

Monk, Ray. *Bertrand Russell. The Spirit of Solitude*. Jonathan Cape. London (1996).

To write a book about any great man always involves intellectual risks and dangers. The most important challenge for a writer is perhaps to be able to remain neutral towards one's object of inquiry, no to develop an openly biased approach to it, regardless of his personal inclinations, tastes and preferences, for then he may very easily pass over his subject and completely misconstrue it. This is clearly the case of R. Monk's latest biographical achievement, *Bertrand Russell. The Spirit of Solitude*. This is an exasperating and irritating massive volume, whose main (and hidden) goal seems to have been to present in the ugliest possible way the life and personality of one of the greatest men this century has given. As a matter of fact, what Monk offers is a distorted picture and a rather pointless caricature of Russell, concocted by means of all sorts of dismissing, pejorative and mocking comments, scattered all around the book, most of them, as I hope to make clear below, wholly inappropriate and, occasionally, offensive and even vulgar. Monk certainly exemplifies how not to write a book not only on Bertrand Russell, but on anyone at all, unless of course one already hates his chosen target and is willing to make one's feelings public. If we are to believe Monk, Russell was an abnormal being, a monster haunted by murderous inclinations, a sexually obsessed fellow, a plagiarizer of other people's ideas, a kind of vampire and, last but not least, a rather fatuous and frivolous man, "always hungry for praise and encouragement" (p.346) and "filled with a desire to make money" (p.596). So "repellent" (p. xx) is Monk's Russell that it is impossible not to feel, from the very beginning, that there must be something radically wrong in the author's treatment and perspective. But before pronouncing myself and putting forward a general assessment of Monk's book, let us proceed carefully by considering, as coldly as possible, the different facets of the text.

From a historical point of view, this books teaches people who already were acquainted with Russell's life almost nothing, except the details obtained from the reading of his correspondence. The work is clearly unballanced, since it abruptly ends when Russell's second part of his life begins, perhaps because, being at the time more or less 50 years old, sex would naturally play a much minor role in his life and actions from then onwards and, therefore, his life would automatically lose its interest for Monk. Indeed, the last parts of the book gives the impression of having been written in a hurry, as if what the author wanted to convey had already been said and the rest did not matter too much. The mission had already been accomplished. Thus it would have been more accurate for his book to bear a title like '*The Life of Bertrand Russell, from the point of view of his sexual instinct*' than the both promising and disappointing one it actually has. Anyway, it is difficult not to see that the ground was carefully prepared to systematically vilify

Russell's image to the utmost and to elaborate a rather absurd picture of him. Unfortunately for the author's purposes, the very material used by him to disqualify that exceptional man that Russell was, says something **completely** different to other readers. And I feel optimistic in saying that this is not something particularly difficult to show.

That the book is full of misunderstandings and wholly misguided is something that Monk's use of Russell's correspondence makes perfectly clear. A letter, especially if written in such a wonderful prose as Russell's, is a kind of document *of the moment* and serves to put in sentences something as ethereal as a mood, to catch on a flashing thought about a person or an event the writer was then concerned with. But it is utterly perverse to transform a letter into a kind of dissertation, a list of theses, as if the writer were producing a book to be read and discussed by other people. Rather, a letter is a written conversation with someone who, *per accidens*, is not there at the moment. Thus what a letter says is something that has to be located within the broader framework of thoughts consciously developed by the thinker in question and by the situation he was in at the time. They simply cannot be the raw material for a biography, unless they are all we have, which is not what happens in Russell's case. Thus, it is *a priori* plausible to assert that Monk's method of quoting from here and there, carrying out a tendentious selection of sentences and short paragraphs out of more than two thousand letters, having in mind from the very beginning precise goals, will in the end lead him to a complete failure as a biographer, an outcome which, after reading the book, it is difficult to deny.

This initial trick is what lays at the bottom of an amazingly amount of explanatory gaps, of gross misinterpretations and of mislocated comments on Monk's side. I will illustrate this by considering first, and very briefly, Monk's version of Russell's relationship with Wittgenstein and Moore.

Let us take first the most controversial of them, *i.e.* Wittgenstein. Russell's and Wittgenstein's passionating but very complex relationship is too much a difficult theme for Monk to analyze it both objectively and correctly. He seems quite happy to perpetuate a trend of thought, dating from the 60's and 70's (although at that time this way of looking at it was understandable) but which since had already been overcome, according to which Russell and Wittgenstein were actual enemies. From this point of view, Russell naturally was to be seen as an incompetent philosopher, unable to understand a single word uttered by Wittgenstein but whose meaning, nevertheless, even the most insignificant of the latter's pupils immediately grasped. What Monk's ill will prevents him from seeing is that Wittgenstein actually grew out of Russell (a marvellous and somewhat strange phenomenon) and that Russell was the only thinker with whom

he could discuss philosophy on an equal foot. However philosophically wrong Russell turned out to be, it is nevertheless true that he never was one pupil of Wittgenstein. It is a platitude to say that Wittgenstein was a genius, but what is less trivial is to recognize that that genius was lucky enough to find someone like Russell in his way and that is something that should be acknowledged once and for all. What has to be understood is that sooner or later, both being outstanding, unusual men, it was **natural** for them to clash. Wittgenstein had no troubles with his followers, but he could have them with an equal to him and Russell was too much of an independent mind to quietly acquiesce to everything Wittgenstein would say (however brilliant or profound). For different reasons, the fact is that Wittgenstein could not become (still less in Britain, being a foreigner) the kind of universal man that Russell already was when they first met. However, their conflict is understood by Monk in a rather childish way. The idea that Russell could have blocked Wittgenstein, discouraged him from doing philosophy, had he been less sure of himself, does not even cross his mind. That is why he is in a position to say of the man who actually introduced Wittgenstein to philosophy (and taught him) that his “perception of Wittgenstein (...) seems naive and superficial” (p.265). This is an actually unapt and unacceptable statement. To my mind, Wittgenstein is much better understood if seen as an essentially *anti-Russellian* thinker. This is true even of the “second” or “later” Wittgenstein. And this is something that Monk could not possibly explain. So if we dismiss Russell out of hand, both Wittgenstein’s and Russell’s thoughts are liable to be misunderstood and their personal relation, complex and difficult but intense and fruitful, remains unintelligible. Incidentally, it must be said that Monk gives the impression of doing nothing else than repeating, almost literally, certain things Wittgenstein said on Russell (naturally forgetting very conveniently many other different things he also said). For example, in a well-known letter, Wittgenstein describes Russell as “Glib and superficial, though, as always, *astonishingly* quick.” Now commenting on Russell’s writing his *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, Monk says “This he accomplished *astonishingly* quickly” (p.532). This, I suggest, is no mere coincidence.

With respect to Moore, Monk’s biased approach manifests itself, for example, in his quiet acceptance of, *e.g.*, Wittgenstein’s crude (and I think unfair) appraisal of Moore’s intelligence and his siding with Moore as soon as the conflict is with Russell. Moore’s attitude towards Russell is alluded to several times in the book, but the thing everybody would like to know is simply evaded, namely, **why** was Moore so unfriendly to Russell? Monk limits himself to narrate certain facts, but he suggests nothing to explain them. One such hypothesis which, it can be argued, throws light upon many anecdotes, is simply that Moore was profoundly jealous of Russell’s intelligence and brilliance. Moore simply could not cope with it. This explains, for instance, his refusal to lend Russell the notes Wittgenstein

dictated to him in Norway, a fact that Monk prefers to ignore. But this in turn leaves certain things unexplained, for when Wittgenstein reproaches Russell for not having taken into account his notes, his reproach was simply unfounded. Monk, one can guess, says absolutely nothing about this. It is also worth noticing that he does not feel the need to say something about Russell's commendatory opinions on Moore, in spite of his knowing that Moore disliked him a lot. This shows how neutral Monk is.

Undoubtedly, Monk's central interests in this book centre round Russell's "sexual life". Now this way of putting it is extremely misleading, since the expression 'sexual life', as he employs it, immediately makes us think of a debauchee, someone who spends his life in orgies and the like. But it is clear, even for Monk (I suppose), that Russell was not that kind of man. Thus time and again he distorts facts by misusing words. Monk seems to be unaware that a sexual revolution took place in the second part of the century and that, therefore, people one hundred years ago used to live in a very different and (from our present standpoint) much more restrained way, especially in countries like England and still more in the upper, educated classes. Victorians did not lack a sexual life, but at all events they were not prone to speak about it. So when someone did, however natural or innocent his or her words were, that was shocking and it had to be said either by someone uneducated or by someone at the top of the most distinguished people, someone who would be prepared to fight against what was in that field social repression. But since whoever dared to speak freely was fighting against something unnatural but very strong, then his words had to mean something rather innocuous. That is what happens in Russell's case. But then 'sexual desires', 'sexual feelings' and so forth meant something different from what they mean now. In this case, it is Monk's complete lack of historical perspective what leads him into an abyss of misunderstanding and calomny. That is why he feels entitled to describe Russell as suffering from "intense sexual feelings" (p.32), a man for whom "sex was becoming one of his chief preoccupations" (p.306) and so on and so on. But this, I maintain, is dishonest. When Russell, with an admirable spontaneousness and frankness and vividness, speaks privately about some of his natural needs, he is not saying anything that any decent person nowadays would be unwilling to hear. We could perhaps say that he was "naturalizing" sex.

On the other hand, it seems to me that what someone who, like Russell, is capable of working for years in logic, bringing something new into the world, something for mankind, who has the strength to put aside his biological requirements, confessing at the same time that it costs him a lot but nevertheless goes on, should inspire in all of us is nothing but respect and not silly and dirty comments, which is what we found in Monk's book. Like Plato, St. Augustine, Kant, Nietzsche and some other great philosophers of former times, Russell lived

an inner conflict, the kind of conflict that only men like them might have: the conflict between the requirements of the mind and those of our biological equipment. Something which would infuriate any candid reader of Monk's book is his incapacity to detect the conflict, courageously assumed by Russell who did not turn his back on his intellectual obligations (because he knew that he had a privileged mind and that he had no right to use it for merely personal goals), and to offer a serious diagnose of it. Neither does he recognize Russell's personal tragedy of being mentally superbly gifted and physically rather slim, frail, delicate. Indeed, there is no real effort on Monk's part to account seriously for Russell's life.

At this stage, I think that it has to be said, against Monk, that it is revolting to make jokes and supposedly funny comments (rather cheap) about the physical aspect of anybody and, also, of his biological, natural behaviour. This is something Monk indulges in all along the book. Thus he allows himself to construe a variety of pseudo-sarcasms, on the verge of vulgarity, concerning those aspects of a person I have just mentioned. So we pass from "It probably requires an effort of the imagination to picture Bertrand Russell playing tennis" (p.49), which is relatively harmless, to statements like "where Allis allowed him to kiss his breast" (p.84) (I wonder what Monk does with his own wife but, since I am not writing his biography, I will not go into that). And what is more incredible is that, after depicting the sexual devourer Russell was, he insinuates that after all he was also impotent! (p.102). It is difficult to be more obviously inconsistent.

Perhaps the most surprising fact about Monk's book is that in it he overlooks practically all of Russell's fascinating features. For instance, he does not even seem to notice that Russell had an extraordinary sense of humour. There are even some good examples of it in the letters he quotes, but since he pursues specific goals he just cannot perceive it and, therefore, he simply cannot enjoy them. Russell's wit is all too well-known to put it into question, but Monk does not say a single word about it. We certainly have the right to be suspicious about the intentions of someone who is blind to such realities. In fact, not a single virtue or quality is to be found in Monk's Russell.

Monk's distaste for Russell is so obvious and strong that it makes him provide very unconvincing accounts of facts about which there should be *prima facie* no disagreement at all. One such case is provided by Monk's explanation of Russell's activities during the First World War and the British Government response to them. It is evident that Russell was beginning to play the role of a somewhat uncomfortable moral prosecutor. On the other hand and for obvious reasons, he was not to be treated as an ordinary protester. Still he had to be harassed and his activities stopped. Thus in order to neutralize potential German

spies, the British Government determined that certain areas were prohibited and that Russell had no longer the right to travel there. One naturally wonders: could anybody suspect Russell for being a traitor? If not, why was he prevented from moving freely in his own country? Monk's answer is that "The Government (...) had evidently panicked" (p.472). It simply does not occur to him that Russell was being punished by the Government, because of his political agitation. Now if one accepts the kind of explanation put forward in this case, then one has to accept anything whatsoever, for instance, Monk's peculiar version of Russell's being sent to jail. From his point of view, it must have been like going to a party. Clearly he does not know what to be deprived of one's liberty is. "Russell (...) was (...) to enjoy a kind of life more conducive to serious philosophical work than any he had known since losing his lecturship at Trinity" (p.524). The particular example is not important. What matters is what it shows, namely, the author's attitude: anything that would be painful for any normal person, in Russell's case was not so; everything which is normal in the case of the average man, in Russell's case is a proof of his wickedness; if Russell had a problem with anybody, it was he who had to be blamed, he was the guilty one, etc. This is the general scheme of Monk's biographical work.

Since this is not a philosophical text, we do not need to go into the details of the author's reconstruction of Russell's various doctrines. In general, they are well outlined, clearly stated and properly reconstructed. But it is also true that Monk does not go much farther beyond elementary levels. So he in a sort of *nonchalant* way presents Russell's philosophy of physics (although he does not even consider it important, e.g., to use the expression 'logical construction'), of the now universally familiar Theory of Descriptions, Russell's religious and political views, neutral monism and so on. In general, as I said, the exposition is clear. But it is not always fair and even right. For one, he saddles Russell with the view that a complex was just a fact. This is debatable. There may be passages in Russell's works in which he does advocate such a view, but this does not seem to be the case in general. A complex is rather what, from the point of view of natural language, is an object picked up either by a proper name or a description (Thus for instance Russell speaks of a "denoting complex" which is a denoting phrase which denotes the meaning of another denoting phrase). But what is an entity at the level of natural language is a complex thing once logical analysis has been carried out on it and what we are left with are real simple objects (*sensibilia*) out of which complex objects are made of. Thus 'complex' and 'fact' are hardly synonymous. Secondly, Monk is anxious to sharply separate Russell's conception of logic from Wittgenstein's. The main difference, we are told, is that in Wittgenstein's doctrine logic is essentially linguistic, while in Russell's it is rather (to use one of Wittgenstein's own expressions) a "kind of ultra-physics". That is why Russell keeps speaking of logical forms as the subject-matter of logic. However, it is far

from obvious that the *Tractatus* does not also incorporate a very similar point of view. For Wittgenstein also holds that logic is “the great mirror” of the world, the structure of all possible worlds, “something” that pervades the world and so on. So Monk’s point is not established, at least as he wishes to. Thirdly, I should say that Russell’s magnificent *Principles of Social Reconstruction* is under-exploited. Monk says nothing about Russell’s revolutionary views on education and religion. He just concentrates in the so called ‘principle of growth’, an idea with a long history and about which he says nothing important (apart from suggesting that Russell borrowed it from Lawrence). The book contains a long list of minor mistakes, as when Monk asserts that Frege had not only anticipated Russell’s logicism, which is true, but also that he “had indeed, taken much further than Russell himself the project of demonstrating mathematics to be founded upon nothing more than logic” (p.153), which is actually false, as he himself states in the footnote: “Actually, in Frege’s case, it was merely arithmetic that he believed to be essentially based on logic: geometry, he held, was essentially *non*-logical, being based, as Kant had argued, on our spatial intuitions” (p.153). But if so, what on Earth does it mean to say that Frege developed logicism further than Russell, for whom it had to cover the whole of mathematics? This does not seem very serious indeed!

The main thesis of the book, to wit, that Russell was afraid all his life of suddenly getting mad and that he felt cut off from the rest of the world, is refuted in the book itself: if there was a man in Europe who at a certain moment was able to make important contributions to a particular science, to play an important social and political role, to be at the center of the cultural world of his times and to achieve all that by remaining fully human, subject to the normal human requirements of sexuality, love, friendship and so on, that man was precisely Bertrand Russell. In fact Russell was (as Whitehead told him so, although in a slightly different sense) a sort of new Aristotle, someone who had something important to say on many fields of human interest, ranging from logic to politics, from metaphysics to religion. Russell was such an important cultural phenomenon that even his private life was of public interest. In this sense, he was not cut off from mankind and in the sense in which he could possibly had been, Monk tells us nothing. On the other hand, it is difficult to believe that someone possessing Russell’s mind could entertain such absurd beliefs as suddenly getting mad. Even if he used that expression, it could not possibly be taken at its face value, for it has no literal meaning. It is much more natural to see Russell at the opposite extreme of madness. He might be accused of being too reasonable, too rational. But surely not of being exposed to madness.

Russell’s formidable and rich personality is completely lost in Monk’s work. Contrary to his own conviction, it is impossible to believe that he had not

made up his mind about what he wanted to say, about what he had decided to say **before** plunging into the sea of letters produced by Russell, Ottoline Morell and the other actors of this melodrama and **before** writing down his construction. Apart from putting them together, he certainly does not show how Russell's philosophical work matches his inner life, influences it, and the other way around. Thus his criticism of other biographies of Russell, on the ground that the authors do not concern themselves with philosophy, is as unjustified as gratuitous. At least so far as I am concerned, I admit that I still do not see, *pace* Monk, any link whatever between, say, the Theory of Descriptions or neutral monism and Russell's sentimental journeys. But if what I have so far said is at all plausible, then only one conclusion follows: in spite of Ray Monk, Bertrand Russell, for all his complexity, defects and contradictions, remains a great man and indeed a rare human jewel.