InVisible Culture

Book Review: Bill Brandt: A Life

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In this lengthy biography of Bill Brandt, author Paul Delany presents the renowned British photographer as a shy and complex individual. Brandt was born in Hamburg, Germany as Hermann Wilhelm Brandt in 1909. His father’s family was successful in banking and international trade, while his mother’s kin were members of the Hamburg governing class, thus Brandt and his five siblings lived their early days according to the highest bourgeois standards. As Delany suggests, “it was a life of wealth, comfort and order; of lavish food and drink” (15). Yet despite (or because of) this privilege, Brandt spent the duration of his life actively trying to escape this past.

Delany’s description of Brandt’s childhood has all the makings of a colorful Freudian case study. He was a sensitive and thoughtful boy who was constantly subjected to the whims of a despotic father. Unable to seek protection from his vulnerable mother, he consequently sought comfort in the arms of his beloved nanny. Although Brandt found some respite upon the elder Brandt’s internment as an enemy-alien (because he was of English birth) for the duration of the First World War, as soon as the Brandt family patriarch returned the boy was sent away to military-like boarding school where he apparently suffered innumerable humiliations. “There is ample evidence,” Delany argues, “that Brandt suffered a psychic wound . . . something so hurtful that it affected every area of his life afterwards” (24). Finally, just as he was finishing at the treacherous Bismarckschule, Brandt was diagnosed with severe tuberculosis and was admitted to a sanatorium where he stayed for four years under the care of a draconian German physician.

For Brandt, Delany argues, the aforementioned doctor’s cruelty, his own father’s tyranny, and his abuse at boarding school led him to reject Germany at a very deep level. For the rest of his life he therefore worked to oblate his own history. When he recovered from tuberculosis, he went to Vienna, where he was apprenticed to a portrait photographer. He then moved to Paris and became an assistant to Man Ray. Using his British citizenship (granted because of his father), he finally landed in London in 1934 and re-named himself “Bill” Brandt. He subsequently refused to speak German, changed the story of his birth, and would never allow himself to be tape-recorded in interviews for fear his accent would betray him.

Brandt, however, could not erase these experiences entirely. As Delany argues, the trauma he endured as a child and young adult plagued him psychologically through his later life. For instance, he suffered extreme neediness and could never be without the affection of at least two women (in fact, he lived much of his British life in a ménage a trois with first wife Eva Brandt and mistress Marjorie Beckett). He also developed intense sexual obsessions, which are illustrated particularly well in his photographs of nudes from the 1940s and 1970s (his Bound Nude of 1977/80 is an excellent example, depicting a naked woman propped in a corner, tied-up, and hooded). Moreover, as he grew older, he suffered more and more from a debilitating paranoia.
Owing to the fact that Brandt was always an extremely private individual, and became more so in later life, it is truly remarkable that Delany could produce such a lengthy and detailed biography. Yet Delany’s depth is also problematic. Because Brandt did not leave behind any record from which to gather information about his life other than his photographs (for instance, letters in an archive, etc.), Delany’s attempts to analyze basic facts are often elaborated with speculation rather than reasoned scrutiny. For example, when he describes the role of Brandt’s nanny in his childhood home, instead of admitting his lack of information, he casually suggests that:

the nanny might well be a pretty and submissive girl, whose affection for her charges could easily catch the eye of her master. The mother might not find out what her husband was up to, or might not have enough power to drive out her rival, as in the enduring ménage-a-trois for which the household of Karl Marx was notorious. It was not unheard of for the father to arrange for his sons to be sexually initiated by one of the female servants who had also served his own needs (17).

These suppositions appear even more overdone after it is made clear that Delany does not have enough facts about the nanny even to know her name, let alone the salacious details of her place in the household.

Much of Delany’s analysis revolves around Brandt’s obsession with erasing his German past and trying to become English. The terms “English,” “England,” and “Englishness” are thus deployed frequently throughout the book. Yet beyond his mere use of these terms, Delany does little to analyze what they actually mean. Using “England” over “Britain” or “Englishness” over “Britishness,” however, is quite a significant choice. Indeed, for the last twenty years, historians and critics have battled over these terms and the implications of their use. They are not, in other words, merely descriptive. “English” (as well as “England” and “Englishness”) connotes those characteristics (real or imagined) historically associated with the southern-most country of the British Isles: largely middle- and upper-class, protestant, white, heterosexual, colonial-minded, and quite patriarchal. Britain, however, is a more inclusive term that indicates the peoples and identity politics of Scotland, Wales, and England (and using “United Kingdom” would further add Ireland).1 Thus as David Peters Corbett, Antony Easthope, and Simon Gikandi amongst others have argued, to choose one term over the other has quite serious political, social, and cultural implications.2 And although I have no doubt that Brandt attempted to specifically embrace England rather than Britain, I do not think that Delany is concerned about the difference.

Finally, this book disappointingly follows the well-worn path of ascribing innate genius to the male artist. This is to say, because Delany chose to investigate Brandt on a psychological rather than a socio-historical level, the book contains little or no reference to those factors that allowed white male artists to succeed many times more often than their female counterparts in early twentieth-century Europe. Brandt’s accomplishment, in other words, is never attributed to the patriarchal organization of society, issues of wealth and class, skin color, or sexual orientation. Rather, Delany’s argument primarily details the photographer and the workings of his individual mind, leading the reader to infer that he assumes Brandt’s talent was purely instinctive. This is never the case. More seriously, however, as Linda Nochlin, Rozsika Parker, and Griselda Pollock have argued, histories of art in which men are innately destined toward creativity and invention, always leave the opposite
implied: that women are essentially intellectual nonentities, merely fated to use their biological skills to become wives and mothers.\(^3\) Thus, although Delany’s exploration of Brandt’s psychology is interesting (sometimes even inspiring a feverish page-turning), perhaps he should have also investigated the photographer’s life from a wider, socially-inspired perspective, not least of all to avoid accusations of prejudice.

**Footnotes**

1. Because Scotland, Wales and Ireland are essentially colonized countries, the identity politics associated with these nations are more or less related to those of the minority “other” as opposed to the mainstream.  
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