The pacifist turn:

an episode of mystic illumination in Russell's life

Bertrand Russell was well known for his enduring commitment to pacifism. During World War I, he was willing to be jailed for his unpopular stand against England's involvement in the war, and later he protested vehemently America's presence in Vietnam. His abhorrence of nuclear war, germ warfare, and the atrocities involved in all wars is common knowledge.

Russell, however, was not always clearly of pacifist persuasion, as he noted in his autobiography. In fact he pinpointed the origins of his pacifism to a day in 1901 (he was 28 at the time), when he had an extraordinary experience. "Suddenly the ground seemed to give way beneath me, and I found myself in quite another region.... At the end of those five minutes, I had become a completely different person. For a time, a sort of mystic illumination possessed me.... Having been an imperialist, I became during those five minutes a pro-Boer and a pacifist".[1]

It is our purpose in this paper to provide a psychodynamically meaningful explanation of why this "illumination" should have eventuated in a "conversion" to pacifism. The three volumes of Russell's autobiography provide the main source of our information. Another important source is the fascinating collection of diaries and letters of Russell's parents (*The Amberley Papers*) compiled by Russell and his third wife. These documents provide important details about his early childhood, although they are, of course, not a totally independent reference inasmuch as Russell himself collected and edited them.

In 1900, Russell at age 28 had made some fundamental breakthroughs in his analysis of the foundations of mathematics which eventually culminated in his *Principles of Mathematics*. He and his wife Alys had been staying with Alfred North Whitehead and his family. He described the month of September, 1900, as "intellectually the highest point in my life."

> It seems to me in retrospect that, through that month, every day was warm and sunny.... Every evening the discussion [with Whitehead] ended with some difficulty, and every morning I found that the difficulty of the previous evening had resolved itself while I slept. The time was one of intellectual intoxication. My sensations resembled those one has after climbing a mountain in a mist, when, on reaching the summit, the mist suddenly clears, and the country becomes visible for forty miles in every direction.[2]

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[1]Vol. I (Boston, 1967), pp. 220-1.

[2]Ibid., p. 218.

During the autumn and winter of 1900 Russell wrote the first draft of *The Principles of Mathematics* and "finished the MS. on the last day of the century." He continues: "Oddly enough, the end of the century marked the end of this sense of triumph, and from that moment onwards I began to be assailed simultaneously by intellectual and emotional problems which plunged me into the darkest despair that I have ever known".[3]

In the latter part of the winter Mrs. Whitehead became increasingly ill and suffered severe attacks of pain due to heart trouble. Whitehead, clearly dependent upon her, was very anxious about her illness and doubted his ability to work creatively if she were to leave him. Russell and Alys were equally concerned about her condition.

Upon returning home one day after attending a deeply affecting reading of Gilbert Murray's translation of *Hippolytus*, they found Mrs. Whitehead undergoing an unusually severe bout of pain.

> She seemed cut off from everyone and everything by walls of agony and the sense of the solitude of each human soul suddenly overwhelmed me.... Suddenly the ground seemed to give way beneath me, and I found myself in quite another region. Within five minutes I went through some such reflections as the following: the loneliness of the human soul is unendurable; nothing can penetrate it except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached; whatever does not spring from this motive is harmful, or at best useless; it follows that war is wrong ... that the use of force is to be deprecated, and that in human relations one should penetrate to the core of loneliness in each person and speak to that. *The Whiteheads' youngest boy, aged three, was in the room. I had previously taken no notice of him, nor he of me. He had to be prevented from troubling his mother in the middle of her paroxysms of pain. I took his hand and led him away. He came willingly, and felt at home with me....*
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> At the end of those five minutes, I had become a completely different person. For a time, a sort of *mystic illumination* possessed me. I felt that I knew the inmost thoughts of everybody that I met in the street, and though this was, no doubt, a *delusion*, I did in actual fact find myself in far closer touch than previously with all my friends, and many of my acquaintances. Having been an imperialist, I became during those five minutes a pro-Boer and a pacifist. Having for years cared for exactness and analysis, I found myself filled with semi-mystical feelings about beauty, *with an intense interest in children*, and with a desire almost as profound as that of the Buddha to find some philosophy which should make human life endurable. A strange excitement possessed me, containing intense pain but also some element of triumph through the fact that I could dominate pain, and make it, as I thought, a gateway to wisdom. The mystic insight which I then imagined myself to possess has largely faded, and the habit of analysis has reasserted itself. But something of what I thought I saw in that moment has remained always with me, causing my attitude during the first war, my interests in children, my indifference to minor misfortunes and a certain emotional tone in all my human relations.[4]

Thus Russell described an experience which was a turning point in

[3] Ibid., p. 219.

[4] Ibid., pp. 220-1; our italics.

(continued on p.17)

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his life. There was, by his account - he uses the word "delusion" - some sort of loss of contact with reality, though we cannot know precisely its extent. He also experienced an excitement compounded of pain and a sense of triumph. Prominent were feelings of increased closeness to others, something akin to feelings of being-at-one-with, and a sense of certain non-verbal kind of communication (e.g., he could know the thoughts of others, without speaking to them).

We believe the elements concerning the three-year-old son and the dying mother crucial to the understanding of how this episode was related to Russell's earliest years.

Russell was born May 18, 1872. He had an older brother, Frank (seven years older), and a sister, Rachel, four years older. His memories of his life begin at about age four, with his arrival at Pembroke Lodge, the home of his paternal grandparents. He had been orphaned by the death of his father a few weeks before, January 9, 1876, and the death of his mother (and his sister), about a year and a half earlier. In addition, shortly after the death of the father, another important figure in his life, his older brother's tutor, died of consumption. His tone in recording the facts of these deaths, of which he has no conscious memories, is strikingly matter-of-fact and dispassionate.

There is no indication that the mother had been chronically ill or depressed and unavailable to him for a prolonged period prior to her death. However, his parents and his older brother Frank had been away on a trip for several months, during which time Russell and his sister, Rachel, were left in the care of his paternal grandmother and his familiar governess. It was shortly after the return that Frank, and later Rachel and Lady Amberley, became ill with diphtheria. Bertrand was sent away to a farm with his governess about a week before the mother's death and did not return home until after the sister's death. The accounts in the letters of the mother, the father, and the doctor emphasize the fear of the throat closing and difficulties in swallowing any food.

Lord Amberley, judging from his diaries, had been somewhat depressed well before the deaths of his wife and daughter, and was plunged into deep despair thereafter. He also became affected with some chronic debilitating pulmonary disease and died soon afterwards. It appears likely that the father was crippled in his capacity to help his sons deal with the death of the mother and sister. A letter from the maternal grandmother records that Bertrand (and Frank) were present at the father's death. "The Dr. lifted Bertrand up and he [the father] kissed him gently and softly and said 'Goodbye my little dears for ever'."[5]

Both parents were clearly mavericks. Lady Amberley was an early

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[5] *Amberley Papers*, vol. II, p. 576.

suffragette and had held some radical views about sexuality, in contrast to her mother-in-law's bizarre and extreme puritanical attitudes. Russell's parents, for example, felt deep solicitude for the young man they hired as a tutor for the older brother. Because he was seriously ill of tuberculosis, they thought it proper for Lady Amberley to have sexual relations with him inasmuch as he would never live to be married.

After the father's death a legal battle over custody ensued, with Russell's paternal grandmother determined to save her grandsons from the guardians designated by her son lest they inculcate the values of the deceased parents.

To complete the catalogue of losses, the grandfather to whom Russell had developed some affectionate attachment died when the boy was six. Thus, the early years of his life were marked by a series of major losses through death.

The atmosphere in which he was raised was permeated by his grandmother's eccentricities, particularly with regard to sex. According to Russell, she nearly convinced him that marriage, sexuality, and procreation could lead only to death, madness, and the perpetuation of various hereditary illnesses. The grandmother, though decidedly peculiar, did provide some sort of consistent, solicitous care. Also of importance was that the grandmother, though not a pacifist, staunchly opposed England's various imperialist wars in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Russell heard her preach these views as he was growing up, and his conversion probably involved an identification with her.

It is our assumption that these major childhood losses exerted a continuing and profound influence on Russell. They were experienced, particularly the death of the mother, at an age when the verbal, symbolic, and affective capacities of the child could register but not adequately "abreact" or buffer the impact of the experience.[6] The traumatic residue of the experience of the sickness and loss of the parents form one element of our explanation of this episode. His then current needs in relation to Whitehead, Mrs. Whitehead, and his wife Alys contribute the other elements.

We offer the following construction: The sight of Mrs. Whitehead in a painful paroxysm of coughing, together with the presence of the three-year-old son, led him to identify with the boy and revived in him memories of and feelings about his own early childhood losses. Those feelings about his mother's death - which took place when he was two - had probably remained inaccessible to verbal memory and could only be

[6]Russell was not a verbally precocious child. A letter of March 1874 presents him as then beginning to talk (21 months) (*Amberley Papers*, II, 563).

available to be *re-experienced* in some altered form. Some representation of the experience of being present at the father's death was also involved. The emphasis on feelings of mystic union and non-verbal communication as well as the imagery of *spatial dislocation* are suggestive of a reliving of rather early experiences and memories, which were revived and represented in this episode.[7] Russell's account emphasizes intense loneliness, the walls around each suffering human being, and pity for the suffering of children. We speculate that for the young child experiencing a parent's sickness and death not only loneliness and fear might be stirred up but also rage and frustration at the abandonment. Whether this would be consciously experienced anger, or anger warded off and indirectly represented in the behaviour of the young child is, of course, uncertain. But the constellation of age-appropriate aggression, the associated fears and fantasies that angry feelings for parents could lead to their death and disappearance, plus the fact that the parents did die, together must have led to a great need to ward off excessive hostility.[8]

We feel, then, that a key element in the episode is that of a *defense* against an upsurge of aggressive feelings. The form of the defense includes some sort of dissociative state, marked by an alteration of state of contact with real objects in the environment and feelings and fantasies of merger and closeness (as in mystical union). Thus, the "mystic illumination" represents a revival of feelings of loneliness and loss, a compensatory feeling of being-at-one-with, and a defense against an outbreak of aggression or a dangerous upsurge of aggressive feelings. Both a wish and defense are combined in the feelings of union.

Two items must be elaborated to make this interpretation of the role of aggression more plausible. The first is the question of what, in that current adult situation, might have been a stimulus to aggressive feelings. The second is the marshalling of evidence from Russell's behavior both before and after this episode to support the contention that he indeed did struggle with control of murderous aggression.

[7]The element of spatial dislocation, "and I found myself in quite another region," may also be related to his earliest memory and a vivid recollection of the *new places* he went to a few weeks after the death of the father (*Auto.*, I, 7). This hypothesis also suggests that the episode of mystic illumination represented an "anniversary reaction" to the death of the father and to the *move* to the grandmother's house a few weeks later. (For a lucid discussion of anniversary reactions, and an overview of the analytic literature dealing with the impact of preverbal traumata, and their relation to transient psychotic episodes, cf. G.H. Pollock, "Anniversary Reactions, Trauma, and Mourning," *Psychoanal. Q.*, 39 [1970], 347-71.)

[8]On the importance of rage in relation to childhood loss, as well as to a discussion of the sequelae in respect to the age of the child at the time of the loss, cf. M. Wolfenstein, "Loss, Rage and Repetition," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 24 (1969), 436-60.

Our supposition is that Russell feared that if Mrs. Whitehead died, Whitehead would suffer total collapse. He speaks of Whitehead's eccentricities, which verged, as far as Russell could see, on suicidal insanity (*Auto.*, I, 225-6). Russell felt he sorely needed Whitehead at that point for help in his own mathematical creativity. Although he did not write collaboratively with Whitehead until several years later, he relied heavily on Whitehead for advice and discussion. Whether or not he could in fact have carried on his work at that time without Whitehead is, of course, unanswerable.

Thus, the death of Mrs. Whitehead might recreate the childhood situation of the mother dying and leaving him with a father whose functioning was severely impaired by depression - and illness.

As for the second item, some evidence does exist for Russell's need to defend against his own aggression. Most striking is that for many years (starting around the time of his courtship of his first wife), he suffered from recurrent violent nightmares, "in which I dream that I am being murdered, usually by a lunatic. I scream out loud, and on one occasion, before waking, I nearly strangled my wife, thinking that I was defending myself against a murderous assault" (ibid., p. 118).

Russell, then, is both the one being murdered and, at the same time, himself the lunatic murderer. (An element of identification with a lunatic murderer is suggested by the family story [ibid., p. 31] that one of his father's brothers had in fact gone mad and been hospitalized: in the hospital, he awakened in the middle of the night from a nightmare and strangled a man in the next bed.)

Russell relates another incident in which as a young man of 16 he became involved in an argument with a friend. A violent physical struggle ensued, and he barely stopped himself from choking the friend to death. "On one occasion, in an access of fury, I got my hands on his throat and started to strangle him. I intended to kill him, but when he began to grow livid, I relented. I do not think he knew that I had intended murder" (ibid., p. 52).[9]

Both these incidents (the strangling of Alys, and of the friend) have elements suggestive of a link between his murderous rage and his feelings about mothers. In the latter episode, the falling out between Russell and his friend Fitzgerald had its origin when Fitzgerald was rude to his own mother. Russell reproached him; Fitzgerald became angry, and eventually Russell "came to hate him with a violence which, in retrospect, I can hardly understand" (ibid.).

[9]These episodes of strangling may be related also to the importance of the throat in diphtheria. It is of interest that in advanced old age Russell became unable to swallow solid foods and subsisted on liquids. The condition was not definitively diagnosed and might have been a major hysterical conversion. See *Auto.*, vol. III, and especially R. Crawshay-Williams, *Russell Remembered* (London, 1970), pp. 115-16.

The recurrent nightmare began at the time when Russell wanted to marry Alys but was told by his grandmother of all the dire hereditary madnesses and illnesses in the family. Were he to beget children, they would all be mad. One night, he had a nightmare: his mother was not really dead, but was alive and mad, and his family had deceived him (ibid., p. 117).

Sometime subsequent to this dream, Russell dates the onset of his *recurrent* nightmare. The sequence suggests, too, a more specific connection between his aggression, fears of madness, and the loss of his mother.[10]

Soon after the episode in the Whitehead home, Russell realized he was no longer in love with Alys, and he stopped sleeping with her. (They continued to live together for nine years, with only occasional unsatisfactory intercourse, during which time Russell had no affairs). He began to see numerous faults with her - when in love, these could be overlooked, but now they became monumental. Part of his falling out with her must have been his disappointment with her inability to conceive. Undoubtedly a serious unconscious ambivalence toward Alys might well have been present before the episode of mystic illumination and only became manifest afterward. But he also was specifically enraged with her for insinuating that Mrs. Whitehead was a bad mother. With a *tu quoque* rebuttal, Russell detailed the sadism of Alys's own mother, who had reared Alys and her homosexual brother, Logan Pearsall Smith (ibid., pp. 223-4).

To recapitulate: for Russell the notion of someone attacking a mother, or thoughts and emotions about a dying mother, seemed connected with extreme aggression and murderous feelings.[11] The direction of these feelings must be sometimes against others and sometimes against himself: homicidal rage or suicidal despair (ibid., p. 229).[12]

It should be noted at this point that Russell did not consider himself an absolute pacifist in any and all circumstances. His first significant deviation from a pacifist stance developed in the late 1930s

[10]Undoubtedly, the death of his grandmother (1898) had also set the stage for this episode of mystic illumination. For his rather nonchalant mention of her death, cf. *Auto.*, I, 205. In that letter, his aunt mourns. Russell does not.

[11]Cf. *Auto.*, II (Boston, 1968), 193.

[12]The extent to which these early losses continued to cast a shadow over his entire life, particularly in terms of his relationships with his four wives and children, cannot be taken up here. For one brief instance, see *Auto.*, III [New York, 1969], 88-9, and also pp. 80-81, 86, and 115 for other incidents where reminders of early childhood precipitated feelings of deep despair and melancholy.

when he became convinced that England must fight Hitler. Strikingly in support of our thesis, he cites as a major factor in his change of heart his experiences in running a school, and his growing recognition of the aggression of young children (*Auto.*, II, 287-288). Thus, as he could consciously accept the reality of childhood hostility, his pacifist stance became modified.[13]

In effect, then, our analysis and construction of the episode of mystic illumination points to the interplay between Russell's pacifist stance and his quest for inner peace. The dynamic and genetic factors that seem predominant are: (1) The need to control aggression, specifically that aggression engendered by the experience of early parental loss, (2) identification with suffering children, and (3) peace as a mystic fusion, or reunion - the end of loneliness and pain.

It is of interest that, the very opening of his autobiography, the dedicatory poem "To Edith," begins, "Through the long years I sought peace." This poem, composed in old age and anticipating his own death, recapitulates all the major themes associated with the episode of mystic illumination. The parallels between the two are quite remarkable.

Through the long years
  I sought peace.
I found ecstasy, I found anguish,
  I found madness,
I found loneliness.
I found the solitary pain
  that gnaws the heart,
But peace I did not find.

Now, old and near my end,
  I have known you,
And, knowing you,
I have found both ecstasy and peace.
  I know rest.
After so many lonely years,
I know what life and love may be.
  Now, if I sleep,
I shall sleep fulfilled.

In conclusion, we wish to raise two further points. The first refers to our particular analytic construction. We have deliberately emphasized a defensive vicissitude of aggression connected with object loss and have glossed over other questions which are worthy of further elaboration. These include the role of guilt, the relationship of this episode to Russell's interest in modes of knowing (logic versus mysticism), and the relationship of this episode to sexuality. Not the least of the questions left unanswered is that of the mechanism of an "episode" or "conversion," as opposed to a more gradual defensive shift.

[13]Cf. his advocacy for threatening Russia with nuclear destruction in *Auto.*, III, 7-8 and Crawshay-Williams, pp. 26-9.

The second point brings us to a larger issue, namely that of the proper place of psychoanalytic explanations of the political behavior of a particular individual. We shun the reductionistic use of psychoanalytic accounts of unconscious motives, a use that ignores or minimizes the causal importance of a whole host of conscious motives, as well as of historical and social forces. To this complex issue we offer two footnotes about the proper place for psychoanalytic explanations of a particular individual's political behavior. The one is that of understanding, not the constancy of a political view held by an individual, but rather the *inconstancy*, the sudden and surprising reversals in an accustomed stance. In Russell's case, we have alluded to one instance of a dramatic turnabout: his documented proposal in 1948 that the United States should threaten Russia with atomic destruction and his later vehement denial that he had ever espoused such a view. It is our impression that a detailed examination of Russell's private life at that period, with the psychodynamic hypothesis we have elaborated, would genuinely fill in a lacuna in the understanding of his putting forth this nakedly aggressive proposal.

The second use of psychoanalytic explanation in understanding political behavior is in the comparative study of life histories of particular political "types," in this instance, dedicated and politically active pacifists.[14] There are, for example, a number of remarkable surface parallels between the lives of Russell and Tolstoy, another renowned pacifist.[15] These include the experiencing of a mother's death at age two, an interest in childhood education, similarities in social class and position, and a change from interest and even enthusiasm for war to a pacifist stance. For Russell and Tolstoy, there also seem to have been important connections between the experience of early maternal loss and the development of life-long ambivalent attitudes towards women, particularly with regard to their sexual and child-bearing functions. By tracing out constellations of particular conflicts and their defensive vicissitudes, one might demonstrate common denominators even among men who are superficially quite different. To discover that a pacifist has struggled with the mastery of aggressive impulses would be almost trivial. But to trace out in certain pacifists the struggle with a particular kind of aggression bearing the stamp of a particular genetic situation and undergoing a similar kind of fate would be a considerable interest. Whether such detailed psychoanalytic examination of the biographies of dead pacifists, as well as studies of living men, would in fact yield data that would shed light on common features of political behavior is, however, a question requiring empirical study.

[14]Cf. H.D. Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics* (New York, 1960).

[15]Cf. H. Troyat, *Tolstoy* (New York, 1967).

Finally, we feel that in tribute to Bertrand Russell, it is worth recording and analyzing his own statement about the origins of his pacifism. For him, the quest for peace was inseparable from the elementary passions of pity for those who are victims, pain for those who are lonely, and, above all, an awareness of the sufferings of little children, sufferings which cannot be expressed in words.

Summary

We present an analysis of Bertrand Russell's account of an episode of "mystic illumination" which culminated in his "conversion" to pacifism. Our construction links the form and content of the episode, as well as its outcome, to the traumatic experience of early parental loss. We particularly emphasize the role of aggression engendered in the setting of separation and object loss as crucial to understanding Russell's pacifist turn.

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