

Bertrand Russell and the decline of mysticism

by Andrew Brink

I

BERTRAND RUSSELL CONFESSED that "Underlying all occupations and all pleasures I have felt since early youth the pain of solitude." He added: "What Spinoza calls 'the intellectual love of God' has seemed to me the best thing to live by, but I have not had even the somewhat abstract God that Spinoza allowed himself to whom to attach my intellectual love. I have loved a ghost, and in loving a ghost my inmost self has itself become spectral."¹ It may be surprising that early in the century Russell's "vain search for God" had led him toward mysticism. Too late in the development of scepticism to be a Christian mystic, Russell nevertheless had a strong mystical urge which took several forms: Pythagorean mathematical mysticism, nostalgia for a lost past (being in love with a ghost), aesthetic feelings about nature and poetry and, finally, sensual and erotic mysticism. All offered experiences of high intensity calculated to dispel feelings of isolation and deprivation. His literary efforts prior to the Great War testify to largely futile attempts to reach sustained mystical consciousness. By following Russell's changing views of mysticism we see his emergence from asceticism to erotic activism—from spare mathematical Platonism to a Don Juan-like eroticism, not so unabashed as D.H. Lawrence's sexual apocalypticism but allied to it. A failed mystic, Russell was to become a

¹ *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. II: 1914–44 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 38. Further references are given in the text.

prophet of sexual liberation, and I believe that his disappointed religious search and the continuing pain of isolation were the reasons.

To appreciate the strain that Russell put on mysticism as a concept we should be reminded of what traditionally mysticism has meant in the Christian west. For Dean W.R. Inge, writing in 1932 a preface to the seventh edition of *Christian Mysticism* (Bampton Lectures, 1899), mysticism is simply the purest form of prayer elevating the mind to God. Dean Inge's chief exemplars include not only St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila and St. Francis of Assisi but also the Alexandrian Plotinus, whose *Enneads* helped to merge Platonism with Christianity. Purity of prayer, sometimes taking the form of ecstatic or visionary moments, transformed the lives of each of these mystics leading to self-abandonment and an altered sense of reality. In *Mysticism* (1910) Evelyn Underhill describes the stages of disciplined awareness through which the mystic typically passes: awakening, purification, illumination, introversion, the dark night of the soul and a final unitive state fulfilling the journey to God as light and love. Underhill's historical analysis of the mystic way is documented with examples from St. Paul and the author of the Fourth Gospel to William Blake, the late eighteenth-century poet, painter and prophet. Together, these books establish norms for mystical awareness, shown to have been the outcome of only a very few privileged lives over the centuries.

Let us review Russell's quest for religious truth by looking at the origins of what may be called his ontological insecurity, at his conversion of 1901 and the writings following from it, preceding those associated with his "second conversion" during the love affair with Lady Ottoline Morrell. Nature mysticism is seen as early as 1888 in the "Greek Exercises", with mysticism remaining a central theme in writings on religion until his early forties when, in "Mysticism and Logic", he all but repudiated it in making the case for logic as the key to truth. But even in that essay the account of mysticism is surprisingly sympathetic.

So vehement an anti-Christian as Russell would not be expected to value mystical experience. The sharp debating points of "Why I Am Not a Christian" (1927) hardly recall his earlier anguished search for religious truth within the Christian church followed by his search for non-dogmatic forms of mysticism. A secularized language of mysticism was, however, always with him, as in the final paragraph of his *Autobiography*:

I have lived 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. (III: 223)

In his strenuous anti-Christian moods, as in debate with Father Copleston on the existence of God (1948), Russell allowed that while he saw no reason to think that religious experience proved the existence of God, it could improve moral character. As he put it, "I've had experiences myself that have altered my character profoundly. And I thought at the time at any rate that it was altered for the good. Those experiences were important, but they did not involve the existence of something outside me...."² As early as "Seems, Madam? Nay, It Is" (1897), Russell had made exactly this point: "The value of the [religious] experiences in question must ... be based wholly on their emotional quality, and not, as Bradley would seem to suggest, on any superior degree of truth which may attach to them."³ Indeed in "On the Distinction between the Psychological and Metaphysical Points of View" (c. 1894) Russell had cautioned about the vague feelings conjured up in F.H. Bradley's doctrines and about the danger of plunging into mysticism.⁴ "The Free Man's Worship" (1903) states the need for stoicism in the realization "[t]hat Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving", that we "are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms".⁵ Though we may "burn with passion for eternal things", it is unlikely that intuition will unlock the universe's secrets.⁶ The point about the moral good of mystical contemplation was repeated in "Mysticism and Logic" (1914) and also appeared in a review of Dean Inge's *The Philosophy of Plotinus* (1919).

By the time Russell went up to Cambridge in 1890 he had jettisoned the Christian metaphysic of his childhood, including the doctrine of the soul's immortality (see *Collected Papers*, I: 47). But he was still susceptible to the appeal of systems showing that the universe cares for man, as neo-Hegelianism seemed to say. Neo-Hegelianism was the dominant philosophy at Cambridge and Russell briefly adhered to "the Absolute", a metaphysical term more suggestive of mysticism than of empiricism. However, about 1897, influenced by G.E. Moore, Russell gave up the doctrines of Bradley, the Oxford philosopher, and of his

Cambridge tutor, J.M.E. McTaggart, whose form of idealism no longer seemed tenable. But Russell could never rid himself of idealism altogether, with his investigations into the philosophy of mathematics always having some background of it. As he said: "I came to think of mathematics ... as an abstract edifice subsisting in a Platonic heaven and only reaching the world of sense in an impure and degraded form."⁷ He longed for a sort of nirvana of number, a revelation of the eternal transcending the forms of time. In "The Study of Mathematics" (1902) he speaks of the "supreme beauty" and "stern perfection" of its demonstrations, affirming the power of reason to delineate a realm of the ideal.⁸ Disillusioned, he wrote in 1959, "I cannot any longer find any mystical satisfaction in the contemplation of mathematical truth", but in the early years of the century his hope had the strength of a metaphysical hunger.⁹ The complications of human relations both urged him to take refuge in abstractions and pulled him away from them when moral claims became too much to avoid.

In February 1901 Russell underwent what he called a "sort of mystic illumination", prompting a tenderness toward suffering humanity and setting aside, if only temporarily, the "habit of analysis" (*Auto.*, I: 146). The conversion emerged from an aesthetic experience of Greek tragedy followed by an empathetic response to Mrs. Whitehead's acute suffering in an angina attack. Russell was prompted to think of the "solitude of each human soul" and to identify with Mrs. Whitehead's young son who had to be taken from his mother's side (*ibid.*). From the fact that Russell was moved so deeply and, as he claimed, permanently transformed by the insight, we may infer that repressed feelings had been activated. It is probable that the event pierced defences against grief and sorrow for the deaths of his parents and sister before he was four. The altered state of consciousness dramatically changed what he thought life was about, preparing for humane endeavours in the world rather than maintaining exclusive commitment to the technical problems of philosophy. The conversion's effect was to validate intuition as a way of knowing in the moral realm, but over time it had some curious results.

II

The first literary result of Russell's transformed consciousness in the conversion was "The Pilgrimage of Life" (1902-03). These twenty-one

² Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 158.

³ *Cambridge Essays, 1888-99*, ed. K. Blackwell, A. Brink, N. Griffin, R.A. Rempel and J.G. Slater, Vol. 1 of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* (London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1983), p. 110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁵ *Contemplation and Action, 1902-14*, ed. R.A. Rempel, A. Brink and M. Moran, Vol. 12 of the *Collected Papers* (London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985), pp. 66-7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁷ Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 209.

⁸ *Contemplation and Action*, p. 86.

⁹ *My Philosophical Development*, p. 212.

lyrical prose meditations may well have been attempts to resume the mourning process for his lost parents and sister; their melancholy and pessimism suggest origins in the writer's own preoccupation with an unreachable past. They are written in a language of the soul shunning an inhospitable world and looking to the moral compensations of courage, love and peace as possibilities for man, qualities not inherent in a universe lacking the certainty of God. Typifying the condition of radical spiritual loss, Russell wrote: "We are all orphans and exiles, lost children wandering in the night, with hopes, ideals, aspirations that must not be choked by a heartless world."¹⁰ He examines in his own case the perception of the conversion that "the loneliness of the human soul is unendurable" (*Auto.*, I: 146), asking radical questions about our ultimate support in a universe devoid, as it seemed to him, of God. His consolation is less than might be wished: nature "speaking straight to experience and sorrow" and "eternal beauty ... ready to stanch the wounds which man inflicts on man...."¹¹ The darker shades of melancholia in these writings do not yield to such glimmers of hope. Mystical transformation is more discussed than enacted as in the meditation on "Religion", while the psychological issues of grief, sadness and mourning are never quite brought to the surface where they could be confronted and perhaps healed rather than projected as cosmic pessimism. No doubt the attempt at imaginative closure with the painful past gave some relief, but the contact was not one he could sustain, leading as it would to painfully dichotomized feelings of loss and rage. The struggle would not then have been between reason and emotion, as is often maintained of Russell, but between repressed contending emotions from which no easy deliverance could be envisaged. As far as is known, "The Pilgrimage of Life" was abandoned incomplete, with its self-analytic mode of psychic survival largely discredited. His vision of man alone in an uncaring universe prompted an appeal to something more reassuringly personal, and it is not to be wondered that, with the failure of his marriage to Alys Pearsall Smith, Russell should find other companionship. In 1911 he began an affair with Lady Ottoline Morrell which stimulated the next two stages of Russell's mysticism, the Spi-

¹⁰ *Contemplation and Action*, p. 42. Russell's view of mystical contemplation as retrieval of the past owes much to his reading of the Belgian Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck's *Le Temple Enseveli*, as he explained to Helen Flexner in a letter of 2 August 1902.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 47. See my "Bertrand Russell's 'The Pilgrimage of Life' and Mourning", *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 10 (Winter 1983): 311-31, and "Death, Depression and Creativity: a Psychobiological Approach to Bertrand Russell", *Mosaic*, 15 (Winter 1982): 89-103, for the background of loss.

noztic and the erotic.

III

Russell's affair with Lady Ottoline was an adventure in expanding the sensibilities, centering as it did on a quest for beauty in nature and the arts. Religious questions, however, were to bring strife. One can find in the polarizing conflict revealed in their love letters the explanation for Russell's most remarkable psychological discovery about the split nature of the human psyche. Like the great imaginative writers, Shakespeare in *The Tempest* and Milton in *Paradise Lost* for instance, Russell hit upon the bipolar archetype as his central organizing image in "Prisons". Remarkable though this writing sometimes is, regrettably his powers of imaginative creation are not up to the core material in "Prisons", material derived from contact with the conflicted psyche, the author's own inner division. The exercise was intellectual, to unify the opposites discovered in the confrontation of two very different personalities. Russell wanted a product of the physical union between himself and Lady Ottoline, and the book "Prisons" was to be their "child". Thus the act of writing was itself a symbolic unification—of male with female, unbelief with belief—into a non-theistic mystical tract.

In contrast to the cosmic loneliness of "The Free Man's Worship", "Prisons" sees the universe as abounding in opportunity for self-enlargement through impersonal contemplation and love. "The essence of religion is union with the universe achieved by subordination of the demands of Self", Russell wrote.¹² This high-minded ascetic demand contrasts with the sensual delights spoken of in the love letters, and we do not know that Russell ever entered upon the austerities implied in his new view of religious purpose. Nonetheless, he writes of striving for a monistic contemplative attitude independent of beliefs about the actual nature of the universe, a sort of "cosmic consciousness" without a supporting metaphysic. The teaching of "Prisons" is one of emotional self-help, of a sort of purgation to achieve a purified state of mind, setting aside action in favour of contemplation. This was to prepare for a sort of "communion of saints", as the outline for this incomplete work puts it.

The title "Prisons" probably reflects the chapter title in Spinoza's *Ethics*, "Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions". To Russell, "Prisons" meant incarceration of the self, an idea carrying over

¹² *Contemplation and Action*, p. 105.

the personal anguish of "The Pilgrimage of Life".¹³ Mysticism as a delving into the painful personal past seems to have been too much to sustain, and the new writing strives for impersonality. Self-imprisonment prevents contact with external revivifying forces in the universe of Spinoza's pantheistic vision: "Self, children, friends, country, all prisons", Russell wrote in an outline.

What is [a] prison? Self-interest, subjectivity, insistence. Why a prison? because [it] shuts out the love, the knowledge, and the attainment of goods otherwise possible.¹⁴

The universe, he adds, "forbids the freedom of omnipotence; it permits the freedom of contemplation"; that is, it is unnatural for anyone to want ultimate control over his environment and the people in it. Contemplation counteracts egotism, freeing and reassuring the lonely soul. Thus Russell talks about the essential schizoid problem of withdrawal out of fear of there being nothing there, a fear poignantly pictured in "The Free Man's Worship". The weakened schizoid ego may well imagine an empty universe, devoid of caring and, in compensation, try to build a system of necessary intellectual dependencies which make the universe less frightening. But mathematics and logic are too inhuman to be completely satisfying to an intellect even so large as Russell's. Spinoza's austere intellectuality applied to questions of human meaning was a reassuring model by which to reappraise the erotic feelings aroused by Lady Ottoline.

Spinoza clearly delineates the psychology of selfhood which by enslavement to passion and loss of inner harmony prevents true freedom. He wrote, "In so far as men are prey to passion, they cannot, in that respect, be said to be naturally in harmony" (Book IV, Prop. XXXII).¹⁵ Assailed by his passions, man is "variable and inconstant" (Bk. IV, Prop. XXXIII), and these variable passions "can be contrary to one another" (Bk. IV, Prop. XXXIV). It would be more than two centuries before this insight about inner division would become known in psychodynamic theory as "splitting". In *Studies in Hysteria* (1893-95) Freud outlined splitting of the ego as a process which seriously weakens the individual's capacity to face life confidently. Since Freud, the concept of ego-splitting has been elaborated, for instance by W.R.D. Fair-

¹³ *Ibid.*, cf. p. 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁵ Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1955), p. 207.

bairn, to explain the divided-against-oneself feeling that poorly integrated people struggle against. The cause of ego-weakness, appearing when defensive functions are less than effective, is said to reflect "splitting" of the ego into antithetical part structures. These are traceable to "good" and "bad" experiences with parents at the beginning of life. If the parents have been lost, as happened to Russell before the age of four, there is bound to be residual depressiveness. When, in addition, the substitute caretaking is domineering, as that given by Russell's grandmother, conditions are set for a turbulent and rebellious ego. The resulting inner division is certainly capable of later modification, of which one means is symbolic integration by mathematical speculations and mystical vision. I see Russell's symbolic pattern-making in this era, heightened by good and bad romances, as having an ego-reparative intention, his literary efforts directed toward proving to himself that a unified configuration could contain split and contending elements. These elements, desire and fear of capture, the stuff of his "second conversion" stimulated by Lady Ottoline, typify the unstable romantic alliance to ease the pain of being together. Time and again Russell admitted to injuring what he most loved.

I have spoilt another opportunity—put another nail in the coffin of former joys—but life is long, and the battle is not lost—it is never lost till death. I *will* win through in the end—and never never will I give up the fight with Satan. ... I love you with such an aching love—when I hurt you, all the tragedy of the world seems condensed into the one dreadful thing—and yet I go on, and hurt you again and again. Why? I don't know—it is a mystery to me. And all the while the greatness and sacredness of love remains in my heart, though I sin against it. (No. 814, 21 June 1913)

This is precisely the passionate disharmony Spinoza identified in the seventeenth century as most deeply troubling to the human heart. In "The Perplexities of John Forstice" (1912), a novella whose discussion of attitudes to life turn upon the protagonist's guilt about his ailing wife, mysticism's relief from fearful contraries is again considered in the statement by Nasispo, whose name was intended as an anagram for Spinoza. Nasispo speaks of a realm of pure Being to which the contemplative may aspire, leaving behind all hopes and fears. Wrapt into "Spinoza's intellectual love of God, that 'infinite love with which God loves himself'", the contemplative is freed of all worldly desire; but was this an actual possibility for Russell?¹⁶ Another voice of his divided

¹⁶ *Contemplation and Action*, p. 138.

inner state, Chenskoff the Russian novelist, puts the matter more realistically. Chenskoff complains of human relations not satisfying his craving for beauty and speaks of "the infinite pain that lies at the heart of life"—the source of all great achievement, as it is said.¹⁷ (Of all the speakers in "Forstice", Chenskoff enunciates most clearly Russell's view of creativity as pursuit of a "vision just beyond our reach", an essence of being that we need to be whole.) He goes on to sound very much like the Russell of "Pilgrimage" when he speaks of "escape from the pursuing spectre", of "the terrible sorrows of childhood" and of having to learn acceptance of "the deepest horror in the dark caverns of the Soul", perhaps the empty space left by unmourned losses.¹⁸ But here the fictive voice can change the subject, as indeed happens in Part III, Forstice's uncle's love story.

To return to "Prisons", "Action and Contemplation" explains the monism of contemplation as not dividing "objects into two opposed camps", which would be the way of power. Rather it is the way of wisdom Russell wishes to follow, enlargement of soul to reach a unity of action impregnated by contemplation. The essay ends with a poetic figure commending love as our highest good and seeing its object "as part of the whole ocean of Being", reminiscent of the "oceanic feeling" of which Romaine Rolland spoke to Freud.¹⁹ "Freedom and Bondage" seems to qualify this oceanic vision by saying that contemplative freedom is never complete, that desire always limits it, a significant confession in view of the emerging sexual mysticism, precursor of his phase as propagandist for a relaxed sexual morality. Desire and freedom from bondage increasingly take on primacy in Russell's thought about sexuality, with the spiritual objective of "union with the universe" fading into the background of idealism about which he chose to say less as his relational life grew more complicated.²⁰ Since the intended order of "Prisons" is conjectural, it is impossible to say that the idealistic passages on "The Good" were meant to close the writing. As it stands, they determine the tone of the whole, dealing in "Wisdom" with reconciliation of "the two souls in man", the animal and the divine. Reason is invoked to mediate man's inner conflicts, but the writing is inconclusive. All that Russell wished to say on the subject he summarized in the final paragraphs of "The Essence of Religion", the last of his published statements partial to mysticism.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 141–2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 103–4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

Russell's self-teaching in "Prisons" did not carry him very far toward the integration of ego his tormented love affair with Lady Ottoline told him he needed. Spinozistic conceptions are too rarefied to touch the psychological issues that emerged: unmet dependency needs and acute sexual ambivalence. "Prisons" may be mainly wishful thinking, an attempt to escape inner pain by means of Spinoza's ethical system with which Russell hoped Lady Ottoline would merge her Christian beliefs. Their involvement, and his ego needs in particular, were too complex for the attempted reparative function of this writing. Russell speaks of a contemplative world of freedom where "the worst sorrows do not survive", but what were these sorrows; did he have to leave them so substanceless when, as his letters to Lady Ottoline show, spiritual autobiography was his true literary metier?²¹ Russell was obsessed with trying to draw the essence of spirituality out of his all too human experience: he wanted to record once and for all the route to truth, but he lacked a language in which to speak of relationship and sexuality—a lack he would try to make good in the next phase of his mystical search. "Prisons" remains at the level of abstraction, enquiring into ideal unity, brilliantly symbolizing dualism within the ego but failing to enunciate a new religion of love and reason.

IV

There was a pre-Great War revival of mystical religion in England nurtured by such people as Dean Inge and Evelyn Underhill. The war pushed this into the background, and Russell's concern with the topic subsided; after "Mysticism and Logic" he had little to say about it.²² The war loosened conventional morality, with Russell himself entering upon another love affair with Lady Constance Maleson. The Bloomsbury emphasis on relationships took over from asceticism, leading to Russell prescribing his liberal view in *Marriage and Morals* (1929). A sort of coital mysticism is implicit, and anxiety about potency is detectable in this and related popular writings: but the tone of *Marriage and Morals* is that of objective social science designed to banish superstition and prejudice from the free sexual adventures most young people are assumed to want. Russell became increasingly favourable in his notices

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²² Russell's changing view of mystical experience appears in such letters to Lady Ottoline as nos. 176, 342, 427 and 1,321. For a psychiatric view of mystical experience as adaptive see Paul C. Horton, M.D., "The Mystical Experience as a Suicide Preventive", *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 130 (March 1973): 294–6.

of such sexual liberators as Margaret Sanger, Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis. The "longing for love" with which Russell heads up his list of objectives in "What I Have Lived For" (*Auto.*, 1: 13) displaced the stringent moralism of a Victorian upbringing. Was his affirmation of sexuality not a negation of all he had hoped for from Spinoza's "intellectual love of God"? Or does it show that mysticism was only a replaceable sublimation for the sexual behaviour he all along wanted to enact?

Russell well knew that the traditional mystics' desires for direct union with God were often spoken of in orgasmic language, and that aim-inhibited sexuality had much to do with austerity in the cloister. He himself stated that mysticism "is primarily a sublimation of sex",²³ Perhaps the traumatic public events of the early part of this century led to cynicism about the motives for self-regulation which historically had redirected biological urges into spiritual channels. Self-expression and self-gratification came too rapidly to the fore, with Russell easily moving into the vanguard of a changed morality. The liberationists' cry for release from monogamy could not envisage the amount of anguish for interpersonal damage that a too quick relaxation of the rules would cause. Surely there can be few cases on record of so rapid an alteration of course as Russell's from mystical ascetic to sponsor of permissive sexuality. His four marriages, numerous liaisons and propaganda for easier divorce seem to cancel from the record his earlier mysticism. He became captive of an anti-Spinozistic sexual passion, almost a caricature Don Juan adrift in a world without moral bearings. He could find no justification for other than a relativistic ethics. It is easy to condemn him as a harbinger of the age of narcissism, which no doubt he would have deplored in its full-blown state. Russell found it impossible to be a mystic in any accepted meaning of the term. The pain of solitude which he suffered was no doubt assuaged but never removed by his mystical longings and experiences. He could not be a creative writer either, striving for epiphanies and "moments of being" as did, for instance, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Undoubtedly Russell's brush in 1901 with a truer form of mysticism survived in his wish for a warless world.

Department of English
McMaster University

²³ "On Bad Passions", in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism and Other Essays, 1914-19*, ed. J.G. Slater, Vol. 8 of the *Collected Papers* (London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986), p. 274.