

Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell. The Ghost of Madness. 1921-1979* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), pp. 574.

It could be thought that, given that my review of the first volume of Bertrand Russell's biography written by Ray Monk was (I still think rightly) extremely critical (see *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 5, num. 1, March 1988), it would no longer have any sense for me to review this second volume, since most probably I would have to face the same class of literary vices and historical deformations that characterized the first volume. However, I must say that I felt it as a moral obligation first to read it and secondly to review it, not only because I was curious about knowing the overall picture that Monk wanted to produce of one of the most brilliant personalities of the XXth Century, but also because I didn't want to leave unfinished a task (however disagreeable) that I had imposed upon myself. Now the general attitude is exactly the same in both volumes, but it could be thought that Monk did make a serious effort to water down his impossible to hide antipathy towards Russell. The outcome is a slightly more moderate book. I ignore whether it was due to negative comments on the first volume or for some other reason (for instance, the fact that Wittgenstein appears very little in Russell's second part of his life), but the truth is that in this second volume we no longer find the same openly mocking and highly offensive tone which pervaded the first one. It does not mean, however, that the tendentious approach, the author's systematic *parti pris* against Russell and in favour of all those with whom he had discrepancies or conflicts (his family included), the underrating of his work (philosophical or political) disappeared. The great change with respect to the previous volume consists solely in that it is written in a somewhat less provocative style. Given the magnitude of the book, however, I'll have to rest content with a general assessment of Monk's global proposal as to how to understand Russell's life.

Just as the first volume, this second book practically covers half a century, since it deals with Russell's life from 1921 till his death, in 1970. Naturally, Monk's goal is to offer an account in which his family and personal events are intertwined with his philosophical work and political activities. Thus, the stuff is rather huge and it has to be acknowledged that Monk's work of synthesis is on the main successful. The universe of data which he manipulates is adroitly utilized, although the work as a whole is full of thematic unbalances and explanatory holes, on which I'll have something to say below. The book is unavoidably interesting but, this is very important to emphasize and it should be clear from the outset, not thanks to the author, but because of the plain fact that Russell's life, is magnificent. It is Bertrand Russell's life, not Monk's gifts as a writer, what makes this book worth reading.

This second volume is divided into two parts. Basically, the first one is devoted to that period of Russell's life which is marked by Dora Black's (his second wife) presence (their marriage, the school, their children, their quarrels, their divorce, and so on); in the second part Monk concentrates on what was Russell's academic and political activities (as well as on some family tragedies). Both parts are sprinkled with summary expositions of Russell's most important (or at least best known) philosophical contributions, as well as with "critical" comments and clarifications, generally of an alarmingly superficial level. Let's be clear about this: the book contains no serious philosophical discussion. There is an obvious tendency on the author's part to concentrate more on Russell's ideas about education than on any other subject. The trouble of course is that the latter's work embraced many other subjects. After all, Russell published during the period which is being considered around 50 books and only two of them are explicitly concerned with education. This indicates that the tracing of Russell's ideas by Monk is not adequate. I'll give some examples of this inadequacy later on.

As any other biographical work, Monk's is an account of facts, anecdotes, events, vicissitudes, etc., of the man whose life is being reconstructed. It should be noticed that in this case the author was to a great extent spared the exhausting task of data gathering and compiling, since much of what he narrates was already common knowledge before he got interested in Russell. So Monk's work really seems to reduce itself to giving to an already finished portrait its last brushstrokes by establishing some new connections, emphasizing different aspects of what is being described, filling up the holes with negative comments, thus giving to it what he thinks is its true profile, the last touch, and that way leading the reader in a particular direction. In other words, the historical work properly speaking is rather meagre. In fact, more than the real Russell being discovered, Monk's Russell is being invented, a fake. Accordingly, the book's originality springs from the implicit (surely not unconscious) principles which guided the author in his reconstruction and interpretation of Russell's life. Unfortunately, it is here that once more we detect, regardless of its subtle make up, the same profound ill will, the same persistent desire to minimize the character, to make fun of him and indeed to nullify him. Were anyone to have doubts about what I'm saying, the only thing I'd have to do in order to convince him that I'm not exaggerating would be to handle him a list with the crude results which Monk arrives at and by means of which his work could be synthesized. What are they? The Russell of this period that Monk delivers to us is just a philosophically tired and finished thinker, an incoherent husband, a complete failure as a father, a man greedy for money, a cheap moralist and a politically vain and naïve person. Putting aside the Monkian "erudition", which consists mainly in accommodating well known sequences of facts and inserting throughout the text

disdainful and even despising comments, the least we can ask is: is this picture credible? My question is a rhetorical one, since the answer is rather obvious.

The book has hidden goals which are nonetheless uncovered by the author's diverse *faux-pas*. Faithful to his habits, Monk takes advantage of absolutely any negative or critical comment on Russell by anyone whatsoever, either friends of even people that just happened to meet him. Comments may come from distinguished personalities, like Beatrice Webb, or from simple acquaintances with whom Russell was at some stage in contact, as a certain Gerald Brenan, a rather minor writer. What is clear at any rate is that in Monk's hands every negative statement becomes useful, regardless of the quality, the motivations, the goals of the comments and of the obvious fact that it is foolish to ascribe to all of them more or less the same value. What, however, Monk refrains from saying is that for all those "critics" of some facet of Russell's rich and complex personality, it was simply a privilege to enjoy his company, his sense of humour and his conversation. Some critical comments by Beatrice Webb, which naturally Monk uses, are rather a friend's comments, that is, comments by someone who did feel an unbounded admiration for Russell's intellect. Obviously, this is something Monk never mentions. The outcome is monotonous: time and again we are left with negative opinions on Russell which fit perfectly well Monk's obscure goals but that Mrs. Webb would most probably repudiate had she known which use they would be put at half a century later. Brenan turns out to be, in Monk's opinion, a penetrating and lucid psychologist, since he shows "a keen eye for his faults [*i.e.*, Russell's], in particular what was his "violent vituperation of those whose views he disliked" (p. 193). Thus, out of a whole chapter of his *Personal Record*, whose content Monk himself has to acknowledge is "generally admiring" (p. 93), the only thing he actually quotes is the sentence "outside his philosophy, of which I was no judge, his great quality was his unfairness" (p. 193). These are clear examples of Monk's interpretative techniques.

The volume contains an amazing number of pages devoted to people, situations or events which are completely irrelevant to the biography of Russell but which for Monk are essential, since in fact they are part of the background which he carefully sets up in order to justify his always negative judgments and to back up what ultimately is his rather grotesque interpretation. Thus too many boring pages are devoted, for instance, to Dora Black's lovers (as well as to Russell son's and grand daughter's unbalanced lives, to his daughter's spiritual troubles, etc.). In Monk's tale the couple's life seems like the outcome of mere caprices, lightness, superficiality, hedonism and snobbism. But in reality things were different. Dora Black was not a common bourgeois woman. She was a social fighter, with a strong character, a progressive and politically active person, a well known and respected

feminist and a woman who took seriously the idea of women's emancipation, in all contexts. For his part, Russell was at the time a man decided to break, both mentally and practically, with the chains of the hypocritical sexual Anglican morality. Therefore, it was in a very special context, where crucial changes were taking place all around the world, that the events that Monk evokes happened. Russell lived enthusiastically the turbulent period that one has to go through when one wishes to overcome prejudices and to demolish harmful myths. Finally, as we know, due to a variety of causes the model school experiment that Russell and Dora started broke down, as well as all their common plans, their married and family life. The problem with Monk's way of putting it is that he carries out his narration as an accountant would his own analysis: sums and subtractions and that's all, with one difference: the conclusion is always the same: the guilty one is Bertrand Russell. Monk seems to think that the mere presentation of facts the way he does it suffices to draw the conclusions he obviously wants the reader to draw, but that is simply not the case and it can be shown. Actually, Russell's family troubles are no particularly exceptional: after all, divorces, intra-family quarrels, couple treasons, lawsuits, disappointments, etc., is what humanity at large goes through every day. What Monk didn't appreciate is that dull facts as those become interesting precisely because it was Russell who was involved in them; it was he who illuminated them with a particular colour thanks to the special way he had to deal with them. Any other person may suffer from the same kind of passions, legal actions, difficulties to find a job and so on, but most probably he or she will collapse in the middle of the process (some will abandon their projects, others will negotiate their principles, etc.). What is worth observing in Russell's case is that not only he didn't give up, but he went on writing, even while finding himself in the middle of terrible situations, a book per year, in addition to an incredible amount of letters, papers, articles, speeches, etc. (some 2000 words daily, as Monk himself points out, p. 58), not to mention his political activities (elections, anti-war demonstrations and so on). But it then turns out that with regard to these virtues of Russell (as well as to others) his biographer is totally blind. This is really suspect. The question forces upon ourselves: what sort of biographical work is this?

Russell's relationship with his children constitutes another aspect of his life that Monk simply manipulated as much as he wished, but that he really didn't understand. He first has a good time scornfully emphasizing Russell's love for his first son. So at least we can be sure as to the strength of Russell's affective links. However, that son, that Russell adored, who became the axis of his life, in the end terribly disappointed him and evolved into a mentally disturbed person, taking all sorts of silly decisions and behaving shamefully till his very last day. How much, for instance, the man Bertrand Russell suffered from all this is something we simply can know nothing about, or at least not thanks to Monk. That's not the kind of things he

was trying to investigate and therefore he suggests not a single word about it. In fact he never dares to explore Russell's inner life. On the other hand, he does *de facto* even if not *de jure* accuse him for being the cause of all of John's misfortunes, the reason being that he made a sort of Guinea pig out of his son in order to demonstrate the superiority of his "scientific psychology". Monk's explanation of what happened is fallacious: he imagines that because he describes in detail a personal tragedy, he has *eo ipso* explained it. In fact, Monk's way of reading the facts is simply absurd. It can hardly be a causal effect of the superb education that Russell offered to his children that John married a depraved hippie poet with whom he begot three girls, whom he irresponsibly never took care of and one of which (Lucy) committed (almost by accident) suicide. Once again, terrible family problems arise daily all around the world, but few people can flatter themselves of having a father like Bertrand Russell. Then why aren't the world's children completely crazy even if they are systematically ill treated, abused, exploited and so forth? Because there is no direct, simple causal connection between the elements involved the way Monk thinks there is. In his 80s, and having more important things to do, Russell had to rescue his grand daughters from the hellish life they were submitted to. He sustained them, send them to school, etc. After his death one of them killed herself but, according to the author of this book, the one to blame is the person who already was dead and buried! Monk's stance is not only too far-fetched and over-simplistic, but it also represents a serious distortion of facts. What Monk is apparently unable to understand is that there where most people would behave savagely, have recourse to all sorts of tricks, threats, violence, etc., Russell went on behaving with elegance, guided by a clear image of himself and perfectly conscious of his unusual position in the world. Monk simply can't appreciate Russell's fantastic will power, his intelligent and even wise way of dealing with persons in what obviously were extremely infuriating situations. None of this is worthy of Monk's attention. The author of this biography is interested only in collecting data concerning Russell's life in order to elaborate the worst possible picture of him. The only thing he is unaware of are the remarkable qualities those very data tell us (not to say 'shout' at us) about him.

With respect to Russell's philosophical production, Monk's exposition leaves to be desired. The great works of the period are of course considered, but their treatment is utterly arbitrary. For instance, the content of "The Limits of Empiricism", admittedly an important contribution, is examined in four pages, but the book *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* in just one! This perhaps explains why Monk just can't understand Quine's view to the effect that this is Russell's most important book. "I find this an extraordinary, and barely explicable, judgment" (p. 244, note). It is evident that Monk didn't go through the painstaking task of carefully reading the book. Had he done it, he would have understood that *An Inquiry into*

*Meaning and Truth* is both interesting and important, because it is Russell's final reply to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. It took Russell 20 years to digest some of Wittgenstein's results and he did a supreme final effort to refute him on specific points (Wittgenstein's views about identity, to mention just one). Regardless of his being or not successful, the truth is that Monk says absolutely nothing except for some rather shallow remarks about what Russell called 'basic propositions'. Surely the book is more than that! Similarly, when he speaks about one of the books that Russell wrote with his third wife, Peter Spence, that is, *Freedom and Organization*, Monk disposes of it in one blow stating that it "can hardly be regarded as serious work of scholarly history" (p. 212). Again this shows that he didn't racked his brain in reading it. For, however its weaknesses, this book contains a quite interesting discussion of Marx's work in which Russell raises concrete objections to several of Marx's theories. Monk doesn't even allude to it. So the way Russell's work are in general presented, putting aside the works on education, is like the way the content of books are exposed in vignettes: easy statements of the global content of the work in order for people to learn in a couple of minutes what it is about and nothing else. This is not serious work. I have nevertheless to admit that, thanks to his philosophical background and his undeniable ability to summarize, Monk is marvelous at carrying out his job. Unfortunately, it is a deliberately superficial and misleading one.

It is impossible not to feel that this second volume of the biography has exactly the same goal as the first one: to bring discredit on what we could call the 'Russell phenomenon'. There is simply no book, essay, article, speech or letter that, once brought to the fore, is not immediately disqualified. To avoid the accusation of exaggerating, I'll give some examples. About *On Education* we are reminded that "The reasons for its success, however, remain somewhat mysterious" (p. 57); on *The Scientific Outlook* we are told that it "shows Russell at his most irascible" (p. 122); with respect to *The Conquest of Happiness* we learn that it is "arguably the most superficial and dishonest book he ever wrote" (p. 115); concerning *Authority and the Individual* we are warned for being a book which "Many readers (...) have found themselves agreeing with everything Russell says, without feeling that they have learnt anything from it at all" (p. 306); about *An Outline of Philosophy* Monk kindly illustrates us saying that it's nothing but "an uninspired popular guide" (p. 59). It is unnecessary to establish my point to quote here what Monk has to say about, e.g., *A History of Western Philosophy or Human Knowledge*. In front of this overwhelming quantity of evidences of ill faith and deep aversion, the least we can ask is: with what goals in mind, what should someone sit and write for a biography of a man who one so obviously detests?

As it couldn't be otherwise, Russell's political activities are submitted by Monk to a rigorous examination and it could even be argued that this belongs to the best part of the book. In general, his reconstruction of facts is faithful. Likewise, the depiction of the general context or background is remarkable. Nonetheless, Monk's descriptions are characterized by certain systematic features which make his whole work a very dubious one. For instance:

- a) he never concedes that Russell might be right in what he said or did
- b) he attempts to create the impression that Russell's alarm for a potential atomic war was rather a product of his fantasy
- c) as if it were obvious, he tries to disqualify Russell's increasingly anti-Americanism to the extent of identifying him with Che Guevara (actually, here we might have one clue for deciphering the whole work).

Now it might be the case that both American and Soviet policy makers knew in advance that the United States and the Soviet Union would not risk a confrontation while Russell naively thought that war was imminent. The truth is that it is practically impossible to determine whether Russell was completely wrong or whether he did play a positive role (regardless of the importance) during the Cuban crisis (1962) and afterwards, during the American intervention in Vietnam. Anyway, even in the worst case the implications that Monk arrives at don't follow. With respect to Russell's views about American culture and governments, surprisingly apt and historically confirmed ones, the only thing Monk does is to state them and let the reader infer how silly Russell was. To show that Russell's thoughts were neither childish nor mistaken and that he had an extraordinary capacity to visualize the world's development, an ability Monk simply can't explain, I'll quote some of Russell's judgments which are so unobjectionable that they even give the impression of being trivialities:

- a) 1922: "The future of mankind depends upon the action of America during the next half-century" (p. 17). Nobody used to think that at the time, but could any sensible person have nowadays doubts about this pronouncement?
- b) 1924: "I foresee at no distant date an extension of American financial empire over the whole American continent, the whole of Western Europe and also the Near East" (p. 38). Probably Monk thinks Russell was (as always) wrong, but then he flies at the face of history and indeed of common sense.

c) 1924: “Britain could never achieve Socialism unless the United States also adopted it” (p. 38). Can anybody have serious doubts about Britain’s almost total dependence upon the United States right now? Perhaps Monk can!

d) 1939: “If America becomes a belligerent (...) the first effect will be the complete eclipse (at least for the time being) of liberalism, democracy, and free thought in the United States. What will the world gain by the defeat of the fascist Powers if, in the process, the fascist form of government becomes everywhere triumphant?” (pp. 224-25). I’m afraid Chomsky and many other intelligent and well informed people would say that Russell’s premonition has unfortunately been confirmed.

e) 1963: “The real concern of Americans in Vietnam is the protection of economic interests and the prevention of far-reaching social reforms in that part of the world” (p. 460). 40 years later this is almost a platitude, but it certainly wasn’t when, practically alone in the British academic world, Russell wrote these lines.

f) 1965: “the threat to the world peace is American imperialism” (p. 466). So far as I can see, this is now a rather popular view.

Of course, we can accept *in extremis* that someone rejects the, so to speak, readings of the world that Russell suggests, but we certainly can’t see in them nothing else than absurdities and folly. The problem is that that’s precisely the way Monk wants his reader to see them.

There are interesting events in Russell’s life that any biography which deserves to be considered seriously, especially one in which so much attention is paid to details and minor facts (like Monk’s), should have incorporated but that Monk’s doesn’t. For instance, the latter goes as far as to present Russell, after his coming back to England in 1944, as a radio commentator, but he doesn’t deign to mention his famous a quite exciting debate with F. Copleston; he didn’t consider either Popper’s cynical provocation of Wittgenstein at the Moral Club in Cambridge and in which Russell played in a sense an important role; no effort is displayed to analyze the final stage of Russell’s and Wittgenstein’s complex, conflicting but intense relationship, surely a more important subject than the sexual adventures and useless gossips he focuses on. From a literary point of view, the book has obvious ups and downs: the narration itself is well articulated, but some chapters end abruptly, with irrelevant or impertinent comments, and the book itself ends up in an



anti-climax: Russell's death is dealt with in a couple of lines, without taking care of quoting his last words, without examining its significance, etc., as if it were the least important *datum* of the book and as if the author's duty were to get over it as quickly as possible. As I said, there are no final reflections about Russell's impact and the last pages are devoted to tell the reader in great detail how Russell's grand-daughter died. Facts are always interesting, but the book was supposed to be on Russell, not on the people he was surrounded by. That's the way the second volume ends, a biographical work which for some time and to some extent will perhaps attain its goals, that is, to tarnish Russell's public image but which, I'm pretty confident about it, in the long run it'll be nothing more than a useful database.

How to assess Monk's biographical work? After reading carefully some 1114 pages, which is what the texts of the two volumes amount to, I am left with just one explanatory hypothesis: it is impossible for me not to believe that it is a work written on request, with previously, coldly and clearly determined goals. Either for personal or political reasons (we can imagine others as well), what emerges from the reading of these two volumes is the urgency to reduce Russell's popularity, to denigrate him before the general public, to erase him from the cultural panorama of our age, which he did so much to mould. I confess I can't get rid of the feeling that the author's ultimate ambition was to prevent present and future generations to see in Russell a first level philosopher, a liberating, independent, rebel and helpful thinker. Since I don't believe that the project which between the lines and almost instinctively I seem to adumbrate in Monk's work can be successful, I must conclude by saying that this second volume is, like the first one, a book bound to fail, an ideologically biased work, which however will have in the end consequences contrary to the obscure aims which gave life to it. I am convinced that it is not Ray Monk and people like him who will prevail and who will be able to prevent millions of people all around the world, now and in the future, to go on enjoying and benefiting from Bertrand Russell's fresh, interesting and useful thoughts which fortunately and with respect to a huge number of subjects he legated us.