

Men of letters: Bertrand Russell and Joseph Conrad

by Margaret Moran

IN SPITE OF an unwavering commitment to some constant principles, Russell's life was notable for its diversity. Social causes and intellectual tasks were enthusiastically adopted, diligently pursued and then supplanted by some new interest. The same pattern of discontinuity may be observed in his romances and friendships. Because his restless, questing spirit interfered with the development of abiding relationships, a series of alliances were formed with the highest idealism and usually abandoned later in disenchantment. Russell's relationship with Joseph Conrad distinguishes itself from many of his other associations because it was spared the final period of disillusionment. Though atypical, the story of their sympathetic attachment deserves attention for its own sake and for its connection to an unfamiliar aspect of Russell's nature: his unfulfilled artistic aspirations.

The general outline of this friendship has been known for many years. Russell's tribute to the novelist appeared in his *Portraits from Memory* (1956)¹ and again for a wider audience in the first

¹ "Joseph Conrad", fifth in a series of talks on the B.B.C., was delivered on 11 September 1953. These talks were included in *Portraits from Memory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956). For the material on Conrad, see pp. 86-91. The description of Conrad is repeated in *Autobiography*, I (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967): 207-10.

volume of the *Autobiography* (1967). Representative letters from Conrad were also included in the *Autobiography*.² The rest of the eleven surviving letters from Conrad have since been published in *Conradiana*.³ What has remained enigmatic, however, is the nature of the bond that could ally with such force two people who were ostensibly so dissimilar.⁴ Perhaps the difficulty could be at least partially dispelled if Russell's side of the correspondence were ever found. Unfortunately, only one letter has so far come to light. Any hope, though, that the missing letters might offer a complete solution is rendered vain when account is taken of the admission Russell made late in his life that he was unable to understand rationally their powerful sense of brotherhood.⁵

Compensation is afforded by the explanation, however imperfect, that survives in other correspondences. There are a few helpful remarks in letters to Lucy M. Donnelly, a professor of English at Bryn Mawr. Introduced to Russell as a close friend of his first wife's American cousins, she remained his friend even after the deterioration of his marriage. She played a minor part in this story as the person who initially recommended the reading of Conrad. More important are the letters Russell exchanged with Lady Ottoline Morrell.⁶ In the correspondence with her, Russell

offered his opinion of a number of novels and he explored more fully than in any published writing his reaction to Conrad as a human being. In so far as this reaction can be analyzed, its understanding is dependent on a preliminary consideration of the two main factors that predisposed Russell to be so powerfully affected by this man:

- I his relationship with Lady Ottoline herself, and
- II his long-standing desire to write imaginative works of his own.

To isolate these two into separate components is really to make a rather artificial distinction, necessary only for the convenience of this discussion. In the less orderly state of Russell's life as it was lived, the two were often more reciprocal.

The insistence that Russell's attitude to Conrad must be seen against the background of his fervent love for Lady Ottoline is not merely the substitution of one enigma for another one. Because his romance with her was so turbulent, he was driven to think very carefully about what it was that made all the anguish worthwhile. His letters to her are therefore not only expressions of passion, of hopes for his own accomplishments, and of pleasure in their shared intellectual or cultural interests—although they have all these elements in great abundance. They are also searching efforts to attain self-knowledge. Although it may seem odd at first to say so, his introspective analysis shows that Russell revered Conrad for reasons that were not altogether dissimilar to the qualities that drew him to Lady Ottoline.

When Russell looked back on his relationship with Conrad, he made a dry acknowledgment of Lady Ottoline's role as the intermediary who arranged for his introduction.⁷ While not untrue, this was nevertheless a diminution of her actual place in the drama. At the time, his gratitude was expressed more warmly in these words: "I don't think I should *ever* have got to know Conrad but for you—it is a *very* great thing that I owe to you" (21 Jan.

3–15. They are discussed with the correspondence to Alys Pearsall Smith and that to Constance Malleon in Andrew Brink, "Love and Conflict in Bertrand Russell's Letters", *Queen's Quarterly*, 86 (Spring 1979): 1–15.

⁷ *Autobiography*, I: 207.

² *Autobiography*, I: 224–5, and *Autobiography*, 2 (1968): 144–5 and 161–3.

³ Edgar Wright, "Joseph Conrad and Bertrand Russell", *Conradiana*, 2 (Fall 1969): 7–16.

⁴ For a hypothesis, see James W. Hamilton, "The Doppelgänger Effect in the Relationship between Joseph Conrad and Bertrand Russell", *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 6 (1979): 175–81. Various similarities in their experiences are set forth and the suggestion is offered that Conrad served as a father-figure to Russell.

⁵ In a letter to Mr. Watt (3 Oct. 1961) published in *Dear Bertrand Russell: A Selection of his Correspondence with the General Public 1950–68*, ed. Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), he wrote: "the experience, while it lasted, was too intense for analysis" (p. 190).

⁶ This massive correspondence includes approximately 2,000 letters by Russell and 1,600 by Lady Ottoline. His original letters are now housed in the Humanities Research Center in the University of Texas at Austin. Hers are in the Bertrand Russell Archives. For a detailed and perceptive analysis of this correspondence, see Andrew Brink, "Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell: the Letters of Transformation", *Russell*, nos. 21–22 (Spring–Summer 1976):

1914). In context, this statement can, without strain, be understood to imply an indebtedness far beyond the mere orchestration of the first meeting. For Lady Ottoline had, since their affair began in 1911, been fostering an aspect of his nature that made him particularly receptive to Conrad's personality. The Russell who met this remarkable author was not the same man Alys had once years earlier called "brains in the abstract".⁸ Nor was Lady Ottoline herself as insensitive as the popular caricature of the flamboyant Bloomsbury hostess once suggested.

Readers of the correspondence between Russell and Lady Ottoline can see that she exercised an entirely positive effect on his aesthetic sensibilities. Unconsciously, he had carried into maturity some of the limitations in his perceptions of art that had been assimilated from the rather puritanical atmosphere of his youth. Cultural pursuits, though valued as an estimable recreation or as a vehicle for human improvement, could not be seen in Russell's early training as completely worthy in themselves. Not until 1902 are there signs that Russell was beginning to formulate a tentative literary theory of some sophistication. From Lady Ottoline, Russell learned to be still more emancipated in his views, with results that were admittedly more felicitous in his role as appreciator rather than as creator of art.

Had he never known her, he would have been prepared for his friendship with Conrad to some degree by his own prior familiarity with a number of his books,⁹ but his delight in them was intensified by being shared. Her enthusiasm for a particular work often led him to a second or even a third reading. Since they discussed the fiction in conversation, their written allusions could be cryptic at times. Some works, including *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (reread in June 1913), *Under Western Eyes* (reread in

May 1913 and again in December 1914) and *Heart of Darkness*¹⁰ (reread in January 1914) were declared by Russell to be "good" or "very good", but no analysis accompanied these evaluations. *Almayer's Folly* (finished 28 January 1914) was mentioned without any comment. Still, the written evidence is full enough to establish that the impact of these books was mutual and deep. Volumes were exchanged frequently as gifts and impressions treasured.¹¹ Occasionally a fairly extended analysis, of the sort *Lord Jim* elicited from Lady Ottoline, was offered. Both the character portrayal and the power of the style received her effusive praise (23 Feb. 1912). Russell's reply indicated his pleasure at her enjoyment of this book, but he demurred about a comparison drawn to Henry James. Although he conceded that the two authors had similar methods, he considered James's characters to be lacking in as much fascination. There was occasion to pursue this point of disagreement when Lady Ottoline read some short stories by Henry James. Both James and Conrad had, she insisted, the power to exalt human beings by treating them in "a great intricate fallen divinity way" (25 Oct. 1912). To this description, Russell responded with complete assent about Conrad and equivocation about James.¹² The characters of the latter fell short by not being "passionate enough to compensate for their lack of futility" (27 Oct. 1912).

⁸ Russell protested her description, saying: "Don't say thee thinks of me from my letters as 'brains in the abstract', it does sound so cold and dry and lifeless" (15 Oct. 1894).

⁹ The exact date of Russell's first readings has so far been impossible to establish. The record he kept between 1891 and 1902 called "What Shall I Read?" has no entries of any of Conrad's books. Since this list is known to be incomplete, the absence there is not absolutely conclusive evidence that he began reading Conrad later.

¹⁰ Russell did, however, explain the reasons for his admiration for *Heart of Darkness* in *Portraits from Memory* (p. 87). He told Lady Ottoline that the book was important enough to justify the enormous cost to Conrad's health and equanimity exacted by his Congo experiences (13 Aug. 1913).

¹¹ In Russell's library in the Russell Archives, the following editions have remained as part of the collection: *An Outcast of the Islands* (1907), *Lord Jim* (1915), *Nostramo* (1919), *Some Reminiscences* (1912), *Tales of Unrest* (1909), *The Arrow of Gold* (1919), *The Mirror of the Sea* (1913), *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1898), *The Rescue* (1920), *The Rover* (1923), *The Shadow-Line* (1917), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), *Victory* (1915), *Within the Tides* (1915), and *Youth* (1923). *Nostramo* is inscribed "To Bertrand Russell from J. Conrad with love" and *The Shadow-Line* was a gift from Lady Ottoline. The library also contains *Conrad's Eastern World* (1966) by Norman Sherry.

¹² In part, Russell may have been reacting to the fact that James was an author whose appeal was most vital during the early years of his involvement with Alys.

In spite of this minor dispute about whether Conrad was entirely without rivals among modern novelists, Russell and Lady Ottoline agreed about his most arresting quality. Above all else, it was the pity he felt for his characters as representatives of suffering humanity that they found most remarkable. Nevertheless, a paradoxical element was sometimes singled out for special notice: ironical detachment. A decade or so earlier in 1902, Russell had elaborated an explanation for the paucity of truly great literary artists in comparison to the numerous practitioners in other forms of human endeavour.

All great literature requires the rare and all but impossible combination of fiery emotion with an intellect capable of viewing it impersonally. Where the latter fails, you get mere Byron; where the former, mere preciousness. It is, I am quite sure, a mistake to suppose that without an intensity of feeling which would crush an ordinary mortal it is impossible to produce Shakespeare, Milton, or Carlyle. But when the feeling has been got, it is necessary to have the strength of a giant, so as to turn it into literature instead of mere lamentation.¹³

By offering such a theory of creativity for a company of artists so exclusive that even Carlyle's presence seems surprising, Russell may have inadvertently given a predictive explanation for his own inability to gain admission among their number. Although Russell has often been subject to the accusation that he valued reason over feeling, one of the major goals of his life, as man, would-be artist and thinker, was the attainment of equilibrium between the two. His view of the literary genius as one who achieves balance between the two states at their greatest acuity is one to which there will be occasion to return. For the moment, what must be stressed is that this analysis makes Russell's homage to Conrad's ability to unite sympathy with control the more impressive.

While Russell's praise for Conrad was high indeed, his was not blind adulation, but an alert critical consideration that gave rise to some ambivalent and even adverse judgments. For instance, he told Lady Ottoline that *Nostramo* was not among Conrad's very

best novels (3 March 1912); yet his memories were sufficiently positive that he determined to reread it in May of 1913. However, he found himself so absorbed then by his own work on theory of knowledge that he could not surrender himself to the story. A failure of concentration brought on in her case by fatigue and ill health had similarly attended Lady Ottoline's efforts with *The Outcast of the Islands* (4 March 1912). Later, Russell dismissed the new stories (*Within the Tides*) in 1915 quite abruptly as inferior works. Both were quick to recognize that Conrad's most excellent work was in the past by then. Although they were usually in essential agreement, there was sometimes disparity in their views. For example, whereas Lady Ottoline found plenty to commend in *Reminiscences*, Russell's attitude was more severe. He wrote: "... on the whole I feel the book unworthy of him. It gives the sense of pot-boiling, of not being written from impulse; and some of his moralizings are a little cheap. I am very glad, though, to know about his Polish antecedents" (4 Sept. 1913).

Probably no book left Russell more undecided in opinion than *Chance*. Since it was sent as a gift from the author, he felt obliged to offer him a careful and honest appraisal. But there were moments when the prospect of having to do so seemed onerous. On 17 January 1914, he wrote to Lady Ottoline, "So far, I don't think it up to his best. I dread writing to him about it." By the next day, the report was more encouraging: "I have finished *Chance*. It becomes very good as it goes on; it is rather different from most of his books; profoundly moving in parts, but I think at the very end not quite up to his best." Later, there was more vacillation: "I have written to Conrad—parts of *Chance* are very good indeed, but the beginning is too slow, and I don't like the end. The two principal characters are very poignant, but he hasn't quite made the most of them" (22 Jan. 1914). His letter of the same day to the author was more detailed, but no less forthright.

I have now finished *Chance*. It held my interest intensely and increasingly as it went on. The effect of the governess's speech on Flora seemed to me very searching and admirable, and Captain Anthony is most poignant. And old de Barral as a monument of vanity is almost God-like. I felt some qualms about the "happy ending"—I think a tension increasing up to the point of disaster would have struck

¹³ To Helen Flexner, 31 March 1902. The original is held by the American Philosophical Society.

me as more credible. I had been admiring the courage with which you squeezed the last drops of misery out of Captain Anthony as he paced the other side of the deck with his gaze out to sea; and I doubted whether, after all that, the normal is still possible. But I dare say I was quite wrong.

It is a book which I am very glad indeed to have read, and to have had from you.¹⁴

Some months later, Conrad was able to repay Russell in kind by giving him advice about a story of his own, "The Perplexities of John Forstice". No doubt Conrad was diplomatic in his remarks, but the essential message did not escape his would-be apprentice in the art of tale-telling. Russell reported to Lucy Donnelly: "He was useful and good. But obviously he thinks very little of it as it stands" (27 July 1914). Although the thought of appealing to Conrad for suggestions about "Forstice" had been in Russell's mind for some time, anxiety about what he would say had delayed the deed. He was finally prompted to take the risk when he received Conrad's high praise for "The Free Man's Worship", the essay Conrad had declared "a gift from the Gods".¹⁵

Russell had excelled in "The Free Man's Worship" partly because the essay form was suited to his talents as virtually no other literary genre could be. As a dialogue, "Forstice" had made discussion primary. If the work could be classified purely as a vehicle for his thought in the same way that the dialogue had served philosophers from Plato to Berkeley, it might command more attention. But it forces evaluation in literary terms by its use of novelistic methods. The protagonist, a thinly veiled persona for the author, confronts a series of characters who incarnate various possible solutions to his private dilemma. Although the book therefore bears some resemblance to the novel of ideas, it suffers from the absence (except perhaps in the opening pages) of the piercing satire that Huxley later used to give zest to this static form. Instead, "Forstice" is a serious spiritual quest locked into a genre that provides no objective correlative for the inner voyage of discovery. As an amalgam of abstract philosophical dialogue,

novel of ideas and personal pilgrimage, "Forstice" challenges formal conventions without resolving them by the creation of a new form. Had he been able to achieve his high aims, Russell might have made a significant contribution to modern literature. As it was, the impulse toward self-disclosure that gave rise to "Forstice" never attained a satisfactory accomplishment until the *Autobiography* was written many years later. For the life story, the episodic approach proved highly appropriate; while in the fictionalized version of personal experience, the absence of formal unity created less satisfactory results.

Sensing that his aspirations for "Forstice" had created a challenge that only a master of prose fiction could resolve, Russell asked for Conrad's advice with trepidation. Conrad's solution was to disentangle the conflicting aims. He discouraged Russell from attempting to embody the people as fully rounded characters or to energize the situation in fictional terms. Recognizing that the craft necessary to make these revisions was not among Russell's otherwise formidable capabilities, he must have felt that the book could stand best as a sparse philosophical dialogue. The advice was not welcomed by the author who was reluctant to destroy the efforts he had already made to support the intellectual interchanges with novelistic development. Russell reported the conversation to Lady Ottoline:

I rebelled, but he was inexorable. I can't bear to sacrifice the poet's speech! He seemed to think by a great deal of work I could make something of it, but not to be sure whether it was worth my while to give so much time to it. He seemed to think very well of the garden party at the beginning. And I am happy to say he liked the nun. (22 July 1914)

(Russell was careful to include specific mention of Conrad's praise for the nun because Lady Ottoline had written some of this portion. She had incorporated her memories of a childhood ideal, Mother Julian, into "Forstice".) As Conrad had doubtless foreseen, the recommendations he had offered needed more in skill, restraint and time than Russell had at his disposal. His advice was not adopted and the story was left in a state that failed to satisfy its

¹⁴ This letter is owned by Colgate University, Hamilton, New York.

¹⁵ *Autobiography*, I: 225.

author.¹⁶ Regrettably, the single occasion when one of these great writers might have been able to exert real influence over the other's work was thereby missed.

Subsequent critical opinion¹⁷ has tended to the judgment that Russell had good reason to feel disappointed by this effort as an imaginative author. However highly admired are Russell's achievements as a mathematician, philosopher, essayist and social critic, even his most devoted supporters usually prefer to forget his purely literary attempts. When they are remembered clearly, as they are by one character in Robertson Davies's novel *The Rebel Angels*, they serve to justify the generalization: "You can't make a novelist out of a philosopher".¹⁸ Although Russell was eventually awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, this distinction was earned not by his very minor career as an imaginative author, but by the exemplary clarity of his philosophical prose.¹⁹

Since Russell is so little known as a poet *manqué*, it is a shock to realize that by the time he sought Conrad's help with "Forstice", he had been struggling intermittently for twelve years to find a literary vehicle for his creative impulses. This unfamiliar part of his *oeuvre* must be stressed, not to cast aspersions on his difficulties in an alien genre, but to establish his predisposition for sympathy with Conrad's account of the trials of his own artistic struggle. Russell had personal knowledge of the toil involved in what Conrad called the "conversion of nervous force into

phrases".²⁰ This point needs developing because Russell was eventually very successful in perpetuating a myth about the ease with which he composed both his popular and his specialized books. While this may have been near the mark, especially in later years with analytical and expository styles, the situation was certainly otherwise for the literary work undertaken between 1902 and 1914. These manuscripts with their cancellations, insertions and rearranged pages testify to the troublesome nature of the creative process. Reinforcing this evidence are the many complaints in letters about the difficulties of composition.

Russell had first been driven to lament his lack of natural poetic ability during his courtship of Alys. On 3 December 1893, he wrote that the desire to have language powerful enough to articulate his love had given him a new experience of envy for the creative genius of a Shakespeare. But the wish did not flower at the time in any serious literary endeavour. With a frankness not usual to people in love, Alys discouraged his amateur efforts by expressing a preference for extracts from accomplished authors that spoke directly to their situation. Russell was content to comply with her wishes and the urge for poetic expression faded. With the discovery in 1902 that his love for Alys had totally disintegrated, his need to write imaginatively became irrepressible. At this time, his suffering was exacerbated by acute anxieties about the value of his professional work and by a new awareness of the tragic nature of the human condition. For release, he wrote a series of meditative prose paragraphs that were presumably intended to take their places in an extended work called "The Pilgrimage of Life".²¹ Of this large-scale project, all that survives are unpublished segments or "disjointed reflections" in which the sadness of experience is

¹⁶ Russell was sufficiently dubious about the quality of "Forstice" to be reluctant to have it published. His lack of enthusiasm must explain the fact that the work never appeared in print during his lifetime. He agreed to its posthumous appearance only on the condition that there always be an accompanying note designed to absolve him of some of the responsibilities for its deficiencies. The waiver was to state that he had been overly pliant to the influence of Lady Ottoline Morrell at the time of composition. "The Perplexities of John Forstice" is the first work in *The Collected Stories of Bertrand Russell*, ed. Barry Feinberg (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972). This edition uses as copy-text the manuscript of 1912. Russell continued to rework his story at least a year thereafter, but the later versions (typescripts) have not survived.

¹⁷ In "Bertrand Russell: The Logic of a Literary Symbol", *Russell in Review*, ed. J. E. Thomas and Kenneth Blackwell (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, Hakkert and Co., 1976), p. 60, S. P. Rosenbaum writes: "(Though as a writer of fiction he merits the oblivion that an injudicious admirer had recently tried to dispel by publishing what he calls *The Collected Stories of Bertrand Russell*.)" For a positive assessment see Gladys Leithauser, "Principles and Perplexities:

Studies of Dualism in Selected Essays and Fiction of Bertrand Russell" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Wayne State University, 1977).

¹⁸ Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1981), p. 275.

¹⁹ However, the award must have given Russell the impetus to renew his efforts to write literature. At this time the chosen mode was the short story.

²⁰ Conrad to H. G. Wells, 30 Nov. 1903, in *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* by G. Jean-Aubry (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1927), I: 321.

²¹ The unpublished manuscripts that are presumed to have been intended as part of "The Pilgrimage of Life" are in the Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin.

brooded about and some severe consolations are tentatively suggested. Though these fragments never proved amenable to fusion into a coherent whole, there was throughout an endeavour to attain in densely metaphoric prose the lyrical power of poetry. At intervals this admirable aim resulted in bathos as in the case in an extended comparison in which Duty was likened to a railroad track. Over its rails composed of human souls, Fate in the form of a train went crashing with inexorable force. Yet there are also sentences phrased with real eloquence like this one: "We are all orphans and exiles, lost children wandering in the night with hopes, ideals, aspirations that must not be choked by a heartless world."²² In reading such passages, the attraction Russell felt for Conrad, an author who could write with sustained power about "the tremendous fact of our isolation ... of the indestructible loneliness that surrounds, envelopes, clothes every human soul from the cradle to the grave, and perhaps, beyond",²³ seems suddenly clear.

The existence of these virtually unknown fragments shows that Russell's creative endeavour had started nearly a decade before he began to be influenced by Lady Ottoline. She gave new encouragement to his pursuits in a medium that was essentially unsuitable for his talents. Her intellect, though considerable, was undisciplined and idiosyncratic, as Russell himself sometimes ruefully observed. Since she therefore had no hope of being able to collaborate on his highly specialized work as a philosopher or a mathematician, she supported his detour into more popular forms of expression. While her reaction to "Pilgrimage" is not extant, the assumption seems warranted that she agreed with Russell's decision to make a completely fresh start. Eagerly they planned a cooperative venture in which she would serve as muse while he wrote. Because of this reciprocity, they referred to the book as their "child". Titled "Prisons",²⁴ the book was intended as a

study of the forces that entrap man and the means of setting him free. Though more analytical than "Pilgrimage", "Prisons" carried over many of the same thematic concerns. Among these recurring motifs are the need to attain a balance between action and contemplation, and the desire for an undogmatic faith. Since these were emotionally charged topics for Russell, his initial impulse to treat them in the diffusive and florid manner of "Pilgrimage" is understandable. The gradual and unwilling recognition that the lyrical method could not take advantage of his strengths led to the determination to adopt an anatomical approach. But the result was not much more satisfactory, and this project too was reluctantly abandoned.

Nothing Russell wrote in the literary vein achieved his own standard for artistic excellence as had been set forth in 1902. The desired confluences of sympathy and control, and of poetry and prose could not be made. The surviving pieces of "Pilgrimage" reveal a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling, but they too often lack the necessary concomitant of recollection in tranquillity. By contrast, "Prisons" overcorrects the balance in its orderly rationalism. Unlike the great artists he revered, Russell was unable in his fictional attempts to combine emotion with form, although his capacity for each in isolation was remarkable. His tragic presentation of himself as an individual who had encountered "more strange and torturing horrors"²⁵ in life than in any book cannot be dismissed as dramatic posturing. But, as "Forstice" betrayed, a sustained and convincing projection of his own sensibilities into another situation or structure was beyond his range. Except in letters to trusted intimates, Russell feared the power of his emotions too much to articulate them in a literary mode. Instead, the icy remoteness of mathematics and symbolic logic was sought as safe refuge. Yet even as he escaped from inchoate passion in this way, he suspected that artists had a more courageous solution. He therefore envied the catharsis the artist achieved from the imposition of formal patterns upon intense emotions.

(Oct. 1912). Some short segments from "Prisons" appear in the last chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912).

²⁵ Letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, 20 Jan. 1912.

²² From "The Comforters of the Soul", unpublished ms., Humanities Research Center.

²³ *An Outcast of the Island* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907), p. 264 (Russell's library copy).

²⁴ Unpublished manuscripts that are associated with the writing of "Prisons" are in the Humanities Research Center. Only one chapter, "The Essence of Religion", ever achieved final form. It was published in *The Hibbert Journal*, 11

After fitful yet intense effort spanning eleven years, Russell had by 1913 little to show for his noble artistic aims. Since he was by then highly regarded for his extraordinary achievements in other fields, his literary failure might be expected to cast no more than a slight shadow over an otherwise general sense of accomplishment. Nevertheless, his disappointment was so deeply felt that he continued to cherish the expectation that his poetic voice might yet be found. His unabated longing for artistic fulfilment and his understanding of the rigours of that vocation made his approach to Conrad completely reverential. When they met, Conrad was at fifty-six only beginning to gain a measure of recognition. After years of poverty and undervaluation, Conrad had even then little prestige in the eyes of the world. Yet Russell valued this association as if he hoped that contact with the divine fire of a true creator might provide the inspiration he needed. His adulation was equally unaffected by the suspicion that Conrad had no more masterpieces yet to write.

With the man himself, there seemed no need for any of the reservations that had tempered Russell's enthusiasm for some of Conrad's recent work. Instead, the person behind the books was no less than an ideal for emulation. Before their respective meetings, Russell and Lady Ottoline had speculated about whether their expectations would be fulfilled in actuality. "One wonders", she had written, "if a man like Conrad in ordinary life is very understanding—sympathetic and gives out to people or whether he has to keep it all in for his work and only watch and watch and understand inside" (23 Feb. 1912). In response to their discovery that he was even more sensitive and generous than they had hoped, they developed an attitude close enough to hero-worship as to have a nearly comic dimension.

Prior to their various encounters with him, they invariably fussed over details in order to ensure that conditions would be exactly right in every aspect. They saw him separately, believing that each would be less inhibited in these circumstances. Indeed, they went so far as to prefer to forego the pleasure of his company altogether if they were too tired or too busy to do the occasion full justice. They grew anxious if there was the least delay in replies to invitations and suffered needless agitation about boring him in conversation. The following passage in a letter from Russell may

be taken as representative of the kind of excited tension plans for a visit created:

I have been wondering if it would not be possible for us to see him together. Could I suggest to him to come to Bedford Square (where Ottoline lived with her husband and daughter) to tea sometime when I could be there? What do you think? Or if I asked him to tea with me would you come? Or do you think I had better not attempt it? If you are not included, I will suggest Sunday week to him. I won't write till I hear what you think. (c. 17 Feb. 1914)

In the end, this particular meeting did not materialize, but on other occasions, the talk always flowed so naturally as to allay all these preliminary concerns.²⁶

Conrad was able to give his frank views about contemporary authors and to share his personal memories about the circumstances surrounding the composition of his own books. More remarkably, there was immediately so much trust that he was able to expose his vulnerability and his disappointments. About her first impression, Lady Ottoline remarked: "I felt underneath sadness that he was not more appreciated and a fear that he wrote on too much the same as before" (11 Aug. 1913). With Russell there was no less honesty and poignancy. Indeed, Russell responded to Conrad with so much intensity precisely because he discerned his capacity for the noble endurance of acute suffering. In this respect, Conrad appealed to the identical areas of his spiritual life as Lady Ottoline did. While Russell did not have the same urgent compulsion to articulate the reasons that Conrad affected him so strongly, he occasionally wrote about his susceptibility to them both in the same terms. Thus, a statement of nearly mystical intimacy with Lady Ottoline required a significant addendum: "In the deepest things, no human being can come so near me—except possibly Conrad" (5 Jan. 1914). A fuller statement about the way she and Conrad touched his innermost soul was offered in these words:

²⁶ Lady Ottoline's retrospective account of her association with Conrad is found in *The Early Memories of Lady Ottoline Morrell*, ed. Robert Gathorne-Hardy (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 240–3. The statement that she accompanied Russell on his first visit is not borne out by the correspondence.

I have been thinking what it is in you that holds me to you—it is chiefly, I think, the way you feel the ultimate sadness of the world—the deep tragedy of life. I have not known anyone else—except possibly Conrad—who seemed to feel it in the way I do—and it means that in what is deepest you are the first person I have ever met who spoke the same language and was a comrade and not merely an audience. That feeling made me unspeakably lonely until I knew you. (24 Feb. 1914)

Russell's insistence on the need for an understanding of the tragedy at the core of reality as a prerequisite for genuine intimacy with him ran like a sad refrain through the years. With his more superficial acquaintances, he was able to derive some forgetfulness about the sadness of the human condition. Although there was, admittedly, temporary comfort to be drawn from these lighter temperaments, he was not satisfied by friendships at that level alone. He needed more urgently people who had some of his own discontent with man's lot.

It is the passionate sense of exile from the land of vision that makes one feel people comrades. So few seem to have seen the gates of heaven opened, or to know that heaven is different from this earth. They do not dream, or hear the song of angels, or yearn for the fulfilment of what is frustrated by the accidents of life. (29 April 1914)

Through contact with those rare individuals who understood the misery in human existence, he had caught "fleeting glimpses of the unseen" (letter no. 670, Jan. 1913).

The disadvantage of associating with these rare individuals was, however, that he periodically grew anxious because they seemed able to turn their insights to better account. Whereas Lady Ottoline and Conrad had been able to effect "a transmutation of the pain into beauty and wonder" (12 June 1914), he despaired about being able to achieve a similar transcendence for himself. In Russell's eyes, Lady Ottoline had made her life into an elegant work of art, while Conrad had achieved both purity of design through language and an estimable *modus vivendi*. He therefore needed them as examples of high achievement when his own courage flagged. Conrad's role as spiritual mentor was expressed

most dramatically at a time when Russell felt that he had recently erred in choosing comfort over wisdom. A letter from his model in fortitude aroused a sense of shame so intense that Russell was able to speak about himself in his weakness only impersonally as "a man": "The affection he gives is not now deserved—the man who would face a hostile universe rather than lose his vision has become a man who will creep into the first hovel to escape the terror and splendour of the night" (letter 955, Jan. 1914). If salvation was to come for Russell, it would be through what Conrad called a daring immersion in the destructive element. Whenever Russell felt mired at that stage, his triumphant guides inspired a resolve to renew his efforts. This perception was the reason that one of his favourite terms of endearment for Lady Ottoline was "Star". There can be no coincidence about the fact that the same image was applied to Conrad at the conclusion of his Portrait: "his intense and passionate nobility shines in my memory like a star seen from the bottom of a well".²⁷ In essence, Conrad served Russell more as symbol than as friend. For this function, the separation that was enforced by circumstances could be no impediment.

With the outbreak of World War I, references to Conrad in the letters to Lady Ottoline diminish. As Russell became engrossed by the need to understand the conflict in order to work effectively for peace, there was less occasion for introspection about the attachment. Visits, though always rare, became virtually impossible. For the earliest part of the war, Conrad was away in his homeland. After his return, there may have been a tacit, mutual decision to avoid subjecting the relationship to the strain that their antithetical views about the war might have caused. By 1915, Russell and Lady Ottoline had ceased to be lovers. One aspect of that loss was that Russell was then deprived of the person best able to understand his attitude to Conrad. With others, he tried to express the extent of his admiration, but the analysis could never again be as penetrating, nor the sharing as full. When his favourite niece, Karin Costelloe, married in October of 1914, he presented her with a complete set of Conrad's works. With witty frivolity in 1918, he named a diamond arrow pin he had given to Constance

²⁷ *Portraits from Memory*, p. 91.

Malleson “Conrad” because of the recent appearance of the novel *The Arrow of Gold*. More seriously, he attempted at least once to explain to her, his new love, the extent of his identification with Conrad:

The centre of me is always and eternally a terrible pain—a curious wild pain—a searching for something beyond what the world contains, something transfigured and infinite.... I can’t explain it or make it seem anything but foolishness—but whether foolish or not, it is the source of whatever is any good in me. I have known others who had it—Conrad especially—but it is rare—it sets one oddly apart and gives a sense of great isolation—it makes people’s gospels often seem thin. (23 Oct. 1916)²⁸

But the greatest testimony of Russell’s respect was reserved for later years. When his first son was born in 1921, he named him John Conrad²⁹ and the other who was born in 1937 was called Conrad Sebastian Robert. For the firstborn, there was the additional privilege of having Conrad as godfather. Throughout his own life, Russell appreciated his parents’ choice of John Stuart Mill as one of his two godfathers. His mother had written when she made the request: “There is no one in whose steps I would rather see a boy of mine following in ever such a humble way, than in Mr. Mill’s.”³⁰ In the same spirit, Russell was pleased to provide his eldest child with a distinguished symbolic lineage to complement the family heritage. To both sons, Russell gave, through the example of their namesake, proleptic encouragement to overcome in their turn the natural condition of all men: that of orphans and exiles.

²⁸ *Autobiography*, 2: 75–6.

²⁹ In *The Tamarisk Tree* (London: Elek, 1975), Dora Russell recalls visiting the Conrads with Bertrand. The “long romantic” letter she received from Conrad when her first son was born was subsequently lost (pp. 149–50).

³⁰ Quoted in Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Jonathan Cape and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 23.