

Bertrand Russell and the Greeks¹

by John R. Lenz

BERTRAND RUSSELL WAS raised in the Victorian era, but, unlike most aristocrats of the time, he was educated at home and avoided the usual classical education. Yet his works abound in references to the Greeks and Romans, whether to ideas of their philosophers or to incidents from their history. Indeed, few of his writings lack such references. The heritage of Greek civilization was always important to Russell, in several different ways. The breadth of his life and thought make him a representative figure of one modern view of the importance of the Greeks, between the Victorian era² and our own.

This paper will consider a few topics concerning Russell's attitude towards the Greeks, and towards classical learning: First, his education and his own educational principles; then, the famous "conversion" incident of 1901 which included his reaction to Euripides' play, *Hippolytus*; third, the implications of Russell's attitude for his study of Greek mathematics and philosophy, and for his politics; and, finally, the enduring importance of Greek civilization to him.

Russell's education and educational principles

T.S. Eliot once wrote, "It is a public misfortune that Mr. Bertrand Russell did not have a classical education."³ We hope to arrive at a different estimate by the end of this paper.

¹ I am grateful to Kenneth Blackwell, Harry Ruja, and John G. Slater for supplying me with essential references.

² R. Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1980), and F.M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1981), both touch on changes in classical studies early in this century, particularly the First World War and the "Cambridge School".

³ S.P. Rosenbaum, review of *The Life of Bertrand Russell*, by Ronald W. Clark, in *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, reprinted in the *Newsletter* of the Bertrand Russell Society, no. 12 (Nov. 1976): 19.

Certainly, Russell himself was never grieved by his lack of a classical education. He hated the idea of having to learn dead languages.

Russell's grandmother kept him educated at home until age sixteen. The learning of Latin and Greek played only a small role in his tutelage. He did have some instruction in Greek from a tutor before he wrote the "Greek Exercises" notebook (1888–89), for besides being written in English using Greek characters, the journal contains a number of Greek words and constructions. These are halting attempts at the language. One look at their quality is enough to prove that Russell had little interest in learning Greek, and no desire to pursue it! He also had some Latin, since he quotes Horace in the same notebook.⁴ He later wrote, "I hated Latin and Greek, and thought it merely foolish to learn a language that nobody speaks."⁵

Similarly, Russell had Latin lessons at the "crammer's", the school to prepare him for entrance to Cambridge. At this school, he wrote an essay on language at age seventeen in which he contrasted outmoded languages, including Latin, unfavourably with modern ones.⁶ He then believed that language progressed in accordance with the growth of ideas. Essentially, he thought that dead languages, such as Latin, were obsolete, that they had been superseded by others increasingly capable of expressing more sophisticated ideas and feelings. The youthful Russell wrote of "the utter inability of [Latin] to express modern thought" (*Collected Papers*, I: 33).

He did show some youthful interest in the laws of language. A notebook of 1888 contains lists he drew up to check the validity of "Grimm's Law", which governs sound changes within Indo-European languages. Russell compiled fourteen pages of lists of related words in Greek, Latin, English and German, and came up with an hypothesis of his own. He also cites Grimm's Law in the "Greek Exercises" diary in the course of arguing for "the reign of law".⁷ That is, he was only interested in Greek and Latin for the scientific purpose of discovering

⁴ *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1: *Cambridge Essays, 1888–99*, ed. K. Blackwell, A. Brink, N. Griffin, R.A. Rempel and J.G. Slater (London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1983), pp. 4, 459–61, 14. The same notebook contains a brief Greek translation exercise from a standard school text, Xenophon's *Anabasis* (*ibid.*, p. 4).

⁵ *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872–1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 36. The quote continues: "I liked mathematics best, and next to mathematics I liked history."

⁶ "The Language of a Nation Is a Monument to Which Every Forcible Individual in the Course of Ages Has Contributed a Stone", *Collected Papers*, I: 33–5 (1889). The essay is in a notebook which also contains some Latin translations (*ibid.*, p. 23).

⁷ *Collected Papers*, I: 18, with annotation at I: 4, p. 376.

laws which would embody a more general truth than any one language would.

In later life, Russell felt his time spent on Latin and Greek had been “almost completely wasted”.⁸ He stated that he had learned the least amount of Greek compatible with his going to Cambridge (*Collected Papers*, I: 4).

A fair amount of Latin and Greek was required for the “Previous Examination” which all students matriculating at Cambridge had to pass before making progress in a degree course. The “Little-go”, as it was known colloquially, was divided into two parts, classical and mathematical. In classics, Russell faced the following test in October 1890:

The First Part embraces one Gospel in the original Greek, one Latin Classic and one Greek (for example, two books of Ovid’s *Fasti* and one book of Herodotus). In each of these subjects passages are set for translation, and questions on the subject-matter, grammar, &c. There is also a paper of easy passages of Latin taken from other books, to be translated with the help of a dictionary, and a paper on Latin and Greek accident and syntax.⁹

Russell acquitted himself well, with a “first class” in this part, as well as in the second, mathematical part (*Collected Papers*, I: 389). The amount of Latin and Greek required is equivalent, for each language, to what is today covered in a modern American university curriculum in one and one-half to two academic years. Russell would easily have been prepared for the exam by his eighteen months of cramming at B.A. Green’s Tutors, from May 1888 until his scholarship exam in December 1889.¹⁰ It would be reasonable to assume that his “cramming” there included some Greek as well as Latin. Thereafter, there

⁸ *Education and the Good Life* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), p. 28. In a letter of 1955, he reminisced about the Latin textbook “on which I wasted so much fruitless labour”: *Dear Bertrand Russell ...*, ed. B. Feinberg and R. Kasrils (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 141. The date he then recalled, “70 years ago”, is surely an approximation, but may suggest tutelage at Pembroke Lodge before entering the crammer’s in 1888.

⁹ *The Student’s Guide to the University of Cambridge*, 5th ed. (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, 1893), pp. 17–18; it is slightly less demanding than the 4th edition. (1880). Questions on “subject-matter” were fairly new. The regulations published in the 1893 edition were those in effect in Russell’s day, for an October sitting is provided for in them, but not in the 4th ed.

¹⁰ J.E. Littlewood tells of cramming Greek for the purpose in four weeks (in 1903), and states that a man could do it from scratch in six intensive weeks; “The record was ... 3”: *Littlewood’s Miscellany*, ed. B. Bollobás (Cambridge: University Press, 1986), p. 132.

is no sign that he concerned himself with the languages before the “Little-go” was held in the following October, although his diary from this period shows that he persevered with mathematical work.¹¹

The Cambridge student handbook itself is somewhat apologetic. It mentions “easy passages” (above), and even the previous, slightly stricter regulations state, “The Previous Examination ... is necessarily easy. The standard is low, and will be so ...” (4th ed. [1880], p. 21). In fact, at Cambridge, classics had always played second fiddle to mathematics. Trinity had been the first college to institute a Classical Tripos, beginning in 1824. Even then it had been specified that the Classical Tripos “should not be of such a searching character as to militate against the zealous pursuit of mathematics.”¹²

The requirements for Greek and Latin (which reflected emphasis on them in the secondary schools) were now waning. The trend is visible within Russell’s family. The same master who awarded Bertrand his mathematical prize (in 1893) had earlier (at Harrow) awarded his father a Latin prize. Another generation back, “Lord John Russell [had once] passed the time at Geneva in translating a book of the *Odyssey*.”¹³ And Russell’s so-called “godfather”, Mill, was heavily steeped in the classics.

It was an educational system which insisted on the rudiments of Latin and Greek for examination purposes, without integrating them into the life of the times, that Russell rebelled against, both as a student and in his later writings. At Cambridge, he met vestiges of a Victorian classicism which he found stifling. An anecdote reveals his disgust with a don who once wished a woman a happy birthday with the words, “Now, my dear, you have lasted just as long as the Peloponnesian War” (*Auto.*, I: 66). Russell himself was responsible for changing G.E. Moore from a classicist into a philosopher, by Moore’s own admission.¹⁴

The young Russell was a late Victorian, interested in scientific progress. His scientific attitude to the classics is shown by his first exposure to them, by way of Euclid. He tells in his *Autobiography* how at first he would not agree with his brother’s insistence that the axioms must be accepted without proof. He believed that his refusal to take the text on its authority was the beginning of his most important work on the foundations of mathematics. Significantly, his doubting of Euclid is

¹¹ *Collected Papers*, Vol. 1, Paper 9; *Auto.*, I: 43.

¹² M.L. Clarke, *Classical Education in Britain, 1500–1900* (Cambridge: University Press, 1959), pp. 104–5.

¹³ Jenkyns, p. 199.

¹⁴ Quoted in A.J. Ayer, *Russell and Moore: the Analytical Heritage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1971), pp. 138–9.

recounted on the same page of his *Autobiography* (1: 36) as is his hatred of Latin and Greek, quoted above. To Russell, accepting the classics on authority, just because they were classics, was as bad as accepting traditional religion.

It was not only the neglect of science that worried him, but the neglect of modern literature and history as well. Mill had written: “The battle of Marathon, even as an event in English history, is more important than the battle of Hastings.”¹⁵ For political reasons, too, Russell believed that a classical education was part of an outmoded aristocratic ethos which reinforced the *status quo*.¹⁶ He regarded the motive for acquiring classical learning as usually, historically, “snobbish rather than economic”.¹⁷ Perceptively, he traced this ethos back to the Greeks themselves:

The Greeks, like all communities that employ slave labour, held the view that all manual work is vulgar.... They tended to think that all manipulation of matter was unworthy of a gentleman, and this probably had something to do with their partial lack of success in experimental science.... [D]own to our own day this view has been dominant in all countries of Western Europe ... and [it] is still that adopted ... by most ... teachers....¹⁸

Latin and Greek had no necessary place in the kind of education Russell thought best for children. He believed “men lost the taste for” Latin and Greek, when these were forced on them as children.¹⁹ In this, he agreed in principle with the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, his friend Gilbert Murray. In a debate at Oxford, Murray argued against compulsory Greek, because “men should come to Greek, he thought, out of love and not by compulsion.”²⁰ Russell used the same argument against inflicting Shakespeare on young people.²¹

Russell himself may never have come to Greek; but this summary

¹⁵ Quoted in Jenkyns, p. 15, and Turner, p. 188.

¹⁶ *E.g.*, Chapter 1 of *Education and the Good Life*, and *Education and the Social Order* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932, rpt. 1977), p. 56.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁰ E.R. Dodds, in Gilbert Murray, *An Unfinished Autobiography*, ed. J. Smith and A. Toynbee (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), p. 17.

²¹ *Understanding History and Other Essays* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), p. 10. On the danger of pedantry to a proper appreciation of Greece and Rome, see *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 12: *Contemplation and Action, 1902–14*, ed. R.A. Rempel, A. Brink and M. Moran (London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 85.

dismissal does not exhaust his attitude towards the classics. In his own educational scheme, he recognized classics as a possible specialization. He would provide just enough instruction in Latin to children between ages twelve and fourteen to determine who had a special aptitude for it.²² But a true appreciation of Greek culture was an important component of civilization, too important to be confined to instruction in grammar:

... I have no wish whatever to disparage a classical education. I have not myself enjoyed its benefits.... But I am firmly persuaded that the Greeks fully deserve all the admiration that is bestowed upon them, and that it is a very great and serious loss to be unacquainted with their writings. It is not by attacking them, but by drawing attention to neglected excellences in science, that I wish to conduct my argument.²³

He wrote this in 1913 in the context of arguing for “The Place of Science in a Liberal Education”.²⁴ He thought modern science, and even language, could advance beyond what the Greeks and Romans knew. But he had by then come to a mature appreciation of the Greeks, and Euripides and Gilbert Murray had played a role in his education.

The “Hippolytus” and the “conversion” incident

Gilbert Murray’s translation of Euripides’ play, *Hippolytus*, figures prominently in Russell’s account of his so-called “conversion” of 1901. As he tells the story in his *Autobiography* (1: 145–6), he and Alys had heard Murray read part of his translation in Cambridge before it was published. Russell wrote, in retrospect, “I was profoundly stirred by the beauty of the poetry.” When they arrived home, they found that Mrs. Whitehead had suffered an attack. The combination of the two events, as he suggests by juxtaposing them in the same paragraph, pro-

²² *Education and the Good Life*, p. 275; cf. p. 29, on the study of grammar by specialists. When speaking of instruction in classical languages, which he found distasteful, he usually specifies Latin. He shared a general preference for the Greeks: “... and as for the Latin tradition, its value is not really very great” (*ibid.*, p. 30). It is curious that he twice uses Latin terms in his *Autobiography*, just before and after expressing disdain for classics (1: 36, 67). Does he wish to tell us that his attitude is not due to a lack of aptitude on his part? Evidently, he translated part of the appendix of his book, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (Cambridge: University Press, 1900), from Latin.

²³ *Collected Papers*, 12: 391.

²⁴ *In Fact and Fiction* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), p. 156, Russell returns to the issue of science vs. classics with the proscription of Greek and Latin for science students.

duced a strong emotional reaction in him: “I had forgotten all the deeper issues, and had been content with flippant cleverness. Suddenly the ground seemed to give way beneath me...” A rapid series of reflections on human misery caused him to change his views drastically, to turn from a pro-Boer into a pacifist, and to experience other insights, including mystic feelings for beauty and a hatred of public-school education. The epiphany may be suspect (did he ever favour a public-school education?), but the sentiments are significant.

What was the role of Russell’s reaction to the *Hippolytus*, or to Greek tragedy more generally, in motivating the incident? It would be difficult to point to any one thing in the play as having especially affected Russell. We do not even know which part of it he heard Murray read.²⁵ Reading it, later, left him with a feeling for “whatever is noble and beautiful in sorrow” (*Auto.*, I: 156, letter to Murray); the feeling, indeed, which could be said to pervade Greek tragedy, and which is much expressed by more than one character in the *Hippolytus*. It might have been a general sense of tragedy that struck Russell, combined, of course, with the central event of Mrs. Whitehead’s pain and developments in his own life.

Then we might suppose Russell to be unusually responsive to Greek literature; and he might be trying to give us this impression. His account might represent a vivid enactment of one interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of tragic catharsis, by which a tragedy arouses feelings of pity and fear in its audience.

But it is curious that he calls the play one of the “truly great English poems” and implies it is a “masterpiece” of “modern literature”.²⁶ It was Murray’s translation that moved him. Nowhere does he mention the name of Euripides. No doubt, this would have pleased Murray. He, too, in his correspondence with Russell, speaks of “what I meant to convey.”²⁷ For Russell and Murray shared a conviction that the classics must be made to speak to men today. It was partly this aim which

inspired Murray’s work on Euripides.²⁸ Russell, who had earlier read Murray’s own play, *Andromache*, which was based on a classical theme, and several other works in the same genre,²⁹ now encountered Greek imaginary literature more directly. The form it took was congenial to him; for he believed, “Much of the value of the Greek tradition can be conveyed to people who do not know Greek...” The belief was reflected in his educational philosophy: he advised teachers, “Before sitting down to a Greek play, I would have the students read a translation, by Gilbert Murray or some other translator with a poetic gift.”³⁰

For his part, Murray in 1912 commissioned the book *The Problems of Philosophy* from Russell, as part of a popular series he edited, the “Home University Library”. Writing this book was the first of Russell’s many endeavours in popular writing. In the course of its composition he expressed privately many doubts about the relevance of his own technical work. New circumstances, in particular his affair with Lady Ottoline Morrell, had brought about renewed literary aspirations in Russell.³¹ The role of Murray provides a link between them and his earlier turn to literature at the time of his first “conversion”.

Russell may not have known much about the Greeks in 1901—for example, in a letter to Murray he praises Plato’s “austerity in matters of Art”, a theory he soon came to abhor³²—but he began to be influenced in a literary way. He was entering a period of his own life dominated by tragic feelings. He read two other works on Greek subjects

²⁸ R. Ackerman, “Euripides and Professor Murray”, *Classical Journal*, 81 (1986): 329–36.

²⁹ A number of works on his reading list (*Collected Papers*, I: App. II) were Victorian works on classical themes, or classics of English criticism (e.g., Arnold’s “On Translating Homer”, Pater’s *Greek Studies*) or translation (Jowett’s Plato, North’s Plutarch).

³⁰ *Education and the Good Life*, pp. 30, 280.

³¹ *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 8: *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism and Other Essays, 1914–1919*, ed. John G. Slater (London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986), p. viii. Russell had as early as 1902 compared his work in both mathematics and philosophy with Murray’s on textual scholarship and poetry (i.e., translation), although he then had no doubts about the former, or more “certain”, pursuit: *Collected Papers*, 12: 7 (however, the note at 12: 443 misses the distinction; the “Euripides text” is Murray’s Greek edition, in the Oxford Classical Texts series—that is, scholarship as opposed to poetry).

³² Plato’s theory of art is praised in a letter to Murray in 1902 (*Auto.*, I: 160), but condemned in one of 1941, in *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1914–1944* (1968, rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1969), pp. 365–6. The change was visible in 1911 (see below).

²⁵ A. Brink argues that Russell identified with Hippolytus, in “Bertrand Russell’s Conversion of 1901, or the Benefits of a Creative Illness”, *Russell*, n.s. 4 (1984): 88ff. A more extreme and literal example of this has been argued for the great German scholar U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf: W.M. Calder III in *Wilamowitz nach 50 Jahren*, ed. Calder et al. (Darmstadt: 1985), pp. 80–110. I find that my interpretation of the incident is closest to that of M. Moran, “Bertrand Russell’s Early Approaches to Literature”, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 54 (1984): 56–78 (at 69f.); she has more discussion of the literary effect upon Russell of his two “conversions” of 1901–03 and 1911–13.

²⁶ Letter to Gilbert Murray of 26 Feb. 1901, in *Auto.*, I: 156.

²⁷ Letter to Russell of 2 March 1901, in *Auto.*, I: 156–7.

by Murray³³ and submitted his writings to him, among others, for his advice. The most notable literary expression of Russell's mentality at this time is "A Free Man's Worship" (1903). Murray disliked the essay, except that he did say, "Bravo about Tragedy!"³⁴

The theme of mysticism is prominent in Russell's soul-searching writings in the decade or more after his "conversion" incident. In his study of Greek philosophy, he came to be much impressed with what he called Greek mysticism.

Attitude to Greek mathematics and philosophy

Russell's attitude towards the Greek philosophers, in this period of his life, vacillated between the two attitudes evidenced above, towards literature and Euclid: his near-longing towards poetry, and his desire to improve on scientific, but out-dated, modes of thought. He saw the Greek philosophers partly as visionary mystics, and partly as possessors of a true scientific spirit: precisely the two elements agitating his own character. In "Mysticism and Logic" (1914), he praised them for their skilful blending of the two, particularly Plato and Heraclitus.

Russell was surprised to make this discovery about the Greeks. In 1901, he had experienced some response to a Greek tragedy, but he had compared his "semi-mystical feelings" with the Buddha's.³⁵ He had felt a "strange mystic exaltation" in Murray's *Bacchae* (*Auto.*, 1: 160, Nov. 1902). In January 1914, he wrote to Ottoline: "Bevan ... tells me Arabic & Persian mysticism was borrowed from the Neo-Platonists. It is odd: one thinks of mysticism as so essentially Eastern. It makes me realize more than ever the greatness of the pre-Socratic philosophers: Par-

menides really invented metaphysical mysticism in the West...."³⁶ In "Mysticism and Logic", he elaborates on this theme and its influence upon Parmenides' and Plato's logic; he also dwells on Heraclitus, whom he had been reading with delight, and at other times attributes a key role to Pythagoras.³⁷

The "Cambridge School" of classical studies had some influence on Russell's view of the Greeks. Its leading members were friends of his: Murray, Jane Harrison, F.M. Cornford. Inspired by Nietzsche and by anthropology (especially Frazer), they emphasized the darker, non-rational side of the Greeks.³⁸ Affinities with this outlook might be argued for "A Free Man's Worship". Positive influence, or reception by Russell, is evident in *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945). He devotes much attention to the Orphic mystery-religion, for example, and dispels the Romantic myth of the "serenity" of the Greeks. He thought that Prometheus was the prototypical Greek in combining both intellect, that is science, and torment.³⁹

However, Russell was sceptical of the excessive tendency of this school to trace primitive or religious forms of thought behind Greek philosophy.⁴⁰ The scientific spirit mattered most to him, and he could not help applying scientific criteria to evaluating the Greek philosophers. To him, philosophy was a cumulative science in the way that he thought language was. He regarded the Greeks as great thinkers whose works were part of the treasure-store of Western civilization (reserving especially high praise for Archimedes⁴¹), but, as with Euclid, he did not think their ideas worthy of belief for that reason alone. For example, he wrote of an idea of Aristotle's: "... this, like everything else that Aristotle said on scientific subjects, proved an obstacle to

³³ He read Murray's survey of Greek literature with Alys (*Collected Papers*, 1: 364), in addition to the published *Hippolytus* (*ibid.*), and had high praise for his *Bacchae* (*Auto.*, 1: 159–60, Nov. 1902). The impression the *Hippolytus* reading had on him is seen from his recording its two-year anniversary in his journal for 10 February 1903 (*Collected Papers*, 12: 18).

³⁴ *Collected Papers*, 12: 63. Lowes Dickinson, whose book *The Greek View of Life* Russell had read (*Collected Papers*, 1: 358), helped arrange for the essay's publication (*Collected Papers*, 12: 63). Russell would have the influence go in both directions; he wrote in his journal, "Today I heard from Gilbert that a rhapsody on tragedy I had sent him had induced him to start writing one" (*ibid.*, p. 17).

³⁵ *Auto.*, 1: 146. Use of this description is complicated by its retrospective nature. However, in general, the interest in Buddhism was an early one of Russell's (as early as the "Greek Exercises", *Collected Papers*, 1: 13, 47), which he shared with his father and brother (*ibid.*, p. 375), and even the Pearsall Smiths (*ibid.*, p. 396). There is no interest in Greek themes, as such, that early. He was impressed that "the Greeks were the first to make statues of the Buddha" (*Education and the Social Order*, p. 91; *History as an Art* [Ashford, Kent: The Hand and Flower Press, 1954], p. 7).

³⁶ Letter #972 to Ottoline, 18 Jan. 1914, quoted in part at *Collected Papers*, 12: 467.

³⁷ Heraclitus: letter #820 to Ottoline, 30 June 1913, quoted *Collected Papers*, 12: 467. As late as the Prologue to the *Auto.*, Vol. 1, he speaks of his mathematical work as a search for "the Pythagorean power by which number holds sway above the flux."

³⁸ See M.I. Finley, "Anthropology and the Classics", in *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Viking, 1975), pp. 102–19. Russell read Frazer's *Golden Bough* in 1900 and 1901: *Collected Papers*, 1: 363–4.

³⁹ *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1946), pp. 39, 272; on pre-philosophic modes of thought surviving in philosophy (Cornford's view), see p. 135.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40, criticizing Cornford.

⁴¹ *In Praise of Idleness* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1935), p. 173. Russell was impressed with the culture of the Hellenistic period, a relatively new area of scholarship. He included *The Hellenistic Age*, by W.W. Tarn *et al.* (1923) in a list of ten of his favourite books published in the 1940's, along with Murray's *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (National Book League pamphlet, *Ten of My Favourite Books*, by R.A. Butler *et al.*, n.d.).

progress.”⁴²

Russell’s attitude is exemplified in something he wrote in a letter: “None of the classical people ever discovered Zeno’s merits—it was the mathematicians who unearthed him.”⁴³ He could write triumphantly of the modern solution of Zeno’s paradoxes, while praising Zeno for inventing them.⁴⁴

Russell did not think any less of the Greek philosophers as great men because, in his view, modern science and philosophy had surpassed them. However, he was concerned to establish, especially in *A History of Western Philosophy*, that Greek thought, and all other, had arisen from a particular set of social circumstances. As early as 1911 he expressed the view that Plato’s *Republic* was modelled on the laws of Lycurgus, the legendary Spartan lawgiver, and was in part a response to the defeat of Athens by Sparta.⁴⁵ By such arguments he urges men not to revere unduly the authority of the past, but to develop their own thought in response to modern conditions and needs. He knew the harm that reverence of authority, including classical texts, can do. He was especially unsparing of Plato. He wrote in a letter, “In his Republic there would have been no philosophers, because every one would have thought as his grandfather thought. Plato conceives wisdom as something to be learnt once for all, by a definite unchanging curriculum, not as something only kept alive by the constant exercise of going beyond what one knew already.”⁴⁶

Criticism of the classics thus had a political importance. As early as 1911, Russell wrote in a letter that Plato’s theory “leads to persecution”;⁴⁷ and in 1913, “Yes, Plato is wonderful. But ... I have begun to feel just a hint of the mediaeval prison-house in his authoritativeness and insistence on ethics as against science.” (He goes on to state, “But

of course really he is about as great as any man who ever lived....”⁴⁸) The public attack on Plato intensified with the coming of fascism, and is best known from Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) and Richard Crossman’s *Plato Today* (1937). Russell had already in 1920 compared Soviet Russia to Plato’s ideal republic, and had in 1936 spoken of Plato’s “Hitlerite” doctrines.⁴⁹

Russell’s attitude towards the classics is crucial for understanding his politics at the time of World War I. Many civilized people in England thought that their country represented the highest point of civilization the world had reached. They combined this with an idealized worship of the Greeks derived from Victorian times. To them, the English were the Athenians, upholding classical civilization, and the Germans were the Spartans or the “barbarians”. Thus, Murray, if not during, then at the end of and immediately after the War, wrote essays comparing England to Athens at the time of the Peloponnesian War, especially as described by Thucydides, and he persisted in this view, remarkably enough, well into the 1950s;⁵⁰ basically, both were supposed to be liberal sea-empires civilizing the world.⁵¹ Bevan, the classical scholar mentioned above, was another who pressed the same analogy;⁵² so did Toynbee. During World War I, Russell engaged in a pamphlet-fight with Murray, whose views he found nationalistic. An important part

⁴² *A History of Western Philosophy*, p. 551.

⁴³ Letter #899 to Ottoline (autumn 1913?).

⁴⁴ In “The Study of Mathematics” (1902; *Collected Papers*, 12: 88). He there employs the language of Greek mythology in describing Cantor’s solution of what “had been given over to Chaos and old Night.”

⁴⁵ Letter #165 to Ottoline, July–Aug. 1911; all such originals in Morrell papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. Russell could carry the argument to an extreme: “Herodotus was in the pay of the Athenian State, which accounts for the fact that Athens comes out of his history with so much glory” (“Government by Propaganda”, in *These Eventful Years* [London and New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1924], 1: 380).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Letter #870 to Ottoline, 16 Sept. 1913, quoted at *Collected Papers*, 12: 467, where he names “Burnet’s book” as a source. When Russell praised Plato in 1902 (see above), he had agitated over reconciling “morals” (as in Plato’s austere aesthetics) and “beauty” (as expressed in the *Bacchae* of Murray) (*Auto.*, 1: 159–60). He now condemns Plato’s ethics on the basis of science and politics.

⁴⁹ *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1920; 2nd ed., 1949), p. 29; *In Praise of Idleness*, pp. 178. W. Fite, *The Platonic Legend* (New York: Scribner’s, 1934), also compared Plato’s ideal with the ideology of the U.S.S.R., and with Sparta (pp. 147, 218–19, 243). R.B. Levinson, *In Defense of Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1953), thinks Popper was influenced in a general way by Russell (pp. 301, 635; see p. 510n.24 for doubts of Russell’s fairness to Plato). Russell wrote an appreciative blurb for the dust-jacket of Popper’s second impression (London: Routledge, 1947), and he reviewed Crossman enthusiastically (“Plato in Modern Dress” [*New Statesman and Nation*, n.s. 13 (22 May 1937:)] 850).

⁵⁰ E.g., “Aristophanes and the War Party” (Nov. 1918), in *Essays and Addresses* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1921); “Greece and England”, in *Greek Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946); “Lessons from History”, *Diogenes*, 1 (1953): 43–8. See Jenkyns, pp. 336–7.

⁵¹ Whitehead expressed the prevailing temper: “The Athenian navy and the British navy together ruled the seas of our imaginations.” Quoted by V. Lowe, *Alfred North Whitehead: the Man and His Work*, Vol. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1985), p. 53.

⁵² G. Murray, “Edwyn Robert Bevan, 1870–1943,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 29 (1943): 411–20.

of Russell's position was the fact that he did not share the self-serving analogies between England and Athens which a classical education had made widespread.⁵³ In an essay written just after the pamphlet-fight he said:

The speech of Pericles to the Athenians at the beginning of the Peloponnesian war has been thought worthy of a place among recruiting appeals in the London Underground Railway; yet the war which he recommended by recalling the greatness of Athenian civilisation proved in fact to be its end.... It is impossible to imagine a more sinister precedent than that war....⁵⁴

Russell understood the dark and non-rational side of civilized man, ancient and modern: "Many of the unpleasant features of our age existed among the Greeks."⁵⁵ Or again: "The Greeks devoted their energies to art and science and mutual extermination, in all of which they achieved unprecedented success."⁵⁶ The international outlook he espoused is reflected in the statement: "In literature and art, the Greeks may have been supreme, but their superiority to China is only a matter of degree."⁵⁷ Such an attitude (although still conceding first place to the Greeks) went hand-in-hand with his work for world peace and his anti-imperialism—the anti-imperialism which he was converted to, somehow, in the 1901 incident.⁵⁸

However, Russell's views changed during and after World War II. He then thought that civilization *was* threatened by barbarism from without. Of his mood in the post-war world, he wrote in 1960 that he and Gilbert Murray were like St. Augustine and St. Jerome viewing the fall of the Roman Empire.⁵⁹ This changing attitude—that the heritage of the ancient world was in danger of being lost—reflected the fact that

⁵³ See Jenkyns, Ch. XIII.

⁵⁴ "The Danger to Civilisation", *Justice in War-Time*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 1917), p. 102.

⁵⁵ *In Praise of Idleness*, p. 200.

⁵⁶ *Education and the Good Life*, p. 49.

⁵⁷ *In Praise of Idleness*, p. 199.

⁵⁸ This is not the place to defend or describe Gilbert Murray's many years of work for the League of Nations and other causes. His character is shown by his work for conscientious objectors and his contribution to Russell's defence fund (F. West, *Gilbert Murray: a Life* [London: Croom Helm, 1984], pp. 160–1, etc.; see also, generally, D. Wilson, *Gilbert Murray OM* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987]). I have simply tried to trace one facet of his disagreement with Russell over the First World War, and to show how one type of classicism may go hand-in-hand with imperialism. The British control of the Ionian islands in the nineteenth century is another facet of the same theme.

⁵⁹ "A Fifty-Six Year Friendship", in Murray, *An Unfinished Autobiography*, p. 209.

Russell was no longer a pacifist. He now thought that men must fight to preserve the distinctive character of Western civilization.

Late in his life, as the nuclear arms race intensified, Russell sometimes despaired for the future of the human race, and he returned to an image of its past. In a lecture on history given in 1954, he said, "In the past, Prometheus was regarded as a would-be liberator ... but now we begin to wish that there were some Zeus to restrain the modern followers of Prometheus." The scientific attitude had gone too far, it had been abused; whereas he had earlier fought for its place in education, he now felt called upon to tip the balance the other way, for a return to humane values. It led him to appeal to the Greeks with the sentence, "I wish there were a Thucydides to treat this theme as it deserves."⁶⁰ In this metaphor of Russell's despair, the past has triumphed over the present; and the study of the classics has acquired a new value. It took Russell until the hydrogen bomb to express a modern parallel with the themes of Thucydides, as Murray and others had at the time of the First World War. But the others had appealed to Thucydides for the conduct of war by a liberal empire; Russell now appealed in the cause of peace.

In Russell's hope for civilization, there was always included the ability to appreciate and enjoy history and to be stimulated by the great men and ideas of the past. The monuments of the past of man could not be superseded, but could be used to enrich our imaginations. "Hellenism", as he put it, still had much to teach us: "Something of Hellenism, something, too, of Oriental resignation, must be combined with ... hurrying Western self-assertion before it can emerge from the ardour of youth into the mature wisdom of manhood."⁶¹ This ideal of a Hellenism which beautifies life, an aesthetic or humanistic "Hellenism", is reminiscent of language made popular by Matthew Arnold.⁶² "If I did not meet Calypso and Circe," Russell said of a trip to Australia in 1950, "that was entirely my fault. They are emanations of the imagination, and I am sure the right sort of traveler would find them...."⁶³

Russell's near life-long interest in Greek civilization was fueled by his own love of history, by his acquaintances in British classical studies, and by his own work in mathematics and philosophy. Threads of an "ancients vs. moderns" debate run through his career, inherited from

⁶⁰ *History as an Art*, p. 21. Russell had earlier used the image of Prometheus, somewhat ambiguously (e.g., in 1903 and 1912, *Collected Papers*, 12: 68–9, 119).

⁶¹ "Mysticism and Logic", *Collected Papers*, 12: 171.

⁶² Turner, p. 17f.

⁶³ "Hopes for Australia in a Hundred Years", radio broadcast of 2 April 1951, *Russell Society News*, no. 56 (Nov. 1987), p. 5.

the Victorian traditions into which he was born. To him, there was really no loser in this debate. Throughout, he sought to attain a proper balance between the "two cultures". He did not want the weight of tradition to stifle modern advances, but he knew that life was enriched by an appreciation of what was best in man. Greek culture, at its best, represented this for him, while he was not in awe of its uniqueness. Although not classically educated, Russell was able to incorporate an appreciation of Greek achievements in his mature and sceptical wisdom.

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