

native economic growth to the Amazon region based on clean industry and manufacturing may remove the need to cut more and more forest for mere economic survival.

Hendrik J. Bruins
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

BENJAMIN'S CROSSING by Jay Parini, Boston: University Press of New England, 1998.

Walter Benjamin argued that the entire life of authors, and the effects of their writings, should stand alongside the history of their composition. In other words, their fate, their reception by their contemporaries and society, must be known, in order to understand the author and their work (Eiland and Smith, 1999). It is not common that an academic journal would review a novel. However, Benjamin's Crossing is a novel with important implications to many areas of scholarly and intellectual inquiry. It portrays the life and tragic death of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who is certainly considered among the most important cultural and literary critiques and philosophers of this century. His personal life and writings, encapsulates and was affected directly by some of the most consequential challenges and conflicts that threatened the basis of civilization and decency during this century. He has become a cult figure within the academy during the last several decades, yet most scholars know little about his life and pay scant attention to it. In fact, one could argue that without knowing of Benjamin's experience, it is not possible to truly understand his contribution.

Benjamin's Crossing is a moving novel set against the backdrop of the encroaching Holocaust. Jay Parini is able to recreate much of Benjamin's life, from his youth in Berlin, to his final hours in a Pyrenees village in Spain after fleeing the Nazi invasion of Paris. Parini convincingly conveys these important historical moments, and in doing so, is able to create a riveting story. It is evident that Parini carried out intensive research in order to recount this novel. It depicts Benjamin's numerous attempts to flee Nazi occupied Paris and France, culminating in his frantic escape over the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain. *Benjamin's Crossing* begins with Gershom Scholem at Walter Benjamin's unmarked grave sight in a small Spanish town, ten years after his disappearance. The story then moves to 1940 Paris, where Benjamin is preparing to flee from Nazis, after having spent an entire decade working on his important manuscript. Parini is able to portray Benjamin's life in realistic detail, and also characterizes the general ethos of an era, vanished forever.

Parini concentrates on several episodes in Benjamin's life, including the period just before and during WWI, Benjamin's visit to Russia, his difficult life in Paris during the late 1930s, and his flight to Spain. Parini uses several narrators, including his lifelong friend, the eminent scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem, and his lover Asja Lacis, to capture both Benjamin's brilliance and his tormented personality. In the novel Benjamin's character is largely made up of the bohemian

and the scholar, though simultaneously remains somewhat elusive. Born in Berlin in 1892 to a well-to-do Jewish family, Benjamin reflected many of the twentieth century's most turbulent currents, and was doomed to a life of increased uncertainty. He visited Russia in the 1920s after becoming fascinated by Marxism, and left Germany in the 1930s with the rise of Nazism. He lived uneasily in Paris, suspected because he was Jewish and as a possible Communist. With Benjamin, went his thousand page manuscript that he carried while attempting to escape the Nazis the length of France.

Parini embarks on a mesmerizing account of Germany and its Jewish intellectual life between the two world wars. Benjamin's youth and university days are woven into the greater story of escape and pursuit. There are appearances by intellectual giants such as Hanna Arendt and others throughout the book. Parini's portrait of an entire generation of intellectuals overwhelmed by revolution and war, and of their desperate attempts to make sense of their world, is resonant and convincing. Parini is able to capture the intensity and richness of the cultural and intellectual life in Berlin between the two wars. This is especially vivid among the Jewish intellectual community—a community eradicated—yet the abundance of vibrant movements of socialists, Zionists, Bondists and various religious groups, involved some of the greatest minds of the century.

Two important themes that run in the novel, center on the binary notions of denial and the reality of persecution. Parini shows how difficult it is to accept, at a personal level, rejection due to group identity assigned by nationalists and their exclusionary ideology. In 1939, when Benjamin had been interned by the French authorities in Paris, he finally realized that he must escape the city he loved in order to pursue his life's work and simply survive. Through rare letters among old associates, namely Scholem, he is repeatedly urged to travel to Palestine to save himself from the impending Nazi onslaught. In fact, Scholem goes to great lengths to secure work for him at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Benjamin planned his escape through Spain to Palestine. The trip through Vichy France is portrayed in the first person, in poignant fashion.

Hours after arriving in Spain, Benjamin, in a weakened and extremely ill state, apparently commits suicide. He does so, in order not to slow down his group of fellow Jewish refugees that were informed upon by the Spanish inn keeper to the local fascists. The loss of such a vital intellectual is symbolic of the destruction of European Jewry and civil society. The book is important not just in terms of Benjamin, but also with regard to the role of the intellectual in modern society. With the recent re-emergence of notions of nationalist exclusion, intolerance, forms of racism and anti-semitism; and the fact that the term 'ethnic cleansing' has entered into our contemporary vocabulary—the book, indirectly, poses a vital question. Were Benjamin or Scholem correct in the paths they chose to pursue, at the personal and intellectual level? Benjamin's life work centered on a world view of an 'enlightened' inclusive Europe for all citizens, including the Jews. Yet in the pursuit of his dream, Benjamin ends up in an unmarked grave, deprived of his citizenship and basic dig-

nity, hounded by Nazis. Scholem, on the other hand, Benjamin's childhood friend emigrated to Palestine concerned mainly with Jewish rehabilitation, and perhaps in possession of less universalistic concerns. He helps to establish the Hebrew University, and succeeds in bringing Jewish mysticism and philosophical thought to secular western university educational curriculum. *Benjamin's Crossing* subsequently possess a pertinent question for our time. Is it possible to attain true integration with respect for minorities in society? In the wake of the Holocaust and contemporary forms of xenophobia, is particularist thought the only viable path to safe-guard group rights? How should society treat minorities, guarantee basic human rights and citizenship? Despite his personal tragedy, Benjamin's writings provides us with hope for a better, a more just, and inclusive future.

I highly recommend *Benjamin's Crossing*. It is both a learning and enjoyable novel. It offers insights into the life and work of Benjamin, one of this century's most important thinkers, whose life experience is profoundly wound up and central to his work. Parini offers us crucial insights to his life, in a well-researched and carefully detailed account. It should be considered relevant reading material for university courses that use the work of Benjamin so to place the person and his writings in their proper context, so often neglected in current discourse. It is also appropriate for those interested in reading a well written novel.

REFERENCES

Jenning, M. Eiland, H. and Smith, G. (eds.) (1999) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927–1934*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Charles Small
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

THE LAST BEST WEST: ESSAYS ON THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE CANADIAN PRAIRIES by Yossi Katz and John C. Lehr. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1999.

A distinguished British student of cultural geography once told me that he envied those of us who live in the North American Midwest, because we have such a splendid 'laboratory' in which to observe first-hand how different culture groups have occupied an environment that is essentially homogeneous over an extensive area. Up close, however, that environment is not quite as uniform as it seems when seen from afar, and culturally the Midwest is the epitome of the melting pot. Strong social pressure forced newcomers, groups as well as individuals, to conform to and to adopt an existing farming system that flourished for more than a century and a half because it was economically successful and ecologically sound. In the Midwest you have to work hard to find cultural differences.