence is philosophically significant: from Hegelianism under the influence of older thinkers through abandonment of both Kant and Hegel under the influence of a younger contemporary. That turn anticipates the philosophical contour of Russell's life, which he constructs as a move away from "pure" mathematics and philosophy under the pressure of contemporary events. It has some bearing on Russell's later description of the difference between his philosophy and Whitehead's. Speaking of Whitehead, Russell writes, "He had always had a leaning towards Kant, of whom I thought ill, and when he began to develop his own philosophy he was considerably influenced by Bergson. He was impressed by the aspect of unity in the universe, and considered that it is only through this aspect that scientific inferences can be justified. My temperament led me in the opposite direction, but I doubt whether pure reason could have decided which of us was more nearly in the right. Those who prefer his outlook might say that while he aimed at bringing comfort to plain people I aimed at bringing discomfort to philosophers; one who favoured my outlook might retort that while he pleased philosophers, I amused plain people. However that may be, we went our separate ways, though affection survived to the last" (129-130). The image of twentieth century philosophies being defined largely by their orientations to Kant and Hegel is telling, as is the influence of Bergson on Whitehead and process thought. Equally telling in Russell's construction of his own life is the extent to which affection (one of the three passions, recall, that he said drove his life) had to "survive" philosophical partings that trace divergent searches for knowledge. As Russell understood subsequent events, affection would be equally tested by "pity" for the suffering of humankind. On more than one occasion, Russell's path diverged from that of friends not only because their philosophical quests took different turns but also because of their political engagements.

Emblematic of Russell's style, as a person, as a philosopher, as a writer, is the sequence on pages 149-150 in which he moves from a discussion of a particular problem in *Principia Mathematica* to the sudden realization that he no longer loved his (first) wife Alys: "At the end of the Lent term," he writes, "Alys and I went back to Fernhurst, where I set to work to write out the logical deduction of mathematics which afterwards became *Principia Mathematica*. I thought the work was nearly finished, but in the month of May I had an intellectual set-back almost as severe as the emotional setback I had had in February. Cantor had a proof that there is no greatest number, and it seemed to me that the number of all the things in the world ought to be the greatest possible. Accordingly, I examined this proof with some minuteness, and endeavoured to apply it to the class of all the things there are. This led me to consider those classes which are not members of themselves, and to ask whether the class of such classes is or is not a member of itself. I found that either answer implies its contradictory. At first I supposed that I should be able to overcome the contradiction quite easily, and that probably there was some trivial error in the reasoning. Gradually, however, it became clear that this was not the case. Burali-Forti had already discovered a similar contradiction, and it turned out on logical analysis that there was an affinity with the ancient Greek contradiction about Epimenides the Cretan, who said that all Cretans are liars. A contradiction essentially similar to that of Epimenides can be created by giving a person a piece of paper on which is written: 'The statement on the other side of this paper is false.' The person turns the paper over, and finds on the other side: 'The statement on the other side of this paper is true.' It seemed unworthy of a grown man to spend his time on such trivialities, but what was I to do?" As Russell continues to wrestle with this "trivial" problem, he turns to "a more serious blow": "I went out bicycling one afternoon, and suddenly, as I was riding along a country road, I realised that I no longer loved Alys" (150). In each case, theoretical and practical, an abrupt insight is followed by a long period of struggle, often punctuated by additional abrupt insights. This mirrors Russell's understanding of the distinction between his philosophy and Whitehead's: it is not that they disagreed on the unitive drive of philosophical system but rather that they dealt with paradox differently. Whitehead, a philosopher of internal relations like Hegel, subsumed paradox in system. Russell was more likely to see systems shattered by paradoxes, and that could send him off in what appeared to be an entirely new direction where he would likely encounter new paradoxes—an outlook that certainly adds interest to the telling of his life.

Russell connects both his difficulty with *Principia Mathematica* and "the strain of unhappiness" to "the change in the nature of his work" after 1910: "The strain of unhappiness combined with very severe intellectual work, in the years from 1902 till 1910, was very great. At the time I often wondered whether I should ever come out at the other end of the tunnel in which I seemed to be. I used to stand on the footbridge at Kennington, near Oxford, watching the trains go by, and determining that tomorrow I would place myself under one of them. But when the morrow came I always found myself hoping that perhaps *Principia Mathematica* would be finished some day. Moreover the difficulties appeared to me in the nature of a challenge, which it would be pusillanimous not to meet and overcome. So I persisted, and in the end the work was finished, but my intellect never quite recovered from the strain. I have been ever since definitely less capable of dealing with difficult abstractions than I was before. This is part, though by no means the whole, of the reason for the change in the nature of my work" (155). The larger reasons are Russell's engagement with the world (the third of the three "passions" that he said determined the course of his life) and the understanding of ethics as a laboratory science to which he alluded in a 1902 letter to Gilbert Murray (161). Russell's engagement in the world and his conviction that "the true method of Ethics [is] inference from empirically ascertained facts, to be obtained in that moral laboratory which life offers to those whose eyes are open to it" (161) make it almost inconceivable that his work

would not turn under the impact of war and preparation for war.

Whether one agrees with his inferences or not, Russell's observation of "immediate concrete moral experiences" (161) is one of the richest aspects of the autobiography. The observation often comes enfolded in his engaging comments about people with whom he was associated during his life. When he begins commenting in the second volume (pp.238-504 of this edition) on the First World War, he says he "found a minor degree of comfort in the conversation of Santayana, who was at Cambridge at that time. He was a neutral, and in any case he had not enough respect for the human race to care whether it destroyed itself or not. His calm, philosophical detachment, though I had no wish to imitate it, was soothing to me" (241). He reports that he met T.S. Eliot in New Oxford Street in October 1914: "I did not know he was in Europe, but I found he had come to England from Berlin. I naturally asked him what he thought of the War. 'I don't know,' he replied, 'I only know that I am not a pacifist.' That is to say, he considered any excuse good enough for homicide" (242). He speaks of his brief friendship with D.H. Lawrence: "I liked Lawrence's fire, I liked the energy and passion of his feelings, I liked his belief that something very fundamental was needed to put the world right. I agreed with him in thinking that politics could not be divorced from individual psychology. I felt him to be a man of a certain imaginative genius, and, at first, when I felt inclined to disagree with him, I thought that perhaps his insight into human nature was deeper than mine. It was only gradually that I came to feel him a positive force for evil and that he came to have the same feeling about me" (243). The contrast in these descriptions highlights the interplay between engagement and philosophical detachment in Russell's outlook. One of his great strengths as an ethicist and political philosopher is that he did not try to resolve the tension created by that interplay. His conviction that Lawrence was "a positive force for evil" derived at least in part from Lawrence's inability to embrace the tension: all passion, he found no tension to embrace. On the other hand, Russell could appreciate both Santayana's detachment and Eliot's confession of ignorance, not because he agreed with their stances (his criticism of Eliot's is clear) but because detachment and ignorance prevented both from becoming positive forces for evil. In Russell's case, there was sufficient passion to drive a lifetime of engagement in political issues related to war and peace; but there was also sufficient detachment to allow him to modify his views and change his positions (as reflected, for example, in his non-pacifist stance during the Second World War).

Russell's description of his abandonment of pacifism at the time of the Second World War illustrates his experimental approach to ethics: "This attitude," he writes, "had become unconsciously insincere. I had been able to view with reluctant acquiescence the possibility of the supremacy of the Kaiser's Germany; I thought that, although this would be an evil, it would not be so great an evil as a world war and its aftermath. But Hitler's Germany was a different matter. I found the Nazis utterly revolting—cruel, bigoted, and stupid. Morally and intellectually they were alike odious to me. Although I clung to my pacifist convictions, I did so with increasing difficulty. When in 1940, England was threatened with invasion, I realized that, throughout the First War, I had never seriously envisaged the possibility of utter defeat. I found this possibility unbearable, and at last consciously and definitely decided that I must support what was necessary for victory in the Second War, however difficult victory might be to achieve, and however painful its consequences" (430). Russell describes this process as being "the last stage in the slow abandonment of many of the beliefs that had come to me in the moment of 'conversion' in 1901" (430). The process, he says, was as much the result of private experience as of world events; but the important point is that the change was a result of conscious reflection on experience—an experimental process that involved both principled engagement in the world and the possibility of modifying principles on the basis of experience. Russell writes that, while he "had come to agree with Santayana that there is no such

thing as ethical knowledge" (523), this did not mean that ethical concepts were irrelevant to history. He adopted as his "guiding thought the principle that ethics is derived from passions and that there is no valid method of travelling from passion to what ought to be done" (523). While he writes that he is not satisfied with Hume's maxim that "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions," it is "the best he can do" (523). For Russell, then, ethics and politics are matters of passionate and concrete engagement, not dispassionate and abstract reflection. This guided his involvement in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament as it had earlier guided his resistance to conscription and support of conscientious objection during the First World War—and as it guided his rejection of pacifism in response to Hitler.

Russell's writing near the end of his life illustrates the passionate engagement that imparts consistency to the many directions his long life took. On reaching 90, he wrote in the *Observer* that "it is natural for those who are energetic and adventurous to feel in youth a very passionate and restless desire for some important achievement, without any clear prevision of what, with luck, it may be. In old age, one becomes more aware of what has, and what has not, been achieved. What one can further do becomes a smaller proportion of what has already been done, and this makes personal life less feverish" (628). From this vantage point, he comments on history: "Ever since 1914, at almost every crucial moment, the wrong thing has been done. We are told that the West is engaged in defending the 'Free World', but freedom such as existed before 1914 is now as dim a memory as crinolines. Supposedly wise men assured us in 1914 that we were fighting a war to end war, but it turned out to be a war to end peace. We were told that Prussian militarism was all that had to be put down; and, ever since, militarism has continuously increased. Murderous humbug, such as would have shocked almost everyone when I was young, is now solemnly mouthed by eminent statesmen. My own country, led by men without imagination and without capacity for adaptation to the modern world, pursues a policy which, if not changed, will lead almost inevitably to the complete extermination of all the inhabitants of Britain. Like Cassandra, I am doomed to prophesy evil and not be believed. Her prophecies came true. I desperately hope that mine will not... The way in which the world has developed during the last fifty years has brought about in me changes opposite to those which are supposed to be typical of old age. One is frequently assured by men who have no doubt of their own wisdom that old age should bring serenity and a larger vision in which seeming evils are viewed as means to ultimate good. I cannot accept any such view. Serenity, in the present world, can only be achieved through blindness or brutality. Unlike what is conventionally expected, I became gradually more and more of a rebel. I was not born rebellious. Until 1914, I fitted more or less comfortably into the world as I found it. There were evils—great evils—but there was reason to think that they would grow less. Without having the temperament of a rebel, the course of events has made me gradually less and less able to acquiesce patiently in what is happening. A minority, though a growing one, feels as I do, and, so long as I live, it is with them that I must work" (628-629).

In a world where serenity still appears achievable only by blindness or brutality, Russell is an inspiring example of a philosopher who engaged the world with eyes open. In the postscript, Russell writes lucidly of both failure and hope: "I set out with a belief that love, free and courageous, could conquer the world without fighting. I came to support a bitter and terrible war. In these respects there was failure. But beneath all this load of failure I am still conscious of something that I feel to be victory. I may have conceived theoretical truth wrongly, but I was not wrong in thinking that there is such a thing, and that it deserves our allegiance. I may have thought the road to a world of free and happy human beings shorter than it is proving to be, but I was not wrong in thinking that such a world is possible, and that it is worthwhile to live with a view to bringing it nearer" (727-728). He lived, he says, "in the pursuit of a vision, both personal and social. Personal: to care for what is noble, for what is beautiful, for what is

gentle: to allow moments of insight to give wisdom at more mundane times. Social: to see in imagination the society that is to be created, where individuals grow freely, and where hate and greed and envy die because there is nothing to nourish them" (728). At the end of his life, even the horrors of the twentieth century had not shaken his belief in this vision, and that makes him an exemplar worthy of reconsideration at the beginning of the twenty-first.

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