



“This Place Is Hell”: Bertrand Russell at Harvard, 1914

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IN the spring of 1914 Bertrand Russell was at the peak of his scholarly reputation and philosophical prestige. Enconced in a Cambridge lectureship in logic and the philosophy of mathematics which had been created especially for him, he had enjoyed two decades of uninterrupted intellectual achievement. With works from *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* (1897), to *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (1900), to *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903), to *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), to *Principia Mathematica* (3 vols., 1910–13), to over thirty major articles in British, French, Italian, German, and American journals, Russell had won renown not simply as “the most discussed logician since Aristotle” (in the words of Josiah Royce) but as the chief proponent of a new and powerful technique of intellectual discourse—analytic philosophy.¹ Honors, such as election to the Royal Society and the presidency of the Aristotelian Society, pressed upon him yearly, as did talented pupils from all reaches of Britain, Europe, and North America—men such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Norbert Wiener, and Jean Nicod. On the eve of the First World War, Russell was indisputably the most celebrated and influential philosopher in the English-speaking world.

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¹Royce’s remark is reported by Victor F. Lenzen, in “Bertrand Russell at Harvard, 1914,” *Russell: The Journal of the Bertrand Russell Archives* 3 (Autumn 1971): 4.

Further evidence of his fame lay in the steady stream of invitations to lecture, teach, and travel which made their way to his Trinity College rooms. Unable and unwilling to accede to more than a fraction of these demands on his time and energies, Russell had grown extremely adept in the art of polite refusal. One especially persistent and not easily dissuaded petitioner had been Harvard University, whose department of philosophy had ritually invited Russell to teach—for a spell of his own choosing—every year since 1910. Deep at work on the mammoth manuscript of *Principia Mathematica*, however, Russell had, in the years before 1913, been unwilling to interrupt his labors and had repeatedly turned aside Harvard's various importunities. In the winter of 1912/13, however, circumstances changed on both sides of the Atlantic—conditions that would prompt Russell to change his mind. In America, Harvard's annual request was coupled with an invitation from the prestigious Lowell Institute that Russell give a series of well-paid public lectures on some general philosophical topic.² In England, on the other hand, Russell found himself if not precisely at loose ends, then at least highly susceptible to the temptations and opportunities available in America. Estranged from his wife, straitened in his means, finished with the *Principia*, convinced that "America contains a number of people who are ready to take up my sort of work," and excited by the prospect of venturing into the wilds of New England, Russell reconsidered his earlier refusals and assented to the Harvard/Lowell offer in November 1912.³ By the terms of his agreement, negotiated by the chairman of Harvard's philosophy department, Ralph Barton Perry, Russell would spend the three-month spring term of 1914 in

²Bertrand Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, 16 November 1912, #638. Original at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin; photocopy at The Bertrand Russell Archives, Mills Memorial Library, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. In every case, I have consulted the photocopy at the Russell Archives. I am grateful to the Permissions Committee, Bertrand Russell Archives, for permission to quote from Russell's correspondence.

³Russell to Morrell, 9 November 1912, #628.

“the other Cambridge”—offering two courses at Harvard, delivering the Lowell lectures to a general audience in Boston, traveling in the surrounding countryside and to neighboring universities on side trips, and experiencing the “vitality” of America at first hand. It was a prospect, he told his mistress, Lady Ottoline Morrell, on the eve of his departure, to which he looked forward with increasing enthusiasm, even if it promised to make him “busier than I have ever been in my life.”⁴ In fact, Russell’s months in America would prove to be a time of growing disillusionment and bitterness, a period that would transform his opinion of American culture and society, sour his attitude towards American academic life, provoke his aristocratic snobbishness and Cambridge provincialism, and allow full rein to his remarkable capacity for insightful observation, shrewd analysis, and puckish humor.

I

Aboard the *Mauretania* and in the pleasant company of the celebrated British explorer Francis Younghusband, Russell sailed to New York in the second week of March 1914. This was not his first trip to America. In the late autumn of 1896, he and his American-born wife, Alys Pearsall Smith, had spent nearly three months visiting her family. That journey, which had taken Russell to Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, and Boston, had been both a joy and a revelation to him.⁵ In common with so many other English men and women of his class, the young Russell had viewed America from afar as “a romantic land of freedom,” as a place happily free from the petty snobberies and stifling “prejudices which hampered me at home.” Three months of actual experience of America and Americans, however, led

⁴Russell to Morrell, 7 March 1914, #1001.

⁵For accounts of that earlier trip, see William M. Armstrong, “Bertrand Russell Comes to America, 1896,” *Studies in History and Society* 2 (Spring 1970): 26–36; Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils, *Bertrand Russell’s America, 1896–1945* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973), pp. 19–27; *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872–1914* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), pp. 130–33.

him to temper his enthusiasm. Not only were America's politics appallingly corrupt and its industrial elite ruthlessly exploitative, but its "society" seemed at once "effete" and "curiously innocent."⁶ Despite such major reservations, Russell had nonetheless come away mightily impressed by the energy, inventiveness, and freedom of the culture and by the kindness, candor, and humor of the inhabitants. "Individual Americans are delightful," he had reported to his friend Graham Wallas. "The level of intelligence is high," the leading colleges and universities "a match" for Oxford and Cambridge, and the potentialities for change and achievement vast.⁷ He had left eager to return.

When the *Mauretania* docked in New York, Russell was met by two friends, Lucy Donnelly, a Bryn Mawr classmate of Alys's, and Helen Thomas Flexner, one of Alys's Quaker cousins and wife of the eminent scientist and medical researcher Simon Flexner.⁸ After a brief visit and the exchange of promises to meet again during the Easter holiday, Russell boarded the train to Boston. Excited by the "delicious" prospect of "seeing so many new things," "prepared to enjoy the adventure of it," and reminded of his earlier judgment that Boston "seems to be the most interesting place in America," he was in high spirits when he arrived there that very afternoon.⁹ Almost immediately, however, he began to wonder whether he had erred badly in abandoning the old Cambridge for the new, no matter how short the stay. Far from sharing the pastoral splendors and majestic beauty of its mother university, "the other Cambridge" had a setting utterly "suburban—endless incredibly muddy streets of squalid wooden houses, almost always with trams shrieking down them." Nor were his lodgings, at the respectable Co-

⁶Russell, *Autobiography*, pp. 76, 133.

⁷Quoted by Feinberg and Kasrils, in *Russell's America*, pp. 22-23.

⁸The relationship between Russell, Donnelly, and the Flexners is well described in James Thomas Flexner's *An American Saga: The Story of Helen Thomas and Simon Flexner* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984).

⁹Russell to Morrell, 13 March 1914, #1004; Russell to Rollo Russell, 20 November 1896, Russell Archives.

lonial Club, any less ghastly. “This Club is humble and shabby,” he informed Ottoline Morrell the afternoon of his arrival. Not merely was it “very dirty” with “disgusting food, windows *never* opened, [and] spittoons distributed tastefully about the floor,” but it was full of “hard efficient un-meditative men coming and going, talking in horrible American voices.” Of considerably more interest to Russell were the black servants, and his impressions of them revealed both his previous unacquaintance with blacks and his reflexive aristocratic prejudice. “I find the coloured people friendly and nice,” he informed Lady Ottoline, herself the sister of the Duke of Portland and hence likely to appreciate both his anxiety and his inexperience. “They seem to have something of a dog’s liking for the white race—the same kind of trust and ungrudging sense of inferiority. I don’t feel any physical recoil from them.”¹⁰ Blessedly, from Russell’s perspective, he did not long have to endure the unpleasantries of the Club. Rescue came from another exiled Trinity don, H. A. Hollond, then reading at Harvard Law School and in possession of a luxuriously spacious apartment which he offered to share with Russell.¹¹

Russell took no time settling into his duties: presenting the Lowell Institute lectures, teaching Harvard graduate and undergraduate students, and enduring the attentions of the Harvard and Boston academic and social elites. The Lowell lectures, delivered Monday and Thursday evenings for six weeks, proved more a chore than a pleasure. Intending originally to offer a series of reflections on “The Place of Good and Evil in the Universe,” he had been warned off this potentially controversial topic by the redoubtable president of both Harvard and the Institute, A. Lawrence Lowell. Lowell had suggested that Russell consider a more “scientific” topic, a proposal to which Russell had assented

¹⁰Russell to Morrell, 29 April 1914, #1025; 14 March 1914, #1004; 19 March 1914, #1006.

¹¹Russell found Hollond to be “amazingly kind,” which “in Trinity, I should never have found out” (Russell to Morrell, 14 March 1914, #1004).

with raised brows but no complaint. A notoriously fast worker when under either the pressure of time or the urgency of inspiration, he produced the first draft of what would become a two-hundred-and-forty-two-page book in the first twenty-five days of September 1913. "They will all have to be rewritten," he confessed amusedly to Lady Ottoline in mid composition. "They must be easier, longer, in better style, and with more jokes—I will get a book of jokes and put in one from each page. I am told one joke at least is *de rigueur* in an American lecture."¹² Revisions took but little longer; by mid-November he had completed a manuscript with which he was well satisfied. In literary grace, logical structure, and argumentative force, the lectures, finally entitled (and published) as *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy*, were well up to Russell's standards and offered a clear and powerful statement of his new analytic doctrines and techniques.

Delivering his thoughts, however, proved to be quite another matter. Unaccustomed to public lecturing on such a scale, Russell was struck by stage fright. "My first Lowell lecture was a failure," he confided to Morrell. "There were 500 people, I was seized with shyness, I felt they wouldn't like what I had to say and that it was foolish of them to come; so I didn't speak loud enough, and half couldn't hear. No doubt there will be many fewer tonight." By the beginning of the second week matters had improved, and Russell was able to turn his attention from his own limitations to those of his audience:

The audience has settled down to about 280. It seems to me futile, but as they pay me I don't scan the matter too closely. I am expected to dress, tho' none of my audience do. The people who run the place are fussy and old-maidish—fearfully particular about punctuality in starting and stopping, and everything else except the excellence or the reverse of the lecture.¹³

¹²Russell to Morrell, 15 June 1913, #808; 15 September 1913, #869.

¹³Russell to Morrell, 19 March 1914, #1005; 26 March 1914, #1010.

By the end of the six weeks, Russell was able to boast that “the Lowell lectures have become very successful,” and he quickly made arrangements to have them published in both Britain and the United States.¹⁴ Nor was his satisfaction misplaced, at least in the judgment of one prominent Boston critic:

Hearty applause honored Mr. Russell when he had finished his address last night. That passion for cogency and certitude, that uncompromising struggle for clear-cut truth which dominate Mr. Russell, appear to have delighted a popular audience quite as they did Professor George Santayana. Never yielding to tactics which please the crowd, but turn truth into glittering generality, Mr. Russell yet contrives to interest by the sheer force of his arguments and the steady consistency of his doctrine.¹⁵

Both Russell and the Lowell Institute, then, appear to have received good value from their arrangement.

The second, and easily the happiest, of Russell’s tasks at Harvard was his teaching. Expected to offer both an undergraduate and a graduate course, he addressed the younger students on “The Theory of Knowledge” and the advanced on “Logic.”¹⁶ As he had been accustomed to doing at Cambridge—where he had gained a reputation as an uncommonly fine teacher—Russell threw himself into the task with enthusiasm. In theory, his approach was a simple one: “In teaching able men . . . one’s relation to them should be like that of Columbus to his crew—tempting them by courage and passion to accompany one in an adventure of which one does not know the outcome.”¹⁷ In practice, Russell did his best to create an intellectual atmosphere at once relaxed, rigorous, and venturesome. Not only did he urge his stu-

¹⁴Russell to Morrell, 8 April 1914, #1015. *Our Knowledge of the External World* was published in the autumn of 1914.

¹⁵*Boston Evening Transcript*, 10 April 1914, p. 10.

¹⁶Russell had spent much of 1913 on a lengthy study of epistemology. A course on the theory of knowledge therefore reflected his current philosophical preoccupations.

¹⁷Russell to Morrell, 8 May 1914, #1028.

dents to interrupt his resolutely informal lectures with their questions and insist that no topic or individual be exempt from scrutiny, but he encouraged—indeed demanded—that they come to his rooms for individual tuition, afternoon tea, and, one evening a week, general philosophical discussion—all on the assumption that “really advanced teaching of clever people is best done in personal talk.”¹⁸

To his surprise and delight, this technique proved to be both successful and gratifying; indeed, from the very start he found his teaching to be incomparably the most pleasant of his chores. “The men at my lecture seemed very intelligent,” he reported after the first meeting of his undergraduate class. “At any rate they listened and took in all my points.” Within the week he was happily reporting that “my pupils . . . are very well prepared, much better (for my work) than at Cambridge; and several of them strike one as really able.”¹⁹ In particular, they seemed receptive to his proselytizing efforts on behalf of both mathematical logic and analytic philosophy; never shy of sharing his enthusiasms with others, Russell took great pains to make apparent both the charm and the power of his new philosophical style.

Nor did Russell’s ardor wane over the course of his three-month stretch; his correspondence with English friends was full of fond references to his pupils, whom he characterized as an astonishingly “motley crew—Greek, Indian, German, Jewish”—far more diverse than any group of Cambridge students he might encounter. One, for example, was the enigmatic Mr. Wu (“who wrote to say he wished to know the meaning of Being, Reality and Existence by return of post. . . . I considered such mysteries should not be entrusted to the post, and asked him to come and see me, which he did; and I answered him!”); another was the gentle Victor Lenzen (a “German-Dane from California, who, I hear, writes long letters about me to a young lady at

¹⁸Quoted by Feinberg and Kasrils, in *Russell’s America*, p. 40.

¹⁹Russell to Morrell, 14 March 1914, #1004; 19 March 1914, #1005.

Bryn Mawr, full [I am told] of passionate devotion”); yet another the tempestuous Raphael Demos (“an unshaven Greek . . . who earns the money for his fees by being a waiter”); and still another the fastidious T. S. Eliot (“the only one who is civilized, and he is ultra-civilized—knows his classics very well, is familiar with all French literature from Villon to Vildrach, and is altogether impeccable in his taste, but has no vigor or life or enthusiasm. He is going to Oxford, where I expect he will be very happy”).²⁰ For all their variety and despite his impish jokes at their expense, however, the Harvard students Russell encountered inspired his genuine affection and led him to hope that his time with them had been of mutual benefit. “I think my work here is really useful,” he wrote to Ottoline Morrell in the last days of his stay. “The best young pupils do seem to be learning something which I don’t think the people on the spot could have given them.”²¹

Russell’s pupils shared his assessment. Not only was the time he devoted to their conversations and written work far greater than that spent by any other instructor and his accessibility virtually unmatched, but his ability to convey a feel for current philosophical debate was quite outside their experience. A brave Columbus Russell may not have been; but a skilled pilot through the swirling waters of contemporary philosophical discourse he most certainly was, as he cautioned against the sirenic calls of both the mature Bergson and the young Wittgenstein, warned of the hidden shoals of idealism, and pointed to the calm seas of empiricism and analysis. To Victor Lenzen, fresh from a brilliant undergraduate career at Berkeley, soon to return there to begin another as a distinguished physicist, and enrolled at Harvard specifically to study with Russell, his time in Rus-

²⁰Russell to Morrell, 19 March 1914, #1005; 26 March 1914, #1010; 13 April 1914, #1016; 27 March 1914, #1009; 11 May 1914, # 1029. To Lucy Donnelly Russell described Eliot more critically: “He is very capable of a certain exquisiteness of appreciation, but lacking in the crude insistent passion that one must have in order to achieve anything” (26 March 1914, Russell Archives).

²¹Russell to Morrell, 8 May 1914, #1028.

sell's course on logic was the high point of his graduate education and prompted him to near hyperbole in reminiscence: "To the students, Mr. Russell was an almost superhuman person. I can not adequately describe the respect, adoration, and even awe which he inspired."²² Less uncritical and far more arresting was the reaction of Russell's most famous pupil, T. S. Eliot, in the poem "Mr Apollinax":

When Mr. Apollinax visited the United States
 His laughter tinkled among the teacups.
 I thought of Fragilion, that shy figure among the birch-trees,
 And of Priapus in the shrubbery
 Gaping at the lady in the swing.
 In the palace of Mrs. Phlaccus, at Professor
 Channing-Cheetah's
 He laughed like an irresponsible foetus.
 His laughter was submarine and profound
 Like the old man of the sea's
 Hidden under coral islands
 Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down in the
 green silence,
 Dropping from fingers of surf.
 I looked for the head of Mr. Apollinax rolling under a chair
 Or grinning over a screen
 With seaweed in its hair.
 I heard the beat of the centaur's hoofs over the hard turf
 As his dry and passionate talk devoured the afternoon.
 "He is a charming man"—"But after all what did he mean?"—
 "His pointed ears. . . . He must be unbalanced,"—
 "There was something he said that I might have challenged."
 Of dowager Mrs. Phlaccus, and Professor and Mrs. Cheetah
 I remember a slice of lemon, and a bitten macaroon.²³

In the end Russell felt more than a few pangs of guilt about leaving his "young men" behind. "If I had stayed

²²There is a brief discussion of Russell's teaching technique in Lenzen's "Russell at Harvard," pp. 4-5, where his reminiscence is also to be found.

²³"Mr. Apollinax" in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* by T. S. Eliot, copyright 1936 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., copyright © 1963, 1964 by T. S. Eliot, reprinted by permission of the publisher. Permission also Faber and Faber Ltd.

much longer I should have begun to feel it mean to desert them," he confessed in a striking simile. "They seem so grateful for the sort of thing I try to give, and so genuinely anxious to do their very best. . . . I feel almost like a missionary who has converted a tribe of cannibals, and then left them to be eaten by their unrepentant neighbours."²⁴

II

Russell's third task in America was to serve as the object of flattery and attention dispensed by the Harvard and Boston academic and social elites. Although superficially unobjectionable, such duty was in fact far from easy for, as he soon discovered, their respect and solicitude went far beyond the traditional requirements of common hospitality and grew into a source of irritation rather than of pleasure.²⁵ Prompting this excess of good manners was one overriding imperative: in the eyes of Harvard officials, Russell was not simply an eminent scholar, the grandson of a Prime Minister, and the heir to an earldom; he was also a much-desired recruit for a permanent faculty position. That the university was eager, indeed nearly desperate, for Russell to join its philosophy faculty Russell had been well aware long before he left Britain. In February 1913 Josiah Royce, then in Britain to deliver the Gifford Lectures, had traveled to Cambridge and "asked," as Russell recalled, "if I would go to Harvard permanently as their chief professor," an offer which Ralph Perry repeated almost as soon as Russell had set foot in Boston.²⁶

Such eagerness, which continued throughout his stay and which would persist until 1916 (when his anti-war activities would offend President Lowell), was not out of place.²⁷ At

²⁴Russell to Morrell, 26 May 1914, #1032.

²⁵"Yes, they make rather much of me," he confessed, "but it gives one less pleasure than I thought it would" (Russell to Morrell, 19 March 1914, #1006).

²⁶Russell to Morrell, 7 February 1913, #693.

²⁷For a brilliant study of the state of the Harvard philosophy faculty in these years, see Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 405-16.

the time of Russell's arrival, the fortunes of Harvard's philosophy faculty were at what would be their twentieth-century nadir. Although the faculty had been, in Russell's own judgment, "the best in the world" in the decades between 1880 and 1910, it had been ravaged by death (of William James), retirement (of George Santayana and George Palmer), and illness (of Josiah Royce) in the years between 1910 and 1913.²⁸ The quickest and surest way for it to recapture its earlier distinction would have been for the department to lure Russell away from Cambridge (in much the same manner, of course, that it would later entice his old teacher and collaborator, Alfred North Whitehead). Thus to tempt Russell—to try, in the words of Ralph Perry, "by hook or crook [to] attach him to ourselves" and thereby to "accomplish something towards regaining our former glory"—Harvard's faculty and administration spared no effort to demonstrate the charm of the community, the excellence of the university, and the beauty of the countryside.²⁹ Russell therefore found himself living "in a whirlwind" of lunches, dinners, teas, lectures, gallery visits, theatre excursions, and sight-seeing expeditions. Harvard and Boston were at their studied and self-conscious best, and Russell acknowledged that "they behaved most beautifully to me."³⁰

Unfortunately for Harvard's most carefully contrived plans, Russell drew a clear distinction between the beauty of his hosts' manners and the quality of their minds. Ralph Perry, for example, then the extremely young department chairman, Russell judged "a nice person, but quite without intellectual force." Hugo Münsterberg, "a great experimental psychologist here," he dismissed as "dull," "tiresome," "complacent," and—tellingly—as "not the sort of man I could ever like because of the touch of Jew vulgar-

²⁸Russell, *Autobiography*, p. 211. "The low point was reached in 1914," observes Kuklick, "when five acting appointees taught philosophy, among them Bertrand Russell, who was a brilliant success" (*Rise of American Philosophy*, p. 408).

²⁹Quoted in Kuklick, *Rise of American Philosophy*, p. 409.

³⁰Russell to Morrell, 26 March 1914, #1010; 26 May 1914, #1032.

ity.” Edmund Schmidt, a German emigré responsible for the teaching of symbolic logic, he assessed as “a nice man but not very clever.” And as for the ornament of the department, the venerable Josiah Royce, Russell appraised him as a “lovable” yet “garrulous old bore” devoted to the hopeless defense of a discredited philosophical system—idealism. Nor did the visiting John Dewey fare much better. “Dewey (the 3rd pragmatist, with James and Schiller) has been here,” he remarked to Ottoline Morrell:

I met him at lunch yesterday and then had a walk with him. To my surprise I liked him very much. He has a large slow-moving mind, very empirical and candid, with something of the impassivity and impartiality of a natural force. He and Perry and I had a long argument about “I”—Dewey saw a point I was making but Perry didn’t—he is a good man but not a very clever one, as the country gentleman said of Dizzy.³¹

Russell’s high standards and snobbish biases were similarly offended by the many other Harvard faculty members he encountered. The entire mathematics department, for example, he dismissed as “full of stuck-pig prejudices,” presumably because they did not share his views on the philosophy of mathematics. As for the “history and literature” faculties, “they were all barbarians, but some, who had been to Oxford, accentuated their barbarism by a Common Room veneer. Ugh!” Nor did Harvard’s most distinguished scholars succeed in impressing Russell. The eminent classicist and historian of ancient philosophy Benjamin Fuller, to give one example, Russell described as possessing “the feebleness of civilization”; especially offensive was Fuller’s affected Oxbridge manner and irritating habit of “always imitating English people.” And the celebrated historian of nineteenth-century Italy William Roscoe Thayer, to offer but a second instance, he judged “a virtuous man, but not exciting.” Indeed, Russell left Harvard convinced that al-

³¹Russell to Morrell, 14 March 1914, #1004; 4 May 1914, #1026; 26 and 19 March 1914, #1010 and 1006; 22 March 1914, #1008.

though the university “produces a type of bore more virulent . . . than the bore of any other [place],” it did not contain even a single man “from the first rank.”³²

Russell was quick to admit that the many scholars he met were at once affable, diligent, and “intelligent along the narrow lines of their work.” “None,” however, had any “quality”—to repeat his favorite term of respect. By “quality” Russell meant neither abstract intelligence, scholarly distinction, nor ethical righteousness; rather, he meant an amalgam of poetical insight, intellectual fervor, and academic risk taking. Perhaps the clearest explanation he offered was in a letter to Ottoline Morrell in which he complained of the complacent “low-mindedness” that everywhere assaulted him and “that makes this place intolerable—no one is fanatical, no one would be torn asunder by wild horses sooner than yield to common sense.” Except for the aged Royce, he observed in another letter, “nobody here broods or is absent-minded, or has time to hear whispers from another world.” Nobody, indeed, would even have the capacity to understand that very lament.³³

The cause of this “low-mindedness” was not simply a pervasive American shallowness or a particular Harvard self-satisfaction—although Russell believed that both traits ex-

³²Russell to Morrell, 30 April 1914, #1025; 6 April 1914, #1014; 8 April and 11 May 1914, #1015 and 1029; 14 March 1914, #1004; 19 March 1914, #1005. As evidence of the unsurpassed virulency of Harvard’s bores, Russell remarked upon their habit of giving “one exactly the same sort of information, slowly, inexorably, undeterred by all one’s efforts to stop them.” In his *Autobiography*, published fifty years later, Russell shared this remembrance: “Every professor to whom I was introduced in Harvard made me the following speech: ‘Our philosophical faculty, Dr Russell, as doubtless you are aware, has lately suffered three great losses. We have lost our esteemed colleague, Professor William James, through his lamented death; Professor Santayana, for reasons which doubtless appear to him to be sufficient, has taken up his residence in Europe; last, *but* not least, Professor Royce, who, I am happy to say, is still with us, has had a stroke.’ This speech was delivered slowly, seriously, and pompously. The time came when I felt that I must do something about it. So the next time that I was introduced to a professor, I rattled off the speech myself at top speed. This device, however, proved worthless. ‘Yes, Dr Russell,’ the professor replied: ‘As you very justly observe, our philosophical faculty. . . .’ and so the speech went on to its inexorable conclusion” (Russell, *Autobiography*, p. 211).

³³Russell to Morrell, 19 March 1914, #1006; 18 May 1914, #1031.

isted in abundance—but rather the nature of the Harvard instructional system and, especially, the values of the administrators who directed it. Specifically, Russell thought that the faculty spent far too much of its energy teaching. “Building up things within oneself is a slow and painful process,” he explained, “but mere giving out is like spending one’s capital—a great show, leading to bankruptcy. Everybody who teaches here gives out too fast, and becomes empty.” What was prized were “quick results [and] efficiency”; what was lost was “the patient solitary meditation . . . the lonely hours away from mankind that go to producing anything of value”; what resulted was “dust and ashes . . . a soul-destroying atmosphere.” Responsibility for this spiritual desiccation, Russell charged, lay not with the misplaced priorities of the Harvard faculty itself or even with the pernicious philistinism of American culture as a whole; responsibility lay squarely with the anti-intellectual values of Harvard’s president, A. Lawrence Lowell, a man of whom Russell saw a good deal and for whom he had no respect:

President Lowell, the head of Harvard, is an intolerable person—a deadly bore, hard, efficient, a good man of business, fundamentally contemptuous of learned people because they are not business-like.

Such “hard slave-driving efficiency” Russell found to be “utterly loathesome” and fundamentally destructive of the entire purpose of a university.³⁴

What was needed at Harvard, indeed at “all other universities here,” was not merely a change in attitude—away from efficiency and towards quality—but also an alteration in structure—away from “the institution of the President

³⁴Russell to Morrell, 15 April 1914, #1017; 22 March 1914, #1008; 19 March 1914, #1005; 27 March 1914, #1009. By the time he wrote his *Autobiography* Russell had not changed his attitude about Lowell: “At Harvard I met all the professors. I am proud to say that I took a violent dislike to Professor [*sic*] Lowell, who subsequently assisted in the murder of Sacco and Vanzetti. I had at that time no reason to dislike him, but the feeling was just as strong as it was in later years, when his qualities as a saviour of society had been manifested” (Russell, *Autobiography*, p. 211).

and the Board of Overseers” and towards faculty self-governance. Only if Harvard’s faculty imitated that at Cambridge and governed itself would it cease to be “over-worked” and “more alert and business-like and punctual than one expects very good people to be.” Under the Lowell regime, Russell complained, “this place is hell”; and as for Lowell’s oft-expressed ambition to add Russell to his “staff,” Russell did not hesitate: “I shouldn’t think of it.”³⁵

Unimpressed as he was by the academic dignitaries at Harvard, Russell had an even lower opinion of the members of the Boston cultural and social elite with whom he had contact, an acquaintance far more extensive than he had anticipated—or would desire. Its extent derived in part from the determination of Lowell and Perry that he be introduced to “the finest” people in Boston, in part from the willingness of those same people to attend his Lowell lectures, in part from their eagerness to meet a member of a genuine aristocracy, and in part from the connections of his celebrated brother-in-law, Bernard Berenson, with the Boston art-collecting community. Not only was Russell therefore deluged with invitations to dinners and luncheons and pestered to attend the opera and theatre, but he was also allowed to enjoy membership in some of the most exclusive clubs in Boston.

Russell’s reaction to this large dose of Boston “society” was immediate and severe. “It seems to me Boston is the worst place in America,” he complained to his English friend Margaret Llewellyn Davies. Although “Boston prides itself on virtue and ancient lineage,” he went on, “it doesn’t impress me in either direction. It is musty, like the Faubourg St Germain. I often want to ask them what constitutes the amazing virtue they are so conscious of—they are against Wilson, against Labour, rich, over-eating, selfish, feeble pigs.” What troubled Russell most, as he elaborated in another letter, was “the absolutely unbelievable conven-

³⁵Russell to Lucy Donnelly, 26 May and 20 March 1914. Russell to Morrell, 27 April and 14 March 1914, #1023 and 1004.

tionality” of this self-satisfied elite—a conformity derived from both the unhappy remnants of seventeenth-century Puritanism and an absurd pride “in their ancient lineage because they go back to 1776.” Both traits gave these “descendants of Cromwell’s Ironsides” an unjustified and debilitating arrogance and “feebleness.” Far from enjoying the robust good health of a vigorous and self-confident ruling class, Boston’s elite suffered from “weakness” and “rot.” Indeed, a constant feature of Russell’s descriptions of his Boston acquaintances was the imagery of debilitation and decay—“the mental atmosphere is foetid with putrefying puritanism” was a characteristic judgment.³⁶

Two experiences, in particular, made a deep impression on Russell and seem to have determined his harsh attitude towards Boston. The first, which took place at the end of his second week, was a luncheon at one of the finest men’s clubs in the city:

You would utterly *loathe* this place. There is ugliness everywhere, and the people offend one’s taste in every imaginable way—their speech, their thought, their pretended enjoyment of music etc., their morals, everything. Yesterday I lunched at a function called the “Saturday Club,” whose sole function is to lunch on Sats. Lowell, Longfellow, etc. belonged to it, and so they think they are great men.

The second, which came within days of the first, was a poetry reading by the then lionized Alfred Noyes:

Never in all my days have I seen such a conceited fatuous ASS. He had that peculiar kind of manner that comes of having been made much of by silly fashionable women. The poems he read were sentimental balderdash. I refused to stay and came away in a tempest of fury, which Hollond (who is kind and without taste) thought quite absurd. We walked along the river, which is very beautiful at night, but I railed against mankind in general and Americans in particular—it was hours before I calmed down. Ab-

³⁶Russell to Margaret Llewellyn Davies, 9 June and 12 April 1914, Russell Archives; Russell to Morrell, 26 March 1914, #1010, and 30 April 1914, #1025.

solutely *everybody* here thinks him a good poet. . . . Not a soul knows he is a vile CREATURE. This is only typical of the complete lack of taste and discrimination and power to know the difference between what is good and what is meretricious that absolutely everybody has here. It makes one feel them all utter strangers. . . . I find more pleasure in sitting at home with Holland than in trying to be interested in these people.³⁷

Russell exempted only two individuals from this otherwise blanket condemnation. The first was Isabella Gardner, the wealthy collector who, as Russell rightly observed, "made B. B.'s fortune." "She is a little wizened old woman, whose talk is a trifle foolish," he reported to Ottoline Morrell, "but to my surprise I found she does really appreciate the beautiful things she possesses, and has a genuine delight in beauty, so on the whole I liked her." To be sure, he observed censoriously, "her dress is not becoming to her years," but she was nonetheless "the only woman I have met here who is not genteel—they all seem as if they ought to be governesses." The other exception was similarly free from the curse of gentility: Rachel Perry, the wife of Ralph Perry and sister of Berenson. "The person I like best here is Mrs Perry," Russell confided. "She is not at all like B. B., full of fun, very unaffected, and without the priggery of most of them." Unfortunately, he lamented, Boston contained "only one" of her, and in the absence of any others it was quite "impossible" that he would ever consent to abandon Cambridge for Boston.³⁸

III

Although Russell naturally spent the bulk of his time in America in Boston and Cambridge, he took advantage of virtually every opportunity to travel, to escape New England and meet people who were "not machine-made or

³⁷The two incidents are related by Russell to Morrell, 29 March 1914, #1011, and 2 April 1914, #1012.

³⁸Russell to Morrell, 22 March and 20 April 1914, #1008 and 1020; 8 April 1914, #1015.

correct, but real and refreshing.” Most of these trips, squeezed into gaps in his teaching schedule, were only one- or two-day visits to neighboring colleges and universities, although he did venture as far afield as Baltimore and Philadelphia during the Easter holiday. Once on another campus Russell routinely gave a popular lecture—entitled (and soon published as) “Mysticism and Logic”—met with students and faculty interested in philosophy and mathematics, and endured both a quick reception and an interminable dinner.³⁹ Although usually too tired and distracted to do more than dash off a brief account of his various experiences to his English correspondents, Russell nonetheless demonstrated a shrewd eye for place and character, an unerring talent for the telling phrase, and a wicked streak of biting humor. Taken together, Russell’s remarks offered a striking portrait of academic America on the eve of the Great War.

The colleges of the Ivy League dominated Russell’s itinerary; none, however, managed to impress. Princeton, for example, struck him as “full of new Gothic . . . [and] as like Oxford as monkeys can make it,” while Yale seemed “a one-horse place” memorable only for its “compulsory chapel at 8:15 . . . defended by the teachers on the ground that it gets men up early and facilitates 8:30 lectures.” Brown and Columbia, for their part, proved utterly unmemorable. Slightly more distinctive were the women’s colleges he visited. At one “rejoicing in the name of Smith,” Russell enjoyed his first extended automobile ride, while Wellesley proved physically “very charming” but with a “mental atmosphere” that seemed excessively “goody-goody.”⁴⁰ Bryn Mawr, alma mater of Russell’s estranged wife and headed by her legendary cousin Carey Thomas, refused him permission to lecture, although he did evade the prohibition by

³⁹Russell to Morrell, 22 and 24 April 1914, #1021 and 1022. Russell’s lecture, which became one of his best-known essays and was often republished, first appeared as “Mysticism and Logic,” *The Hibbert Journal* 12 (July 1914): 780–803.

⁴⁰Russell to Morrell, 24 April and 6 May 1914, #1022 and 1027; 15 April 1914, #1017.

meeting informally with students and faculty in the rooms of his friend Lucy Donnelly, who taught at the college.

Nor did the faculties Russell encountered impress him any more favorably—although they did seem distinctly better than that at Harvard. At Princeton, for example, he was plagued by the attentions of a gaggle of philosophers “who were not much good except a Scotchman named [Archibald] Bowman,” while at Yale he was subjected to the hospitality of Charles Bakewell, “a tiresome fool who hadn’t understood a word I said, but insisted that if I understood my own views I should agree with him.” Even more dispiriting were the women’s colleges where, “because women are so receptive that the men get dogmatic and soft,” he met a succession of “fools.”⁴¹ At Bryn Mawr, for instance, the people proved to be uniformly “dreary” and the “local philosophers . . . *ghastly* people.” The low point, however, came at Smith, where Russell was in the care of Gerald Stanley Lee, an acquaintance of Russell’s Cambridge friend Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, the author of a “silly book called ‘Inspired Millionaires,’” and a long-time teacher of creative writing at the college. “Lee and his wife were *dreadful*,” he howled to Lady Ottoline, “sentimental and woolly, awful bores, and always putting before me ideas so utterly silly that I didn’t know how to contain myself. . . . He dresses like an artist and thinks he is one. She is a successful novelist and thinks him an ass (which he is) and herself a woman of profound intuition (which she isn’t).”⁴²

All was not darkness, however. In New York, at a lecture at Columbia, Russell renewed his acquaintance with John Dewey, “who again impressed me very greatly, both as a philosopher and as a lovable man.” Even more wondrous, however, was an encounter at Brown with Walter Everett, a moral philosopher of whom Russell had not heard:

⁴¹Russell to Morrell, 24 April and 6 May 1914, #1022 and 1027; 27 April 1914, #1023. “Segregating women is madness,” he continued, “another sacrifice for chastity. I begin to think the harm that does is tremendous.”

⁴²Russell to Morrell, 20 April 1914, #1020; 27 April 1914, #1023.

To my surprise I met there an elderly philosopher, of no very great ability, whom I *loved*: my whole heart went out to him. He has whiskers and the manner of a family doctor, but his soul has the pure flame. His name is Everitt [*sic*]. He makes no compromises with orthodoxy, was a realist when no one else was, has a passionate devotion to Spinoza, and cares nothing for fashions or the opinions of others—a lovely spirit, unknown and unappreciated. We talked in my bedroom half the night, and I loved him more and more. I hope I may see him at Cambridge some day.⁴³

Easily the most pleasant of Russell's "escapes" from Boston was a three-day trip to New York City which he took in early April. Staying with Helen and Simon Flexner, Russell played the tourist, gazing at the architecture, marveling at the energy, and thrilling at the chance to go "up to the top of the tallest sky-scraper, which, incredible as it may seem, is really *very* beautiful as architecture—like an immensely magnified Gothic spire . . . twice the height of St. Paul's."⁴⁴ The city captivated him: "New York seemed to me far less repulsive than Boston; it has pride of life, exuberant energy, and a new form of self-expression—in many ways it is like the Renaissance." The highlight of Russell's stay was dinner with John D. Rockefeller, Jr.—"the son of the old villain"—and his wife, "the daughter of Senator Aldrich, a very wicked politician":

I liked her a good deal. She asked me what I thought of my pupils here, so I praised them; then she said some one had told her Americans had no minds. I said that was true of teachers, because they are so busy their minds are killed—her husband could alter all that in five minutes if he chose so I felt I must be prudent in what I said. He is essentially the same type as Noel Buxton—stupid, nonconformist in essence, virtuous and willing to fatten on a nation's ruin.⁴⁵

⁴³Russell to Morrell, 24 April 1914, #1022; 4 May 1914, #1026.

⁴⁴Russell to Morrell, 13 April 1914, #1016. This building was almost certainly the majestic Woolworth Building, blessedly still standing.

⁴⁵Russell to Morrell, 13 April 1914, #1016; 27 April 1914, #1023.

“I am sick to death of this country and of the procession of second-rate professors I have met,” Russell lamented to Ottoline Morrell less than a fortnight before his term at Harvard had ended. “As I think of Cambridge, Mass., I find I have an intimate horror of every corner of the place.”⁴⁶ Russell left Boston on 26 May 1914. He headed not towards New York and a liner to Southampton but to Chicago and a lucrative two weeks of lecturing at the universities of Chicago, Wisconsin, and Michigan.⁴⁷ Both the city and university at Chicago impressed Russell mightily. Not only did the city’s lakeside location “please” him and its “bustling life” remind him of New York, but

None of the people I saw in Chicago had the insincerity and high moral tone one associates with America. I expect the West really is better in that respect. I liked E. H. Moore, the chief mathematician at the University, *very* much—and Dewey comes from Chicago. I had seen Moore before, at Rome and at Cambridge, and had liked him then.

The University of Wisconsin—“a State University run out of taxes” where, “when any farmer’s turnips go wrong they send a Professor to investigate the failure scientifically”—puzzled Russell. “It is odd the taxpayers should pay to hear me on principles of mathematics,” he joked. As for the University of Michigan, Russell’s brief stay there provided him with what would remain one of his favorite stories about America and its culture:

Among others [universities] I went to Ann Arbor, where the president showed me all the new buildings, more especially the library, of which he was very proud. It appeared that the library had the most scientific card-index in the world, and that its method of central heating was extraordinarily up-to-date. While he was explaining all this, we were standing in the middle of a large room with admirable desks. “And does anybody ever read

⁴⁶Russell to Morrell, 6 May 1914, #1027; 20 April 1914, #1020.

⁴⁷Russell estimated that he would be paid £60 for his “western” lectures. Russell to Morrell, 29 May 1914, #1033.

the books?" I asked. He seemed surprised, but answered: "Why yes, there is a man over there now reading." We went to look, and found that he was reading a novel.⁴⁸

Russell returned to Britain—via Montreal—the second week of June 1914—ominously close to the Balkan tragedy that would convulse Europe and transform his own life. By his own estimate, his time in America had been a mixed success. To his delight, he had made a great deal of money—£750, a sum which he joyously claimed sufficient to make him "a millionaire."⁴⁹ He had also made enormous progress in his determined attempt to proselytize on behalf of both the arguments and the techniques of his analytical doctrines among American philosophers. Indeed, while aboard the train to Chicago, he exulted that he had persuaded Perry and most of the rest of the Harvard philosophy faculty "that logic is *the* important thing, and they are all going to try and learn it."⁵⁰ And as a final benefit, Russell's American interlude had slaked his thirst for adventure outside the comfortable cloister of Cambridge—even if that adventure had been limited in region and class.

At the same time, Russell's months in America had been a severe trial to him. The Boston elite he had looked forward to encountering with such eagerness proved to be self-important and effete—laughable in its pretensions to pedigree and culture and pathetic in its narrow-mindedness and ignorance. Likewise, the Harvard worthies with whom he came into contact had proved to be dull, pedestrian, and flaccid, as had, indeed, virtually all the academics he had met. Only the Harvard students, "quite untouched by culture and retain[ing] the roughness of the people," had impressed, and several—Demos, Lenzen, and, most famously,

⁴⁸Russell to Morrell, 29 May 1914, #1033; 26 May 1914, #1032; Russell, *Autobiography*, p. 212.

⁴⁹Russell to Morrell, 18 May 1914, #1031.

⁵⁰"That is one of the things I hoped to achieve here, so I am glad it has happened," Russell confided to Morrell (26 May 1914, #1032).

Eliot—would continue to gratify Russell through their long-term friendships.⁵¹

As intemperate as Russell's reaction to his American experience was in 1914, it would only deepen and intensify over time. To be sure, he would return to America and to Harvard many times over the course of his remarkably long life, but neither place would ever recapture the charm, innocence, and hope he had once felt towards them or live down the disappointment, anger, and unhappiness he had experienced on his second visit. Russell's trip to America in 1914, that is, permanently affected his vision of America and of American culture and would bedevil his later attempts—through the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Vietnamese War Crimes Tribunal—to understand and influence that culture. To the end of his life Russell clung to the image of America he had acquired in 1914—the image of a country that, for all its energy and talent and wealth, was pervaded by cultural philistinism, political corruption, economic inequality, and moral bankruptcy.

⁵¹Russell to Morrell, 13 April 1914, #1016.

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