

NEWS

Massacre of the Innocents: Derrida and the Cambridge Dons

On 21 March, at a lofty conclave of dons at Cambridge University, something happened. The matter for discussion was a list of academic aristos to be invited to receive an honorary doctoral degree from the Duke of Edinburgh. (Honorary degrees are solemn rewards for those who have advanced the goals of a university; the world record is held by Herbert Hoover, who collected ninety.) The list included several scientists, a novelist and a dancer; but the fly in the ointment was Jacques Derrida, nominated by members of the English Faculty in recognition of the energy which he has infused into literary theory over the past twenty years.

What the English dons had forgotten was that Derrida's official trade is Philosophy, not English. They had reckoned without the fury of Cambridge's official philosophers – a group which, it must be admitted, had not shown many signs of life for the past half century or so. But the prospect that Derrida might be honoured by their university was too much for them. Four people, led by Professor Hugh Mellor, stood up at the meeting on 21 March, and uttered the ritual shout of '*Non placet!*' when Derrida's name came up. This meant that the question whether he should be offered an honorary degree would have to be settled by a ballot of all senior members of the university.

The ballot was to take place on 16 May, and the Cambridge philosophers set about organising a campaign against Derrida. He was a charlatan, a double-crosser, a traitor. The fact that the sumptuous allusiveness of his writing is actually attractive to a considerable public only aggravated the offence. Apparently people had been offering £50 a ticket to hear Derrida's low-key performance at the Oxford Amnesty Lectures a few weeks before (where he had presented himself as the soul of moderation), and this unusual popularity was also held against him. They turned him into a kind of Mata Hari of the philosophical world: a seductive and ambiguous entertainer whose name could be relied on to stir old gentlemen into a lather of prurient and self-righteous sadism.

The main plank of the campaign was a letter to *The Times* (9 May) signed by nineteen individuals, some noted for their work in philosophy, and all for their self-esteem. Here is how they set themselves up: 'In the eyes of philosophers, and certainly those working in leading departments of philosophy throughout the world, M. Derrida's work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour.' Professors Smith, Albert, Armstrong, Marcus, Quine *et al.* were offering, in other words, a mere and meagre argument from authority. You might have expected the self-appointed representatives of 'the leading departments of philosophy throughout the world' to be a bit more circumspect. If the existence of their drab profession has any justification at all, beyond self-satisfaction and self-perpetuation, it must be that it provides some kind of intellectual encouragement or at least

asylum for those who may have reason to dissent from common sense or professional intimidation. Arguments from authority, you would have thought, are the one thing that philosophy should never countenance at all. The professors made themselves even more absurd because the authority to which they were appealing was none other than – themselves. 'We're the masters of this college, what we don't know isn't knowledge' – that was the long and the short of their argument.

The affair was taken up in the 'quality' press. Numerous scribblers were found with the confidence, if not the competence, to give bluffers' guides to Derrida, and editorials brimmed with embarrassed jocularly and innuendo about eggheads and frogs' legs combined with a bit of everyday racism about Plucky Brits calling the Fancy Frenchman's Bluff. As if to clinch the matter, they would take sentences at random from Derrida's work and invite us to have a good laugh at their alien opacity.

It can hardly be denied that readers are unlikely to get much out of reading isolated sentences from Derrida, or indeed from anyone much else for that matter. It is also true, no doubt, that Derrida has published some rather slight, inflated and forgettable pieces. But then, so did Descartes, Kant, or Bertrand Russell, amongst others: so let them be forgotten, rather than tracked down and brandished as if they somehow discredited all the rest. What is certain is that Derrida has made considerable contributions to a long and high line of Western literature. The tradition includes Montaigne, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and its starting point is a fear that overweening confidence in one's own comprehensive rationality and humanity may – however righteous its intentions – be in effect exclusionary, crazy and cruel.

No doubt this kind of writing has its limitations: for example, it is inevitably self-referential and ironic in style: you cannot consistently propose a complete ethico-philosophical system of your own, when it is precisely the dangers of any such proposal that you are trying to warn against. Graham McCann of super-rich King's College Cambridge wrote to the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (15 May) to explain his opposition to Derrida. He announced his sympathy for 'the two teenage boys now living on the street outside my faculty' and asserted that Derrida, in contrast, is 'disinterested (*sic*) in other people's suffering'. Which tends to prove the Derridean point: that self-righteous humanists are liable to become mindlessly aggressive when their own credentials are on the line. Dr David-Hillel Ruben, from a Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method in London scored a similar own-goal when he wrote a sporting letter to *The Times* (13 May). He boasted that 'philosophers love a good argument about anything' but then said that Derrida must be excluded because he has questioned the philosophers' rules of 'clear, rigorous, rational discussion'.

The Crusaders for proper professional philosophy may have

symbols of sweet compassion and cool reason emblazoned on their armour, but they get pretty aggressive when they smell the blood of a Derridean. The name of their game could be Acting the Innocent. It is a gratifying routine which offers all players the assurance that nothing which challenges their pride or prejudice could possibly deserve a respectful hearing. This is how it works. The Crusaders profess that, though they may be somewhat simple-minded, they are filled with a sincere desire to understand what their challengers are saying. So they ask them, frankly and apologetically, to translate their challenge into plain language. The rest is easy. If the challengers do not paraphrase themselves to the Crusaders' satisfaction, they can be reviled as heathens,

charlatans and foreigners, who have refused to abide by the proper rules of intellectual engagement. But if they do, then the Crusaders can ask with a great show of astonishment: 'Is that all?' The challenge, it appears, is something everyone had always known about: the only novelty was that it was dressed up in swanky foreign prose. Heads I win, tails you lose.

In the event, the players of Acting the Innocent were outwitted, and on 12 May the self-appointed guardians of philosophy were defeated. Derrida's invitation was confirmed by 336 votes to 204, in an approximately 25% poll, and he collected his honour on 13 June. The only intelligent accounts of the affair were in *Libération* (17 May) and *Die Zeit* (22 May).

Jonathan Rée

Walter Benjamin Centenary

Of all the figures of the intellectual left in the febrile German culture of the 1930s, Walter Benjamin is perhaps the one now most closely associated with the pathos of the times. From his almost total obscurity prior to the publication of Adorno's two-volume edition of his writings in 1955, Benjamin has emerged as the most celebrated, and scrutinised, of thinkers. The appearance in German of a selection of his letters (1966) and the seven-volume *Collected Writings* (1972-89) containing (as volume 5, 1982) the materials of his great unfinished project, the *Passagen-Werke* (Arcades Project) was accompanied by an avalanche of secondary literature, as Benjamin's work quickly became a battleground for more recent intellectual and political disputes. Translations followed, albeit with the delay customary to the complacency of English-language publishing, and a substantial portion of Benjamin's writings is now available in English, along with a mounting critical literature of an unusually high standard.

Benjamin's place in the pantheon of critical theorists is established, yet the search for some readily transmittable essence of his thought remains largely unrewarded. For all the exegesis of the writings, the thought eludes summation. Captured, bespectacled, chin in hand, in the photograph by Gisele Freund which has done so much to fix his image as the quintessential intellectual - solitary, intense, Jewish, preoccupied, yet nonetheless exuding a certain arrogance and calm - Benjamin's downcast eyes do not so much connote the displacement of attention from the camera to some other object within their field of vision, as the melancholy awareness of profounder, inexpressible truths, of history, the actuality of which were soon to overwhelm him. Frozen in the extra-temporal stasis of the photographic image - a stasis that was the model for Benjamin's own notion of the dialectical image - Benjamin is at once placed beyond our reach and produced as a screen for the projection of a variety of current concerns - with marginality, with language, with time, with Judaism, with the city - which his texts are then asked, retrospectively, to authenticate, nurturing them with the gravitas of his *persona*.

It is in the context of this uncomfortable combination of familiarity and distance, assimilation and inassimilability, that the centenary conference, *Walter Benjamin, 1892-1940*, held at Birkbeck College, London, 16th - 18th July, derives its interest as a snapshot of the current state of the reception of Benjamin's work in the English-speaking world. Twelve papers over three days, all in plenary sessions, with a range of speakers from Germany, the USA and the UK, suggested that a sustained engagement with the vexed issue of Benjamin's contemporaneity was in store. If this engagement never quite happened, it was nonetheless a highly stimulating and occasionally intriguing experience.

The papers were broadly of two types (with the inevitable

exceptions): sophisticated academic interpretations of specific themes in Benjamin's work, without much direct consideration of the contribution of Benjamin's treatment of these themes to current political debates; and more or less ambitious attempts to chart Benjamin's contemporary significance, within which the interest of the readings of Benjamin on offer was generally in inverse proportion to the directness of its application. As a whole, the conference may thus be seen to have staged a dilemma in the interpretation of Benjamin's work in the form of a contradiction between the textual and practical adequacy of its various readings: a contradiction that gradually became more apparent as the conference progressed.

Of the more academic papers, three stood out. First was Sigrid Weigel's 'From Gender Images to Dialectical Images' - for me, one of the highlights of the conference. Based primarily upon a reading of the little known early work 'Metaphysics of Youth' (1913), it traced the positioning of female figures in the development of Benjamin's writing in terms of a movement from the side of the 'other' (silence) to the threshold between dreaming and awakening - Benjamin's central metaphor for the elucidation of historical consciousness - through a comparison of the roles of the prostitute and the whore, within which, it was argued, women gradually come to represent what is present in the form of the repressed and forgotten within modernity; rather than a purely negative, internal limit to representation as such. They thereby become a privileged site for allegory, whereby the imaginary structure of representation is dispersed from within. Thus, while Benjamin's earliest writings position women within language only by negation, in a way directly comparable to the analyses of Kristeva and Irigaray ('Language denies women their souls', Benjamin writes at one point), the later work was seen to make them central. The movement of reversal at work here in the allegorical deconstruction of the image (privileging the repressed, distorted and forgotten), central to Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image, was presented by Weigel as the distinctive product of a preoccupation with the polarities of gender.

Second was Gillian Rose's characteristically idiosyncratic 'Walter Benjamin - Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', which extracted a theological interpretation of fascism as 'the evil of liberation from law without God' from *The Origin of Trauerspiel*, and more or less deduced the 'spirit of fascism' from the immanent development of Protestant thought.

Finally, Andrew Benjamin offered a comparison of Benjamin's and Heidegger's work on historical time by reducing the presence of the Messiah in Benjamin's writings to the status of a figure within an attempt to articulate an 'ontology of the event', on the basis of a demonstration of the impossibility of redemption.



extending Benjamin's notion of shock into a full-blown neurological concept of modernity characterised by a 'synaesthetic system' within which the aestheticisation of politics has outlived fascism to become the narcotic norm of everyday life; the latter through some desultory, but highly pertinent, remarks on the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* as a model 'only for an interruption, never for a curriculum'. Distanced as we are from the 'terrible simplification' of the conjuncture of 1940, Wohlfarth argued, we need a political redefinition of the present out of which we write if we are to begin to appropriate Benjamin's critique of historicism for a living politics. Once more, however, as at certain points earlier in the conference, it was the spectral presence of theology, Benjamin's 'wizened dwarf', that made room for doubt about the feasibility of the whole enterprise.

If Buck-Morss's paper was the strongest affirmation of the potential of Benjamin's thought for a contemporary cultural criticism which has not forsaken the big issues of commodification and aestheticisation, Wohlfarth's was its salutary companion. And if the issue of the contemporaneity of Benjamin's thought was never completely satisfactorily addressed, this was in one sense a tribute of its own to what was perhaps Benjamin's most enduring theme: what he once described as the 'falling ill' of tradition, and the difficulties of replacing it with new forms of collective experience capable of securing a mode of continuity with the past that can form the basis for a liberated future.

Peter Osborne

Women and the History of Philosophy

The eighth annual conference of the British Society for the History of Philosophy was held at Girton College, Cambridge in April. Its theme was 'Women and the History of Philosophy: Genre, Canon, Audience'. There were papers on individuals such as Elena Tarabotti, Catharine Trotter, Edith Simcox, George Eliot, Queen Christina, Anna Wheeler, Mary Wollstonecraft, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Catherine Macaulay, as well as on general themes about canonicity and philosophy's audience.

Speakers had evidently heeded a request from the organisers that, beyond unearthing forgotten philosophical women, the conference should consider more general issues: whether some conceptions of philosophy were more hospitable to women than others; whether philosophy is more hostile to women than other disciplines; whether the study of woman philosophers throws up problems for received approaches to the history of philosophy; and several more.

The papers were excellent, and the discussions unusually wide-ranging and open-minded. Perhaps this was because four out of five of the participants were women – roughly the reverse of the customary sex-ratio at philosophy conferences. This was one of the rare occasions when the BSHP has tried to fulfil its founding aims, which included cooperation with other disciplines, reappraisal of the canon, and raising methodological and historiographical questions about the nature of philosophy. The Society will revert to its usual form for its next major conference, on George Berkeley, in Oxford in July 1993. Anyone wishing to join the Society should write to Beverley Southgate, Hatfield Polytechnic, Wall Hall Campus, Aldenham, Herts WC2 8AT, England.

Jonathan Rée

Falling most clearly into my second category (with the exception of Terry Eagleton's 'Benjamin and Ireland', which took relevance to the point of almost failing to refer to Benjamin at all, whilst offering a clearly historicist history of Ireland as an alternative) were Janet Wolff's dissection of 'The Equivocal Appeal of Walter Benjamin for Contemporary Cultural Studies' - from which I have borrowed the theme of the iconic status of Freund's photograph (above); Julian Roberts's 'Constructivism, Melancholy and Architecture', in which another highly idiosyncratic intelligence was put to work - Rose and Roberts, one is tempted to suggest, are the torn halves of an idiosyncrasy of the intellect; and Axel Honneth's 'Moral Function of Magic Experience', in which the Habermasian categories of communication and intersubjectivity were deployed to translate Benjamin's work into a moral philosophy so as to compensate for its allegedly inherent lack of either theoretical or political contemporaneity. Each offered illuminating insights into their respective topics, yet, one felt, without ever really getting a grip on the distinctive theoretical structure of Benjamin's work. Wolff's paper was followed by an exchange with Sigrid Weigel over the feminist critique and/or appropriation of Benjamin's work which highlighted the contrast between the two approaches. Thus, whilst Wolff reiterated her much cited gender critique of the *flâneur* ('the invisible *flâneuse*'), Weigel insisted on the historical objectivity of the gender content of Benjamin's account, and suggested that it is more productive for feminists to appropriate Benjamin's interpretive procedures for gender criticism.

If, in the course of the papers described so far we had had 'Benjamin and ...' the Borgesian list of Feminism, Judaism, Philosophy, Cultural Studies, Architecture & Habermas, it was left to Susan Buck-Morss, author of what is probably the best book on Benjamin in English (*The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT, 1989) and Irving Wohlfarth (editor of the Benjamin special issue of *New German Critique*, no.39, Fall 1986) to restore the political context to Benjamin's thought: the former through an illustrated *tour de force*,

Singer Silenced

Peter Singer, leading light in the field of applied ethics and notable campaigner on behalf of animals, has recently been drawing the attention of English-speaking philosophers to a new expression of intolerance in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. Apparently, disruptive action by protesters at the University of Hamburg secured the cancellation of a lecture by Dr Anton Leist, a shortlisted candidate for a new chair in applied ethics. His name was subsequently removed from the shortlist. Singer says that he has, himself, been unable to lecture openly in any of the three countries since 1989, whilst courses based on a translation of his *Practical Ethics* have been persistently disrupted. He also cites the cancellation of one international conference, and the transfer of another from Germany to the Netherlands because of threats of disruption or objections to the participation of some of the invited speakers.

The objections are not to Singer's advocacy of extending the circle of moral concern to non-human animals, but rather to his reasoned defence of euthanasia in certain circumstances. Indeed, for some of the objectors, it is not the *position* on this issue taken by Singer and other practitioners of applied ethics which causes offence, but the attempt to discuss the issue at all. Singer notes that these objections come, not as might be expected in the English-speaking countries from Conservative and religious quarters, but from an alliance of campaigning groups of the disabled, feminists, and some groups on the left. Clearly these groups are associating the

concerns posed by applied ethics with the Nazi programmes of eugenics, and the murder of many thousands of disabled people. But Singer notes a 'peculiar tone of fanaticism about some sections of the German debate over euthanasia that goes beyond normal opposition to Nazism, and instead begins to seem like the very mentality that made Nazism possible'.

There are, however, parallels with disruptions of lectures carried out by UK left groups not so long ago under the slogan 'No platform for Racists'. Singer does, indeed, agree that there would be wide support for *some* restrictions on free speech, e.g., in banning incitement to racial hatred – and he distinguishes defence of the principle that views should not be suppressed from the right to express those views in particular ways and in particular times and places. Reasoned and respectful debate, he thinks, is the way to come to terms with Germany's Nazi past – not sloganising and disruption. (See P. Singer, 'A German Attack on Applied Ethics', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1991, pp. 85-91.)

Ted Benton

Philosophy for Children

The International Council of Philosophical Inquiry with Children (ICPIC) Conference was held in June at Graz in Austria. Attended by about 200 participants from over 26 countries, this gathering marks the growth over the last twenty years of the teaching of philosophy at school.

At this year's conference issues were discussed ranging from the philosophical

underpinnings, the evaluation and the implementation of philosophy for children, and the training of teachers to environmental ethics and the first ever feminism and philosophy for children seminar.

Prof. Mathew Lipman founded a programme in philosophy for children at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State College, New Jersey, USA. Since 1970 curriculum materials for kindergarten to final year have been developed in the form of a set of 'novels' (such as *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*) accompanied by substantial teachers' manuals explaining the leading philosophical ideas likely to be raised by readers and providing a variety of discussion plans and exercises for use in the classroom.

In the classroom, these 'novels' stimulate discussion in the context of a community of inquiry, in which the pupils raise their own questions, set the agenda for discussion and share their ideas together. The pedagogical process is pupil oriented rather than teacher centred. The fundamental insight of Philosophy for Children is that overlaid curricula leave little space for children to explore their own and others' ideas. The community of inquiry provides a locus for critical and creative thinking as well as the examination of the big questions in philosophy which fascinate kids.

Those interested in the teaching of philosophy in schools should contact: IAPC, Montclair State College, Upper Montclair, New Jersey, 07043 USA

San MacColl

ERRATA

Due to teething problems with changes in our production system, a number of errors found their way into RP 61. In particular, two lines were omitted from the penultimate paragraph of Gregory Elliott's 'A Just War?', on p.13. The third sentence of the paragraph in question **should** have read as follows: 'One salutary effect on the real Gulf War was to remind us of something fashionably reviled as 'essentialism' by those for whom life is not a recurrent emergency: i.e., the existence of human needs which are universal (trans-historical and cross-cultural) and objective (rooted in nature common to *homo sapiens*), and upon whose satisfaction, whatever its precise modality, human beings are dependent for survival and hence any conceivable well-being.'

There were also a number of smaller errors in Wal Suchting's 'Reflections Upon Roy Bhaskar's "Critical Re-

alism"'. Wal Suchting has asked us to draw readers' attention to the following:

p.26, col.2, line 22: For 'producers of production' read 'process of production';

p.27, col.2, 28 lines from the bottom: For 'of the transcendental' read 'of that the transcendental';

p.28, col.2, 31 lines from the bottom: For '(CN-2_' read '(CN-2)';

p.28, col.2, 26 lines from the bottom: For 'restructures/' read 'structures/';

p.29, line 13: For 'instances in' read 'instances of';

p.30, col.2, line 12: For 'substantive' read 'substantive', and delete the question marks which follow;

p.31, col.2, lines 3 & 30: For 'Böhme' read 'Böhme';

p.31, col.2, line 7: For '1713' read '171e'.