

Bertrand Russell and Gamel Woolsey

by Kenneth Hopkins

[F]OR PART OF another summer [I] took the Gerald Brenans' house near Malaga. I had not known either of the Brenans before this and I found them interesting and delightful. Gamel Brenan surprised me by turning out to be a scholar of great erudition and wide interests, full of all sorts of out-of-the-way knowledge and a poet of haunting and learned rhythms. We have kept up our friendship and she visits us sometimes—a lovely autumnal person.¹

With these words Bertrand Russell records his first meeting with Gerald and Gamel Brenan (Gamel Woolsey), which seems to have taken place in the early summer of 1933; Russell does not always date such things with strict precision, and as my own researches into all that concerns Gamel Woolsey are still proceeding, I cannot be more precise myself at the moment. The last record I have of Gamel Woolsey being with Russell is summer, 1967, in late August, which was only a little more than four months before her death, and the last letter I have seen from Russell to Gerald Brenan is dated 29 January 1968, and is a letter of sympathy occasioned by Gamel's death. Russell himself died in 1970, and I don't think he and Brenan met again after this exchange of letters. But it will be seen by these dates that Russell and the Brenans maintained a close and rewarding friendship for more than thirty years.

The present essay is concerned principally with Bertrand Russell's relationship with Gamel Woolsey, but as she is not widely known, whether in her life or her writings, it seems desirable to sketch in her

¹ *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1914–1944* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968), p. 190.

background, and to say something also of Gerald Brenan, who is a leading character in the story. Gerald Brenan has discussed his own life memorably in two volumes of autobiography, in the course of which he has also written perceptively of Russell; but the relevant background may be included here. The life of Gamel Woolsey I shall treat at greater length because of her importance in the life of Bertrand Russell. In his biography of Russell Mr. Ronald Clark says that there is some reason to believe that Russell wished to marry Gamel—and may have proposed marriage to her.² Clark quotes a letter from Gerald Brenan in support of this suggestion, and Mr. Brenan has written in similar terms to me. It is certain that Russell felt very deeply about Gamel, as his own letters to her testify, and I shall discuss this more fully later.

But first, Gerald Brenan. He was born at Malta on 7 April 1894, and was thus almost twenty-two years younger than Russell. His father was a subaltern in the British Army who advanced to the rank of major at the time of his retirement. Gerald and his father waged a running battle over the years, and Russell more than once remarks in his letters how much he enjoys Gerald's account of his father and their differences, which were somewhat on the scale of Samuel Butler's similar incompatibility with his father, as recorded in *The Way of All Flesh*.

Like any small boy, Gerald had some pleasant times, but the first volume of his autobiography, *A Life of One's Own*, paints a rather depressing picture of his childhood and schooldays. He was at the public school, Radley, and didn't much care for it. After leaving Radley he spent some time travelling in Europe—and travel, all his life, was one of his abiding pleasures—but at last the time came for him to settle down, to use a phrase that would have commended itself to Major Brenan, who announced that Gerald was to enter either the Indian or the Egyptian police, for which of course he must sit the appropriate examination. Gerald sat the exam for the Egyptian police, and failed.

Almost before there was time for recriminations the 1914 war broke out. Major Brenan thankfully secured for his son a commission in the Gloucester Regiment, and Gerald departed, for once perhaps with his father's blessing. He served with distinction, was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry, and returned home at the end to quarrel with his father over the future. Major Brenan had found Gerald a place in the Indian Army, but Gerald said No—one can understand that; who, on leaving one army after four years of desperate fighting, ever wanted to join another? Instead, he went to Spain, where he remained, with occasional absence, for the rest of his life.

² *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), pp. 498–9.

In 1934 he published his first book, *Jack Robinson*, a picaresque novel under the *nom-de-plume* George Beaton, which is now hard to find and expensive when found. From that time forward he wrote many books, and became a distinguished authority on the history and literature of Spain. He also published some excellent essays and commentaries, several novels, a collection of poems, and did a great deal of miscellaneous journalism and broadcast talks.

Brenan's involvement with the Bloomsbury Group, and in particular with the painter Dora Carrington, is chronicled in *Personal Record, 1920-1972*, which is the second volume of his autobiography. This contains the character sketch of Bertrand Russell formerly mentioned, and other sketches of important personalities of the period, such as E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Arthur Waley and Roger Fry. It also gives an extended account of the life of Gamel Woolsey, with whom Brenan lived from 1930 until her death.

Since 1972, when his autobiography closes, Gerald Brenan has continued to live in Spain, and has continued until latterly publishing books, of which the latest at the time of writing this essay is *Thoughts in a Dry Season* (1978), a miscellany of notes and observations on such subjects as love, marriage, religion, the art of writing, travel, and the like. We may again be reminded of Samuel Butler, beside whose *Notebooks* this miscellany is fit to stand, within easy reach of the bedside.

I come now to Gamel Woolsey, with whose life I shall deal more fully. A woman whom Bertrand Russell may have wished to marry, and whom he certainly loved (for he says so) may justly be discussed at some length in a journal devoted to his life and work.

Elizabeth Gammell Woolsey was born at Breeze Hill Plantation, Aiken, South Carolina, the second daughter (by his second marriage) of William Walton Woolsey and his wife Elizabeth Gammell. The Woolseys are a distinguished family in the United States, stemming from one George Woolsey who emigrated to America from Great Yarmouth, England (by way of Holland) in 1623. The Woolseys have long been influential in the United States, and have affiliations by marriage with many other celebrated American families, including the Dwights, the Hoadleys, the Edwards, the Griswolds, and others of similar standing. Gamel Woolsey's great-uncle, Theodore Dwight Woolsey, was a president of Yale University; her uncle, Daniel Coit Gilman, was the first president of Johns Hopkins University; her aunt, Sarah Chauncey Woolsey, became a best-selling author as Susan Coolidge, with *What Katy Did* and many other successful stories for children; Gamel's half-brother, Judge John M. Woolsey, wrote the celebrated judgment that James Joyce's *Ulysses* was not obscene, under which it became possible for that book to be

published in the United States. The Woolseys were always prominent in the law, the church, education, banking, railroad administration, and other callings in which wealth and influence are important ingredients of success.

By his first wife Gamel's father had three sons and a daughter, and after her death he married Gamel's mother, whose first daughter, Marie, was born (it would seem) in 1893. Gamel was born two years later, but although such things are certainly noticed in families, no exact date seems to have been recorded, and the biographer is confronted with three alternatives, of which the most likely appears to be 28 May 1895. Gamel herself might be expected to know, but she gets it wrong on her marriage certificate, and provides a second choice, also wrong, on the passport issued to her husband and herself only six months later.

In later years Gamel spoke nostalgically of her childhood in her poems and in some of her letters, and she recalled her early adolescence in an unpublished novel called *Patterns on the Sand*, which has its setting in and around Charleston, South Carolina. This had been Mrs. Woolsey's home before her marriage, and when William Woolsey died in 1910 she left the plantation in the care of her stepson, Convers, and shortly afterwards returned to Charleston—taking a trip to Europe with Gamel along the way. It should be explained that Gamel Woolsey's family name was Elsa, although that I think is an unusual shortening of her first name, Elizabeth. Her second name was her mother's maiden name, and was not used in its shortened form, Gamel, until she began to publish her writings, in the early 1920s.

In Charleston Gamel attended a well-known girls' school, Ashley Hall. This had been discussed earlier, during her father's lifetime, and he had then remarked that if she and Marie went to Ashley Hall they would learn bad habits; but with the bad habits they already had they probably wouldn't be admitted. However, in a letter to Julia B. Hammond dated 19 October 1909, William Woolsey says that the girls are at Ashley Hall for the winter.³ Gamel's schooling was interrupted when she contracted tuberculosis about 1915. She spent a year in a sanitarium, and lost half of one lung.

Despite this setback, some part of her life in Charleston was happy, as her novel shows. Mrs. Woolsey was connected with a number of old Charleston families, in particular with the Horrys and the Branfords, and it was in the converted servants' house of the big Branford-Horry mansion that she lived with her daughters. This house is no cottage, and

³ Quoted in *The Hammonds of Redcliffe*, ed. Carol Bleser (New York: Oxford U.P., 1981), p.360.

the big house itself is one of Charleston's most spectacular mansions, dating from around 1751. But shortly after Gamel's recovery from her illness, perhaps about 1921, she left home to seek her fortune in New York as an actress and later, when that did not succeed, as a writer. The earliest published poem of hers that I have seen appeared in the *New York Evening Post* in June 1922. It was probably while she was at Woodstock, New York, that Gamel met Rex Hunter, for there is a photograph of them together in costume for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. On 25 April 1923, they were married at City Hall, New York.

Maurice Reginald Hunter—Rex, as he was usually called, and he signed himself Rex Hunter in most of his writings—was a native of New Zealand who spent the greater part of his life as a journalist and miscellaneous writer in the United States, principally in Chicago and New York. He wrote several short plays, published a novel and three collections of poems, and left unpublished a number of other works, including the first volume of a proposed two-volume autobiography. As the first volume closes just before his marriage, and the second was apparently never written (or at least has not yet been found), we are left with only tantalizing remarks about his wife—Elsa, as he calls her. This is a pity, because her life in New York is very scantily documented.

Very shortly after their wedding Gamel had a miscarriage, and over the years she had at least two other miscarriages, and two abortions—these last on legitimate medical grounds, for it was considered that with her medical history a normal pregnancy was inadvisable, and might be dangerous; a judgment which the miscarriages confirm. To restore her health after this misfortune, Rex Hunter took her for several months to England, but soon after their return to New York they began to live apart. The marriage lasted perhaps four years and was increasingly unhappy for the last three, and when they finally separated Gamel and Rex never met again. The story of this marriage is told from Gamel's viewpoint in her novel, *One Way of Love*, which was accepted for publication by Gollancz about 1931, but in the event suppressed before publication. At that time there were a series of prosecutions for obscenity in the British courts—the most familiar now being the case of Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Gollancz had also suffered prosecution for a novel he had published, and he decided not to proceed with Gamel's book, of which four sets of page proofs survive. A reader today would have difficulty in finding anything obscene in this novel, and it is interesting to speculate what Judge John M. Woolsey would have thought if he had read it after finishing *Ulysses*. No doubt Gamel consulted him, but I have not yet traced any of her letters to the Judge.

By internal evidence from occasional references in her letters, I am

inclined to date Gamel's other unpublished novel at roughly the same time, although *Patterns on the Sand* seems to be a little later. But the difficulty of dating anything concerning Gamel is greatly increased by her habit of never dating letters, and I say "never" after reading several hundred of her letters in which, if my recollection is correct, there are two specimens carrying dates. Some others may be dated from postmarks, but even here the dates are approximate, for Gamel had a habit of writing a letter one day and posting it a week or so later, if she remembered.

Although she was so soon separated from Rex, Gamel's marriage coloured all her subsequent life. First, the pregnancy so comparatively soon after her serious illness seems to me the probable cause why she was never afterwards able to have children; but, of more obvious effect, the fact that she and Rex were never divorced meant that Gamel was unable to marry again. And it may be also that she had difficulty thereafter in giving her complete love and trust to any man—this is something Gerald Brenan hints at in his autobiography, and speaks of in his private letters, including letters to Bertrand Russell which I shall quote. Gamel Woolsey's relationship with Russell presents certain puzzles not readily cleared up, and these also may have their origins in her life in New York many years before she ever met Russell.

After her separation from Rex, Gamel continued to live in New York, and her room in Patchin Place was one floor below the apartment occupied by John Cowper Powys and Phyllis Playter. Greenwich Village, and Patchin Place in particular, are the setting for much in many literary lives of that period between the wars; Gamel and Rex lived there when they were first married; she later lived there on her own; and when she had gone to England Rex lived there for some fifteen years before his final return to New Zealand. The little cul-de-sac figures in the writings of them both, as it does in the writings of many of their generation in New York. But for Gamel it had yet one more significance, for here she first met Llewelyn Powys and became his mistress. She subsequently had two pregnancies by Llewelyn, and both had to be terminated.

Llewelyn Powys had lived in New York in the years 1921–24, when he was at the beginning of his career as a writer, and had published several books with considerable success in America, though rather less successfully in his native England. In 1924 he married Alyse Gregory, who was then Managing Editor of *The Dial*, and by 1925 they had returned to settle in Dorset. It must be remembered that Llewelyn Powys suffered from tuberculosis, and indeed was a semi-invalid for long periods of his life, which is another factor which affected the life of Gamel Woolsey, for this relationship with Llewelyn was star-crossed from the first, as quite soon appeared.

In the winter of 1927–28 Llewelyn and Alyse were in New York for several months while he fulfilled an appointment as “visiting critic” for the *New York Herald Tribune*. It was natural enough that he should encounter Gamel Woolsey, who lived so close to his brother John Cowper Powys. Alyse Gregory was one of the most remarkable women of her time, a long-time advocate of freedom for women, and it would appear that she encouraged Llewelyn in his fancy for Gamel—a fancy which turned easily to love. Llewelyn remained in New York until April 1928 and then returned to England. Almost immediately he and Alyse left for Europe and Palestine and were absent until May 1929. Within a few days of their return, Gamel arrived from New York, and for another year her presence only a mile or two from Llewelyn and Alyse was the means of bringing all three endless stress, anxiety, and unhappiness—which none of them could avoid or lessen, do what they would.

This story has been told in two publications which are central to an understanding of Gamel’s character. The first is *So Wild a Thing, the Letters of Llewelyn Powys to Gamel Woolsey*, edited by Malcolm Elwin and published in 1973. The second is the selection from the journals of Alyse Gregory covering this period, edited by Michael Adam and published also in 1973 under the title *The Cry of a Gull*. In her journal Alyse Gregory says at one point that she hopes all the documents in this matter between Gamel, Llewelyn and herself will one day be published, and to this end I have edited the *Letters of Gamel Woolsey to Llewelyn Powys*.⁴ Of equal importance is the correspondence of Gamel Woolsey with Alyse Gregory—for despite everything these two were close friends from the beginning. These letters, too, will be published in due course.

During that year in the remote village of East Chaldon the love affair ran its course. Gamel had doubtless been swept off her feet by Llewelyn’s charm, his reputation, his persuasive eloquence and romantic personality—a man not unacquainted with grief, with an interesting weakness, for he was beset with the same malady that Gamel had so recently combated, and above all because at forty-five, despite his lined face and gray hair, he was as strikingly attractive as he had been at twenty. Gamel had already sought comfort from her forlorn marriage with other men, as she records in *One Way of Love*, but this was something quite different. Llewelyn Powys was “the love of her life”, Gerald Brenan has said; I am not sure about this, but certainly her love for Llewelyn Powys brought the greatest and most sustained unhappiness of her life. Finally, in the summer of 1930, Gamel said that the relationship must end.

⁴ Published in 1983 by the Warren House Press, North Walsham, Norfolk.

Just at this time Gerald Brenan arrived in the village to visit T. F. Powys, whose extraordinary genius attracted many artists and writers. It was shortly after his allegorical novel, *Mr. Weston’s Good Wine*, had been published, and artist Steven Tomlin had given Brenan an introduction to Powys. He arrived in the village one afternoon, and after settling into his lodging had gone out for a walk along the lanes, where he met Gamel. He was much struck, and thought she was probably one of the Powys sisters, for at that time there were a number of members of the family living in East Chaldon. Later he met Gamel at T. F. Powys’s house, and very quickly after that he fell in love with her. The break with Llewelyn was imminent, and in desperation she agreed to throw in her lot with Brenan. It was not exactly the most romantic of love stories, but it sufficed; and over the years the two grew close, as the letters of both testify, time and again; nor were they separated until Gamel’s death nearly forty years later. As Alfred de Kantzow had said years earlier to John Cowper Powys, “You can’t live with a woman for forty years without loving her”, and no doubt that is true for women living with men.

A few weeks after this Gerald took Gamel to Norfolk, where she had to enter a sanitarium; and Llewelyn and Alyse hurried from East Chaldon and took ship for New York. “The high song is over”, they might have said, all three; but love is not so easily shrugged off, as Gerald Brenan learned. But he had known hopeless love himself, and he brought to Gamel a strengthening sympathy and understanding, which she remembered, always with gratitude. When Llewelyn Powys went to Switzerland, some years later—a journey he did not live to retrace—Gamel several times made a visit to see him. He died in 1939, but her firm friendship with Alyse lasted almost another thirty years.

When Gamel was well enough Gerald returned with her to Spain, and it was here that she first met Bertrand Russell, in the early summer of 1933, as my opening quotation relates. We have seen how Gamel appeared to Russell from the beginning, for although the quotation is retrospective it records how she seemed to him as he came to know her, even though at the end he presents her as lovely but autumnal. Gamel’s regard for Russell developed more slowly, and the ambivalence of her feelings may be seen in a passage from a letter she wrote to Llewelyn Powys about April 1936, after she had known Russell for almost three years. She says:

I am so tired of seeing people—it sounds strange to say so here, but so many people seem to come, and the Russells stayed such a long time. And I only half like him. It’s queer that I can never really like him. My heart never warms to him at all. His guiding forces are vanity and love of power, and to gratify them

he wasted his amazing talent for Mathematics and took to writing books on happiness and marriage, and all the subjects about which he so evidently knows nothing worth saying. But in many things he shows great integrity of thought and character. And I *admire* him, only I can't really like him. I never quite know why.⁵

Beside this may be set an interesting exchange between Brenan and Russell on the character of Gamel Woolsey in letters dated respectively 1 June and 7 July 1959—when both friends had come to know one another better. Gerald says,

Gamel is very well. She has been writing a good many sonnets, her best work so far. Naturally they are all very melancholy. She has the greed for unhappiness of those who have suffered little. Her pride has always prevented her from doing this—pride is the great isolator. And so she is inclined to feel that she has missed all the great things in life and wasted or misused her talent.

To this Russell answers, "Would you tell Gamel that I should be deeply grateful if she would let me see her sonnets? I find it hard to believe that she has suffered little. She does not look as if this were so. I still have a strong affection for her.... Please give her my best love."

Now Gerald does not mean to dismiss Gamel's suffering, he only says that by the exercise of her pride she has mastered it, or at least kept it under control. There was a strong vein of melancholy in her make-up, dating from her severe illness as a young woman, as Gerald says elsewhere. And Gerald's own sufferings in his long and unhappy love affair with Carrington made him quite aware of the effect on Gamel of her marriage, and her affair with Llewelyn Powys; he knew also that she was often homesick for South Carolina. He was not unsympathetic, as his published and unpublished references to her amply demonstrate; but he was trying to be objective, and he knew her better than any other person ever did.

Gerald Brenan's letters are full of little vignettes which are perhaps more familiarly composed than they would be if designed for print; the short passage that I have quoted about Gamel is an example, and here is one concerning Bertrand Russell in a letter from Gerald to Alyse Gregory of 1 April 1967. In this letter he has been discussing another writer, and he turns to Russell almost as an afterthought:

Bertrand Russell, on the other hand, whose autobiography I expect you are reading, has never had more than three or four men friends in his life. For

⁵ *The Letters of Gamel Woolsey to Llewelyn Powys, 1930-1939*, p. 80.

other men he develops in the long run a veiled hostility, unless they are his disciples, for it is disciples he wants. But he cannot resist any attractive women; and then, like Voltaire, he has a love of humanity and a horror of cruelty and oppression which are completely genuine. However this allows him to hate the oppressors and he is stronger at hatred than at love. As he is absolutely lacking in what Pascal calls "esprit de finesse" or in knowledge of the world, he makes shocking blunders, carried away by his passions. Yet he is certainly a very great man, though if he had the sense that every farmer and grocer has he would be a greater one.⁶

Whatever the merits of this assessment of Russell's character, it shows that he and Brenan would have many things upon which to argue and disagree; but their friendship over forty years was stronger than any disagreement. At one point, in a letter dated "Nov 23rd, Sunday" addressed to Peter Spence, Gerald says "You place a great many interpretations on my letter which are not there. But first let me say how sorry I am if I have said anything that could be thought *unkind*. I certainly had no such intention, for my love and admiration for Bertie are very great. He has the mind which I admire above anyone else's in England." And in a letter to Russell dated 26 November 1940, he refers to his distress at "upsetting Peter" and goes on at some length to refer to a letter concerning Russell's *Which Way to Peace?* (1936), the general contents of which Gerald goes over again. Gerald Brenan's original letter would seem to be that dated 18 November 1936, and both are in the Bertrand Russell Archives.

Gerald Brenan does not quarrel with Russell's main arguments, but with the manner in which he presents them, for Gerald held strong views of his own on all the political subjects which engaged Russell, and frequently in his letters (and one imagines, in his conversation) he suggested alternative means of approach, without differing in fundamentals with Russell's thesis. His appreciation and admiration for Russell's other writings were unbounded, and for such a work as the *History of Western Philosophy* (to name but one) he has no words which could praise it too highly.

Whatever might have been Russell's capacity for friendship, I cannot think that such letters (whether of praise or blame) as Gerald Brenan wrote to him could be written without a very real friendship between sender and recipient.

Gamel Woolsey's correspondence with Russell as it survives is relatively scanty, taking into account the span of years over which it was

⁶ Correspondence in my possession.

written. Many of the letters are addressed to Edith, Countess Russell, although naturally these contain passages concerning Russell, and others are addressed to them both. I attribute this partly to Gamel's reluctance to write letters, which Gerald Brenan remarks upon; and perhaps partly to the fact that some letters have not survived, or have not yet come to light. I would have expected rather more letters from Brenan to Russell than I have yet heard of. Russell was constantly on the move, and letters sometimes are not preserved, or go astray.

But Gamel's letters to Russell are also relatively short, and somewhat noncommittal; other letters she wrote to close friends are altogether freer in expression and content—those, for example, to Alyse Gregory and to Phyllis Playter. It is as though, with Russell, she was holding something back: "I *admire* him, only I can't really like him." Certainly there is neither the implied intimacy, nor the explicit expressions of love which occur in some of Russell's to her. But this cannot necessarily be attributed to Gamel's more cautious response to Russell, for there are reticences in her responses to almost all the people she knew. Gerald Brenan speaks of these in several of his letters to Alyse Gregory, as in this passage from a letter of 2 October 1961:

It is really Gamel's mental state that I worry about.... She is too centred in her own incommunicable thoughts and feelings, and doesn't give herself enough to other people. Her judgements on them are harsher than they used to be.... She ... will never be a novelist because she is not and never has been much interested in other people. And she cannot criticise herself or she would see that.

If this is true, and I think there is much truth in it, we can see why Gamel in her introspective moods was ideally suited to write the sort of poetry she did, so much of it concerned with private thought and private emotion, set down rather than "shared"; and why the novel *One Way of Love* is so interesting, for it is of such things that it treats, against a rather superficial framework of outward events; and why her other novel was not even seriously considered for publication by a number of publishers who read it, despite its many fine qualities.

When these principles are applied to Gamel's letters to Russell we see how they are borne out there, also. Here is an example, undated as usual, but probably early 1955, as Gamel had not yet met Edith Russell, and the Russells had then just moved to their house in Wales. Gamel says,

My dear Bertie,

I would very much like to come to see you on the 13th and stay until the 16th if that would be convenient. I'd then go on to John Cowper Powys at

Blaenau-ffestiniog—it sounds like a journey in the *Morte D'Arthur* but I suppose it is possible in these days—

It is strange to be back in England after so long—But how beautiful England is—even more beautiful than I remembered. And how I love the Atlantic after that tideless sea—

I'll find out about trains and send you a telegram or note, if that time is convenient.

I look forward so much to seeing you, and to meeting your wife too.

With love always,
Gamel.

Now, even with love always, this is a shade perfunctory, even if one agrees that this would not be the occasion for a love letter, especially to a man fairly recently married. But, although this is comparatively brief, and there are some much longer letters from Gamel to Russell, I do not find in any of them any note much deeper than I find here. A very brief quotation from Russell will point the difference; here are the closing sentences of a letter of 5 March 1947:

I hate the way the months go by without our meeting, while the deserts of vast eternity draw nearer and nearer. I feel that what I miss now I may miss for ever, which I did not feel when I was younger. I have lived a great deal, but am not yet sated. Goodbye dear Gamel.

All my love. B.⁷

Words, whether written or spoken, often conceal as much as they tell, and we cannot assess the relationship between Russell and Gamel on such evidence as this; nor can we eavesdrop as they walk together in the sunshine, possibly to an observer, if there were one, quite openly in love. The most we can do is recognize the genuine depth of Russell's feelings for Gamel, over some part of the years he knew her, and speculate on the real nature of her feelings for him. "Love, what is love?" says the poet.

There were times during the years of Russell's friendship with the Brenans when what Byron might have called "his Domestic Circumstances" made it inadvisable to write or receive letters of a personal kind. Russell's letters to Gamel can hardly be considered love letters, and some of Gamel's are hardly letters at all. We must suppose that any expression of deep feeling, beyond a few words like those of Russell's just quoted, must have been made when they were together. But there is one document which is an exception to this. It is in Russell's handwriting, but has no date or place of writing, nor any signature. It is certainly

⁷ Correspondence in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

addressed to Gamel, although her name does not appear. It is not part of a letter; that seems clear. It is as though he placed it in her hand at parting from her one day.

From the first I have loved your strange eyes, expressing a kind of gentle mockery and the wisdom of old pain assimilated. Then I noticed the loving kindness expressed in all your movements. Very soon I saw that, like me, you live in an alien world, whose manners and customs and assumptions are not what seem deeply natural to you. This has caused us both to have a secret inner life of memory—memory of people and places we have loved, the people dead or estranged, the places deprived of their ancient beauty. Those with whom we associate, even in apparent intimacy, cannot share this secret life, and are even likely to be jealous of it. And so I came to look to you for a companionship I had no longer hoped to find. Your silences said more to me than the words of the most eloquent and explicit. Gradually your beauty invaded my inmost being. I feel it as I feel the night wind in willows, or the note of distant curlews on a lonely moor. I feel no longer alone, no longer dusty, for your existence sheds enchantment even over this arid world.

By a curious coincidence, there is an undated, unaddressed paper on rather similar lines to this, among the letters of Gamel Woolsey to Lewelyn Powys, in which she employs allegory (not very skilfully). Towards the close she says, "And she knew that the noise of the world, the chariots and the confusion, the passions and the griefs, the jealousy and giving in marriage went by outside and left the children unchanged in their windless spring, walking in their secret garden."

The most revealing passage I can find in any of Gamel's letters occurs in one written to Alyse Gregory, perhaps in December 1952—for as usual this tentative date can only be established by internal evidence. Here is what Gamel says:

I feel so sad because I have not seen Bertrand Russell for such a long time—we have both wanted very much to meet. But it leads to such difficulties—and then I feel despondent and will not try—but is sad—for life is so uncertain and those rare meetings were so much better than anything else—But this for your eyes only—

This short passage suggests several things, if I interpret it correctly. It suggests to me that Gamel enjoyed Russell's conversation and his company, but encountered what she calls "difficulties" because Russell wished for a closer relationship. And it suggests that although there are a number of passing references to Russell in the letters to Alyse—references to visits, his fourth marriage, things he has said—the absence

of any other such passages as the one I have quoted means that Gamel had told Alyse all she wished to of her relationship in private conversation. When she says "I have not seen Bertrand Russell for such a long time", I find by checking that the last meeting between them prior to December 1952 was June 1950, so far as my records go at present. But, so far as "difficulties" arose, I must acknowledge that these might only have been occasioned by the distance between Russell and Gamel, his crowded life, and such external hindrances. So difficult is it to come at what lies behind even a few simple words.

Despite what I have said, there is one sustained passage in an undated letter to Alyse Gregory, probably of autumn 1945; and as a prelude to this, a small aside in another letter of this period, where Gamel says "Bertrand Russell wrote me that he longed to die a heroic death fighting against evil, but that when the atom bombs fall he will be struggling to pay his bills...." The other quotation is much longer:

Since I wrote you I have been all the way to Cambridge to see Bertrand Russell—(this is only for you, for it is better for him no one should know). I had to spend two nights in London so I could go down just for the day. Cambridge was like a dream of falling leaves—and it did not seem possible that I was sitting in *Newton's* rooms with Bertrand Russell, watching the golden leaves falling, falling outside.

He talked a great deal of his youth when he first came to Cambridge and what passionate friendships he made. And how they used to walk round and round the cloisters of Trinity at night talking and talking, and always thinking that if they talked a little more they would discover something of infinite importance—and, as he said, it was true really, for all his ideas for *Principia Mathematica* came to him when he was very young out of such discussions and such exaltations.

He is writing a book on philosophy, which he wants to be his swan-song—to express most fully his ideas on philosophy—And I think this book is a passionate interest to him and a happiness—But I think apart from that he is lonely and sad. He has patched up his life with Peter as best he could for Conrad's sake. But I think all these storms have worn him. He looks older—even older than he is sometimes—though wonderfully distinguished.

Sometimes I found his vanity so *touching*. He said that he always felt hostility to other people—it was very hard for him to get over this—I saw how much it explained in his character and manner. The brilliance, the instinctive attack with the sharpest weapons because he expects attack—But what do such feelings come from?—Something far away and long ago I am sure—deeply hidden and deeply rooted. What maimed and halting creatures we all are—All of us with the Wound—so few with the Bow.

I wonder if you could help me with something I quoted to Bertie—

"I spoke as never sure to speak again—
And as a dying man to dying men."⁸

He was immensely struck with this and said he would like to quote it on the title page of his book—but I don't know who it's by—

Gamel Woolsey was widely read in the ancient and modern literatures; she could visit ancient ruined cities and remember the myths surrounding them; she was sufficiently conversant with the Arthurian legends to be able to advise John Cowper Powys in the writing of *A Glastonbury Romance*; she had studied religions, and philosophies, and legends and peoples. Such a man as Bertrand Russell would have been an absorbing and exciting companion for her, but beyond that she would not go. She was essentially a solitary person, withdrawn, reticent, uncommitted to close personal and emotional relationships, except perhaps with such old friends as Alyse Gregory. But Russell "could not resist any attractive women", and moreover in the years of his friendship with Gamel he had experienced many frustrations and disappointments. His second marriage failed, his third marriage failed; and his unrewarding love for Constance Malleon so late as 1949–50—these factors must all have weighed with him, perhaps subconsciously, to look for consolation in Gamel. Moreover, she was a mysterious, intriguing person, and little of what was within her appeared to a casual observer; she could respond to the shade of Newton, understand Russell's undergraduate passions, and quote Richard Baxter ... a woman for all seasons, Russell might think. He had found a number of such women, over the long decades of his life; and perhaps he had lost them before they were found. Perhaps Gamel Woolsey was the last.

Bertrand Russell saw her for the last time in the summer of 1967, and in January 1968 Gerald Brenan wrote to say that Gamel was dead.

Dear Bertie,

I have very sad news to tell you. Gamel died on Tuesday Jan 18 of a cancer radiating from her breast. She had concealed it for perhaps three years but when last August my son-in-law, who is a doctor in Paris, saw that her arm was swollen he took her to a cancer surgeon in Malaga who said that the disease was too deeply rooted to be curable. We went back to England for a fortnight, and she was glad to have seen you there, and then she had cobalt ray treatment out here in the hope of prolonging her life, but it did no good. The last two or three weeks were very distressing though she did not suffer acute pain. The doctor had refused to give her morphia because her heart was so weak, but she had opium suppositories. Her throat became completely blocked, so that it was an

⁸ It is from Richard Baxter, *Love Breathing Thanks and Praise*, slightly misquoted.

immense relief to me when her heart gave out and she died, for had she lived longer she might have suffered intense pain. Her patience, gentleness, uncomplainingness and courage all through her illness were amazing, though only what you would expect from knowing her.

Don't trouble to answer this. I know what you will feel. I hope you are well and going on with your Autobiography.

Ever yours
Gerald.

Russell replied:

Dear Gerald

Your sad letter informing me of Gamel's death reached me on Saturday. I am very much distressed as I felt her a close and sympathetic friend. Throughout all the turns and twists of public policy our friendship survived. I greatly admired the poems which, some time ago, she allowed me to see, but above all I liked the warmth and intimacy of her sympathy, which I shall miss as long as I live.

Yours ever,
Bertrand Russell

Thinking of the poems which Gamel had allowed him to see, perhaps Russell now remembered this:

When I am dead and laid at last to rest,
Let them not bury me in holy ground—
To lie the shipwrecked sailor cast ashore—
But give the corpse to firs, to flood, to air,
The elements that may the flesh transform
To soar with birds, to float where fishes are,
To rise in smoke, shine in a leaping flame—
To be in freedom lost in nothingness,
Not garnered in the grave, hoarded by death.
What is remembrance that we crave for it?
Let me be nothing then, not face nor name;
As on the seagull wings where bright seas pour,
As air that quickens at the opened door:
When I am dead, let me be nothing more.⁹

North Walsham, Norfolk, U.K.

⁹ *Twenty Eight Sonnets* (North Walsham, Norfolk: Warren House Press, 1977), p. 34. Reprinted in *The Collected Poems of Gamel Woolsey* (*ibid.*, 1984), p. 82.