

Jean Nicod: familial background and pacifist commitment

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Introduction

In the vol. 41 of the *Russell Journal*, Roseline Adzogle and I published a commented translation of Jean Nicod's « Les tendances philosophiques de M. Bertrand Russell ». By way of biographical presentation, we quote the preface that André Lalande, Nicod's PhD supervisor, had written for the posthumous publication of *Le problème logique de l'induction* :

Born in 1893 of a family of great intellectual culture, Nicod at first turned towards the sciences, and he had acquired by the age of eighteen, after two years of special mathematical studies, that solid fund of knowledge and technical habits which are obtained only with difficulty in later education. But philosophy appealed to him and ... he came to the Sorbonne, where in three years he obtained his degree, diploma of graduate studies and the [agrégation of philosophy] ... Meanwhile, he had pursued graduate course in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, and in the Faculty of Sciences; he had learned both Greek and English so well that he ... carried off first prize at Cambridge University in competition with British students. Too frail in constitution to be drafted, he spent the greater part of the war period at Cambridge, working diligently on the most varied subjects (he even went so far as to learn Persian in a few months of his leisure time), taking the English degrees, studying particularly, under the invaluable direction of Bertrand Russell, problems of logic and logistics which had already awakened his curiosity during his studies at the Sorbonne... On his return from England he married one of his student comrades, Miss Jouanest... At first he followed the usual career of young [agrégés]: he taught philosophy at the lycées of Toulon, Cahors and Laon; but the fatigue of lecturing made itself felt and he had to give up secondary teaching. With his extraordinary faculty of learning, and as a result of a competitive examination in which law and political economy played the principal part, he acquired a post, in 1921, with the International Bureau of Labour of the League of Nations... An improvement in health allowed him to come to Paris for some time where he was able to give a course on the history of Greek philosophy, and where he worked at the same time on his theses. But in winter of 1922-23, a rest at [a sanatorium] in Leysin became necessary, and after that, in spite of periods of relative improvement in health, he was no longer destined to resume work. He had just returned to his functions at the International Bureau of Labour at Geneva, his doctoral theses were printed and handed in, and he was to defend them soon after at the Sorbonne, when abrupt complications set in; on February 16, 1924, he was removed from the affection of his family and friends.

So far, this aptly summarized all that was known about this loveable and singular figure of the early Twentieth Century French philosophical scene.

New research, made possible by the reopening of the archives after the pandemic, has uncovered other elements that complement Lalande's account. In the meantime, thanks to the careful attention of Kenneth Blackwell, a short article published (partially censored) in *Le Journal du Peuple* on September 13, 1916 entitled "Un penseur libre et socialiste. Bertrand Russell" has been found. This short note has two purposes: to summarize the main discoveries about Nicod's life that this archival research has brought about; to publish and comment on Nicod's new article on Russell. As the reader will realize on the way, the two objectives are in fact linked to each other.

1. Familial background

The new information comes mainly from two sources: the Fond Ignace Meyerson (the most important one), kept at the Archives Nationales, which contains more than one hundred letters from Jean and from Thérèse Nicod (mainly after Jean's death) to Ignace and various documents (faire parts, reports on requests, etc.); the Fond Isidore Levy (which contains seven letters from Jean, and one from his father) kept at the Archives du Collège de France. The letters to Ignace Meyerson are mainly from the post-war period (1919 to 1924). Only two letters date from the Cambridge period (October and November 1915). The letters to Isidore Levy date from 1922-23, and are all linked to Nicod's search for a position. This means that these documents do not directly tell us anything new about Nicod's time in Cambridge and his interactions with Russell.

Let's talk about the family background first. Jean Nicod is the son of Leon Nicod (1867-1948) and Tauba Efron (1867-1923). The records from the Etat Civil tell us that the marriage took place in 1892; two children apparently resulted from it, but I have found no mention of Jean's sister or brother in the document I read. The couple divorced in 1901. The couple separated and divorced in 1901, when Jean was 8 years old.

Léon Nicod was a former student of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, and was an "agrégé" of grammar. He apparently was a teacher at the Lycée Stanislas in Paris. He is the author of an edition of *Les partures Adan* from Adam de la Halle, published in 1917¹. Jean does not seem to have been close to his father. There is no reference to visits or stays in his correspondence or in the correspondence of Thérèse. The two men were, however,

¹ *Les partures Adan: les jeux partis d'Adam de La Halle*, L. Nicod ed., Honoré Champion, 1917

sufficiently close for Jean to seek him out when, after completing his PhD, he was looking for support for his applications for university positions². It seems that Isidore Levy, whom Jean contacted at the same period for the same reasons, was also an old acquaintance from Léon's studies at the EPHE.

The maternal branch is much more interesting. As Cecilia Beach explains, Tauba Efron came from a wealthy family active in the Russian political and literary world (2005, p. 68-9) :

Tauba Efron was born ... into a privileged milieu in Russian-occupied Poland. Her grandmother, Taube Wilner, was a direct descendant of the famous eighteenth-century rabbi Gaon of Vilna, though her immediate family appears to have converted to Protestantism, perhaps to avoid persecution in Czarist Russia. In the early years of the twentieth century, her father, Ilya Efron, had a publishing house in St. Petersburg. His firm published books on social, cultural, and economic history, as well as the highly respected *Brockhaus-Efron Encyclopedia*. In 1884, like many young Russian women, [Tauba] went to Switzerland to study. Then going by the name Thérèse, she lived in Geneva where she reportedly attended classes in philology at the University of Geneva. [She] moved to Paris in 1889 at which time the Efron family came under investigation by the Czarist police due to her close association with Véra Davidovna Gurari, a Russian revolutionary and labor organizer. ... [Tauba] would [not] have been the first in her family to participate in revolutionary activities. Her uncle Jean Effront was exiled from Russia after being arrested for revolutionary activities during this period.

Note, however, that political involvement in the Efron family was not one-sided, since the uncle, Akim, was suspected of being a Czarist spy³. Lalande is not mistaken when he says that Nicod was born into “a family of great intellectual culture”, but on his mother's side, his background is quite peculiar, marked by the Russian culture and political commitment.

But it is the figure of his mother that especially catches the eye. Under the pen name of Véra Starkoff, Jean's mother published, from 1898 onward, numerous works⁴ -- and notably a play *L'amour libre*, just after her divorce. She was a leading figure on the feminist

² Thus, in a letter from 1923, Jean told Ignace that, in Montpellier, his father contacted Grammont, then professor of grammar at the university.

³ (Beach 2005, p. 69) : [Tauba's] uncle Akim Effront (1855–1909), with whom she is buried in the Montparnasse Cemetery, came to Paris in 1889 for the World Fair and returned two years later to found “La correspondance russe,” a publication whose goal was to maintain good relations between France and Russia. Five years later, when Akim was under investigation prior to his election as Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, police reports indicate that Akim was most certainly a secret agent of the Russian government; his official title was “attaché à la chancellerie de sa majesté l'Empereur de Russie”.

⁴ We can distinguish three categories of writings: translations from Russian and works about Russia; plays written for the theater; pamphlets and political essays. A short bibliography is given in (Beach 2005, p. 177). For an analysis of her work, see (Beach 2005) and (Auffret & Vayrou 2019).

and left-wing scene in early 20th century France⁵. During the war, she was a pacifist. And she showed her support, at least initially, for the Bolshevik revolution, to the point of being under surveillance by the French police⁶.

Jean seems to have had much more of a relationship with his mother than with his father. Indeed, the correspondence mentions the presence of Tauba with Jean during periods of care in the mountains or visits to Thérèse⁷ and Jean⁸. In one of the numerous letters sent to Ignace after Jean Nicod's death (undated, 1924), Thérèse, who reproaches herself for having remained too passive in front of Jean's doctors, affirms that "Véra, in her love, would have been more clear-sighted" ("*Véra, dans son amour, eut été plus clairvoyante*"). Nevertheless, at times, Jean showed discomfort with his mother. For instance, he asked Ignace to make sure that his ailing mother did not consider Therese, herself in poor health at the time, as a caretaker⁹. And Dora Black, to whom Véra gave Russian lessons before her trip to Russia, indicated that "Nicod finds [her mother] very tiresome and hates his friends to meet her" (letter to Russell 29/02/1920). One thing Jean shares with his mother is an interest in politics and a support for left-wing ideas. The correspondence shows that Jean is an attentive and enthusiastic supporter of the Bolshevik revolution¹⁰. He was also involved in pacifism during the war¹¹. Jean's concern for politics, however, remains moderate and occupies a marginal place in the letters he sends to Meyerson. There is nothing comparable in intensity with the commitment of his mother Véra Starkoff.

Regarding Jean Nicod's education, Lalande's description is accurate. A report (dated from 16/01/1922) written after Jean's application for the position of "maître temporaire" at the EPHE, tells us that, after having obtained his scientific "baccalauréat" at the age of 16, Nicod prepared for the Ecole Polytechnique during two years of "classes préparatoires"

⁵ Véra Starkoff was a member of *Le Libre Examen*, the first French women's Freemason Lodge, and wrote several plays, for the Université Populaire, of which she was an active contributor.

⁶ Beach 2005, p. 89 : "As of 1918, Véra Starkoff came under investigation by the police for her pro-Bolshevik activities. In a report about the innumerable other Russian émigrés living in France suspected of subversive political activities, Starkoff was categorized as having an "Attitude politique douteuse".... In 1920, she was suspected of using her Russian language classes to recruit communist militants and was included in a list of Russian Freemasons established by an anti-Bolshevik organization in 1922."

⁷ Thérèse Jouasnet (alias Joujou) married Jean on September 17, 1917. She was an English teacher and, as Lalande says, probably a former classmate of Jean. Many letters from her are preserved in the Fond I. Meyerson. Her relationship with Ignace deteriorated after Jean's death (see below).

⁸ Letter from Jean to I. Meyerson 09/12/1919, Letter from Thérèse to I. Meyerson, not dated, probably February 1919.

⁹ Letter from Jean to I. Meyerson 06/03/1923

¹⁰ All the letters from 1919 to Meyerson contain passage about the Bolshevik revolution. Jean did not seem very informed about Marxism, however, since he asked Ignace to give him some references of books to read.

¹¹ See below.

in mathematics. He then switched to philosophy, which he studied at the Sorbonne. He obtained the licence, the maîtrise and the agrégation in three years. In 1914, the war interrupted the examination for the agrégation, only the written part was organized, and no final ranking was published. But Nicod was placed first in the written part¹². From the readings he mentions in his correspondence with Ignace, it seems that Nicod retained a very strong inclination for the sciences¹³. He even explained to Ignace that he thought “half seriously, of moving on to science”, taking the example of Helmholtz, who gave up his profession by taking advantage of the opportunity offered by an illness¹⁴. But after 1919, these hesitations disappear and the correspondence focuses on the redaction of PhD: Nicod compares the degree of progress of the Ignace’s (who is also a doctoral student) and his own work, speaks about the vicissitudes of the organization of the defense (especially in 1922), and evokes the prospects of academic positions (especially in 1923). The only remaining trace of this constant implication with the sciences is the presence in its committee of the great mathematician Elie Cartan, whose letter (dated from 14/06/1922) bears witness to the interest he had in reading *La géométrie dans le monde sensible*.

Last point that can be clarified by looking at the Fond Ignace Meyerson: the publishing, immediately after Nicod’s death, of his two theses¹⁵. The letters show that Nicod, from 1922 onwards, worked hard to find a publisher, and that he succeeded both in securing publication and in obtaining a preface by Russell and Lalande. It is therefore not surprising that the two books appeared as soon as 1924. The correspondence tells us, however, that, after Jean’s death, a volume of tributes was planned and organized by Ignace Meyerson -- texts from Cartan, Lalande and Russell had been written (perhaps for the last two the same as their prefaces). Thérèse Nicod (Jean’s widow), who had been very close to Ignace until then, seemed to have objected at the last minute, refusing to allow a

¹² Letter to I. Levy (undated, probably January 1922) : « A l’agrégation de 1914, j’ai été premier à l’écrit – Lalande et Levy-Bruhl qui me l’ont appris, l’ont rappelé devant moi à Belot il y a quelques mois, et sont sans doute tout disposé à le confirmer. »

¹³ In a letter dating from 09/12/1918, Nicod asks Ignace to send him the books of Silberstein, Minkowski, Langevin on Einstein mechanics, of Hilbert (on the foundations of geometry) and of Mach. He also mentions reading various books from Poincaré (like the one on thermodynamics).

¹⁴ Letter to Meyerson 22/03/1919.

¹⁵ Let me recall that at the beginning of the XXth Century, the “thèse de doctorat” was composed, in France, of two parts, one “thèse principale” (*La géométrie dans le monde sensible* in Nicod’s case) and one “thèse complémentaire” (*Le problème logique de l’induction*).

photograph of her husband to appear in the volume¹⁶. The book never saw the light of day, and the relationship between Ignace and Therese has been damaged by this episode.

2. A witness of Nicod's pacifist commitment: the publication of "A free and socialist thinker. Bertrand Russell" in *Le Journal du Peuple*

Jean Nicod published in the issue dated from 13/09/1916 of *Le Journal du Peuple* a paper entitled « Un penseur libre et socialiste. Bertrand Russell ». *Le Journal du Peuple* was a daily newspaper founded by Henri Fabre in 1916, which presented itself as the voice of what one will associate, a few years later, after the congress of Tours¹⁷, to the left of the Socialist Party and to the right of the Communist Party. During the war, *Le Journal du Peuple* defended a pacifist line, and Nicod's paper is preceded by a series of articles on pacifist protests in allied, enemy and neutral countries.

In the issue dated from 02/08/1916, the newspaper "published" what seems to have been a short article completely censored (which means that the editor leaves a blank space without text), except for the title "La révocation de B. Russel", and the name of the author, Véra Starkoff. It is likely that the "revocation" in point refers to the decision of the College Council, dated from July the 11th, to dismiss Russell from his Lectureship at Trinity College, Cambridge. Nicod's article published one month later, also censored, is longer than Véra's one. It can be divided in three parts : the first one is a presentation of Russell and his scientific reputation to a wide audience, which concludes with an uncensored reference to the "passions of the hour", that deprived Russell of the chair which he held at the University of Cambridge ; the second part, which is also uncensored, portrays Russell both as a teacher attentive to his students and as the representative of the Republic of Letters, a true successor of Leibniz ; the third part, which is almost completely suppressed, deals with Russell's attitude towards the war and, as far as we can tell from the censorship filter, with his book *Justice in War Time*, which Nicod was translating at the time¹⁸.

¹⁶ Letters from Thérèse to Meyerson dated from 1925

¹⁷ The congress of Tours is a decisive moment in the history of the French left, which split into two organisations, the Socialist Party (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière) and the Communist Party (Section Française de l'Internationale Communiste).

¹⁸ The translation should appear in *La Forge*, a monthly journal (see letter from Nicod to Russell dated from 15/06/1919). The revue is today difficult to find, and whether it has been the case is not known. In the numero 15, from May 1919, one finds a chapter of Nicod's translation *Justice in War-time* (« La guerre et la non résistance »).

This unusual mixture of remarks about Russell's person, about his work, and about his pacifist commitment was perhaps motivated by a desire to at least partially circumvent censorship. If this was the case, then the attempt was successful : less than one third of the article has been suppressed, and the readers of the *Journal du Peuple* were then able to understand between the lines what had happened in Cambridge.¹⁹

I reproduce here the verbatim translation (slightly modified)²⁰ of Nicod's article, published in *The Cambridge Magazine* in a article entitled "Trinity in Disgrace – America's Opportunity" (October 14, 1916, pp. 18-19). This paper was likely written by *the Cambridge Magazine's* editor, Charles Kay Ogden. Nicod's translation is introduced by these words : "A FRENCH VIEW OF THE MATTER. Meanwhile the affair has been noised abroad throughout the [civilized] world." Its title is not translated. The French text is given in the appendix.

* * *

The name and work of Mr. Bertrand Russell are well known to philosophers and men of learning in all lands. Like Leibniz, Russell is both a mathematician and a logician; and frequently, in his book on the philosophy of Leibniz "the interpreter -- to quote the philosopher M. Lévy-Bruhl -- vies with his author in subtlety, and, I venture to say, is of sufficient stature to warrant the rivalry".²¹ Louis Couturat, speaking of Russell's contributions to mathematics, in a transport of admiration, called it -- in the words of Thucydides -- "an acquisition for ever." Then, last year, Columbia University awarded Russell the gold medal in recognition of his work as a whole. And this is the philosopher who, in the tumult of the passions of the hour, has just been deprived of the chair which he held at the University of Cambridge.

I can picture him now, as I saw him for the first time three years ago, ensconced in that ancient college whence the war has driven him. Towards the close of a December

¹⁹ On this event, see (Hardy 1942).

²⁰ I reintroduced two footnotes that have been suppressed in the English translation, and I have indicated the change of column in order to give the reader an idea of the size of the spaces left blank.

²¹ Nicod's footnote 1 : Lévy-Bruhl, Avant propos of the French translation of *La philosophie de Leibnitz*, by Bertrand Russell.

afternoon I entered his book-lined study, which was lit up by a large fire. Some of his Cambridge friends, a young American mathematician (his pupil) and myself were present.²² Russell had just finished

[2nd column] making tea. His finely cut, aristocratic profile was almost lost to view in the depths of an immense armchair; he was talking animatedly of the new branch of learning, to whose foundation his researches have so largely contributed. The lamp and the glow of the fire lit up his remarkable face – a face whose every line suggested subtleties and great discoveries. His conversation gave food for amusement and reflection. It had that indefinable acridity which always arrests our attention when reason is the dominant note. A small portrait of Leibniz stood between two silver candlesticks on the [mantelpiece]. As if by some sudden spell, the mind was borne back to the time of the Republic of Letters. We were citizens of Europe – no less.

This aristocratic mathematician – he is the brother of Lord Russell, and the name he bears is one ancient and [honored] in England – is famed throughout the world of learning. Russell, together with the German Frege and the Italian Peano, has created a new conception of mathematics. He is the youngest of the three, and his work is the most constructive and the most fully developed. Far along the path which Leibniz had dimly perceived, despite our imperfect perspective, their achievement stands out as one of the great triumphs of reason – a triumph scarce hoped for.

While he was lecturing on the principles of mathematics at Cambridge, Russell had turned his clear brain to philosophy, and he had just published his first researches in this new field. He had already expounded these results in a course of lectures at the great American University of Harvard.²³ We have seen him a mathematician like Leibniz, a logician like his great forerunner, but it has been left to the war to complete the parallel by revealing yet a third aspect common to both. Bertrand Russell, like Leibniz, is a great European.

The war stirs this famous thinker to the depths of his soul

[3rd column] uncovering that moral foundation which years of scientific [labor] have slowly built up within him.

²² My footnote : In the letter to Ottoline dated from 02/12/1913, Russell refers to a meeting in his room with Nicod and Wiener.

²³ Nicod's footnote 2: *Our Knowledge of an External World*, series of Lectures by Bertrand Russell, 1915.

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[4th column] This specialist in the purest branch of pure reason is careful to avoid assigning too important a role to thought. His writings reveal a precise and adequate doctrine of the practical application of reason. Already in his work in logic, reason is allotted the task of disentangling, illuminating, and widening, but not that of making decisions. And this conception is embodied in Russell's reflections on the war. "The fundamental facts

[5th column] in the question of war, as in all ethical problems, are feelings. All that thought can do is to clarify and [harmonize] the expression of those feelings." And it is with doing this that Bertrand Russell is concerned in all his studies of the war, for in them we find a delicate and accurate psychological analysis of the forces which make for war and peace. These articles on ethics and politics are, by their simplicity and earnestness, not unworthy of their author's renown. Russell detests the spirit of which the German Emperor is, as it were, sign or symbol. "As for the Kaiser, ever since I first began to know Germany, twenty years ago, I have abominated him. I have consistently regarded him, and now I regard him as one of the sources of evil in the world."

[blank]

[6th column]

Jean Nicod.

* * *

Conclusion

What this dive into the correspondence with Meyerson shows, and which is completely absent from the biographical note that Lalande presents, is that Nicod was in contact, through his mother, but also through his personal activity, with the militant circles of the French pacifist left. When Nicod arrived in Cambridge in 1914, his political commitment was certainly not at the forefront of his mind. It likely played no role in his decision to learn logic from Russell, and to follow Russell's program of scientific philosophy. But

events brought political issues back to the forefront. Nicod's article (as well as his translation of *Justice in War Time*) attests to the importance to him of Russell's courageous pacifist position, which were consistent with those he and his mother had taken independently. It is as if Nicod, because of the war, found in Cambridge the world of his mother Véra (that of political commitment) that he had left in Paris.

One thing sheds an even more dramatic light on the situation : Nicod should have been drafted into the army, and it is not clear why this was not the case. Lalande mentions his frail constitution. But it seems that his disease was not discovered until the end of 1918.²⁴ It is also possible that young men abroad were able to escape service for a time.²⁵ In any case, contrary to what happens in England, there is no legal disposition in France allowing conscientious objection. In her *Autobiography*, Dora Black seems to draw a link between Nicod's willingness to maintain his "pacifist objection" and his future illness (Black 1975, p. 74):

Jean Nicod had managed to maintain his pacifist objection and survive the war, but only at the great cost of making himself ill and unfit, since in France there was no provision for conscientious objection. His health was undermined, with tragic consequences later.

The passage is not clear. Since conscientious objection was not legally admissible, what does Dora mean by "pacifist objection" here? And how can maintaining such an objection deteriorate Nicod's health? Is she referring to any bad treatment Nicod might have suffered as an objector (prison, ...)? Does she suggest that Nicod would have voluntarily endangered his health in order to escape service? In the correspondance found in the Fond Meyerson, there is unfortunately nothing that would allow us to know what Nicod's situation was with respect to conscription.

Did Russell know about Nicod's political commitments? Did he know that he was in contact, in France, with important people of the pacifist and socialist milieu? Did he know who Véra Starkoff was? We can assume that he did.²⁶ But he does not mention anything about this aspect of Nicod's life in the passages he dedicates to him in his (1959). And the letter to Russell dated from 29/02/1920, mentionned above, in which Dora speaks about Véra seems to confirm that Nicod remained discrete about his mother's militant activities.

²⁴ See the letter to I. Meyerson 09/12/1918.

²⁵ A letter from Russell to Ottoline from 26/01/1917 mentions that Nicod had been threatened to be enrolled by a change in conscription regulation.

²⁶ In the letter dated from 28/09/1919, Nicod informs Russell that that he was unable to see Romain Rolland in Paris, as Russell had asked.

Nicod seems to have wanted not to confuse the scientific with the political facet of his existence, even if this duality was present at the same time in his master. This compartmentalization was certainly due to the fact that, for him, the intellectual commitment had to take precedence over all others. Probably also, this discreetness suited his character. But this restraint was perhaps also dictated by prudence : the vast majority of the French academic world (especially men over 40 who could no longer be conscripted) at the time favored war against Germany, and professed the greatest contempt for pacifists like Romain Rolland.²⁷

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²⁷ Let me quote a passage from Romain Rolland's journal of (from August 1917), speaking about Jean de Saint-Prix (Rolland & de Saint-Prix 1980, p. 16): "What [Jean de Saint-Prix] tells me about the high University, and, in general, about the generations above 40, is not to surprise me. Everywhere, the same unconsciousness of suffering and ruin, the same stubbornness of mind, Bergson saying: "In three years, the war will come to an end"; Lalande saying to a poor boy who was about to go back to the front, and came to confide in him his sorrow: "But yes, yes, it's unfortunate, but you have to be killed, we have to get you killed"; or again: "Without a doubt, after the war, France will be depopulated, ruined, etc. But that's how it is, that must be so." Especially Durkheim, playing the role of impassive, coldly *implacable pontifex maximus* of the republican, secular and compulsory Law."

Jean de Saint-Prix was a young pacifist, admirer of Romain Rolland, who died in 1919. He studied philosophy at the Sorbonne at the same time as Jean Nicod. Nicod knew him, and said to I. Meyerson in a letter dated from 29/02/1919 (after de Saint-Prix' death): "Saint-Prix. I will not forget. His ardor was delightful. He had something of a pure force, which the hazard of words makes me call Buddhist. Perhaps we love each other, having seen each other little."

Appendix

« Le nom et les ouvrages de M. Bertrand Russell sont bien connus, en tous pays, des savants et des philosophes ».

Comme Leibnitz, Russell est à la fois mathématicien et logicien. Dans son livre sur la Philosophie de Leibnitz, souvent « l'historien lutte de subtilité avec son auteur, et j'oserai dire qu'il est de taille à se mesurer avec lui ». C'est à M. Lévy-Bruhl, le philosophe, qui écrit cela (1 : Lévy-Bruhl, Avant propos de la trad. Française de La philosophie de Leibnitz, par Bertrand Russell). Parlant de l'oeuvre mathématique de Russell, Louis Couturat, emporté par l'admiration, lui appliquait le mot de Thucydide : « Une acquisition pour toujours ». L'année dernière encore, l'Université Columbia, aux Etats-Unis, décernait sa grande médaille d'or à Russell pour l'ensemble de ses travaux. Tel est le savant que les passions d'aujourd'hui viennent de priver de la chaire qu'il occupait à l'Université de Cambridge.

Je le revois comme il m'est apparu pour la première fois, il y a trois ans, au fond du vieux collège d'où la guerre vient de le chasser. A la fin d'un après-midi de décembre, je suis entré dans son cabinet de travail tapissé de livres, qu'éclairait un grand feu. Il y avait là quelques-uns de ses amis de Cambridge, un jeune savant américain son élève et moi-même. Russell avait fini de préparer le thé, son mince profil d'ancien régime se perdait dans un vaste fauteuil ; il parlait [?] avec

// esprit de la branche nouvelle que ses travaux ont contribué à fonder. La lampe et le reflet du feu éclairaient son visage singulier, respirant la subtilité et les découvertes. Sa causerie était amusante et solide. Elle avait ce rien un peu grêle qui nous surprend toujours dans l'apparence de la raison. Un petit portrait de Leibniz était sur la cheminée, entre deux flambeaux d'argent. Un charme imprévu reportait l'âme au temps de la République des Lettres. On se sentait en Europe, simplement.

Ce géomètre aristocrate – il est le frère de Lord Russell, et le nom qu'il porte est un des vieux noms d'Angleterre – est connu de tout le monde savant. Avec l'Allemand Frege et l'Italien Peano, Russell a créé une nouvelle conception des mathématiques. Il est le plus jeune des trois, et ses travaux ont le plus d'ampleur constructive. Avançant loin dans une voie que Leibniz avait entrevue, leur oeuvre apparaît, malgré le peu de recul, comme un des triomphes de la raison, un triomphe inespéré.

Tout en continuant son enseignement sur les principes des mathématiques à Cambridge, qu'il illustre, Russell avait tourné vers la philosophie son esprit lucide. Il venait de publier ses premiers travaux dans cette direction nouvelle. Il en avait exposé les résultats dans une série de cours à la grande université américaine de Harvard (1 : Our Knowledge of an External World, series of Lectures by Bertrand Russell, 1915). Mathématicien comme Leibniz, philosophe de la logique comme son grand devancier, il était réservé à cette guerre de compléter le parallèle par un troisième aspect. Bertrand Russell est comme Leibniz, un grand Européen.

La guerre atteint ce savant dans le plus profond de son âme. Une assise morale se

// découvre lentement par les années de labeur scientifique.

[censure]

// [censure] Ce spécialiste du domaine le plus pur de la raison pure se garde de grossir le rôle de la pensée. Ses écrits laissent apparaître une doctrine, précise et ample, de l'application de la raison à la pratique. Déjà dans ses œuvres sur la logique, la raison n'a pas pour rôle de trancher, mais de débrouiller, de clarifier, d'élargir [?]. Cette conception prend corps dans les réflexions de Russell sur la guerre. « Dans la question de la

// guerre, comme dans toutes les autres questions morales, des sentiments sont les faits fondamentaux. Harmoniser et clarifier l'expression de ces sentiments, c'est là toute l'œuvre de la pensée. »

Cette œuvre occupe toutes les études de Bertrand Russell sur la guerre. On y trouve une psychologie fine et réelle des forces qui tendent à la guerre et à la paix. Ces articles d'un grand savant sur la morale et la politique sont dignes, par leur simplicité et leur sérieux de la célébrité de leur auteur. Russell déteste l'esprit dont l'empereur allemand est comme le symbole : « pour le kaiser, depuis le temps où j'ai commencé à connaître l'Allemagne – et il y a de cela vingt ans – je le tiens en abomination. Je l'ai constamment regardé, et je le regarde maintenant, comme une des sources du mal dans le monde ».

[censure]

// [censure] Jean Nicod.