philosophical nature, and that no problem of substance is to be solved by analysis. New explanatory ideas are what is called for, and they form the chief content of worthwhile philosophy, and have always done so. Because he believed this, and practised it, always from outside the main thought-systems of the age, he was never in the fashion. And because he spent so much of his time attacking and severely damaging the ideas of people he disagreed with he was never popular. But what matters is the quality of the work itself – and the sheer substance and weight, as well as originality and range, of Popper's work are altogether unmatched in that of any philosopher now living.

BRYAN MAGEE

CONFESSIONS OF A PHILOSOPHER

12

Getting to Know Russell

MOST people must go through life without ever getting to know anyone of genius, so I count it a piece of great good fortune that I have known two. In 1959 I was earning my living as a programme maker for ATV, one of the independent television companies that had come into existence when commercial television began in Britain in 1955. I did not as yet appear on the screen: my designation was Editor, and my job was to think of subjects and contributors for features and documentaries, assembling the necessary components and delivering them to a producer in such a form that he could turn the package I gave him into a programme without himself knowing much about the subject. Towards the end of the year I was allotted my first one-hour documentary, having previously made only half-hour programmes. I decided to devote it to the threat of global over-population. It seemed to me important in so long a programme to vary the content and pace, so in addition to assembling a good deal of dramatic and unusual film, and trying to think of ingenious ways of animating statistics by means of graphics, I also decided to include two studio interviews. My chosen contributors were Julian Huxley, who was at that time the best-known biologist in Britain, and Bertrand Russell.

Some time in December I telephoned Russell at his home in North Wales. He answered the telephone himself, which surprised me slightly. From the beginning of our conversation it was obvious that he was interested in the project, but before committing himself wanted to be sure that I and the enterprise were going to be serious. At that time so-called educated people were deeply

suspicious of commercial television – indeed, in general, they did not watch it. It sounds absurd now, but the truth is that most of the middle and upper classes watched the BBC while most working-class people watched ITV. In the end Russell said, in effect (I do not recall the actual words): 'I'd like to meet you and talk it over with you personally before saying Yes.' I agreed to this, whereupon he said that at eighty-seven he found the journey to London burdensome in winter, and would I be willing to come down and visit him in Wales? I said Yes to that too; and the upshot was that at some point during the week between Christmas 1959 and New Year's Day 1960 I took a train to North Wales to visit him at his home in Penrhyndeudraeth.

By arrangement, I arrived not long after breakfast. My first physical impression of Russell was how tiny he was. Popper was no taller but gave an impression at that time of burliness and a certain strong slow forcefulness of movement, whereas Russell was bird-like and slight, light-boned, spry, quick-darting. The quickness of bodily and mental movement were extraordinary in a man of his age.

His wife, he explained to me, was in bed with flu and sent her apologies for not receiving me. He then proceeded to wait on me with a degree of attentiveness that I mistook for a desire to make up for his wife's absence: peeled the coat off my back, fussed about where and how to hang it, led me into a living room, took pains to see that I was comfortably ensconced on a sofa, plumped the cushions. In the course of time I discovered that he had the courtly manners of the Victorian age and invariably behaved as if whoever he were attending to were of nabob-like importance. We discussed the television programme at useful length, and he agreed to take part in it. When that was out of the way he questioned me about myself and sparked with new life when it emerged that I was a passionate student of philosophy.

For a long time he quizzed me about philosophers at Oxford and Yale whom I had come up against personally, people he had heard of but never seen. Then I began to ask him about philosophers he had worked with closely and also known well, above all Wittgenstein, Whitehead and Moore. Keen-edged comment,

usually catty but affectionate, consistently funny, poured out of him – penetrating remarks, wonderful anecdotes. He was not at all like those people who make one's smiles creak by trying to be funny with everything they say: he just *was* funny with more or less everything he said. His normal mode of utterance was to use some sort of literal description for purposes of comic irony, with the result that his almost every remark was informative and funny at the same time. I do not think I have ever listened to anyone with greater delight. He had an ability unique in my experience to express himself in perfectly balanced and economically formed sentences that were strikingly satisfying, so much so that if they had been written down and published they would have constituted elegant, tightly constructed and almost unrevisable prose. It is true that I subsequently came across many of the same sentences in his writings, and of course a lot of the same points and anecdotes; but most of us are guilty of retelling our best stories in the same words, and in any case all this accounted for only part of his conversation: I said many things to which his response could not have existed in ready-cooked form, but his replies came out in the same spare, luminous, faultlessly constructed sentences as everything else he said. He was a little vain about this, and told me that for several decades he had dictated all his correspondence and everything he had published. 'Not since the First World War have I used a pen for anything other than to sign my name.' As a matter of fact I found him a little vain altogether, but in a vulnerable and lovable way, like an attractive and clever child seeking approval.

We were in agreement about a lot of basic things: that Wittgenstein's early philosophy was work of genius, whereas his later philosophy was a highly sophisticated form of intellectual frivolity; that the current orthodoxy in philosophy was deeply, deeply in error in treating analysis as the sole and whole function of philosophy, this being to treat a philosophical tool as if it were itself philosophy, and that to do this was an abuse not only of philosophy but of the tool, which could have been of immense power if put to better uses; that the central task of philosophy was still, as it had always been, the attempt to understand the world, or our experience of it; that in the history of this attempt one of the two or

three supreme success stories so far was science, which must therefore have an especially important relationship to any properly conducted philosophy, and indeed that it was impossible to be a serious philosopher at all without a serious interest in science. He remarked that he often felt he had been mistaken in becoming a philosopher, and ought to have been a scientist.

His closest personal contact on the contemporary philosophical scene was A. J. Ayer. He spoke of Ayer with friendship and loyalty, but it became clear that although he regarded him as clever and quick he did not think he had anything original to contribute. He liked Ayer as a person, saw him as being on the right side of most controversial issues, and rated him a brilliant interlocutor, debater, critic and teacher, but did not see him as having important ideas of his own. Popper, whom he had met only briefly, he did see as an original, but knew only as the author of *The Open Society*, of which he approved highly. He had not read any of Popper's philosophy of science and did not think of him in the context of general as distinct from political philosophy. When I talked about *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, which had just been published for the first time in English, it became clear that he had absorbed the common and mistaken view that Popper was advocating falsifiability as an alternative to verifiability as a criterion of meaning, this being the interpretation contained in, among many other books, Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*. When we brought this part of our conversation to an end Russell said I had stimulated him to read Popper's philosophy of science, but I do not know whether he ever did.

After some hours our conversation was still bubbling out of its natural spring when we were called away to lunch. This had been prepared by a couple who worked for the Russells but whom I did not see. It was waiting for us on the kitchen table, a hot boiled ham of Dickensian proportions, two steaming dishes of vegetables, and an open bottle of red wine. Russell put a hand on my shoulder and sat me down firmly on a wooden chair and proceeded to carve the ham with a certain flamboyance of gesture, continuing the conversation non-stop. He and the food were to my right, and since he insisted on serving me – first with ham, then with each

vegetable in turn – from my left, it involved him in continually dancing round the back of my chair. As an able-bodied twenty-nine-year-old I felt embarrassed at sitting there being waited on in so elaborate a fashion by a man of eighty-seven. I confess that some notion of our relative status was also involved in this feeling: it seemed to me inappropriate that a person of historic importance in philosophy, world famous, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature and so on, should be dancing attendance like this on a total stranger young enough to be his grandson. At least I should be helping, I thought. So I tried to serve him with vegetables. For this I was sternly reproved. That was the host's job, he said.

'Well at least let me pour the wine,' said I, reaching for the bottle.

'*No, no*,' he said emphatically, snatching the bottle before my hand could get to it. 'If there's one thing the host absolutely *must* do it's pour the wine,' and he poured the wine.

At this a resentment welled up in me. This man is being downright insensitive, I thought. Surely he must realize that his behaviour can only embarrass me. If he had real and not just token consideration for my feelings he wouldn't do it. I said something aloud to this effect, and he, unperturbed, replied: 'I know, I know. A difference in age can have a quite irrational effect. When I was seventeen I had dinner alone with Gladstone . . .'*

The conversation changed direction over lunch, and it emerged that I was a prospective Labour parliamentary candidate. This galvanized Russell afresh, and launched us on a conversation about political and social affairs that swept us back into the living room and went on for the rest of the afternoon, so that by six o'clock we had been talking to each other with unflagging vitality for over eight hours. During this time a lot of things about Russell were revealed that are not evident from his writings, for example that he had an extensive knowledge of imaginative literature in English, French and German, and could quote large quantities of poetry in

* According to his writings this was artistic exaggeration. What happened was that at the end of a dinner the ladies withdrew and left the seventeen-year-old Russell alone with Gladstone over the port.

all three languages. Music was a blind spot (the one he regretted most, he said) but there seemed to be no main field of intellectual activity in which he did not possess as much knowledge as some people who pass for experts. He had known an extraordinary number of world-historic figures. Having grown up as a child in the household of his grandfather, a former British Prime Minister (his parents were both dead by the time he was four), he had always been accustomed to meeting international figures in informal surroundings; and his own eminence in adult life had caused this to continue. He referred to them spontaneously as people he knew, not in any spirit of name-dropping – he scarcely needed to drop names – but because our discussion brought them naturally to mind. For instance, when I mentioned what seemed to me an unsalvageable fault in Marxist theory he said: 'I made exactly that point to Lenin, but I couldn't get him to see it.' When I made some reference to Conrad it transpired that Conrad was the godfather of one of Russell's sons, and that both of them were named after him. And so on and so forth. He seemed to have met 'everybody', and quite naturally so, in the course of his long life.

I found myself fascinated at talking to someone who had met so many of the people I had learnt about at school and university. It brought recent history alive for me in a new way and made me feel somehow in personal contact with it. I could ask Russell what he thought of Trotsky, Einstein, T. S. Eliot and a whole host of very different other people, and he had actually *known* them, and I would get an answer based on personal acquaintance, sometimes surprisingly extensive. For instance, he had taught philosophy to T. S. Eliot at Harvard, and the poet had later come to live in his home in England. He did not tell me what I subsequently discovered, that he had had an affair with Eliot's wife while the Eliots were living under his roof. One way and another most of the history of the last eighty-five years seemed to have passed through his private life. This had been brought about, I think, by a unique combination of factors. He had been born into one of the handful of most powerful political families in Britain when the country was at the apogee of its imperial might, governing a world-wide empire that embraced a quarter of the human race;

and all the advantages that this conferred on an individual accrued to him. In particular, the fact that his grandfather had been Prime Minister meant that heads of government from all over the world visited their house, and he took this for granted. At the same time the young Russell had been possessed of world-class ability in his own right, and in a non-political field of activity. So he moved at the highest level in three different international worlds: political, social and intellectual.

Queen Victoria had died in the year in which Russell was twenty-nine, so he was in the literal sense a Victorian Englishman. More specifically, his first decade of adult life had been the 1890s, so he was a *fin de siècle* Englishman too. Since he was not the sort of individual to change his manners or accent to accommodate others his persona was quite simply that of a nineteenth-century aristocrat – he was, after all, an earl, though compared with his abilities this fact was so slight that people tended literally to forget it. In the age of democracy and modern political parties, trade union power, mass media and the rest, he was a creature from elsewhere, despite his success and fame, like an expatriate who keeps his original nationality yet rises to the top in his adopted country. It was, I felt, something for which he deserved to be greatly honoured.

One of the most dating and distinctive things about him was his way of speaking. His 'o's were forward and open, not enclosed in the mouth but projected outwards. In the word 'civilization' he pronounced the first three 'i's the same, like 'ee'. He referred to someone's family as 'his people', someone's circle of close friends as 'his set'. The robust language of the Victorian novel came alive on his tongue. The actual sound it made in his case was high-pitched, nasal and reedy, yet always vigorous and emphatic. It was mimicked a good deal at the time, not only to imitate Russell but to stand for what was thought to be the archetypal philosopher, and even bad imitations of him were instantly recognizable.

I can still hear his voice in my mind's ear saying things he said to me at that first meeting, often summing up a whole argument or point of view in a single sentence. 'Religious education is always an evil because it means teaching children to believe things for

which there is no evidence.' . . . 'Aneurin Bevan considers it more important that he should become Foreign Secretary than that the human race should survive.' And so on. When I asked him who he regarded as the most intelligent person he had ever met he replied unhesitatingly: 'Keynes.' When I asked: 'Did you honestly regard him as more intelligent than yourself?' he said with equal lack of hesitation: 'Yes. Every time I argued with Keynes I felt I was taking my life in my hands.' When I said I was surprised by his answer because I had been more than half expecting him to say 'Einstein', he replied that Einstein did not exhibit pure intelligence in the same way, but rather something akin to the gifts of a great creative artist: Einstein's work had come from depths of imagination rather than of intellect. When I asked him who he regarded as the greatest man he had ever met he needed longer to consider his reply. In the end he came up with Lenin. When I asked why, he said it was because Lenin combined a brilliant mind with genius-level ability as a man of action, and this gave him extraordinary stature and effectiveness as a person. Also, he had changed the entire course of world history in a way few individuals ever do. However, he added, Lenin was not in the least morally admirable: he came near to boasting about the enormous scale of the death and suffering he was causing, and laughed about it in conversation with Russell.

My first day with Russell remains for me the most memorable day of talk I have ever experienced. For decades *Reader's Digest* used to run a feature in every issue called 'The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met'; and Russell remains the most unforgettable character I've met.

After that first day, we met several times more, usually at his London house in Hasker Street, where he would invite me (again in the Victorian manner) to tea, on the ground that he became tired in the evening and needed to go to bed early. On the question of his vitality: I never ceased to be amazed not only by his mental energy but even more, if anything, by his physical energy. If in the middle of making a point he wanted to quote from a book he would leap out of his chair and prance over to the bookcase, go up on tiptoe, reach down a book from a high shelf and sweep back

with it round the sofa to his chair, all in one single fluid line of movement, without the slightest appearance of effort or even hesitation in the flow of talk. He was so quick and light on his feet and so flowing in his movements that I always thought of the word 'dancing' in connection with them. It was all, I believe, powered by his intellectual energy and his unflagging enthusiasm for what he was saying.

On one of my visits to Hasker Street I took him to task for having advocated the nuclear bombing of the Soviet Union to relieve mankind from any further threat of nuclear war. He denied that he had. He had been misrepresented, he said: what he had advocated was that before the Soviet Union developed nuclear weapons the West should use its monopoly of them to force the Russians to renounce any attempt to develop them. It is perfectly true that what would compel the Russians to accede to this demand would be the threat of nuclear attack if they did not, but since they would have no choice but to agree, there would in fact be no nuclear attack. But the proposal had led people simply to say of Russell that he advocated bombing the Soviet Union, and that, he said, was an utter slander. Next time we met I showed him a copy of an original source in which he had advocated bombing the Soviet Union. It was the only time I saw him flustered. He said he had genuinely and completely forgotten that he had said it, admitted that such forgetting was almost certainly Freudian, but insisted that he could have said it that once only, talking excessively loosely, and that on all other occasions he had said what he claimed he had said, this being his considered point of view. But I am afraid this is not true either. Russell had on a number of occasions advocated bombing the Soviet Union, over a period of two or three years.

This is an example of what was, in the end, my greatest reservation about him. He dealt in concepts, in words, in thoughts, with a wholly inadequate understanding of what they meant in terms of non-linguistic reality. Confronted with any human problem he looked for the right way of thinking about it rather than the right way of feeling about it, and consequently he tended to see both the problem and its solution in terms of ideas rather than in terms of flesh-and-blood people and effects on *them*. This

led him not infrequently to believe and propose silly things – silly in the sense that they were out of contact with how life actually is, and how people actually are, and what it is actually possible to get people to do or go along with. This fact about him was at its most highly conspicuous in later life when he was publicly active in the cause of unilateral nuclear disarmament. (It always seemed to me fitting that the only person I ever met who had advocated the nuclear bombing of the Soviet Union was the most famous public proponent of unilateral nuclear disarmament.) It led many observers to say that he had become silly with age, but the truth is that age had little or nothing to do with it: he had been like this all along. During the First World War he had accused those of the bishops who were in the House of Lords of supporting the war because the Church of England owned shares in armaments factories. Of the ridiculous school, Beacon Hill, that he founded and ran between the wars he himself was subsequently to say that he had been 'blinded by theory'. He had always, from the beginning, had a tendency to say and do idiotic things when it came to practical matters, and always for the same basic reason: he treated practical problems as if they were theoretical problems. In fact I do not think he could tell the difference. I would even go so far as to say that he did not know that there was a difference. (It was a good thing for him and everyone else that he never went into parliamentary politics, as his family had expected him to, and as he himself felt until middle life that he ought – he stood for parliament two or three times.) Really, the explanation of how it came about that this man who was a genius in some ways could be so foolish in others was relatively simple. His whole genius was for solving theoretical problems, and – no doubt partly for that reason – he tended to see all problems as theoretical. When a problem really was theoretical he was masterly, but when it was not theoretical but a problem of private or public life he was a blunderer. And because he had so little practical intelligence he learnt almost nothing from the experience. He was as much (but no more) of a silly-billy when he was old as he had been as a young man.

An American called Ralph Schoenman became one of the voluntary helpers in his public campaigns, and rose to become his immediate assistant, and eventually took him over completely. I had personal experience of one of the ways in which this happened. After I had been in easy and pleasurable contact with Russell for a couple of years, exchanging letters, meeting him occasionally, chatting from time to time on the telephone, everything suddenly changed. If I wrote to Russell the reply came from Schoenman, and it was obvious that Russell did not know of the existence of my letter. If I tried to talk to Russell on the telephone my call would be answered by Schoenman, who had moved in with him. Schoenman would ask me what it was I wanted to talk to Russell about. Whatever I replied, he would say that Russell was too busy to attend to it, and I should call another time, or write. If I declined to discuss it but asked to speak to Russell, Schoenman would say he could not possibly pass me on to Russell unless I was prepared to say what it was about. If I wrote, I got another reply from Schoenman. If I telephoned again I found myself talking to Schoenman again. The whole situation was Kafka-esque. I never met Schoenman – to me he was only a voice on a telephone. But all the means I used to make contact with Russell were effectively blocked by him, and it was clear that Russell had no idea what was going on. I naturally wondered whether this might be merely personal – perhaps Russell had come to the conclusion that he did not want to see me any more, and had instructed Schoenman accordingly – but I began hearing similar stories from other of his friends and acquaintances whom I knew. Indeed, such stories were beginning to appear in the press. Like everybody else, I suppose, I gave up in the end.

Meanwhile public declarations began to appear over Russell's signature that he could not possibly have written (if only because of their inadequate literacy) and which did not represent his views. This is itemized by Alan Ryan in his book *Bertrand Russell: A Political Life*, where the onset of this nightmarish development is described in the following words (pp. 196–7): 'Many English readers doubted whether Russell had read, much less written, what he had put his name to; it read like the rantings of the student Left, not like Russell's own immaculate prose ... At times he

began to sound like the Ayatollah Khomeini denouncing the "great Satan" – in itself a reason for wondering how much he wrote of all the articles he put his name to.' It was a terrible end for a philosopher of such magnificent gifts, a subject made worthy of Greek tragedy by the fact that it was the central figure who was responsible for his own downfall.

Schoenman was an appallingly sinister figure, like an evil dwarf out of Wagner's *Ring*, and his motivations were unquestionably calculated and manipulative. Whether they were of the far left or the far right I never knew, but it made little difference in practice because, as usual, it came to much the same thing. Many thought he was motivated by what later came to be called loony-left views plus an unbalanced hatred of his own country, the United States. Certainly these were what characterized the writings that appeared over Russell's signature once he was in Schoenman's clutches. But at least as many people suspected that Schoenman had been planted on Russell by the CIA with the mission of discrediting him internationally as the world's most prominent spokesman for unilateral nuclear disarmament – and certainly this was what occurred as a direct result of Schoenman's handling of him. If I had to bet on one of these alternatives I would opt for the latter, but it does not seem to me to be any longer a significant question.

13

First Attempts at a Political Philosophy

I HAVE told how, on my return to England from Yale in the late summer of 1956, I was plunged almost immediately into political activity by the crises of Suez and Hungary. This led me for the first time to attend one of the Labour Party's annual conferences, which was held in Brighton. The Labour Party Conference of 1957 turned out to be the historic one at which Aneurin Bevan made his famous 'naked into the conference chamber' speech. The most charismatic figure ever to have emerged within the Labour Party, he had consolidated his reputation by creating the National Health Service as a Minister in the post-war Labour government. He had then resigned, in part out of protest against the introduction of charges in the Health Service, which seemed to him contrary to the principle on which it was based, but also partly because he knew that if he stayed in the Cabinet he would have to support the rearmament programme that had been put in hand after the outbreak of the Korean War, and this he was not prepared to do. From his new position outside the government he became the undisputed leader of the dissident left in the Labour Party and a brilliant spokesman for its most passionately held cause, unilateral nuclear disarmament. The 1957 conference was to be the occasion on which he publicly abandoned that cause and his left-wing followers, to throw in his lot as Deputy Leader of the party and Shadow Foreign Secretary with a new leader, Hugh Gaitskell.

Annual conference is the only occasion in the political year when the Labour Party meets as a whole. Representatives from the remoter areas use it as a unique opportunity of serving the interests