

## THE MADNESS OF TRUTH: RUSSELL'S ADMIRATION FOR JOSEPH CONRAD

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What is it that the philosophical biographer is trying to do?<sup>1</sup> I want to answer that with the following story: After I had been working intensely on my biography of Wittgenstein for about three years,<sup>2</sup> I decided that I had to make a close study of Otto Weininger's book, *Sex and Character*. Wittgenstein many times referred to this book; he recommended it to his friends and he even characterized his own work in terms of it. Many years earlier I had taken it up, but had been unable to see anything in it except confusion and bigotry. This time, however, with my mind crammed full of events and dates from Wittgenstein's life and quotations from his work and letters, I found reading Weininger's book a very powerful experience. It wasn't just that phrases from it recalled phrases from Wittgenstein's writings, nor just that the attitudes it expressed seemed importantly similar to Wittgenstein's, it was that the book crystallized in my mind the theme that had, up to then, in a murky, inarticulate kind of way guided my research.

In the connections between Wittgenstein and Weininger I now had, I realized, a framework, within which all that I had read and thought about Wittgenstein's life and work could be fitted. It is a framework suggested by my subtitle, "The Duty of Genius", a phrase that suggested

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally written for a one-day conference on "Philosophical Lives" held at Swarthmore College, Philadelphia, 2 April 1994.

<sup>2</sup> *Ludwig Wittgenstein: the Duty of Genius* (London: Cape; New York: Free P., 1990).

itself to me almost as soon as I had finished my study of Weininger. The beauty of this framework was that it embraced both Wittgenstein's life and his work, and, moreover, pointed precisely to the place where the two met. "Logic and ethics are fundamentally the same", wrote Weininger, "they are no more than duty to oneself." "Yes, that's it!" I thought, "that's what I've been trying to draw out about Wittgenstein's life and work: that they are fundamentally the same, that both his work on logic and his earnest striving to be a decent human being are both driven by the single duty, the duty to oneself, the duty of genius."

Up to that point, I had written masses of more or less unstructured material, recording conversations I had had with Wittgenstein's friends and colleagues, summarizing the work he had written at various stages in his life, and so on. Now, I went through everything I had written, re-writing it in one chronological sequence in accordance with this central theme. The result, I realized, was a book very close to the one I had set out to write, a book that would describe Wittgenstein's life and work in one narrative and seek to show the connections between the two. It was, in the way that I had intended it to be, a *philosophical* biography: not yet another introduction to Wittgenstein's philosophy, nor yet just another biographical sketch—and certainly not, of course, a psychobiography. It did not *apply* a theory—philosophical, psychological, sociological or whatever—to Wittgenstein's life, it rather *showed* the intertwining of the life and the work. It showed how the life was soaked through with his work, and conversely how his work was steeped in his attitudes to life. And this is precisely what, as a philosophical biographer, I had set out to achieve.

My task in writing a philosophical biography of Bertrand Russell may prove to be a much tougher undertaking. Wittgenstein, from the point of view of the biographer, was conveniently monomaniacal. *Everything* in his life was subordinated to the twin search for philosophical clarity and ethical *Ansändigkeit*. Convenient, too, was his tendency to strip his life down to its bare essentials: he never owned a house or got married, he had little money, few possessions and a rather small circle of friends. Furthermore, he published just one book and one article in his lifetime, and devoted himself, during the last twenty years of his life to just one task: that of putting his later philosophy into a satisfactory book. Russell, on the other hand, married four times, had countless lovers, published over sixty books and over two thousand articles, was involved in many

complicated public activities and corresponded with an almost unbelievably large number of people—friends, relatives, colleagues and members of the general public. The Russell Archive in Canada estimates that it has over sixty thousand letters by Russell. Future generations, I am convinced, will refuse to believe that the name "Bertrand Russell" describes an individual and will conclude instead that it is the name of a committee.

Faced with this multiplicity, diversity and sheer bulk, the importance of a framework becomes, I think, all the greater. Two large biographies of Russell have already been published and they both, in my opinion, suffer from the lack of a central theme. I don't mean—heaven forbid—that a biography should have a *thesis*. A biography is not a scientific paper. It is a work of literature, and it is in that literary sense that it should have a theme. Otherwise (and I think this is the chief problem with the two biographies of Russell just mentioned) it will not come alive, it will read like a more or less inconsequential list of the external events of a person's life.

A biography, or, at any rate, a philosophical biography, should be first and foremost a drama of ideas. This obligation has two sides to it: on the one hand, it means that the biographer is obliged to *dramatize* the ideas of the philosopher he or she is writing about, to, as it were, make them *come alive*. But, looking at it another way, it also means that the biography has, at least on occasion, to receive its dramatic tension *from* the ideas. For ideas can not only live within a literary narrative, they can themselves *give life* to the narrative. But this requires compression, it requires a comprehensible—and appropriate—framework.

I got my first glimpse of what this might be in the case of Russell when, on re-reading his work I noticed something that, to my knowledge has remained unremarked upon by commentators, and that is how often—in all sorts of context—he uses images of ghosts and phantoms. To take a key example: in the second volume of his *Autobiography* he summarizes his life and his nature in these terms:

Underlying all occupations and all pleasures I have felt since early youth the pain of solitude. I have escaped it most nearly in moments of love, yet even there, on reflection, I have found that the escape depended partly upon illusion. I have known no woman to whom the claims of the intellect were as absolute as they are to me, and wherever intellect intervened, I have found that the sympathy I sought in love was apt to fail. What Spinoza calls "the intellectual love

of God” has seemed to me the best thing to live by, but I have not had even the somewhat abstract God that Spinoza allowed himself to whom to attach my intellectual love. I have loved a ghost, and in loving a ghost my inmost self has itself become spectral. (*Auto.* 2: 38)

This is a sad and chilling passage, but it also seems in some way central, an attempt by Russell to get at his very core, so to speak.

On reflecting upon this passage, I realized that the phrase “I have loved a ghost” might have for Russell another—perhaps even more dreadful—application. For Russell’s childhood was spent “loving ghosts” in a quite different sense. His sister and his mother died when he was just two years old, his father when he was four and his grandfather when he was six. After that, he was brought up by his grandmother, and, perhaps not surprisingly, used to lie awake at night thinking how awful it would be when she too died.

When he was twenty-one and passionately in love with Alys Pearsall Smith, the woman who would become his first wife, Russell had a curious dream about his mother. He dreamt that he had discovered that his grandmother had deceived him: that his mother was not, in fact, dead, but rather mad and locked away hidden in a madhouse. “I therefore had of course”, he writes in a journal of the time, “to give up the thought of ever marrying” (*Papers* 1: 61–2). Curiously enough, some of the dream came true. Shortly afterwards, he announced to his grandmother his intention of marrying Alys. His grandmother was horrified. He was too young, she thought, and, in any case, Alys Pearsall Smith was both middle class and American and, on those grounds alone, quite clearly a gold-digger. In order to put Russell off the idea, his grandmother told him—what she had previously kept from him—that there was madness in the family, that his uncle Willy was locked away in an asylum, his Aunt Agatha had remained unmarried because she suffered from insane delusions and that his father had suffered from epilepsy. In the face of that, she argued, Russell could not possibly get married, for his children would almost certainly turn out to be insane. And neither was it any use thinking that he and his wife could marry and practice birth control, for practising birth control was precisely what had caused his father to become epileptic in the first place.

Throughout that summer, these revelations cast a gloom over Russell’s life. “One by one”, he wrote in his journal, the discovery “of the

tragedies, hopeless and unalleviated, which have made up the lives of most of my family;

above all, the perpetual gloom which hangs like a fate over P[embroke] L[odge], and which, struggle as I will, invades my inmost soul whenever I go there ... all these, combined with the fear of heredity, cannot but oppress my mind ... I feel as though darkness were my native element.... (*Auto.* 1: 85; *Papers* 1: 65)

“I am haunted by the fear of the family ghost”, he writes in the same entry, “which seems to seize on me with clammy invisible hands....” He would, he thought, have to get out of Pembroke Lodge, for “otherwise I really shall begin to fear for my sanity. P.L. is to me like a family vault haunted by the ghosts of maniacs.”

The fears that grandmother Russell inspired were deep-seated and long-lasting. After these revelations, Russell says in his *Autobiography*, he was subject to violent nightmares in which he dreamt that he was being murdered by a lunatic. Another recurring dream to which he was subject, which seems somehow related, Russell described many years later in a letter to his daughter, Kate: “I imagine myself behind plate glass, like a fish in an aquarium, or turned into a ghost whom no one sees; agonizingly I try to make some sort of human contact, but it is impossible, & I know myself doomed forever to lonely impotence.”<sup>3</sup>

The twin fears—of loneliness and of madness—expressed by these dreams and diary entries seem linked by the notion of *making contact* with what is deep, either in oneself or in another. Writing of the fears evoked by his grandmother, Russell says that they “have never ceased to trouble me subconsciously ... [they] caused me, for many years, to avoid all deep emotion, and live, as nearly as I could, a life of intellect tempered by flippancy” (*Auto.* 1: 86).

It is as if he thought that if one gave way to any kind of emotion, if one delved beneath the flippant surface, one would get sucked in by the madness underneath. But, equally, he seems to have been aware that, if one preserves the flippant surface undisturbed, one cannot hope to make real contact either with oneself or with others. The fears of loneliness and madness, then, were experienced by him as complementary terrors: the only way of overcoming loneliness was to risk madness, the only way

<sup>3</sup> Russell to K. Tait, 23 January 1948 (RA REC. ACQ. 435).

of ensuring against madness to embrace superficiality and solitude. This dichotomy, between, as it were, the ghost and the lunatic, provides, I believe the central core to Russell's life. Several times in his life he strove to escape the hard shell of his solitude, to make real contact with the people around him, only to recoil from the depth of the emotions unleashed and seek sanctuary once more in that very solitude. What, from one point of view is a prison, is, from another, a shelter.

Of course, to some extent, this is the story of *all* our lives: we are all of us conscious of the risks of exposing our emotions, the risk of being hurt, of being rejected, misunderstood and so on, and also of the corresponding risk of deadness if we hide our emotional life. What, I think, is special in Russell's case, is the depth and acuteness of his fear of madness. This was to have terrible and dark repercussions throughout his life. In the letter to Kate I quoted from earlier, in which Russell reports his recurring dream of being a ghost with whom no-one can make contact, he says: "I used to have this feeling often before I had children." Having children was, for Russell, the means *par excellence* of escaping one's loneliness.

His tragedy was that his grandmother was right: his first son, John, was diagnosed as schizophrenic at the age of thirty-three. Until then, Russell had doted on John. But the shock of finding that his worst fears had been realized, that John was indeed mad, was almost too much for Russell to bear. He broke off all contact with his son and tried to have him committed—just like his Uncle Willy had been committed—to a long-term psychiatric hospital. Further, he took legal control of John's three daughters and brought them up himself. The effects of this were disastrous: Lucy, the youngest committed suicide, Sarah, the middle child, was in turn diagnosed schizophrenic and has spent much of her life in hospitals, and Anne, the eldest, turned her back on the Russell family and now lives in the New Mexico desert, determined to live a life as removed as possible from that of her past.

In the end, Russell's fear of madness was greater than his fear of loneliness—and John and his three daughters were not the only casualties of that fact. Russell had an astonishing ability to completely close himself off from people with whom he had previously experienced the greatest possible emotional intimacy, people who had come to depend upon him, and the results were catastrophic. To research the personal aspects of Russell's life is to pick one's way through a long trail of

emotional wreckage.

This, then, was to be my theme: the twin fears of loneliness and madness, how they manifested themselves in almost all aspects of Russell's life and the consequences for himself and the people around him of the struggle between the two.

One lasting consequence for Russell was a view of personal psychology, which saw the individual as a seething mass of strong, irrational and even insane impulses kept barely hidden and under control beneath a civilized and more or less cold surface. Getting to know someone deeply, penetrating that person's surface, was thus for him a rather dangerous business.

Nowhere in his work is this view of personal relations more clearly spelt out than in his extraordinary account of first meeting Joseph Conrad. "At our very first meeting," he writes:

we talked with continually increasing intimacy. We seemed to sink through layer after layer of what was superficial, till gradually both reached the central fire. It was an experience unlike any other that I have known. We looked into each other's eyes, half appalled and half intoxicated to find ourselves together in such a region. The emotion was as intense as passionate love, and at the same time all-embracing. I came away bewildered, and hardly able to find my way among ordinary affairs. (*Auto.* 1: 209)

The meeting took place in September 1913. In a letter to Ottoline written shortly after the meeting (indeed, on the train back to Cambridge from Conrad's house in Kent), Russell writes about the meeting while still in the half-intoxicated state he describes:

Here I am on my way back from Conrad. It was *wonderful*—I loved him & I think he liked me ... I plucked up courage to tell him what I find in his work—the boring down into things to get to the very bottom below the apparent facts. He seemed to feel I had understood him; then I stopped & we just looked into each other's eyes for some time, & then he said he had grown to wish he could live on the surface and write differently, that he had grown frightened. His eyes at that moment expressed the inward pain & terror that one feels him always fighting... At first he was reserved even when he seemed frank, but when we were out walking his reserve vanished & he spoke his inmost thoughts. It is impossible to say how much I loved him....<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, #865, pmk. 11 Sept. 1913 (U. of Texas at Austin);

From Conrad's point of view, the meeting seems to have been rather less powerful. It is hardly mentioned in his correspondence of the period, and when it is, there is nothing in Conrad's description of it that would lead one to think that he and Russell had experienced a near-mystical communion, that they had "reached the central fire" and shared a bond "as intense as passionate love". After the meeting he and Russell exchanged a few letters. They are warm and friendly letters, but they hardly merit the description Russell gave of them to Lucy Donnelly. "I have seen Conrad just twice", he told her:

but he is already one of the people in the world that I am most intimate with—I write to him & he to me on all the inmost things. He is quite wonderfully loveable. (RA1 710, 20 Feb. 1914)

After that, Russell and Conrad were barely in touch with one another. They saw each other perhaps twice after that first meeting, and exchanged a handful of letters. It was not, despite the impression he gives in his letters and in his *Autobiography*, either a close or a lasting relationship.

And yet, Conrad had an importance for Russell unmatched by perhaps any other person. He called *both* his sons Conrad. This in itself indicates the extraordinary extent to which Russell revered Conrad, for he approached the naming of offspring with all the seriousness and solemnity appropriate to a member of the British ruling class, and for the most part did the conventional thing: he chose his mother's name, Katharine, for his daughter and his father's name, John, for his first son. But for his second son, and for his first son's middle name, he chose to honour Joseph Conrad in preference to the many famous and distinguished Russells that have played a prominent role in British life over the last six hundred years or so.

If we want to understand *why* Russell revered Conrad so much, and why he had a tendency to mythologize his brief personal relationship with Conrad, we should look, I think, not at their meeting face to face, but at Conrad's novels, Russell's editions of which are unusually well thumbed, show signs of having been read and re-read. And there are signs, too, in his writing of an unconscious echo of passages from

Conrad's work.

The two of Conrad's novels that stand out as especially significant are those that Russell summarizes in his account of his relationship with Conrad: *Heart of Darkness* and *Amy Foster*, both of which might be regarded as stark dramatizations of Russell's deepest fears and nightmares.

*The Heart of Darkness* concerns the journey along the Congo to the heart of Africa, undertaken—for a reason he does not quite understand—by the narrator Marlow. Along the way, Marlow sees evidence of the barbarity, cruelty and corruption of Imperial officials, but consoles himself with the thought that when he gets to the heart of the jungle he will meet Kurtz, a man whose remarkable integrity and abilities are famous. When he finally meets Kurtz, however, he discovers that this outstanding model of Imperial uprightness is in fact completely insane and even more barbaric than the others. "His soul was mad", Marlow says, "Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad." Marlow nurses Kurtz through his last few days and is with him when he dies, his last words being: "The horror! the horror!" Reflecting later, Marlow considers that, after all, Kurtz *was* a remarkable man, for he, unlike Marlow himself, had stepped over the brink. "Since I had peeped over the edge myself", Marlow says,

I understand better the meaning of his stare, that ... was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness .. he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible.<sup>5</sup>

The most you can hope from life, says Marlow, "is some knowledge of yourself." And that is what Kurtz attained in his insanity, indeed, it is a kind of knowledge, he implies, that can *only* be attained through insanity; its sheer horror is not compatible with sanity.

At the end of the story Marlow has to meet Kurtz's fiancée, who knows nothing of the manner of Kurtz's death or of his insanity. As far

<sup>5</sup> *The Heart of Darkness* (New York: Signet Classic, 1983), pp. 148–9.

as she is concerned, Kurtz was everything that Marlow had been led to believe before he met him. Without any doubt that Kurtz's dying words would be in keeping with the upright character she believed him to possess, the fiancée presses Marlow to tell her what those last words were. Should Marlow tell the truth and shatter her illusions? Or should he tell her what she wants to hear and become a liar in the process? Being one who stepped back from the brink, he opts for the latter. "The last word he pronounced", he tells her, "was—your name."

In a letter to his brother Frank written in 1918, Russell discusses the themes of madness, truth and self-preservation in a way that indicates what ideas he took from *The Heart of Darkness*. He had just read two books about journeys along the Amazon. The first, *The Naturalist on the River Amazon* (1864) by H. W. Bates bored him. The second, *The Sea and the Jungle* (1912) by H. M. Tomlinson he loved. "Tomlinson", he wrote, "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, ghastly: 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 truth. But for my part I would rather be mad with truth than sane with lies....

(*Auto.* 2: 36)

This was written at the beginning of his prison term. By the end of it, having read in the meantime Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* and been alternately delighted and repulsed by it, Russell had decided that the Victorians were not so bad after all. In fact, by the time he wrote up his account of Strachey for his *Autobiography*, he had decided that he himself *was* a Victorian. "We were still Victorian", he writes, comparing his generation with that of Keynes and Strachey, "they were Edwardian:

We believed in ordered progress by means of politics and free discussion. The more self-confident among us may have hoped to be leaders of the multitude, but none of us wished to be divorced from it. The generation of Keynes and Lytton did not seek to preserve any kinship with the Philistine. They aimed rather at a life of retirement among fine shades and nice feelings, and conceived of the good as consisting in the passionate mutual admirations of a clique of the elite. (*Auto.* 1: 70-1)

But now what has happened to the idea that the Victorians were sane and successful because they never got near the truth, the truth that is incompatible with sanity? Could it be that Russell, having remained convinced of the truth of the dichotomy he outlines to Frank, decided, when the crunch came, that, actually, he would rather be sane with lies than mad with truth and that the Victorians had the right idea all along?

Something like that would seem to be suggested by *The Conquest of Happiness*, which he published in 1931 and in which he ridicules what he calls "Byronic Unhappiness", the belief that the truth about ourselves and the world is at bottom (to use the words he used to Frank) spectral, insane and ghastly. While ridiculing this view he never once mentions that it was at one time his own, or that, when he found it in Conrad he regarded it as the greatest wisdom. Instead he vents his scorn on a version of the view that he finds in a book by Joseph Wood Krutch called *The Modern Temper*. This particular chicken has now come home to roost, for in *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, published in 1991, the Conrad scholar Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan uses Krutch's book as a means to explain Conrad's own beliefs. *The Modern Temper* is, she writes, "a painfully lucid perception of the cultural crisis which looms so large in Conrad's work."<sup>6</sup>

Another indication that Russell preferred lies—or at least superficiality—to madness, that he was not, in the end, prepared to advocate a true madness rather than a false sanity, comes, ironically in his description of *The Heart of Darkness* in his piece on Conrad. His description is not only quite astonishingly shallow, it also strips it of the meaning that he at one time took it to have. "Of all that he had written", he says of Conrad:

I admired most the terrible story called *The Heart of Darkness*, in which a rather weak idealist is driven mad by horror of the tropical forest and loneliness among savages. (*Auto.* 1: 207-8)

As Russell must surely have realized, the whole point is that Kurtz is *not* weak, that he represents the very best type of Imperial official. The moral is, that if penetrating to the heart of darkness would drive a man like Kurtz mad, then it would drive us all mad. The only way in which

<sup>6</sup> Oxford: Clarendon P., 1991, p. 1.

we can keep our sanity is by following the example of Marlow (and of Russell) and stepping back from the brink. Russell, of course, understood this all too well, as he indicates in his next few lines:

This story expresses, I think, most completely his philosophy of life. I felt ... that he thought of civilized and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava which at any moment might break and let the unwary sink into fiery depths.

That *he* (Conrad) thought this? But isn't this image of the "fiery depths" exactly the one that Russell himself used in his description of meeting Conrad? "We seemed to sink through layer after layer of what was superficial, till gradually both reached the central fire" And isn't this "philosophy of life" precisely what drew him to Conrad? Recall what he said to Ottoline in 1913: "I plucked up courage to tell him what I find in his work—the boring down into things to get to the very bottom below the apparent facts. He seemed to feel I had understood him; then I stopped & we just looked into each other's eyes for some time, & then he said he had grown to wish he could live on the surface and write differently, that he had grown frightened." So, it seems, had Russell.

This tendency to render superficial what previously he had considered deep is evident too in his account of Conrad's short story *Amy Foster*, which he quite rightly describes as "extraordinarily moving".

If *The Heart of Darkness* presents a dramatization of Russell's fear of madness, then *Amy Foster* conjures up in the most vivid way imaginable, Russell's sense of being alone. The situation of its central character is not unlike that of Russell himself in his recurring dream: agonizingly unable to make contact with the people around him. The story concerns a man who, having set off for America from his native country somewhere in eastern Europe (Conrad is deliberately non-specific) finds himself the sole survivor when the ship carrying him sinks. He is washed up on the shores of England, unable to speak a word of English. Unable to make himself understood, he is trapped, like Russell in the dream, behind, so to speak, his own plate of glass. He is regarded by the villagers as a strange, and perhaps insane, alien, and shunned by everybody except Amy Foster who shows kindness towards him, bringing him food to eat and teaching him some English. He and Amy marry and have a son, in whom he delights and to whom he sings—much to Amy's dislike and

suspicion—the songs of his homeland. When he falls ill, he relapses into his native language, and Amy, taking the child with her, ignores his cries for help and abandons him. He dies alone and broken-hearted, unable to understand why he has been deserted by the woman he loves and why he has to lose his beloved son.

One can imagine how such a story might have affected Russell. With its themes of loneliness, of feeling like an alien, and of thwarted parental feeling, it touches many of his deepest emotions. But after he has summarized the plot, he says, incredibly lamely under the circumstances: "I have wondered at times how much of this man's loneliness Conrad had felt among the English ..." (*Auto.* 1: 209). Again, he insists on attributing to Conrad alone what he and Conrad had in common. And, as Russell, again, must surely have realized, the fear of strangeness, of madness, that is expressed in Conrad's work is nothing to do with being a foreigner in a literal sense.

That Russell did see a more general significance in the loneliness of Yanko, the central character in *Amy Foster*, is indicated by his borrowing, perhaps unconsciously, Conrad's description of Yanko's alienation. The passage I am thinking of comes from Russell's autobiography and attempts to convey a rather Conradian feeling, the feeling that one is a stranger to the people around one because one has penetrated to the madness that is at the centre of the human condition and therefore feels removed from the everyday lies and superficiality that form the common bond between ordinary men. Among the celebrations to mark the end of the First World War, Russell writes, he felt that the crowd had learned nothing from the horror: "I felt strangely solitary ... like a ghost dropped by accident from some other planet" (*Auto.* 2: 38). In *Amy Foster*, Conrad, in describing Yanko, writes:

He was different; innocent of heart, and full of good will, which nobody wanted, this castaway, that, like a man transplanted into another planet, was separated by an immense space from his past.<sup>7</sup>

Conrad, for his part, though he did not apparently share Russell's rather romantic view of their meeting, *did* see some connection between their philosophies of life, as expressed in their published work. Shortly

<sup>7</sup> *Typhoon and Other Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 155.

after meeting Conrad, Russell sent him a copy of his *Philosophical Essays*, a collection which includes his most famous essay, "The Free Man's Worship" (an exercise in Byronic Unhappiness if ever there was one!). In writing to thank him for it, Conrad was quick to see the affinity. He described reading the essays as "A wonderful experience for which one cannot even express one's thanks:

You have reduced to order the inchoate thoughts of a life-time... For the marvellous pages on the Worship of a free man the only return one can make is that of a deep admiring affection, which, if you were never to see me again and forgot my existence tomorrow, will be unalterably yours *usque ad finem*.

(22 Dec. 1913; *Auto.* 1: 225)

Russell was understandably proud of this letter, and even though he reproduces it in its entirety at the end of the book, nevertheless quotes from it in the text of his description of Conrad (*Auto.* 1: 207). What he does not mention, however, but which cannot have been lost on him, is that the Latin phrase with which Conrad closes the letter is charged with significance.

The phrase "*usque ad finem*" is one that Conrad uses in the novel *Lord Jim*, in a scene in which Stein, a character who in the context represents the scientific point of view, is discussing the romantic inclinations of Jim with the more stolid Marlow. Men, says Stein, fall, the moment they are born, into a dream, and, just as when you fall into the sea the best policy is not to fight for air but to submit yourself to the water and let the sea keep you up, so the best policy in life is "to follow the dream ... *usque ad finem* [to the very end]."<sup>8</sup> What Conrad saw in "The Free Man's Worship" was a view similar to his own: the truth about life, about ourselves, is almost too horrible to bear and the wisest course—the only one that can keep us sane—is to pursue a dream, a fiction, *usque ad finem*. To complete the appropriateness of the allusion, notice that in *Lord Jim* it occurs in a passage that presents a defence of romanticism by a scientist—which, in a sense, is also what "The Free Man's Worship" does.

What Russell calls "Conrad's philosophy of life" was, then, also his own. Conrad's greatness was in expressing it in what Russell himself

<sup>8</sup> *Lord Jim* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 201.

realized was the only way it could adequately be expressed, namely in creative language, in fiction. Russell himself tried to do just that in 1913, in his novella *The Perplexities of John Forstice*, which he abandoned only after he had shown it to Conrad and Conrad had expressed severe misgivings about its literary merits. Russell's later attempts at fiction—the stories collected in *Satan in the Suburbs* and *Nightmares of Eminent Persons*—are very slight and artistically unambitious, their formal and rather stilted satirical tone being quite inadequate for the expression of a purportedly deep philosophy of life.

I think part of the reason that Russell revered Conrad is that Conrad had at his command the right form of literature to express what Russell himself considered to be the deepest truths. In this respect he recognized his own limitations. When, in 1961, someone wrote to him to ask him to explain the sympathy between himself and Conrad, he admitted that he could not do so. "The experience", he replied, "was too intense for analysis."<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, in 1916, when he tried to explain to Constance Malleson his Conradian philosophy of life, he did so in a hesitating, halting kind of way that was all too conscious of its own inadequacy of expression. "The centre of me is always and eternally a terrible pain", he wrote:

—a curious wild pain—a searching for something beyond what the world contains, something transfigured and infinite—the beatific vision—God—I do not find it, I do not think it is to be found—but the love of it is my life—it's like passionate love for a ghost. At times it fills me with rage, at times with wild despair, it is the source of gentleness and cruelty and work, it fills every passion that I have—it is the actual spring of life within me.

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. At most times, now, I am not conscious of it, only when I am strongly stirred, either happily or unhappily. I seek escape from it, though I don't believe I ought to...

"Windows always open to the world" I told you once, but through one's windows one sees not only the joy and beauty of the world, but also its pain

<sup>9</sup> Russell to Cedric Watts, 3 Oct. 1961, quoted in Watts' *Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"* (Milan: Mursia, 1977), p. 134.

and cruelty and ugliness, and the one is as well worth seeing as the other, and one must look into hell before one has any right to speak of heaven.

(23 Oct. 1916; *Auto.* 2: 75-6)

Russell, I think, never quite gave up this Conradian vision. In the 1930s he wrote some of his most Conradian passages for his autobiography, in 1937 he called his second son Conrad, and as late as 1962 he was impressing upon his favourite granddaughter Lucy the merits of Conrad's work. The tragedy for those close to Russell, and, I believe for Russell himself, is that he could not, after all, bear to leave his windows always open to the world, and indeed was capable of closing them with a finality that left him immune to the suffering, the "pain, cruelty and ugliness", the "hell" endured by others and left them shut out from his emotional life. Only with the windows firmly shut did he feel safe from the threat of madness—whether his own or that of other people.

The epigraph to my biography of Russell, I have come to think, should be the remark of Vladimir in yet another Conrad story, *The Secret Agent*: "Madness alone is truly terrifying."

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