

## Auto-Obituary [1936]

ALTHOUGH THIS FAMOUS essay continued to appear in print intermittently up to and even after Russell's death, it is very much a product of the mid-1930s—with its foreboding of another world war and slightly melodramatic self-portrait of a man swimming against the tide of contemporary opinion (see Monk 2000, 187–90). Yet the piece was also written with Russell's “tongue fixed squarely in his cheek” (Willis 2006, 14). His deft half-parody of the obituary form managed to combine “a sly irony that was his own [with] an Olympian tone familiar to any *Times* reader” (*ibid.*). Writing to an inquisitive American correspondent some twenty years later, Russell recalled that his “‘obituary’ ... was not intended to suggest my own opinions but what I guessed that the London *Times* would say” (to Edwin B. Wilson, 31 Aug. 1956). As a result, he had produced a rather selective summation of his first sixty-four years, which was not only deliberately distorted by faux self-criticism but which also, in its concluding paragraph, provided a revealing view of how Russell saw, and would continue to see, himself.

Paper 48 was the fifth in a series of “auto-obituaries” commissioned by *The Listener*, where it was published as “‘The Last Survivor of a Dead Epoch’”, 16 (12 Aug. 1936): 289 (B&R B36.22). The other contributors included H. G. Wells, George Lansbury, Sylvia Pankhurst and the cartoonist Low. Unlike the majority of Russell's appearances in this in-house journal of the BBC, the present paper was not delivered in the first instance as a broadcast talk. The first of many reprints, and the initial American publication, appeared five years later in *Coronet*, Chicago, 10 (Sept. 1941): 36–8. Russell later chose his auto-obituary for inclusion in *Unpopular Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), pp. 221–3 (B&R A87)—although not before a telling revision had taken account of his estrangement from Peter (see T232: 22–3). Russell introduced two other changes to this version, supplying a title and footnote, both of which stated incorrectly that the piece had first appeared in 1937. As the discussion in the Textual Notes reveals, however, most of the variation between the unreliable 1950 text and the two previous publications is to be explained not by authorial intervention but by the careless typing of the printer's copy from Russell's fourteen-year old manuscript.

The copy-text is the manuscript (RA1 220.016470); in addition to the typescript prepared for the reprint in *Unpopular Essays* (RA1 210.006801), there is a photocopy of an earlier typescript printer's copy used by *Coronet* (RA REC. ACQ. 315). A listing of the numerous published versions is available at B&R C36.22.

BY THE DEATH<sup>1</sup> of the third Earl Russell (or Bertrand Russell, as he preferred to call himself) at the age of ninety, a link with a very distant past is severed. His grandfather Lord John Russell, the Victorian Prime Minister, visited Napoleon in Elba; his maternal grandmother was a friend of the Young Pretender's widow. In his youth he did work of importance in mathematical logic, but his eccentric attitude during the first world war revealed a lack of balanced judgment which increasingly infected his later writings. Perhaps this is attributable, at least in part, to the fact that he did not enjoy the advantages of a public school education, but was taught at home by tutors until the age of eighteen, when he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, becoming 7th Wrangler in 1893 and a Fellow in 1895. During the fifteen years that followed, he produced the books upon which his reputation in the learned world was based: *The Foundations of Geometry*, *The Philosophy of Leibniz*, *The Principles of Mathematics*, and (in collaboration with Dr. A. N. Whitehead) *Principia Mathematica*. This last work, which was of great importance in its day, doubtless owed much of its superiority to Dr. (afterwards Professor) Whitehead, a man who, as his subsequent writings showed, was possessed of that insight and spiritual depth so notably absent in Russell; for Russell's argumentation, ingenious and clever as it is, ignores always those higher considerations that transcend mere logic. 10

This lack of spiritual depth became painfully evident during the first world war, when Russell, although (to do him justice) he never minimized the wrong done to Belgium, perversely maintained that, war being an evil, the aim of statesmanship should have been to bring the war to an end as soon as possible, which would have been achieved by British neutrality and a German victory. It must be supposed that mathematical studies had caused him to take a merely quantitative view which ignored the questions of principle involved. Throughout the war, he continued to urge that it should be ended, on no matter what terms. Trinity College, very properly, deprived him of his lectureship, and for some months of 1918 he was in prison. 20

In 1920 he paid a brief visit to Russia, whose government did not impress him favourably, and a longer visit to China, where he enjoyed the rationalism of the traditional civilization, with its still surviving flavour of the eighteenth century. In subsequent years his energies were dissipated in writings advocating socialism, educational reform, and a less rigid code of morals as regards marriage. At times, however, he returned to less topical

1 This obituary will (or will not) be published in *The Times* for June 1, 1962, on the occasion of my lamented but belated death. It was printed prophetically in *The Listener* 40 in 1936.

subjects. His historical writings, by their style and their wit, conceal from careless readers the superficiality of his thought, and are not without value as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the antiquated rationalism which he professed to the end.

In the second world war he took no public part, having escaped to a neutral country just before its outbreak. In private conversation he was wont to say that homicidal lunatics were well employed in killing each other, but that sensible men would keep out of their way while they were doing it. Fortunately this outlook, which is reminiscent of Bentham and  
10 John Stuart Mill (who was his godfather), has become rare in this age, which recognizes that heroism has a value independent of its utility. True, much of what was once the civilized world lies in ruins; but no right-thinking person can admit that those who died for the right in the great struggle have died in vain.

His life, for all its waywardness, had a certain anachronistic consistency, reminiscent of that of the aristocratic rebels of the early nineteenth century. His principles were curious, but, such as they were, they governed his actions. In private life he showed none of the acerbity which marred his writings, but was a genial conversationalist and not devoid of human  
20 sympathy. He had many friends, but had survived almost all of them. Nevertheless, to those who remained he appeared, even in extreme old age, full of enjoyment of life, no doubt owing, in large measure, to his invariable health, for politically, during his last years, he was as isolated as Milton after the Restoration. He was the last survivor of a dead epoch.

## 48 Auto-Obituary

- 231: 3–4 **Lord John Russell ... visited Napoleon in Elba** On Christmas Day 1814 Lord John had a ninety-minute audience with Napoleon Bonaparte on the Mediterranean island of Elba, to where the lately deposed ruler had been exiled seven months previously. His impressions of Napoleon as a man “open to flattery and violent in his temper” were recorded in his diary (Walpole 1889, 1: 75).
- 231: 4–5 **maternal grandmother ... Young Pretender’s widow** Russell’s maternal grandmother, Lady Stanley of Alderley (1807–1895, née Henrietta Maria Dillon), was born into an aristocratic family of Irish Jacobite exiles; she spent much of her childhood in Florence where, according to Russell (1967, 33), she regularly visited Princess Louise of Stolberg-Gedern, Countess of Albany (1752–1824) and widow of the late Jacobite claimant to the throne, Charles Edward Stuart (1720–1788), “Bonnie Prince Charlie”.
- 231: 11 **becoming 7th Wrangler** Russell was named “7th Wrangler” after completing the first part of the notoriously taxing mathematical trips in June 1893. The designation conformed with the Cambridge convention of placing its mathematics students in an exact order of merit. Although Russell achieved a

high ranking, he was frustrated with the emphasis on examination technique and had come to think dismissively of mathematics “as consisting of artful dodges and ingenious devices and as altogether too much like a cross-word puzzle” (1956, 20).

- 231: 15–19 **Dr. A. N. Whitehead ...spiritual depth** Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), Russell’s former teacher and the co-author of *Principia Mathematica* (1910–13), went on, after this collaboration ended, to practice philosophy in a markedly different way to Russell. While Russell emphasized the affiliation of his philosophy to science, Whitehead turned to idealism and emphasized its affiliation with religion. The “process philosophy” that he developed, most elaborately in *Process and Reality* (1929), gave rise in America to a school of “process theology”. This was exactly the sort of philosophical approach that Russell had excoriated in *The Scientific Outlook* (1931) and elsewhere (in Paper 56, for example) and which, he thought, received undue recognition from the academic establishment.
- 231: 24–7 **wrong done to Belgium ... neutrality ... Germany victory** “The chief crime of Germany in invading Belgium lies less in the fact that a treaty was broken than in the fact that terrible cruelty was inflicted on an unoffending nation.... But the question which England had to consider was, not whether Germany had committed a crime, but whether we should do anything to mitigate the bad consequences of that crime by going to war.... In return for a free passage and for our neutrality, the Germans would have respected Belgian independence, and Belgium would have been spared almost all that it has suffered” (Russell 1915b; *Papers* 13: 187). Although not oblivious to the “wrong done to Belgium”, Russell had criticized the exploitation of “Belgian atrocities” for propaganda effect (see A64: 10–11).
- 231: 30–1 **Trinity College ... deprived ... lectureship** See *Papers* 13: lxi–lxiii.
- 231: 31–2 **for some months of 1918 he was in prison** See *Papers* 14: xlix–lv.
- 231: 33–4 **brief visit to Russia ... longer visit to China** Russell toured Bolshevik Russia with a British Labour Delegation between 11 May and 16 June 1920. His critical appraisal of the revolutionary regime was memorably set down shortly afterwards in *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1920). He travelled to China with his future wife Dora Black after accepting a visiting professorship at the National University of Beijing. They arrived in Shanghai on 12 October 1920 and remained in the country until departing for Japan on 11 July 1921. For a detailed account of Russell’s Russian and Chinese experiences, see *Papers* 15: xxxiv–lxv.
- 232: 9–10 **Bentham ... Mill ... his godfather** On Bentham, see A60: 1–4 and A100: 11. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) was one of two secular godfathers chosen for Russell by his freethinking parents (the other was the atheistic founder of the Doves Press, Thomas Cobden-Sanderson).
- 232: 23–4 **as isolated as Milton after the Restoration** Although he produced some of his best work (including the epic *Paradise Lost*) in the last fourteen

years of his life, John Milton (1608–1674) had been such an ardent champion and devoted servant of the late Commonwealth regime that his public activities were abruptly terminated in 1660. Indeed, immediately after the Restoration the poet was forced into hiding and briefly imprisoned before a general amnesty at least enabled him to pursue his literary craft quietly, unencumbered by political or religious interference.

## 48 Auto-Obituary

The manuscript (“CT”) is written in black ink on three leaves that are foliated 1–3 and measure 201 × 330 mm. Russell placed a handwritten note of the word-count for fos. 1 and 2 in the lower-right corner of these leaves. Unless indicated otherwise, the emendations are also in black ink: the title and the footnote—with their inaccurate dating of the initial publication in *The Listener* (“LIS”)—were added to CT for the essay as it appeared in the first British edition of *Unpopular Essays* (“50”). The printer’s copy for this version was a three-leaf typescript (“TS”), prepared somewhat carelessly from CT in its final revised form—perhaps by the “slatternly chit of a girl” whose limited skills Lady Constance Malleson had also, by pure coincidence, found herself using in October 1949. After dictating a letter to this typist in her “dingy office”, she had noticed “strewn about anyhow” a batch of Russell’s “three months’ old, still unanswered, semi-business letters” (pmk. 2 Jan. 1950). Whether or not this particular individual was responsible for typing Russell’s manuscript, a number of erroneous readings, affecting both the accidental and substantive features of the text, were introduced to TS. Russell caught some of these errors in correcting this pre-publication version in pencil; three others were altered, likely on the missing page proofs, but the remainder were printed both in 50 and in the substantively identical concluding chapter of the first American edition of Russell’s book. They appeared once again in the second British edition (1968) but have been excised from the present volume. For the substantives affected, see T231: 20, T231: 28,

T231: 29, T232: 2–3, T232: 21 and T232: 22. Two other important authorial readings are missing from 50, not because of the careless typing of TS, but because the source for this printer's copy was CT, as opposed to a typescript contemporary with CT, or a tear-sheet from LIS or the first American version, in *Coronet* ("COR"). One of these readings (see T232: 4) is peculiar to LIS and has not been restored to Paper 48 because it ties Russell's text too closely to the 1930s, when his intentions as revealed by the reading from this volume at T232: 22–3 (which was probably introduced on the page proofs of 50) were clearly otherwise. But Russell's resonant allusion to John Stuart Mill as his godfather (see T232: 9–10) has no such effect, and the reading common to both LIS and COR—which probably originated as an emendation on an earlier typescript sent by Russell to *The Listener*—has been preferred for *Papers* 21. It has been decided that a third reading common to LIS and COR (see T231: 8) was most likely not the result of authorial intervention but of an uncorrected typographical error on the earliest typescript. Although this first typed copy is missing, there is one other pre-publication document: a photocopy of the three-leaf typescript printer's copy for COR. Four substantive emendations, seven paragraph breaks and some house-styling changes were marked up on this typescript by the editors of this Chicago-based periodical. The first substantive emendation changed Russell's title from "Auto-Obituary", a deletion which has been undone for the present volume because, first, the prior reading is definitely authorial; second, this hitherto unpublished title is more descriptive than any of the alternative readings; and third, the only other authorial title, which originated as an emendation to CT, contains in its subtitle the same bibliographical error that has been corrected editorially in the footnote (see T231: 39–41). The other three revisions to the printer's typescript for COR are indicated by the readings from the latter publication at T231: 10, T231: 33 and 231: 37. COR is substantively identical to the emended form of this typescript, which is not a carbon of the ear-

liest typed copy, for its American paper stock suggests that it was prepared in the United States, and probably some five years after LIS was published in Britain. Many other reprints appeared during the 1950s and 1960s, and especially after Russell's death in 1970. But none of these later publications feature in the textual notes, which provide a collation of CT with LIS, COR, TS and 50.

*title* Auto-Obituary] Obituary inserted in pencil before subtitle inserted in blue ink [1937] CT] "The Last Survivor of a Dead Epoch" LIS] Bertrand Russell's Own Obit COR] as for CT TS, 50

231: 1 death<sup>1</sup>] footnote indicator inserted in blue ink after title CT] footnote indicator after title TS, 50] footnote indicator not present LIS, COR

231: 8 infected CT, TS, 50] affected LIS, COR

231: 10 education, but CT, LIS, TS, 50] education; he COR

231: 13 books CT] above deleted work

231: 16–17 was ... in its day, CT] inserted

231: 17 superiority CT] inserted above deleted merit

231: 17 afterwards LIS, COR, TS, 50] afterward CT

231: 19–20 for Russell's CT] inserted above deleted whose

231: 20 always those CT, LIS, COR] those TS, 50

231: 28 merely CT, COR, LIS] wrongly (wrongly replaced wrong TS) TS, 50

231: 29 questions CT, LIS, COR] question TS, 50

231: 33 1920 CT, LIS, TS, 50] the year 1930 COR

231: 37 educational reform, LIS, TS, 50] inserted above deleted freedom in education CT] educational reforms COR

231: 38 At times, however, CT] inserted above deleted The course of events, however, was not to his liking, and in the end

231: 39–41 This obituary ... in 1936.] inserted in blue ink except that "1936" reads "1937" CT] footnote not present LIS, COR] as for CT, TS, 50

231: 39–40 , on the ... death CT] inserted in pencil within previous insertion



- 232: 1 historical writings CT] *replaced* writings on historical subjects
- 232: 2–3 his thought... the antiquated CT, LIS, COR] the antiquated TS, 50
- 232: 4 end. CT, COR, TS, 50] end. After enjoying the ephemeral reputation appropriate to his talents, he suffered, in later life, the pinch of penury. LIS
- 232: 9–10 Bentham ... his godfather) LIS, COR] Bentham CT, TS, 50
- 232: 13 for the right CT] *inserted*
- 232: 21 even in CT, LIS, COR] in TS, 50
- 232: 22 enjoyment of life CT, LIS, COR] enjoyment TS, 50
- 232: 22–3 his invariable health 50] the happiness of his private circumstances CT, LIS, COR, TS