

## TWO NEW CRITIQUES OF MONK

Ray Monk. *Bertrand Russell*, [Vol. 2:] *The Ghost of Madness, 1921–1970*. New York: Free P., 2000. Pp. xvi, 574.

### MONK'S "PATHOGRAPHY"

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A few years ago I heard the author Peter Guralnick interviewed on National Public Radio, discussing the second book of his two-volume biography of Elvis Presley. Volume 1, *Last Train to Memphis: the Rise of Elvis Presley* (1995),

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describes the excitement caused when this young man brought together many disparate musical sources, and the pivotal role he played in changing the very nature of American popular culture. Volume 2, *Careless Love: the Unmaking of Elvis Presley* (2000), however, is a much sadder tale. It deals with Elvis's life after his return from a stint in the army, when he made an endless series of awful movies, became a glitzy Las Vegas performer, and overindulged in every human appetite to the point where he became a bloated, incoherent mess and a caricature of his former revolutionary self. Guralnick admitted during the interview that writing the first volume, where he catalogued Elvis's meteoric rise, had been a pleasure, but writing Volume 2 had been a sad and almost deadening experience, a chore he had to force himself to complete.

I couldn't help but be reminded of this anecdote while reading Ray Monk's *The Ghost of Madness*, the second book of his two-volume biography of Russell. Much like Guralnick's version of Elvis's life, Monk's biography bifurcates Russell's life very neatly, in this case 1921. In the first volume, *The Spirit of Solitude*, Monk describes the excitement caused when this young man brought together so many disparate epistemological sources (empiricism, rationalism, and even some mysticism), and the pivotal role he played in changing the very nature of Anglo-American philosophy. The volume ends with Russell at the peak of his powers, married for the second time, with his first child on the way. Obviously, he is ready for a fall.

In *The Ghost of Madness*, Monk clearly agrees with Ludwig Wittgenstein (the subject of his earlier, one-volume biography) that nothing Russell wrote after 1921 was of much worth. Yet Russell lived nearly half a century after this cutoff point. How disturbing it must have been for Monk to force himself to confront the endless litany of potboilers, polemics, and screeds which Russell's pen produced during those decades. There is not a single work in all of these years that, for Monk, came anywhere near the breathtaking analyses of Russell's early career, when he attempted the monumental work of proving the logical foundations of mathematics. Even Russell's later attempts to "get back into the game" by writing such technical works as *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940) and *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (1948) fell short of the mark, and were received by most professional philosophers with, at best, polite silence. Like Elvis forcing his overweight body into a gold lamé suit several sizes too small, Russell was unable to recapture the glories of his youth, when his logical analyses were second to none in their sharpness, clarity and precision.

This vision of Russell as a washed-up philosopher desperately trying to stay involved has some merit. It is true that Russell himself strictly differentiated his technical from his popular writings, and seemed proudest of the former, recognizing their long-lasting worth. Many of his later works were by their very nature ephemeral, given that they dealt with the specific social and political

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issues of the times. They were often dated before they were even published. And the intellectual effort expended on these “potboilers” was nowhere near that which was given to his work on *Principia Mathematica*. Russell often wished that he could recapture the white-heat days of his earliest efforts. But beginning with the First World War, his own focus switched much more to popular issues, primarily those of war and peace, and he came to look askance at those followers of his—including Wittgenstein—who treated philosophy as a rarefied field, unpolluted by the day-to-day concerns of struggling humans. This may be an unjust assumption on Russell’s part, but it is surely no less unjust to judge Russell’s popular works by the same standards one would apply to the technical writings of the first half of his life.

One can also raise the question, were all of Russell’s non-technical writings really so second-rate? Monk has a tin ear for Russell’s contributions to popular philosophy. For instance, the 1957 collection by Russell entitled *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Matters*, which gathered together many of his musings on the topic of religion, continues to this day to have a major effect on many people. Perhaps nothing he says in the book is new, but his piercing style makes much of the argumentation memorable. Russell had a rare gift for taking abstruse, highly complicated philosophical issues and turning them into clear arguments that any intelligent reader could follow, regardless of his or her background. This was no doubt why his *History of Western Philosophy* became a bestseller. Its breezy style infuriated those who felt that philosophy should only be for the technically inclined, but it proved nonetheless that there *is* a hunger for philosophical knowledge among the *hoi polloi*, a hunger that the analytical school did little to appease.

Besides his contributions to religious polemics, Russell made many other important contributions to popular philosophy. In the 1967 *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards takes an editor’s prerogative by devoting 24 pages to the entry on Russell. Considering the fact that Plato only gets twenty pages, this is perhaps a bit extreme, but it does show the importance which Edwards placed upon Russell’s entire philosophical oeuvre, including the popular writings. There are three separate authors for the entry, each of whom deals with a different aspect of Russell’s career—Edwards on biography, social theories, ethics, and critiques of religion; William Alston on metaphysics and epistemology; and A. N. Prior on logic and mathematics. Edwards admits that, “What is generally considered Russell’s most important work in philosophy was done between 1900 and the outbreak of the First World War”, yet he is by no means dismissive of the content of such later volumes as *Marriage and Morals*, *On Education*, and *A History of Western Philosophy*. Edwards writes:

It is safe to say that not since Voltaire has there been a philosopher with such an enor-

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mous audience. Russell also shares with Voltaire a glittering and graceful prose style and a delicious sense of humour. It is perhaps Russell's gay irreverence as much as the substance of his heretical opinions that has so deeply offended several generations of moralists and religious conservatives.<sup>1</sup>

It is this "gay irreverence" which is so sadly missing from Monk's second volume. One almost suspects that Monk, coming from a different perspective, would share the sentiment of Joseph Goldstein, the attorney who in 1940 fought to keep Russell from being employed at City College in New York, and whom Edwards quotes as saying that Russell "is not a philosopher in the accepted meaning of the word; not a lover of wisdom; not a searcher after wisdom ... all his alleged doctrines which he calls philosophy are just cheap, tawdry, worn-out, patched-up fetishes and propositions, devised for the purpose of misleading the people." Edwards puckishly adds, "In the present encyclopedia, a somewhat different view is taken of the value of Russell's philosophy."

One must remember that for much of the second half of his life Russell made his living as a writer. He did not have the luxury, for most of this time, of drawing upon an academic salary to pay for his and his family's keep. His wonderful ability to write memorable copy on a deadline is not something one should easily dismiss.

I don't accept Monk's view that Russell's last 49 years were basically tragic, and that almost all of his writings from that period were second-rate. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, through his social activism, frequent media appearances and non-stop issuance of manifestos, he made philosophy exciting and relevant to a new generation. Russell became the stereotypical image of a philosopher in the minds of many non-academics, much as Einstein became the stereotypical image of a scientist. Both showed that one could be a deep thinker and still be passionately involved in life's struggles (and even have an active sex life, too).

Another aspect of Russell's popular appeal that Monk slights is the powerful effect of Russell's writing abilities. Surely Monk could have devoted more than one page to the story of the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Russell in 1950. Even if, as Monk seems to think, there was something scandalous about Russell being awarded such a high honour for his popular writings (there being no equivalent prize for technical philosophy), why then was he given it? Obviously the Nobel Committee must have found some merit in these writings, which in their view had to exemplify Alfred Nobel's request that the laureate should have authored works that somehow uplift the human spirit. What was it about Russell that would justify such recognition? Monk doesn't seem to have a

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<sup>1</sup> "Russell, Bertrand Arthur William", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan/Free P., 1967), 7: 235-58 (at 235-6).

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clue. Those of us who do admire Russell for his writing abilities look upon this award as a richly deserved accolade, but even if objectively Russell deserves to be ranked with such “lesser” Nobel Literature laureates as Sully Prudhomme or William Golding rather than such grandees as T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett, a biographer could still tell us more about the politics behind this decision. Sylvia Nasar, for instance, in her biography of the mathematician John Nash, *A Beautiful Mind* (2000), has a fascinating discussion of the behind-the-scenes controversy over Nash’s receiving the Nobel Prize for Economics.

I suspect that Monk does not dwell upon the Nobel Prize because he has an almost visceral aversion to Russell, and begrudges him every triumph. In 1988, the novelist Joyce Carol Oates coined the term “pathography” to describe biographies that seem to dwell almost entirely on the unseemly, the unsavoury and the despicable aspects of the biographee’s lives, and are preoccupied with dysfunction and disaster. One of the worst such books was Albert Goldman’s 1981 bestseller *Elvis*, in which no sordid detail escaped his notice. Peter Guralnick’s recent biography was written, at least in part, to give balance to the sordid portrait Goldman paints. I fear that Monk’s Russell comes closer to Goldman’s Elvis at times: a lecher, a terrible husband, an uncaring father, and a man out of touch with reality—all in all, a thoroughly disreputable piece of work.

Possibly the root cause for such an unpleasant depiction is that Monk was the beneficiary of an overabundance of material. Thanks to the fine job done by the Russell Archives at McMaster University, thousands of letters by Russell have been preserved, as well as diaries, newspaper accounts, and other materials detailing all facets of his life. This allows a biographer to discover just about all there is to learn about his love life, family affairs, financial matters, and even his bathroom habits. I would imagine that such total immersion into *any* person’s life would prove to be unsettling, but this is especially so for a controversialist like Russell. Yet there is always the danger, in such close-up inspections of a person’s day-to-day existence, of losing the forest for the trees. After many pages demonstrating Russell’s quirks of pettiness, a reader can’t help but ask, “What did anybody see in him anyway?”

Russell may have brought this upon himself, by making such a strict distinction between philosophical reasoning and emotive argumentation. Biographers are not required to write complete lives. There is nothing wrong with focusing upon the areas one feels most important, and quickly summarizing or even ignoring the rest. Monk has done something of the sort in his contribution on Russell to “The Great Philosophers Series” which he co-edits for Routledge, and which deals almost entirely with the first half of Russell’s life. But somehow, like a man caught in a Kantian categorical imperative, Monk felt duty-bound to write the entire story of Russell’s life, leaving no stone unturned.

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Oates remarked that “pathographies” occur when biographers become obsessed with the details of a person’s fallow years or years of decline. “We all know that Jonathan Swift, for instance, was senile for many years, but in the biographies we just summarize it succinctly and tastefully”, she said (*Newsweek*, 3 Oct. 1988, p. 46). Perhaps Monk should have done the same. Rather than write the second volume, he could have merely added a coda to his first volume, detailing in five or so pages the highlights, as he saw them, of Russell’s last half century.

I would recommend Volume 1 of Monk’s biography of Russell to anyone wanting to know about the origins of analytic philosophy, the role that Russell played in this, and the significance of his position in the history of early twentieth-century thought. But I would caution them that, if they want to know about the *whole* man and his position as the twentieth century’s premier public philosopher, then *The Ghost of Madness* is not the book to read. Surely there will be other biographies, drawing upon not only the archival material but also on Monk’s own views, which will present a more sympathetic view of this logician and public citizen. When it comes to the Pantheon of Great Philosophers, Russell has not yet left the building.

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