RAY MONK, BERTRAND RUSSELL: THE SPIRIT OF SOLITUDE. Jonathan Cape: London, 1996; pp. xx + 695. ISBN: 0-224-03026-4.

The reception of Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude in the British daily press, weeklies and literary reviews has been remarkably generous. "As a scholarly and literary production, Bertrand Russell is wholly admirable", says Alan Ryan in the Times Literary Supplement; "an extraordinary full and fascinating account of the early phase", says Frank Kermode in the London Review of Books. In The New Statesman we are told that the book is "likely to emerge as the definitive account", while in the Spectator Monk is declared to have provided a "full and cogent account". The Independent even went so far as to publish a fairly weighty essay by Monk expounding his views about Russell's loneliness and misanthropy, and The Observer dedicated a page to extracts of the book detailing Russell's relationship with Vivien Eliot, T.S. Eliot's wife. Few biographies, let alone biographies of philosophers, receive such attention and praise.

Much of this applause is undoubtedly well-deserved. Ray Monk has woven together the familiar facts of Russell's life into a compelling story and the book is an enjoyable read despite its extravagant length. Few will want or need to know more about Russell's upbringing, his life at Cambridge, his political activities during the First World War, or his notorious affairs. In particular Monk's picture of how English aristocrats like Russell, with their brilliance and their snobbery, conducted themselves in the first two decades of the twentieth-century leaves a lasting impression. And never before has the darker side of Russell's character and the frenzy responsible for his prodigious feats of literary composition been so clearly portrayed.

Still as a biography of one of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century the book disappoints. It is only because Russell was so remarkable a thinker that he warrants such an enormous biography (the 600 pages of this volume take us up to 1921, leaving another 50 years of Russell's life for the second volume). Apart from the technical philosophical work, which was central to Russell's thinking up to 1913 and which continued to splutter during the rest of the period Monk covers, there is not much deserving detailed investigation. Philosophy was as important to Russell as physics to Einstein and music to Beethoven, and it is a strike against a biography of him, as Monk observes when criticizing his predecessor's efforts, that it "suffer[s] from ... a more or less complete lack of interest in [his] philosophical work" (p. xviii).

Of course Monk does not ignore Russell's philosophical ideas, but neither does he show much interest in them. For the most part he focuses on the ups-and-downs of Russell's marriage with Alys, his rather fleeting relationships with Joseph Conrad and D.H. Lawrence, and his affairs with Lady Ottoline Morrell, Helen Dudley, Vivien Eliot, Lady Constance Malleson and Dora Black (who eventually became his second wife). While this is doubtless essential for understanding Russell's "own particular forms of love and madness" (p. xvii), it does little to clarify his ideas or why he had them, still less illuminate what he achieved and why he has been so enormously influential. Someone actually asked me after reading Monk's book whether Russell was a major philosopher.

I was especially bothered by the cursory treatment of the programme inaugurated in The Principles of Mathematics and pursued with such dogged determination through the writing of Principia Mathematica. These two great works, on which much of Russell's lasting fame rests, get less consideration than the breakdown of Russell's marriage to Alys. Worse, they are discussed in a general and unhelpful way. "By the time Russell left for Paris on 31 July 1900", Monk writes in a typical passage, "The Principles of Mathematics was already a large and impressive work, and at a fairly advanced stage of completion. Divided into seven parts, it sought to analyze the foundations of mathematics, beginning with the notions of number and of the analysis of wholes into parts, and showing how continuity, infinity, space and time, and matter and motion can be understood arithmetically, as relations between numbers" (p. 128). What made the work "impressive" and how Russell understood continuity, infinity and the rest "as relations between numbers" (or even what this means) are left unexplained.

More surprisingly still, Russell's most important philosophical ideas and most accessible philosophical books are given short shrift. The theory of descriptions is accorded less than a page; all we are told is how "The present King of France is bald" is paraphrased and how the theory might help solve Russell's famous paradox about the classes that are not members of themselves (pp. 182-183). Even The Problems of Philosophy is dispatched with the observation that it "concentrates for the most part on comparatively dry aspects of the subject" (p. 228). For Monk the book seems worth mentioning mainly because its final chapter incorporates some of what Russell had said in "Prisons", a work that was supposed to appeal to Ottoline Morrell (whose concerns were more spiritual than intellectual). We are never told why the theory of descriptions is widely regarded as a "paradigm of philosophy" or why The Problems of Philosophy has been thought to be a good introduction to the subject for generations of students.

Making technical philosophy intelligible to the general public is not an impossible task. Physicists manage to explain more complicated theories, and there have been many attempts, not least by Russell himself, to explain logicism, the notion of an incomplete symbol, the nature of propositions and the like. The trouble is that Monk, like the earlier biographers he chastises, devotes far too much space to Russell's correspondence. I do not doubt that going through Russell's letters requires enormous dedication and stamina, but it is surely a huge mistake to let them dominate the discussion. It would not have been so bad had the letters reflected the full-range and depth of Russell's concerns and Monk had considered more closely his philosophical correspondence, of which they is apparently a fair amount. (Far better to dip into Nicholas Griffin's The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell: The Private Years.) Russell was no less evasive and prone to posturing in his letter-writing than anyone else, and his correspondence must, I think, be treated with the same scepticism that Monk treats Russell's Autobiography.

Reading Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude I had the impression that Monk was more interested in cobbling together an account of the particular form of insanity that drove Russell than in figuring out his views and why he shifted from one philosophical position to another. Monk's attention to personal psychology marred his earlier biography of Wittgenstein but not so much (perhaps because Wittgenstein was more circumspect in what he wrote and his particular form of insanity took a less public form). Tracing Russell's achievement to "the spirit of solitude" seems to me no more credible than tracing Wittgenstein's to "the duty of genius". Russell may have felt himself to be a ghost and his story "Satan in the Suburbs" may be his "most deeply personal and self-analytical piece of writing" (p. 23), but I remain disinclined to believe that a complex life like Russell's can be reduced to a simple formula.

So while I cannot imagine a better treatment of Russell's state of mind as Russell reports it in some of his personal letters, I think that an intellectual biography of him still awaits to be written, one informed by the mountain of scholarly work that has been done on the sources of his ideas and the nature of his arguments. These days biographies which focus on the subject's personal quirks at the expense of what he or she accomplished are popular, and the English public seems to find its upper-class endlessly absorbing. Nonetheless I would have expected Monk, who is after all a philosopher himself, to have been more attentive to Russell's philosophy (and more alert to the pitfalls of amateur psychologizing). Can there really be any doubt that the philosophical ideas of one of the greatest philosophical minds of our time are in the final analysis much more fascinating than the emotional tribulations of the future 3rd Earl of Russell?

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