

PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY AND REALITY

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Andrew Brink. *Bertrand Russell: the Psychobiography of a Moralist*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1989. Pp. vii, 174. US\$39.95 (paper, \$12.50).

In this work Professor Andrew Brink seeks to get beneath Russell's confident public persona as a champion of reason and the scientific method. Instead, he sets out to explore the private Russell, a far less confident, even desperate seeker after personal wholeness and self-realization. The public Russell, he maintains, is revealed in his characteristic literary form, the expository essay. But the private Russell is revealed in letters, diaries, unpublished essays and occasionally in a public work, notably "The Free Man's Worship". Brink is a Professor of English Literature, and one sometimes senses the shadow of the literary caricatures of Russell by D. H. Lawrence and T. S.

Eliot that parody Russell as a disembodied mouthpiece of pure logic. But in calling attention to Russell's tormented struggle after wholeness, Brink shows himself to be far more interested in discovering the real man than in contributing to the caricatures. The thesis of the work is that Russell, *qua* philosopher and rationalist, sought an Olympian escape from his tormented struggle for self-knowledge. The record of this struggle is preserved in Russell's purely literary works, and Brink implies that the world might have been better off had Russell persisted in his literary quest than in his philosophical one.

Brink calls his work a psychobiography, a term that sets off many alarms, even though psychobiography is a type of enterprise that Russell would have accepted. The alarms go off when one thinks of psychobiography as a type of hatchet job in which the subject is seen as the plaything of various subterranean and usually infantile psychical conflicts. They also go off when writers try to discredit philosophical ideas by tracing their origins in psychic deformities. Freud and Bullitt's distorted study of Woodrow Wilson fits this description. But though Russell is perceived to be the strongest defender of pure reason, he was in fact, one of the most vehement critics of the adage that Man, or Woman, is a "rational animal". He thought of psychology as the new frontier of science, arguing that human beings must be understood with reference to pre-rational impulses. His own portraits of his contemporaries and figures from the past contain a good deal of psychobiography. Russell's celebrated *History of Western Philosophy* (1945) is in large part a study of the psychological origins of many philosophies—the traditional systems of metaphysics which he traces to a will to cosmic security, and the more contemporary philosophies that he traces to a will to power. Brink proceeds then with Russell's imprimatur.

Russell's *Autobiography* initiates the narrative structure of Russellian psychobiography. Volume 1 in particular is a "coming of age" story beginning with an account of the suffocating repression of Pembroke Lodge. There Russell endured the severity of his grandmother's regime until going up to Cambridge in 1890, where he was liberated intellectually. His moral liberation proceeded in 1901 through intense experience of the suffering of Mrs. Whitehead, while his instinctual liberation came about in the arms of Lady Ottoline Morrell. As his godfather, John Stuart Mill, had learned before him, the rigours of a repressive upbringing can lead to secular liberal superegos as ferocious as the Christian ones.

Brink's volume retraces this odyssey arguing that it is more complex than Russell, and scholars writing about Russell, had revealed. He maintains that Russell's emancipation was not fully realized. He describes Russell's psyche as a maelstrom, a meeting of contradictory currents, which can be characterized, according to Brink, as an immature instinctual liberation that mingled with another psychic process that Brink calls an incomplete process of mourning.

The failed liberation turns Russell into the prophet of sexual emancipation as the author of the notorious *Marriage and Morals*. In this work, Russell disparages monogamous marriage and calls for impermanent liaisons and an acceptance of libertinism. *Marriage and Morals*, writes Brink, shows Russell the "propagandist and sexual politician" and "signals his emergence as spokesman for a new psychoclass" (p. 153). Russell had taken this path as a response to the wounds that he received from a domineering, all-seeing grandmother in his childhood. Brink regards this liberation, which takes him from marriage to marriage and woman to woman, as a shallow byproduct of a fear of being devoured by women. It is a liberation that achieves nothing more than an illusion of autonomy, an inability to make permanent connections. For Brink, this Russell is one of the prophets of the "me generation."

Brink is more impressed with another Russell, the Russell of the literary fragments, letters and diaries of his Edwardian youth. Brink was one of the founding editors of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* and has drawn on a rich collection of literary material at the Russell Archives of McMaster University. He has also drawn on post-Freudian depth psychology. He particularly acknowledges the work of John Bowlby on mourning and grief to interpret this material, beginning with Russell the child who in early infancy lost both his parents and his sister, and who at his grandmother's home became attached to nannies who after the pattern of upper-class child-rearing of that time look after him and then suddenly depart. Brink argues that these traumas display a pattern of grief mourning, an attempted symbolic repair that is described in Bowlby's writing. In Russell the pattern consists of escapism into the serene fortress of mathematical certainty, the tragic poetry of "The Free Man's Worship", and comes to a partial resolution in the encounter with the agony of Mrs. Whitehead. There, as Russell declares in his own famous description, he confronted the loneliness of the other. He became a pacifist and entered the first stages of a truly human relationship with the world and his fellows. But he does not follow through this process of mourning. If I understand Brink correctly, one of the signs of Russell's imperfect maturation can be observed in his later lapses from pacifism.

Brink's account focuses especially on a work entitled "The Pilgrimage of Life" published for the first time in *Collected Papers* 12, but also includes other works and brief discussions of Russell's famous correspondences with Ottoline Morrell and Constance Malleon. These discussions are very probing and often very moving. One of the virtues of Brink's account is that he takes Russell's torments very seriously and tries to understand them. Certainly the points are fascinating in that we live in a post-holocaust, post-Vietnam war, post-all the tragedies of the twentieth-century age of mourning, and for the layman the possibility of a resolution of this is certainly compelling.

Some of the points in Brink's account need further elaboration. For example, how are we to judge Russell's inability to achieve lifelong monog-

amous marriage? Even if we concede that monogamous marriage is a desirable norm, surely it is merely a necessary rather than sufficient criterion of healthy relations between the sexes. It seems to me that Russell's relations with women, flawed as these relations may have been, achieved a deeper level of friendship than do most monogamous marriages. What is the relationship between this intriguing cycle of mourning, healing and repair and pacifism? It is not obvious to me. Judging by TV accounts of mourning of the victims of violent death, mourning and grief elicit cries for bloody revenge rather than for the reconciliation of pacifists. The most important question, though, is this: do these materials give us the "real" Russell, or is the "real" Russell the sceptic, the rationalist, the defender of scientific rationalism that we all know? This in turn takes us to one of the most fundamental problems in Brink's account and in psychobiography as a form of analysis. Should any ethical or political position be used as the measure of our psychological realization? In connection with this Brink makes one major error.

For Brink, one of the symptoms of Russell's lapses from the path to self-realization is his frequent lapses from pacifism. He writes that Russell consistently upheld the principle of the "wrongness of war through two world wars and the age ... of nuclear terror". Later he amends this astonishing statement into Russell "had been less of a pacifist in the war against Hitler" (p. 158). Surely this is disingenuous. By contrast, it is only accurate to say that Russell consciously and with full self-knowledge rejected pacifism in the war against the Third Reich; he only regretted that he was too old to join the fighting forces. He even asked his publisher not to reprint his pre-war volume *Which Way to Peace?* (1936). Later, he praised the armed resistance of the Vietnamese against the Americans. In these instances, Russell would have never agreed to the term "angry pacifism" or "lapses from pacifism". He rejected pacifism in 1940, in a letter to Kingsley Martin, not because of a blemish in his psychological maturation, but because he had reached the conviction that pacifism in that instance evaded the claims of reality.

This, then, brings us close to the heart of Russell's being as a philosopher and the relationship of his philosophical position to his role as a popular moralist. He believed that science, and any form of truthfulness, implied the readiness to submit concepts to the harsh discipline of reality. He also believed that reality as such had no regard for our deepest hopes and moral convictions and that it was *hubris* to believe anything else. A regard for reality at certain points then called for the abandonment of pacifism or, for that matter, any other moral or religious certainty. This position is not popular among literary scholars or for the most part among philosophers, but it is where Russell stands as a philosopher and where, in the end, Russell must be engaged.