

attempting to find a resolution between these very different conceptions of the political.

Young draws on postmodern theories of alterity to develop a critique of impartiality as an ideal. *Contra* this 'ideal' she argues that the meaning of the 'public' should be transformed to exhibit the positivity of group differences, passion, and play. So, by implication, both the liberal and the communitarian political models are subject to her critique. But what of the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy? An alternative to moral theory founded on impartiality, argues Young, is communicative ethics: 'Habermas has gone further than any other contemporary thinker in elaborating the project of a moral reason that recognised the plurality of subjects.' Yet, there is, she finds, a strain of Habermas's theory that relies on counterfactuals which build in an impartial standpoint in order to get universality out of the moral dialogue. Is this a problem? For Young and most feminist critics, the answer has been yes. It is precisely this scepticism about the public/private dichotomy and the definition of the public as 'impartial' that has led so many feminists to critique the public/private dichotomy and offer alternative visions of the political. Feminists have turned to expressive and aesthetic politics by way of endorsing the validity of particular, bodily expressions of desire, rather than universal, abstract statements of rationality. So it is that feminism comes to be characterised by expressions of desire rather than by claims of justice.

But, assuming we do not want to give up on the emancipatory ideal, how might we now make the move from expressions of desire to claims of justice? And can we make this move without invoking some problematic appeal to impartiality that entails some exclusion of difference? How are we to arbitrate between competing and conflictual desires?

Young addresses the dilemma thus: she quotes a passage from Hanna Pitkin, who argues that interest group competition draws

us into politics because 'we are forced to find or create a common language of purposes and aspirations'. Young adds: 'In this move from an expression of desire to a claim of justice, dialogue participants do not bracket their particular situations or adopt a universal and shared standpoint. They *only* move from self-regarding need to recognition of the claim of others.' But how precisely does this transformation occur? How does a cacophony of conflicting desires find resolution in just norms? Is mere presence enough? This question, which is at the heart of liberal, communitarian, and deliberative political theory, is simply glossed over by Young. Appeals to transcendental archimedean privileged positions, to embedded communal bonds, or to ethics which derive from the structure of undistorted communication, may all be

problematic resolutions to the question in hand. But we ought to offer an alternative in their place.

This is the task facing feminist theory. Its focus on the aesthetic and expressive offer great resources for reinvigorating political discourse and practice. The corresponding task for feminist practice is to integrate transgressive acts of expressive or aesthetic politics into collective goals of democratic politics. It must then show how we might move from self-regarding need to recognition of the claims of others in a way which acknowledges feminist epistemological, ontological and moral critiques of the impartiality and abstraction of the procedural model of political justice.

Dr Judith Squires is in the Department of Politics at the University of Bristol. This is an edited version of a paper she gave to the CSD Research Seminar in January 1997.

CSD Perspectives

a series of monographs published by University of Westminster Press.

The Betrayal of Bosnia, by Lee Bryant. No. 1 (Autumn 1993). ISBN : 1 85919 035 9. £3.50.

Nations, Nationalism, and the European Citizen, by John Keane. No. 2 (Autumn 1993). ISBN : 1 85919 040 5. £3.50.

Universal Human Rights? The Rhetoric of International Law, by Jeremy Colwill. No. 3 (Autumn 1994). ISBN : 1 85919 040 5. £3.50.

Islam and the Creation of European Identity, by Tomaz Mastnak. No. 4 (Autumn 1994). ISBN : 1 85919 026 X. £3.50.

Uncertainty and Identity: The Enlightenment and its Shadows, by Chris Sparks. No. 5 (Autumn 1994). ISBN : 1 85919 031 6. £3.50.

The Making of a Weak State: The Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1906, by Mehdi Moslem. No. 6 (Summer 1995). ISBN: 1 85919 071 5. £3.50.

The 1996 Intergovernmental Conference: Perspectives on European Integration, by Richard Whitman. No. 7 (Winter 1995). ISBN: 1 85919 002 2. £3.50.

Renewing Local Representative Democracy: Councillors, Communities, Communication, by Keith Taylor. No. 8 (Spring 1996). ISBN: 1 85919 082 0. £3.50.

European Democracy at the Russian Crossroads, by Irene Brennan. No. 9 (Spring 1996). ISBN: 1 85919 077 4. £3.50.

The End of Religion?, by Marcel Gauchet. No. 10 (Spring 1996). ISBN: 185919 072 3. £3.50.

The Common Foreign and Security Policy: Obstacles and Prospects, by Richard Whitman. No. 11 (Winter 1996). ISBN: 1859190480.

Managing Variety: Issues in the Integration and Disintegration of States, by Margaret Blunden. No. 12 (Spring 1997). ISBN: 1859190685. £3.50

Available from CSD. Cheques should be made payable to 'University of Westminster'.

REVIEW

BENJAMIN'S LOST BIOGRAPHY

by Niels Jacob Harbitz

Momme Brodersen

Walter Benjamin. A Biography.
Translated by Malcolm R. Green and
Ingrida Ligers. London: Verso, 1996.

More than half a century after his death, Walter Benjamin's work is as original and insightful as ever. Posthumously - and especially in the last twenty years - his thought has been radically re-examined, and he is now recognised as one of the most significant thinkers of our times.

Appropriately for such a cryptic thinker, Benjamin has become a myth, a sign, and a symbol. And - ironically - he has also become a commercial commodity. Like a work of art in his own right he has entered the age of mechanical reproduction, only to undermine his own thesis about the damage this age can do to a unique work of art; his aura has remained intact.

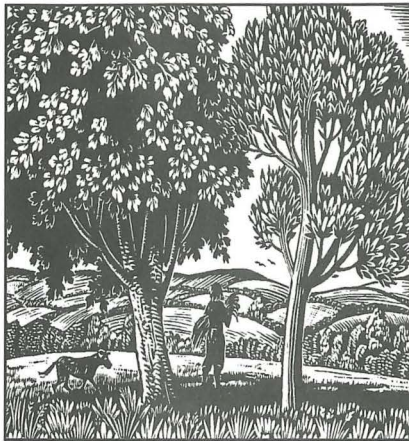
Yet in the proliferating literature devoted to Benjamin's relatively limited oeuvre there was a glaring gap. Then, late last November, on popular demand as it were, the gap was to be filled: the ultimate biography was announced.

Walter Benjamin. A Biography - beautifully produced and richly illustrated - has, for the most part, been favourably received. The book certainly has its strengths. It highlights the enormous number of articles, essays, and other texts Benjamin published only in journals and magazines and which are, therefore, easily overlooked by his readers. Drawing heavily on Benjamin's own memoirs, it also tells us much about Benjamin's childhood and adolescence.

But the shortcomings of Brodersen's biography become only too clear when it deals with Benjamin's adult life. As Benjamin grew older, the story of his life became disseminated throughout the hundreds of pieces he wrote;

these pieces are not autobiographical, but they are, nonetheless, relevant for a biographer. Their interpretation for a biography requires perceptive analysis; this Brodersen does not provide.

The relationship between Benjamin's life and work was unusually intimate. Benjamin lived through his work and worked throughout his life. Moreover, despite being a true book maniac,



for his own writing Benjamin drew more than most upon his own lived experience. His entire oeuvre is saturated with implicit and explicit references to his life. The lack of distance between life and work should be the paramount reason for writing a unified account of the two; indeed, it should be central to a telling of Benjamin's life. One is comforted, therefore, by the publicity material's claim that Brodersen 'records [Benjamin's] extraordinary life and gives a fresh and lucid presentation of Benjamin's written work'.

Sadly, Brodersen does neither. Indeed, he seems to be guided by the belief that discretion is a virtue even when writing a biography. But a biography not only allows for anecdotes, it begs for them, and especially the telling ones. Yet of the thousands of stories - present throughout Benjamin's work - that could have shed light on Benjamin's life, Brodersen includes only a few. Why, for instance, does he not tell this one (from Terry Eagleton's *Walter Benjamin Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*)? One afternoon, Walter Benjamin was struck with

compelling force by the idea of drawing a diagram of his life, and knew at the same moment exactly how it was to be done. He drew the diagram, and, with utterly typical ill-luck, lost it again a year or two later. The diagram, not surprisingly, was a labyrinth.

Brodersen could also have gone much further in integrating fragments of Benjamin's work into his account of the writer's life. After all, Benjamin was not a writer of fiction. His memory-traces, to borrow the Freudian term that Benjamin himself used, are all as real and true as memory-traces can be.

Furthermore, as a translator of Proust, Benjamin was deeply interested not only in the genre of biography but also in the 'organic unity' between memory, reminiscence, and writing. More generally, he also showed a lifelong passion for linguistics, and for a wide range of philosophical problems regarding the various uses, means and modes of language, speech, and writing. His approach to the writing of history - that it can only be seen as the creation of a palimpsest - is merely one example of this. As a consequence of this view his imagery of 'excavation,' prescient of Foucault's 'archaeology', was developed precisely to undermine the homogeneity of history. All this is relevant; but Brodersen mentions none of it.

It is only in a strictly empirical, and thus very superficial, sense that Brodersen's biography can be described as reliable and well researched. Benjamin remains an inscrutable presence throughout his own biography. Worse, however, the Benjamin that *does* come across is very far from the one I thought I knew - and still do - through his own work as well as through others'. Brodersen tells us that he was denied access to the Benjamin estate; one can't help wondering whether this whole job should have been left to someone else. Or, simply, left.

Niels Jacob Harbitz is a Chevening Scholar and PhD candidate at CSD.