

MONK ON RUSSELL'S HEART OF DARKNESS

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The paper argues that Russell's fascination with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* reveals a positive aspect of Russell's character neglected by Monk's biography. Section 1 sketches some of the darker aspects of Russell's character. §2 outlines the relevant themes in *Heart of Darkness*. §3 argues that Russell's fascination both with Conrad and his novel derives from his resolute commitment to a painful exercise in self-knowledge. §4 explains the more positive perspective on Russell's "strength of mind" that emerges from this argument.

I. THE DARKER ASPECTS OF RUSSELL'S CHARACTER

When Russell told Ottoline that the character in fiction with whom he felt most "intimate" was Dostoevsky's Rogojin—the sinister, embittered murderer of The Idiot, consumed by hatred, disappointment and jealousy—he was, I think, revealing something crucially important in understanding his own character....

(Monk 1: xx)

There is no need to rehearse all the excruciating details of the darker aspects of Russell's character.¹ Ray Monk's descriptions of Russell's hatreds, murderous thoughts, egotism,

* This paper is dedicated to my beloved mother, Marilyn Louise McDonough (3 Oct. 1926–7 May 2015).

¹ The idea for the paper began when I found myself experiencing sharply opposite feelings about Russell while reading MONK's biography *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude* (1996). Side by side with repulsion at some of Russell's darker character traits, I found myself, confusingly, experiencing a growing admiration for Russell. This was the more confusing because I have tended to prefer the Wittgenstein strand of twentieth-century philosophy to Russell's. The paper is an attempt to reconcile these opposing feelings and to articulate the more positive perspective on Russell's character that, I believe, eludes Monk's treatment.

jealousies and callousness towards people are, presumably, familiar. Indeed, Russell acknowledges these faults himself. Although much could be said about Russell's darker sides, this section presents only a brief survey sufficient to prepare the ground for later discussions.

Russell's indifference to others is reflected in his treatment of his first wife, Alys Pearsall Smith. Monk (1: 119) reports that even during the better years of their marriage, one has the impression that he regarded her as a "necessary means" to satisfy his basic needs, but that she was "not otherwise of much interest to him". Helen Thomas is more critical, stating that Alys seems "to be a slave" (*ibid.*).

Matters only got worse when their marriage broke down in its seventh year (1901). After the breakdown, Alys continued to love Russell for the remainder of her life, even keeping a scrapbook of his accomplishments, while Russell scarcely gave her a thought after they separated. Russell's Aunt Agatha, replying to his request to her to withdraw friendship towards Alys after their separation, responded to him in scathing terms:

It would have been more manly and chivalrous of you to *write* me *not* to withdraw friendship from the woman *you* brought into the family, the woman you once loved and had forsaken, though *her* love was unchanged.... You ... always speak of "pain to *me*", "giving *me* pain", etc.—Do you ever think of Alys's suffering—from her love for you.... Yet she always speaks beautifully of you, wishing only for *your* happiness.

Agatha's criticism coheres with Russell's own account of his indifference to most people. Indeed, later in life, Russell described himself as a "vampire" in his relations with women (Monk 1: 484–5, 528, etc.), suggesting that he saw himself, at least sometimes, as living off their blood. One cannot resist the conclusion that Russell saw people, especially women, as of value because they could help him achieve his life's work.

Similarly distressing are Russell's admissions of violent impulses: "[T]he only thing I strongly *feel* worthwhile would be to murder as many people as possible so as to diminish the amount of consciousness in the world" (quoted in Monk 1: 164). Nor were these impulses merely abstract. Russell described how his "warm affection" for his "ideal" friend, Edward Fitzgerald, turned to "fierce and disillusioned hatred" (Monk 1: 35–6, 259)—resulting in a serious attempt to murder

him: "On one occasion, in an access of fury, I got my hands on his throat and started to strangle him. I intended to kill him...." It was this incident that first led Russell to fear "the forces of violence within him" (Monk I: 36).

Nor can these cases be dismissed as isolated weak moments. They relate to a deep moral conflict within Russell himself. Monk (I: 258–9) reports that in "the cold light of day" Russell embraced utilitarianism, but there was a part of him that "despised the dry, mechanical approach of the 'felicific' calculus and which yearned for the grandeur of a more heroic ... attitude to life" that involves the sort of violent emotions expressed by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "O! from this time forth, | My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (IV.iv.65–6). To be sure, Russell did not end up adopting this "morality of passion" and did not think he would be *justified* in killing Fitzgerald or Alys, but he did retain the belief that there was something "splendid and glorious about violent passions" (Monk I: 259).

2. A PLOT SUMMARY OF CONRAD'S "HEART OF DARKNESS"

The story told in [Conrad's] The Heart of Darkness is the perfect metaphor for Russell's fear that, if one delves too deeply into one's self, one will find nothing but madness. (Monk I: 317)

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* begins with a scene between Marlow, a river boat captain, anchored at the heart of the civilized world on the Thames in England, relating a story to his ship's mates about a trip he had taken as the captain of a steamboat for an ivory trading company up the Congo River into the African wilderness. At a company station in the wilderness, he met an accountant who told him of a "first class agent" of the company named Kurtz who resides at an "inner station" even deeper in the wilderness. Although Kurtz is variously described in the novel, sometimes with resentment by some members of the company, he is often described as a remarkable man.² In his youth in Europe Kurtz had been thought to possess great promise in music, painting, writing, and politics. As the head of the Inner Station in the

² One telling exception is the remark by the manager at one of the stations along the Congo, explored later by ELIOT in "The Hollow Men", that the "whisper" of "the great solitude ... echoed loudly within [Kurtz] because he was hollow to the core" (CONRAD, p. 97).

Congo he obtains valuable ivory for the company and had written a pamphlet concerning the prospects for civilizing the natives. Thus, trade is linked to science and civilization. Kurtz is not merely bringing ivory out of Africa. He is bringing civilization, science and progress to the primitive Africans).³

It is repeatedly stated that Kurtz is “eloquent”. Early in the novel, before one actually meets him near its conclusion, one gathers that he is eloquent since he can speak to the primitives in such a way as to make them useful, but that he can also speak to the white man. Kurtz is a great man in the sense that he stands on this boundary between the two opposing worlds and communicates effectively with both of them. In fact, given the “singularly unremarkable” remarks Kurtz actually makes when he meets Marlow (O’Prey, p. 20), it becomes important to determine in what sense Kurtz really is eloquent.

The immediate problem for Marlow was that Kurtz has fallen ill with “jungle fever”. Marlow sets out to rescue him and makes contact with Kurtz near the end of Kurtz’s life. What follows is a bizarre and confusing series of scenes. In brief, Kurtz has become corrupted. He is no longer simply acting as an agent of the company but is living amongst the natives as a kind of demigod. The primitives worship him, but the novel is pervaded by the ominous feeling that Kurtz’s fragile control might dissolve at any moment and the dark forces residing there might burst out into an orgy of violence. Indeed, Kurtz had scribbled into the back of his civilizing pamphlet, “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Conrad, p. 87). Kurtz came to Africa to civilize the natives but ended up wanting to exterminate them.

As Marlow attempts to transport Kurtz upriver towards civilization, Kurtz succumbs to the fever and dies. His last words to Marlow are, “The horror! The horror!” This bizarre remark is, presumably, an example of Kurtz’s eloquence. At the end of the novel, Marlow visits Kurtz’s fiancée in Europe. Still in love with Kurtz, and aware that Marlow was with him at the end, she begs to know of Kurtz’s last words. In order not to hurt her needlessly, Marlow lies to her that Kurtz’s last words were her name.⁴

On the surface, *Heart of Darkness* is the story of an African adventure. However, the trip up the Congo symbolizes both a trip back in

³ O’PREY, Introduction (1986) to *Heart of Darkness*, pp. 12, 24; CONRAD, p. 35.

⁴ WILSON, *Conrad’s Mythology* (1987), p. 49.

time to man's primeval beginnings and a trip from humanity's civilized surface world into the unconscious (O'Prey, pp. 15, 18, 24). The novel is pervaded by the foreboding that madness lies just beneath the civilized surface. The doctor examining Marlow before his trip up the Congo asks him "in a matter of fact tone.... 'Ever any madness in your family?'" (Conrad, p. 38; O'Prey, p. 21). The central theme of the novel is that the contrasts between the civilized and uncivilized worlds—the civilized Thames at the beginning of the novel and the wild Congo encountered later, the white Europeans and the black Africans, the sane and the insane—are superficial. The heart of darkness that Kurtz and Marlow glimpsed in the African wilderness is in everyone, European and African, white and black, male and female, civilized and uncivilized. "Civilization" and "progress" are really only a fragile veneer cast over this omnipresent brooding darkness. Since Kurtz's fiancée, living in the superficial civilized world, simply cannot understand this, it would only pain her to tell her the truth about Kurtz, herself, and everyone. Thus, Marlow, behaving in a civilized manner, gives her a comforting illusion—a lie. Kurtz had *not* remained faithful to her. He had, rather, embraced the horror with no "restraint" (O'Prey, p. 17) and become *a lord of darkness*. Kurtz might well second Satan's remark from *Paradise Lost* (Book 1): "Better to reign in hell, than serve in heav'n".

This suggests an interpretation of Conrad's description of Kurtz as eloquent. The description is puzzling because the various remarks made by Kurtz to Marlow are, putting it mildly, not Pericles or Marcus Aurelius (O'Prey, p. 20). The claim that Kurtz is eloquent might seem to be a sad sarcasm, but there *is* a sense in which Kurtz really *is* eloquent. The etymological meaning of "eloquent", traced to French and Latin roots, derives from "*ex-*" (out) and "*loqui*" (to speak). In its literal etymological meaning, to be eloquent is to *speak out*, to bring forth what is inside. Kurtz's "eloquence" will not win any toastmaster competitions, but what Kurtz, and no one else, does, is speak out the horror that lies just beneath the surface in the most civilized human beings. For most of the sailors who journeyed into the heart of the African darkness, as for Kurtz's fiancée, the savagery one encounters there seems radically "other". Surely it has nothing to do with us! In fact, however, Kurtz alone knows that the darkness resides in all of us and he alone *can* speak it out. In that sense Kurtz *is* great, although it is, of course, a "malevolent" kind of greatness (O'Prey, p. 17).

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF RUSSELL'S FASCINATION WITH CONRAD

We could not understand, because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. (Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 69)

Whereas one can readily understand Russell's attraction to someone like Voltaire (Monk 1: 502), the pro-science progressive enlightenment *philosophe*, his attraction to Conrad is more puzzling, but also more revealing. One can hardly imagine two more different characters, Russell, the logically-scientifically oriented philosopher of rationality *par excellence*,⁵ and Conrad, a novelist influenced by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche⁶ who attempts to expose the darkness in man that eludes rational comprehension (O'Prey, pp. 19–21).⁷ For example, Russell insists that one must not begin philosophical investigations with the vague and superstitious language of primitives,⁸ but with the views of the modern reflective person,

[W]hen your object is ... to ascertain the nature of the world, you do not want to go any further back than you are already yourself. You do not want to go back to the vagueness of the child or monkey...

(*PLA, LK*, p. 181; *Papers* 8: 162)

By contrast, Conrad follows precisely the opposite procedure in *Heart of Darkness* (see epigraph above).⁹ Why, then, was Russell so fascinated by Conrad's book?

⁵ RUSSELL, *PLA, LK*, p. 281; *Papers* 8: 243. RUSSELL, "On Scientific Method in Philosophy" (1914), *ML* (1994 edn.), pp. 97, 120; *Papers* 8.

⁶ PANAGOPOULOS, *The Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (1998).

⁷ This is somewhat surprising because Russell sees Nietzsche as an occasionally interesting but ultimately quite problematic figure (*HWP*, pp. 752–72). One might speculate that this is because Russell felt that Nietzsche's themes are more appropriate to literature than to philosophy proper.

⁸ This is probably a slap at Hegelianism, which sees it as essential to start at the primordial ("immediate") beginning and advance through the developmental process towards a more embracing understanding of the developed ("mediated") whole (WALLACE, *Prolegomena to the Study of Hegel's Philosophy* [1931], Ch. 19).

⁹ Russell was also especially interested in CONRAD's "Amy Foster" (MONK 1: 317), which explores human irrationality but in a very different way from *Heart of Darkness*.

Before one can answer this question, it is necessary to examine Russell's notion of mysticism. Fundamentally, Russell sees mysticism as the antithesis to science.¹⁰ Mysticism generally endorses intuition as opposed to reason and denies the common-sense empirical belief in the multiplicity of separate things.¹¹ "While the mystic mood is dominant", Russell remarks, "the need for logic is not felt" (*cf.* Monk 1: 323). Thus, Russell sees mysticism as naturally allied with the poetic imagination. He also sees elements of mysticism in many great philosophers, though often precariously combined with a belief in science and reason.

Although Conrad, as a novelist, does not formulate mystical theses with philosophical precision, *Heart of Darkness* belongs with mysticism in the sense that it explores the primitive mind that contrasts with the logical-scientific attitude. Indeed, Russell notes that the "primitive mind" is generally opposed to the objectivity of scientific philosophy.¹² Further, since *Heart of Darkness* employs the poetic imagination to explore the primitive non-scientific mind, it belongs, broadly speaking, with mysticism.

One might, therefore, expect that Russell would be uninterested in Conrad's exploration of the primitive mind, but Russell had a deep recurring fascination with mysticism. Indeed, Russell holds that whereas some people have achieved greatness by pursuing solely the one impulse or the other, i.e. Hume the scientific impulse and Blake the mystical impulse, *the greatest philosophers* have felt the need to *harmonize* the two—which is also the most difficult task.¹³ Russell aspires to be one of these great philosophers (Monk 1: 234). So even though, in the final analysis, he endorses the scientific philosophy,¹⁴ Conrad is fascinating, even necessary, to Russell, precisely because

¹⁰ "Mysticism and Logic", *ML* (1994 edn.), pp. 20, 29; *Papers* 12.

¹¹ "Mysticism and Logic", *ML*, pp. 26–9. Specifically, Russell sees mysticism as holding that (1) there is a kind of intuitive knowledge separate from reason, (2) all plurality and division are illusory, (3) time is unreal, and (4) evil is illusory. Russell sees mystical elements in the Pythagoreans, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Hegel, Romanticism, Spinoza, Bergson, and others (*HWP*, pp. 37–48, 105–39, 172, 292, 730–1; "Mysticism and Logic", *ML*, pp. 30–5, 38; Monk 1: 69, 77, 313–14). He sees a kind of "logical mysticism" in Parmenides and Plato ("Mysticism and Logic", *ML*, pp. 26–7), but this "logical" species is the exception.

¹² "Mysticism and Logic", *ML*, p. 48.

¹³ *Ibid.*, *ML*, p. 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 48, etc.

Conrad represents the antithesis of Russell's own views. Thus, if Russell is to be one of the greatest philosophers, he must come to terms with Conrad's world view and harmonize it with his own.¹⁵ This is why Russell can consistently say that these primitive mystical matters are not a suitable *beginning* point for philosophy but that they are still valuable. One does not *begin* with the primitive mind—but the greatest philosophers must come to terms with it.

The present paper, however, is not concerned solely with Russell's *theoretical* views about the light and dark corners of the world. It attempts to come to terms with the darker aspects of Russell's character. For Russell is interested in the darker corners of the world because he is all too aware of his own darkness.¹⁶ Referring to Russell's explanation later in his life when he was asked to explain his sympathy with Conrad, Monk writes,

It had to do, [Russell] explained, with a shared “Satanic mysticism” ... [a] feeling that there were two levels: “one that of science and common sense, and another, terrifying, subterranean and periodic, which in some sense held more truth than the everyday view.”¹⁷ (I: 317)

Although Russell's official philosophy envisages a world comprehensible by science and logic, he sometimes fears that this is only the surface and that there is a deeper truth about the world expressed by certain artists and mystics.¹⁸ Indeed, this general feeling is not uncommon in some great philosophers. After a spiritual revelation Aquinas remarked that all of his previous writings now seemed to him as “so

¹⁵ Despite his occasionally stated desire to “harmonize” science and mysticism, Russell's (1971) rejects mysticism “in all its manifestations” (MONK I: 313, 568).

¹⁶ See MONK (I: 529–30) and the epigraph to §2.

¹⁷ The same themes are explored in RUSSELL, *Satan in the Suburbs* (1961).

¹⁸ Russell's remark that the vision of some mystics is more true than the common sense and scientific views is *not*, I take it, an admission that his official views are *literally* less true than mystical views, i.e. he is speaking loosely here. RUSSELL's official view is that there is “an element of wisdom” in mysticism but this consists in “an attitude to life, not ... a creed about the world” (“Mysticism and Logic”, *ML*, p. 29). Similarly, is it really obvious, as one says when speaking loosely, that the darkness in Kurtz cannot be explained scientifically? ALLELY *et al.* (2014) identify a series of causal factors that contribute to the development of serial killers. Thus, Russell can consistently hold that science may continue to open up these dark corners of the world far into the future.

much straw".¹⁹ One also recalls, of course, Wittgenstein's mysticism in the *Tractatus*.²⁰

The picture that results from a study of Russell's fascination with Conrad is of a Russell deeply conflicted within himself. On the one hand, Russell articulates a powerful logical-scientific philosophy, and on the other he has a deep-seated feeling that his official philosophy fails to capture important deeper aspects of the world—a feeling inspired, in part, by his awareness of the darkness in his own character. Thus, whereas in his official philosophy Russell holds that there is no point in returning to the perspective of the primitive mind, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* reminds him of what he already knows—that if he is really to achieve *genuine* self-knowledge, he must do precisely that. In Conrad, *Russell bumps up against the limits of his own conception of philosophy, the world, and himself*. Russell's reaction to this awareness of his limitations reveals something significant about his character.

This deeply divided Russell is much more problematic than the better known, logical-scientific philosopher and champion of social progress,²¹ but it is also, in certain respects, more interesting. The dark aspects of Russell's character are not to be dismissed or minimized. He spoke of them often himself. However, the present reading, arising from Russell's interest in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, suggests another, more positive perspective on the darker aspects of his character that deserves recognition.

4. RUSSELL'S STRENGTH OF MIND

[T]he fundamental constitution of existence might be such that one succumbed by a full knowledge of it—so that the strength of a mind might be measured by the amount of "truth" it could endure—or to speak more plainly, by the extent to which it required truth attenuated, veiled, sweetened, damped, and falsified.

(Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §39)

I do not quarrel with Monk's account of the facts about the darker

¹⁹ CHESTERTON, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (2009), p. 90.

²⁰ JAGER points out that Wittgenstein's mysticism was "firmly anchored in his logic" while Russell's has more to do with "religious philosophical autobiography" (*The Development of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy* [1972], pp. 495–6).

²¹ FROMM, "Prophets and Priests" (1967), and AYER, "An Appraisal of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy" (1967).

aspects of Russell's character. Russell's violent impulses and his callousness towards various women in his life are well documented. But it is significant that much of what is known about Russell's failings is unconfirmed outside his own admissions (Monk 1: xx, etc.).²² In this respect, Russell contrasts with Kurtz's fiancée in *Heart of Darkness*. Whereas Kurtz's fiancée could not even look at the darkness just beneath the surface of human life, Russell insists on looking it straight in the face. Further, whereas Kurtz's fiancée passively awaits Marlow's visit, Russell pursues Conrad and *Heart of Darkness*. That is, the significance of Russell's fascination with Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* is that he positively *pursues* his antithesis. In his early work "The Pilgrimage of Life", Russell describes his God as a "grim and vengeful deity called Truth",

Truth is a stern and pitiless God; he exacts his hecatombs of human sacrifices, he slays with jealous thunder every love which is unfaithful to him, he drives into madness those who cannot bear the full terror of his majestic frown.... Why worship such a God?... In his service is courage, in his service only can the soul grow great....

(*Papers* 12: 43; cf. Monk 1: 160)

The significance of Russell's fascination with Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* is that he *must* face the poet of the darkness, no matter what the consequences for himself.

Russell's commitment to the truth does have some unpalatable consequences. Just as Plato (*Republic*, 517b–c) sees human affairs as so imperfect in comparison with the perfect world of timeless truth as to be of little importance, Russell explains, in a passage quoted by Monk

²² The point is that Russell may have thought of himself as a worse person than he actually was and Monk simply accepted Russell's harsh self-critique too uncritically. One cannot identify someone as a murderous person when they never actually murdered anyone. Studies shows that *admitted* homicidal fantasies are quite frequent, roughly 70+ percent for males and 60+ percent for females (KENRICK AND SHEETS, 1993), and there may be many more cases that are not admitted. The fundamental point about Russell's admission (MONK 1: 36) that he attempted to strangle his friend Fitzgerald is that unlike, for example, Ted Bundy, Russell gained control of himself, did not go through with it, and soon felt remorse afterwards for "poor Fitz". There is a tendency to forget that MONK's statement that he attempts to present Russell's life and personality "as revealed by his own words" (1: xix) is a very big qualification. Highly self-critical people, especially, often judge themselves more harshly than is warranted.

(I: 268) from “The Perplexities of John Forstice”:

Mathematics gives most joy when life gives most disgust. Remote from the passion and sordidness, the weakness and failure of our human world, the mathematician enters upon a calm world of ordered classic beauty, where human will, with its violence and uncertainty, counts for nothing; with joyful resignation he contemplates the unchanging hierarchy of exact, certain, shining truths, subsisting in lofty independence of Man....
(*Papers* 12: 136)

Russell's respect for truth, so conceived, leads him sometimes, with Plato, to a cold attitude towards human beings, i.e. much of Russell's coldness to human beings is associated with his “metaphysics”.²³ Further, he did not shy away from the negative consequences for himself of his views. Much of his loneliness, fears of madness, etc., derive from the same source. Accordingly, he displays the same harshness to others whose friendship is important to him. In a letter to Ottoline Morrell, while risking his relationship with her by rejecting her religious views, Russell stands fast on his absolute commitment to truth: “[Y]ou wd. suffer if you lost yr. belief—but for my part I wd. suffer anything—even morally—than believe what is false ... and I cannot have a different standard for you” (16 May 1911, quoted by Monk I: 219). Russell does not merely worship his pitiless God of truth when it suits his own needs. He applies the same ruthless standard to himself that he applies to others. He does not avert his eyes from his own darker side when he remarks that “the language of hate” comes to him quite easily, that hate usually derives from failure, and, to Ottoline, that he fears that she would come to hate him if she really knew him (Monk I: 479–80). He makes no attempt to soften his realization of his selfishness: “It is odd how one finds out what one really wants, & how selfish it always is” (Monk I: 475). He is able to admit to Ottoline that his own personal failures in life have given him “an untrue view of life” and that he (the great philosopher) has much to learn from her. He describes himself as a vampire in relation to women (Monk I: 476, 479, 484–5). In his letters to Colette (Constance Malleson) and to Ottoline he admits to having realized “some horrible truths, not only about mankind

²³ It is, of course, possible that Russell's “cold” metaphysics might be caused by a cold character, but no claim about the causal priority of the one relative to the other is made here.

but about himself” (Monk 1: 513). Russell’s harsh self-criticism extends to his philosophical enterprise. Even as he prepared to present his manifesto on the importance of mathematical logic in Paris, he writes to Ottoline: “I feel myself so rugged and ruthless, so removed from the aesthetic side of life—a sort of logic machine” (Monk 1: 202). He admits that he finds technical philosophy, which includes much of his own most celebrated work, to be trivial (Monk 1: 234, 263, 292). One could go on. Whereas many people simply *cannot* engage in serious self-criticism,²⁴ Russell looks his own failings square in the face. In a letter to Ottoline he writes: “I believe there is an issue to be found, & that I shall find it. But I must go down into very deep waters first, & I know I must go alone” (see Monk 1: 513). It is clear that Russell scores quite high on Nietzsche’s criterion of “strength of mind”.²⁵

The claim is *not* that Russell comes close to achieving perfection in his lonely search for self-knowledge. To take just one example, Monk (1: 307) exposes Russell self-deception in his anger to Lady Ottoline. A close reading of Nietzsche’s criterion of strength of mind reveals an ambiguity. In his first formulation, Nietzsche suggests that the strength of mind is measured by the amount of truth one can endure, but he immediately reformulates a “more plain” criterion, namely that strength of mind is measured by the degree to which one needs to “veil”, “sweeten”, or falsify the truth. This second formulation is more pessimistic (perhaps more realistic), suggesting that some falsification is *inevitable* in any given case. The only real question is: how much falsification? I only claim that relative to the bulk of mankind, Russell shows a truly remarkable degree of strength of mind in attempting to look his own darkness straight in the face. Indeed, one might say of Russell what Conrad writes of his African explorers: “They were men enough to face the darkness” (*Heart of Darkness*, p. 31).

This cannot, of course, be used to excuse particular cases of bad

²⁴ Many narcissists readily admit to being narcissists, but this is not a genuine recognition of their condition; these are “throwaway lines”, designed to deflect a more penetrating criticism (SYMINGTON, *Narcissism* [1993], p. 10).

²⁵ Indeed, a fundamental attitudinal difference between Russell and Nietzsche consists in RUSSELL’S (“Postscript”, *Auto.* 3: 220) demand for certainty and NIETZSCHE’S (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §10) rejection of those “metaphysicians” who “prefer ... a handful of ‘certainty’ to a whole cartload of beautiful possibilities.” Whereas Nietzsche chose life, warts and all, Russell chose perfection and, consequently, found life—and himself—wanting. See n. 7 above.

behaviour. The fact that Russell displays an exceptional strength of mind does not exculpate him from treating his wife Alys badly, from his tendencies to hate, etc. The present claim is only that even though Monk may be correct that, on some measures, Russell's character is not very attractive, there are other measures that Monk fails to emphasize. Further, this strength of mind is independent of those aspects of Russell's character that Monk does find attractive—"his enormous intelligence, his commitment to philosophical clarity and rigor, his dedication to the causes of social justice and international peace, and so on" (1: xx). In fact, however, it may only be expected that Russell displays considerable strength of mind. If self-knowledge remains among the central missions of philosophy (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 229e–230a), this only means that Russell, for all of his faults, is a philosopher—that is, a *genuine* philosopher, not merely someone who "imitates" (*Republic*, 491a) the philosopher for career, financial gain or fame.²⁶ In a letter to Ottoline that explains his kinship with Conrad, and expresses the key aspect of his character, Russell states his determination to face the darkness. As Monk (1: 529) quotes it:

Bates bores me while I am reading him, but leaves pictures in my mind which I am glad of afterwards. Tomlinson²⁷ owes much to *Heart of Darkness*. The contrast with Bates is remarkable: one sees how our generation, in comparison, is a little mad, because it has allowed itself glimpses of the truth, and the truth is spectral, insane, ghostly; the more men see of it, the less mental health they retain. The Victorians (dear souls) were sane and successful because they never came anywhere near the truth. But for my part I would rather be mad²⁸ with truth than sane with lies.

²⁶ The present author also believes that Russell not only tried to face his darker side head-on, but that, over time, he combatted it with *some* success. However, that requires a different argument and different facts and must be left for another occasion. For the record, MONK ("The Madness of Truth" [1994], pp. 129–34) disagrees, holding that in the end Russell simply succumbed to the need for lies and superficiality.

²⁷ For those unfamiliar with Bates and Tomlinson, H. W. Bates' *The Naturalist on the River Amazon* was "written in an unreflective confidence in the superiority of European civilization", while H. M. Tomlinson's *The Sea and the Jungle* is "more modern and more sceptical, hinting at dark unseen forces that threaten to penetrate the thin veneer of European civilization" (MONK 1: 529). In contrast with his faint praise for Bates' book, Russell stated to Ottoline that he "loved" Tomlinson's (*ibid.*).

²⁸ Recall the doctor's question to Marlow before his trip up the Congo whether he had any madness in his family and Lady John Russell's insinuation to Bertrand that his family suffered from "hereditary madness" (MONK 1: 74–5).

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