In our Time Programme 44
The Individual

Melvyn Bragg : Hello, one view is that the Renaissance gave birth to the concept of the individual, and Shakespeare most brilliantly defined this individual, "What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason , how infinite in faculty. In form, in moving, how express and admirable. In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god". According to Michel Foucault, French philosopher polar opposite of Shakespeare, and backed as he thought by Marx and Freud, our century has killed off the individual. But has it? And what is the individual?

With me to discuss this is the philosopher Richard Volheim, Professor of Philosophy at the University of California in Berkeley, and author besides much else of "The Thread of Life". I'm also joined by the cultural critic, Jonathan Dollimore who's Professor of English at York University, and the author of "Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture".

Jonathan Dollimore, why do you think individualism, or the concept of the individual was, as it were, invented or born in the time of the Renaissance?

Jonathan Dollimore : Well historians of course, disagree about when it was born, but yes I think there is a good argument for saying it was the Renaissance. You...you quoted from Hamlet and of course in a way, Hamlet is the modern individual. I mean for hundreds of years now we've been fascinated by this figure. He's enigmatic, he's complex, in some sense we see ourselves in this figure, and yet at another level what is he? He's a dysfunctional depressive. Now there are two things going on in that play. Earlier on when Polonius gives advice to his son on how to behave in that sinful city, Paris. He gives him a lot of good humanist advice and at the very end he says, "Above all else, to thine own self be true". Now that idea, I think, is a crucial touchstone for individualism, throughout the last few hundred years. The trouble with Hamlet is, he tries to introspect this self and what does he find? The quote continues, the one you gave us at the beginning with, "What is man to me but the quintessence of dust".

Melvyn Bragg : But do you think that Hamlet or the Renaissance discovered an individual who is markedly and decisively different from Plato, from Julius Caesar, from Edward the Confessor, spread over the last ....whatever it is?

Jonathan Dollimore : Well the....

Melvyn Bragg : Two and a half thousand years.

Jonathan Dollimore : ....the person who wrote about this most influentially, Jacob Burkhart, he was the one who said the Renaissance *was* the place where the individual emerges. He was talking about a very different kind of person from Hamlet. He was talking about the Renaissance Man , the great individual, the individual who is thirsty for power, thirsty for knowledge, self-affirming, but in often a brutally self regarding way, a brutally self-*serving* way. But, yes in a way life-affirming, one thinks in English terms of Sir Walter Raleigh. But the odd thing about Raleigh is, the great man of action, but if you read his poetry, it's amazing that he got anything done, because their is a melancholy there similar to Hamlet's .

Melvyn Bragg : I'd just like to come back, before I go to Professor Volheim to ask you, what is there different about the individual at the time of the Renaissance? How do ..... how..... in what ways could you tell listeners, that a person's a different person from, I've just chosen three at random from..... Plato, Julius Caesar and Edward the Confessor, just for example

Jonathan Dollimore : I would say that there's not a fundamental difference in the sense that, again philosophers and historians will find the antecedance of individualism as far back as the Greeks and the Romans, what you have in the Renaissance is an intensification of certain qualities. As I say the quest for knowledge, the quest for power, a heightened sense of individuality, a heightened sense of self which is nevertheless problematic.

Melvyn Bragg : Professor Volheim, Richard Volheim, do you think it's possible to date the birth of the individual, or to see what Jonathan Dollimore's been talking about in the way that he looks at it?

Richard Volheim : Well I think there's a lot of exaggeration to my mind, in the way in which...in those views which Jonathan puts forward. The first thing is, there obviously have for many, many thousands of years been individuals, that's just a matter really of evolution, and the individual is a kind of biological unit out of which there develops some very special kind of psychology. I think that's interesting what that psychology is, and so the actual fact of the individual, and for that matter the concept of the individual they must be absolutely age old, certainly older than civilisation, as we know it. But then I think at a certain period of time, and it may be around the Renaissance, not one ideology but a series of ideologies did develop, and these are really ideologies about how individuals should be, how they should live, what forms authority should take, and I think it's important to see that there are many, many of these and they all conflict with one another, so I don't think even on the level of ideology we've got anything like unity. I mean if you think of say Descartes and if you think of Montaigne , one thinks of the individual something almost shorn of psychology, the other thinks of it as deep as possible of psychology.

Melvyn Bragg : You talked about an individual being present before civilisation.....

Richard Volheim : Yep.

Melvyn Bragg : ....can you therefore some....you've written extensively about this and we're necessarily in this sense rather elliptical, but could you give us some notion of *your* definition of an individual.

Richard Volheim : Yes, well my understanding really of what an individual is, is this, it's first of all a biological unit, it's got this very distinctive structure, sort of neurophysiology I suppose, and out of that there develops a certain kind of psychology. Now what is to me very significant about this psychology, is the particular way in which any...at any given moment the individual is linked to its past and to its future, it's particularly linked to its past in the way in which this past is always exercising some influence over it and through consciousness, specifically I think through memory, so when we remember our past events we've lived through we also reinforce to some degree or other that influence over us, and then we are peculiarly concerned with the events in our own future.

I don't mean that we're more....that we're particularly egotistical, selfish about that, but there's some way that we react when we know that something is going to happen to us, that is distinctly different from when it happens to someone else, whether that's someone whom we love or hate or someone in between. So that's really where I think the core of the individual lies in this psychology.

Melvyn Bragg : If you accept that Jonathan Dollimore, how does that fit in with your notion that the individual as outlined very succinctly and clearly by Professor Volheim there, came to be born or reborn or certainly given enormous energy, according to your thesis in the Renaissance, a mere few hundred years ago, 5-600 years ago?

Jonathan Dollimore : I agree with Richard, of course there are conflicting ideologies of the individual and in a sense it's the philosophers task to separate them out, to try and give us that clarity. The point about the individual in real life and of course in literature is that they often live those contradictions, they live those conflicting ideas. That was the point I was making with Hamlet, not that he's a unified individual, and my argument is that it's often quite simplistic to assume that there was once a time when the individual was confident, secure and knew exactly who he or she was. My argument is actually that the individual has been in crisis from the very beginning, and that's part of the human identity.....

Melvyn Bragg : When for you is the beginning, I mean, I'm not going to dwell on this much more, but I'd just like to...Richard has put it way back, back....you talk of beginnings, and I've been talking about the Renaissance as the beginning, being prompted by you, from your book, but when...so you think that is the beginning?

Jonathan Dollimore : No, no I don't say that.....

Melvyn Bragg : That's what still rather disturbs me, that.....

Jonathan Dollimore : I don't actually say that, but what I'm trying to say is that there are...that there's an intensification of certain ideas, the individual....put it this way, to be simply put, the individual comes to embody more conflicting ideas of the self in the Renaissance perhaps, than before. Now it's important not to simplify the medieval period, but the argument goes, that actually then the individual was conceived, or the identity of the

individual was theorised in terms of his or her relationship for community, the clan or whatever. Now again medievalists would challenge that, we don't want to get into that dispute, but what I'm saying is that the individual comes to embody, to internalise many more conflicting emotions of what it is to be a person, a subject, an individual.

Melvyn Bragg : Would you accept that Richard?

Richard Volheim : Well, I'm interested in this idea of conflict. Of course there are conflicting ideas of what people are, no doubt at all about that, but I think there's maybe something maybe more fundamental than that, and that is, whether we expect the individual itself to be in conflict, to be in internal conflict, nothing to do with views about the self, but the self itself, and that I think is absolutely inherent to the notion of an individual or person, that there are these internal conflicts. Now these conflicts don't, it seems to me, conflict with the idea of unity, they conflict, of course, with the idea of simplicity, and some people have thought that the self was simple. Not at all, and I think what's interesting is the way in which we experience a lot of these conflicts, and a lot of conflicts we experience by feeling that there are as it were, different people inside us. We notice this of course, particularly in crises of guilt. We hear these voices talking. But that, it seems to me is not merely the source of conflict, but it's one..... one of the ways in which the individual lives, that's inherent to the life of the individual, as I think of it.

Melvyn Bragg : But do you think there was a real change, as exemplified by Hamlet, the few lines I read out at the start, and the lines subsequently brought to the conversation by Jonathan? Do you think there was a change then, a different sort of self-awareness, a different outlining of what the individual could be, could stand for, about 5-600 years ago, which we have..... which has driven through since?

Richard Volheim : Well...I think broadly...roughly, I don't. I mean, I'm sure there are differences of degree here, and I think probably, just moving away from Hamlet into slightly more general territory, I think that what I've called these "ideologies of the self", one of the peculiarities about them is that a lot of people have thought that we ought to be able to decide how individuals should be, or how they should live, using some material, basically, primarily, the fact that they are individuals. So the fact that they are individuals should really tell us what they like, that's the most important thing about individuals, that's what they are.

Melvyn Bragg : Jonathan?

Jonathan Dollimore : Okay, I think I accept the idea of unity, but for me it's a very abstract concept , and I'm not sure it helps explain, for example, why the Renaissance is that period of extraordinary intellectual and creative productivity. Now surely that has something crucially to do with the individual. But it's not this stable complacent, individual which is sometimes theorised in individualism, as I say, it's an individual in crisis, an individual deeply conflicted, and in a sense I don't think the idea of unity helps us understand the complex psychology, which I think -and often for the modern reader, a pathological psychology - which is at the heart of that of that tremendous intellectual creative productivity.

Richard Volheim : Well you see I don't think you can begin to understand the conflicts to which individuals are exposed until you think of the individuals themselves as unified, because it's materials out of which these conflict comes are things which are deposited within the life of the individual.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you think that a liberal humanism at that time brought to idea of the individual something that had not been there before, and something strikingly different from that which had been there before?

Jonathan Dollimore : Strikingly different, but again, if I can make the point, Pico della Mirandola who of course did the great oration, "On the dignity of man", now this is one of the great humanist texts for the Renaissance concept of man , and of the individual, but what does he say? He says that "God does not make us fixed", He precisely made us lacking a unity or a fixaty, and it is precisely because we are mobile, that we, are restless, we move between these identities, that is what makes us uniquely human. So I think that, very often, to come back to your question, what happens is that when we do this cultural history, we retrospectively imagine that there was a more confident, stable, clearly defined individual in the past, and I don't think that's true in the context of literature, and certain kinds of intellectual writing, and maybe there is a distinction here, between the philosopher and the artist, an interesting difference.

Melvyn Bragg : Can I bring it up to the last century or so? Richard Volheim, do you think that Marx's ideas about the individual and society challenge the notion of the individual? That individuals didn't make society, society made individuals, and they were again, putting it rather elliptically, even crudely, they were cogs in a much more massive machine, their influence, their place was just a sort of drop of water in a flood?

Richard Volheim : Well, I suppose with Marx, these ideas of the pressure of society, and the pressure, more specifically of forms of society, different ways in which property and power are assigned , that these really act as deformations of the individual. These are the features that make the individual alienated, make it...make self-fulfillment very different for the individual, and on the positive side of course, Marx, apart from the very early writings, is rather not explicit on the matter. I mean the hope is, that once you overcome these forms of exploitation, then the individual will flourish as individuals do. But we don't know really very much about that. The picture is pretty sketchily and maybe rather simplistically presented. Of course, that wasn't really his interest at all. So I don't think that there's any overall challenge coming from Marx to the idea of the individual, something with a unity and also with great conflict. Perhaps I think, Marx probably underrated the internal sources of conflict in human nature as far as we can see.

Melvyn Bragg : Well I'll pursue this with Jonathan Dollimore. Jonathan don't you think though that it could be said that your Renaissance man having some sort of unity out of internal disunity , did think he could impose - he or she, mostly he - could impose his view, her view on society, win battles, write books, change civilisations, conquer countries, and Marx said, you know, this was to do with "forces" and you were just caught up in the forces, and this...didn't this turn the whole thing on its head?

Jonathan Dollimore : I think it did, and I disagree with Richard on this. I think that Marx's idea that social being determines consciousness made a profound difference. Now we don't necessarily have to accept that he's right. But let's remember also -and I'm not going to get too technical here - that Marx was drawing on Hegel, Hegelian dialectic, and nothing has been more important to the modern challenge to the unity of the individual than the dialectic. Roughly, the idea is this:- That as soon as I start to define myself as individual, isolated and separate, I have to exclude something else, and in the end, this process of exclusion becomes so crucial to my identity, I end up being dependent upon it , and this has become tremendously important even though Marx himself, has waned, the influence of Marx, the Hegelian influence coming through Marx in terms of this idea that the individual is never unified is always to some extent the product of his or her other, this has become tremendously important. I think that.....I think that Marx *did* make a crucial difference.

Melvyn Bragg : As a direct opposition to your position, Richard Volheim, would you like to develop yours a little more strongly then?

Richard Volheim : Em, yes, well I certainly think that the way in which we do develop as individuals is in part through conflict, part through opposition with other people, and that may of course be benign, we derive some of our strength from other people, the way in which we internalise them. Alternatively that may lead to conflict. So, I think that any view about the unity of the individual, particularly the unity of the individual.....the conflicted individual, is bound to emphasise the importance of the environment, and the importance of other people. I mean Freud, who after all who is though by.....

Melvyn Bragg : Can we stay with Marx for a second? Because I just wan to .....

Richard Volheim : Yes, do.....

Melvyn Bragg : Now I mean that man..... we can look at man a species rather than an individual, that this species was moved by economic forces, by powers literally outside his or her control, but even great wars. I remember talking to Alan Bullock, which war leaders, or which persons, single persons could be said to have had a singular and defining effect, and he was very chary indeed about that, and he admitted in the end, perhaps Hitler. So he went that far from a historian who -you couldn't call Alan Bullock a Marxist historian - but the idea of the whole of society driving on an individuals being, tossed like corks in the sea.....

Jonathan Dollimore : Destroyed almost by historical forces.

Melvyn Bragg : Yes.

Richard Volheim : Yeah.

Melvyn Bragg : There's obviously an opposition between the two of you, I'm not look for any, sort of you know, silly rows or anything, but it's very interesting to define it, because Jonathan is very much saying that Marx has..... the Marxism...the influence of Marx and his understanding of society has *attacked* the notion of the individual as defined, or heavily redefined in the Renaissance, aren't you?

Jonathan Dollimore : I do believe that, and I think it's not necessarily inhumane to say that. What I mean is, that for me, the something that brings tears to my eyes every time I read it is Brech's remark on mother courage, I mean the great figure in his play, where he said that, "she *thinks* she is choosing, she *thinks* she is making her life, but in fact what is happening is that she is being absolutely being destroyed, pulled apart by great historical contradiction". That seems to me the humane consequence of the Marxist insight.

Richard Volheim : Oh yes. But that of course, is the individual under one of these forms of society in which it can only be alienated and can fall into this self-deception, but I suppose Marx was fundamentally inspired by the hope that mankind can get out of this, and could in some liberated form of society.....

Jonathan Dollimore : Yes he was.

Richard Volheim : ....fulfil itself.

Jonathan Dollimore : Yes he was.

Melvyn Bragg : But what he saw was anti the individual that the Renaissance saw?

Richard Volheim : Erm, well it might be that the position of man after the overcoming of exploitation and oppression, would be maybe something along one or other of these many idea which did indeed flourish in the Renaissance.

Melvyn Bragg : But what it.....

Jonathan Dollimore : But..... sorry.

Melvyn Bragg : No after you Jonathan.

Jonathan Dollimore : Well I was going to say, the consequence of Marx is that the individual..... one has always got to be defined or understood in terms of his or her social being, and all the conflicts and contradictions which that entails, and I think the second consequence of Marx, of course drawing on Hegel and many other people actually before him, is that the individual is inherently unstable, and it's a fantasy to think that there is a private sphere, an authentic subjectivity into which we can withdraw in order to escape the conflicts of the world.

Melvyn Bragg : You mentioned Freud earlier Richard Volheim, and alongside Marx, Freud could seem to have challenged the notion of the individual as you presented it earlier in this programme. He famously said, "the individual is not master of his own house" and the notion is that you have to suppress your individuality, *re*press your individuality in order to serve society, what would your comment on that be?

Richard Volheim : Well of course notice that Freud does say, "in his own house", in other words.....

Melvyn Bragg : Mmmm, "the individual is not master *of* his own house", *of* his own house.

Richard Volheim : *Of* his own house.

Jonathan Dollimore : It's the *ego*, the ego he says.

Richard Volheim : Yep, yep, so that's really just referring to the ego, exactly, is not master in its own house. But the house is the...is the the self, the person, which of course is prone to conflict, and what I think is distinctive, perhaps most distinctive feature of Freud is how he thought this conflict arose, and he traces it really, basically to two sources. There's the instincts, the desires we have, which for some reason or other -Freud was always much less certain on this point -of why this was so, but nevertheless, these things which are unwelcome to us, which are alien to us, and they we repress or in some other way , defend against, and that of course is never totally successful, so these things come back. But the things which come back are things that have always been ours, and then the other source of the conflict is the way - something which doesn't at first sight necessarily look like a source of conflict - the way in which the people who surround us are people who either - once we think of them - either as dangerous to us, or as in danger to themselves, themselves in danger, we internalise. So we get this inner world, and then the thing in Freud is this notion of the inner world, these figures inside us, and these repressed desires, they link up up in a certain kind of way. So the inner figures become representatives of (indistinct). But everything....all the conflicts in us, are of course, conflicts which derive from us, that's the unity of the self.

Melvyn Bragg : Can I just bring.....sorry....can I, Jonathan, can I just steer that back to the individual? To keep it on.....

Jonathan Dollimore : Yes, yes.

Melvyn Bragg : ..... try to keep it on one line through this programme. How does what Richard says, and what Freud said affect your notion, influence your notion of what you think has happened to the Renaissance idea of the individual?

Jonathan Dollimore : I think that what Freud does is to greatly....again to greatly intensify the idea of the individual to conflict, to a degree where again, I cannot see any unity. I think the unity is a purely abstract idea in relation to Freud. The difference between the Renaissance, perhaps, and Freud is that in the Renaissance, the individual was theorised as someone who could use their energy, could utilise their energy in a dynamic way.

Now in Freud what we have is a model of the psyche, where the energy is always to some degree, turned against itself. You are using up a degree of your energy in order to hold down your neurosis, hold down your repressions, to combat the unconscious, and to that extent, the individual is a necessarily a casualty of civilisation, and what Freud says is quite clear, "if you want civilisation, and most if us do, the price you pay, is a highly conflicted, often neurotic, repressed individual, and we are all damaged", that's what he says, and I think I agree with Freud.

But I would also add, that Freud, when he makes this crucial remark about the ego not being master in its own house, it's in the context of where he talks about psychoanalysis being only the last of a whole series of attacks on the individual, beginning with Copernicus.

Melvyn Bragg : Can I come nearer.....even more up to date with the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who's talked about "the death of the individual", something that you, in your book, also write about Jonathan, can you..... how has the individual died, this century? What are the signs of this death?

Jonathan Dollimore : Yes, this again is a very influential idea, it comes from continental philosophy, mainly the French, people like Michel Foucault, and it rests, I believe, and here I agree with Richard, on a simplistic notion of history, it says, "well there's this individual, who is not a very nice creature, because he", and it usually is a he, "is intrinsic to empire, colonialism, patriarchy". He grew up...emerged in the Renaissance, got theorised in the Enlightenment, had his high point in the 19th century when he stomped around the world, but in the 20th century when all of these things have collapsed, imperialism, empire, masculinity, patriarchy, so the individual man has been thrown into crisis, and they say "there is no such thing as the individual, there's no such thing as man, and any notion of an interior or autonomous self is just the residue of Western metaphysics". This is the argument. I think it's a simplified argument, but it's been a tremendously influential one.

Melvyn Bragg : And you endorse it in your book?

Jonathan Dollimore : I don't endorse it, in the sense that my argument, the point I was making with Freud, is that

Freud is that Freud sees man as in permanent crisis from the Renaissance on. I want to say there was *no* point when the individual was stable an secure. He has always been in crisis, and that crisis is crucial to his history.

Melvyn Bragg : But nevertheless the phrase "the death of the individual" figures in your book, taking on from Foucault, does that make any sense (coughs) ...excuse me, does that phrase, "the death of the individual" in this century, make any real sense to you Richard Volheim?

Richard Volheim : Erm, not really, no. I think what it depends upon is a very exaggerated view of the relation between the things themselves and the thoughts we have about them, in other words it depends upon a certain version of thinking makes it so. Now there are two ways, I think, in which thoughts can relate to the things they're about. I mean if we take say, this coin, a pound coin, now, I can for instance, think about it, and I can think that the currency to which it belongs is really much more under strain than other people think it is, that its worthless, and this could ultimately have an effect upon the buying power of the pound. So that's one way in which thought can always influence that which it's about. But with this coin there's a deeper relation of thought to it. That is to say that..... all...the social conventions about money, actually make this thing into a ...into a unit of currency, that's....in other words, that's a kind of constitutive role. Now, I think the error in various thinkers like Foucault is they don't see the limitations of that. There are certain things that are made so by thought. Thinking makes them so, because they're social, they're institutional facts, like currency, other things okay?
But with something like the individual or human nature, I think that thought about it plays a somewhat superficial contingent role....

Jonathan Dollimore :Yeah.

Richard Volheim : ..... and that's why to talk of "the death of the individual" and to think that that follows from the death of these individualistic ideologies, seems to me like a big error.

Jonathan Dollimore : Right. But what I think....one of the things which people like Foucault talk to is actually the desire of people today to relinquish these older ideas of a deep self, of an individual self. I mean there's a sense in which they find them boring. There's that wonderful post-modern anecdote about the fetishist who is in love with a foot, but had to settle for the whole person. There's a sense now in which the whole person is boring. People feel that these are obsolete ideologies which constrain us, which actually don't liberate our potential.

Now, I'm not saying they are correct, but I think that Foucault and others speak to a great wish to be a free and yet a new way and that freedom involves negating these older ideas of human nature, of man and the individual.

Melvyn Bragg : Does that strike a chord with you Richard Volheim? That the whole thing is..... the wholeness of it is boring, and that the particularity and the idea of the thing being..... withering away is where the energy and interest lies?

Richard Volheim : Well boredom, it's another matter. We all have things which we're bored by. But I think that the....that we might very well be bored by some of these ideologies, but it certainly doesn't mean that the whole way of thinking about people is boring, and also the question doesn't arise at all because it's just inevitable. It's rooted in the very..... in these facts. We can't but think of ourselves in these ways.

Jonathan Dollimore : But the post-modern individual, and I don't endorse him or her, but the post-modern individual which is so influential in metropolitan circles, is very much a multiple individual, it's someone who is mobile, who is defined in terms of style and appearance rather than a deep self. People do find this rather exciting, I suspect it rests on a certain kind of advanced capitalism, and could easily fragment. I also think incidentally that the melancholy is still just underneath.

Melvyn Bragg : Would you agree with that?

Richard Volheim : Well I don't think we can affect our psychologies by ..... in quite such direct ways as that, of course we can affect our psychologies up to a point, by thinking. But in these oblique ways, but we can't just wish that we weren't conceptualised in this boring fashion, and change.

Melvyn Bragg : Well thank you both very much, thank you Jonathan Dollimore, and Richard Volheim and thank you for listening.