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Learning to Look: Berger's Lessons

It was the beans that were the problem. *Fuul*, the young man told me, naming one of Egypt's most common dishes, makes you slow and heavy, 'like a donkey'. Food back home in Sierra Leone, he explained, filled him with energy. Not like the beans. 'The Egyptians want to trap us here', he said.

In 1998, Charles fled his country's civil war for an uncertain present in Cairo. He hoped to eventually resettle in America or Europe. A few months after he arrived, Charles went for his 'status determination' interview at the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) where the officials eyed his carefully ironed shirt with suspicion. Charles was apparently too well-dressed to be in fear of his life. (He had wanted to make an impression.) Despite their doubts, the officials gave Charles his refugee card. Then he waited. By the time I met him, it had been four years. Actual resettlement depended on the mysterious priorities of far-off capitals – in the case of London, Tory electioneering and agricultural labour shortages – and so Charles was forced to eke out his meagre refugee stipend, supplementing it with back-breaking work on the black market. While he waited, Charles refused to eat Egyptian food or learn Arabic. Establishing a connection to Cairo risked acknowledging that the present in which he lived might become permanent, and the present was a nightmare.

Charles remained estranged from life in the capital. Sitting in the darkness, surrounded by windows that his landlord demanded he kept covered to ensure the other tenants wouldn't have to see the Black faces within, Charles found himself running over the events of the civil war again and again. The future was in the hands of bureaucrats, and Charles lived life in the conditional tense. 'If I reach London', so many of his sentences would begin. In Egypt, time spoiled, like wine left too long in the barrel.

I was a twenty-year-old writer living in Cairo and struggling to give form to what I was witnessing – not only the intimate experiences of Charles and his friends, but the global forces that had rendered them unfree: the UN system that had barracked thousands of surplus men

on the edge of Europe and the Egyptian labour market that exploited their refugee status and inability to work legally.

For my trip to Cairo, I had packed books by Bruce Chatwin and other British travel writers. After a day with the refugees, *In Patagonia* felt wan and mannered. Scholarship was no help either. The more I found theories that explained the situation of the refugees, the further I found myself from the concrete elements of Charles' existence. Everything in the academic accounts I read made things comprehensible, and yet what I found so interesting about Charles' life is how confusing he found his own experience, from the bureaucratic machinations of the UNHCR to the slurs shouted at him on the street. I wanted to write about that experience, not explain it away.

In desperation, I turned back to the Bs who had shaped what I thought writing could be. From Roland Barthes I learned to trust the unfolding of my own thought. I took Bertolt Brecht's injunction to render explicit the human relations hidden by functional institutions (the violence of the UN refugee agency no less than the oppression of the factory) as a personal mission statement. It was Walter Benjamin's work that helped me see the limits of the humanitarians who worked with the refugees, and for whom Charles and his friends were a set of material needs to be inputted into a spreadsheet. Did they have enough food? Water? This reduction of the human to the quantifiable didn't capture the horror of Charles' position: he had no legitimate status as a political being, and no freedom to determine the shape of his own life. In Cairo, the Bs remained my intellectual lodestars. But I couldn't write like them. Every sentence of European theory I tried to compose read like a bad translation. Worse: when I read my work out aloud to Charles, he had no idea what I was talking about. I failed to capture Charles's dilemma – the violence of the bureaucracy and racism that determined it, and the intimacy and delicacy with which he lived it.

I ended up pulling another book out of my bag, written by a later B.¹ *A Seventh Man* was the work of the English novelist and critic John Berger, working with the Swiss photographer Jean Mohr.² Nothing else I have ever read has had quite the same intellectual electricity as my reading of that book, that summer, in that situation. *A Seventh Man* attempts to grasp the experience of male migrant workers in Europe during the 1970s.³ In Berger's text, intimate evocations of subjective experience and descriptions of objective conditions constantly jostle up against each other without forming a whole. Statistics and quotations from Marx vie for space with descriptions of street corners at the end of long night shifts and photocopies of tram tickets. There are lists, polemical interventions, imaginary conversations, and the contents of

a Turkish family's cart. Mohr's photographs, interspersed throughout the text, do not illustrate the book's arguments or depict its characters but form part of a contrapuntal conversation, in which a sentence is often answered – or questioned – by a photograph. That summer, as I spent my days with Charles and his friends on the streets of Cairo, it felt to me like all of migrant life was contained in *A Seventh Man*, in glorious, messy contradiction: its injustices, but also its loves and delights. The book's form owes something to Brecht's work of poetry and photo montage, *War Primer*, which was created during World War II; while its theoretical sections are indebted to Benjamin's philosophy of history.⁴ Berger's prose had a different tone to those European Bs, though, a certain directness of address that I suspect we all feel when we read Berger: that he is inviting us to think through a question with him.

In *A Seventh Man*, the question is this: how do we understand the dislocations and deformations wreaked by capital on the lives of migrant workers? 'This unfreedom', Berger writes, 'can only be fully recognized if an objective economic system is related to the subjective experience of those trapped within it. Indeed, finally, unfreedom is that relationship.'⁵ After being awarded the Booker Prize in 1972, Berger used half of his winnings to fund a series of trips, to Germany, Spain, Turkey, and Italy, to do research for the book. The resulting work is not a plot-driven narrative with a relatable lead, but the story of a collective subject: 'He. The existence of a migrant worker.'⁶ We find *him* in his village, being examined by German doctors, working in French factories, and struggling to make sense of life back home. Sometimes *he* is Portuguese, occasionally Italian, and most often, Turkish. *He* is picked out with a novelist's skill. While waiting to be humiliatingly examined by German doctors, *he* glances hastily (for to stare would be to show his astonishment) at the implements that will be used to examine him. Berger imaginatively reconstructs *his* subjective experience of the world. This encounter between *his* life and the indifference of the machinery – medical and economic – used to oppress him is the fundamental theme of *A Seventh Man*. Parts of the text feel like letters in a bottle that had washed up in Cairo. I immediately thought of Charles' predicament when I encountered Berger's description of the difficulties of leisure time for the migrant worker: 'Time-off' cannot be exchanged against anything in the future. It exists in a present which is exterior (like that of work-time), but also meaningless ... He tries to avoid it ... To fill it with talk about the past.'⁷

The *he* of *A Seventh Man* is an individual, insofar as Berger tries to imaginatively reconstruct *his* subjective experience, but also a container

for experiences contoured by political and economic structures, and thus *he* is also a collective subject, insofar as *his* state represents a broader condition for a whole class of migrant workers. *A Seventh Man* is neither a heroic saga of the migrant labourer, nor a defence of private existence against the abstractions of inhuman economic forces. Berger's migrant is not a romantic whose individuality pre-exists his encounter with capitalism. *His* subjective experience only exists in relation to those abstractions. It's the empty hours at the end of the day; the embarrassment he feels when being inspected by the German doctor. *He* is formed by these experiences. In *A Seventh Man*, it can seem as if subjectivity is a wound that capital left in the flesh.

The heteroclitite form of *A Seventh Man* mirrors *his* fragmented self. Abstract economic language rubs up against evocations of family life in montages which bear traces of Brecht's brash juxtapositions but are also part of a disjunctural totality: it is only through the lack of correspondence between the different parts of the book that we can understand the unfreedom of the migrant worker, caught within a system not of his own making. The unnamed *he* is an invitation to participate in Berger's imaginative attempt to render the concrete lives of migrant workers visible within the geometry of capital. In Cairo, I wrote out, and then took as a mantra, one of Berger's statements of intent: 'To try and understand the experience of another it is necessary to dismantle the world as seen from one's own place within it, and to reassemble it as seen from his. For example, to understand a given choice another makes, one must face the lack of choices which may confront and deny him.'⁸

In Cairo, part of my work involved writing reports about the conditions of refugees living in the city. I felt the documents I produced were simply accumulations of facts, written by those from the outside, for those on the outside, in answer to an implicit question: what do *we* do about *them*? *A Seventh Man* proposes that such facts, without an imaginative reconstruction of the other's experience, don't get us to the heart of the real questions: What am I seeing in front of me? How might I render it faithfully? It was Berger's spirit that guided me as I tried to write about Charles, sleeping all day in a darkened apartment, with only dreams to protect him from the open prison outside. While one can read *A Seventh Man* as a work of 1970s theory, in which the subject, the *he*, is produced solely by the interactions of capital and racism, the book proves to be as bifurcated as *he* is. While it is a consideration of the political economy that structures the lives of migrant workers, it's also a work of empathetic humanism, and Berger is insistent on the dignity of those whose travails he tries to render. If the subject washed

up dead on a beach during this period, then Berger didn't notice – he was alienated too much of a humanist for that.⁹

I read some of *A Seventh Man* with Charles, and there was a lot in it that rang true. The homelessness of the migrant, Charles thought, was even more extreme today, because for refugees like him, return was foreclosed, and departure to Europe had turned into a permanent limbo in North Africa. At other times, he disagreed. *He* wouldn't have done that, Charles insisted. That's not like the migrant workers he knew. Rather than *he* becoming a mythological hero in my conversations with Charles, *he* became a space for debate – for thinking about the place of the migrant in our world. I suspect that Berger would have relished the conversation, if it weren't for the venue. Charles had insisted that we meet at McDonald's. I had arrived in Cairo after a year of anti-globalization protests and was full of indignation at his choice. This is alienation, I insisted, gesturing at the chips, while suggesting we go to a nearby Egyptian hole-in-the-wall. Charles smiled. Here, he told me in a passable American accent, people think I'm a tourist, and leave me alone. Being alienated, he said, isn't so bad.

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After I returned to London, I proceeded to read everything Berger had written, while counting down the days until I could follow in the footsteps of my heroes and leave Britain. (If I shared nothing else with D.H. Lawrence and John Berger, I told myself, at least we shared a hatred of England, that land where, in Lawrence's words, 'every impact, every contact is sand-bagged, deadened.'¹⁰) When I finally managed to flee – first for France, then for Kenya – I took Berger's books with me. Reading his essays became a preparatory ritual before I embarked on a trip or commenced a piece of writing. From Berger's work, I gained the conviction that if one dwells long enough in a place, observes keenly, and listens generously, then one can write in a way that makes it both teem with life and reveal the ideas that were always there, just under the surface, animating it.

I loved 'Why Look at Animals,' Berger's celebrated polemic on our estrangement from animals and their transformation into spectacle.¹¹ When I wanted a writing primer, however, I came back to his short essay – almost a preparatory study for the later work – about visiting a zoo. In 'Through the Bars,' Berger focuses loving attention on a timid agouti, her existence as contoured by dread as a petit-bourgeois shopkeeper, and on the drama of a Malaysian tree-shrew that attempts to bite off Berger's finger, carefully, furtively, 'like any good sniper.'¹² In

my twenties, no other essay had the same simple pull; it made me want to go outside, really look at things, and then take out my notebook and dance along to wherever my thoughts might take me. So when I say I read ‘Through the Bars’ as a writing primer, that isn’t quite right.

Reading some of my favourite writers – J.M. Coetzee springs to mind – I get the sense that all their work happens on the page, and they could be anywhere, really, even in Australia, having a humdrum existence. The Flaubertian triumph of these writers would be that the life of words would have no necessary relationship to the life lived.¹³ I don’t mean that as a criticism – one finds style where one can – but this is never a sense that one has reading Berger, whose essays feel like a direct reflection on having lived, and having done so with an impassioned attention to the world.¹⁴ In an essay entitled ‘The Storyteller,’ indebted to Benjamin’s consideration of the same subject, Berger writes: ‘Writing, as I know it, has no territory of its own. The act of writing is nothing except the act of approaching the experience written about.’¹⁵ As a peripatetic youth without a territory of my own – Kenya was followed by the Netherlands, America, South Sudan – I took Berger’s work as a guide, not to living or writing, but to how to approach experience. Turning to the desk, his essays showed, didn’t mean turning away from life, but living it all the more thoroughly, by thinking it.

Over the years, I spent less and less time with the essays collected in *Permanent Red*, his first collection, which was composed of the art criticism he wrote while at the *New Statesman* in the 1950s. He praised Léger’s bold materialism and Zadkine’s monument to Rotterdam’s ordeals during the Second World War while damning Pollock and other exemplars of capitalism’s decadence. Those pieces were too polemical to endure multiple readings and often didn’t contain the same generosity of spirit that animates his best essays, many of which were written for *New Society*, a magazine that began publishing Berger’s work in 1965, shortly after he left London for the continent.¹⁶ The essays he wrote over the next decade were electric. The polemical tone of Berger’s art criticism had softened, without a slackening of the political seriousness that characterised his earlier writing.

From 1965 to around 1975, and the publication of *A Seventh Man*, Berger was concerned with the present, not only politically – that never ceased to be the case – but also formally. One only has to encounter the fervour of ‘The Moment of Cubism,’ first published in the *New Left Review* in 1967 and then released as a book in which Cubist portraits are juxtaposed with contemporary photographs – such as one of a Vietnamese peasant interrogated at gunpoint – to realize that Berger is not writing academic art criticism, but urgently trying to think about

the forms of creativity and writing appropriate to the world around him.¹⁷ It is the essays from this decade, which we could call Berger's middle period, that I read throughout my 20s, and which remain a touchstone: an exemplary case of thinking and writing to be emulated, even if the historical conditions that gave rise to their particular quality have utterly shifted.

In his later years, Berger would frequently describe himself as a storyteller, just as he had previously fashioned himself as an art critic, a novelist, and an essayist.¹⁸ Don't you believe it. His novels and short stories are bursting with ideas, and what drives them is intellectual intensity, not plot.¹⁹ The common response to this observation is to say that while Berger's novels are essayistic, his essays are driven by narrative, as if to indicate the genre-bending nature of all Berger's work.²⁰ Yet the narrative drive of Berger's middle-period essays doesn't stem from character, plot, or anything conventionally associated with storytelling, but from his patient attention to the unfolding of his own thought, a process that the reader is let into almost as if a murder mystery was unfolding. Re-reading his essays for this piece, I was reminded of teaching, back when I had a position at an American university. What I wanted to viscerally convey to my students was not a given concept or fact, but the process of thinking itself. It is this hesitant, intuitive movement that Berger succeeds in putting on the page, and why, I think, it is quite so exhilarating to read his essays. He described this technique, years later, when reflecting on a book about time that he planned to write: 'It is a way of taking the reader inside a mind or a life trying to reflect upon itself.'²¹

Like a good murder mystery, his essays frequently begin with a description of the crime scene. As our resident detective, Berger commences his investigation by paying very close attention to the situation in front of him. 'Seker Ahmet and the Forest' begins simply: 'The painting measures 138 x 1777 centimetres. Fairly large.'²² He recounts some facts about the painting, and then introduces our crime: 'As soon as I looked at it, it began to interest and haunt me ... Why it haunts me I only understood later.'²³ As in some of Barthes' essays, Berger begins with his own uncertainty: something has affected him.²⁴ Why? This interrogation of his own disquiet will propel the essay.

With the mystery introduced, the detective comes closer to the scene and invites us to peer at the canvas: 'There is something deeply but subtly strange about the perspective, about the relationship between the woodcutter with his mule and the far edge of the forest in the top-right hand corner. You see that it is the *far* edge, and at the same time, that third distant tree (a beech?) appears nearer than anything else in the

painting.²⁵ Do you see? Is it a beech? Slowly, Berger takes us through his thought process, as it unfolds before the canvas. At times, he returns to us, and recounts what he has thought: 'So, I was faced with two questions ...'²⁶

The mystery is then explored. First, Berger imagines himself deep among the trees. The painting's 'precision is existential. It accords with the experience of the forest. The attraction and terror of the forest is that you see yourself *in* it as Jonah was in the whale's belly.'²⁷ The same sort of imaginative leap used to render the lives of migrant workers in *A Seventh Man* is here used to bring to life the woodcutter in Seker Ahmet's painting. The novelist's tool, however, is put to the essayist's ends. Rather than plunge into an evocation of the life of the woodcutter, Berger breaks off and offers a series of whirlwind comparisons to Ahmet's painting, including the work of Millet, an exhibition of Chinese peasant paintings in London that Berger had just seen, Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, and Heidegger's *Discourse on Thinking*. I think it's a mistake to think about these comparisons as being employed solely to understand Ahmet's painting. Rather, they are deployed to another end, simultaneously more personal and political.

In 'Seker Ahmet and the Forest', we are invited to watch Berger trying to make sense of his existence: its contingent connections and uncertain intuitions. Sometimes, when he tries to understand why a painting has caused him so much disquiet, he is stymied. The exhibition of Chinese peasant paintings that he had seen in London contained many works that he thought failed because they offered only a helicopter's overview of the fields (the perspective, precisely, of the overseer). He only knows why they failed when he sees Ahmet's painting, which succeeds, Berger claims, by incorporating two pictorial positions: a view from above, within the tradition of European landscape painting, and a view from within the forest, as the trees appears to the woodcutter. That Ahmet in some ways 'answers' the problem posed by the Chinese peasant paintings with his image of a woodcutter is only a conjunction that can occur within the unfolding of Berger's own thought, as he tries to make sense of his own life within its political context.

His celebrated essay on 'Che' Guevara's death opens with a description of the photograph taken of Guevara's body and transmitted to the world on 10 October, 1967.²⁸ (In this case, there really is a crime scene.) Berger then takes us through an imaginative reconstruction of the fears of those who killed him and then had to work out what to do with the body. 'First they hid it. Then they displayed it. Then they buried it in an anonymous grave in an unknown place. Then they disinterred it ... This might suggest that they had serious doubts whether it was really

Guevara whom they had killed. Equally, it can suggest that they had no doubts but feared the corpse. I tend to believe the latter.²⁹ The purpose of the photograph, Berger contends, was to bring an end to the myth of Guevara. First, they killed him in life, and then, in taking his photograph, they tried to kill him in death. The photograph, Berger argues, is intended to be exemplary: this is the fate that will befall all revolutionaries, the image warns. Yet, Berger is certain that the lesson of Guevara's death will be the opposite, and the photograph will instead be an example of a man who fought against injustice.

He moves us through his argument by comparing the image of Guevara's death to others: Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Professor Tulp* and Andrea Mantegna's *The Lamentation of Christ*. These are not scholarly contrasts. From the juxtaposition of Guevara's corpse with Mantegna's painting of Christ, we get almost an anti-comparison. That the drapes and the hands are in identical positions in the photograph and the sculpture should not surprise us, for there 'are not so many ways of laying out the criminally dead.'³⁰ In Berger's depiction, Guevara is super-imposed on Christ. 'If I see the Mantegna again in Milan, I shall see in it the body of Guevara.' He goes on to argue that the revolutionary's death clarified the stakes of his life, in implicit comparison to Jesus. As with the essay on Seker Ahmet, the comparisons are intuitive and designed to explore the initial feeling of disquiet and, I think, to salvage meaning and hope from a broken present.

If one were to try and strip away Berger's Marxism, his work from this period often follows a well-trodden path for the essay as a form, as defined by Adorno: 'Luck and play are essential to it. It starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about; it says what occurs to it in that context and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say.'³¹ Berger's essays are speculative, and to read them requires a spirit of generosity. Often, he throws out sentences with the confidence of a twentieth-century Rousseau. Some have me scribbling in my notebooks, others furiously underlining in red. In *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965), Berger offers a line that would leave Charles (and the later author of *A Seventh Man*) indignant: 'Exile is a state which, in its subjective effects, never stands still: you either feel increasingly exiled as time passes, or increasingly absorbed by your adopted country.'³² His comparisons can obscure as much as they reveal. But it's the petty academic who judges Berger harshly on these counts. The point of his essays is to explore, in its halting uncertainty, the process of thinking.

In any case, you can't strip the Marxism from the essays of middle-period Berger. Marxism is not simply a content – a slogan here, a call for justice there – but also inherent in the very form of his work. For whom does one write? How should one write? In an essay on the art historian Max Raphael, one of three figures – along with Ernst Fischer and Frederick Antal – who most influenced Berger's approach to aesthetics, he approvingly quotes Raphael quoting Cézanne:

I paint my still lifes, these *natures mortes*, for my coachman who does not want them, I paint them so that children on the knees of their grandfathers may look at them while they eat their soup and chatter. I do not paint them for the pride of the Emperor of Germany ... I'd rather have the wall of a church, a hospital, a municipal building.³³

Berger's insistence on revealing his own thought processes has nothing to do with a concern for the self and its opinions, but it is rather an attempt to open up the creative process and show the reader that the artwork – in Berger's case, the essay – is not a totality, sculpted and reified and impervious to criticism, but something actually made, and thus that could be made differently. It is an invitation to the work, made to workers. Such an approach is suggested by *The Demands of Art*, the book by Raphael that is the subject of Berger's essay. The artwork, in Berger's rendering of Raphael's argument, is composed of the artist, the world, and the means of figuration (itself divided into the material – stone, paint, etc. – and the means of representation). Through the means of figuration – and I simplify massively – what Raphael thinks the successful art object accomplishes is the revelation of the activity that brought about the work. In Berger's essays, the activity revealed in the writing is the work of actively engaging and thinking politically about the world around him.

In the essays from his middle period, Berger does not write for that mythical phantom, the general reader. He does, however, write as an invitation. The plural subject of *A Seventh Man* is present in all the essays he wrote in the period. Berger wrote as a determined amateur, not as someone who wished to have the last word – as if then we could all stop the labour of thinking and go home – but in order to start a conversation about injustice. Running through all the essays of the period is a question he ceaselessly came back to: 'Does this work help or encourage men to know or claim their social rights?'³⁴ It's a question he poses of the artworks he studies, but he is no less concerned that his essays answer this question in their own right.

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From the beginning, Berger is worried that the museums in which he sees the art that he loves are charnel houses. In 'Understanding a Photograph,' he writes that painting and sculpture are 'dying because, in the world as it is, no work of art can survive and not become a valuable property.'³⁵ All works of art, Berger fears, are being reduced to their value on the market, and even conservation has become a question of proprietary interest. A private collector of Berger's beloved Cubist works, he tells us in 'Art and Property Now,' is not a lover of art, but a possessor of *things*.³⁶ It's against this background of commodification that Berger delivered his sternest artistic judgments. Jackson Pollock is decried as purely anxious subjectivity, isolated from the world, a testament to a decadence from which he cannot extricate himself.³⁷ Francis Bacon, the poor soul, is taken to task twice: first for expressing, in the pain of his pictures, the tragedy of an art that cannot escape commodification, and then, in a different essay, for creating pictures that provoke only alienation's longing for mindlessness, as if, Berger suggests, they were Walt Disney cartoons that never end.³⁸

Berger's often facile critiques of Bacon and Pollock are a failure to live up to his own standards for engagement with the world. His essays on the two artists do not attempt the imaginative work of understanding that he carried out in *A Seventh Man*, but substitute a swift dismissal – subjective decadence! – for the labour of trying to understand the worlds in which Bacon and Pollock (and Pop Art and Neo-Dada and all the other forms of contemporary art he trashes) emerge. The only twentieth-century form of art with which he really engages is Cubism, and in a curious palimpsest, it is Cubism that emerges as the artistic equivalent of the political transformations of the sixties. In 'The Moment of Cubism,' Berger argues that 'the cubists imagined the world transformed but not the form of the transformation'.³⁹ In some ways, Cubism arrived too early, its optimism brutally interrupted by World War I. What Berger finds so gripping about the movement is that, unlike the decadence of the styles that follow, Cubism engages and imagines a different form of modernism. In the twentieth century, Berger writes, 'a transformed world became theoretically possible and the necessary forces of change could already be recognized as existing. Cubism was the art which reflected the possibility of this transformed world and the confidence it expressed.' Cubism offered a revitalized vision of man's relationship with the world and the possibility of an art that was not destined to be consigned to the charnel house.

It is in relationship to Cubism that one must place Berger's furious creativity during the period from 1965 to 1975. The experiments of *G.*, *A Seventh Man*, and the essays – among other works – signal Berger working through the influence of Picasso and his contemporaries. The much-cited line from *G.*, 'never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one', and the constant narrative and spatial juxtapositions that mark the novel, owe their origins to a narrative Cubism in which a multiplicity of viewpoints constantly confront each other.⁴⁰ Cubism's mark can also be found in the juxtapositions and collages of *A Seventh Man*, while Berger's devotion to showing the process of thinking in the essays he writes from 1965 to 1975 emerges from his debt to the Cubists, for they 'created the possibility of art revealing processes instead of static entities'.⁴¹ One could read the middle period of Berger's work as an attempt to show that the moment of Cubism had only just arrived, fifty years after the fact.

The years between the first of his *New Society* essays and the publication of *A Seventh Man* were marked by almost constant travel. The writing, too, seems to exist in a sort of heightened state of tension, bearing the weight of unbearable and often contradictory commitments: to rendering subjective experience and objective economic conditions; to forms of modernist experimentation that had already been passed over by many; to keeping alive the connection between political struggle and the creation of art. It might be that Berger could avoid Yeats's dilemma – the life *or* the work – by making his experiences the basis for his art, but he could not resolve all the contradictions of those ten years. Indeed, the fact that they could not be resolved is precisely what makes works like *A Seventh Man* so indelible.

The mid-1970s marks a shift in the intensity of these contradictions. While doing research for *A Seventh Man*, Berger said that he had often struggled when talking to peasants. 'When they talked, I realized a great deal of what they were feeling I couldn't locate ... I was ignorant. I wanted to try and get over that ignorance.'⁴² In order to understand peasant life, he moved to Quincy, in the Haute-Savoie, two hours outside of Geneva. The move, at least as Berger accounts for it, is in keeping with his past decisions: it's an attempt to imaginatively and practically enter into a world, study hard, listen generously, and then write about it.

I don't agree with those who take this move to be some sort of forest kitsch, in which Berger plays peasant and runs back to Geneva whenever the weather gets too cold. There is a shift, however, in his work. Instead of engaging with contemporary art, he turns to the Old Masters, and increasingly, places them in the context of the landscapes in which they worked: Courbet becomes the Jura region, Cézanne his hills. With

contemporary art – according to Berger – mired in subjectivity and decadence, he instead turns to art that still lives and exists within communities. These shifts are exemplified by a beautiful essay from 1985, ‘The White Bird.’⁴³ The birds in question are made of pine by peasants in the Haute-Savoie and hang in kitchens and chapels. Berger’s essay lovingly describes the ingenious way they are made and the function they have within the community of creators. The enemy of the text – for Berger remained a polemicist to the end – is not capitalism, however, but evil. ‘[W]e live in a world of suffering in which evil is rampant, a world whose events do not confirm our being, a world that has to be resisted.’⁴⁴ Against this, we have beauty, Berger argues, which allows us to feel more deeply inserted into existence than our loneliness might suggest. At the end of this essay, Berger returns to the question that inspired me in my twenties. ‘Several years ago, when considering the historical face of art, I wrote that I judged a work according to whether or not it helped men in the modern world claim their social rights. I hold to that. Art’s other, transcendental face, raises the question of man’s ontological right.’⁴⁵

Politics here is supplemented with ontology, in a gesture that marks much of late Berger – to its detriment, in my view. It’s a curious separation. One cannot read *A Seventh Man* and not think it is about ontology: questions of being and belonging are central to the politics of Berger’s writing. What is so exciting about the mid-period work is that all the contradictions are within us: capital and labour, freedom and unfreedom. Berger looked at humans and artworks alike, alive to our contradictions, and the moments of hope and grief created by these struggles. In the later, ‘ontological’ texts, evil appears, and it has a Christian character. In the essay ‘Ten Dispatches about Place’ (2005), capitalism has a quasi-mythic register, everywhere and nowhere at once: ‘Their nowhere generates a strange because unprecedented awareness of time. Digital time. It continues forever uninterrupted through day and night, the seasons, birth and death.’⁴⁶ The specificities and concreteness of the analysis of *A Seventh Man* are replaced by a sort of Manichean anti-capitalism that often feels lazy.

The work suffers. What were contradictions immanent to us all are transposed onto a geographical opposition between the rural (community, survival, authenticity) and the urban (cosmopolitan, false, and capitalized). The historical afterword to Berger’s trilogy of novels about the peasants of the Haute-Savoie, *Into Their Labours*, often reads like a salvage anthropology, with Berger diving down into the sinking ship of the peasantry to save what baubles of wisdom he can before the waters of capital cover us all.⁴⁷

I took this all very personally, probably too personally. In 2008, when Berger published ‘Ten Dispatches about Place,’ as part of *Hold Everything Dear*, I had just returned to Nairobi from southern Sudan, and I remember urgently reading his essay, hoping to find some way of making sense of the complicated mixture of pastoralism, oil politics, and humanitarian work that I had found on my travels, along with some suggestions about how to give form to it all. No such luck. ‘Ten Dispatches about Place’ felt tired and vague, unable to deal with a world in which ‘Their nowhere’ was everywhere, but everywhere; it was full of holes, or what Berger might call pockets of resistance. John, I wanted to tell him, you can even find them in the McDonald’s in Cairo.

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In 1996, Jean Mohr was convalescing after a serious illness in a clinic near Geneva, in an area known as the *Bout-du-Monde*: the edge of the world. Having reached the limits of his body, Mohr went to the outskirts of the city and reviewed the photographs he had taken over the course of his life, as he worked for the UN, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and the rest of the alphabet soup of NGOs. He published a book of these photographs, *At the Edge of the World*, and John Berger provided the introduction.⁴⁸

In December 2020, I sat at a bus stop in the *Bout-du-Monde*, with a copy of *At the Edge of the World*, looking through its pages avidly, but with disappointment. The images were snapshots, the introduction desultory. The book didn’t tell me where, in a connected world, I might be able to find an edge. It was eighteen years since I had met Charles in Cairo, and in the intervening period, I had worked as a researcher for many of the same organizations as Mohr, mainly in the crisis zones of the Horn of Africa. I had a three-month writing residency in Geneva, at the Embassy of Foreign Artists, where I was to do research in the archives of the UNHCR for a novel about the global situation of refugees. On my computer, I still had the transcripts of my conversations with Charles. I envisaged writing an enormous experimental novel about the way the UN flattened refugees’ stories into spreadsheets, how life in refugee camps consisted of an eternal waiting, and yet, despite it all, *their* stories emerged.

But we were in the midst of the pandemic. And although the archivists kindly agreed to email me some files, processing them took forever. I found myself sitting in my room, staring at my computer, and thinking: I could be anywhere. (Maybe Berger *was* right about digital time.) One of the other residents at the Embassy, Aziz Hazara, an Afghan artist,

kindly took me along to meet some of the Hazara refugees living in the city. It was a nice Swiss apartment, but the décor didn't fit, like the awkward suits worn by the peasants in August Sanders's photographs that Berger so beautifully analysed in 1979.⁴⁹ We sat on a rug, below the imposing furniture, and Aziz's friends told me about life in Switzerland and the struggles to keep alive a sense of time, as they waited, and worked, and the days rolled on without distinction. I thought then about a line from *G*. 'Every ruling minority needs to numb, and, if possible, to kill the time sense of what it exploits by proposing a continuous present.'⁵⁰

You still have it, John, after all these years. I still carry *A Seventh Man* with me.

Notes

- 1 The earlier Bs were some of Berger's biggest influences. Writing about Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Berger describes Barthes as 'the only living critic of theorist of literature and language whom I, as a writer, recognize.' John Berger, *New Society*, 26 February, 1976, 445. Berger also wrote about Walter Benjamin and translated Bertolt Brecht alongside Anya Bostock, his second wife. See John Berger, 'Walter Benjamin' [1970] in John Berger, *Selected Essays*, edited by Geoff Dyer (London: Vintage), 2001, 186-90; Anya Bostock and John Berger, 'An Address to Danish Worker Actors on the Art of Observation, by Bertolt Brecht,' in John Berger, *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*, edited by Tom Overton, (London: Verso), 2016, 36-43.
- 2 John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man*, (London: Verso, 2010 [1975]).
- 3 In his note to the reader, Berger writes: 'Among the migrant workers in Europe there are probably two million women. Some work in factories; many work in domestic service. To write of their experience adequately would require a book in itself.' John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man*, (London: Verso, 2010 [1975]), 10. As Joshua Sperling notes in his biography of Berger, a similar sidelining acknowledgement leaves the wife and family of John Sassa out of the picture painted in *A Fortunate Man* (1967). Joshua Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time: The Life and Work of John Berger* (London: Verso, 2018), 130.
- 4 Bertolt Brecht, *War Primer* (London, Verso, 2017).
- 5 *A Seventh Man*, 11.
- 6 *Ibid*, 20.
- 7 *Ibid*, 200.
- 8 *Ibid*, 96-7.
- 9 The reference is to the famous image that closes out Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, (New York: Vintage), 1994 [1966].
- 10 From D.H. Lawrence, 'On Coming Home' [1924-5], in *The Bad Side of Books: Selected Essays of D.H. Lawrence*, edited by Geoff Dyer, (New York: NYRB Press), 2019, 214.

- 11 John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals,' *Selected Essays*, 259–73 [1977].
- 12 John Berger, 'Through the Bars,' in John Berger, *The Look of Things*, (New York: Viking Press), 1971, 28–34 [1959], 30.
- 13 The reference to Flaubert is to his famous contention that a writer must 'be settled in your life and as ordinary as the bourgeois, in order to be fierce and original in your works.'
- 14 In his introduction to his *Selected Essays*, Geoff Dyer argues that Berger gives the lie to Yeats' famous dilemma—the perfection of the man or the work—in a fashion suggested by Camus in his notebooks: 'So that in the last analysis the great artist is first and foremost a man who has lived greatly (it being understood that in this case living also implies thinking about life—that living is in fact precisely this subtle relationship between experience and our awareness of it).' *Selected Essays*, xi.
- 15 John Berger, 'The Storyteller,' *Selected Essays*, 366. [1978]. Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller Essays*, (New York: NYRB), 2019. The canonical Walter Benjamin essay, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov,' was finished in 1937.
- 16 Sperling, 100.
- 17 John Berger, 'The Moment of Cubism,' *New Left Review*, 1/42 (March–April 1967); John Berger, *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson), 1969.
- 18 See, for instance, Elanor Wachtel, 'An interview with John Berger,' *Brick: A Literary Journal* 53, Winter 1996, 35, quoted in Sperling, 58.
- 19 In many cases, the fiction contains the greater intellectual rewards. The reflection on crowds in *G.* is far more sophisticated than its parallel essayistic treatment in 'The Nature of Mass Demonstrations,' for instance. John Berger, *G. A Novel* (New York: Vintage), 1972; John Berger, 'The Nature of Mass Demonstrations,' *Selected Essays*, 246–49, [1968].
- 20 This is Dyer's approach, *Selected Essays*, xii.
- 21 The book on time eventually became *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Vintage), 2005. The quote is from a letter John Berger wrote on 20 December 1981, quoted in Sperling, 204.
- 22 John Berger, 'Seker Ahmet and the Forest,' *Selected Essays*, 305–9.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 305.
- 24 In his review of *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes, Berger cites Barthes explaining an approach that he will also employ: 'To begin with, some images: they are the authors treat to himself, for finishing his book. His pleasure is a matter of fascination (and thereby quite selfish). I have kept only the images which enthrall me, *without my knowing why.*' Barthes, cited in John Berger, 'Roland Barthes: Inside the Mask,' in *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*, 79–82 [1977].
- 25 'Seker Ahmet and the Forest,' 306.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 This essay, like so many of Berger's, has been placed in many collections, under a variety of titles. I'm referring to the version in the *Selected Essays*, entitled 'Images of imperialism,' 108–16 [1967].
- 29 *Ibid.*, 108.

- 30 Ibid, 109.
- 31 Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form,' in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume II*, edited by Rolf Tiedeman, (New York: Columbia University Press), 4.
- 32 John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, (New York: Vintage), 1967, 15.
- 33 John Berger, 'Revolutionary Undoing,' *Selected Essays*, 230-37. The quote is from p. 230 [1969].
- 34 The quote is from the introduction Berger that wrote to *Permanent Red*, reprinted in *Selected Essays*, 7.
- 35 John Berger, 'Understanding a Photograph,' in John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, edited by Geoff Dyer, (London: aperture), 2012, 24-27 [1968].
- 36 John Berger, 'Art and Property Now,' in *Selected Essays*, 103-7 [1967].
- 37 John Berger, 'Jackson Pollock,' in *Selected Essays*, 15-18, [1958]. The dilemmas produced by the separation of the artist from the world, in an era of commodification and celebrity, are also the subject of Berger's treatment of late Picasso.
- 38 The first charge is laid in 'Art and Property Now,' 105, the second in 'Francis Bacon and Walt Disney,' *Selected Essays*, 315-19 [1972].
- 39 John Berger, 'The Moment of Cubism,' *Selected Essays*, 80.
- 40 *G.*, 149. That *G.* aspires to be a Cubist novel is not at all an original observation and is already remarked upon by Geoff Dyer in his early study of John Berger, *Ways of Telling* (London: Pluto), 1988.
- 41 John Berger, 'The Moment of Cubism,' 86.
- 42 John Berger talking to Richard Cork, BBC Radio 3, quoted in Sperling, 197.
- 43 John Berger, 'The White Bird,' *Selected Essays*, 361-5.
- 44 Ibid, 364.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 John Berger, 'Ten Dispatches about Place,' *Landscapes*, 216-27. [2005]
- 47 John Berger, 'Historical Afterward to the Into Their Labours Trilogy,' 186-202.
- 48 Jean Mohr and John Berger, *At The Edge of the World*, (London: Reaktion Books), 1999.
- 49 John Berger, 'The Suit and the Photograph,' in *Understanding a Photograph*, 36-41 [1979].
- 50 *G.*, 72.