

# Reading Berger, Responding to the Literary

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PhD

University of York

English

May 2015

## Abstract

This thesis performs original close readings of a number of texts by John Berger, responding in particular to the work's literary qualities. It is the contention herein that the critical heritage has consistently failed to account for the richness and distinctiveness of Berger's work, attempting to place him within the context of Marxist thought and literature: both applying to the texts pre-existing models for writing and reading politically engaged work, and using the texts as illustrations of, and an opportunity to debate the merits of, Berger's own explanations for his work. This approach has consistently failed to account for the richest moments and works in Berger's oeuvre. In the course of the readings in this thesis, a number of hitherto underemphasised themes and qualities in the work are raised to prominence: Berger is a consistent and inventive writer of himself, both dramatising and referring to himself by naming characters 'John' and its etymological cousins, among other strategies. His fiction is also fascinated by representing the problems of searching, discovery and doubt. At its richest, the work contains within it both the impression of a search and the restriction of that search by the limits of what is knowable, readable, legible, or interpretable. He is an obsessive writer of animals. He is also a writer of patterns of figures that exist in an idiolectic vocabulary of symbols that shift and alter somewhat with every iteration. He is an inventive writer of dreams, and an original writer about sex, and a writer seemingly energised by working between genres and traditions, and by probing the spaces between various oppositions: the material and metaphysical, the present and the absent, life and death, historical and personal. This thesis is also among the first able to make use of the manuscripts and correspondence contained within the John Berger Archive in the British Library.

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## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Daisy, to whom this study is gratefully and lovingly dedicated, and to my parents, Jan and David, for their love and support. John Bowen's advice and example has been inestimable, and the four years of supervision meetings have been wonderfully energising and inspiring. Many thanks also to Hugh Haughton, for his generous encouragement and enthusiasm, which always came at just the right moment.

## Declaration

I declare that the work in the thesis is my own and has not been submitted for examination at this or any other institution for another award.

## Introduction: Literary Berger

### 1

This thesis is based upon two assertions: firstly that John Berger's fiction is yet to be satisfyingly or sufficiently read by critics *as literature*, and secondly that it is a body of work that hugely rewards such reading. The second of these assertions I hope to justify in the chapters that follow, and in doing so help to claim for Berger the more prominent space within post-war British literature that his work undoubtedly merits; what I mean by the first is outlined in this introduction. Berger's fiction has consistently, and with particular intensity until the late 1980s, attracted politically inflected criticism. This trend began with its most hostile example, Stephen Spender's accusation that Berger's first novel, *A Painter of Our Time*, 'stank of the concentration camps'.<sup>1</sup> There are the reviewers who have decided to read Berger as a political opponent, and the politically sympathetic critics who have nevertheless seen Berger's subject matter and aesthetics as failing to fulfil a pre-determined model for literature, (such as socialist realism) or as a betrayal of a set of aims, beliefs or values (see the reception to *Pig Earth*, discussed in Chapter 6). There is the criticism that has admiringly attempted to read Berger's texts as though they are dramatic illustrations of political certainties. Although there are sophisticated and

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Spender, *Observer*, 9 November, 1958.

thoughtful examples of all these kinds, they very rarely begin to account for my fascination with this writer, rarely touch on the aspects of these texts I would most like criticism engage with, and in sum produce a Berger duller and certainly more predictable than I find him to be.<sup>2</sup> As examples, these are the opening postulations of two articles, firstly by A. R. Brás:

Unlike the vast majority of his literary confrères, [Berger] is an explicitly political author whose oeuvre is marked by a genuine and uncompromising social commitment. Although convinced that the work of imagination is neither timeless nor self-sufficient, he is nevertheless positive that it can be more than mere entertainment; indeed, he is certain that it can be revolutionary.<sup>3</sup>

And secondly by Joseph H. McMahon:

Throughout his career as a teacher, art-critic, television commentator, novelist and scenario-writer, Berger has been a dedicated and open Marxist who has used his writings to bring into high relief the tensions, dramas and disappointments of life in the modern world. Berger has tried to keep his investigations as free as possible of ideological clutter while adhering to a particular ideology which he sustains out of a belief that, if human existence does not make sense on a human scale, then men will live in chaos with themselves and with others.<sup>4</sup>

To my ear these points of departure reverberate with the sound of doors slamming shut. An open approach to the richness and distinctiveness of each of the idiosyncratic and formally diverse texts within Berger's literary oeuvre is in these examples replaced by reading that is funnelled narrowly through pre-conceived notions about what these texts are, Berger's intentions and explanations for writing them, and what meanings they therefore generate. In the introduction of the most

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<sup>2</sup> For a strong example of this kind of criticism, see Peter de Bolla's persuasive article 'John Berger and the Ethics of Writing' in *Minnesota Review*, Number 28, Spring 1987 (New Series), 78-84.

<sup>3</sup> A. R. Brás, 'A Sense of the Future: The Work of John Berger' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (25:3), 1984, 125.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph H. McMahon, 'Marxist Fictions: the Novels of John Berger. *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring, 1982), 202.

sustained example of the trend to read Berger's work as a case study in the relationship between aesthetics and politics, Duncan O'Connor writes:

as well as attempting to show the success and failings of Berger's politics of form as it develops in terms of style, this thesis proposes that the need to read Berger's novels through different critical frameworks is a central dynamic of their form which readers are required to project so as to test the limits of Berger's intentionality.<sup>5</sup>

As intellectually strenuous as such an approach may be, it produces criticism I confess I don't particularly want to read about books I either struggle to recognise, or that are discussed in the most general of terms. The texts themselves become the grounding, sparingly referenced or almost invisible, for a theoretical discussion about the relationship between literature and society. Such a discussion is of course valuable and potentially fascinating in its own right. It is also fundamental to understanding certain aspects of Berger texts, but for the critic it must not come at the expense of close reading the work itself, in all of its specificity and idiosyncrasy, and with a much stronger sense of the particular characteristics of literature, or literary reading, that make it a case apart. Even the best examples of this kind of criticism schematise work that, perhaps against initial expectation, responds badly to such treatment. Such criticism must privilege ideas over any other quality of the work.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for example, *Pig Earth* can be 'explained' with well chosen quotes from its historical afterword, or by reading it through *Ways of Seeing*, or *Permanent Red*, or any other chosen companion text. The ending of an article by Raymond Mazurek is indicative: 'as is appropriate with a realist work, the substantive issues *Pig Earth* raises are much more important than its method', he writes.<sup>7</sup> By 'method' I take Mazurek to mean how the text is constructed and written. Thus the densely crafted figuration surrounding the human and animal characters, the ladder-scaling movements the book makes from rotting corpses on the forest floor to the butterflies disappearing as they signal a glimpsed otherness, and the harsh and

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<sup>5</sup> Duncan Longland O'Connor, *From Fictions to Stories* (University of Cambridge: PhD Dissertation. Classmark: PhD.26357), 10.

<sup>6</sup> Eric P. Levy has remarked that 'in approaching Berger's fiction, critics frequently invoke the primacy of event over character'. "'Seeing That Eye': Tragedy and the Vision of Vision in John Berger's *Pig Earth*' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (45:3), 2004, 310.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond A Mazurek, "Totalization and Contemporary Realism: John Berger's Recent Fiction" in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (25:3), 1984, 145.

potent energy of the mountain slope that the stories invoke to represent various kinds of transformation - all are dismissed. I couldn't disagree more wholeheartedly with him.

An overlapping critical trend comprises often brief articles which set themselves enormous tasks, such as to analyse multiple Berger texts, of all forms and genres, in relation to a large given topic, for instance 'historical consciousness', 'commitment', 'contemporary realism' or Berger's 'vision' or 'way of seeing'.<sup>8</sup> This inevitably leads to generalisation: '*What* Berger looks at, and *how* he sees - both in his fiction and non-fiction - are part of a whole, a seamless oeuvre', writes Robin Lippincott, for example.<sup>9</sup> The complexity and variety of dozens of wildly different texts and their individual contexts, spanning decades of life, are here simplified into a few sentences, and once more all sensitivity is abandoned.

Engagement with a work of literature on such terms does not particularly interest me as a reader, and does not account for the reasons why many of the books remain fascinating, complex and compelling when the urgency of political contexts have faded, or when, in our stylistically-promiscuous and theoretically heterogeneous age, the importance of debates about the politics of form has diminished. The critical heritage has consistently risked dismissing as detail the spectacular craft, density, repetitions and oddities of Berger's richest work. The reviews and articles that avoid this are few. Nikos Papastergiadis perceptively suggests that '[critics] seem to take [Berger's work] in order to fly faster to somewhere they seemed to be already heading'.<sup>10</sup> Those who produce literary critical readings of Berger's work - whose predominant interest is in being closely attentive to the detail of the work - are startlingly few.<sup>11</sup> The full-length studies of Berger

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<sup>8</sup> For examples of these see, respectively, Harvey J. Kaye, 'Historical Consciousness and Storytelling: John Berger's Fiction' in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, (16:4), 1983, 43-57; R. Selden, 'Commitment and Dialectic in Novels by David Cate and John Berger' in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, (11:2), 1975, 106-21; Raymond A. Mazurek, 'Totalization and Contemporary Realism: John Berger's Recent Fiction' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (25:3), 1984, 136-146; and Robin Lippincott, 'One Big Canvas: The Work of John Berger' in *The Literary Review: An International Journal of Contemporary Writing*, (35:1), 1991, 134-42.

<sup>9</sup> Robin Lippincott, 'One Big Canvas: The Work of John Berger' in *The Literary Review: An International Journal of Contemporary Writing*, (35:1), 1991, 134.

<sup>10</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, 'John Berger: An Interview' in *The American Poetry Review*, (22:4), 1993, 10. It must be said that perhaps Papastergiadis fails to entirely avoid this himself in his own reading of Berger's work through the lens of Twentieth-Century migration. See Nikos Papastergiadis, *Modernity as Exile*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Such criticism is certainly not entirely absent. See, for example, Eric P. Levy, 'Seeing That Eye: Tragedy and the Vision of Vision in John Berger's *Pig Earth*' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (45:3), 2004, 309-20, in which Levy reads *Pig Earth* for its relation to that most literary of forms, tragedy. Bruce Robbins's too brief work on Berger is excellent. G., perhaps Berger's most famous

published by non-university presses, Geoff Dyer's *Ways of Telling* and Andy Merrifield's *John Berger*, tend towards explications of Berger's work in his own terms and in significant collaboration with Berger himself.<sup>12</sup> As surveys attempting to cover an overwhelming body of work (this was already the case for Dyer, twenty-eight years ago), they lack the space for the depth and sensitivity that good criticism always requires. They also attempt to cover all aspects of a wide-ranging output, using a one-size-fits-all approach to discuss art criticism, film, photo essay, and fiction. Merrifield's book is at times little more than plot summary. Although Dyer's approach was an attempt to claim for Berger a place within the contemporary literary landscape, making comparisons with Ted Hughes, for example,<sup>13</sup> I nevertheless mostly agree with his own later description of the book as 'a boring, timid, sub-academic thing, almost a text book (and, as such, an unintended insult to its subject).'<sup>14</sup> Dyer's account nevertheless remains the most visible piece of criticism on Berger, and thus a work I refer to frequently. Within the academy, a number of doctoral theses, frequently interesting and benefitting from increased space and depth, nevertheless can tend to the same faults (as I see them) of proximity to Berger's own explanations of his work or of reading Berger through a fairly narrow political prism. They also have not captured the Berger I wish to read about.<sup>15</sup> Beyond the mid-1990s there is relatively little published material in English, save for frequent, mostly short, mostly admiring, rarely fascinating, reviews and interviews. Over time these have developed their own set of clichés; a recent piece by Phillip Maughan in *The New Statesman*, for example, contained the same unhelpful tropes that have been seemingly endlessly repeated: there is a half-hearted attempt to marry the aspects of Berger's work into a totality united by Berger's 'vision' or 'way of seeing'; the depiction of Berger as a selfless man and self-effacing writer, the embodiment of the Benjaminian storyteller; and the observation that he writes as if

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and critically read novel, is the notable though partial exception to this claim, having attracted two PhD theses focused solely on it and several articles that do the work of close reading, focusing particularly on its formal relationship to cubism.

<sup>12</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Ways of Telling* (London: Pluto Press, 1984); Andy Merrifield, *John Berger* (London: Reaktion, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 121-2.

<sup>14</sup> Geoff Dyer 'The Road Less Familiar', published in *The Guardian*, 8 November 2005.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Duncan Longland O'Connor, (already quoted above) 'From Fictions to Stories' Unpublished doctoral thesis, (University of Cambridge: Classmark: PhD.26357); Roger Rajeeve Mehta. 'Telling stories and making history: John Berger and the politics of postmodernism.' Unpublished doctoral thesis, (University of Leicester, 1999); and Diane Margaret Watson, 'John Berger's Fictional Acts of Faith' (*Open Access Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 2775, 1990).

he is drawing (the meaning of this is always presented as self-evident: it is anything but to me).<sup>16</sup>

The critical heritage pertaining to Berger's writings on art, and in particular *Ways Of Seeing*, is a more impressive body of work, including substantial and provocative texts such as Peter Fuller's *Seeing Berger*, later stingingly revised to *Seeing Through Berger*, and *Art - Language's* special on *Ways of Seeing* in 1978. Furthermore, parts of Berger's essay output - the discussion of 'the gaze' in *Ways of Seeing* and 'Why Look at Animals?', for example - have been incorporated into a wide-ranging discourse within the fields of sociology, feminism, philosophy and anthropology. Here the critical heritage is well established, but, important as it is, it is not directly relevant to Berger's literary texts.

Perhaps the criticism that Berger's literary output has received is understandable. Berger's own essays (he has written exceptionally few that could be considered literary criticism), and interview responses about his work, although often stimulating, also tend to move quickly from the particular to the abstract.<sup>17</sup> John Barrell, in his conflicted review of *Keeping a Rendezvous*, captures well the difficulties of reading Berger's essays:

Throughout this very varied book, and especially when writing on art, John Berger invites us to acknowledge the absolutes and universals which, he insists, lie behind the surfaces of things. He doesn't have a great deal to say about those absolutes, and asks us to be content with terms like the essential, the invisible, the sacred or the real, as if the words themselves, floating free of any discernible theology or metaphysics, can answer the questions they raise by the simple urgency with which they are uttered. For me they can't: and yet I found myself hurrying through these essays, eating them up, as if I really believed they could feed the hunger they created. The greater my disbelief, the more often it was suspended.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Phillip Maughan. "I think the dead are with us' John Berger at 88." *The New Statesman*, 11 June, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> 'Berger's own comments encourage this tendency to construe his fiction ideologically' writes Eric P. Levy, "'Seeing That Eye": Tragedy and the Vision of Vision in John Berger's *Pig Earth*' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (45:3), 2004, 310.

<sup>18</sup> John Barrell, 'Back of Beyond', *London Review of Books*, 14.7, 9 April 1992, 3.

The affecting quality of the writing expressed by Barrell is something familiar to readers of Berger ('and the reason must be that he really can write', as states Frank Kermode in the LRB).<sup>19</sup> In his fiction, however, 'absolutes' are rarely presented so simply. 'Absolutes' (metaphysics, temporality, History, Marxism, the physical world) are local, subject to juxtaposition with other things, and under constant pressure and alteration. In Berger's literary work, any idea or theory is always in play, always subject to complication by specific experience or other ways of thinking. Doubt and the on-going search are more prevalent characteristics than certainty or assertion.

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This study is founded upon an attempt to testify to literature's unique qualities and inherent strangeness. It attempts to treat the literary - the act of literary reading the literary text - seriously. The spirit of my endeavour within the context of the critical heritage is captured by the first editorial of the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*:

We gesture towards a mode of reading that stays with the text, lingers with it and expresses a reluctance to depart from it...in other words, at the risk of echoing a well-known maverick philosopher, we *tarry* with the text. In bringing back the term *literary* to the idea of postcolonial inquiry, we signal the paradigm of reading that we feel has been somewhat eclipsed in recent decades by the field's voracious extratextual and interdisciplinary perambulations.<sup>20</sup>

Of course I am not making a serious comparison between Berger studies (such as it is) and the field of postcolonialism, but Berger does have a critical heritage similarly fixated with various extratextualities, and I ascribe to the need to read the work closely and deeply, and with a reluctance to depart from it. Such an approach is demanded by the density and craft of the work. Berger may have expressed strident opinions, adopted entrenched positions and provoked strong reactions on many

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<sup>19</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Vérités Bergères', *London Review of Books*, 13.5, 7 March 1991, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Ato Quayson, Debjani Ganguly and Neil ten Kortenaar 'Editorial: New Topographies', 5-6, taken from Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 102.

issues, (from the USSR, the debates surrounding aesthetics in the 1950s and *Ways of Seeing* in 1972, on the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, through to the Middle East), but in Berger's literary oeuvre these views do not survive unchanged and unchallenged. His changing attitude to social and political revolution, even at its most strident in the 1950s, (and becoming progressively more unsure and complicated after the Secret Speech, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the rise of neoliberalism, et cetera), appears alongside an exploration of individual uncertainties, loves, weaknesses and doubts. Berger's fiction has been as much about strategies for escaping history as changing it, about trialling beliefs and certainties rather than transmitting them. Combined with his singular attentiveness to a particularly vivid creative imagination, this results in strange and recalcitrant texts. In Berger's best work, different ways of thinking about the world are held in tension; contradiction is not dismissed or assimilated, mystery is acknowledged and preserved. Berger has been remarkably faithful to both his creativity and his experience of the world, at the risk of lack of neatness or clarity. He has inserted his dreams into texts without claiming to understand why they need to be there.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the risk of incomprehensibility or nonsense becomes a subject in the work itself.

Berger does not pretend he can explain the unknowably complex set of factors that are involved in literary production, and critics should not pretend that they can either. The idea of an easy and direct relationship between Berger's politics and his literary texts is one I wish to continuously scrutinise in my readings. For some writers - for Berger - I suggest that an attractive aspect of writing fiction is the relief it provides from using language to (attempt to) straightforwardly refer to the world beyond the page, including him- or herself in that world. Berger seems to make full use of a peculiar quality of literature - what Jacques Derrida describes in the following:

Paul de Man was not wrong in suggesting that ultimately all literary rhetoric in general is of itself deconstructive, practising what you might call a sort of irony, an irony of detachment with regard to metaphysical belief or thesis, even when it apparently puts it forward. No doubt this should be made more complex, "irony" is perhaps not the best category to describe this

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<sup>21</sup> So Berger states in an interview with Adam Hothschild, 'Another Way of Seeing' in *Mother Jones* 6 (Number 10) December 1981, 48.

"suspension," this *epochē*, but there is here, certainly, something irreducible in poetic or literary experience.<sup>22</sup>

For Derrida, after de Man, the most fervently held belief, when framed within a literary work, is open to suspension, to being undermined, or read 'ironically' as its opposite. A phone number that appears in a literary work resists any guarantee that it will work in the world beyond the pages of the work. This property of the fictional phone number must remain, even if the number does correspond to a real number, and even if that number calls the phone of a person with the same name as the character in the book. Literature plays on the gap, the suspension and freedom that such a necessity engenders. Clearly Berger is a profoundly historical writer who frequently takes various aspects of the political as subject matter. These things are vitally important to any reading of his texts, without which they will be unrecognisable in the account. And yet the literary text remains suspended from the world, and the specific kind of irresponsibility this confers repeatedly allows Berger freedoms that no other mode of discourse or action provides him with. A characteristic of some of Berger's best work is that it does not (appear to) stage things to assert them, but seems to be testing out the foundational principles upon which it was conceived. This is perhaps simply a more guileful use of rhetoric, one that this study needs to respond to; nevertheless readers throughout his oeuvre have testified to a sense that they are discovering things *with* Berger: as Brian Dillon has it in his admiring review of *Here is Where We Meet*: 'Berger reads as if he is reaching for forms as yet not invented...[his] uncanny knack is...to seem always (as one of his ghostly interlocutors has it) "a beginner".' Furthermore, Berger approaches topics that come with unresolved mysteries understood (and incorporated) as such: the consolations of poetry and art; how verbal language functions and meaning is generated; the conflicts a person in the creative act experiences attempting to be loyal to both her talent and beliefs; our relationship to our prehistoric and preindustrial forebears; what happens to us when we die. He is a writer wary of easy resolution, and far too interested in metaphysics to be an exemplary materialist.

There is a wider point to be made against the 'intentionality' trend of critical reading. J. Hillis Miller states that writing in general inhibits the 'coherent or noncontradictory' transmission of meaning of a story, or of information, a

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), 50.

statement of belief or any attempt to express anything.<sup>23</sup> With the massive grouping of unstable and unruly signs that comprise something as complex as a literary text, criticism that seeks to explicate authorial intention risks missing what is really going on. We find language's properties as a theme of Berger's work: the allusions to Mallarmé in *G*, for example, show his fascination with the mysteries and uncertainties of representation in words, and such ideas are frequently subject-matter, in the tradition of a self-reflexive modernism. For Hillis Miller, it is also paramount for the critic not to miss the anomalous in literature.<sup>24</sup> Anomalies in Berger have been too often dismissed as flaws, treated with suspicion, or passed over without comment. There is no critical discussion of either the suicidal dog or dead fox in the drawer in *Corker's Freedom*, for example, or of the killing of the horses in *G*, or Régis's story 'The Two Hunters' in *Once in Europa*, or of the extraordinarily strange conversations between John and Mim atop the aqueduct in *Here is Where We Meet*. In such moments - the best and most thrilling moments to my mind - Berger proves to be a considerably more fascinating writer than the body of criticism has been able to acknowledge.

During this project I have taken as a working truth, after Derrida and Hillis Miller, that the literariness of a text is activated, as it were, within the delicate relationship between the conventions of writing and reading.<sup>25</sup> In other words, if a text can be read as literature - if the text itself contains qualities that reward being approached in this way, and if this approach is successful in finding them - this alone is enough for that reading to take place. I discuss texts that have been classified by Berger or his publisher as a collection of essays, and have things to say about generically hybrid texts, such as *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* and apparently documentary works, *A Fortunate Man*, *Photocopies*, for example. These texts reward the type of reading I am concerned with here. Thus, amongst more obviously literary texts, such as some of the novels, I also read pieces for their literary value that were first published as journalism. There is nothing new about this: few readers approach 'Ballets' by Stéphane Mallarmé (to use as an example a text that appears in *G*.) primarily as a review of a production of an minor ballet performed in Paris in 1886. Instead they are drawn to its extraordinary attempt to

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<sup>23</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> See Jacques Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature' in *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992) and J. Hillis Miller, 'Derrida and literature' in *Derrida and the Humanities* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

recreate dance in the act of writing, which is to say to the most forceful aspect of its literariness.

I have tried to respond creatively to the work. A creative reading, in Derek Attridge's words, involves

an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text...to work against the mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to what can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought and feeling in this particular work. It involves a suspension of habits, a willingness to rethink old positions in order to apprehend the work's inaugural power.<sup>26</sup>

It is to these ideas, and to respond to the distinctiveness of Berger's work and its particular invitations that my readings aspire. Without exception the texts focused on in this study have become richer and more compelling the more fully I have attempted to register their individual characteristics. I have tried to read until the strangeness of their details - the half-hidden repetitions and structures - start to emerge as their most forceful aspects.

This study is not intended as an illustration of how a particular theory or method might help us understand the books. Once more I agree with Derek Attridge, who reasons that, because:

reading happens as an event, there is no possibility of legislating in advance, as many critical theories have attempted to do, what is and what is not relevant to a full response. We may want to exclude as illegitimate the author's intentions, or the facts of his or her biography, or our own beliefs as readers, or the quality of the paper on which the text is printed, but the reality is that any of these factors, and dozens more, may enter into a reading that does justice to the alterity and singularity of the work.<sup>27</sup>

In what follows I have attempted to be sensitive to the invitations my reading of these texts presented, spending time discovering what excites or interests me most about them as literary works, and then drawing in other material to deepen my

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<sup>26</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 81.

<sup>27</sup> Derek Attridge, *Singularity*, 81.

understanding of, and the implications of, a particular aspect of each text which I find most forceful. I have tried to uncover the motions or repeated gestures that lie at the centre of a text's construction: the vertical and horizontal coordinates upon which *Pig Earth* and *Here is Where We Meet* are respectively plotted; *A Painter of Our Time's* insistence on gesticulating towards the modes of Berger's writing and other contexts from which emerges; the twin impulses of capturing both the fecundity and limits of verbal language that *G.* and *Once in Europa* demonstrate, manifested in part by long metonymical chains which never resolve into a final or privileged figure, and which are used to express both the superabundance of life, and the unknowable. At times I make specific arguments about the relationship between Berger's work and a wider historical-political situation. However, I also find that Berger criticism has been too quick to attempt to close down the texts in some way in the process of striving towards a particular standpoint. The most thrilling moments of a text may well be those in which many different meanings co-exist. The criticism I value most tries to account for this, not ignore or limit it in the pursuit of neat reasoning. When dealing with texts such as Berger's, which themselves seem repeatedly to strive for open-endedness, this is particularly important. It is to this ideal of criticism the present study aspires.

Some critical sources recur. Jacques Derrida is the writer I cite with the greatest frequency, and whose conception of literature I find the most exciting and useful, as extended and practised by people in English departments (J. Hillis Miller and Derek Attridge, both already cited, among them). That is not to say that I have attempted to deconstruct Berger's texts; indeed, it is equally testament to the overlaps in the interests of two very different near-contemporaries (namely: animals; ghosts; Mallarmé; the structure of the promise posed by a messianic return; and the legacies of Marx) that results in my repeatedly reaching for what Derrida has to say on a particular topic. Derrida, as a philosopher of difference, also appears often because Berger is a writer who asks us to consider spaces between: between the essay and the novel forms; words and image; the thing and its representation; public and private time; the author and his auto-representation, et cetera. Approaching Berger's creative output seriously, first and foremost *as literature*, with a commitment to the distinctiveness of that mode of writing, is where this study strives to be original.

This study is arranged chronologically rather than thematically or employing any other system. This is not foremost to show Berger's development as an artist, although I am interested in trying to complicate both, on the one hand, the oft-told story of the homogeneity of Berger's creative vision, and on the other the decisive breaks that have become another familiar part of the critical narrative. Primarily, because the development of historical events is clearly relevant, I am using the story of those unfolding events to orientate the reader. At strategic times I take the opportunity presented by a particular text to discuss an aspect of Berger's work more generally. Thus *G.* (Chapters 3 and 4) affords me the opportunity to discuss Berger's representations of women, and I use *Pig Earth* and *Once in Europa* (Chapter 6) as a jumping off point to discuss Berger's own poetry as embedded within his prose work.

No attempt has here been made to survey Berger's literary output. Both reader and critic are faced with the sheer volume of work, and so choices need to be made. There are books barely mentioned here that the reader might reasonably expect to feature prominently in a study of Berger's literary output, including one of the most praised, read and taught novels, *To The Wedding*. Others, such as *The Foot of Clive*, an 'unmitigated failure' in the eyes of Geoff Dyer, receive what might be deemed undue space.<sup>28</sup> It ends at *Here is Where We Meet*, leaving several texts written after 2005 (as yet) unconsidered. The most sizeable gap contains the three consecutive novels Berger wrote in the 1990s, *Lilac and Flag* (1990), *To The Wedding* (1995) and *King* (1998), none of which feature prominently. That the first of these is the final part of a trilogy, *Into Their Labours*, might seem a particularly strange decision. These texts contain fewer of the particular qualities which became the focus of this study. In these three works Berger had entered a period in which formal hybridity, collage and other stylistic experimentation had temporarily faded from view, replaced by a narrative style familiar from the peasant texts but containing less of the extraordinary materiality of *Pig Earth* or the self-reflexive sophistication of *Once in Europa* and less of the figurative richness of both. Several

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<sup>28</sup> Writers Colum McCann, Michael Ondaatje and Anne Michaels, for example, have all professed their unqualified admiration for *To The Wedding*.

of the themes that reappear frequently in this study - including the problematic human-animal divide, the challenge offered by the representation of sex, Berger's staging of himself as a character, the use of a metaphoric of height and depth, the figure of the ghost, and the operation of dreams - are in this period muted, or present in less fertile iterations. For example, the negotiations between inside and outside (rooms, rivers, bodies, et cetera) in *To The Wedding*, which pivot around the moment when Ninon, climaxing, kicks apart the hut in which she and Gino are having sex, are extremely intriguing. And yet that text, which is so much concerned with permeating borders and boundaries - of bodies, societies, families and countries - nevertheless seemed less of an opportunity to discuss this feature than the earlier, much less loved novel *The Foot of Clive* or the later *Here is Where We Meet*. *Clive* is also a more fertile place to discuss the human/animal divide than *King*. Similarly, Berger's reference to himself through the bike-riding character *Jean* in *To The Wedding* seemed a less intriguing moment to explore at length Berger's auto-representations than its original manifestation in *A Painter of Our Time*.

Ultimately, these texts contain fewer unique characteristics that, during the particular period of time of writing, and of my life, I wanted to explore and in some way respond to. It would be both ungenerous and almost certainly disingenuous to try to make further account. Such absences are bound to read as a qualitative judgement; it is also true that the critical heritage already includes several examples of works being condemned too hastily and without purpose. A body of work as large and multifarious as Berger's might well contain different aspects that appear particularly arresting, decisive or moving at different moments or phases in any given reader's life, (this may also be true for a generation or indeed century of readers' lives). It might well be that the absences in this study point towards my future work in ways I do not yet foresee.

The most prominent feature of *A Painter of Our Time*, the subject of Chapter 1, entitled 'A Strange Borderland', is its demand to be read in relation to the discourse of texts and contexts it emerges from, to which it consistently and insistently refers. It contains the most complex of Berger's fictional self-representations. Examining those contexts, utilising letters between Berger and his publisher and framing the book within the specific context of the battle for realism in the 1950s London art world, and also exploring the paratexts of the first edition, the discontinuities between Janos's diary and John's commentary and editorship,

and the startling beginning of Berger's career-long fascination with names, this opening chapter explores how *Painter* attempts to stage multiple representations of its author (from the front cover onwards) to fragment, amplify and free Berger's voice as it is previously found in his journalism for the *New Statesman*. In doing so, it affirms as a defining characteristic of *Painter* its use of a particularly literary set of techniques - this despite *Painter* being a text that other critics, its publishers and Berger himself have been reluctant to read as literature. This approach also tries to account for the generic restlessness of the book. *Painter* both appears to attempt to dissolve Berger's journalistic voice as it creates his novel-writing one, and simultaneously to dramatise these two things happening.

Berger's second novel, *The Foot of Clive*, refers to figurative and real animals, predominantly dogs, to scrutinise the problematic human/animal divide within the context of society, socialism, and a background metaphor of sickness and health. It also probes the boundaries between the individual and the collective, and the domestic and the wild. Chapter 2, entitled 'The Dogs of Clive' explores these areas of the text, as well as how they disrupt the attempt to read it, as critics have tried to, as a piece of generically conventional realism. The chapter draws in Jacques Derrida's writing on animals and takes the emerging theme as an opportunity to introduce a wider look at Berger's representation of, and thinking on, animals, which is a major characteristic of his oeuvre, barely discussed by critics. The chapter also takes seriously the claim on the blurb that the book is taking Berger's belief in man's capacity for change 'out of the sphere of intellectual or polemical argument and submit[ting] it to the ruthless trial of ordinary life'.<sup>29</sup> What such a trial can mean in fiction, and its effect on the structure and ending of the novel, leads me to suggest a particular type of rhetoric is characteristically in play in this and other Berger texts, which appear to be tests for the foundational principles upon which they were conceived.

Chapter 3 takes as its starting points the theme of inarticulacy that develops during much of Berger's early work and attempts to account for a strange set of correlations between the position of a viewer of a photograph of agony (as Berger characterises it), the position of the reader of *The Foot of Clive* (as Geoff Dyer and others have described it) and the representation of Dr Sassall in the moments after seeing a grief-stricken patient. In contrast to the relative helplessness of the first two

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<sup>29</sup> John Berger, *The Foot of Clive* (London: Methuen, 1962), jacket blurb.

of these situations, Sassall is able to respond by working harder, seemingly providing an archetype for both Berger and his reader, and thus highlights a fundamental absence in Berger's earlier work in which the depiction of wholesale inarticulacy is a prominent theme. This reading is used to further emphasise that imaginative writing is often presented as a resolution in Berger's work, characterised as contingent and insufficient, but as an action (and indeed the only one seemingly available) in the face of the unchangeable bleakness or incomprehensibility of multiple sets of circumstances. The importance of literature as a repeatedly privileged theme in the work is thus emphasised.

Chapter 4, entitled 'Birds Like Letters Fly Away' (a quotation from a poem Berger wrote in the year *G.* was published) reads *G.* both with and against its most prominent and critically acknowledged feature. *G.* both gestures off-stage, as it were, to a vast array of other texts and contexts, but I argue that at the same time through the vast array of these gestures, it also undermines the importance of any particular one, signalling the novel's fascination with both abundance and emptiness. This is linked to the text's other concerns, such as the inability of verbal language to mean a single stable thing or to access all aspects of existence and experience. My reading of the text maps a chain of metonymically linked motifs which lie at the heart of the novel's structure, and arrives at an under-explored element of its intertextuality, Stéphane Mallarmé's poetry, which, in Jacques Derrida's reading, emblematises these important characteristics of the text.

Chapter 5 uses *G.*, Berger's most sustained engagement with gender politics, to discuss Berger's somewhat vexed representations of women throughout his work. Moving from the unsettling depictions of women in the early texts, it attempts to evaluate Berger's claims for the novel's sympathy with the Women's Liberation Movement, placing it within the context of Eve Sedgwick's understanding of the cuckold and Simone de Beauvoir's link between female sexual desire and oppression. My suggestion is that Berger's understanding of liberation is filtered by the historic tendency within socialist thought to prioritise class warfare over other liberation struggles, and that this inscribes a set of tensions into the texts of the early 1970s and before.

Chapter 6 ('Everything is Precipitous') is divided into three parts. Firstly it considers *Pig Earth*, exploring the critical reception of a text which has been marked as the defining shift in Berger's oeuvre, and moves on to plot the various metaphors

of vertical movement that the text is built upon. The reading explores the ways in which animals attract vastly more description and figuration than human bodies, emphasising their material presence within the stories, and their position within a chain of associations with the peasant landscape, the wider galaxy, death, and an unarticulated sense of mystery or metaphysicality. The reading then charts the decisive break that 'The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol' makes in this pattern, as Lucie, her body adorned with a multitude of animal figures, leads Jean into privileged spaces only animals have lead people into until this point.

The chapter then charts a similar-style metonymic chain in *Once in Europa* as that found in *G.*, including some of the same figures (flight, ballets, and whiteness), which produces both coherence and irresolution. This figurative strategy emerges as a major characteristic of Berger's literary oeuvre, helping to produce the sense of open-endedness and the preservation of mystery that is such a prominent and mostly ignored feature of the work. As with *G.*, moments which emphasis these characteristics are prominent, such as the enigmatic story 'The Two Hunters' that Régis relates to Odile.

The chapter ends with a short study of Berger's poetry as it appears in his predominantly prose work - a feature which has been almost entirely ignored by critics. I attempt to explain the correlation between the period in which Berger writes and uses poetry most prolifically and the historical events which contextualise it, tying the two together by examining Berger's writings on the properties of poetry.

Chapter 7, 'Dancing on the Ruins, Spectres of Hope', attempts to account for the most forceful features of Berger's late masterpiece, *Here is Where We Meet*: the size and sweep of the horizontal movements of this text which is continually representing the crossing of boundaries, borders and bridges; the book's representation of ghosts and how this tessellates with Berger's wider use of the ghost figure in his later work and thought; and the characteristic gesture of the book of introducing and then undercutting a series of metaphysical explanations for its events and the world more generally. These features are brought together, attempting to also remain faithful to the book's domestic scale. Derrida's writing about the spectre sharpens the discussion of the ghost. The chapter ends by looking beyond *Here* to other late Berger texts in which the spectre is prominent, and suggests why this figure becomes particularly crucial to Berger in the late Twentieth and early Twenty-First centuries.

Many other long studies of Berger include interviews with him and cite conversations. Andy Merrifield stresses *just how long* these phone calls were.<sup>30</sup> My position on this is expressed exactly by the formidable severity of Fred Orton's introduction to his monograph on Jasper Johns:

Finally a brief comment on Jasper Johns and 'Jasper Johns'. In my text Jasper Johns is the name of the agent who - sometimes with assistance by others - made the objects I look at, see and seek to understand. He is the intentional producer, the real person who is known to no one but himself, and not even to him. But 'Jasper Johns' names the imaginary or symbolic character who stands in causal relation with the works, who is their producer and who enables their inscription in discourse even as they and their inscription in discourse produce him...because he is unknowable, I saw no reason to go out of my way to make the acquaintance of Jasper Johns. I saw little point in questioning him about the work of 'Jasper Johns'. This puts a distance between this book and those books devoted to the study of 'Jasper Johns'. Most of them - all of them - try to conflate the distinction between Jasper Johns and 'Jasper Johns'. The art disrupts the attempt...To have met with Jasper Johns as part of my research and writing would have complicated a project that was already complex and would have diverted me from what I was looking at, and how I was looking at it.<sup>31</sup>

From what I can gather, Berger has always been generous with his time to those writing about his work.<sup>32</sup> By not seeking him out, by not feeling obliged to offer him my thanks in the acknowledgements, made clear is another way in which this study is distinct from many that have gone before. When I stated that no one has

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<sup>30</sup> Andy Merrifield *John Berger* (London: Reaktion Press, 2012), 217. 'Thank you, John, for your cooperation and support for this project', writes Merrifield to Berger in the acknowledgements (222).

<sup>31</sup> Fred Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 14-15.

<sup>32</sup> He is thanked in several theses, and he kept the copy of Diane Watson's PhD she sent him, which is now in the 'About John' section of the archive (London, British Library, Manuscripts Collection, John Berger Archive, MS 88964/9/4).

captured why I find reading the work so compelling, that includes Berger's own piecemeal and patchwork account, found in essays, conversations and interviews which often provide the cue for those who have followed him. This is not to say I ignore these explanatory texts where I see an interesting relationship to the work, but I do not aim to arrive at an explanation of the work authorised by these texts. I try to trust the work itself.

One other important difference is not methodological but serendipitous: in 2009 Berger donated his archive to the British Library. During the writing of this thesis that archive has been undergoing cataloguing, and access during this time has, until very recently, been intermittent. Nevertheless, this study has been enriched by access to Berger's manuscripts, early drafts, notebooks and letters unavailable to previous critics. The limits in the scope of this study, combined with the potential within this large and significant resource both point to future work.

A common complaint is that there are no good jokes in Berger. This is true, and yet I would argue that there is plenty of *play*. Perhaps Berger is less interesting when this play is minimal, at which point he leaves himself open to the charge of worthiness or reverence, even sentimentality. It has nevertheless been my experience that the work becomes more interesting the more closely one reads it. The Bergerian universe is wide and outward-reaching, it makes raids across borders and borrows from many worlds and forms; following that movement first as reader and then as critic - into fin-de-siècle Trieste, strip-lit laundrettes, up to the alpage where birds stitch and unstitch the sky, into the Chauvet caves, to ballets and flights of many kinds, the tropes of realism and modernism, and into an ever-building sense of a singular private universe with its own patterns, symbols and multiplying self-representations - has been both an intellectual challenge and an enormous pleasure.

1

'A strange borderland':

*A Painter of Our Time*

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*A Painter of Our Time* is a text in which various kinds of being are scrutinised: there is the instability of its generic identity; the question of what it means to be an artist, and to be an émigré, to be a socialist, even to be a man (emphatically and unfortunately gendered as such), and how these pressurise each other. There is the non-relationship between its two central characters, Janos and John, and the dramas of their own private searching. The text provokes us to consider its complex representations of its author, whose name and likeness appears in the text and its associated paratexts in a surprising and complex web of reference, complicated further by the biographical fact that before writing criticism for the *New Statesman*, and then this first novel, Berger was himself a painter - one who responded to his own time by abandoning his brush and picking up a pen. In Berger's own, much later words, 'somehow this book is a farewell to the art I had just abandoned.'<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> John Berger, 'Afterword (1988)' (Reprinted in London: Granta, 1992, 198). Forty-five years after the event, in an interview with Andrew Lambirth, Berger stated 'In that situation, to draw and paint seemed not urgent enough' (*Independent on Sunday*, 17 January, 1998).

predominant effect of some of Berger's best work (and a characteristic effect of the novel in general) is to draw the reader into a seemingly discrete and self-contained world (*Clive's* hospital ward, the peasant village of *Pig Earth*). *Painter*, however, is a novel which demands to be read in relation to the discourse comprising of the texts contexts it emerges from, to which it consistently and insistently refers.

The book presents us with gaps, silences, incoherencies and apparently wilful strangenesses. As critics and reviewers have noted, *Painter* is a text with a mystery at its heart: the sudden disappearance of Janos Lavin, secluded Hungarian revolutionary socialist, realist painter, émigré, and the novel's central character.<sup>2</sup> Given its importance to the final text, Janos's disappearance was a surprisingly late addition; in the archived drafts the book opens with Janos's death after illness, having spent nine days in bed.<sup>3</sup> It is a major change. The published version emphasises Janos's substitution of political activity for painting, and in concert with the structure of the mystery story, we read as if progressing towards a final revelation for why this has happened. Janos, we discover, has gone home primarily to 'tell my mistake to those who are like I was'.<sup>4</sup> He decides to substitute words for paint, the relative directness of verbal testimony superseding the complicated, drawn-out and oblique communication his art may embody. Tacitly but insistently, Janos's situation echoes Berger's own. The discovery of Janos's journal, related in 'The Beginning' section, is the piece of the puzzle which kickstarts the narrative. Although Janos's pictures are available to John, still leaning against the walls of the studio, they tell him nothing about Janos's disappearance. In his current situation, wishing to answer certain questions, the diary is a crucial and privileged object. The mystery-plot also underwrites this claim for the verbal, because the detective story is fed by the periodic recovery of new information - clues - and thus favours the kind of knowledge found in a written diary over the kind of knowledge and meaning found in artworks. In these ways the book dramatises a series of substitutions in which painting and paintings are replaced by words. *Written in a 'sketch-book'* (14, my emphasis), the diary physically embodies the superseding of words for painting that is inscribed into every aspect of the book's construction. The diary entries move ever closer to the date on which Janos vanishes, but the ending preserves the

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<sup>2</sup> For example, 'The novel opens in classic mystery tradition...'. Geoff Dyer *Ways of Telling* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 34.

<sup>3</sup> John Berger Archive, London, British Library, MS 88964/1/5.

<sup>4</sup> John Berger, *A Painter of Our Time* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958), 236. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be made in the text.

mystery; if revelations have occurred, then they are complex, the length of the entire journal, or an entire life. We can begin to understand the reasons why Janos has gone, but nevertheless the written account frustrates its promises of clear comprehension, and the question of what exactly has happened to him remains open: 'what happens after this? We do not know' (237) writes John (the editor of Janos's diary, who so closely resembles Berger), before speculating inconclusively on the book's closing page. Neither do words lead us to a straightforward resolution or understanding.

It is also a text in which the mystical - that close relation of the mysterious - lingers. At root both words derive from the Greek meaning 'to close the eyes or lips', and blindness and silence pervades this book.<sup>5</sup> At times Janos's disappearance has the appearance of a rapture as much as a political decision (and his change of heart something like a biblical epiphany) not least in the last sentence of the book, when he is compared to Elijah being taken up to heaven in a chariot (238). Furthermore, the sense of the unknowable and inexplicable is also situated in the process and productions of artistic creation: for both Janos and John painting and paintings, in spite of their materiality and the material approach that they take to understanding them, are situated beyond full comprehension, and in strange relation to the rest of life. And Janos's works, which grow larger and larger, dominating his studio and large sections of the diary, remain invisible to us.

*A Painter of Our Time* endures. Hostilely received, possibly strangled at birth by its publisher, strangely formed, alarmingly unforgiving to its women, it nevertheless refuses to be quite forgotten (and was chosen by Verso in 2010 when they republished a selection of Berger's back catalogue).<sup>6</sup> It is a work in which the widely significant and personal theme (for any writer or artist on the Left) of the relationships between creativity and various socialisms (socialism, which itself is a kind of creation project), is explored in depth, and to crisis point. It interrogates the anomalous kind of action that making artworks involves. Its autobiographical element takes surprising turns, making highly sophisticated use of the novelist's

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<sup>5</sup> The Ancient Greek word 'muein'.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough discussion of the circumstances of the publication of *A Painter of Our Time* see Gordon Johnston, 'Writing and Publishing in the Cold War' in *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 12, no. 4, (2001): 432-460. Johnston concludes that Secker & Warburg probably did suppress the book after the wave of hostile reviews. This is certainly Berger's view - in the afterword to the Penguin 1988 reprint he wrote 'after one month's life, my first book became a dead letter' (Reprinted in London: Granta, 1992, 196). For a consideration of the representation of women in Berger's work, including in *A Painter of Our Time*, see Chapter Five.

freedoms in ways that are both artistically fascinating and which (as the initial reception proved) spectacularly failed to free Berger from his entrenchment.

Janos's absence and John's incomprehension of his friend's actions form the hollow core around which everything accumulates. Reading *Painter* can be a confusing experience, and what limited criticism exists is surprisingly frequently blighted by factual errors.<sup>7</sup> As with Berger's second novel, *The Foot of Clive*, reading this book can also be fraught: Kiernan Ryan finds 'the constant risk' of the text 'tilting and turning completely from fiction to discursive theorising'.<sup>8</sup> His phrase, with its evocative coupling of verbs, neatly illustrates both (one of) the generic problems the text proposes as well as its transitional, shifting quality. It seems insufficient to state that *Painter* is a hybrid of autobiography, fiction, criticism and biography; instead it seems to invoke all these genres - gesturing towards a real painter's life, the novel Berger wanted to write but was unsure about whether he could, the autobiographical story Berger was clearly compelled to relate, and a body of to-deadline criticism that he was feeling increasingly suffocated by. To read it *feels* risky, even now, as it most certainly did in October 1958, to judge from the 'virulent and dismissive' reaction to its publication, most famously from Stephen Spender.<sup>9</sup> Some of the reasons, though, are different. If the stakes still feel high then it is probably no longer because of John's hope that Janos, if alive, is supporting the Red Army rather than the Hungarian freedom-fighters - the provocativeness of this sentence published two years after the Hungarian Uprising has diminished considerably.<sup>10</sup> Nor has it much to do with Janos helping to murder a traitor in Berlin thirty years before the diary entries begin. Instead, we feel the pressure exerted on a text that is so desperately trying to do and be so many things. Criticism has barely begun to explore the richness of this text's cracks and fissures.

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<sup>7</sup> Both Nikos Papastergiadis (*Modernity as Exile* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993]: 146, and Max Saunders ('File Under Freedom' *TLS*, 10 December 2010) display some confusion as to the actual events of the novel. Laszlo has not, as Papastergiadis writes, stayed in Hungary, but instead returned there with the Red Army after World War II, and it is his pardon, not execution, which appears to precipitate Janos's return. Janos did not flee Stalinist Hungary, as Saunders suggests, but leaves three decades earlier. James Hyman's gross misreading of the book is considered below. Colum McCann even manages to cite '*An Artist of Our Time*' as one of his favourite books in *The Guardian*, Friday 17 June, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Kiernan Ryan, 'Socialist Fiction and the Education of Desire' in *The Socialist Novel in Britain: Towards the Recovery of a Tradition* edited by H. Gustav Klaus (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 179.

<sup>9</sup> This is Geoff Dyer's description of the book's reception in *Ways of Telling* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 36; Stephen Spender reviewed *Painter* for the *Observer*, 9 November, 1958, and used the opportunity to liken it to *Michael* by Joseph Goebbels.

<sup>10</sup> Particularly given the subsequent relative benignity of János Kádár's (First Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, 1956-88) long rule, and its peaceful ending.

Like its later critics, *A Painter of Our Time* posed problems for its first readers, representatives of the book's publishers, Secker & Warburg. In his meticulous article on the circumstances surrounding publication, Gordon Johnston has surveyed the various reactions *Painter* provoked during its genesis in a series of fraught exchanges that eventually led to the complete breakdown of the relationship after publication. In March 1957, halfway between commission and delivery, Fredric Warburg worriedly wrote to Berger:

I feel that it is falling at the moment between two stools. On the one hand it has not the vitality of a novel and the characters don't come to life. On the other, it has not the authenticity of a documentary or non-fiction book on art and artists. In other words it is a hybrid, or to use a nastier word, a mongrel.<sup>11</sup>

Notwithstanding Berger's seeming lifelong preference for mongrels over thoroughbreds, he remained conciliatory at this stage, and manuscript drafts show that he revised the book considerably. Nevertheless, in 1958 Warburg was still nervous about marketing a book that 'is on a strange borderland between fiction, reportage and aesthetics'.<sup>12</sup> Roger Senhouse, a co-director, read a late draft, stating 'all the characters including I, John Berger, become alive in this story, in spite of the method' which was problematised by the use of 'a Hungarian to explain [Berger's] theory of aesthetics'.<sup>13</sup> Berger himself did not help matters by cryptically explaining at the beginning of his exchanges with Warburg that the book 'was to be written in the first person and that this 'I' would be myself, Berger, art-critic...there will be no attempt to turn the book into a novel'.<sup>14</sup> This is a strange statement given that the fictional painter at the centre of the book had already been established, and thus the text replicated the kind of proposition we see in the founding works of the novel-

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<sup>11</sup> Gordon Johnston, 'Writing and Publishing in the Cold War' in *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 12, no. 4, (2001), 435.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

genre, from Daniel Defoe onwards, in which the author 'stumbles' across the true account of someone's life, or pretends to be faithfully representing an (imaginary) other's testimony. *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, written by himself* is the full title of Defoe's novel, for example, and in the preface (that crucial element of early realism, utilised in *Painter*) Defoe presents himself as editor, claiming the book as 'a just history of fact'.<sup>15</sup> Berger uses this technique once more much later in *From A to X*, which is presented as 'some letters recuperated by John Berger'.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, despite using the oldest trick in the novelist's book, Berger appeared anxious to down-play the book's literary properties, and so to cultivate a different kind of expectation from his early readers. Archived, undated manuscripts show two distinct versions of the book: a first-person narrative from John's point of view, written after Janos's death from illness, and a version in which Janos's journal is presented free from John's interpolations. It is not clear which came first, but at some stage Berger hit upon the idea of combining elements of the two.<sup>17</sup> Both of these drafts read like works of fiction, particularly the 'John' narrative, which begins with him visiting the studio, seeing Janos's dead body, conversing with Diana and then with Susan the sitter, who is an extremely peripheral figure in the final text, but who is pregnant with Janos's child in this version. Nevertheless the early readings contained in the correspondence, including Berger's own, point to the general confusion and apprehension about what the emerging text was to be.

The dust jacket of the original edition is a fascinating document with which these confusions are papered over. By this point the question of genre appears to have been settled: the text on the front and back flaps introduce the book as answering a challenge posed by the history of the *novel*:

John Berger, whose lively and controversial art criticism in *The New Statesman* has provoked wide discussion[...]believes that no convincing portrait of a painter has ever been drawn in fiction. Accepting this belief as a conscious challenge, he has here set out to remedy the omission[...]The painter is Janos Lavin[...]when Lavin, a Communist, mysteriously disappears in the autumn of 1956 just as success has come to him through his first one-man exhibition, his friend John Berger discovers the journal which Lavin

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Defoe *Robinson Crusoe* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2000), xxx.

<sup>16</sup> John Berger, *From A to X* (London: Verso: 2008), 1.

<sup>17</sup> John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/4; MS 88964/1/5; MS 88964/1/6; MS 88964/1/7.

has kept for several years, and which forms the main body of the novel[...]. The self-portrait and story of the artist that emerges from the journal is rounded out by the commentary of his friend, who gives his own description of people and incidents to which the journal merely refers. John Berger's accounts of their visit to Sir Gerald Banks...of his own abortive attempts to interest dealers...and of the private view, present a bitingly satirical (and very amusing) picture of the modern art world.<sup>18</sup>

'John Berger' is named here first as author and then as a character in the text. The nature of this naming is slightly discordant because no acknowledgement is made that Janos's 'friend John Berger' shares a name or identity with the earlier John Berger, the believer that no convincing portraits of artists exist in fiction, author of the book.<sup>19</sup> It thus becomes unclear if the third mention of 'John Berger' above refers to the author or the character. This naming is also anomalous: Berger does not give the character John his surname in the text itself, a move that distances the text somewhat from any attempt to produce what Phillip Lejeune calls 'the autobiographical pact', opening up a freer fictional space in the process.<sup>20</sup>

Berger also appears in the reproductions of an ink drawing on the front cover (fig. 1) by Berger's friend Peter de Francia, and a photograph on the back cover (fig. 2).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Quotation from the inside front cover of the dust jacket of the first UK edition of *A Painter of Our Time* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958).

<sup>19</sup> The jacket text is reproduced in no other UK edition, and the flimsiness of this contract is materially highlighted by the fact that it is absent from its rightful place in the V&A Design Archive, where the British Library copy of the jacket should be held. It is possible, therefore, that there is no publicly preserved or accessible copy.

<sup>20</sup> See Phillip Lejeune *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), Chapter 1: 'The Autobiographical Pact'. There are other interesting instances of such naming, for example (in a completely different context) Elie Wiesel and 'Eliezer', the narrator of *Night*, given the longer form of the name and no surname. In that case, Wiesel furiously repudiated the space he has seemingly opened for himself.

<sup>21</sup> It is one of a series made by de Francia, exhibited in 'Art and Property Now' at Somerset House in 2012.

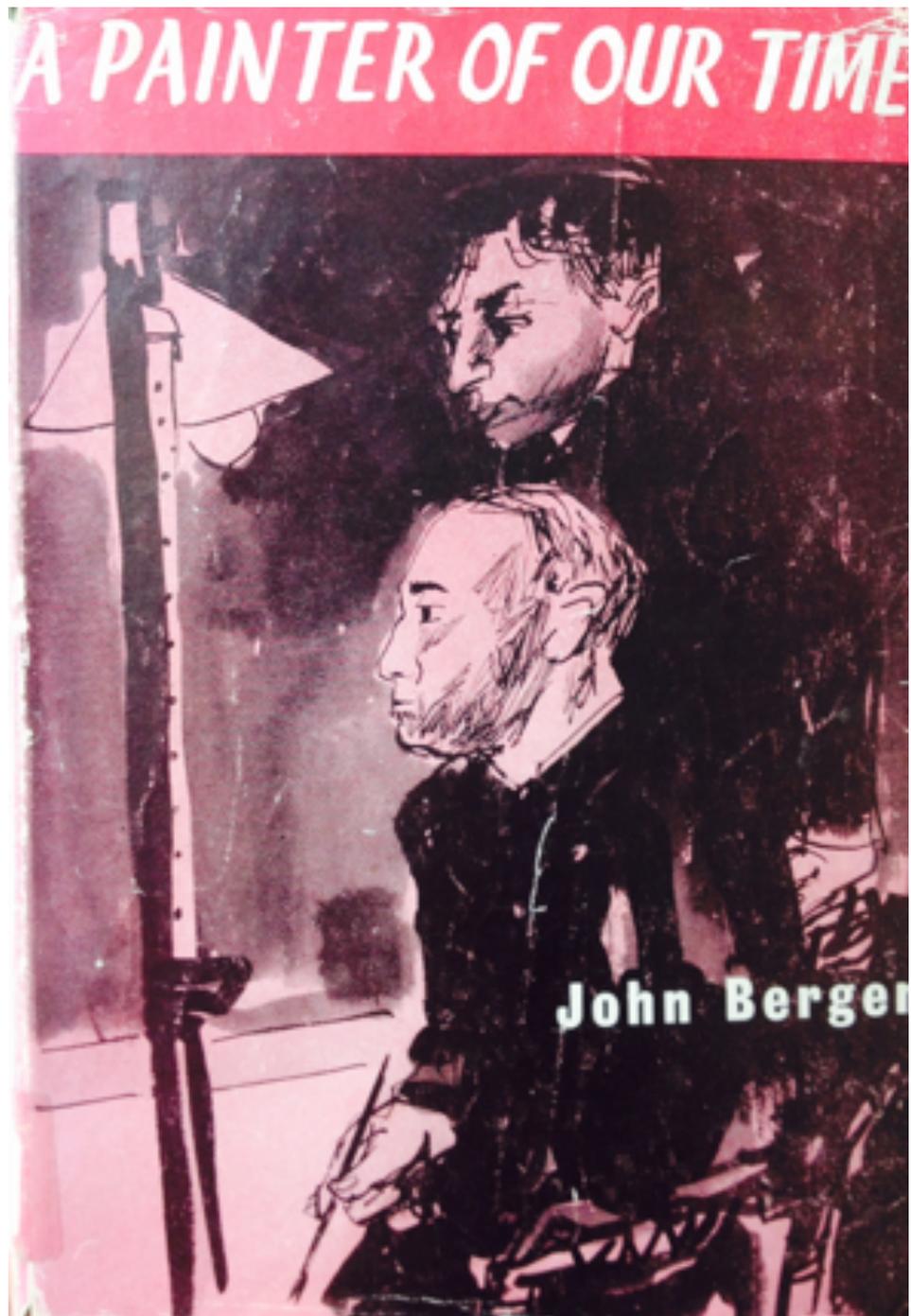


FIGURE 1

Front cover of the first edition of *A Painter of Our Time*, published by Secker and Warburg, 1958. Jacket designed by Peter de Francia.

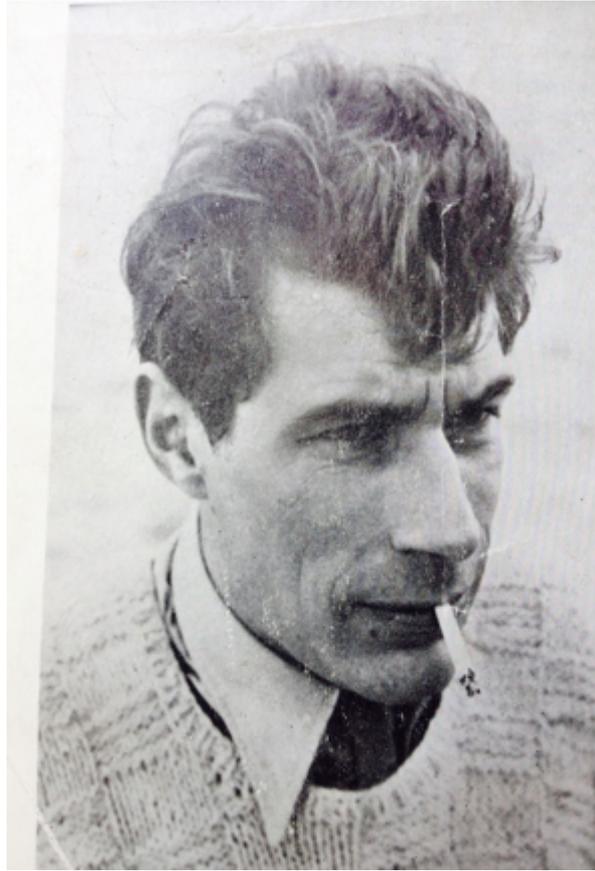


FIGURE 2

Detail of the back cover of the first edition of *Painter of Our Time*.

The drawing depicts two men of different generations. The older one is seated, brush in a hand resting on his knee; the younger man is standing behind him looking over his shoulder, slightly further from the canvas, yet close enough that the men could be touching, and his presence in the studio and proximity suggest intimacy. He can see both the seated painter and the canvas, both the painter's movement and resulting mark, but he is also so close in this cramped composition that he appears a participant, along with the artist, in the emergence of the work. Partially obscured, his torso merges with the shadows. Our viewpoint is on the same plain as the canvas itself, meaning that we see the left hand edge of the frame and easel, and the viewpoint the two men share of the work is hidden from us, as it is in the book, the ekphrastic descriptions notwithstanding. The standing figure is recognisably a portrait of Berger, and given the photograph on the back cover, the reader is invited to perceive this regardless of previous knowledge. The painter he stands over is old; to borrow from a description of Janos, he looks 'an energetic sixty' (21). His 'bald brow' and 'thick but drawn mouth', also recall the description

of the fictional painter (22), and suggest that De Francia has imagined a scene from the book for its cover, a move which again draws the book towards autobiography without explicitly saying so.<sup>22</sup> And yet the images and text on the jacket present two distinct John Bergers without attempt to bridge the gap between them. On the one hand we have John Berger, author of the novel and depicted in the back cover author photograph – the ‘real’ Berger. On the other hand we have the fictional character ‘John Berger’ and an unnamed yet recognisable portrait of Berger on the front cover.

What relationship does the dust jacket have with the text it enfolds? Discussing author likenesses on book jackets, Gerard Genette sees the pictures of Proust *aging* from volume to volume for the 1954 edition (the dates of the photographs in no way correspond to those of the writing of the book) as ‘inevitably drawing the *Recherché* toward the status of autobiography’.<sup>23</sup> De Francia’s drawing adds to the case which identifies Berger with ‘John’. This strengthens the invitations in the text (the shared forename, occupation and politics) to read the character not autobiographically but in the more definite sense of autobiography.<sup>24</sup> The flap-text is not attributed to Berger; even if he did write it, the lack of attribution and third-person reference to the author are enough to incline us to separate it from the main body of the text, and subordinate it, and so rather than reinforcing the identity of the character in the novel, it seems in conflict with the main body of the text, in which John is never given a surname, Berger’s own, ‘myself, Berger’ comment notwithstanding. We also are repeatedly told of the text’s generic status as both novel and fiction. If autobiography attempts to completely close the gap between the textual figure and the author to whom it refers (you might believe, as I do, that anyway this is an impossibility) it would appear that here we see both a closing and an opening of this gap occurring simultaneously at the threshold of the book.

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Peri was of the same generation as Janos, and, according to Berger’s essay in *The Look of Things*, Janos resembled him physically, although the pictures of Peri I could find do not look like de Francia’s cover portrait. Berger also states that Lavin should not be confused for Peri, although conversations with Peri provided inspiration for the novel. John Berger, ‘Peri’ in *The Look of Things* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 61-65. The essay is undated but, given that Berger talks about Peri in the past tense and the elegiac tone it seems likely that it was written after Peri’s death in 1967, possibly as the introductory essay of the memorial exhibition of Peri’s work held in 1968.

<sup>23</sup> Gerard Genette. *Paratexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 31.

<sup>24</sup> The US edition, published by Simon and Schuster shortly after the UK edition in 1959, did away with de Francia’s drawing, replacing it with an image dominated by a picture of a nude mounted on an easel and in the process downplayed both the autobiographical element (Berger would have been less well known in USA) and the ‘study of a relationship’ aspect of the text.

If de Francia's cover anticipates certain aspects of the novel it also precedes it – in terms of narrative chronology, for John and Janos are never together in the 'present' of the novel - and misrepresents it. The picture records presence, perhaps even communion (albeit possibly tension too) yet it covers the surface of a text which at times resembles a catalogue of endings and absence, and which collects the deaths of Stalin, Janos's childhood friend Laszlo, Leger, de Stael, 'the old man down the road', a majolica pot, and perhaps even Janos himself. It dramatises the apparent impossibility of painting in 'Our Time', the destruction of John's illusions and the breakdown of a marriage. It has, at its heart, a missing painter and invisible art. The inevitable failure of words successfully to re-present the paintings mirrors the complicated and unstable substitution at the centre of the book; for Janos's words are a substitute for his presence. Indeed they are a more vivid version of him, because John learns far more of his friend's inner life from the diary than he does from the man himself.

### 3

The aesthetics of realism in both art and literature are a key facet of the novel, and there are two debates that particularly inform it. The novel is written towards the end of a series of exchanges across the political spectrum that formed what James Hyman labels 'The Battle for Realism', which shaped discussion on art in Britain in the 1950s.<sup>25</sup> Berger, as art critic for *The New Statesmen*, was a major voice within it, an independent on the far left fighting for a British social realist movement distinct and creatively autonomous from Soviet Socialist Realism. During the period immediately before Berger sat down to write *Painter* we can see a marked constriction of his critical voice and an increased bullishness in his tone. This paragraph from a piece entitled 'The Battle' from January 1956 is a good illustration:

The movement gathers more and more force, extending from Guttuso in Italy to Theodore Major in Wigan. What is this movement? The kitchen-sink school? Social Realism? The name, deprecating or proud, doesn't matter. It is a movement of protest. A protest of young zeal against old

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<sup>25</sup> The composition dates for *Painter* are June 1956 to February 1958.

expediency? Partly. A political protest against capitalism? Partly. A protest against art becoming a snob commodity? Partly also. But above all it is a protest against the squalor of indulgent dishonesty and self-deception: the kind of dishonesty which pretends that five million Communist votes in France do not really represent the will of five million people: the kind of pathological self-deception which claims that the 'action' paintings at the Tate have anything to do with art.<sup>26</sup>

In pre-*Painter* criticism Berger stresses the anticipatory quality of realism. The two shows he curated were both called *Looking Forward*, and he was quick to criticise what he saw as disillusioned art. The future, and the imminent rise of British social realism, was the foundation of his critical project. In 'The Difficulty of Being an Artist' essay in *Permanent Red* Berger criticised 'men such as Camus, Malraux, Beckett, Giacometti, Marini, Buffet... (for producing) works of qualified disillusion and despair'.<sup>27</sup> Berger had no use for existentialism at this time. Instead he pleaded for 'the domestic virtues of painting' and he remained silent on many artists he has subsequently admired who did not share a positive outlook.<sup>28</sup> Berger's model for British social realism was Italian social realism, with Renato Guttuso at its helm, and the artists he put forward were a combination of émigré painters such as Peter Peri (a Hungarian in London) and Josef Herman (cutting an unlikely figure among Welsh miners), and young British artists such as the 'Beaux Arts Quartet', Derrick Greaves, Jack Smith, Edward Middleditch and John Bratby, otherwise known as the 'kitchen sink painters' and one of whom (or a composite) likely forms the basis for the young realist George Trent in *Painter*. A different realism, 'modernist realism', (sometimes 'existential realism') was championed by David Sylvester as the heir to modernism in opposition to social realism. It was initially symbolised by Alberto Giacometti's stretched, isolated figures, and it is telling that Berger's sympathetic essay on Giacometti, in which he describes the sculptor's theme as an insistence that

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<sup>26</sup> John Berger, 'The Battle', *New Statesman*, 21 January 1956, vol.51, no.1298, 70.

<sup>27</sup> John Berger, *Permanent Red*, (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperation, 1981), 32. *Permanent Red* is comprised of selected and reworked pieces from Berger's criticism. Methuen first published the book in 1960 and reprinted it in 1969.

<sup>28</sup> Hyman, *The Battle for Realism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 124.

‘no reality...could ever be shared’ was not written until 1966, close to a decade after the push for social realism in Britain was over.<sup>29</sup>

Richard Wollheim’s exploration of *Permanent Red*, the collection of Berger’s *New Statesman* articles written mostly during this debate (modified and collected afterwards), carefully unpicks Berger’s position, or positions, at this time.<sup>30</sup> Wollheim highlights Berger’s inconsistency of position, his double standards concerning the philistinism of the working class and the middle class viewer, for example.<sup>31</sup> He is justified in describing Berger’s motivation as sectarian, in that Berger’s politics were clearly more likely to inform his aesthetics than the reverse, whatever Berger said to the contrary. Berger relies heavily on intention to knit together artists whose work is otherwise disparate, the preface to the 1956 version of the exhibition *Looking Forward* being an example:

There is no such thing as a realist style. There is no such thing as a realist subject matter. Nor is there a realist conspiracy. All these artists have in common is a certain attitude to their job.<sup>32</sup>

In Hyman’s account Berger appears as an influential figure attempting to will, at times almost by furious force of personality alone, a British social realist movement into being.<sup>33</sup> In this debate Berger drew heavily from one which took place in the 1930s in which European Marxist intellectuals including Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht contested the question of the compatibility of realism with modernism, and the impact of it for politically engaged, avant-garde art. In 1950

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<sup>29</sup> John Berger, *Collected Essays*, 148. The essay was first published in *New Society* and collected in *The Moment of Cubism* (1969). In it Berger suggests that the ‘social despair or cynicism’ that fuelled Giacometti’s work is transcended by the ‘lucidity and total honesty’ with which he expressed it. This is not an argument that Berger would have made in the 1950s.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Wollheim, ‘The Sectarian Imagination: On John Berger’s Criticism’ *Encounter* (June 1961), 16(6): 47-53. I have some reservations about this article. The gloss Wollheim gives, for example, to Berger’s definition of the two approaches to criticism (the long-term historical view or the limited view) is inaccurate. Wollheim states that Berger believes that the long-term historical view equates to the position of God (49) whereas in Berger’s essay it is the impossible combination of the two positions which Berger equates with God. That Berger finds the long-term historical view problematic goes a long way to explaining why he does not employ the Marxist methodology that Wollheim criticises him for not utilising. Also, Wollheim’s conclusion, that Berger’s critical project is animated by ‘a certain envy of creativity’ seems to be a considerably lower level of argument to what precedes it, ignores the earlier realist context for his opinions and appears to be another way of saying that Berger’s desire for a socialist society is based on envy. In the 1988 Afterword to *Painter* Berger complains that Wollheim reviewed *Painter* for *Encounter* and ‘attacked me savagely’ (196). Paul Igotus also reviewed *Painter* extremely unfavourably for *Encounter* in February 1959.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>32</sup> James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism*, 128.

<sup>33</sup> For more on this see Part 4 of this chapter.

Georg Lukács's *Studies in European Realism* appeared in English translation and it is Lukács's thinking on realism that Berger's early critical journalistic project is most influenced by.<sup>34</sup> For Lukács, overly subjective or individual works of art were incomplete or one-dimensional: the subjective experience of the artist, increasingly incoherent as it mirrors the experience of living in an alienating and disorientating capitalist society, does not make for a successful work of art. Such works are 'frozen in their immediacy'.<sup>35</sup> Art must break through this incoherence and discover the ordered totality of the system. Lukács wrote that 'realism must be concerned with the creation of types...the realist must seek out the lasting features in people...which constitute the objective human tendencies of society'.<sup>36</sup> This broadly resonates with Janos's oeuvre: In *The Games*, we are told, individual athletes represent all men in a socialist future. Janos insists on the figures' anonymity: 'I realize it was a mistake now to ever think of including figures of different races. Let them be – men and women' (160). But a trace of autobiography lingers. Two years before, prompted by a trip to the National Gallery, Janos writes about his sense of 'fraternity' with other painters: 'We are all athletes whose limbs are images' (78), he remarks. And so although *The Games* is about the athlete as the type of person ready to inherit the socialist future, the painting is also a self-portrait, a painting about painters. It also has implications for Berger's choice to so obviously represent himself in the book. If we are to read John as a 'type', it is also impossible to escape the specificity, individuality and contingency of the reference.

The portrait of John painted by Janos dramatises this dilemma. It is a fascinating moment in the text. By having Janos paint John, Berger is re-presenting John to us, transformed into the stuff of art. Given that Berger is already creating a version of himself in the novel, the scene is akin to a play within a play, a moment in which the novel's self-reflexivity is particularly intense. Both characters read

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<sup>34</sup> For all of his words on realist art, Berger in this period is virtually silent on literary realism. The exception is a letter published in the *New Statesman* (3 November 1956), responding to an article by W.H. Auden. Auden was reviewing a new translation of the Icelandic Sagas, but he began - irresistibly provocatively for Berger - by reimagining social realism 'disinfected' of its 'polemical associations' (W.H. Auden, 'Concrete and Fastidious' in *The New Statesman*, No. 52, 1956, 551). Berger responded that for him the realist writer (and we again see the continued influence of Lukács) must create the typical, which involves a critical understanding and scrutiny of society, which necessarily involves politics. Without politics, social realism means nothing. He ends by remarking that 'those who invented the term, and those few who have created Social Realist masterpieces, have always stressed that the term has nothing to do with a style: but only with a purpose' (John Berger, letter in *New Statesman*, No. 52, 1956, 588).

<sup>35</sup> Georg Lukács, 'Realism in Balance', in *Aesthetics and Politics*. (London: Verso, 1980), 38.

<sup>36</sup> Georg Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics*, 46.

Janos's portrait of John as transcending individual psychology and likeness to represent 'a modern man thinking' (123). Janos states that 'a woman in love with J. would prefer' the sketch of John, which is a better 'portrait to cherish, to put in your locket' (123). Such a motivation for liking a picture is here snortingly dismissed. Instead artist and critic are reading the painting as a realist work: the individual subject represents a type, and the narrow context is representative of, and subordinate to, a much wider one. We can see the episode as an example of how to approach John (and by extension everyone else in the novel) - as a type, not as an individual - and the book as sharing its protagonist's realist aesthetic and author's critical viewpoint. And yet, Janos also writes a somewhat unflattering portrait of John in his diary which causes John intense humiliation; he has to recover from his 'own personal shocks' (16). Why does John read this written portrait of himself so differently, so personally? The diary is not read as a work of art, and the distinction seems to matter a great deal. We are invited to read John as he reads himself in front of the painting, detached and objective, as if we are reading a work of realist fiction, and simultaneously like John reading the diary, psychologically and specifically. This leads us back to the Bergers on the cover, and back to questions of realism, and to what extent we should apply them to Berger's literary output as well as his views on art. In a text which invites the reader to ask questions about its very nature, the examples of reading within it seem only to reiterate them.

#### 4

When John enters Janos's studio in the opening pages of the book, he remembers that he wishes to find his copy of 'Diderot translations' which Janos has borrowed, and which he 'should need' (14). Instead he finds the journal, and forgets all about the Diderot. It is an intriguing substitution, in which a real book with a real author is replaced by a fictional alternative, in which that real book is both introduced into *Painter's* world to be immediately abandoned afterwards.<sup>37</sup> Diderot's work is particularly significant because of its formal qualities. Texts such as *Rameau's Nephew*,

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<sup>37</sup> Of the translations of Diderot available in 1958, the most likely to be carried by John was an influential collection of materialist writings with a strong Marxist emphasis published as *Diderot, Interpreter of Nature: Selected writings*, trans. Jean Stewart and Jonathan Kemp, (New York: International Publishers, 1943).

a philosophical dialogue framed by a fictional situation, may well have provided Berger with the kind of example which allowed him to eschew certain unwanted conventions of the novel in search for a looser form. Diderot also alerts us to Berger's burgeoning Francophilia,<sup>38</sup> and there are other reasons for looking to France in the context of *Painter*. Jacques Derrida has spoken of the formal influence of existentialist texts in his early life (he is almost an exact contemporary of Berger's, born four years later): 'Sartre, Camus were present everywhere and the memory of surrealism was still alive...these writings practised a fairly new kind of contact between philosophy and literature'.<sup>39</sup> Like *Painter*, Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* (a text to which we will return) also employs the frame of the found diary of a missing person, and appears to be only minimally concerned with the conventions of the bourgeois novel. The jacket states that the writers Berger admired most were 'Diderot, Gorki and Yeats', an eclectic trio, with Gorki the only novelist of the three. Yet Berger's early fiction also claims a relationship with modernism, and *Painter* is no exception, with its working title of 'Portrait of the Artist as an Emigré' (a phrase retained in John's preface) nodding to Joyce, and in the allusion to Virginia Woolf in the title of Janos's painting *The Waves*. Much later, Berger wrote of the importance of Joyce on his early imagination: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was the honorary title that Berger 'gave to myself in my daydreams'.<sup>40</sup> *Ulysses*, which Berger read when he was fourteen, was the book that showed him 'that literature is inimicable to all hierarchies, and that to separate fact and imagination, event and feeling, protagonist and narrator, is to stay on dry land and never put to sea'.<sup>41</sup> Although there need not be any correlation between Berger's account thirty years later and the working imagination that produced *Painter*, nevertheless the freedom that Berger suggested he learnt from Joyce seems to say more about the idiomatic wilfulness of Berger's work than anything we can take from a narrow account of realist aesthetics.<sup>42</sup> Berger's literary aesthetics seem to always have been drawing in a

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<sup>38</sup> Asked by Geoff Dyer why he moved to France, Berger replied: 'There were people working in France whom I felt close to: Sartre, in a different way Camus; Merleau-Ponty. In the Britain that I left there were no thinkers like that.' (Geoff Dyer, 'Ways of Witnessing', *Marxism Today*, December, 1984, 38).

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature' (interview with Derek Attridge) in *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), 34.

<sup>40</sup> John Berger 'The recipe of Ulysses' in *Selected Essays* ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 467. The essay was first published in the *Guardian*, 1991.

<sup>41</sup> John Berger 'The recipe of Ulysses' in *Selected Essays*, 469.

<sup>42</sup> Other voices in that 1930s debate, such as Ernst Bloch and Bertolt Brecht, clearly do not see a conflict between modernism and realism. Berger's insistence on following Lukács's entrenchment seems all the stranger given his instinct for a much freer aesthetic sensibility when it came to his own

much wider range of influence than those he claimed for the principles of British social realism.

*Painter* continues an explicit dialogue with real events and people beyond Berger himself. For example, Janos's friend Laszlo appears at first glance to straightforwardly refer to Laszlo Rajk, a party member hanged by the regime as a traitor and pardoned just before the Uprising, making him an emblematic figure for this period of Hungarian history. However, certain facts of Rajk's life have been changed: he was executed in 1949, three years earlier than Janos records the fact of Laszlo's death in his entry for 7<sup>th</sup> July 1952 (72). And Rajk was born in 1909, too late to have been Janos's childhood companion. The character simultaneously refers to a real figure and a fictional one. By not giving Laszlo a surname, Berger is able to draw from the associations of the real man whilst altering the facts to fit his narrative, positioning the character between a real and imagined referent. Similarly, John, the naming on the dust jacket notwithstanding, and despite resembling John Berger, the portrait of Berger appearing on the cover, and Berger's affirmation that it is himself, is never given Berger's surname in the text. This important absence is most obviously felt at the end of John's preface to the diary, 'The Beginning' section of the book. We expect an editor's preface be signed or initialled by that editor, acknowledging his responsibility for the process of editorship. This is what Defoe does, if we return to *Robinson Crusoe* as our example, and what Berger does in *From A to X*.<sup>43</sup> We have an empty space where John's full name should be, or more accurately, a space that rings with the telling last words of the preface it would follow had it been there: 'naturally, I have changed most of the names' (16).

Janos is to be 'the mouthpiece for many of my own ideas', wrote Berger in another pre-publication letter.<sup>44</sup> 'Mouthpiece' is a metaphor worth pausing over: the word most commonly connotes the part of a telephone or intercom spoken through, or the part of a musical instrument blown into. In both these instances the mouthpiece is held close to the mouth and transmits the breath that emanates from it, aiding transmission, altering, amplifying, carrying away. 'Mouthpiece' also has the sense of a protective covering for the mouth: it provides an intervening layer between the mouth and the world. The names 'Janos' and 'John' - both deriving

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work. He simply may not have known the work of these figures well at this time. Later, Brecht especially becomes an important figure for Berger.

<sup>43</sup> 'Some letters recuperated by John Berger' is the framing conceit in *From A to X*.

<sup>44</sup> Gordon Johnston, 'Writing and Publishing in the Cold War' in *Twentieth Century British History*, 435.

from the Latin route 'Iohannes' - are cognates. 'Janos', in other words, is a translation of 'John'; 'John' is a translation of 'Janos'. They are the same, half-hidden in the unfamiliar, relating to each other with both distance and startling nearness.<sup>45</sup> 'John' and various translations of 'John' appear so often in Berger's work and associated texts that they are impossible to ignore: along with 'John' and 'Janos' in *A Painter of Our Time* there is John Sassall in *A Fortunate Man* (based closely on a real person, of whom the surname is changed, but not the forename), 'Johannes' (whom G., or should that be 'Giovanni'?, so much resembles) in Kierkegaard's *Diary of a Seducer*, 'Jean' in both *To the Wedding* and 'The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol' from *Pig Earth*, 'John' in *Here is Where We Meet* and *Bento's Sketchbook*. There are other forms of self-reference, such as the reproduction of *A Portrait of Aesop* by Diego Velázquez (fig. 3) from 'A story for Aesop' in *Keeping a Rendezvous*. This last employs the technique found in *Painter*, reproducing a photograph on the back cover (fig. 4) highlighting the author's similar appearance to, in this case, Aesop.



FIGURE 3

Diego Velázquez. Detail of *A Portrait of Aesop*, 1639-41. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

<sup>45</sup> The manuscripts show that Berger changed the name of his protagonist from Jacob to Janos at some point during the novel's gestation. See MS 88964/1/5.

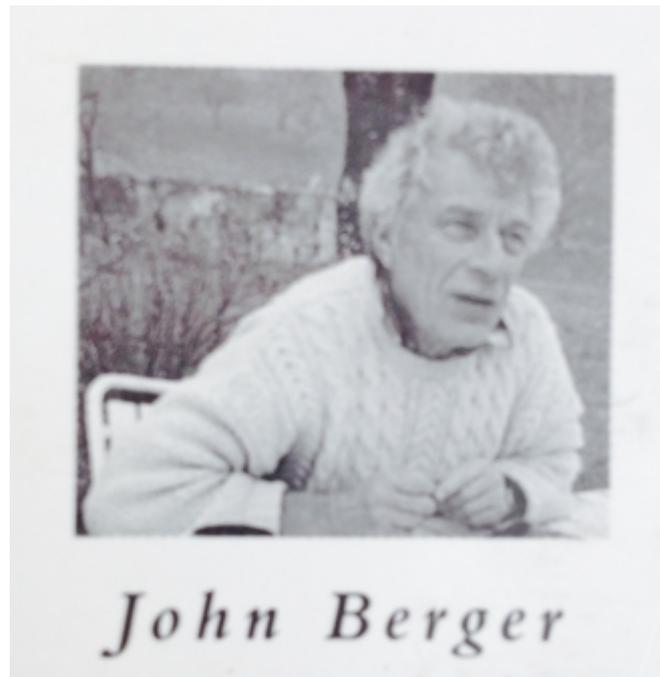


FIGURE 4

Detail of the back cover of the first edition of *Keeping a Rendezvous*, published by Granta, 1992. Photograph by Jean Mohr.

One sees the twin impulses in Berger's work to represent himself with both a narrating presence and fictional alter ego in the stories, but never again is this representation quite as complicated as in *Painter*.

The decision by Berger not to give John his surname is thus the initial alert that much more complicated forms of self-representation are happening within the book than might first appear. There is a considerable distance between John and Janos as characters, both the biographical differences and the wide areas of understanding that their friendship does not cover. The humiliation caused by the disparity between what John believes to be the nature of their friendship and what he reads in the diary is marked. He did not, it transpires, know his friend well; Janos has refused to share his inner life with him. On top of this there are the unflattering descriptions, such as when Janos struggles to paint John's suspiciousness, which he likens to 'a bird breaking a snail on a stone' (118), and the discovery that Janos is unimpressed with his artistic judgement: when *The Waves* is taken away for the Sports Association Competition he writes 'John, as usual, admired because he needs to believe in my genius to prove some obscure point that dominates his mind' (74). If this is modesty, it is also a sharp critique of John's approach to art. It calls into question John's readings in the book – readings that we are often blind without. But

it is Janos, not John, that Berger states will be ‘the mouthpiece for many of my own ideas’. What are those ideas, as they appear in the novel?

## 5

Given its context it would be tempting to read the representations of aesthetics in *Painter* as a continuation of the realist polemic that we find in Berger’s early art criticism, and therefore to see this aspect of the novel as a different costume for the same arguments. This is the view of James Hyman, for instance, who sees the novel as the conclusion of Berger’s increasingly isolated position on the subject.<sup>46</sup> *A Painter of Our Time* was written after the debate in the 1950s had reached its climax. Social realism as a movement reached a peak with the Venice Biennale in 1956 and then disintegrated completely during the turmoil on the Left precipitated by the Russian invasion of Hungary. It was becoming rapidly clear that, after years of bruising campaigning, Berger’s much-desired art movement had failed to sustain its early momentum and its young artists, perhaps flattered initially by attention, subsequently began to distance themselves from it. The period of Janos’s diary (4<sup>th</sup> January, 1952 – 11<sup>th</sup> October, 1956) corresponds almost exactly with that of the debate, which begins with an article entitled ‘For the Future’ in which Berger first identifies British realism (published 19<sup>th</sup> January 1952) and ends abruptly with the Hungarian Uprising in October, 1956.

James Hyman sees the novel as a continuation of Berger’s entrenchment, but he bends the novel to fit his reading, distorting it unrecognisably. He uses Laszlo, speaking as a bureaucratic advocate of Stalinist Socialist Realism in Budapest, as representative of the novel as a whole. This is clearly a misreading, and a profoundly shaken Janos explores the effect of Laszlo’s words at some length after he has read them, devoting large parts of the journal to argue against this standpoint, which he believes to be utterly mistaken, personally alienating and dangerous. Hyman also makes the mistake of conflating Berger (as champion of social realism) and Janos. He writes:

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<sup>46</sup> James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism*, 187-188.

Berger characterised such polarisation in a single sentence in an exhibition preface of 1956. Identifying what he considered to be the choice at the heart of the realist debate, he wrote that ‘the artist either blows his own trumpet or is the herald of his time’. For Berger the choice was clear; as Janos Lavin, the painter hero of his first novel, *A Painter of Our Time* argued, ‘today the artist either serves or searches arrogantly alone.’<sup>47</sup>

Using Janos here to back up Berger is a mistake. With an air of self-loathing, Janos is trying to justify searching ‘arrogantly alone’ rather than serving the state back in Hungary. He has, in fact, made the opposite choice. However, Hyman’s misreading is a useful illustration of the distance between Janos’s position and Berger’s in his pre-*Painter* criticism. There are plenty of examples: Janos’s impassioned proclamation here is a significant modification of Berger’s view:

I believe we have made a profound mistake whenever we have used our Marxism to make an arbitrary division between art that is for us (progressive art) and which is against us (decadent art). All good art is for Man – and therefore for us. The division we should make is between good art and bad art. (156)

Janos would be accepting of Giacometti’s existential nihilism in a way that Berger would also be in the mid 1960s, but would not countenance a decade earlier. Similarly, Janos’s answer to his own question: ‘You deny the possibility of a Socialist, popular art? No. It will come. But it cannot be demanded’ (183) is very different from Berger’s attempt to spin, publicise and market the movement into being through his *New Statesman* column. Writing about art from Janos’s point of view allowed Berger a change of emphasis. This was made clearer in an earlier version of the novel, in which John states of his relationship with Janos: ‘On certain subjects - such as the theory of Social Realism which he thought too narrow - we disagreed with mutual respect for one another’s opinions.’<sup>48</sup>

In the published version, however, through Janos’s eyes John appears inexperienced and somewhat credulous. His anger and embattled nature lie at the edge of parody. At times there might be an attempt to make it comic: ‘John is

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>48</sup> John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/4.

always coming in after he has been round the galleries, indignant and furious about what he has seen. It's a betrayal, he says...but I can get no more angry...than I can about the price of fish' (164). Earlier, he struggles to paint John's suspiciousness (118). There is a moment immediately after John and Janos's visit to Sir Gerald Banks's private gallery (at which Janos has lost his temper) in which Janos describes his reaction to John's admiration:

In fact he misunderstood the situation. I did not decide to behave as I did. I did not act according to principle. I reacted...most protests are like that. You can put your principles in a match-box, but what fills the whole room are your instinctive responses. (47-8)

John is, by contrast with Janos, the theoretical revolutionary, and this, the novel suggests, is a position from which one is liable to misunderstand things. It is also a position of questionable authority. What Janos expresses is a set of more nuanced aesthetic principles, still political, but personal and less insistent than the 'obscure points' that 'dominate' John's mind. His principles are in a match-box. Janos's aesthetics (as distinct from his turmoil about his own agency) are cautiously optimistic.

By his own admission, Berger's critical project had become increasingly fraught by this time and it is clear that he had begun to look for ways to move beyond the confines of a weekly column. In the summer of 1957, in the middle of writing *Painter*, he published an article in *Universities and Left Review* entitled 'Wanted - Critics'. The words are battle-weary:

I do not recommend art criticism as a life-long profession. All criticism has in it for the critic an element of claustrophobia and in the long run this can prove fatal. What I recommend is a bout of five years or so of criticism – and the image of a bout is not carelessly chosen.<sup>49</sup>

If Berger's criticism of this period can be characterised by its passion, it also struggles for coherence and eventually becomes resigned. By using Janos as a mouthpiece for revised and freer ideas on art and as a position from which to

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<sup>49</sup> Hyman, James. *The Battle for Realism*, 178.

criticise John, Berger is fragmenting his voice – specifically the voice situated in his criticism - in order to re-examine it and to undermine it. He disables it, splits it, and frees himself from the claustrophobia of his position. Of course, this also amplifies and reinforces certain aspects of it, and provides a fresh space in which to open up new possibilities for his novelistic aspirations. Whatever he might say in the letter to his publisher, he is making use of the specific freedoms the novel form offers him. Ten years later Berger wrote in the new preface to the 1969 edition of *Permanent Red*, ‘re-reading this book I have the sense of myself being trapped’.<sup>50</sup> *Painter* can be read as part of the process of extricating himself from that trap, albeit, given the reaction to the novel, a spectacularly unsuccessful one.

## 6

Given the above, it is tempting to think that 'John' belongs to the past, by which I mean as representing Berger's earlier voice, found within the *New Statesman* journalism. This is to over-simplify. John's preface, 'The Beginning', is primarily the culmination and presentation of John's relationship with Janos's diary, as seems reasonable enough given that he its editor. Janos is long gone (for a year, John tells us [15]) by the time John writes the first words of 'The Beginning', and so this beginning is no beginning at all: it was composed after - and is intended to shape - everything that follows it. In this it follows the sneaky logic of all prefaces and forewords, the nature of which Derrida describes thus:

From the viewpoint of the fore-word, which recreates an intention-to-say after the fact, the text exists as something written - a past - which, under the false appearance of the present, a hidden omnipotent author (in full mastery of his product) is presenting to the reader as his future.<sup>51</sup>

John has discovered the diary, taken it, read it (with neither permission nor veto) and written his commentary on it by the time he finally addresses it to another reader. The editorial figure suits the way John's words envelop Janos's text,

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<sup>50</sup> John Berger. *Permanent Red*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Outwork, prefacing' in *Dissemination* (London: Continuum, 2004), 6.

preceding, following and interpolating themselves within the main body of the diary. He has even had a hand in Janos's words themselves, having helped to 'polish the translation' (16).

Janos doesn't need a narrator – he speaks for himself, but John's editorship is quietly invasive. The preface has at its core a description of the history of John's relationship with Janos.<sup>52</sup> First, he tells us, he reads as a detective looking for Janos, 'excited and appalled' (15). John understands that Janos will be present in his diary in a way he never was - to John at least - in the flesh. This is how communication works in the book: there is little direct speech in a text of recorded voices, of non-exchange, unanswerable letters, of one-way dialogues, temporal disjunction, of no reply. John quotes himself only four times speaking directly to Janos in the entire commentary, and Janos in reply barely more. Communication is almost always deferred in some way, and always suffers some disability as a result.

The diary is being read initially as the delayed answer to a question, which on the face of it would appear to be 'why did Janos disappear?' John puts it like this: 'I would now learn exactly how this man whom I loved as a friend had eluded me, and therefore how I had failed him' (15). John understands that absence was always a condition of Janos's presence for him, a fact confirmed by Janos's disappearance. He also tells us that he will learn from the diary 'how I had failed him', meaning, in other words, that he is reading the text to discover things about himself, as well as Janos. The language, moreover, ('exactly' 'therefore') suggests that this reading will provide a particular, logical end point. John is looking through Janos to look at himself, to his own failure. As he enters the studio on his way to discovering the diary John comes across a mirror:

Waiting for the coffee to filter through, I gazed idly into it. Here Janos shaved, and Diana, if she was in too much of a hurry to go up to the bedroom, did her hair and touched up her lips. I thought of their faces. (11)

This moment, in which John conjures Janos and Diana's faces as he looks at his reflection in their mirror, symbolises this structure. It also reminds us that Diana is a

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<sup>52</sup> John is the second reader of Janos's diary, as far as we know: its author is the first. Janos understood from the outset the reflexive nature of diary writing: 'I need to see myself again' (11) he states on the first page, in a statement that conflates seeing and writing, an indicative characteristic of the book.

significant factor in this dynamic, as well as indicating how women are marginal in the text. Dyer is right to notice that John's description of Diana, 'she had never been hungry. She had never been interrogated...' (28) applies equally well to John.<sup>53</sup> Berger classifies his own relationship to Peri in similar terms:

He considered our experience inadequate. We had not been in Budapest at the time of the Soviet Revolution [...] we had not been in Berlin in 1920 [...] we did not know what it was like for an artist to abandon the work of the first thirty years of his life.<sup>54</sup>

What John finds of himself reflected in Janos's diary is 'a humiliating experience' (15). However, he then sees a different way of approaching the diary. He begins to realize 'what a remarkable document I had in my hands' (16). It amounts to a '*Portrait of the Artist as an Émigré*' he states, and 'today in one sense or another all artists are émigrés' (16).

This approach to Janos's diary strongly resembles the aesthetic principles of realism, as suggested by Lukács's 'types'. In other words, John is here suggesting we read Janos's diary as if it were a realist text. It is this interpretation of the diary that the reader is guided towards. In suspicious mood, Gerard Genette states that the primary duty of the 'assumptive authorial' preface-writer is '*to ensure that the text is read properly*'.<sup>55</sup> The instructing tone John employs here appears to be an attempt to negate his earlier description of how he has approached the text. Nevertheless we, as his readers, do not forget his primary, personal responses to the diary; using the rhetorical figure apophasis, in which the speaker raises a subject by denying that he will do so, John has already told us about them. We have also seen that the relationship between John and Janos is constantly present, from the cover onwards. Furthermore, and crucially, the relationship between the two men is almost exclusively contained *within John's commentary*. Janos mentions John in passing precisely twelve times in the entire fifty thousand or so words of his diary, pausing on the subject of his friend only once, when writing about the portrait he is sitting for. John receives much less consideration than Laszlo, Diana, Max, and others. John's contribution is thus not a simple 'commentary of background facts' (16) but

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<sup>53</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 43.

<sup>54</sup> John Berger, *Selected Essays* 'Peter Peri', 63.

<sup>55</sup> Gerard Genette, *Paratexts*, 197. The emphasis is Genette's.

a means *to write himself into the text*, and so to make the diary appear to refer to the relationship between John and Janos far more than it would otherwise. He is therefore Janos's editor and his own narrator.

John's realist reading of Janos's diary requires details of the London galleries and art schools surrounding him, because this world, which (in John's mind, at least partly) is the reason all artists are émigrés, exists only in a very limited way in the diaries themselves, with a few mentions of the college Janos teaches at part-time. It is John who mediates between Janos and this world, until the late but considerably more effective intervention of Michel. Yet John's approach has two effects: by providing the contextualising supplements to the diary to support his realist, impersonal interpretation, he simultaneously reinforces his first, personal response. The dual consequences of his approach pervade John's commentary. For example, during the portrait, he confirms Janos's declaration that the picture 'represents a modern man thinking' (123), a statement that all but effaces the individuality and particularity of John as sitter. Yet John uses this same moment to reflect, in parenthesis, 'that Janos never talked to me about Laszlo's execution now shocks me profoundly. We were friends and we were political comrades, but he could not trust me' (100), drawing us back to the theme of the relationship.<sup>56</sup> So it appears that John finds his responses to the diary impossible to untangle.

In another piece of John's commentary, the afterword entitled 'The End' John reprints a letter he has received from Janos. Janos has returned to tell of his

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<sup>56</sup> This handwringing is extended in one version of the manuscript: 'Here the journal breaks off for a period of about nine months. Very roughly I will try to bridge this gap. But I am badly equipped to do so - for many reasons. The most serious and for me in retrospect painful reason is that Janos did not confide in me. When I first read this journal and realised how much Janos had suffered as a result of the Laszlo affair, I was profoundly shocked. Except for the passing remark I have already quoted, he said nothing to me. Even when later we discussed the Moscow Twentieth Congress and Krushev's speech, he did not refer to his personal predicament and suffering. Why should he have done? the reader may ask. Because, despite the difference in our ages, I was during these years his most intimate friend. And because we shared the same political beliefs. One would not necessarily have expected him to discuss such a matter with a catholic or social democrat. But we were both marxists and we talked politics together with what seemed then complete frankness. On certain subjects - such as the theory of Social Realism which he thought too narrow - we disagreed with mutual respect for one another's opinions. I knew that he was no longer politically active. He knew that I worked, as I still do, in close association with the Communist Party. This however was a difference of circumstance and opportunity that again we both accepted and understood. Yet when it came to a matter of life and death the fact remains that he did not talk to me because he did not trust me. Clearly there was no-one to whom I could betray him. I do not mean trust in that sense. He could not trust that I would not try to encourage his shame. And this failure on my part now seems to matter so much, not because we fell short of any ideal standards of friendship, but because obviously he needed to talk at that time. Just conceivably, it might even have prolonged his life.' John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/4.

bad choices, Ancient Mariner-like, to Hungarians in Hungary. He is worried John will not understand: 'does this make sense to you?' he asks, 'there was much we did not discuss together' (200). Janos makes no mention of the diary, and this question would suggest he has no idea of John's access to his inner thoughts. It would seem to remove the possibility that Janos left the diaries for John to find. Janos has not made him into an addressee, (an addressee after-the-fact). In a sense the letter addressed to John is a substitute for the diary: the diary's pages of revelations are reduced to one meek and enigmatic phrase. Indeed it seems that Janos has forgotten about the diaries completely – would he want Diana to discover them and would John not be in a position to remove them? They seem to no longer exist for him. In a sense, then, this letter is confirmation that John has been reading illicitly - without unspoken consent - but at the same time the fact that Janos doesn't identify his ownership frees up the space for appropriation. Following on from the letter John states: 'I myself would like to believe that Janos, if he is now alive, supports Kadar' (201). These have proven to be the most controversial words in the book, seized on by Stephen Spender, but to me they are more interesting because here John – for one last time – is writing into view his own presence and his own thoughts in place of his absent friend's.

The novel strongly suggests telling a story is an action in the world in a way painting is not, and it is this that Janos disappears to do (236). In this way the novel affirms the decisions its author has made - to give up painting firstly for art criticism, and then to tell stories. John tells us he receives a letter from Janos a fortnight after he has disappeared, in other words just after John discovers the notebook. Its placement at the very end of the text magnifies the significance of its contents. Janos is gone, his diary related, his story told, and these are his parting words. Janos's letter ends: 'Work well. We have little else. Trust your imagination a little more' (236). Janos, absent, as he has been for the entirety, speaking in this coda-positioned letter, tells John to work more creatively. Given that we are reading a novel written by an art-critic with the same first name, trying his hand at fiction for the first time, these words seem deeply self-reflexive, dramatising the move that Berger is hoping to take from critic to novelist. Thus we learn at the end why John has written himself into the text - the book has been about him all along. It is reminiscent of the end of *Nausea*, by Jean-Paul Sartre, a book translated into English in 1954 as *The Diary of Antoine Roquentin*, in which in the penultimate chapter

Antoine writes of his wish to pen a story in the spirit of the song ‘Some of these days’ that so uplifts him.<sup>57</sup> ‘It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence,’ he writes.<sup>58</sup> The moment appears to be a turning point:

Perhaps one day, thinking precisely of this hour, of this gloomy hour in which I wait, stooping, for it to be time to get on the train, perhaps I shall feel my heart beat faster and say to myself: “That was the day, that was the hour, when it all started.” And I might succeed – in the past, nothing but the past – in accepting myself.<sup>59</sup>

James Woods has commented on this aspect of *Nausea* as follows:

It is one of those books...which becomes a document of its own making. That is to say, in such books the writer-narrator talks about writing a great, solving work: only slowly do we realise that we are reading that very work.<sup>60</sup>

*Painter* similarly makes one last transgressive journey beyond its fictional world, referring beyond it to itself as an authored text, and asks us to realise that it has been a dramatisation of the circumstances of its own making. Substitutions are inferred, John for Janos, John Berger for John. Nikos Papastergiadis worries for John at the end of the novel, ‘what is John left with? He is left to his own devices, forced to unshackle his own dependency’.<sup>61</sup> It seems to me, conversely, that John is reinvested with authority. And the powerful effect of this method of self-reference is that, as we have seen, the anxious questions – will a creative approach work? Am I capable of it? – are not just answered *immediately* but appear to be answered by the questions themselves in the act of writing them. The richness of the moment is intensified when we remember that Janos – that other John – is the voice passing on the message. It helps to confirm what we already have begun to understand about *Painter*: it is a work that attempts to dissolve Berger’s journalistic voice as it

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<sup>57</sup> In a different context Duncan O’Connor has also associated *Nausea* with *Painter*, see *From Fictions to Stories*, 75-77.

<sup>58</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 178.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>60</sup> James Wood, Introduction to *Nausea*, (London: Penguin, 2000), vii.

<sup>61</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis. *Modernity as Exile* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 155.

creates his novel-writing one, and at the same time dramatise these two things happening.

## 2

### 'A dog's life': *The Foot of Clive*.

#### 1

'For we will have to ask ourselves, inevitably, what happens to a fraternity of brothers when an animal appears on the scene.' – Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

Although some of the creaturely concerns that would lead John Berger to write about animals emerged in *A Painter of Our Time*, *The Foot of Clive* is where Berger's bestiary properly begins.<sup>2</sup> Below its knees, Clive Ward houses a host of other species that describe, pursue and are imagined by the seven human patients. Four dogs lead the way: Eleanor's randy Dalmatian that emasculates Ken; the drooling Irish Wolfhound which occupies the pen adjacent to Pearl's sleeping form; Penny whimpering in Robin's trembling arms; and the unpredictable stray that snaps at Peter's heels. They are followed close behind by birds, butterflies, deer, worms, a

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham UP, 2008), 12.

<sup>2</sup> 'Through the Bars', an article for *New Statesman* (22 August, 1959, 216-217) is the first place I can find in which Berger explores the links between animals and people. The zoo is seen as 'a penitentiary...a microcosm' for society, and the animals within it anthropomorphised. Berger might well have been thinking about *Clive* at the time: the agonti lives 'a life of dread', but is no more aware of it than 'a *petit-bourgeois shop-keeper brought up in a Wesleyan chapel*' (216, my emphasis). This could easily be a description of Cyril.

tree-shrew, pigs, foxes, chickens, monkeys, sheep and more dogs, appearing in figures, in dreams, in dialogue and in jokes. Most extraordinary are the dogs that invade a transformed Clive in 'The Execution' section of the novel, scaring the living daylights out of the patients, and bringing with them a long dark night, and Cyril's death. The foot of Clive proves a dangerously porous place; canine visitors disrupt the day-lit routine of the hospital, journeying into the patients' minds, individually, and then collectively, posing uncomfortable questions, exploiting latent and oblique fears. When Ken says of Harry (in Clive for an ulcer) 'underneath he's worried', he is right; Harry is worried - about his job, about the social order, about nurse's wages, his son's future, his memories of the slow death of a German soldier and of a Nazi death camp.<sup>3</sup> He is not alone: all the patients worry about their problems, which remain unspoken until the group confessional of 'The Execution'. Ken's phrasing also captures the play of surface and depth, private and public, screened and revealed that forms the hinge to the novel's drama. And all the patients will also be worried in another sense of the word, worried at by the dogs approaching them, by the arrival of House, the cop killer, and by each other; Ken could well have been speaking for all the patients, and for the novel itself.

In *Clive* we see the origins of the novel-writing aesthetic that Berger developed through the 1960s, culminating with *G.* It is within *Clive's* walls that we first find a Berger narrative punctuated by essayistic fragments: here they comprise pockets of text about dogs that relate associatively to the story and are written in a different register ('Occasionally dogs behave like the wolves or jackals from which they are anciently descended' [44]); it is in a *Clive* bed that Pepino's wet dream prefigures the scrambling of identity, space and time in the sexual encounters in *G.* and beyond ('there is no longer left or right, front or back, man or woman' [155]); in the streets outside the hospital a young boy falls in love with his teacher for the first time in Berger's oeuvre (122). If there is no other reason to read *Clive* today (and I believe there are many others) it is hard to imagine a reading of *G.*, Berger's influential essay 'Why Look at Animals', *Into Their Labours* (Boris, to illustrate, 'died like one of his own animals'<sup>4</sup>), or *King* (with its dog-narrator), that would not benefit from taking into account the precedent of *Clive* and its fauna.

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<sup>3</sup> John Berger, *The Foot of Clive* (London: Methuen, 1962), 16. All subsequent references will be to this edition and made in the text.

<sup>4</sup> John Berger, *Once in Europa* (London: Granta, 1989), 39.

It is also a book that appears at a socially and culturally interesting moment. Considerably more sexually explicit than *Painter, Clive* is a vivid example of a novel published in the comparative freedom after Penguin's victory in the obscenity trial over Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which took place whilst Berger was writing.<sup>5</sup> It is also published two years before the last people were hanged in the UK, and during a time when the National Council for the Abolition of Capital Punishment (with members such as Victor Gollanz and Henry Moore) was asking whether a society that sentenced its subjects to death could call itself civilised.<sup>6</sup> It is a novel, therefore, that could only have been written as it is in a four-year window of British society. And, indeed, the novel represents the post-war, post-holocaust world more explicitly than any other of Berger's texts: Harry's 'confession' in 'The Execution' section of the book explores his horror and guilt about the 'subtler' thing he and other soldiers 'felt the existence of' (149) without understanding until they come upon the death camps. What they failed to see 'beyond the horizon was the murder of eleven million people' (150). Harry's own failure, as he sees it, and his sense of responsibility are two of the things he is able to express in 'The Execution' section and seemingly nowhere else: 'I ask myself forever whether our backs are still to the horizon', (150) he states. There is also the double use of the word 'survivor', to connote those Harry finds alive in the death camp, 'thin as stick[s]' (150) and as the title for Part 4 of the novel, thus associating Nazi Häftlinge and the patients, minus Cyril, who have survived the night of 'The Execution'. Hovering in the background of the questions about society, civilisation, crime and punishment that the novel raises, is the understanding of what advanced, industrial Europe has recently been capable.

The book is kick-started by the joke told by Dai, (28-30) in which a doctor gives a castrated Irishman the testicles of a dog, ram, goat and monkey in turn. The doctor fails to explain that each pair does not require the patient to have sex with a female of the corresponding animal, and the patient's mistake is revealed when he can't find a female monkey in all of London. It's a joke about the surgical and sexual

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<sup>5</sup> According to Berger's own dates of composition, which appear at the end of the novel, he wrote *Clive* between 1 February 1960 and 15 March 1961. The Chatterley trial took place in October 1960. No archived manuscript exists of the novel, so we cannot see whether the sexually explicit sections of the novel were added or amended after the trial.

<sup>6</sup> The question of the death penalty is dealt with very briefly in the novel (77-78). The Indian clerk is against it, and the two (unnamed, but presumably white) men he is talking with are firmly in favour. Gwynne Evans and Peter Evans, Britain's last recipients of capital punishment, were hanged on 13 August 1964.

coupling of a man with various animals, playing with the anatomical similarities and differences, and taboo sexual urges, here legitimized by misunderstanding and brought into the institutional space of the doctor's surgery. As Derrida writes in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*,

one cannot speak...of the *bêtise* or bestiality of an animal. It would be an anthropomorphic projection of something that remains the preserve of man, as the single assurance, finally, and the single risk of what is 'proper' to man.<sup>7</sup>

Dai has got both bestiality, and (animal-like) stupidity into his joke; it is a gag exploring the ever-present risks facing mankind as it seeks to extricate itself from the rest of the animal kingdom: a joke about transgressing the limits of what people consider to be properly human. The joke has a long build-up, in which the anticipatory threat and pleasure to the listener builds. As a character named only 'the old man' listens, his 'eyes bulge with pleasure...soon it will touch him exquisitely' (29). The anticipation gives way to the explosion of the punch line: Clive laughs at Dai's joke 'like a Jonah who, once out of the whale, bursts into laughter himself' (30). The effect of its telling on its listeners has created the sense of a sealed space; there is a feeling of grateful release from being trapped inside the whale, a joke that is also a dwelling place, and a prison. Dai's joke, which plays with 'the shapes you may notice or imagine when your eyes get accustomed to the dark of Clive,' (31) is the moment at which *Clive's* dogs appear.

Berger's text also eagerly finds spatial terms to describe the human body, and vice versa. The title, 'The Foot of Clive,' is exemplary of a process that develops within *Clive*: without context, these words suggest not a space but a body part. Clive, we discover, is named for Clive of India, but the ward has inherited more than just the colonial associations of the name: the human body is used as a tool to navigate the reader through Clive, ('the head and body of Clive,'[78] 'the stomach of Clive,'[24]) and in a complementary move 'Clive' is used to refer to the patients as a single entity ('Clive's imagination centred on House,'[84] 'Clive is agitated, palms wet' [77]). 'Clive' refers to space, but it also refers to people, and is a way of referring to a number of them with the illusion (or, indeed, truth) that they

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham UP, 2008), 41.

comprise a single agent. It forms a second, larger body for the patients, as they occupy this space, beyond the limits of their individual body, and into which their local, unhealthy bodies periodically disappear. The book makes use of common ground, allotments, cities and towns as metaphors, including the perplexing name of 'House', the silent catalyst for much that follows. There are also moments when spatial figures and animals encroach upon the humanness of the patients simultaneously, as at Cyril's death, when the remaining patients see the corpse as a deserted town, pawed to dust by the dogs who have come to embody, or preside over, his end (162-3). This mixture of figurative associations routinely probes the conceptual boundaries which delimit the individual human being. What a human is, where it ends, what it can be compared to or understood as or through is a major theme, and is inscribed onto the text from the title onwards.

## 2

Critics have responded to *The Foot of Clive* with a mixture of silence and complaint.<sup>8</sup> When Verso, Berger's latest publisher, pleasingly reprinted several of his early works, *Clive* was not among them. Readers seeking to find the single pattern or meaning in (what appears to be) the novel's bold and overt symbolism, eventually give up, believing that Berger isn't fully in control of his material. For Geoff Dyer, having finished the book,

we remain slightly dazed, unsure of what has happened and still faintly numb as if coming round from an anaesthetic...Berger's realist ambitions are spoilt by laboured anthropomorphism and insistent allegories (Cyril as Christ.)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Contemporary reviews are scarce, short and not terribly interesting. The most note-worthy is from the *Times Literary Supplement*, which mildly praised the novel's technical achievement that set the patients 'spinning with a remarkable, perhaps excessive, inner mobility.' *TLS*, Friday, 9 March 1962. Duncan O'Connor passes over *Foot* in 'something akin to embarrassed silence'. *From Fictions to Stories*, 89.

<sup>9</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Ways of Telling* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 49. As far as I can see there is little or no anthropomorphism in *Clive* as I understand the term. 'Zoomorphism' – people figured as animals, not the reverse – seems more appropriate to describe (one aspect) of the relations of animals to people in this book.

As his medical simile suggests, our experience of the text cleverly echoes that of the characters. We come round, just as they do, disorientated, having been submerged in the book's darker moments, surfacing, having been operated upon, and wondering what meaning we can generate from the experience and thus in what sense we have been cured. Dyer's presumption that Berger is attempting to write a realist novel that he spoils with figuration is a reductive and dismissive response that fails to account for the complex and experimental aesthetics of the book. In one sense *Clive* is Berger's clearest expression of the Lukácsian realism of 'types' (Dai is 'typical' of the tramping underclass; Harry of the left-leaning proletariat, Cyril the petit-bourgeois religious obsessive, Robin the sheltered, privileged teen, Ken the flash young capitalist). But to read the novel's stranger moments as a poor attempt at a coherent symbolic system risks dismissing entirely the effects that the book creates. The detailed, calm depiction of the everyday events at the hospital, punctuated precisely by the mealtimes, doctors' rounds and other routines, blends into the fantastical and unexplained, peaking with the forcefulness of *Clive's* alarming centrepiece. In 'The Execution' section, the established foundations of time and place fracture, and the text, presumably following the patients' unconscious minds, wanders into the unnerving and inexplicable, House swings dead above them, Clive's landscape changes to a rocky wasteland (or prison yard, or a concentration camp, or all of these) and three days have gone by in a sentence (142). The 'Circe' chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses* (stuffed with its own glorious array of animal life, and its own trial) is surely the primary inspiration for 'The Execution'.<sup>10</sup> Berger's record of where and when he wrote the book - 'February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1960 – March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1961 / Geneva, Paris, Agay' (196) may be another claim for Joyce as fellow self-exiled writer and stylistic antecedent, echoing the last words of *Ulysses*: 'Trieste-Zurich-Paris/1914-21'. This is a Lukácsian realism modified by strong and strange figuration and experimentation, and that owes much to the restlessness of the 1960s British novel. *Clive* plays with layout, switches tense, employs different registers, and refers to its characters with differing levels of formality. B.S Johnson's *Alberto Angelo*, for example, published two years after *Clive*, has an even bolder mixture of

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<sup>10</sup> See Berger's essay 'The first and last recipe: Ulysses' in *Selected Essays* ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 467-471, for Berger's account of his teenage relationship with Joyce's text, also mentioned in Chapter One.

experimental freedom and close attention to the materiality of a frayed and grimy London.<sup>11</sup>

Kiernan Ryan comes to a similar conclusion to Dyer, albeit through a more certain critical methodology. He writes that *Clive* is:

dedicated not so much to extending our consciousness of the possible as to the complementary task of stripping away our illusions as to the true nature of the prevailing bourgeois social relations, escalating and sharpening our dissatisfaction with the poverty of the available. But this indispensable negational process proceeds deprived of any real dialectical counterdrive to disclose the simultaneous emergence within the social order of alternative new vitalities.<sup>12</sup>

Ryan (in an essay championing Berger's work) finds *Clive* lopsided according to his equation for socialist fiction; the book criticises the present without showing why or where there is hope for the future (the 'dialectical counterdrive').<sup>13</sup> *Clive* has a curiously muted ending. It finishes without obvious conclusions or outcomes for the bizarre and harrowing events that have taken place within its pages. Slim pickings, given everything the book has thrown at us. It is, however, somewhat more ambivalent than Ryan gives it credit for. *Clive* ends with both laughter and tears, Pepino's and Robin's respectively (197). Two pages after Cyril's death (163) Pepino learns of the birth of his son (165). The final dawn of the book is bright, but by the time the novel ends, mid-morning, it is raining (185). Harry remains distinctly nervous about his son Peter's future (196), and he looks down on the streets below the hospital 'without surprise' (196); neither the world nor his perception of it has changed markedly. But there is burgeoning inter-class and inter-generational fraternity (Dai-Robin-Harry) and greater understanding that time in the NHS ward has haltingly managed to engender. There is Harry's desire for renewal, and sense of melancholy; Robin's desire to be useful and his rare sensitivity, preserved and

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<sup>11</sup> Rochelle Simmons has also noted a commonality between G. and Johnson's *Travelling People*. 'John Berger's Revolutionary Narratives' in *British Culture and Society in the 1970s: The Lost Decade*, ed. Laurel Foster, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 15. Johnson and Berger were friends and admirers of each other's work. Berger speaks warmly of Johnson in Jonathan Coe's biography *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Kiernan Ryan 'Socialist fiction and the education of desire' in *The Socialist Novel in Britain* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 180.

<sup>13</sup> See also Diane Margaret Watson 'John Berger's Fictional Acts of Faith' (1990). *Open Access Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 2775, 75-86.

emboldened as he moves into adulthood: for the first time he does not feel shame for his tears as he sheds them. All of this amounts to a richer and more nuanced outcome than perhaps first meets the eye, but nevertheless still some distance from Ryan's desire for 'alternative new vitalities'. And yet, to read the text through such strong preconceived ideas about the work it should be performing risks failing to respond to the unique qualities of the work itself.

Lest we think of casting aside Ryan's observations, we should remember that the critical method he displays is very similar to Berger's own, as applied to visual art in the same year that work began on *Clive*.<sup>14</sup> In *Permanent Red*, Berger stated 'the question I ask is: Does this work help or encourage men to know and claim their social rights?'<sup>15</sup> For Berger, the viewer experiences the artist's vision of the world through the work, and 'a valid work of art promises in some way or another the possibility of an increase, an improvement'.<sup>16</sup> Berger's next two books and six years of work, *Corker's Freedom* (1964) and *A Fortunate Man* (1967), are set in Britain and cover similar themes, perhaps suggesting that *Clive* proved as unsatisfactory an ending for him as for some readers.<sup>17</sup> Berger's criticism of his most famous antagonist, Francis Bacon, sounds rather like Ryan's of *Clive*. For example, Berger criticised Bacon at a public meeting at the ICA, for his lack of both a 'constructive attitude' and expressed his 'indignation in Bacon's art which does not stir the conscience'.<sup>18</sup> This is the debate we saw in the previous chapter, but Berger's vehement reading of Bacon survived the wider relaxation of his principles. In an article first published in 1972, Berger wrote 'There are no alternatives in Bacon's world, no ways out', which again is echoed by Ryan's criticism of *Clive*.<sup>19</sup> As with *Painter*, this highlights a fascinating and strange situation: that the early fiction refuses to conform to Berger's own critical principles. Odder still is the striking resemblance between *Clive* and a series of apprehensive and brooding paintings Bacon exhibited at the Hanover Gallery in the early 1950s.

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<sup>14</sup> *Permanent Red* was first published in 1960. As previously alluded to, according to the dates on the final page of *Clive* work on the novel began 1<sup>st</sup> February of the same year.

<sup>15</sup> John Berger *Permanent Red* (London: Readers and Writers, 1979), 15.)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter Three for more on this.

<sup>18</sup> Quotations appear in James Hyman, *Battle for Realism*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001), 173. Hyman does not provide a reference.

<sup>19</sup> John Berger 'Francis Bacon and Walt Disney' in *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 120. *About Looking* was first published in 1980, 'Francis Bacon and Walt Disney' in 1972, in *New Society*.



FIGURE 5

Francis Bacon, *Dog, 1952* (1952). Private collection.



FIGURE 6

Francis Bacon, *Fragments of a Crucifixion* (1950). Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

In *Dog, 1952* (fig. 5) the blurred, aggressive-looking creature seethes within a house-shaped grid on the floor. It also appears caged and forlorn. The picture reveals, or pleads for, or warns against, what is hidden in civil society, and provokes questions about the borders of the animal and human, the wild and the civilised. It alludes to the domesticating process dogs and humans have undergone together, from tame wolves with Ice Age hunter-gathers to suburbanites with Chihuahuas. *Fragments of a Crucifixion* (fig. 6), in which a screaming figure on a cross is stalked from above by a dog is an extraordinarily appropriate visual depiction of the description of Cyril's death, attended to by dogs, framed by Christian judgment and in the same raw, heightened key. Cyril's repeated complaint that 'the silence goes on like a scream' (159) mirrors the ubiquitous indifference of the backgrounds surrounding Bacon's figures.

It seems almost certain that Berger had seen as least some of Bacon's series although he does not mention them explicitly: 'Francis Bacon's new series of paintings at the Hanover are even emptier in design and shallower in content than his last' wrote Berger bombastically in 1954, confirming that he was aware of what Bacon was exhibiting around the time the dog paintings were being shown (1952-4).<sup>20</sup> Berger saw 'bogus horror' in Bacon,<sup>21</sup> but these paintings have also been read as capturing the pervading sense of dread in 1950s Britain, caused by the Cold War,

<sup>20</sup> John Berger 'Round the Galleries' *New Statesman*, June 26, 1954, 830.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

the aftermath of the Second World War, and Bacon's own private concerns, such as a sexually restrictive society, homosexuality's continued illegality and his violent, alcohol-fuelled relationship with Peter Lacy: many of the same public and private pressures that impinge upon *Clive's* patients, in other words.<sup>22</sup> *Clive* might be a straight book, but through Ken and Cyril, and Dai's joke, it contains its share of sexual anxiety. Gilles Deleuze finds in Bacon's work of this period a 'zone of indiscernability' between animal and man.<sup>23</sup> This idea is deeply resonant with *Clive* and the uncomfortable revelations the patients discover within its walls. Berger himself identifies something very similar in a 2004 essay on Bacon, in which he stated

[Bacon] repeatedly painted the human body in discomfort or want or agony. Sometimes the pain involved looks as if it has been inflicted, *more often it seems to originate from within, from the guts of the body itself, from the misfortune of being physical.* (My emphasis)<sup>24</sup>

The indiscernibility between human and animal exists because they are joined by a common physicality (pleasure, pain, sex and death) before subtler separations occur. Berger may not draw on these paintings consciously, but they nevertheless cast their shadow over his text and serve to illustrate he was not the only person in London at this time thinking through human identity using the relationship to the pet dog. That his own text does not manage to avoid the central points of his criticism of Bacon makes the distinction between Berger's literary voice and his journalistic one all the more pronounced.

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<sup>22</sup> See the description of the room 'Apprehension', at Tate Britain, 2008-9, (<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/francis-bacon/room-guide/room-3-apprehension>) which is illustrated with *Man with dog, 1953*. For a contemporary account see David Sylvester, 'Francis Bacon', *Britain Today*, no.214, Feb. 1954, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze *Francis Bacon – The Logic of Sensation* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 18.

<sup>24</sup> John Berger 'A Master of Pitilessness?' in *Hold Everything Dear* (London: Verso, 2007), 86. Although this can be read as Berger's reconciliation with Bacon's work, his argument is that the relentless misery of the world has caught up with Bacon's depiction of it. Which is not much to celebrate. See also Simon Pummell, 'Francis Bacon and Walt Disney Revisited' in Pilling, Jayne (ed. and introd.), *A Reader in Animation Studies*, Sydney: Libbey, 1997, 163-76.

There is a blurb on the inside front cover of the dust jacket of the original Methuen edition of the novel. Such marginal texts tend not to be signed, but there must be a strong possibility that Berger wrote it himself, stronger still that he at least approved it. The last paragraph reads:

Those who read John Berger's other novel *A Painter of Our Time*, and those who know him as a critic, will be surprised and perhaps disappointed not to find any reference to art here. Yet this book is by no means a chance excursion into a new field. At the centre of all Berger's work is his belief in man's potential for change. In *The Foot of Clive* he takes this belief out of the sphere of intellectual or polemical argument and *submits it to the ruthless trial of ordinary life*. (My emphasis)<sup>25</sup>

*Clive*, according to this blurb, is trial for a belief about man, or for a quality within man closely linked with a socialist future and Ryan's 'alternative new vitalities'. Berger stages this trial as the basis of the novel. He claims to be taking his belief and testing it against ordinary life (which post-holocaust and during the Cold War, might not seem very ordinary). The book, then, is presented as the staging of a process, or figuratively as the process itself: the ideal applied to the material. Of course this isn't really the case. Berger's idea is submitted to his *representation* of 'ordinary life', whatever he decides that to be (predominantly all-male, for one thing). The belief in man's potential for change is a tenet of socialist thought. Berger should be confident of the outcome of trialling this idea in his chosen context of seven imaginary characters in an NHS hospital ward in late 1950s London. The word 'ruthless' suggests otherwise, and indeed Berger's representation of 'ordinary life' is hostile and unforgiving, and the patients' differences and anxieties prove finally to be insurmountable. Berger's text presents itself as upstream of Ryan's (and his own) thinking as critics on socialist art. Fundamental tenets are questioned, not assumed, and *Clive* will have to earn Ryan's dialecticism. This is to speculate on and

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<sup>25</sup> To my ear the style of this passage is strongly reminiscent of Berger's writing for the *New Statesman*: the prosopopeia of arguing against the imagined response of a reader is a favoured rhetorical strategy; then two short declarative sentences, allowing no room for response or uncertainty, followed by the longer final sentence; the directness and drama of 'the ruthless trial of ordinary life.' All pure Berger.

schematize a creative process, and given that after multiple takeovers, no such thing as a Methuen (the original publisher) archive exists, we do not know whether this blurb conveys a retrospective idea of the book's genesis. Nevertheless, given the ending, the risk that 'man's potential for change' will fail its trial by ordinary life seems to have been genuine. *Clive* seems to present us with an explicit dramatization of the quality of literature that, in Derrida's words, always 'suspends' the ideas incorporated within it, 'practising what one might call a sort of irony, an irony of detachment with regard to metaphysical belief or thesis, even when it apparently puts it forward.'<sup>26</sup> *Clive* again seems close to a modernist text, questioning its own assumptions, undermining its own foundations and those of the society it represents.

'Trial' evokes several contexts in the book: the trial of Bloom in 'Circe'; the looming trial for which House is being treated (and he swings above the other characters in a premonition of his presumed guilt and hanging); the trial of Ken by the other patients; Cyril's longing for Christian judgment; and the idea of trial as ordeal following Christ's temptation by Satan in the desert. Nevertheless, *Clive* is also a book without verdicts: House is not tried by the end of the book (we do not even know if his surgery will be successful; Ken's trial ends without verdict; Cyril's last judgement may or may not come; and the final section of the book is titled 'Outcome', a more open word than 'verdict' or 'judgement' with which to describe the ending of this trial. We thus find the overall project of the book mirrored by themes and episodes within it. There are other instances of this: the build up, punch-line and reception of Dai's joke mirrors a central concern of the whole: the punch-line of *Clive* as a whole is the culmination of 'The Execution', and the threat is drawn out and deep, and takes its time, circling and lingering; the risk to the patients grave rather than funny. Within the laughter that Dai's joke brings forth is Robin's relief at having 'survived' the joke (mirrored in the self-congratulatory way the patients conduct themselves in part four, 'The Survivors'.) Then things settle down afterwards, back to the humdrum, perhaps imperceptibly changed. Another joke is told, anticlimactically. The clock ticks, lunch ends. As with the trial motif, small episodes repeat this general structure: Pepino's outburst, for example, builds, explodes, falls back, is assimilated; the bet and fight between Dai and Ken' the altercation between Robin and the nurse. *Clive* is not a novel in which events

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<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 50.

precipitate each other in a plot-forming chain of cause and effect, but instead flame then peter out, returning us to a status quo changed minimally, or invisibly, or perhaps not at all. This is the shape of *Clive*.

Why does *Clive* fail to find its conclusive alternative, its way out? 'A hospital exists to exert pressure, to cure. The patient who leaves is seldom quite the same person as the one who entered', (11) we are told on the novel's opening page. The novel certainly exerts pressure, but just as the cures a hospital ward seeks are not guaranteed (as evidenced by Cyril's death), so the novel seems to contain no assurances. *Clive* is (or rather gives the impression of being) a novel that does not ask itself rhetorical questions, in the sense of designating a question asked only to produce an effect or make a statement, rather than to elicit an answer. This might be a defining and particularly valuable effect some of Berger's fiction constructs, although, as we have seen in the previous chapter, *Painter* (and *Here is Where We Meet*, as I will argue in Chapter Seven) are 'documents of their own making', and thus end with a sense of resolution found in the act of writing. Writing is not a theme of *Clive*, however, and in its absence it appears to be a book that twists and turns, creating grotesque shapes in attempting to represent the sheer enormity of what is wrong with British capitalist society. The brutal power of the mistrust, prejudice, class divisions and fears of ordinary life prove too powerful for the belief in man's potential for change.

#### 4

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida dismantles the traditionally single, indivisible frontier between Man and Animal, 'multiplying its figures...complicating, thickening, delinearising, folding and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply'.<sup>27</sup> It provides an important framework for thinking further about *Clive*'s animals. Derrida introduces the story of creation in Genesis, in which God makes Man after the other animals, but gives him dominion over them, (1:22-28) offering them to Adam to discover what he will call them (2:19-20). For Derrida, this story is indicative of the way man has thought his relationship with animals: it

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<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 29.

has always been a following, and a pursuit of other living beings.<sup>28</sup> By claiming the right to name animals and by defining them as separate, man has also named and defined himself as the giver of names, possessor of language. For Derrida, ‘*animal*’ is a word that men have awarded themselves the right to give. These humans are found giving it to themselves, this word, but as if they received it as an inheritance.<sup>29</sup> By extension, this naming is also an act of ‘auto-definition.’<sup>30</sup> Man is secondary, and also the hunter, and the master. He is always in pursuit: farming, training, exploiting, genetically modifying, destroying - always naming, and naming himself against the animal, separating himself, from Eden onwards. The word ‘animal’, Derrida argues, is part of man’s ‘auto-bio-graphy’ – his telling the story of his own biological identity.<sup>31</sup> He refuses the word, coining instead the punning ‘l’animots’, which, as Marie–Louise Mallet describes, is a portmanteau neologism combining the French for ‘animal’ and ‘word’ which is pronounced the same as the plural of animal; with its singular article and plural-sounding ending, the word jars, as is the intention, in allusion to the many different animal species that are hidden behind the general ‘Animal’.<sup>32</sup>

Berger’s thinking, as belied by his repeated use of ‘the animal’, general singular, belongs to a pre-Derridean tradition.<sup>33</sup> This is not to say that Berger isn’t also critical of the same conceptual distancing by humans from animals that Derrida questions. In ‘Why Look at Animals?’ (1977), written seventeen years after *Clive*, and from a peasant village in the Alps, Berger extends and theorizes his thinking on animals. Berger describes a journey from proximity to distance (from the humans who executed cave paintings of animals to the visitor of an urban zoo) as animals move from central to marginal in the human world. Berger argues that it is Descartes’s division of man into body and soul, and beyond him industrial and post-industrial capitalism that is responsible. From hereon, the animal is reduced to a machine and a metaphorical relationship between man and animal is lost. For Berger, this relationship was a crucial element of human identity: ‘what the two

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, passim. See, for example, 47.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, x.

<sup>33</sup> Berger actually seems to be using the word ‘animal’ to designate a very small section of animal life. ‘Animal’ in Berger’s thought appears to really mean a mammal, usually edible (farmed or wild) or domesticated (working or pets). This unacknowledged synecdoche is particularly apparent when Berger is discussing anatomy in ‘Why Look at Animals?’: animals are different from man ‘in their superficial anatomy – less in their deep anatomy’. (4) Berger probably isn’t thinking of the ‘deep anatomy’ of, say, lizards, worms, octopuses or butterflies.

terms – man and animal – shared in common revealed what differentiated them. And vice versa'.<sup>34</sup> Berger is happy with the moment of human auto-definition against the animal, structured as a differentiation with commonality. It is worth noting, however, that whilst Derrida goes back to Eden and the Christian creation myth, Berger's aboriginal moment occurs at some point in pre-history. For Berger, this is the defining human moment, one that, given the relegation of and distancing from animals, those that live within the culture of capitalism will normally fail to experience or understand.<sup>35</sup> In 1977, Berger saw the aboriginal human relationship to animals surviving solely as a mixture of linguistic puns (such as litter *Clive*), processed meat and Walt Disney cartoons. For Berger, this original understanding was also lost to us regardless: 'all theories of ultimate origin are only ways of better understanding what followed', he notes.<sup>36</sup> What Berger values is a continuous, ambiguous *proximity* to this unknowable prehistorical period, mythical or fictitious as it may be, because of its richness for thinking about the human. He wishes for a humanity still in deep and complicated co-dependence with other animals, but aware of itself, differentiating itself. Of course, he finds something of this in the Haute Savoie; the potential for his fascination with Alpine peasants is already inscribed into *Clive's* pages.

For Berger, the distancing that follows the original relationship with animals leads to a paucity of 'authentic' or 'original' human experience. Berger's exploration of the proximity between humans and other types of animal in *Clive* upsets this distance, rudely, without giving *Clive's* patients or the reader, any warning. The patients are subject to being re-named, in the sense of a replaying of the act of naming the human against other animal life. It can only be a distressing, wrenching experience. For example, as darkness descends on the first night in *Clive*, the dogs are introduced:

the dog, so obedient, useful and faithful, has the longest association with man. He is the most fully trained animal. Yet the dogs who edge their way into *Clive* at night do not behave in a way that entirely supports this

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<sup>34</sup>John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?' *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 7. First published in *New Society*, 1977

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

supposition. *Rather it is as though they are claiming for themselves man's long association with them.* (31, my emphasis)

The order that Derrida identifies, of pursued and pursuer, namer and named, is here reversed. The dogs are positioned actively ('claiming'); they will come after the patients, right into Clive.<sup>37</sup> If humans think of animals as objects – as objects of their thought - in *Clive* they become subjects, both in the figure quoted above, but also more widely. They become agents, even in the patients' minds. The patients' passivity with Clive is an important aspect of this. Harry may be an exception because we are told he at least attempts to live actively in Clive, making the tea, fixing things and helping with dinner, (25) but he does not escape a visit from the dogs, and his impatience to leave is motivated by the 'abnormal' (193) nature of hospital life. This characteristic of the space, in which the patients are done-to, not doing, visited, not visiting, is crucial to the reversal the patients suffer. Clive is not quite a prison (though Pepino refers to it as such [127]) but it has similarities to one. The patients relinquish their authority to Clive and its officials. If they escape they are dragged back in, and this is one of the reasons House's presence is so disquieting. At supper there is talk of a rigged game show. The patients tiptoe into an ethical discussion, during which

each goes back to his own previous opinions, to his own allotment where in his own ground he has planted his own beans and seeds. There is no longer any common land. Either the soil there is too poor or they have long since been bullied and cajoled off it. By their nature all allotments are small. (26)

In 'Why Look at Animals', Berger echoes this passage: He writes:

This reduction of the animal, which has a theoretical as well as economic history, is part of the same process as that by which men have been reduced to isolated productive and consuming units.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In 'Why Look at Animals', Berger claims 'in the accompanying ideology, animals are always observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them.' (16)

<sup>38</sup> John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 13.

The advancing of the dogs into *Clive* is intimately connected with the space. For Derrida,

being *after*, being *alongside*, being *near* would appear as different modes of being, indeed of *being-with*. With the animal. But, in spite of appearances, it isn't certain that these modes of being come to modify a preestablished being, even less a primitive "I am." In any case, they express a certain order of *being huddled together* (which is what the etymological root, *pressu*, indicates, whence follow the words *pres*, *aupres*, *après*), the being-pressed, the being-with, the being-with as being strictly attached, bound, enchained, being-under-pressure, compressed, impressed, repressed, pressed-against according to the stronger or weaker stricture of what always remains pressing.<sup>39</sup>

This idea that being is always 'being-with', without an earlier, independent self, is a lesson the patients confront in *Clive*. The allotment is smashed apart, the dogs transgress the boundaries of the human, and the result is the communal confessional space of 'The Execution'. Alongside this is the other disruption to the idea of independent being, that of *being-in*. Like it or not (most hate it), *Clive's* patients are forced to acknowledge their co-dependence and social identity. Derrida's terminology, 'being under pressure' also echoes the 'ruthless trial of ordinary life'. *Clive* is a place where allotment membership is suspended.

In *The Shape of a Pocket* (2001), forty years after he was writing *Clive*, twenty-five after 'Why Look at Animals?' Berger was still writing about dogs – still interested in what the dog can tell us about human life. In an essay in *Pocket*, 'Will it be a Likeness?' Berger reformulates the closeness and separation of man and dog: 'the dog is the only animal with an historical sense of time, but...he can never be an historical agent. He suffers history but he can never make it.'<sup>40</sup> This is suggestive of the powerless, witness-cum-victim position of the patients in *Clive* ward. *The Shape of a Pocket* has more to say about dogs that chimes with the earlier work: as Alice A Kuzniar has noted, dogs appear in an essay by Berger concerned with the

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<sup>39</sup> Derrida, *Animal*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> John Berger, 'Will It Be a Likeness?' in *The Shape of a Pocket* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 245.

photography of Pentti Sammallahti, 'Opening a Gate', in which dogs feature in enigmatic pictures of open ground (see fig. 7).<sup>41</sup>



FIGURE 7

Pentti Sammallahti, *Solovki, White Sea, Russia* (1992).

For Berger, 'dogs, with their running legs, sharp noses and developed memory for sounds, are the natural frontier experts of these interstices [between different sets of the visible]'.<sup>42</sup> The dog is messenger and guide, able to see into the human world and other worlds: 'in each [photograph] the human order, still in sight, is nevertheless no longer central and is slipping away. The interstices are open.'<sup>43</sup> The dog as far-seeing passeur originates in the dogs of Clive: for all their assertive, aggressive behaviour, they also lead the patients to new landscapes (within their own minds, perhaps), to places where the human order is slipping away, shown to be contingent and partial. This is revelatory for the patients, regardless of their reluctance, which is an inevitable consequence of their lack of preparation, current vulnerability and social conditioning. The dogs perform this mysteriously, without explanation and, in the example of Robin's Penny, at cost to themselves. This resonates with the most extraordinary passage of Berger's next book, *Corker's Freedom* (1964), in which Corker tells a story about a white dog to a lecture audience at Victoria Hall.<sup>44</sup> The dog follows Corker as he walks along a stream, until it disappears. Corker finds that it has jumped into a strong part of the stream, and the current is slowly taking it towards a weir. Corker tries to help in vain, offering the

<sup>41</sup> Alice A. Kuzniar *Melancholia's Dog* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 47. John Berger 'Opening a Gate', *The Shape of A Pocket* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 1-6.

<sup>42</sup> John Berger, *The Shape of A Pocket*, 5.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> John Berger, *Corker's Freedom* (London: Methuen, 1964), 200-205.

dog a rusting pole. Staring fixedly up at the sky, the dog goes over the weir. Corker rushes to the lower level and searches, and waits. The dog never reappears. The suicide of the dog, if this is what it is, shows its agency and Corker, powerless, can only witness its departure. The body never appears, as if the dog has taken a doorway to a realm Corker is denied access to, but perhaps nevertheless glimpses. If at times we cannot make *sense* of *Clive*, it is because Berger finds dogs useful for reminding us that not everything in the world, even in our familiar world, is subject to human sense or verbal expression.

## 5

In the first section, 'The dogs of Clive', each patient in turn, save for Pepino (on morphine) and for Dai (who we will turn to presently,) remembers an encounter with a dog, and these alternate with the narrator considering the generic qualities of the species. The differences between the dogs in these two modes of the narrative are marked. Each particular animal as encountered by a patient is very different – Eleanor's playful, coquettish Dalmatian makes a fool of Ken, who treats it as a love-rival; the unpredictable stray that bites Peter against Harry's expectations; Penny shivering on Robin's lap on the bus; the huge Wolfhound drooling over Pearl as she snores peacefully in the piss-sodden hay. The paragraphs in between, however, build the idea of what a dog is. For example:

Between a dog's eyes there is a bony hollow (it is where with cattle and horses the bolt of the humane killer is applied); beneath this hollow is the centre of a dog's brain. There, in a fashion that we cannot yet analyse, the balance is held between the dog's dependence and independence. (34)

In each encounter, the patient sees himself in the dog he encounters. This encounter, we later discover, corresponds to an issue about which the patient worries, and will confess to in the swirling dreamscape of 'The Execution'. So Cyril, for example, will remember watching the wolfhound drooling over his wife, Pearl, in the Animal Tent, and later confess to the ambiguous sexual encounter he has with her on their honeymoon, which he calls 'rape', (162) where 'I devoured her and

then in my lust I made her feed me.' (161) Ken is similar; he is upset at losing out to the dog in Eleanor's affection, but also ashamed and uncomprehending that he is in competition with it in the first place. It is a scene of emasculation. He confesses to his profound sexual and emotional unhappiness in his marriage, to his suspicion of his wife's infidelity, to the distance between others' perception of him and his experience. For Robin, it is being small, vulnerable and afraid. For Harry, it is that he cannot know the outside world well enough to teach and protect his son. Each scene is being remembered by the patient, but he is not in control of that memory; by the logic of the novel, the dogs have moved in independently. If the separation of man and animal is part of man's auto-bio-graphy, his telling of the story of his biological singularity, then the dogs are undermining its credibility, pulling the patients dangerously back into the fold, and suspending their naming rights. Ken finds he cannot remember the name Eleanor has given to her Dalmatian (33).

Dai's recollection of killing a deer as a child is the richest and strangest of the 'dog episodes' each of the patients remembers or dreams. It has a preface of sorts, in which we have access to Dai's dreaming mind, and in which Dai, 'bounding, leaping, following his pug nose' (48) appears initially to be a dog. Following a cheery 'logic' that centres on the dual 'facts' that he has a salmon under his pillow (which seems to have bled in from another memory concerning a 'gent in the car') and dogs' general lack of interest in fish, Dai is led to the conclusion that he is not a dog but 'a chaser' (49). A chaser is not defined more clearly, although Dai appears to identify a type of person as a chaser, and himself as one of the type. The 'chaser' retains more than a trace of the dog, whilst also acquiring an ambiguous humanity. Dai then does human things (planting cabbages, stepping over gassed corpses on a First World War battlefield), but he does these things as a 'chaser'. Of no fixed address, and therefore not (or differently) hemmed in by the social order and space, and aligned with dogs in the spirit of Sammallahti's photographs, Dai becomes a frontier figure, a representative of the fluid and unstable, if a lonely and forlorn one with a growth under his arm. The passage is preceded by one of the short interpolations on the characteristics of dogs:

No dog is of any use as a witness. His eyes can see, his nose can recognize, his tongue can confirm, but he can make no statement. He has neither

language nor concepts. *The truth for him is only the scent on the wind.* (48, my emphasis.)

Derrida attempts to complicate and rethink l'animot's lack of language as something other than privation. In *Clive*, and Berger's early work more widely, the absence of language is always cast as a privation. The dogs undermine man's autobiography and the patients seem to lose their control of language as part of this process. In his dream, it is Dai's *smelling* of the fish that causes him to realise his difference from the dog he initially believes himself to be. The coincidence of scents and smells pulls the sleeping Dai into a closer cognitive association with the dog – for them both, according to the book, the truth can be located olfactorily. This occurs in the instant he is defining himself against the dog. From the first line of the passage, - 'Shutting his mouth he chased,' (48) Dai closes himself off to speech. He then remembers chasing butterflies away from his cabbages, 'flinging his cap at them...they flew away and then alighted behind him' (49). They infuriate him, as his wife used to do (49). The connection between Dai's wife and the butterflies develops complexly: Dai believes that she 'laid her words in his daughter's ear' which then 'hatched out' (49), causing his daughter to shun him. Dai appears to mistrust language, which is set against his own momentary muteness (Dai is the great fabricator, liar, the great *talker* of Clive ward). The butterfly is threatening because it can speak; conversely, Dai's wife acquires what are (for Dai) the butterfly's chief characteristics: it can contaminate his daughter's idea of him, it is uncatchable, and it will lie in wait until his absence. Dai's wife is not once referred to as mother, she lays '*her* words' (not eggs) into '*his* daughter's' ear (in both cases the emphasis is mine), and it is Dai's cabbages and relationship to his daughter that suffer. There is a mistrust of words inside Dai's dreaming mind, and the conclusion that speaking animals are the most treacherous of creatures.

The other two examples of chasing that come before Dai awakes, and the story of the deer begins, depict Dai being arrested for running an illegal betting stall and being gassed in the war. Both examples reinforce the emerging relationship with language. When Dai is caught he receives 'the magistrate's sermon.' (49) Speech ('sermon' literally meaning 'talk') is aligned here with power, and the implication is that those who are sermonised *to* are powerless, and silent. On the battlefield Dai

begins 'struggling for breath as the gas gathered like white feathers in his lungs' (49) - a further evocation of muteness by way of a simile invoking cowardice.

As Dai remembers the deer killing, he wakes up. He lets his 'memory lead him now, the *reins loose in his hand*' (49, my emphasis). The animal presence, though still present in Dai's cognition, is now driven outside, and Dai experiences a split between his conscious self and his memory, which behaves like an animal. When Matt-boy slices open the deer to reveal the apples and Dai accepts the bet to eat one (prefiguring the bet with Ken in Clive), shared diet is emphasised as another facet of Dai's (and humans') similarity with animals. The taboo, and therefore the stimulus for the bet, does not lie solely with similarity to the deer, however, but also with the similarity to creatures that feed 'like worms' (52) from the animal's stomach. Dai has acted like one of these animals, and his act is labelled 'shameless' (51). For Dai's gang, shame is a defining feature of the human. Dai, having lost his sense of shame, has become bestial. But the apple also points to the Fall, and humankind's postlapsarian shame; thus, Dai loses his shame only to get it back again. A member of the gang suggests that Dai's actions will lead to lockjaw (51), another image of muteness. Dai equates the apple with the painful swelling under his arm he is in Clive for. He wishes that a nurse could take the apple and put it back into the deer's stomach (53).

The narrative periodically lingers on the mouth and muteness as the patients encounter dogs. For example, Cyril's friend, Sidney Parks, is unable to say anything to Cyril after he has seen his wife, Pearl, asleep in the Animal Tent (47). Cyril speaks to Pearl, but asleep, she doesn't hear him and doesn't wake. Peter, having been nipped in the ankle by a stray, is crying, 'his mouth hanging loose, as if it were there, on the mouth, that he had been hurt.' (38) Ken is excluded when his then girlfriend, Eleanor, whispers secrets into her Dalmatian's ear, as the animal 'rubs itself big against her.' (33) Robin, whose leg injury causes him to think about his dog Penny's broken leg, can only watch as the vet talks 'nonsensical words' to calm the dog as he has been unable to on the bus. Pepino, an ever-present but marginal figure in the text and a non-English-speaker, is a constant reminder throughout of exclusion from verbal communication, as he struggles desperately to make himself understood.

This sense of the absence or paucity of speech in the first section is also unobtrusively reinforced by the way in which the narrative reports the words the

patients speak to each other. In a typical example, Robin and Ken are making small talk: 'Was Ken married? Indeed he was.' (17) This enquiry, which might have been written more directly as "'Are you married?' asked Robin. 'Indeed I am', said Ken" is filtered through the narrator so that the tense of the reported words switches from present to the past, the addressee from second person to third. The speaker is not named, so we must infer his identity from the context. It manages to be a funny and somewhat depressing evocation of middle class small talk, as well as distancing the characters from the words they speak. This presentation of speech is different in 'The Execution', where the speech is presented as directly as possible ('KEN: Yes.' [131]) and occupies a far greater proportion of the text than previously. When the book once again reverts to conventional prose in Parts 4 and 5, the speech is presented directly, in the manner of my rewriting of Robin's question. During the course of 'The Execution', with their long confessional speeches, the characters have managed to find their voices, and keep hold of them, in a way that enacts their ability to connect with one another in a slightly more direct way.

The final section of the novel is called 'Outcome', singular, but there is little homogeneity in what has happened to the patients in Clive. As an example, even during the levity of 'The Survivors', in which the patients converse easily and encourage each other to make frivolous plans for the future, Ken is withdrawing into himself. 'Never,' says Ken's survivor, 'let anyone know you again as these three know you' (177). By the final section Ken is talking himself back round to his 'special case' status, and happily agreeing with the doctor that he is lucky, (191) strongly echoing almost the first thing we learn about him at the beginning of the book: 'he is lucky: a fact by which he sets great store' (13). Despite it all, in other words, Ken has not come very far. The dawn is bright as the patients laugh with handless Pepino about the news of the birth of his son. The light is coming from an unusual angle, and is

showing up surfaces more usually kept in shadow, threadbare patches, worn wooden frames, dust. If the sun were like this every morning, different aspects would be noticed, different habits eventually established. (169)

This figure might be as close as the book gets to an explanation for itself. The pressures exerted in the novel do not occur frequently enough in 'ordinary life' to

change things. Things will build, blow up, and then return to the status quo, following the structure of Dai's joke. Harry laments whilst looking out of the window: 'if it was old, and worn out, why should it stay?' (196). Meanwhile, in *Clive*, at least, everything has been up for discussion.

### 3

## 'What they know but cannot think': Anguish, Inarticulacy and *A Fortunate Man*

### 1

A passage from *A Fortunate Man* (1967) confirms inarticulacy as one of the book's main themes, as it is of the three Berger texts which focus on England:<sup>1</sup>

There are large sections of the English working and middle class who are inarticulate as the result of wholesale cultural deprivation. They are deprived of the means of translating what they know into thoughts that they can think.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. John Sassall is marked out from the people he lives amongst because of the way he can think and talk. Representing this ability, and its absence, is the object of much of the work *Clive*, *Corker's Freedom* (1964) and *A Fortunate Man* perform.<sup>3</sup> Berger's footnote to the above quotation, 'My novel *Corker's Freedom* attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> *Clive*, *Corker's Freedom* and *A Fortunate Man* all focus on England and English characters. Along with *A Painter of Our Time*, they are also the only books which are set in entirely in England.

<sup>2</sup> John Berger, *A Fortunate Man* (London: Penguin, 1967), 92. All subsequent references will be made in the text.

<sup>3</sup> John Berger, *Corker's Freedom* (London: Methuen, 1964). All references made in the text.

illuminate this situation' (92), emphasizes the continuity in Berger's mind of this preoccupation, and the three texts converge and diverge around their representation of inarticulacy.<sup>4</sup> There are interesting pairings within this triangle of texts: beyond Berger's explicit coupling of *Corker* and *A Fortunate Man* above, *Clive* and *Corker* are Berger's unfashionable, state-of-the-nation novels ('this book starts where the other one [*Clive*] stopped' reads the blurb on the dust jacket of *Corker*); *Clive* and *A Fortunate Man* comprise Berger's NHS texts, with the potent symbolism of sickness and cure an ever-present background figure.

*The Foot of Clive* ends with the characters' barely tangible ability to express previously inaccessible knowledge.<sup>5</sup> This is the residue from the nightmare of 'The Execution' section, in which unconstrained volubility was granted to all characters. It is an ambivalent outcome, with the common understanding and cooperation (and also terror) of 'The Execution' having receded drastically by the novel's end. Solipsistic thoughts replace conversation and only youthful tears and a baby born abroad provide emblems of hope. The narrative finds no way to transfer the abilities gifted to the characters in the course of 'The Execution' section, so obviously set apart from the 'normal' workings of life as represented in the remainder of the narrative. The realism of the final two parts of the book, 'The Survivors' and 'Outcome', confirms, rather than resolves, the cleavage.

This creates a peculiar difficulty for readers; in Dyer's useful, symptomatic phrase 'we remain slightly dazed, unsure of what has happened and still faintly numb as if coming round from an anaesthetic...', a comment I read as testament to the novel's force.<sup>6</sup> Although Dyer is discussing his experience of reading the whole novel, his comment speaks of the narrative journey we are compelled to take

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<sup>4</sup> Berger can sound pious about inarticulacy but representing the powerless or marginalised remains a feature of his work to date and he has remained bullish. In the 1988 afterword of *A Painter of Our Time*, a propos of the fact that a Hungarian had mistaken Janos for a real person, he wrote defiantly:

it confirmed to me that if you listened well enough, lent yourself enough to somebody else whose experience was totally different from your own, you could nevertheless speak for them and do so authentically. All storytellers knew this, at least until the middle of our century. But then it began to be said - with increasing dogmatism, - that nobody has the right to write about anything they themselves have not lived...Thanks to an unknown woman in Budapest, I have never accepted this golden rule. (Reprinted in London: Granta, 1992, 197-8)

For the most part in this chapter I discuss Berger on his own terms. I take as my subject the form and structure of his representation of inarticulacy, which is fascinating, not its ethics. For an evaluation of the ethics of this project see Peter de Bolla, 'Berger and the Ethics of Writing' in *Minnesota Review*, Number 28, Spring 1987 (New Series), 78-84.

<sup>5</sup> See previous chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 49.

onwards from 'The Execution'. A cleft exists in the book: in 'The Execution' time skips forward so that day becomes night three times within the course of a few lines of dialogue (142), fencing this section from the represented progression of time in the rest of the book. Anguished characters find the ability to speak to each other with such eloquence that the narrative dissolves into play script, becoming, intermittently, comprised of only their names and voices. In the remaining sections, the text and characters return to the mumbling, caginess of the realistically represented hospital ward.

In 'The Execution' anguish and articulacy overlap. They court each other, as the characters voice their anxieties and suffering, caused by their place within, and as a product of, the culture and society which surrounds them, which has caused them to fear death, intimacy and each other, has impoverished their relationships, and made them anxious about what makes them human. The anguish which the characters voice partly lies in the fact that they are unable to express it under normal circumstances. It is a strange dynamic. In 'The Execution' they are able to articulate the anguish they feel caused in part by their inarticulacy.

In *Corker*, the technique is different. Corker 'expresses' sophisticated motivations, desires, influences and pressures that affect him in passages which repeatedly begin with the phrase 'I know' and end with the phrase 'I do not think this' (15, 29, 38, for example). In the play-script layout also employed in *Clive*, Corker's 'speech' is attributed to '*Corker knows:*' and '*Corker thinks:*' (110). As it progresses, *Corker* builds up a repository of unthought ideas, beyond the reach of Corker as his life and wits slip from his grasp. The techniques employed in *Clive* and *Corker* have similar consequences: desperate inarticulacy is dramatised by articulating desperation. The gallows wasteland of *Clive's* 'Execution' evokes this desperation in an extreme way; *Corker* is an attempt to moderate and domesticate. And yet it seems inevitable that we follow Corker through highly uncharacteristic episodes in his life which coincidentally converge: walking out on his sister Irene, getting unexpectedly drunk and leaving the front door to his office open, being robbed on the same night. The finale is dependent upon these things taking place on the same day, and this reliance on the confluence of the events gives the novel the overplotted feel of a farce. Corker ends up regarded as a marginal figure by others, perhaps including the reader, and if he doesn't express anguish in the way *Clive's* patients do, it is because his seemingly unworried geniality is a symptom of unsoundness of mind.

The verbosity he ends with is meaningless, pushing him even further to the edge of society, standing on a soapbox at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, unheeded. This ending is even less hopeful than that of *Clive*, although this is muted by the attempt to make Corker comic.

*A Fortunate Man* depicts a similar social picture once again. In Berger's account, the Foresters are the victims of cultural and social depression, and their own inarticulacy. Here, however, this is represented without the need to push the subjects beyond what routinely comprises their lives. This is an advantage of Jean Mohr's photographs: words are not required to attempt to represent their absence, and to some degree the photographs replace Berger's ventriloquizing monologues in which he places unspoken words unnaturally into the characters' mouths. Equally important is the double filter of the presence of the doctor, our primary subject, who dramatises the need to understand and engage with the Foresters, and the narrator, who provides an intellectualising, self-conscious commentary. Clearly *A Fortunate Man* is a very different project from *Clive* and *Corker*, not least because it was made in collaboration with Mohr. Defining those differences is not as easy a task as one might first imagine: the book refers more explicitly to real people than either *Clive* or *Corker*, most prominently Dr John Sassall, whose name Berger changed from that of a real doctor, John Eskill.<sup>7</sup> The verbal text is hard to classify; its main component is an essay, or series of connected essays, but it also contains stories with figuratively rich passages of description, such as this one, which echoes the ending of *Clive*:

Half the window above the sink was broken and there was a piece of cardboard across it. The sunshine streamed through the other half and the grey dust slowly rose and fell through the beam, so slowly that it seemed to be part of another uninhabited world. (32)

It constitutes a very different form from the novels that precede it, and is more akin to the hybrid or collaged texts that follow. Nevertheless, although the six stories of the Foresters are short, as opposed to the book-spanning attention on the six patients of *Clive*, vestiges of the technique remain: for example, in *A Fortunate Man*

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<sup>7</sup> For a placing of Sassall's relationship with his patients within the context of other literary examples, see John L. Coulehan, 'Tenderness and Steadiness: Emotions in Medical Practice' in *Literature and Medicine*, (14:2), 1995, 222-36.

the first four stories that open the text all use 'animal' figures of some kind to describe the patients.<sup>8</sup> In the conclusion, Berger's rhetorical admission of his formal doubts, ('I cannot. It is beyond me to conclude this essay. I could end with another story about Sassall and perhaps most readers would then not notice the omission' [149]) shows both that he was hesitating about how to end this text to his satisfaction, and will later be echoed by the unwillingness and uncertainty of G.'s narrator:

I cannot continue this account of the eleven-year-old boy in Milan on 6 May 1898. From this point on everything I write will either converge upon a final full stop or else disperse so widely that it will become incoherent. (77)

The blurb on the first edition immodestly suggests that 'such is Berger's skill' that the doctor becomes 'a representative of our society,' an indication that Berger or a member of the editorial team believed that the aims of Lukácsian realism were transferring to a different kind of writing. This also emphasises (though we insist on it in any case) that 'Sassall' in the book is Berger's and Mohr's creation, shaped by creative decisions and the principles behind them. Yet, as the quotation about the conclusion demonstrates, the text is consciously trying not to misrepresent its subject. The doctor's name has been changed, yet we are invited by the text to view him as a real person ('if he were a fictional character...' [149, my emphasis]), and the photographs appear to lend the text authenticity. *A Fortunate Man* occupies a liminal space in many ways, an intriguingly hybrid text masquerading as documentary essay. The text invites literary reading. It provides a reference point for much of Berger's diverse work. Unlikely as it may seem, the formal characteristics of *G.*, so justifiably celebrated - the blend of narrative, essay, psychology, realism, and the narrator's willingness to discuss how the text is constructed, including a mistrust of itself, and understanding of its limits - have a closer antecedent in *A Fortunate Man* than any other text in Berger's early oeuvre. The influence of *A Fortunate Man* also projects beyond *G.*, most obviously in the other books that include photographs, but also in the *Into Their Labours Trilogy* in ways I hope to show below, marking it as an

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<sup>8</sup> In the first the woodsman's leg is like 'a like a dog killed on the road' (16). The second patients 'eyes were round like a rabbits. She was timid of anything outside the cage of her illness' and 'she froze like an animal who realizes that it is impossible to bolt.' (20) The dying woman in the third story is 'fragile, bird-like' (26). Sassall calls the young woman in the fourth 'Duckie' and her face is also described like a 'muzzle' (31).

important precursor of Berger's later work. In *A Fortunate Man*, a doctor is the main focus, whereas doctors are marginal to *Clive*. The Foresters are *his* subjects, too. The book explores the relationship between an engaged intellectual and his community, between an intellectual and his life's work and between Berger and those two things. Our relationship to the material of the book and the book's own relationship with its subject is frequently in dialogue with, mediated or mirrored by, Sassall's own relationship with his patients, a fact illustrated by Mohr's photographs, in which we repeatedly look past Sassall's sleeve or the back of his head to the patients beyond. In contrast, Mr. Pepper, the surgeon in *Clive*, 'knew their [his patients'] stomachs better than their names' (192). Along with the photographs, Sassall's mediating presence is the crucial feature of *A Fortunate Man's* different representation of inarticulacy.

## 2

Berger and Mohr were wary of the power or potential of photographs as a form and as a consequence *A Fortunate Man* is partly characterised by what is not represented visually.<sup>9</sup> Each of the six brief stories about the doctor treating his patients is a story of psychological or physical suffering. The first is a logging accident on a misty hillside (16). Berger's narrative precisely describes the events of the emergency: the screaming victim, the morphine injection, and the plasma transfusion. The trapped leg is described, arrestingly, as 'like a dog killed on the road' (15). The story is accompanied by a photograph (fig. 8).

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<sup>9</sup> For other discussions of the relationship between word and image in Berger's work, see Carol Shloss, 'Double-Crossing Frontiers: Literature, Photography, and the Politics of Displacement' in Bryant, Marsha (ed. and introd.), *Photo-Textualities: Reading Photographs and Literature*, Newark, DE: U of Delaware P, 1996, 141-151 and Michael W. Messmer 'Apostle to the Techno/Peasants: Word and Image in the Work of John Berger' in *Works and Days: Essays in the Socio-Historical Dimensions of Literature and the Arts*, (6:1-2 [11-12]), 1988, 127-150.

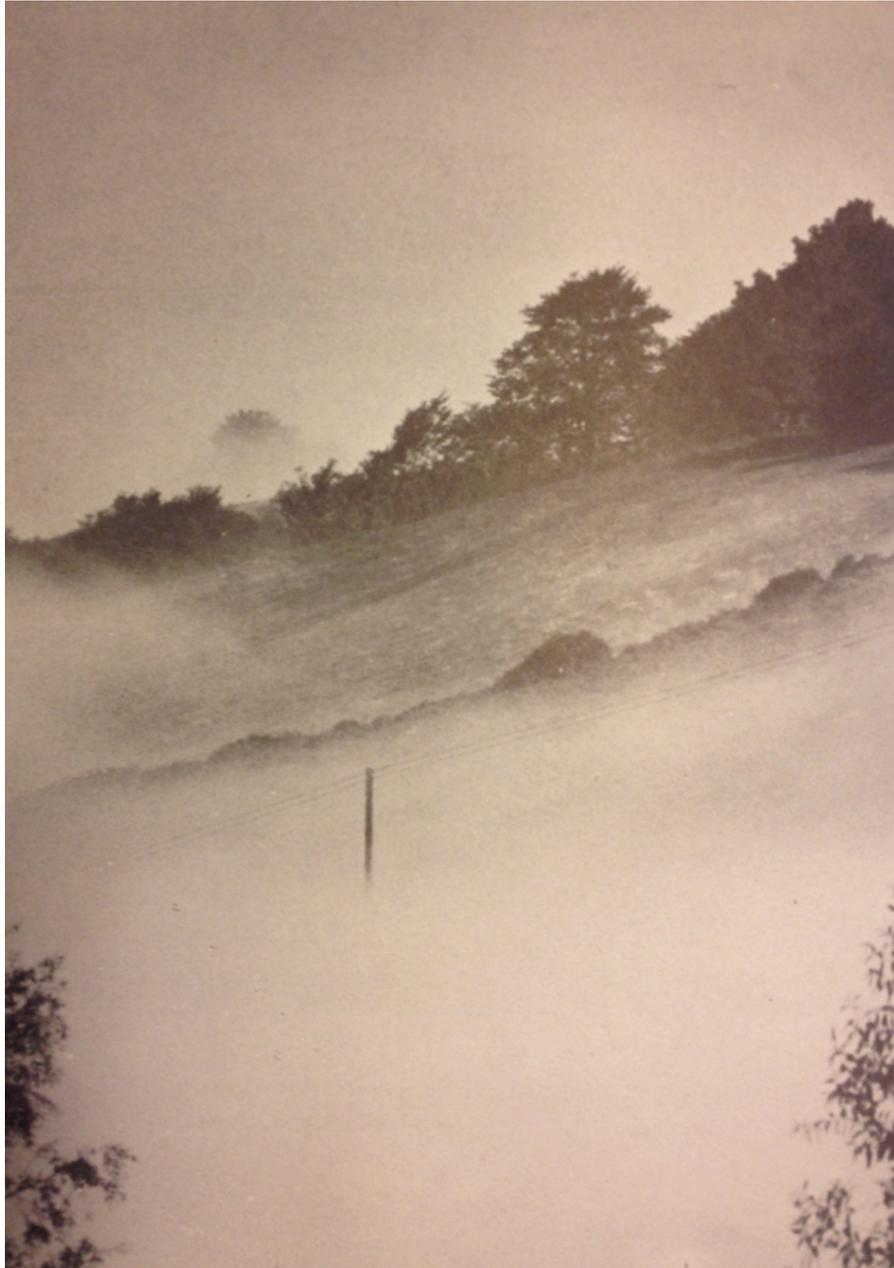


FIGURE 8

Jean Mohr, Untitled photograph from *A Fortunate Man*, 14.

Mohr's picture fills a full page without a border, with no caption (none of the pictures is referred to explicitly in the verbal text). We can see very little as the mist renders the air opaque, and this is surely the point: the contrast between the vivid language and the accident's graphic invisibility. The image both confirms and denies the possibility of the photographic representation of the woodsman's suffering; its presence reiterates nothing more than the location of the accident. In this instance there may have been a practical reason for the lack of this image. In a short essay entitled 'The Subject not Photographed', Jean Mohr describes frostbitten

mountaineers, pictures of whom he could have sold to newspapers. But 'I didn't even take out my camera. There was no virtue in this decision, there was simply something more urgent to be done: to take down the injured on our backs'.<sup>10</sup> Yet only this first story features an emergency situation, and a landscape photograph accompanies all of the six stories that begin *A Fortunate Man*. Two of these photographs emphasise Sassall's tendency to associate cases with the landscape: a bend in the river reminds him of his failure with a patient who has become nervous like water agitated by its own shallowness (21). A photograph of a bend in a river prefaces the story (18). Similarly, a cemented-together dry stone wall is a symbol of the lack of opportunities for the young (31) and the preceding photograph is of such a wall (29). This said, the absence of visual portraits of the patients to accompany the verbal portraits is a striking absence, particularly, as Peter de Bolla notes, as 'the first nine pictures which are scattered throughout the first forty-two pages of the book are exclusively landscapes; every picture bar one thereafter contains people.'<sup>11</sup>

Each of these landscapes also appears to be one of a pair. The corresponding photographs appear seventy pages later, as a series of portraits of villagers (84-90).

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<sup>10</sup> Jean Mohr 'The Subject Not Photographed' in Berger/Mohr *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 78. All subsequent references to the book made in the body of the text.

<sup>11</sup> Peter de Bolla. 'Berger and the Ethics of Writing' in *Minnesota Review*, Number 28, Spring 1987 (New Series), 81.

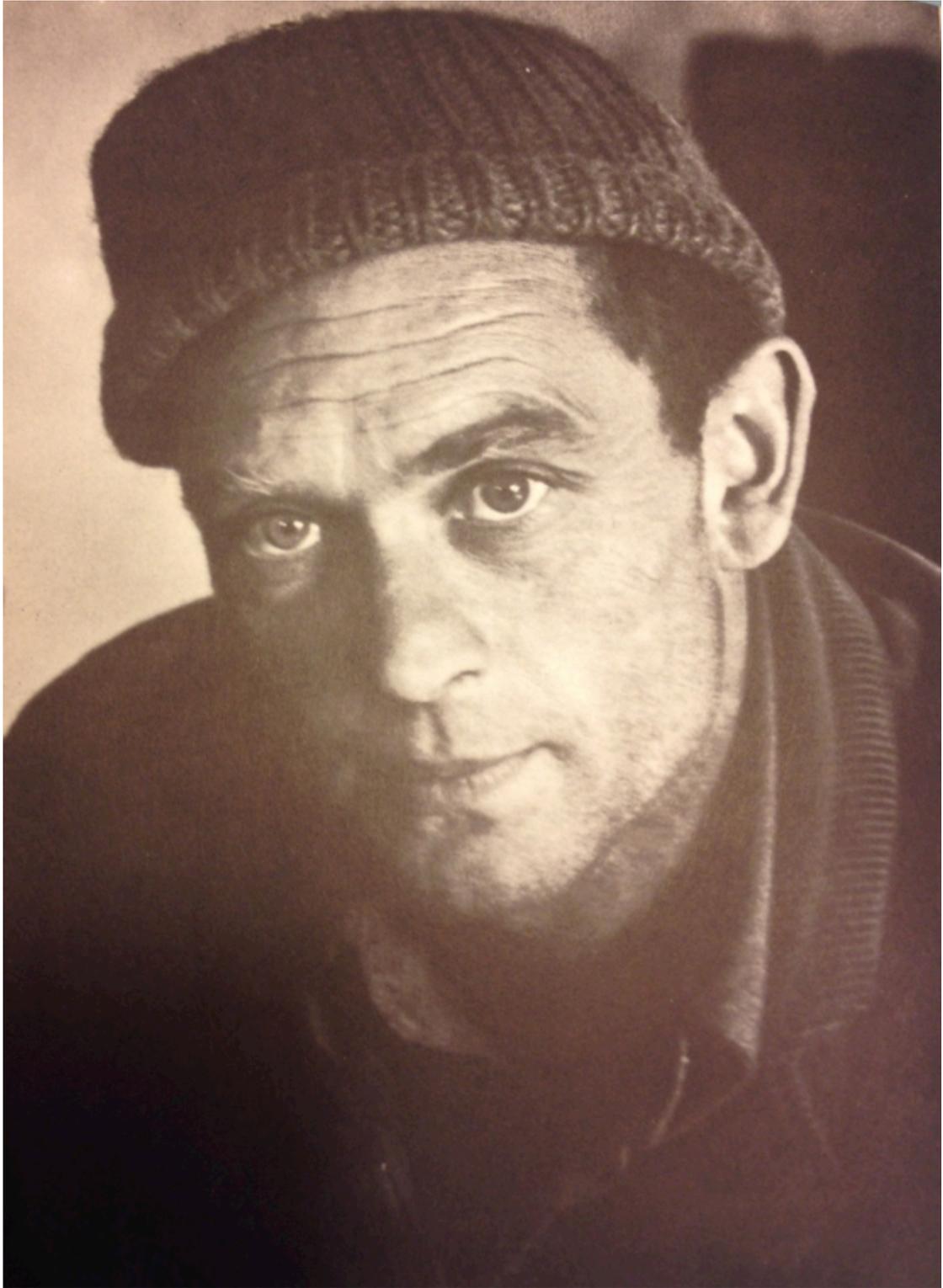


FIGURE 9

Jean Mohr, Untitled photograph from *A Fortunate Man*, 84.

The first is of a man wearing what appears to be a woodsman's hat (84). His direct gaze is searching, seeming to be seeking recognition. The space created here allows the reader to wonder whether he is the woodsman who would lose his leg (17) from

the earlier story - just as the other five portraits appear to correspond with patients who feature in the five other stories, the order slightly rearranged and divorced in time from quiet desperation represented during Sassall's visit. The photo is cropped so that we cannot see his legs, so either way it still denies the visual evidence of the accident. These two photographs, one of a misty hillside and the other separated spatially and temporally from the accident, both in terms of the real events and the layout of the book, seem to stand in lieu of the 'missing' photograph(s), the accident's graphic illustration. It, along with the other distressing meetings between the doctor and his patients, is represented elliptically in between, and directly through Berger's verbal account.

About photographs, Berger has written in *Another Way of Telling*:

In life it is an event's development through time, its duration, which allows its meaning to be perceived or felt.

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Normally a photograph arrests this movement and cuts across the appearances of the event photographed. Its meaning becomes ambiguous.

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(120)

The first line of Berger's diagram represents events unfolding through time. In the second that time is disrupted by the vertical line of the photograph – which subsequently loses its continuity with its own past and future. He has put this differently elsewhere: 'The photograph is irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning.' (92) Susan Sontag reaches the same conclusions in *On Photography*: photographs offer appearances, with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances, prised away from their meaning. Meaning is the result of understanding what she calls 'functions' 'and functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand.'<sup>12</sup> Verbal context can replace the photograph in time (not its own original time, which is impossible) but in narrated time.<sup>13</sup> The very fact of this book suggests that Berger

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Any claim that might be made about *A Fortunate Man*'s authenticity or documentary status through its photographs is thus in Berger's own terms highly problematic. As de Bolla writes, about the Berger essay 'The Uses of Photography', in which Berger makes the same point: 'the essay goes on to make it quite clear that the photograph has as little to do with the "truth" of the real, has as little

is happy to place photographs in a narrative context, and to explore the meanings that can be created. In *Another Way of Telling* he thinks through this phenomenon. However, for Berger, there appears to be something distinct about photographs of suffering.

Berger was writing and Mohr taking pictures for *A Fortunate man* in 1966, the year that US military personnel in Vietnam doubled to three-hundred-and-eighty-five-thousand.<sup>14</sup> Photographs of people suffering horribly by Henri Huet and Horst Faas (among others) were beginning to appear on the front cover of *Time*.<sup>15</sup> In *A Fortunate Man*, Berger directly refers to ‘Vietnam villagers...burned alive’ (126), and the War is a significant context to the implicit critique of photographic representation found within the book. In his 1972 essay ‘Photographs of Agony’ Berger wrote about his response to Vietnam pictures, using Don McCullin’s photography as his example. In the text he describes a particular photo, unpictured, presumably deliberately. It is likely to be this one:



FIGURE 10

Don McCullin, *Vietnamese father and daughter wounded when U.S. Marines dropped hand grenades into their bunker, Têt offensive, Battle of Hué, Vietnam, February 1968.*

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chance of becoming a substitute for the real as any other form of representation, and it is because of this that the photograph must be given its own context, its own time.’ de Bolla, 80.

<sup>14</sup> This is a widely-quoted statistic. See, for example, David W. Blight et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States* (Stamford: Cengage Learning, 10th Revised edition, 2013), 819.

<sup>15</sup> See, for examples, [www.life.time.com/history/vietnam-war-life-magazine-covers-1961-1972](http://www.life.time.com/history/vietnam-war-life-magazine-covers-1961-1972).

Berger wrote:

McCullin's most typical photographs record sudden moments of agony – a terror, a wounding, a death, a cry of grief. These moments are in reality utterly discontinuous with normal time... We try to emerge from the moment of the photograph back into our lives. As we do so, the contrast is such that the resumption of our lives appears to be a hopelessly inadequate response to what we have just seen. (43)

We may be able to contextualize this picture in 'historical time', and say that it depicts the aftermath of US bombing of Hue in 1968, but for Berger the event - this 'moment of agony' - appears to be dependent on the *subjective* experience of time of the person in the picture, with which the viewer partially identifies. For the victim, the moment in time is not like our time. It cannot be said to move forward in a straight line. Berger seems mistrustful that this quality of such photographs can be replaced by contextualisation in narrated time. Berger's ambivalence about war photography, then, stems from the fact that we cannot meaningfully connect the photo with our own lives:

as we emerge from the photographed moment back into our lives we assume that the discontinuity is our responsibility. The truth is that any response to the photographed moment is bound to be felt as inadequate. (43)

There is an arresting similarity here: Berger's description of looking at McCullin's photograph is strikingly similar to Dyer's description of reading *Clive*: 'we remain slightly dazed, unsure of what has happened and still faintly numb as if coming round from an anaesthetic'. One could say that Dyer is blaming bad art, not his own ethical failure, but nevertheless this is more than just coincidence. Both the photograph and 'The Execution' depict acute suffering. Berger's diagram of the photograph could well be a diagram of the narrative of *Clive*, with 'The Execution' taking the place of the photograph, rupturing the continuity of the story, and highlighting the inability of the surrounding narrative successfully to assimilate it and make it meaningful. It arrests the realist narrative time flow and logic, and

neither for the characters nor for readers (as Dyer attests) can it be reintegrated into that time. As we identify with the sufferers, we find the journey back into the realistic world of the ward after Cyril's death extremely difficult.

What is the nature of this moment of suffering that is so different? There is a strong existential thread to the text of *A Fortunate Man*, and Berger quotes at length from Jean-Paul Sartre in this context. A word that recurs in the book to help explain the subjective experience of the suffering of the Foresters is 'anguish'. 'Anguish' in this period is the usual translation for 'angoisse' or 'angst', hallmark of existentialist thought. Anguish is not necessarily caused by physical pain. Given the drama of the opening story about the woodsman, the text has a surprisingly weak interest in physical pain, and in this way charts a similar path to Sassall, who has become a GP, for the most part forgoing the 'stark emergency' (125) of his earlier medical life. Instead, the primary cause of their suffering, in the text's own terms, is the 'continual diminution' (125) that the Foresters experience due to the economic and cultural deprivation of which they are the victims. The medical context is both literally important and a metaphor, as in *Clive*, for a wider social problem.<sup>16</sup> Like *Clive* (and *Corker*) the text explicitly binds the suffering it depicts to inarticulacy. In the 'Key to special terminology' in *Being and Nothingness*, part of Sartre's definition of anguish is '...the realization that nothingness slips in between myself and my past and my future. ...Fear is of something in the world. Anguish is anguish before myself.'<sup>17</sup> For Sartre, and for Berger after him, anguish involves temporal disjunction. For Berger 'the subjective experience of time is liable to be so grossly distorted – above all by suffering – that it becomes, both to the sufferer and to any person partially identifying himself with the sufferer, extremely difficult to correlate with time proper.' (123) This explains why *A Fortunate Man* seems to find certain photographs suspicious, which is not to say that Berger and Mohr reject these photographs completely.

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<sup>16</sup> The text can still be found as a reference point on debates surrounding General Practice. See, for example, Gene Feder 'A Fortunate Man: Still the most important book about General Practice ever written' in *The British Journal of General Practice*, March 1 2005. 55(512): 246–247.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 650.

*A Fortunate Man* contains a series of photographs of two people in distress (figs. 11-13).

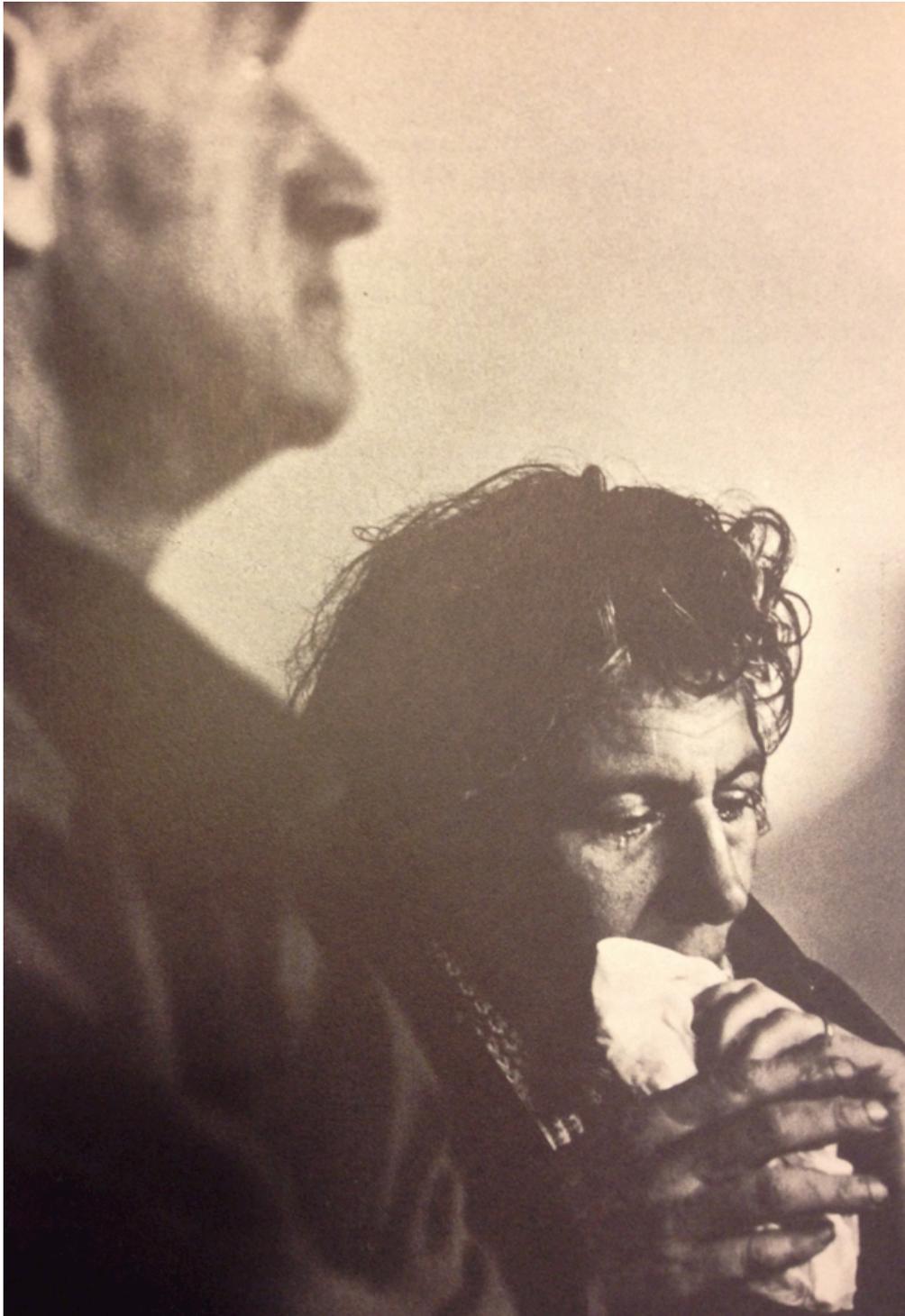


FIGURE 11

Jean Mohr, Untitled photograph from *A Fortunate Man*, 111.

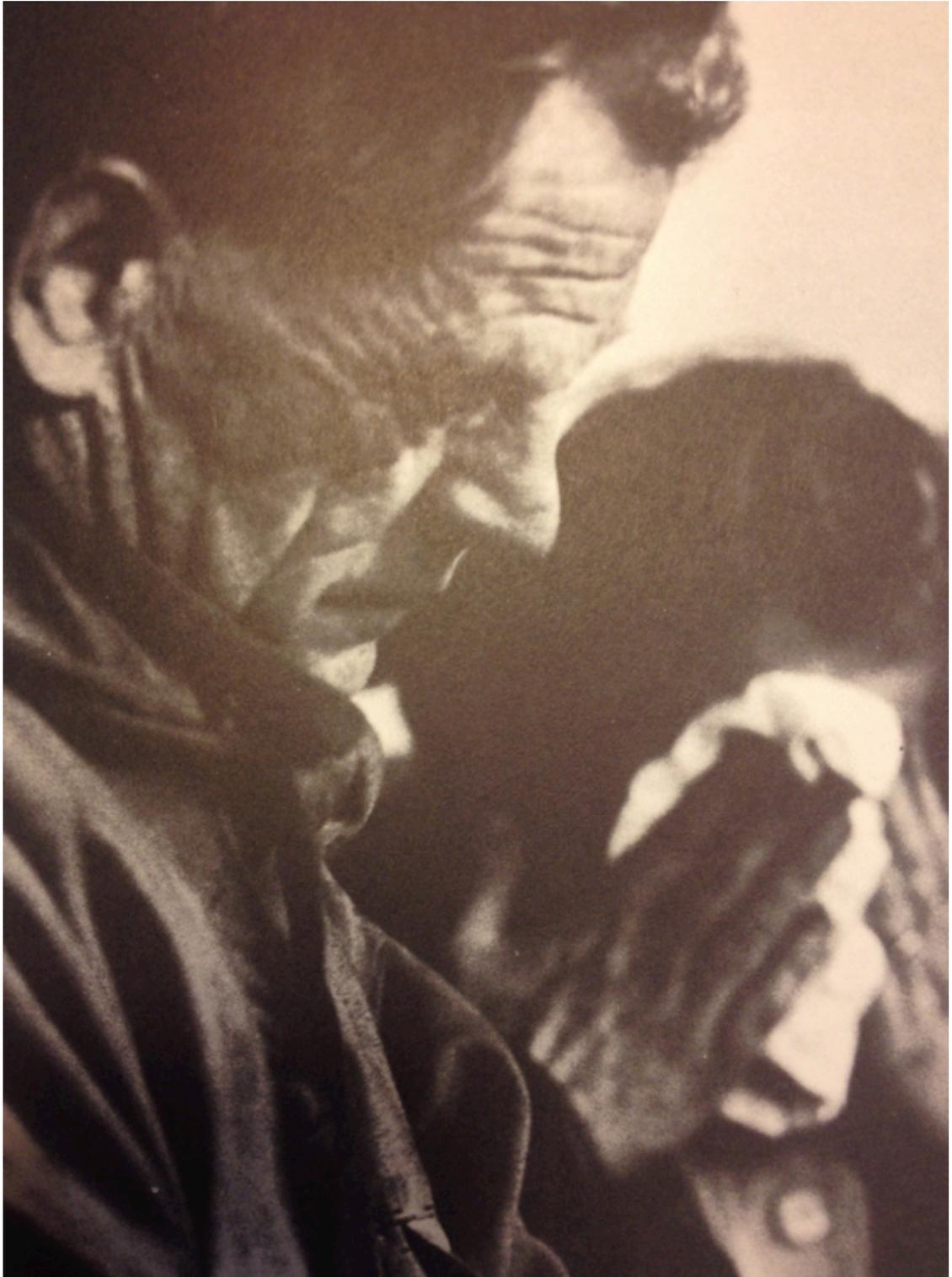


FIGURE 12

Jean Mohr, Untitled photograph from *A Fortunate Man*, 109.

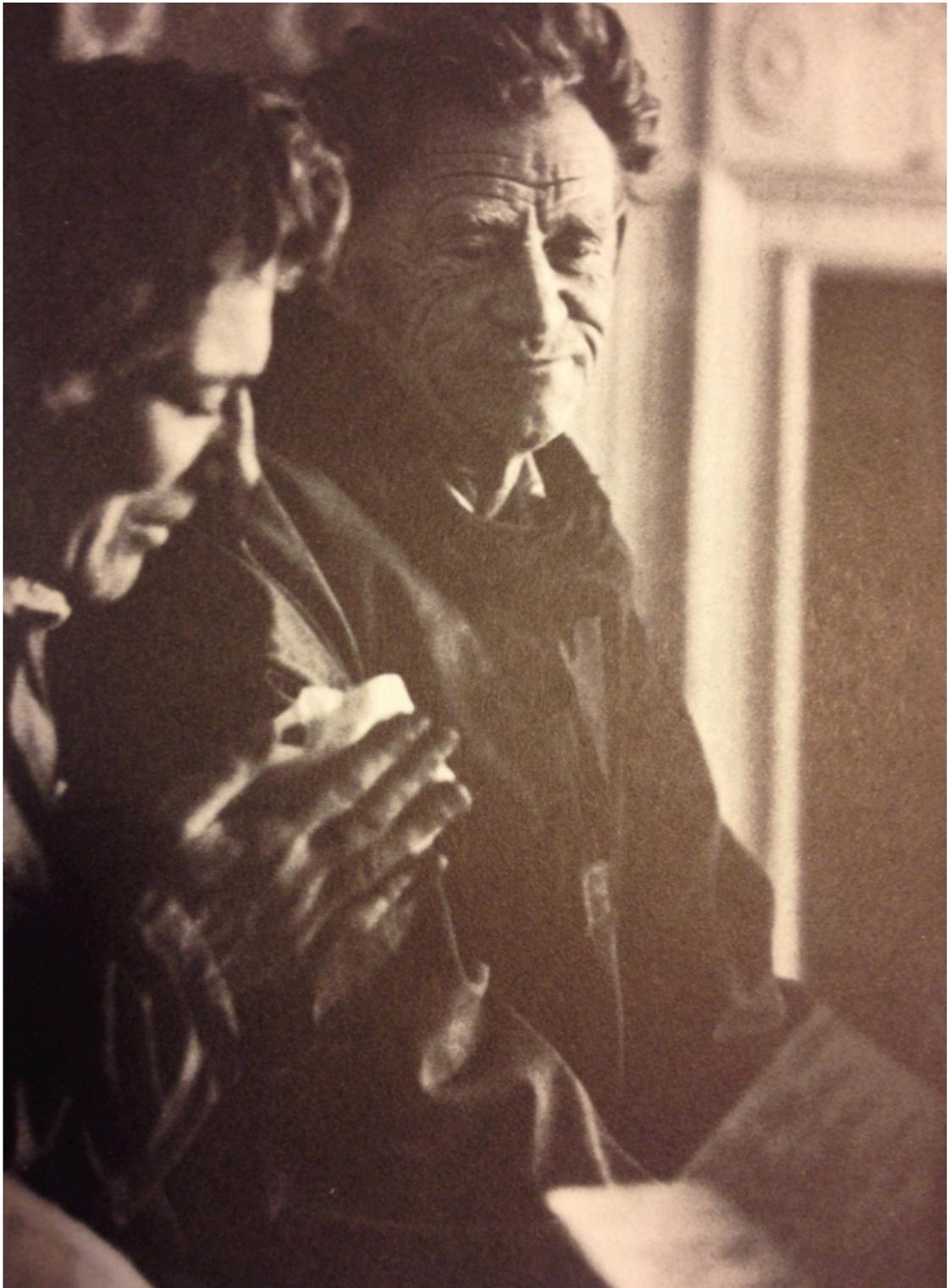


FIGURE 13

Jean Mohr, Untitled photograph from *A Fortunate Man*, 108.

These are dignified, quiet images of suffering. The two people are grieving, perhaps, or assimilating bad news, or waiting for an outcome. The sequence of several photos (instead of just one picture) changes the sense of time. There is no development in them – rather it is like the moment of temporal disjunction that the suffering pair feels is repeated, even as the turning of the pages gives some impression of ‘normal’ time moving forward. This reinforces rather than abolishes the temporal difference of their experience. In this sense the photographs of the people occupy a similar position to 'The Execution' section of *Clive*. Both are depictions of suffering; both are framed by (indeed the entire medical context is a figure for) a wider social malaise caused by deprivation and inarticulacy; both are affected by temporal disjunction and the felt or stated difficulty in re-placing them in 'time proper'. These photos might be less intense than either the McCullin example or the 'The Execution', but their presence and the discussion which surrounds them illustrates that Sassall is in an intriguingly comparable situation to the reader.

Sassall is represented as the ‘person partially identifying himself with the sufferer’ (123), charged with attempting to correlate this subjective, sufferer’s time with time proper. The reader never sees Sassall's face in these photographs, because we see the suffering people from his perspective. The blurred back of his head, his arm and his shadow are present in the photographs as Mohr stands behind him, photographing from his vantage point. When Sassall

has left the patient and is turning the Land Rover round, preparing to drive off, he may suddenly glimpse out of the corner of his mind’s eye the comparative emptiness of that present moment for him, and this emptiness can terrify. (123)

As doctor, Sassall is able to intervene to a degree in the patient's illness, but here Berger and Mohr represent him as witness to suffering he appears powerless to console. Sassall here is in a structurally comparable position to that of the reader in *Clive*, and as Berger's viewer of McCullin Vietnam photographs. Berger's words are reminiscent of Dyer's about *Clive* and Berger's own about photographs of agony. Crucially, Sassall mediates between us and the anguished in a way that has no comparison amongst *Clive*, *Corker*, or McCullin's photograph. His example

dramatises the attempt to reconcile anguish with a wider narrative which is incapable of assimilating it into its temporal flow, and thus also dramatises the problems faced by those witnessing suffering. In *Clive*, the difficulty of bridging the gap between the articulate space of 'The Execution', in which the anguish is articulated (that anguish which is partly caused by inarticulacy) and the 'normal' remainder of the narrative is not a flaw in the text, but an extremely affecting way of communicating the subjective experience of the anguish. It is also true that *Clive* offers no way beyond this.

Sassall's impatience and passion for knowledge, Berger thinks, is

a passion for constructive experience with which to so fill his time that subjectively it becomes comparable with the 'time' of those in anguish. It is of course an impossible aim: to construct, to relieve, to cure, to understand, to discover with the same intensity per minute as those in anguish are suffering. (123)

Unrealisable aims, Berger continues, possess many people, including artists (123). There are, we are told, two phases of Sassall's career. In the first he sees himself as Conradian hero, the Master Mariner battling the uncontrollable elements, the protagonist of any situation (50). After a period of introspection, Sassall enters his second working life, that of the receptive, sensitive doctor treating the 'total personality' (56) of his patients. Central to this new practice is imagination. Sassall realizes that 'the imagination had to be lived with on every level: his own imagination first – because otherwise this could distort his observation – and then the imagination of his patients.' (52) This 'constant will of a man trying to recognize' (71) defines Sassall's project as creative. Berger even uses the vocabulary and motifs of literature to describe this; Sassall was once the central character. Now the patient is the central character. (71) The patient is 'material'. (74)

Aside from the purely medical side of his work, Sassall only marginally eases the social and cultural problems facing the Foresters. They continue. Nevertheless, the ambivalence of the ending of *Clive* is resolved to some degree in *A Fortunate Man*. If hope glimmers weakly at the end of *Clive*, Sassall's example, pictured one last time striding into the distance to get on with more of the work of his life's project (fig. 14), is the hope with which *A Fortunate Man* ends: the resolve to work

creatively in the face of economic depression, cultural deprivation and the suffering these things cause.



FIGURE 14

Jean Mohr, Untitled photograph from *A Fortunate Man*, 158.

This shifts focus from the community towards the inward struggle of the engaged outsider. If Berger, the novelist of *Clive* and *Corker*, remains hidden as he observes society, by dramatising Sassall's example he shows that the outsider can become part of the community – the creative imagination within their midst, imagining, curing, case by case, as life continues around him, made marginally better. He is offered as an example that, had a similar mediatory figure formed part of *Clive's* structure, even as a self-consciously present narrator (such as emerges as one of the

most characteristic presences in Berger's later work), it would have cured our 'dazedness', helped us 'emerge back into our lives' without 'the discontinuity' Berger felt in front of photographs of agony. This is not because it would have solved the problem, but it would have dramatised it, and offered the reader Sassall's imperfect answer (to work harder, 'to construct, to relieve, to cure, to understand') as an exemplar. The book clearly values the real man it depicts, partially because he answers a narrative difficulty found in Berger's previous two novels.

In this context Sassall is also an important exemplary figure for Berger himself.<sup>18</sup> As de Bolla has noted, Berger's work and life amongst the Savoyard peasantry points to this.<sup>19</sup> We should note that the forest in the UK and mountain in the Alps support communities that are very different from each other, not least because the peasants were declining when Berger began to write about them, and because the Forest of Dean was characterised by its post-industrial, post-coal mining history. Also, far from being inarticulate, the peasants maintained a rich oral cultural heritage. In Berger's account, Sassall represents his patients to themselves – 'he is like a foreigner who has become, by request, the clerk of their records' (91). He is said to provide a mirror whereby they can recognize themselves. This, for Berger and Mohr, is a different, direct and practical way of representing the inarticulate. The process, Berger claims, becomes active for those represented, and reciprocal. It is expressed by Berger in exactly the same terms as the narrator expresses Corker's inarticulacy. Thus Sassall

becomes their objective (as opposed to subjective) memory, because he represents their lost possibility of understanding and relating to the outside world, and because *he also represents some of what they know but cannot think*. (103, my emphasis)

It is also strikingly like the role Berger identifies as a traditional oral storyteller, whom Berger, after Benjamin, identifies as 'The Secretary of Death.'<sup>20</sup> Berger, in his own account, later entered a community in the spirit of the clerk of their records, and thus nascent here are the terms Berger will use to describe his later project. Jean

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<sup>18</sup> Duncan O'Connor also sees the similarity Berger claims for his and Sassall's work, noting that 'Berger emerges as another fortunate figure in the background.' *From Fictions to Stories*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> de Bolla, 83.

<sup>20</sup> John Berger 'The Secretary of Death' in *The Sense of Sight* (New York, Vintage International, 1993), 238-242.

Mohr (collaborator in both places) said that Berger lives amongst the Savoyard as a doctor or a priest.<sup>21</sup> These ideas are often repeated, partly because they are Berger's own account. They may or may not be true, and rely heavily on claims that exist other than on the page. What we can say of the text itself is that *A Fortunate Man* sharpens the conclusion that Berger's work finds writing (or in Sassall's case a slightly expanded idea of creative work) to be the answer he represents in the face of all manner of insurmountable historical forces.

Andy Merrifield, in his chapter 'G. and un-G.' is the latest to have suggested that Berger needed to dismantle his modernist aesthetic, which had reached its apotheosis with *G.* in order to move forward, and that this is why he takes up with the peasants.<sup>22</sup> Merrifield writes, "To un-G himself, then, Berger had to change clothes, had to put away his loafers and don peasant boots, Van Gogh's boots. He had to learn not how to travel further, as *G.* desired, but how to go lower: he had, in short, to learn how to wallow in pig earth."<sup>23</sup> It is tempting to tell this linear story about Berger's career, but *A Fortunate Man* is a Janus-faced text that looks both back towards Berger's attempts at representing inarticulacy and forward into many later texts. It helps us to comprehend that the marked and apparently abrupt change from *G.* to *Pig Earth* misrepresents the shape of Berger's oeuvre. It helps us see that the strands of Berger's concerns and aesthetics coil around each other, different aspects forward-facing depending on the project and the moment.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Telling Eye*, dir. Michael Dibb, 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Merrifield, 65-66.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

'Birds like Letters Fly Away': *G*.

## 1

*G*—

'There is probably no novel of comparable length in which the principal protagonist speaks so few lines', suggests Geoff Dyer, getting right to the (hollow) centre of *G*.<sup>1</sup> *G*. the character is cipher-like in two related senses - on one hand, he is as blank as the white shirt he is wearing as he dies; on the other hand, he reads as a cryptogram, as a puzzle to be solved. Throughout, *G*.s personality and significance remains in danger of sliding with him beneath the 'granular surface' (316) of the Adriatic,<sup>2</sup> the glittering veneer of which brings to mind Fredric Jameson's later description of the surface of an Andy Warhol painting ('the spangling of gilt sand').<sup>3</sup> This final figure of the sea - deep, but with a 'continually agitated' mirror-like surface hiding its depth - serves as an opening proposition for thinking about the novel and its central character. The name '*G*.', which replaces 'the boy' a third of the way through the novel for 'the sake of convenience' (127) is indicative; what should we make of '*G*.'

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<sup>1</sup> Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 89.

<sup>2</sup> John Berger, *G*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), 3. All subsequent references will be to this edition and made in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' in *New Left Review* 146, July-August 1984, 61.

as a name for a novel or character? Reading it as a sign of the novel's postmodern sympathies, Pamela McCallum suggests G.'s 'cryptic...anonymity frustrates any free and easy access to the "real" or "external" referent.'<sup>4</sup> The full stop after the capital 'G' indicates an abbreviation, first or last name we do not know, but along the way the text gives us many alternatives for what the initial might stand in for: G-iovanni, G-iolitti, G-aribaldi, G-eo, G-avrilo, G-abriete. Critics have argued that these are examples of the kind of historical figure G., in different circumstances, may have become.<sup>5</sup> G. has a positive identity, of sorts - the constant stranger - and when Marika asks 'who are you really?' he answers 'Don Juan' (264). But he is never granted a full name, or a full presence in the text. The two meanings of 'cipher' denote near-absence and abundance, suggesting the two depictions on the title pages of the first edition of the novel (figs. 15 and 16).<sup>6</sup>

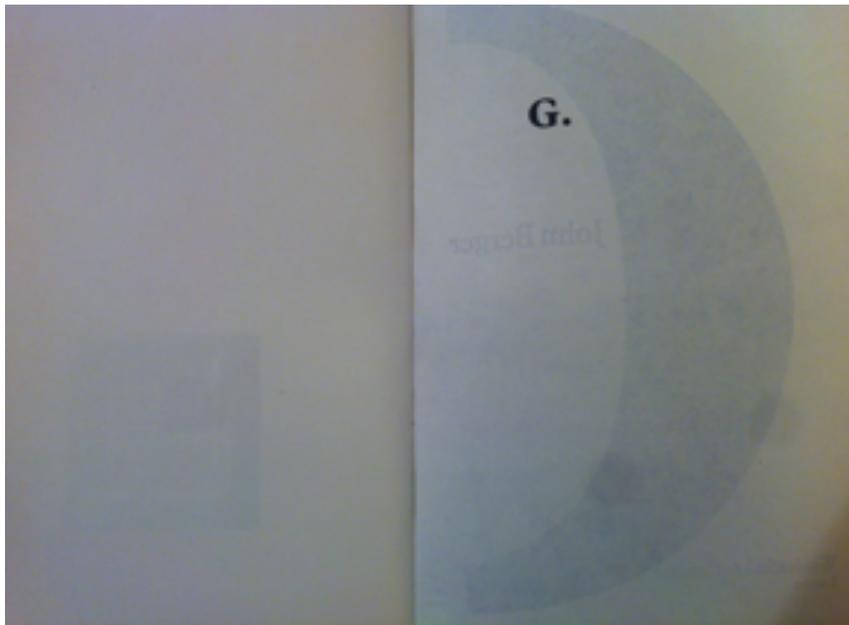


FIGURE 15

The first of two title pages of the first edition of *G.* published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> Pamela McCallum. 'Postmodernist Aesthetics and the Historical Novel: John Berger's *G.*' in *Minnesota Review*, No. 28, Spring 1987 (New Series), 68.

<sup>5</sup> For example: 'Known only by the single letter "G," Berger's protagonist functions as a nexus of historical potentialities, of possible pasts, presents, and futures. G's mother "wants with her baby to start an alternative world, to propose from his new-born life a new way of living"' writes Andrzej Gasiorek, 'Postmodernisms of English Fiction' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel*, ed. Robert L. Caserio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24.

<sup>6</sup> These two pages are consecutive. The huge curve of black ink on the verso of the second spread is visible through the paper on the recto of the first.

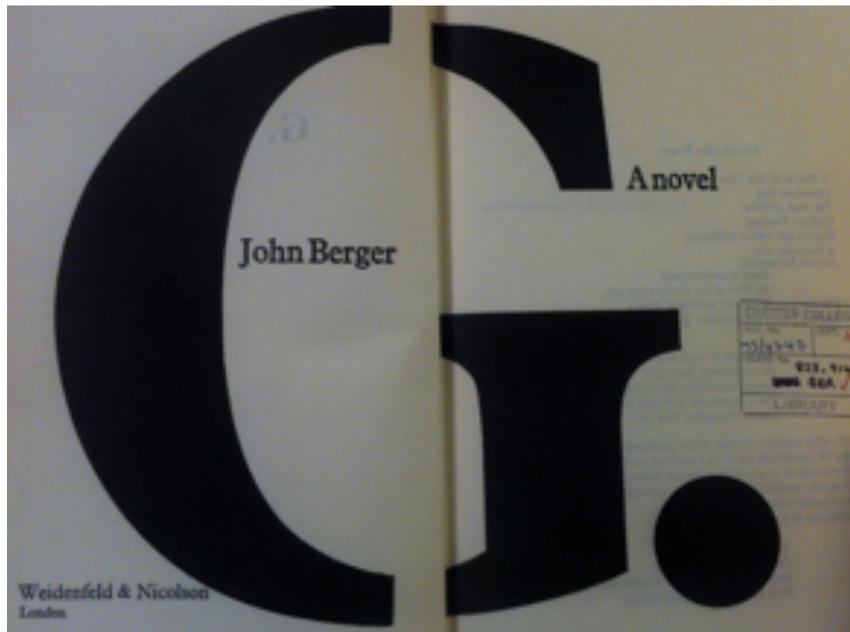


FIGURE 16

The second of two title pages of the first edition of *G.* published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972.

The novel derives its name from that of its protagonist, and so the naming of the text is also at stake. The novel's title confers a sense of deferred meaning (a kind of promise), a sense of half-formedness, along with a frustrated expectation that the full name will finally replace its abbreviated form. There is a simultaneous allusion to and denial of the grand tradition of novels named for their heroes (*Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, *Tom Jones*, et cetera) and a nod to the oppressive, unexplained world of Franz Kafka's *K.*. The name is never completed, and so is uncompletable. It will remain enigmatic; we will be forced to read it as partly configured by an invisible, acknowledged, blank, and this in a novel of self-aware typography in which unusually large expanses of blank space surround islands of text. It is a name of flights of fancy and suspensions, gesturing beyond itself in a number of directions, but also refusing such movement.

From the title onwards, I experience two opposing responses to reading *G.*: the text consistently brings me up short, but also points beyond itself, something like *G.* in boyhood, allowing himself to roll down the bracken-covered hill, 'each turn...like a door opening and shutting' (49). Critics have understandably used the intertextuality of *G.* as a cue, expanding on the text's allusions and resemblances. We can approach *G.* through many different lives and works; it is a text that insists upon its interdependence and interrelatedness to other texts and contexts. A brief

list: Picasso, the philandering genius, cast as such by Berger's monograph *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, published a year before work on *G.* began; cubism more generally, as a guiding aesthetic principle for the novel's prismatic narrative; Johannes's 'aesthetic', anti-social seductions found in the 'Diary of the Seducer' in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*; the Don Juan myth, or specifically Mozart's rendering of it in *Don Giovanni*;<sup>7</sup> Caravaggio (for Berger, 'the exceptional and profound painter of sexual desire'); Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, cited as an antecedent on the first edition blurb for *G.*; Berger's own time in Livorno in the 1940s; the films of Jean-Luc Godard; Italian political figures Giolitti and Garibaldi; Lukács on the realist novel; Marx; James Joyce, writing *Ulysses* in Trieste as the Italians declare war; Kafka's *K.*, Hegel, Brecht, Levi-Strauss and on and on, seemingly endlessly.

*G.*'s story, such as it is, is told episodically, in a variety of tenses, and is interspersed with temporally and geographically remote narratives, as well as the narrator's metanarrative remarks, personal anecdotes and dreams.<sup>8</sup> This creates an approximation of cubist collage, passed from the image to prose ('never again,' the narrator declares, 'will a single story be told as though it were the only one' [133]); the most literal aspect of which is the embedding of a genuine report from the *Corriere della Sera* of 23 September 1910, ('A profound emotion nails us to the spot. We do not move. We are lifeless, our souls shining in our eyes, and our hearts beating fast...' (137)), as the novelistic equivalent to the genuine newspaper clippings in images like the Braque below (fig. 17).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In its first draft, the work was to be called *The Book of Leporello*. In Berger's own note, 'Leporello in Mozart's opera is DG's servant, valet and abetter. He keeps a list (or book) of DG's conquests throughout Europe.' John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/12.

<sup>8</sup> 'The book is a mixture of history, story-telling and the microscopic poetic evocation of quite specific experience' is Berger's own description. John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/12.

<sup>9</sup> *G.*'s relationship with cubism is perhaps the single most critically discussed aspect of Berger's entire oeuvre. See Geoff Dyer's reading of the novel in *Ways of Telling*, 83-85; Andrzej Gasiorek's chapter on Berger in 'A crisis of metanarratives: realism and innovation in the contemporary English novel.' Unpublished doctoral dissertation, McGill University, (1990); David E. James, 'Cubism as Revolutionary Realism: John Berger and *G.*' in *Minnesota Review*, Number 21, Fall 1983 (New Series), 92-96; Rochelle Simmons, 'John Berger's *G.* as a Cubist Novel' Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, (1994), and Dirk Wiemann, 'Cubism as Intersectionalism: John Berger's Figures of Masculinity' in Horlacher, Stefan (ed. and introd.), Floyd, Kevin (ed.), *Post-World War II Masculinities in British and American Literature and Culture: Towards Comparative Masculinity Studies*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, 113-127.

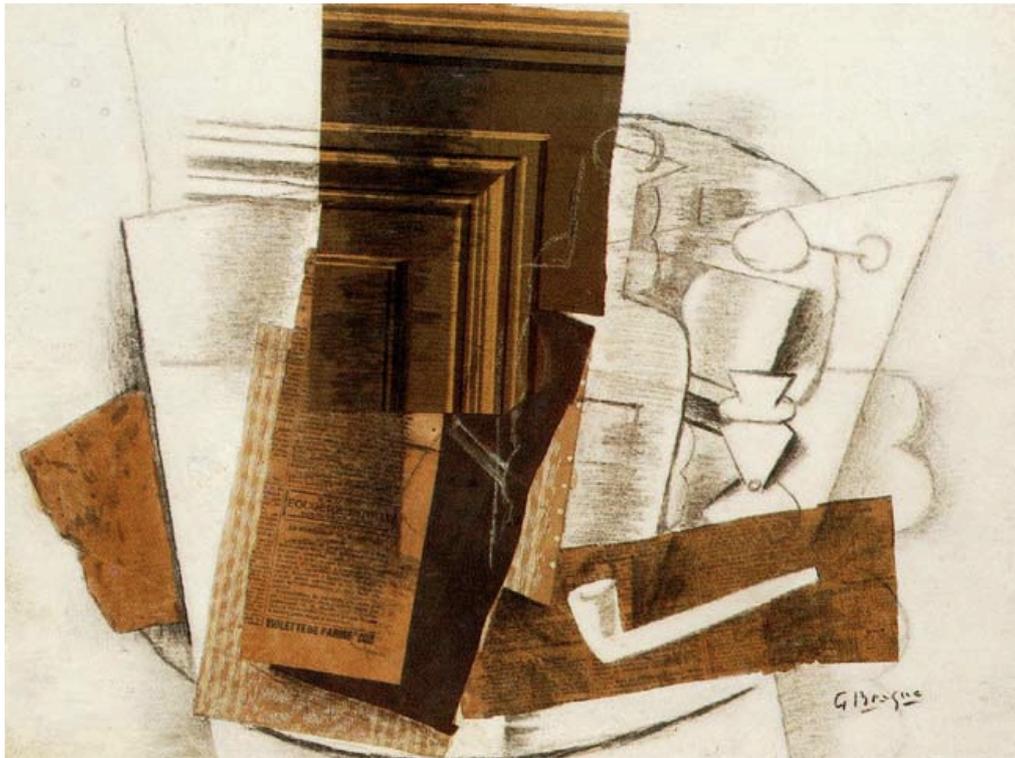


FIGURE 17

Georges Braque, *Bottle, Pipe, Newspaper and Glass* (1913). Private collection.

Yet it is also a novel that openly resists, or limits the importance, of such allusions - partly through the sheer number of them. Clearly, a reading that fails to mention these intersections with other texts will distort the book unrecognisably: *G.* is an allusive journey through fin de siècle and pre-war Europe, and beyond. But neither can any one or combination of these allusions act as a key to unlock the novel, as if it were a cypher itself.

At the same time *G.* also shows a modernist suspicion of language's ability to communicate both certain aspects of experience or the uniqueness of the particular ('I do not wish to become a prisoner of the nominal, believing that things are what I name them' (137) states the narrator) and a suspicion of the causal plot of the nineteenth-century realist novel as a way to represent human experience. *G.* exhibits its resistance to representation through the contingent, unique and specific, particularly the sexual encounter. The quality of *G.*'s gaze and the skill of his seduction make women believe, according to the narrator, that he is seeing them

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purely, as it were, not a priori *as* something other than their private, secret selves.<sup>10</sup> There is a tension here: the escape G. and his partners find on a bed often prompts the narrative into self-awareness about its own limits, manifested as essays and drawings about representing the sexual act. Yet the novel also exploits the gap between words and meaning as a freedom (beginning with G.'s name), and as lovers converge, we will often discover examples of the inaudibility of speech or the illegibility of writing, as the instability of the material signs echoes the inability of language to transmit stable meaning. Very little is grounded in this text; the narrator's eye will never settle, and the world experienced by characters is also a shifting base. For G., on a foggy morning, the company of a dog 'changes his sense of distance' (46); the moments before the thunderstorm in Milan produces a 'strange sensation of a distorted, inconsistent size-scale' (62); Livorno, for Umberto, is a mad city, in 'its shifting population, in the blankness of its walls, in the indeterminacy of its spaces ' (9); when G. is walking with Camille the near-horizontal light means 'every surface is more than usually vivid, but in the forest everything loses something of its substantiality' (175). Such sensations pervade not just the novel's environments, but also our experience of the text itself, with its refusal to ask us to suspend our disbelief, its restrained, brooding intelligence, its near-silent and unlikeable protagonist.

I wish here to emphasise the moments in which the text proves resistant, or suspended, and to use these moments to emphasise a different set of connections: contiguous associations that bind the text together as a whole, but exceed such structuring, refuse a finally privileged and resolving figure, and resist any single interpretative conclusion. These associations, forming a strange but extraordinarily rich metonymic and metaphoric chain, include blankness, suspension, whiteness; the acts of revolving, flight and dance; the limits of representation as both anxiety and freedom; and sexual intercourse. It is these associations and their interrelations that this reading of *G.* will try to map.

Another absence hovers. In 'The Moment of Cubism', published in 1969, when Berger had already begun to work on what was to become *G.* but was called, for the moment, *The Book of Leporello*, he quotes part of Guillaume Apollinaire's poem 'Zone' (1913):

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<sup>10</sup> A discussion of the problems with G.'s gaze is deferred until the following chapter.

Christ pupil of the eye  
Twentieth pupil of the centuries knows how  
This century changed into a bird ascends like Jesus  
Devils in pits raise their heads to watch it  
They say it's imitating Simon Magus of Judea  
If it can fly, we'll call it the fly one  
Angels swing past its trapeze  
Icarus Enoch Elias Apollonius of Tyana  
Hover round the first aeroplane  
Dispersing at ties to let through the priests  
As they bear the Holy Eucharist  
Forever ascending and raising the host<sup>11</sup>

For Berger, in his sweep of modernity at the beginning of the essay, this poem symbolises 'the process of secularisation' completed. 'Man was able to extend *himself* indefinitely beyond the immediate: he took over the territory in space and time where God had been presumed to exist.'<sup>12</sup> Apollinaire's angels and devils are not credible presences; instead modernity advances into the space they have vacated. Apollinaire figures this movement as flight - the Twentieth Century is a bird and named 'the fly one'. Angels must share space with aeroplanes. In Berger's description of pre-war Europe's vision of itself, humankind flies into the void left by God. For Berger, briefly, until WW1, for the moment of cubism, which is also the moment of *G.*, the whole century was flying.<sup>13</sup>

## 2

Next day, Chavez' last words, whose meaning cannot be interpreted, were: *Non, non, je ne meurs pas...meurs pas* (209).

Both writing and death lie down in the bed.

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<sup>11</sup> John Berger, 'The Moment of Cubism' *Selected Essays*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-5.

<sup>13</sup> Geoff Dyer has observed that the dates of *G.*'s adult life correspond to those of cubism. Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 84.

There are a linked set of moments in which *G.* makes a gesture of closure and marks a dead end. Chavez's words on his deathbed ('No, no, I'm not dying...not dying') 'cannot be interpreted' (209), states the occasionally pushy narrator. The syntax and context of Chavez's words allow for two very different meanings: Chavez (mistakenly) announces his recovery; Chavez announces his death, but also that his achievements will immortalize him. The words are not uninterpretable, as such, but we cannot make his words mean a single thing. In part this is because of the incapacity of the speaker, whose body stiffens on its hospital bed - but then from a Derridean perspective the absence of the speaker as authenticating source of meaning can be thought of as a feature of language generally, and thus all words are last words.<sup>15</sup> The narrator also doesn't claim to know what Chavez is thinking and so this moment, enacted between the narrator and the dead Chavez, dramatises the limits of the narrator's knowledge. It is one of a number of such moments in which meaning is interrupted or suspended.<sup>16</sup> Geo Chavez is a real historical figure, one whose last words were variously reported as the sentence Berger uses, and more famously, 'Higher. Always higher,' the phrase which became Chavez's posthumous 'motto' and was adopted by the Peruvian Air Force.<sup>17</sup> It seems unlikely that Berger's obviously extensive research into Chavez produced only the less well known of these alternatives, so it seems he choose between the two. Berger might have been considering historical veracity, but notwithstanding the myth-making sound of 'Higher. Always higher', Berger chooses the phrase which refuses to resolve itself - a move the novel as a whole is concerned with.

The episode is also an isolated reminder in *G.* that people die in beds as well as fuck on them. After crossing the Alps in his Blériot XI monoplane, Chavez feels that his body is still trapped inside the Gondo and his 'agony of mind' on the hospital bed stems from the inexplicable invasion of his body by the mountains. He

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<sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 119.

<sup>15</sup> See Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 42-64.

<sup>16</sup> I am not the first to notice this: 'Berger's continual acknowledgement of the inadequacy of words is not a mystification or a blurring of the novel's precision. It is, on the contrary, part of a persistent cleansing of the doors of perception, so that the dialectical intricacy of contingent experience is left unobscured by the various kinds of false consciousness which are transmitted through language' writes Raman Selden in 'Commitment and Dialectic in Novels by David Cate and John Berger' in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, (11:2), 1975, 118-19.

<sup>17</sup> 'Arriba. Más arriba.' See Henry Serrano Villard, *Contact: The Story of the Early Aviators* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 101.

expected that his act of courage and the engineering triumph would unite God, nature and Man; instead a treacherous alliance has been formed between his body and the implacably terrible mountains (209). We can read this as the sublime winning out over rationality and technology, and a particularly modern faith suffering a local defeat. Chavez notices whilst in flight that the peaks he has just crossed are not markable: 'no stain would remain on the white of the mountains' (138). Furthermore, he 'can no longer distinguish between rock and silence' (139). It is impossible to write on the mountains, even by crashing into them; they are both mute or muting and un-inscribable. Chavez is a 'pioneer' aviator and modernist hero, attempting to 'open a *new chapter*' (129, my emphasis). But the flight has gone beyond his understanding at the moment he comprehends it to be beyond writing or speech.

Flight is an important feature in the novel, and in which many characters and birds (Weymann calls the group of pilots 'early-birds' (129)) are considered in various types of air-travel. Among these, Chavez's flight is in some ways unique. It is the only one to come with prize money, to represent progress, modernity, and human achievement. It grips the public imagination for these reasons, and it is news - its development is followed by crowds of reporters attempting to sate the huge interest in aviation in the short period before it became both commonplace and tainted by militarisation. It is the only flight in the book that attempts to describe, more or less, a straight line. If those are the features that set it apart, it also has things in common with other representations of flight in the novel. It is a wild exploit in the eyes of the bourgeois men who hypothesise about it from the comfort of Monsieur Hennequin's drawing room, and who use the word 'exploit' with 'unconscious condescension, the result of jealousy' (157). Its ending, the crash, is the flight's most private aspect. As G. states, 'hundreds of people witnessed it, yet nobody can describe what he saw. Why? Because it was too unexpected. The unexpected is often indescribable' (159). The unexpected induces a kind of temporary blindness, like being dazzled. Witnesses are rendered temporarily mute. G. and G. find this kind of event particularly significant, and making reference to it in the drawing room is part of G.'s seduction of Camille. The uncertain privacy of Chavez's crash is partially ended by the fact of his death days later, which precipitates the spectacle of his funeral, speeches by officials, and the sense that history is once more being made and documented in a proper fashion. Yet here too

there is uncertainty: the engine driver sounds the whistle for so long that 'it drove out every thought' (218). It is a sound intended as a sign, which fails through misjudgement, poor design or without explanation: it is a sound with 'no echo, no resonance, no meaning' (218). The funeral and the entire section of the novel ends with Chavez's grandmother banging her stick on the platform in a gesture that could either express anger or grief - which, it is 'impossible to know' (218). Both these moments of ambiguity at the funeral amplify Chavez's last words. There follows, in keeping with the novel's typographic design, almost three pages-worth of near-blank space before the beginning of the next section - the significance of which we will return to.

Chavez headed towards a brave future, objectified by a hundred reporters, and flew (uniquely in the book) 'straighter than a bird' (141). When he hits the ground suspensions of meaning become part of the drama - defying grounding, as it were - though they may have caused the crash, if Chavez's state of mind is to be blamed for it. Chavez's crash and death are thus portrayed as more closely allied to the other types of flight in *G.*, by dancers, lovers and birds - flights from, not towards, history and social and public life. These flights are often circular and have little external, objective reality. They are *G.*'s kind of flights - we have already learnt that, to Weymann's utter incomprehension, he has no interest in learning to fly planes (128).

### 3

#### *Miss Helen, flying*

Aside from Chavez's state-of-the-art Blériot, the flights of other characters are domestic in scale and utilise more modest technology (a piano stool, two ladders, a pair of hands, a fairground ride and a dream). The first occurs during *G.*'s attempted seduction, aged five, of his governess. Miss Helen 'sits down on the round piano stool that can twirl like a roundabout' (37). *G.* grasps her hips from behind and turns her, and 'she *lifts her feet off the ground* so that her shoes disappear beneath her skirt. Slowly she revolves' (37, my emphasis). 'What would your uncle say if he could see us now?' (37), she says as she puts her feet down, confirming her complicity in

this imprudent behaviour, which must remain secret. When she then sings G. does not listen to the words (which he can discount because they are so familiar to him) and so 'he hears her singing her song in the same sense as a bird sings its song.' (38) It is not the only time G. will listen to singing without understanding it, because he stands next to the Roman girl as she sings a song in Italian during the Milan riots. Miss Helen's association with the bird also underlines that a flight that has just taken place, and is one of several similar associations that will cluster around the female characters of the book: Laura and the sparrow (*passeretta*), Beatrice with the wasp, Camille with the corncrake and cicada, Nuša with the swan and butterfly.

Miss Helen's flight is immediately preceded by G. listening to the sounds of the conversation of his aunt and uncle. He is unable to pick out the words, but will later realise that the 'cadence of their two voices is like that of a couple talking in bed' (34). G. listens to

the manner in which the male voice and the feminine voice overlap, provoke and receive each other, the two complementary substances of their voices, as distinct from one another as metal and stone, or as wood and leather, yet combining by rubbing together or chipping or scraping to make the noise of their dialogue - this is more eloquent than precise overheard words could ever be. (34)

The voices in their indistinctness become like objects - metal, stone, wood, leather - and also agents, separate from both the speakers and the words spoken. The verbs used to describe this indistinct speech have sexual connotations - provoke, overlap, receive, rubbing together. As their significance as signs are lost, the voices become lovers themselves, and gain a different, more precise eloquence as a result.

When Miss Helen appears to be distracted, G.'s strategy is to make a mistake as he reads to her. Sometimes the mistakes are not intentional (35), and it is left unclear which applies to the quoted mistake G. makes - '...all thrush summer the birds were singing' (35), but it provokes Miss Helen to get up and check the book, and the incongruity and aptness of the error, made in the journey from the written to the spoken, makes her laugh. G. also laughs, and 'throws his head back against her dress' (36), a gesture that Leonie echoes twice, two decades later, firstly at the moment of orgasm, when her 'head is thrown back like a singer's singing'

(141), and then she slowly says a word that G. does not decipher (142). The second time is at the end of her encounter with G., when she tries to make a gesture expressing all that has happened and that she is feeling, and she presses his head against her stomach, 'with her own head thrown back' (146), repeating his name. G. seduces Leonie as she sees Chavez's plane 'flying overhead like a bird' (131). When she enters G.'s hotel room 'he lifted her up. Her feet left the ground' (134), enacting her own flight. Apropos of nothing, but testifying to the novel's structuring repetitions, the narrator also sees the gesture of a head thrown back, in an image on St. Veronica's veil, 'with her head thrown back and her eyes shut' (80) superimposed over Christ. On the same page a female pigeon repeats the gesture once more as part of a mating ritual as she and the male circle each other (80). Early in the text, Laura, sparrow-like in Umberto's arms, makes this gesture in bed (9). It is a gesture of ecstasy and solipsistic independence from the world, and links moments in the book concerned with flying and freedom from coherent or stable language.

Like her many counterpoints Miss Helen flies, but she also revolves, aligning the scene to the later moment when G. asks a calculating question of Hennequin (within Camille's earshot) about revolving fairground swings. The swing lifts its riders off the ground whilst suspended on chains, and two people, if they join together as a pair, fly higher (166). 'Everyone who rides on this kind of roundabout is transformed' (166) G. says, and (this image once more) 'they throw back their heads' (166). The riders also become childlike:

When it stops most of them [the riders] revert to their old selves. As soon as their feet touch the ground, their expressions again become suspicious or closed or resigned. And when they walk away from the roundabout, it is almost impossible to believe that they are the same beings, men and women, who a moment ago were so free and abandoned in the air. (166)

The image is perhaps the clearest expression of what G. is offering to the women he sleeps with and the clearest association of flight with the sexual act. The flight is from normal life, time and adulthood, a circular suspension that will deliver both participants back to where they began.

Circles themselves, as well as acts of revolving, are widely dispersed throughout the first half of the novel, and not always positively. Beatrice validates

Jocelyn's incestuous hold over her, we are told, which confirms the 'strangely circular nature of their moods and intimacy'. (95) It is 'this circle' (95) that Captain Bierce (described as 'straight-speaking' [95, my emphasis]) steps into, briefly and disastrously; it is also this circle that the fifteen-year-old G. unwittingly helps to break when he is seduced by his aunt. There is the round clock face, which in an early semi-aware attempt to resist the tyranny of linear time, G. wishes to smash (45) and much later the winding sheet that the Patriotic Penelopes have associated their widowed selves with, not comprehending its blackly appropriate significance (239). The circle is the novel's most important shape, and multiple senses of encircling and circles occur. Circles in the text mark off, enclose, free and entrap. Revolutionary motion, both in the sense of describing a full circle and political overhaul are aligned punningly and often appear in close proximity to each other. The precise relationship between the two is a question the novel seems to be continually posing. And there is the strange ○ symbol breaking sections of text, scattering dozens of circles throughout the book's pages.

Circles and revolutions take us into strange territory. They bracket the 'TWO MEN' section. G.'s dog circles him in the moments before the mysterious men kill the horses (46), and afterwards G. trips and rolls head over heels down the bracken slope. After this he chooses other occasions to roll deliberately down it, prompting warnings from the cook that he will break his neck (50). The killing of the horses is extraordinarily strange. It is the telling of a dream Berger felt 'compelled to put it in the novel' without understanding its meaning.<sup>18</sup> It initially mystifies the narrator as well, if we are to believe him. He states, over two hundred pages later (272), that only in juxtaposition with the moment in which G. leaves the home of Marika and Wolfgang Von Hartmann does the narrator understand 'TWO MEN', which he retrospectively reads as a prophecy. G.'s hatred for Von Hartmann has provoked a flashback to the smell of paraffin on the man's bloody hand. The conjoining of these two moments happens close to G.'s death; he and Nuša will be *horsewhipped* outside the Stadttheater (296, my emphasis) and then he is killed, like the horses, with a blow to the head.<sup>19</sup> G. begins the episode with the horses with a

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<sup>18</sup> So Berger states in an interview with Adam Hothschild, 'Another Way of Seeing' in *Mother Jones* 6 (Number 10) December 1981, 48.

<sup>19</sup> There are glimmers of Freud in early Berger, and a Freudian reading of 'TWO MEN' has rewards. G.'s two paternal figures in the novel, Umberto and Jocelyn, are both closely associated with horses. Umberto possesses a grey mane and massive head (13), and all of Jocelyn's values are derived from his riding and companionship with horses (33). Horses are symbols for the father-figure in the Freud

conversation between the child and adult in himself, which ends 'he is a child and walks through the woods like a child' (46). The men speak to G. as to a child (47), but then after the deaths of the horses, it is G. who realises he is talking to the killer as if addressing a child (48), and that the first words he is speaking in this reversal of positions between the man and the boy is a lie (that he has seen the killing). Even as it is happening G. is questioning its potential to be explained. 'Will it turn out to be an incident that his uncle or his tutor will explain to him? Or is it already beyond their power to explain?' (47), he asks. A few pages later when he meets Umberto and Laura in Milan before the riots he experiences a similar feeling of being older than the adults he is with:

The boy senses that the three of them have met too late; he is no longer the child who can receive what each of them, independently, wishes to give, and what he might once have welcomed. In the history of his own life he is older than they: about the history of his own life their innocence makes them like two children. (61)

The two men's faces remind him of a wardrobe in the room where the dairymaids sleep (47), and the final image is of hosing down the dairy (49). His tripping and rolling downhill is a flight of sorts, the moment of his childhood ending and adulthood beginning, the revolving nature of the action suggesting the process is not closed or linear. The episode is also a moment of political awareness, with the poverty of the poachers juxtaposed with the fact of magistrates never going hungry (46). Here the chain of metonymic associations - death, sex, childhood, milk, horse, revolving - of which 'TWO MEN' is a particularly rich contribution, intensifies, and asks us to think through its relationship to the flight's of G.'s seductions and the disruptions of language that hover at their margins. TWO MEN is also perhaps a kind of suspension; its meaning is suspended for the narrator, he tells us, until the

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case study known as 'Little Hans' (1909). Unconnected until 'TWO MEN', Umberto and Jocelyn are here brought together: poachers are Jocelyn's 'equivalent' to Umberto's city mob (46), dangerously transgressive figures. If Beatrice replaces Laura as a mother-figure for G. (she later becomes a genuine sexual partner, in effect a replacement for herself), then Jocelyn as well as Umberto is a sexual rival in the Oedipal sense. Some of G.'s other partners are described maternally: part of the preconditions of his love for Miss Helen, the narrator explains, is the absence of his mother (36). Leonie holds G. to her because she wants him to know 'that she loved him like her own child' (146) and Camille finds 'each physical characteristic eloquent of an aspect of his [G.'s] nature, as a mother may find the characteristics of her infant before it can talk or sit up' (193). The code name for the mysterious person that G. passes a present to in Trieste is also 'Mother' (244). Among other things G.'s philandering is obliquely framed as an unfulfilled search for his mother.

final pages of the novel, and perhaps beyond this for the reader. G. wonders whether the deaths of the horses will be explicable to paternal authority (47), a thought that is sandwiched between childhood and adulthood. The scene ends with G. rolling by choice down the hill, which he thereafter frequently repeats. It is an action that refers to the encounter with the two men by repeating its final moment, as if all that it signifies is contained, explained or recreated within that one revolving motion.

### *Beatrice*

The events that lead Beatrice to seduce G. begin whilst she is off the ground - three rungs up a rotten ladder and being stung by a wasp (92).<sup>20</sup> The wasp leads Beatrice directly to her sexual encounter with G., despite the fact that the next day, before she leads him to her bed, the sting is nothing more than 'a pink *circle*' (105, my emphasis). Beatrice is also described as a bird before she seduces G.: bondage-loving Captain Bierce, 'made tender and menacing by drink' addresses her as 'my dove' (97) before tying her up. It is unique in the text - the sexual act as a restriction of flight - and also one in which language is evoked as contractual and domineering: "'Try to slip out, Beatrice, I must tighten the bindings. Speak to me, Beatrice. Declare your allegiance.'" (98). The representation of bad sex, as the novel, and Beatrice, see it, which reinforces patriarchal dominance and female submission, here finds the flying figures reversed.

Just before Beatrice's seduction, a poem appears in the text:

#### A POEM FOR BEATRICE

Continually mists change my size

Only territories on a map are measured

The sounds I make are elsewhere

I am enveloped in the astonishing silence of my breasts

I plait my hair into sentences

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<sup>20</sup> Winged insects make several appearances. Monsieur Hennequin appears to have caught a butterfly whilst walking with the party in the woods, an occurrence resonant with the control he wields, or attempts to wield, over his wife's liberty (181). In actual fact, it has been a joke, and he has nothing in his hands, but it is a sinister and resonant gesture nevertheless. There are others: G. decides to equate Camille with a cicada as well as a corncrake. When Nuša finds G. in the park, and they are bartering for G.'s passport, 'one butterfly follows another making loops in the air near her wide feet in their laced boots' (278).

Never let loose  
I walk where I wish  
My cuffs admit my wrists alone  
Break  
Break the astonishing silence of my breasts. (101)

The poem is 'For' Beatrice, not authored by her, and speaks with a female voice. Its rhythm is slow and halting, comprising a series of declarative statements and commands, unpunctuated and (with the one exception of lines 5 and 6) discretely fitting the line. This style is fitting with what we know of Beatrice: she is introduced as a character whose movements are 'curiously emphatic' (30). The statements, 'my cuffs admit my wrists alone', for example, read like the aphoristic results of thinking carried out previously and elsewhere. The lines do not explicitly cohere, creating jarring gaps as one after another we confront the near non-sequiturs. The phrase in line 4 ('the astonishing silence of my breasts') repeated in line 10 as part of a command, does, however, infer that some kind of oblique reasoning moves through the poem. Obliqueness is part of the poem's work: it is struggling to both say what it wants to and also make sense, as if the two things were hard to achieve together. The body is presented as indeterminate and unfixed, changing like the mist, neither navigable nor definite. It also takes from 'mist' the sense of being temporarily concealed. It is a place of silence. The speaker does make sounds, but they 'are elsewhere', somewhere away from the poem's location in the mute body. The hair, which is emanating from but still attached to the body, is the material from which some kind of language is 'plaited into sentences', in a striking figure which suggests restriction, intricacy and silence once more ('never let loose') as words are twisted together and remain inaccessibly close to and part of the body. The repeated phrase 'the astonishing silence of my breasts' may be a condensing of something like 'the astonished silence of the boy at my (astonishing) breasts', with the boy's imagined awed silence in front of her nakedness transferred by the speaker onto her own body. It presents the body, just before the sexual encounter, as a silent and silencing place. The final line is also a command to another, presumably G., to end the silence, to have sex with her. This is not a question of G. saying anything; as the narrator will state later on, 'to fuck is like naming what has happened in the only language adequate to expressing it' (161).

Afterwards, G. and Beatrice lie damply next to each other. G. sees a look in Beatrice's eyes

for which the Roman girl's prepared him four years ago. Behind such a look is a total confidence that at that moment to express something - without thought, without words, but simply through one's own uncontrollable eyes - is to be instantaneously understood. (114)

It is an expression which achieves, we are told, pure communication: a state where being and expression are indivisible, communication originates in the eyes not the mouth, is pre-verbal and total. This kind of communication and the freedom it expresses is prized highly by G., and by the novel also. It is also explicitly a freedom from time - 'the clocks keep another' (115), we are told - and from sex as an expression of male mastery, in which the look in Beatrice's eyes should transform 'into one which is purely grateful' (114). It also, of course, binds together sex and revolution (through the Milan riots) in G.'s mind, as does Miss Helen's singing. It is followed by another physical, punning revolution, the foreskin peeling like 'the petals of a cyclamen revolving' (115) as G. becomes aroused again. The sex precipitates a short reflective essay on methods of writing about sex, just as the Milan riots precipitate breaking into the scene to bemoan the false closure narrative gives the described event: in both cases the problem is the same: language, by its very nature, conceptualises and generalises. Sex, the narrator argues, is about specificity and contingency, as is revolution. Thus the only poem to be written about sex is 'here, here, here, here - now' (111), though this doesn't stop the narrator writing poems.

'POEM FOR BEATRICE' is one of two poems which bookend the description of their encounter and the metanarrative essay it prompts. The second forms the last words of Part 2 of the novel:

POEM FOR HIM.

éblouir to dazzle

like silk

her body is borderless

its centre a mouth of earth

liquid throat  
(o nightingales of 19th century verse)  
passage of unprotected being  
cul de sac

to have reached there  
to dazzle the earth  
éblouir (117)

This poem, more formally and typographically intriguing than its partner, is split into three stanzas, and has a certain circularity, beginning and ending with the same word. It begins with what appears to be an act of translation from French into English: 'éblouir to dazzle', and a missing punctuation mark - a colon or dash or comma - would make the sense clearer. The rest of the poem is an elaboration of this translation, within the context of G.'s first sexual encounter, marked by the final line being the single word 'éblouir' repeated, as if settled, or resettled in its meaning. The opening of the vagina is recast as a 'mouth of earth' and a destination (the idea will recur on page 205), its inside a 'liquid throat'. The address to 'nightingales of 19<sup>th</sup> century verse' reinforces the sense that this is often a place of voice, of song. Yet to dazzle is to render temporarily blind. Here it seems that the earth is being dazzled into silence. There are echoes in the rest of the text: Chavez's crash dazzles the crowd with its unexpectedness; the final image of the glittering sea obscures what we would see below its surface.<sup>21</sup> G., at the moment he loses his virginity, is dazzled into silence. Both poems focus on the female body, and are about being penetrated and penetrating, respectively, although they eschew such words and the register from which they derive. The female body is the location of the two poems, and in both the indeterminate size or form of that body is described with contiguous terms (maps, territories, borders). In the second a journey is described, but again the sense of conquest is absent; there is no subject in 'Poem for Him', which is often replaced with the 'to' infinitive, in contrast to the proliferation of first-person pronouns in 'Poem for Beatrice' (eleven in the ten lines). The lines

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<sup>21</sup> According to Berger's notes, G.'s death connects 'with éblouir poem (finally it is the surface of the sea which dazzles.)' John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/15.

'liquid throat/ (oh nightingales of 19th century verse)' bring to mind the 'full-throated' nightingale in Keat's ode, and also its source - Ovid's tongueless Philomela metamorphed into the songbird, finding (non-verbal) voice. Berger's own poems in *G.* are particularly condensed expressions of some of the themes of the text, and read as more compressed and intense versions of his prose at its most figurative. *G.* and 'The Moment of Cubism' indicate that Berger was reading modern French poetry during the period he was writing *G.*, and it is a French poet that Berger deploys to reinforce the sets of associations that we have been describing.

#### 4

Si tu veux nous nous aimerons  
 Avec tes levres sans le dire.  
 (If you wish we'll make love/ with your lips wordlessly.)  
 Stéphane Mallarmé

#### *Mallarmé's Pigeons.*

At the dinner party in Stresa, which takes place whilst Chavez lies in hospital after his crash, the engineer Monsieur Hennequin asks his wife, Camille, to quote lines from Mallarmé: 'A woman dancer, she recites slowly and distinctly, is not a woman who dances because she is in no way a woman and she does not dance' (158).<sup>22</sup> Various interpretations of the lines follow: The Contessa R. states that for Mallarmé a great artist, here the ballet dancer, is a god (158). Hennequin himself suggests Mallarmé is trying to destroy language, to deny words the meaning they have, in revenge against an unappreciative public. 'He was an obscurantist, and I believe in clarity' (158-9), he adds, voicing the uncomplicated rationality to which every bourgeois man in the novel adheres. The Contessa revises her opinion: 'a dancer is not a dancer, a singer is not a singer. How true it is. Sometimes I myself wonder who I am' (158). Her words can be heard as a drawing room inanity, but also reference modern anxiety surrounding identity. The Belgian industrialist Harry

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<sup>22</sup> *G.* is the first of Berger's novels to engage with poetry, both his own (the earliest published of which was composed in 1956) and with other people's. He had translated Bertolt Brecht (*Poems on Theatre*, 1961) and Aimé Césaire (*Return to my Native Land* 1969) with Anna Bostock, and had written poems now collected in *Pages of the Wound*, but no poem had appeared in his fiction.

Schuwey makes a joke, designed to limit the disruptive potential of the lines by coarsening them: he has friends with 'first-hand experience' of dancers, who can attest that they both dance and are women. Mathilde, Camille's friend, laughs. G.'s interpretation of the lines is part of his seduction of Camille:

Mallarmé, G. continues, is saying that when a woman dances she can be transformed. Words which applied to her before, will no longer apply. It may even be necessary to call her a different name. (160-1)

The lines that Camille speaks are in fact not from a poem, but from an extraordinary newspaper review of the ballet *The Two Pigeons*<sup>23</sup> - a love story, and an opportunity for the ballet company to represent flight through dance.<sup>24</sup> If Camille had read further she might not have been quite so impressed by the incisiveness of G.'s interpretation, because Mallarmé goes on to explain what he means himself (107), which G. merely paraphrases.<sup>25</sup> For Mallarmé, a ballet dancer dancing is a metaphoric representation of something ('knife, chalice, flower') in a 'corporeal writing' that is beyond the reach of the verbal, and hence *the words* 'woman' or 'dance' no longer apply. This clearly resonates with the representation of the sexual act in *G.*. The effect is a 'poem disengaged from all of the scribe's apparatus' (107). Mallarmé is writing about the impossibility of being a ballet critic; he does not want to write about dancing, but to *write dance*, which is unachievable. Nevertheless, this is what 'Ballets' attempts to do, blurring subjects and objects, nouns and adjectives through syntactic ambiguity and dizzying the reader with the complexity of his sentences. As Evlyn Gould writes:

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<sup>23</sup> 'Ballets', 1886, collected in *Crayonné au Théâtre*. I am quoting from Evlyn Gould's translation in *Performing Arts Journal* Vol. 15, No. 1 (Jan. 1993) 106-110. Subsequent references are to this publication and will be made in the text.

<sup>24</sup> 'Ballets' is obliquely referred to earlier in *G.*, in the paragraph describing the mating flight of a pair of pigeons at the beginning of chapter 4:

Her head is thrown back, her beak points to the sky. She hangs there motionless and yet not falling. The male bird finds himself at her side. She begins to drop, puts her head down and her tail up, dives, and they enter the wood together. A moment later they emerge from the far side of the wood to circle once more and repeat the same flight. (80)

Mallarmé's text is here inverted: flight as dance.

<sup>25</sup> Sadly, no drafts of *G.* or notes exist in the archive that mention Mallarmé, or give any indication of how Berger's use of him originated or evolved.

so many of Mallarmé's sentences dance on, puffing themselves up with relative clauses, that the relatives become more captivating than the sense of the whole they mobilise and detail in fractions, infinitely. This turns reading into translation, a continual exercise in penciling and erasing no different from what dancers do as they write in space.<sup>26</sup>

Mallarmé's text attempts to perform one dance as it bemoans the impossibility of representing another. The problem is also of representation in general. As Richard Candida Smith notes, Mallarmé (along with many others) was much concerned with the impossibility of direct representation, a worry that *G.*'s narrator shares when he tries to write about the sexual act.<sup>27</sup> Both texts yearn for a union of action and expression that Mallarmé, after Rousseau, believed rightly or wrongly was the condition of the first Adamic language, before the stiffening and abstraction of words.<sup>28</sup> But both *G.* and Mallarmé recognise the liberating flipside of this: that which cannot be expressed in language is also in a sense free from that which is controlled by it. This is part of *G.*'s seduction technique: the freedom he offers is a freedom from that which is delimited, organised, institutionalised and otherwise controlled through language. 'Dance is wings', Mallarmé says in 'Ballets', 'it is a question of birds and departures into neverland' (107). Marika Von Hartmann's wish to dance in her husband's drawing room is emblematic. She sways 'in slow gliding circles' (264); whilst left alone, *G.* covers her mouth, playfully and provocatively, preventing her from speaking. When *G.* is beginning his seduction of Marika she climbs the library ladder (echoing Beatrice), and jumps, knocking over an armchair and landing on the floor, enacting the novel's most clumsy flight. It dazzles everyone present, such that they cannot piece together the sequence of events (echoing Chavez's crash), and yet all have the sense that the moment when she was in mid-air 'seemed at the time interminable' (267).

The dreams in *G.* also engage with Mallarmé. There are two of them, although at one stage the entire book may have been conceived as one, as the work in progress that would become *G.* is described in the blurb of the 1970 Penguin edition of *Foot of Clive* as 'a book about Don Juan in 1900. I do not know whether it

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<sup>26</sup> Evlyn Gould, 'Penciling and erasing Mallarmé's "Ballets"' in *Performing Arts Journal* Vol. 15, No. 1 (Jan. 1993), 98.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Candida Smith, *Mallarmé's Children* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 14-15.

<sup>28</sup> For Mallarmé's interest in Rousseau, see Richard Candida Smith. *Mallarmé's Children*, 14-5. For Berger discussing Rousseau and language, see 'Why Look at Animals'.

will be eventually categorized as an essay, a novel, a treatise, or the description of a dream'. The idea that *G.* might have been conceived as the description of a dream is intriguing.<sup>29</sup> 'Sexual acts, like dreams, have no surface appearances; they are experienced inside out; their content is uppermost and what is normally visible becomes an invisible core' (310) the narrator writes in the finished text, explicitly linking the sexual act to the dream and also seemingly inverting Freud's idea of the nature of dreams. *G.*'s sense of the dream, then, is closer to Mallarmé's, which

refers to a state of mind particularly receptive to the flow of sensation because purposive activity has been suspended. It is the place where intellect and sensation are inseparable, because the mind has freed itself from the prison of logic.<sup>30</sup>

For Mallarmé, the dream is where language and thought, intellect and sensation converge, a place in which normal experiences of the world are held in suspension. Both of *G.*'s dreams appear just before a sexual encounter and contain flying birds. *G.* discusses with Jocelyn a dream he has:

I was down in the martin and it was very hot, like it was last summer. I was swimming and there were big birds flying low over the water - not predatory birds. Sometimes a bird's foot touched my hair. Then more and more birds came so that I was forced to swim to the bank and climb out. (82)<sup>31</sup>

When he leaves the water in the dream, *G.*'s clothes have become a soldier's uniform, and his pocket contains a crab which bites him, and subsequently becomes his hand. There is an echo of Umberto in this, who, as Laura mentions to her mother, 'made funny jokes about his hands being like crabs' (6). It is an

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<sup>29</sup> It also suggests surrealism as (yet another) influence. If Berger's interest in Mallarmé is upstream, as it were, of the surrealist movement, nevertheless Breton's defiance of the security of bourgeois faith in logic, objectivity and reason by accessing the unconscious clearly resonates with *G.* and *G.*'s similar project. Whilst writing *G.*, Berger translated Aimé Césaire's long poem *Return to My Native Land*, made famous in France by Breton and hailed as surrealist, and a reproduction of Arshile Gorky's *The Liver and the Cock's Comb* is preserved in the *G.* archive. *G.* has its dream-like moments, seemingly beyond the reach of reason (TWO MEN being the most obvious), and *G.*'s behaviour through his entire life could be read as one long act of defiance, inexplicable to the bourgeois men he meets, and surreal in spirit.

<sup>30</sup> Candida Smith. *Mallarmé's Children*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> The OED sheds no light on what a 'martin' is. Whatever Berger understands this word to mean, it is also the name of a family of birds.

extraordinary image. G., on the verge of his first sexual experience, and who resembles his father physically, is associated with him as he courts G.'s mother. A startling directness (of intellect and sensation) appears available in the dream: Umberto may think (with the narrator) that his hands are *like* crabs, whereas G., in the dream, sees his hand become one.

From the moment 'Ballets' is quoted, Mallarmé's poetry appears repeatedly in the 'Camille' section of Part Three (148-218). Berger uses specific lines in Mallarmé to reinforce the relationship between the sexual act and language in G.. On two occasions the lines quoted combine images of speech and love or sex: firstly Camille thinks of the lines spoken by Hérodias as she speaks to G., 'You are speaking a lie, naked flower of my lips' (198), and secondly the epigraph of the sex scene between Camille and G., 'if you wish we will make love/ with your lips wordlessly' (200).<sup>32</sup> The pigeon is not the only Mallarméan bird to find its way into G.: at the same dinner party Camille recites part of the sonnet, 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui'.<sup>33</sup> On this, and on subsequent occasions, Camille's (Mallarmé's) words are untranslated from the French she has been speaking. Although, at the request of Hennequin, she recites the second and third stanzas of the poem, only two lines are given in the text:

Un cygne d'autrefois se souvient que c'est lui  
Magnifique mais qui sans espoir se délivre...(164)  
(A swan of old remembers it is he  
superb but strives to break free woebegone)<sup>34</sup>

The first stanza is not recited or alluded to except through Camille's touching the glass swan ornament before speaking. If this action prompts her to recite the poem, it also stands in place of the line 'by clear ice-flights that never flew away', the idea cleverly resituated in the glass statue. 'The poem is about opportunities missed' (164) states the narrator, refusing even the slightest nuance, 'but by reciting it, Camille seized an opportunity.' Thus the poem is presented as an object itself

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<sup>32</sup> Berger quotes the original French of both poems. The first line is from 'Herodias', the second are the opening lines of the uncollected poem 'Rondel II'.

<sup>33</sup> Mallarmé may well have influenced Berger's own poems in the text. The word 'éblouir' in 'POEM FOR HIM', is also used by Mallarmé in the sonnet, 'Quand l'ombre menaça de la fatale loi', usually published as one of two companion poems to 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui'.

<sup>34</sup> The translation I am using is by E.H. and A.M. Blackmore, *Collected Poems and Other Verse* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 67-8.

reusable as such; Camille uses the poem to express her desire for infidelity. Camille herself is the main source of Mallarmé in the text, whose poetry she regards as incomprehensible, and as such uses it as a weapon against the rationality of the men who control her.

Critics have interpreted Mallarmé's poem as about poetry itself, and the frozen swan as an image of artistic sterility.<sup>35</sup> In this reading flight is equated not just with the sexual act, but with writing itself. In the same year that *G.* was published, Berger wrote this poem:

*Poetry*

Word by word I describe  
you accept each fact  
and ask yourself:  
what does he really mean?

Quarto after quarto of sky  
salt sky  
sky of the placid tear  
printed from the other sky  
punched with stars.  
Pages laid out to dry.

Birds like letters fly away  
O let us fly away  
circle and settle on the water  
near the fort of the illegible.

1972, *Les Salins de Giraud*<sup>36</sup>

It is at once a love poem ('oh let us fly away') and a poem about writing and understanding poetry ('what does he mean?'). In it, the ocean, an inverted, 'salt sky'

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Henry Weinfield's commentary in Stéphane Mallarmé *Collected Poems* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 213.

<sup>36</sup> John Berger, *Pages of The Wound* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 20.

is transformed into text, 'printed' from the reflection it receives from the night sky above. Birds are 'like letters' which swim on its surface, take off and, having flown in a circle, land again on the water (that is, the page,) presumably rearranged, *near* (not on) the fort of the illegible. The association of the idea of the book ('quarto', 'printed', 'pages') with the sky, and then with flying proposes the intimate relationship between language, flight and lovers in Berger's imagination. Settling, (and so without danger) as if a water bird, near the fort of the illegible, suggests a journey to the edge of comprehensibility that both reader and writer, or lovers, can make by flying, or after a flight has taken place. Letters, in the simile, are granted the ability to fly away - to themselves achieve temporary suspension from being signs before returning to earth, not quite afforded the protection of the 'fort' of illegibility. The poem's location, Les Salins de Giraud, is a salt-making village in Arles striking for its enormous white salt mountains, bringing to mind Chavez's snow-covered, indelible Alps.

## 5

Berger was not the only person reading Mallarmé at this time. Derrida's 'The Double Session' was first published in *Tel Quel* in 1970, whilst Berger was writing *G.* in the same city. Both men also quote from the less well known *Crayonné au théâtre* as well as the *Poésies*. In a slightly later text written for a volume in a series called *Tableau de la littérature française* Derrida discusses the polysemy associated with whiteness and the blank spaces in Mallarmé's typographically experimental poem, *Un coup de dés*, and in doing so captures for us the full extent of the centrality of Mallarmé as emblem for the sense of both abundance and emptiness *G.* points towards:

the sign *blanc* ("white," "blank," "space")...is a huge reservoir of meaning (snow, cold, death, marble, etc.; swan, wing, fan, etc.; virginity, purity, hymen, etc.; page, canvas, veil, gauze, milk, semen, Milky Way, star, etc.). It permeates Mallarmé's entire text, as if by symbolic magnetization. And yet, the white also marks, through the intermediary of the white page, the place of the writing of these "whites"; and first of all the spacing between the

different significations (that of white among others), *the spacing of reading*. "The 'whites' indeed, assume primary importance" (*Un coup de dés*, 455). The white of the spacing has no determinate meaning, it does not simply belong to the plurivalence of all the other whites. More than or less than the polysemic series, a loss or an excess of meaning, it folds up the text toward itself, and at each moment points out the place (where "nothing will have taken place except the place" [*Un coup de dés*, 474-5])<sup>37</sup>

*G.*, too, is a text permeated by blanks and opaque or indelible whites as if by 'symbolic magnetization'. There are a series of associations with the colour white in the novel that fit into the metonymical chain we have been trying to map. There is for example, the snow on the Alps, Monte Leone to be precise (138), its name a punning reference to the woman *G.* is simultaneously seducing, Leonie, the 'Queen of the Alps' (132). The snow on the peak, states the narrator, is 'white in the sunlight, both emphasizes the presence of the mountain and transforms it into a kind of absence. Not a stain would remain on that white' (138). It is an image of indelible blankness and absence. There is *G.*'s white shirt at the riot, picked out twice from afar, the white bird in the narrator's dream. Contributing to the 'huge reservoir of meaning', milk, in *G.* is present at birth, during sex, and in death. When Laura is nursing *G.* her milk is 'the quicksilver of an extraordinary mirror' (23).

The two of them, so long as the nipple remains in the mouth, revert to being parts of an indispensible whole whose energy will lead to their being separate and distinct as soon as the child ceases to suck. (24)

As he grows, *G.* will come to associate the farm's dairy with 'milk, cloth, figures of women...pink hands and udders almost the same colour' (35). When he is struck over the head, in what is his last reported sensation, he tastes milk (316). Just before this, at the beginning of the riot, there is a supplementary sexual encounter with a new character, Louise. There is actually little description of sex in *G.*, for all the text's fascination with it, and the depiction of cunnilingus through the figure of milk in the 'Louise' paragraph is easily the most sustained:

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<sup>37</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 115.

From the ear was born a jug of milk. Beneath the surface of the milk, invisible beneath its whiteness, were the trees of a wood, winter trees without leaves. The jug poured the milk over her lap. Upon some parts the milk remained in white pools; from others it ran down; drops of milk hung like white berries in her hair. He could see the branches of the winter trees in the traces made by the milk. (310)

The jug may be a reference to the fear G. feels in 'TWO MEN', which he carries 'like a full jug' (47), which allusively takes us back to that moment which has been linked, via the smell of paraffin, to Von Hartmann a few pages before. Perhaps, also, it links to the nightingales of nineteenth-century verse in the POEM FOR HIM. Once the milk has been spilled, however, its opacity is striking. For Mallarmé, milk, as much as semen, was a symbol of literary creation. In 'Don du poème', for example, which is the prefatory poem to 'Herodias' (the long dialogic poem from which Berger quotes directly), the poet, who has worked through the night, takes his dead offspring to his wife, who gives life to it.<sup>38</sup> And then there are the blank spaces on the white page: the space where the rest of G.'s name might be, and the whiteness that surrounds the text, every paragraph and line of dialogue receiving its own line break; some changes in location or time marked by six lines of all of space, some marked by a little circle, enclosing yet more space.

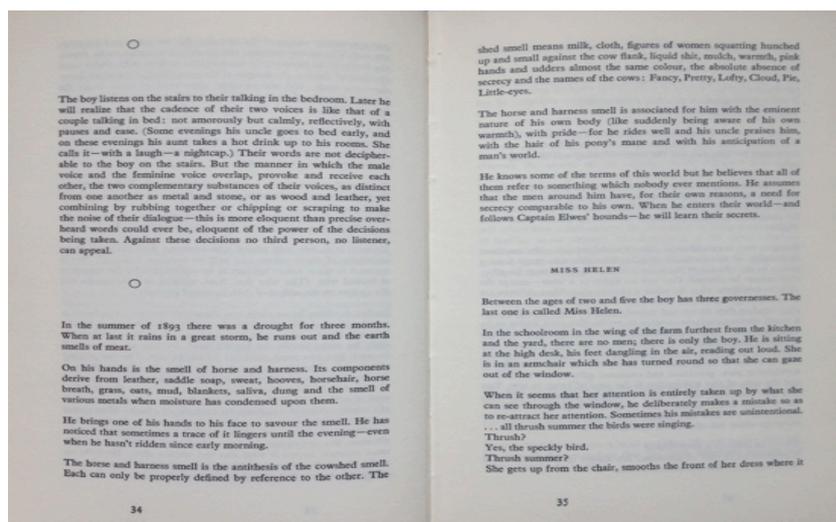


FIGURE 18

Photograph illustrative of the page layout of the first edition of G.. (Pages pictured 34-5).

<sup>38</sup> See the note in Blackmore, *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, 242.

At the point at which history finally catches up with G., as it has been threatening to do since the Milan riots seventeen years earlier it is a *printer's* shop that he helps to burn. Just as G. was unable to speak Italian in Milan, he cannot understand the Slovene spoken around him in Trieste. The crowd burn the printer's because it is where the city's Italian newspaper, *Il Piccolo* is printed, but it is hard not to see G.'s involvement, as he 'emptied some drawers of paper and scattered these too on the pyre' (313) as part of wider symbolic significance for the novel's relationship to the word.<sup>39</sup> The fire is soon extinguished, however, (314) though the building will be successfully burned down later that evening (313). G's death occurs on the last page, and so is followed by blankness - there are literally no more pages (316).

Whites and flights in the text appear to be able to stand for both the suspension or production of verbal language. The novel contains an impulse to represent that which it finds unrepresentable, and its characters desire to find spaces where language's hardened conceptualising presence is held in abeyance. This is all held in tension. The blank spaces, such as with G. and G.'s name, to return to our beginning, point to Derrida's reading of Mallarmé's blank spaces as connoting a 'loss or an excess of meaning'. They are linked through a chain of metonymical associations to the sexual flights which are temporary, circular suspensions. At the end of his life G. feels 'borne along' (309) by the crowd, 'almost like a body in a coffin' (309). It is the final image of flight in the novel, before G. sinks like a stone and closes a chain of associations that, like Jocelyn and Beatrice's overheard voices, circle, overlap, provoke and receive each other.

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<sup>39</sup> For Andrzej Gasiorek's excellent reading of G.'s crowds see 'A crisis of metanarratives: realism and innovation in the contemporary English novel', 212-226.

*We and her.* Berger's women.

## 1

1972 was the year that Berger attempted a contribution to second-wave feminism. He may have been influenced by his then wife Anya Bostock's involvement with the Women's Liberation London Workshop; nevertheless, as a male writer and broadcaster, this made him something of a pioneer, and given his marginal representation of women in his earlier work, marks a progression. The second episode of *Ways of Seeing* mounted an attack on the male attitude to the female nude that, for Berger, combined exploitation with moral condemnation, embodied in the canon by works like *Vanity* by Hans Memling (c.1485). His argument is similar to the one Simone de Beauvoir mounted in *The Second Sex* against the hypocrisy of male judges who condemned the lax morals of prostitutes without acknowledging the appetites of their clients, one of several ways that Berger was influenced by de Beauvoir's text.<sup>1</sup> Berger's universalising critique of the male gaze has been revised, complicated, and modified by others since, but its place in the history of feminist thought is well established.<sup>2</sup> What then, of *G.*, a book dedicated to Anya 'and for her

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<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 582.

<sup>2</sup> An extract of the BBC book version of the episode is collected in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003). Among sixty contributors Berger is one of four men. In addition Berger is regularly taught and cited on the subject of the male gaze.

sisters in Women's Liberation',<sup>3</sup> but which, nevertheless, is notably and understandably a novel that has seduced many more male readers than female?<sup>4</sup>

The rather portentously delivered voiceover in the opening seconds of the *Ways of Seeing* episode, 'Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at', covers the same territory as 'A SITUATION OF WOMEN' (148-153) in *G.*, in which the narrator states that women of the period are taught from a young age to view themselves as if surveyed by another:

Her own sense of being *in herself* was supplanted by a sense of being appreciated *as herself* by another. Only when she was the content of another's experience did her own life and experience seem meaningful to her. (149-50)

The two statements are very similar, and so it appears as if Berger believed little had changed from 1910 to 1972, two world wars, the Suffragette movement, the Civil Rights movement, the sexual revolution, the Women's Liberation movement, et cetera notwithstanding. It is the passage from *G.* about the earlier period which is subtler: it begins '*Up to then* the social presence of a woman was different in kind from that of a man,' (148, my emphasis) clearly denoting that this situation was at a moment of change - presumably in this account by the impending First World War - and it therefore presents a more nuanced picture than *Ways of Seeing's* insistent polemics and provocations. What 'A SITUATION OF WOMEN' suggests is that for a woman in the early twentieth century *being seen* and *being* amounted to the same thing - the understanding or intuition of which is the key weapon that gives *G.'s* gaze its potency. With that singular gaze comes the promise of liberation from being seen as (and so being) one of the constricting social roles (daughter, wife, mother et cetera) women were confined to. This is problematic. As Jennifer Allen puts it:

the women can feel whole again by falling in love with a man like the novel's seductive protagonist – or like Berger? Alas, the poison is difficult to

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<sup>3</sup> The London Workshop of the Women's Liberation Movement was founded in 1969. *The Second Sex*, despite de Beauvoir's ambivalence about a separate women's movement, was an important influence the movement as a whole.

<sup>4</sup> Female critics and readers are often highly sceptical. In an essay otherwise sympathetic to the novel, Rochelle Simmons writes 'it must be said, however, that for those with feminist sympathies, the revolutionary transformation that *G.* offers is heavily compromised by his being identified with Don Juan, whose seductions can be seen as the very embodiment of patriarchal oppression.' 'John Berger's Revolutionary Narratives' in *British Culture and Society in the 1970s: The Lost Decade*, ed. Laurel Foster, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 20.

distinguish from the antidote.<sup>5</sup>

'A SITUATION OF WOMEN' might be another idea derived from *The Second Sex*. In the section 'Situation and Character', de Beauvoir, in a similar universalising tone to that which Berger adopts, addresses again and again the necessity for theatricality, play-acting, feigning and lying by the woman who is compelled by her social and economic position to 'scrutinize herself with fond vigilance.'<sup>6</sup> The woman's body is 'her glorious double; she is dazzled in beholding it in the mirror; it is promised happiness, a work of art, a living statue; she shapes it, adorns it, puts on a show.'<sup>7</sup> This idea is echoed by Camille: 'Look at me, she would address the mirror, see what Maurice's wife is like' (152). G.'s skill is that he can make women believe that he is seeing them uniquely for themselves, and offering them temporary escape. Again, this is reminiscent of de Beauvoir's fierce defence of the female libido:

The call of flesh is no louder in her than in the male, but she catches its least murmurs and amplifies them. Sexual pleasure, like rending pain, represents the stunning triumph of the immediate; in the violence of the instant, the future and the universe are denied; what lies outside the carnal flame is nothing; for the brief moment of this apotheosis, woman is no longer mutilated and frustrated.<sup>8</sup>

The sexual act is an 'apotheosis', a climax and transformation, but the violence of the language surrounding it illustrates de Beauvoir's anger that the sexual act was the single and temporary liberation for most women. G. changes the emphasis, lingering on the wondrous and poetic features of this escape from history and society, refusing de Beauvoir's ambivalence or acknowledgement that a seduction technique predicated upon a temporary reprieve from 'mutilat[i]on and frustrat[i]on' at the very least risks being exploitative of these same mutilations and frustrations. Nevertheless it also adds G., a man, to the list of those who need to escape, for the book makes clear that for G. sex is not about physical pleasure for its own sake, that he picks his women idiosyncratically, and that even the orgasm is a rending of linear time, each one simultaneous with all others. Seen through this lens, G. is 'feminine',

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<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Allen, 'Ways of Being' *frieze*, Issue 150, Oct. 2012.

<sup>6</sup> de Beauvoir, 591 and passim.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 587.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 573.

seemingly refusing to act in the world of men, continually looking for women with whom he can construct together a temporary mutual escape, albeit also a man whose bourgeois inheritance affords him a life of leisure.

*G.* is a novel that describes the (straight) sexual act in an progressive idiom, the language of 'penetration' eschewed. *G.* is repeatedly passive, 'there like the trellis with a vine growing over it.' (204) We find *G.* and Camille 'fucking in the grass' (205) but they are both agents, and although he 'enters' her, (204) the narrative focuses on the softness of his glans to her touch, which, along with the mixing of body parts, scale and shape with which the novel characterises the sexual act, lessens the severity of *G.*'s domination or singular male agency. The language of 'engulfing' is more prevalent; Beatrice's 'cunt enfolds' him (109), Leonie's 'appearances surround his penis' (136). These are early examples of a feminist sexual vocabulary; Berger was composing *G.* at the same time as Germaine Greer was writing in *The Female Eunuch*, 'all the vulgar linguistic emphasis is placed upon the poking element; *fucking, screwing, rooting, shagging* are all acts performed upon the passive female: the names for the penis are all tool names<sup>9</sup> and before Susan Brownmiller was to write in *Against Our Will*,

"penetration," however, describes what the man does. The feminist Barbara Mehrhof has suggested that if women were in charge of sex and the language, the same act could well be called 'enclosure' - a revolutionary concept the world is not yet ready for.<sup>10</sup>

In earlier places Berger's writing about sex speaks of its time. Consider, for example, these passages from *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, published seven years before *G.*:

It is no longer possible to say whether these 'lineaments' [of *Nude, 1933*] are an expression of Picasso's pleasure in the woman's body, or a description of her pleasure. The paintings, because they describe sensation, are highly selective, but part of the very force of sex lies in the fact that *its subjectivity is mutual*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Germaine Greer. *The Female Eunuch* (London: Flamingo, 1993), 47

<sup>10</sup> Susan Brownmiller. *Against Our Will* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), 334. Brownmiller does not give a reference for the Mehrhof quote.

<sup>11</sup> John Berger. *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (New York: Vintage, 1993 (1965)), 158, my emphasis.

It is as though - *and here Picasso is like most of us* - he can only fully see himself when he is reflected in a woman.<sup>12</sup>

These two quotations appear a handful of pages apart during an argument in which Picasso's representation of the sexual act is praised because of the 'mutual subjectivity' of its participants (painter and subject). The woman represented is a subject (not just the object) of desire. This is an important idea for *G.*, recycled in the text, as here about Leonie: 'Armed with the entire language of literature we are still denied access to her experience. There is only one way of, briefly, entering that experience: to make love to her.' (135) The muddling of body parts is an attempt to figure this, for the duration of the lovemaking, that which belongs to the other's body is experienced as one's own. Berger reads Picasso's sculpture (fig. 19) as representative of this entire strand of the artist's work and can be seen as a kind of totem for this aspect of *G.*



FIGURE 19

Pablo Picasso, *Head of a Woman* (1931-2). Musée Picasso, Paris.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 162.

Nevertheless, the second quotation shows the naturalised address to the male reader, claiming a shared male experience, even when it is praising the representation of mutual subjectivity with a woman. A similar thing appears in the essay 'Nude in a Fur Coat', published the year after.<sup>13</sup> Berger references again the 'shared subjectivity of sex' from the Picasso essay, suggesting that total nakedness is important because it exchanges the specific and individual for the universal. As a woman undresses, in the moment of full nakedness 'she is reduced or elevated - whichever you prefer - to her primary category: she is female. Our relief is the relief of finding a reality to whose exigencies all our earlier fantasies must now yield.'<sup>14</sup> Again we find the assumed male reader, a sense of community Berger shares with him, and a sole focus on the female body, when presumably, by the essay's logic, the same must hold for the male body. The first person plural is a common rhetorical device (used in this thesis), but here 'our relief', 'our earlier fantasies' can only, by the logic of Berger's argument, belong to men (the sex being had here is firmly heterosexual), to the exclusion of the female reader. His insistence on using it produces a very strange clause: 'thus it is from the instant of disclosure onwards that *we and she* can become mysterious as a single unit.'<sup>15</sup> The oddness of this formulation stems from a reluctance to give up the brotherly kinship between 'me', writer, and 'you, the male reader', even when describing the 'mysterious' connection between one woman and one man in the sexual act.

Berger's approach appears unwittingly contradictory in these mid-sixties texts. Male homosociality is inscribed onto the very syntax of Berger's sentences, in a way suggestive of the triangular relationships Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick scrutinises in *Between Men*. The triangulation of 'we and she' is a structure that *G.* reformulates in at least three ways. Firstly, *G.* characteristically intervenes in a pre-existing relationship between a man and a woman. (The Milanese girl is the one exception.) It structures almost all the sexual encounters in the text, from the obvious: *G.*, Camille, and her husband, Hennequin; *G.*, Leonie and her fiancé, Eduard, to the subtler versions: *G.*, Miss Helen and Jocelyn (Jocelyn here employer and master of the house); *G.*, Beatrice and Jocelyn (and here in a weaker position of incestuous, thus socially transgressive lover); *G.*, Nuša and her brother, Bojan, from whom she keeps her meeting with *G.* a secret. In *G.*, the most prominent relationship between

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<sup>13</sup> 'Nude in a Fur Coat' in *Selected Essays*, 119. First published in 1966 in *New Society*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 119, my emphasis.

men is that of cuckolding, which as Sedgwick points out, 'is by definition a sexual act, performed on a man, by another man.'<sup>16</sup> Sedgwick shows how the cuckold relationship reinforces, not undermines masculinity in William Wycherley's *A Country Wife*; for Sedgwick, 'its central position means that the play emphasises heterosexual love chiefly as a strategy of homosocial desire'.<sup>17</sup> For, G., the other man is never far from his mind: Leonie is introduced to the text by G.'s mention of 'the maid who serves us breakfast' (129) in a conversation with Weymann, and remarks immediately that 'she's engaged to a clerk in the town hall and they are going to get married at Christmas' (129).

The most banal version is Hennequin, who, when he learns of G.'s attempt to seduce his wife, goes to G.'s lodgings and threatens him with a gun. He has previously stolen Camille's key on his way out, locking her in, because he has decided he might 'decide to fuck her like a prostitute' (184).<sup>18</sup> The scene emphasises the sexual arousal experienced by Hennequin. He finds G. *lying in bed*, and, gun in hand, discovers 'with excitement a new power' (189); he is 'visibly trembling, the words coming out of his mouth with strange cries of pleasure' (189) and as he leaves walks backwards 'prolonging to the last possible moment the excitement...of pointing a gun at the man who had tried to seduce his wife.' (190-1) This scene shows clearly the novel's awareness of the homosocial bond that G.'s seductions make apparent. G. undercuts it immediately, by laughing contemptuously in Hennequin's face, to spoil his fun. G.'s refusal to play his part in this homosocial desire threatens to break the triangle. But laughter is also strongly associated with the sexual act in the novel, and as the narrative lingers on other examples of G.'s laughing, and then Beatrice's, it is this sexual context which is evoked, and sex with Camille remains something G. does to Hennequin.

We see something similar with Von Hartmann, whose incorporation of adultery into the order he has built around himself means he attempts to cooperate with Marika and G.. Entirely contrary to G.'s experience of the temporality of the sexual act, Von Hartmann sees it as 'so absurdly short-lived,' (258) within empty, homogeneous time, to borrow Benjamin's phrase, and is the reason he can apply the

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<sup>16</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 48.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> This is one of two occasions the sexual act is described as something a man does to a woman, the other being Captain Bierce indulging his predilection for bondage. Both occur within the confines of marriage.

same 'realism' (270) to his private life as to his public. G. reviles this complicity, along with Marika's willingness to go along with it, and he invites Nuša to the ball to subvert it. G. refuses to be part of the husband-wife-lover that bourgeois society has learned to incorporate into its fabric (neutralising the threat posed by infidelity) and thus G. and G. might seem to resist a Sedgwickian reading. However, when Marika and Camille are happy to enter into such a conventional relationship, and thus show that they are still under the control of their men, G. punishes them. The second triangle emerges as G. uses Camille and Marika to structure his relationship with men. *Lying in bed*, he looks forward to arguing for the Italian with Von Hartman in the presence of Von Hartmann's wife (250). He speaks to Hennequin about the swings whilst really addressing Camille. In these instances G. uses the man to communicate with the woman to communicate with the man. His hatred of the powerful capitalists and bureaucrats who, among other things, control their women, provokes the only extended 'speech' G. is given, his silent six-page rant at Harry Schuwey and Hennequin as they walk through the forest with Mathilde and Camille:

I hate you...I do not want to live indefinitely in a world which you dominate; life in such a world should be short. Life would choose death rather than your company. (176-181)

It is *this* passion that drives his sexual encounters with bourgeois women. G. thinks about Paris and how he is to humiliate and 'disabuse Camille of her fond illusion that passion can be regulated' (217) by taking up with Mathilde, and that 'he regretted that between Monsieur Schuwey and Mathilde Le Diraison there was little more than a purely contractual relationship. But he supposed that even Schuwey must have some pride invested in the woman he paid to be with him. He would discover where' (217). G. here is scornful and triumphant, motivated by puncturing male pride, and the use of 'invested' echoes the financial preoccupations of his would-be victim. There is no suggestion that G. may be able to stop these men dominating the world; he can merely bring disorder into their private lives. Thus G. is using women in troubling ways, particularly given G., the novel, has been at pains to explain how they are victims of the society they must survive in. He doesn't behave this way with the lower class women he becomes involved with, which is not to say that Nuša does not suffer for G.'s plot to insult a man, receiving a

horsewhipping she has done nothing to deserve. For G., the sexual act is deployed as a way of acting *in* the world as well as escaping from it.

This is a development in G.'s behaviour found in the second half of the book. Up to this point his captivation with women is represented as something that comes to him, and which, in a state of wonderment, he follows, uncomprehending, and wishes to explore further. More than a third of the text occurs whilst G. is a child or teenager. His first sexual experiences happen when young, and these early experiences are reference points for the rest of his life. They are presented as pre-dating rationality, logic and decision-making in G.'s history. In this regard he is a prodigy, as Berger defines Picasso: his fascination and obsession with sex (art for Picasso) is not theoretically or maturely acquired, but appears as an overwhelming gift during childhood.<sup>19</sup> Berger's reading of Picasso's attitude to his own creative impulse is that it comes to him unbidden, he receives it, and continues to be fascinated by it his whole career:

To the prodigy himself his power seems mysterious, because initially it comes to him without effort. It is not that he has to arrive somewhere; he is visited. Furthermore, at the beginning he does things without understanding why or the reasoning behind them. He obeys what is the equivalent of an instinctual desire. Perhaps the nearest we can get to imagining the extent of the mystery for him is to remember our *own discovery of sex within ourselves*.<sup>20</sup>

Here Berger explicitly makes the link with the coming of sexual desire. The kernel of G.'s character can be seen here, extending the correlation between sex and the prodigy's experience of her or his gift until it is the dominant feature of a character bewitched by it. The implications of this are that G. is guileless and a special case, but such a justification cannot be sustained, as his hatred of middle-class men overtakes his interest in the mystery of the sexual act.

The narrator is also fascinated by the nature of sexuality. The constant interjections, thoughts, diagrams, maxims, et cetera all swell the discourse on sex around G.'s encounters. G. literally and figuratively ditches its protagonist without ceremony or apparent regret on its last page and the narrator's relationship with G. is not constant. It oscillates between treating G. at a surgical or anthropological

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<sup>19</sup> Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, 27-34.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 28, my emphasis.

distance and getting microscopically close to him, as befitting a novel so interested in multi-perspective. Significantly, however, the moments at which narrator and character are closest are moments of seduction. This is the third erotic triangle, involving G., the women he pursues, and the narrator. For example, the narrator's voice intrudes in a conversation between Camille and G., making it difficult to say for certain who is speaking, as the text itself acknowledges. The narrator has already singled out Camille ('I am scarcely less interested in her than G.' (157)), and then he addresses her directly:

I am frightened of nothing in myself and you know nothing about me.  
Nothing? I know all that I have written about you.  
Who is speaking? (201)

Interesting formally, this is also uncomfortable. It is perhaps inevitable that Berger in such a self-consciously experimental mood would be tempted to breach the walls of his fictional world with what is now a familiar figure of the postmodern novel. The narrator here appears to participate in G.'s seduction of Camille, to deliberately confuse his voice and that of his principal character's, answering her question in G.'s place and dramatising the disorientation that results. Who responds 'who is speaking? It is a question the text seems to be asking of itself, or of us. It marks a step further than the narrator's earlier participation in G.'s seduction of Leonie, in which he enthusiastically endorses as genuinely valuable the (at best debatable) terms on which the seduction is predicated: 'Leonie, look up. He sees you. Look at him seeing you. You are being seen as you are.' (135-136) The narrator obtrusively calls attention to himself as spectator, giving the scene a voyeuristic feel. The convergence of narrator and G. also finds a precursor with Leonie: 'why do I want to describe her experience exhaustively, definitively, when I fully recognize the impossibility of doing so?' (135) the narrator asks himself. The answer is

Because I love her. I love you, Leonie. You are beautiful. You are gentle.  
You can feel pain and pleasure. You are tiny and I take you in my hand. You  
are large as the sky and I walk under you. It was he who said this. (135)

The narrator tells us that G. is speaking at the end of this paragraph, but it is impossible to discern when he takes over from the narrator. Is it when Leonie is directly addressed, in the change of object pronoun between sentences one and two? This would seem definitive if it were not for the fact that elsewhere the narrator addresses Leonie directly, as we have just seen. Does G. speak all of this, and the narrator leaves his question unanswered, or just the last sentence, in which case he shares the words with the narrator? We cannot tell; the voices are confused and, by revealing only at the end that G. is speaking some of the sentences, we believe the narrator is expressing his own desire until directed otherwise. It is here that the idea that the only way of, briefly, entering the experience of another (woman) is to make love to her is reiterated (135). Berger seemed sincerely to believe this, it appears axiomatically in much of his writing about sex in the 1960s, and forms a substantial part of his reading of Picasso's oeuvre. If we accept its logic for one moment it poses a strange problem for G.'s narrator, who complains more than once, he cannot 'get close enough' (168) to the women he is writing about. He is speaking about the creative act, and his inability to represent or realise her to his satisfaction, but the spatial figure is telling. Thus, perhaps, the vicariousness and obtrusiveness of the narrator at these moments, and the confirmation of the *we and her* structure his presence creates.

## 2

G.'s representation of women should be contextualised within its time and oeuvre. As the photograph below suggests, Berger was not immune to the influence of the regressive post-war culture and values of the London art world that surrounded him.



FIGURE 20

James Fitton, Ruskin Spear, Berger and John Minton judging the *Daily Express* 'Most Beautiful Woman Competition,' 1953. Reproduced from James Hyman, *Battle for Realism*.

Female characters in Berger's first novels are marginal.<sup>21</sup> When Janos leaves Diana, his wife of eighteen years, to return to Hungary, there is nothing by way of farewell but a note with which he attempts to set her up, for her own good (we are asked to accept) with his friend, Max. It is not the action but the novel's apparent complicity that is hardest to swallow; John fits it in with his own patronising assessment of Diana's character ('Max was a "real refugee" and Diana could rescue him from his failure' (199)) and Diana conveniently submits to the manipulation. John tells us the unpleasant story of Janos's first wife, Kati, who goes mad, is locked up, and commits suicide. The description of her is the most vivid, if clichéd in the book: she looked 'like a gypsy: proud and fated; a lean face; daring frantic eyes; a mouth like an orchid, and a mane of black hair' (19). She is the exotic, unknowable madwoman in the attic. Her fate is sealed with a phrase in which the agent is conspicuously hidden: 'she was always trapped' (19).

We can draw a distinction in *Painter* between the female characters who are present and those who belong to the past. Janos often accesses the past through the lovers who populate it. For example he remembers the river Tisza of his youth

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion on the 'misogyny' of *Clive*, see Papastergiadis, *Modernity as Exile*, 156-62.

through the moment he and Laszlo lose their virginities (96). Janos does not name his partner, but Laszlo's, Juli, is later evoked as a way measuring time passing: 'Juli never would have recognised the youth she seduced on the banks of the Tisza in that man' (106). He writes 'that there are two kinds of remembering, and illustrates them with paintings of nude women, *Shepherd and Nymph* by Titian and the *Dresden Venus* by Giorgione. He ends the entry with 'Katinka. My Age' (64). Just before he disappears Janos 'fills a book of drawings of women at love' (177). They are all the women who have loved him, and they 'reconstruct my innocence' (177). The absent women are used as access points: they illustrate memory, symbolise innocence, mark the passing of time, lead him to his homeland, his youth.

Janos has greater enthusiasm for the potentialities of the absent woman than for the present. After Janos has decided to return, Diana is added to the sketchbook: her absence and thus conversion from the real into the ideal is complete. Further to the symbolic work that these characters are already doing, women and female roles are used as metaphors throughout the text: the young painter's subject is overwhelming 'like your first girl' (15); rereading his notes on *The Waves* is like 'hearing a recording of my conversations with a woman...all I really wanted to say was "You are lovely – come home with me"'(44); the newness of socialism will 'shock and hurt' its heroes 'as a mother must know that her son will hurt her' (48) therefore 'we cannot be Virgin Marys' or 'spinster intellectuals'(49). It is not just Janos, from another era even in 1955, who uses these figures. John, talking about Janos but using his own metaphor, says his friend spoke the word 'justice' as if it designated 'a girl who has left the room' (12), and Janos remembers Laszlo talking of his group's relationship to socialism as 'guardians of a small girl' (51).

A quotation in the text from *Culture and the People* by Maxim Gorky, 'capitalism violates the world as a senile old man violates a healthy young woman' (90), provides a glimpse of the socialist heritage of this set of rhetorical figures.<sup>22</sup> We see this similarly expressed later in the diary:

What we mean by Socialism can be clearly defined in economic terms. But the effects, the changes in man that Socialist economic relations can bring about, are so numerous that each can make his own list. I live, work, for a

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<sup>22</sup> Maxim Gorky, *Culture and the People* (Books for Libraries Press: Freeport, 1970), 215.

state...where women are not employed to use their sex to sell commodities - finally this is a much greater degradation than prostitution. (121)

Janos's use of 'man' and male pronouns reinforces the sense in the passage that women are excluded from the agent 'we'; that they will be affected by the revolution, not effect it. It is also *he* who decides what is most degrading for women. In *G.*, Bojan, the chaste (225) and proprietorial brother of Nuša and member of the Young Bosnians, addresses her in similar terms:

Your soul, he said, can't have changed, but then you lived in a village; now you live in this city - this city without a soul, this city with a German mind and an Italian stomach - and here you must question everything you do if you want to live in the way we once aspired to, which is the only way worthy of modern men and of women who are the equals of men. To be found laughing with an Italian who has accosted you in a public garden is a long way from Preseren, he added. (231)

Bojan's moralising derives from ideas from which Nuša herself is excluded; she has to move around Bojan and his male friends 'as though they were trees which have grown up through the floorboards' (230) whilst they study books in German, which she cannot read. Bojan's revolutionary feminism is a male affair, and once more predicated upon necessity of wider revolution. He is pleased that she has no plans to marry, because there is no marriage worthy of the name until 'freedom'. For the novel, women are trapped, and can achieve sweet and temporary freedom from their 'mutilations and frustrations' only by choosing *G.*. Even Nuša's activity is for the benefit of her brother, and forces her into an uneasy alliance with another man whose motives are unclear to her. In *G.*, as with Janos's statement in *Painter*, women's primary relationship to capitalism is passive sexual exploitation. Furthermore, Bojan's silent admonishment that Nuša 'did not wish sufficiently strongly to preserve her innocence' (225) contains within it an unquestioned assumption that the man must protect the woman from her own weakness and that the new society will need pure women, who will become wholesome mothers. Bojan and Monsieur Hennequin, the revolutionary and the bourgeois conservative, think similarly about women. Hennequin, on his way to threaten *G.*, had 'finally

convinced himself she was not to blame: she was innocent. Her weakness was the weakness of her sex' (187).

*Into Their Labours* sees this change somewhat. Partly this is because socialism is far less prevalent as an explicit subject and partly because the way peasants organise their labour, with both men and women working on the land the urban social structures that G. encounters in pre-war Europe are not present. Many of the stories in *Pig Earth* are about women, including Catherine, ('The Independent Woman'), and Lucie Cabrol. Two of the stories in *Once in Europa* are told or part-told by Berger's first female narrators, Danielle and Odile. *Lilac and Flag* is narrated by an old woman, although it is a story in which Sucus's attempted murder of Zsuzsa when he discovers she is a sex worker is presented as a consequence of the entire migratory journey. What happens to Zsuzsa is another example of the pattern we have been identifying. In each case it is men who identify the woman's victimhood for them, and who then decide whether she should be chastised, punished or absolved for it. The male answer, or the implied message, is to work harder for socialism.

By contrast, the chapter or story, 'Islington', in *Here is Where We Meet* (2005) recounts a short, semi-sexual relationship that the narrator has with a fellow student during the Blitz. The two young people explore each other's bodies, naming body parts for distant cities, finding escape from the war, waking with their limbs intertwined. Neither makes a choice to do this; it is an near-agentless act. The memories in *Here is Where We Meet* are presented as Berger's own experience, and if this is the case, then this relationship may well have been a source for the disruptive, transporting potential of sex against the backdrop of dramatic historical events that would become a feature of *G*. Berger was clearly thinking about *G*. as he wrote *Here is Where We Meet*, as he lifted material word-for-word from the earlier text.<sup>23</sup> This encounter is devoid of the power imbalances and predatory context of some of the sex in *G*. and is non-penetrative. There is no other man mentioned in the relationship between John and Audrey. Sex is less problematically liberating here, as in Pepino's wet dream in *Clive* and an image at the end of *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, in which the narrator imagines in death his bones jumbled up with his lover's - a posthumous instance of the jumbled body parts in various of Berger's representations of the sexual act.

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<sup>23</sup> See pages 302-3 in *G*. and 108 in *Here Is Where We Meet*.

*Ways of Seeing* links the painted nude and advertising in an instructive way. Oil painting became popular, ran Berger's argument, when the historical conditions (the rise of an acquisitive merchant class in the fifteenth Century) demanded an art form that adequately represented the lustre of their possessions (including both women and slaves) and 'celebrated private property'.<sup>24</sup> The 'last moribund form' of this is the photographic image in the advert, the ubiquitous symbol of the consumer society.<sup>25</sup> As original and provocative as these ideas seemed when broadcast, Berger was critiquing the representation of women from a tradition of 'Marxist-feminist' thinking that dates back to Friedrich Engels. For Engels, the oppression of women was intimately bound up with the emergence of the bourgeois family and private property.<sup>26</sup> For some Marxists, women's liberation was predicated upon, and thus subordinate to, the class struggle. Berger ingeniously brings this idea into the realm of visual culture, but at its core the argument retains an assumption that the new socialist society will automatically deliver gender equality as a logical consequence. I also place Berger's fictional representation of women within this context.

Famously, Berger used the occasion of his Booker prize acceptance speech at the Café Royal, to launch an attack on the historic exploitation of slave labour of Booker McConnell and to donate half of his winnings to the Black Panthers.<sup>27</sup> It was a gesture that made as clear a claim for Berger's racial politics as the dedication to Women's Lib makes a claim for his gender politics. The image of the chained moors cursing underneath the statue of Ferdinand I of Florence, Berger told his audience, 'is the single most important image in the book'.<sup>28</sup> This is worth pausing over. It is certainly a rhetorical flourish made as part of a provocative speech, but it is also a serious statement about the novel. A text that is dedicated to the Women's Movement and which deals at such length with the sexual act and sexual politics can have slavery as its central image *only* if we see the hierarchy of struggle, as it were, emerging once more in a slightly different form. Before slavery, the European and

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<sup>24</sup> John Berger *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972,) 139. Chapter 6 addresses paintings of slaves depicted as private property.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 139.

<sup>26</sup> See Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, first published 1883.

<sup>27</sup> The speech was published in *The Guardian* on 24 November, 1972.

<sup>28</sup> It appears for the first time on page 9.

the African might have met as equals, ran Berger's argument. But the moment passed, and

henceforth the world was divided between potential slaves and potential slavemasters. And the European *carried this mentality back into his own society. It became part of his way of seeing everything.*<sup>29</sup>

This 'everything', presumably, includes gender relations.

And yet, by shunning a single authoritative narrative, the novel complicates its male voice, with the metanarrative interpolations tending openly to reinforce the uncertainty of the speaking 'I'. The indeterminacy, prismatic and fractured perspectives and suspensions also undermine any claims for the text's singular or total authority. These perspectives might be emblematised by G.'s penis enfolded by Leonie's cunt; the 'purple weal' on Nûsa's back, caused by Marika, a woman she would never have met had they not both been manoeuvred by G. so he could infuriate a man; and as one of the metanarrative explications of the project, appearing immediately before 'THE SITUATION OF WOMEN' section:

Like a never-seen object in the dark, we can feel our way over some of its surfaces. But we have not identified it...

...I am writing this book in the same dark. (148)

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<sup>29</sup> John Berger, *Selected Essays*, 255. My emphasis.

## 6

### 'Everything is Precipitous': *Pig Earth* and *Once in Europa*

#### 1

##### *The moment of Pig Earth*

For a text that has become so important within Berger's oeuvre, the critical reception of *Pig Earth* was quiet. Reviews tended to be brief and broadly positive.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, reviews of the books seem so non-descript that no critical essay I have found makes any use whatsoever of the book's initial reception. The one exception is Terry Eagleton's 'oddly begrudging' and 'willfully insensitive' review (to use Geoff Dyer's description) in the *New Statesman*.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, *Pig Earth* marks a significant shift in Berger's oeuvre, which is probably the cause of Eagleton's grumpiness, and perhaps the unexpectedness of which muted the rest of its initial reviewers. In time, however, the reaction grew, particularly in the USA, as illustrated by Fred Pfeil's disappointed review in 1980:

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Todd Gitlin hails 'Lucie Cabrol' a masterpiece in a brief review of *Pig Earth* in *The New Republic*, vol. 183, Issue 12, 20 September, 1980, 40.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'A Sort of Fiction', *New Statesman* 97 (1979): 876; Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 125.

Those readers who take up these two new disturbing, flawed yet important and beautiful works, *Pig Earth* and *About Looking*, may well find they want something from them which John Berger is not able to supply us with now: a sense of our own political and cultural vitality and possibility. But it is precisely this something which, in 1980, we must re-discover and extend, for Berger's sake and the sake of his work, and for the sake of our lives.<sup>3</sup>

The tone of this is remarkably similar to Kiernan Ryan's appraisal of *Clive*. It seems it is characteristic of Berger's fiction to disappoint readers searching for political solutions. Pfeil's reaction is part of a wider mood of disillusionment Berger's production of *Pig Earth* represented. Gerald Marzorati describes it thus:

Especially to younger, English-speaking intellectuals, in that period of the 1970's that could still be called the 60's, Berger was a kind of seer. He wasn't of the generation of '68; he turned 46 in 1972. But he was outspoken, passionate, longish-haired, good-looking, hip. In that moment, he was at the very center of things. And then he was gone, to live in a remote peasant village high in the Alps. Many of his most avid readers took it personally. How did living among Alpine peasants square with his politics? Peasants were traditional, resistant to change, reactionary - everything a radical like Berger would oppose.<sup>4</sup>

In the 'Historical Afterword' of *Pig Earth* Berger articulated the thinking that was for some so disappointing:

Meanwhile, if one looks at the likely future course of world history, envisaging either the further extension and consolidation of corporate capitalism in all its brutality, or a prolonged, uneven struggle waged against it, a struggle whose victory is not certain, the peasant experience of survival may well be better adapted to this long and harsh perspective than the

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<sup>3</sup> Fred Pfeil, review in *Minnesota Review*, Number 15, Fall 1980 (New Series), 126. Pfeil's illustrative disappointment is also mentioned by Harvey J. Kaye in 'Historical Consciousness and Storytelling: John Berger's Fiction' in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, (16:4), 1983, 52.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Marzorati 'Living and Writing the Peasant Life' in *The New York Times*, November 29, 1987, Sunday, Late City Final Edition, 38.

continually reformed, disappointed, impatient progressive hope of an ultimate victory.<sup>5</sup>

Later critics have noted the significance of this moment. Geoff Dyer quotes the same passage as I do above,<sup>6</sup> and Bill Quillan cites Berger in an interview expressing a similar sentiment: 'one has to have a much longer view—endurance actually. It is simply to keep hope alive. It is a question of putting hands around that flame'.<sup>7</sup>

Berger wrote in *Art and Revolution* that the globally exploited millions would free themselves 'at the longest within the century'.<sup>8</sup> Published in 1969, the text was probably produced before Berger's disillusionment with the events of May 1968 was fully developed. The essay 'Between Two Colmars' is organised around the happenstance that Berger visited the Grünewald Altarpiece in Colmar twice, a decade apart, in 1963 and 1973. Of the great change in the intervening years Berger wrote:

In 1968, hopes, nurtured more or less underground for years, were born in several places in the world at once and given their names: and in the same year, these hopes were categorically defeated. This became clearer in retrospect [...] When I look around at my friends - and particularly those who were (or still are) politically conscious - I see how the long-term direction of their lives was altered or deflected at that moment just as it might have been by private event: the onset of an illness, an unexpected recovery, a bankruptcy. I imagine that if they looked at me, they would see something similar.<sup>9</sup>

The following decade saw the so-called 'Era of Stagnation' in the USSR, the Red Army increasing its hold on Eastern Europe and the series of US-backed military coups in South America in the 1970s. These last touched Berger personally when a friend from Allende's exiled government, Orlando Letelier, who had supported Berger through the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, was killed by a Pinochet-

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<sup>5</sup> John Berger, *Pig Earth* (London: Readers and Writers Cooperative, 1979), 212-3. All subsequent references to this edition and made in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 125.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Quillan, *Minnesota Review*, Number 28, Spring 1987 (New Series), 94.

<sup>8</sup> John Berger *Art and Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 153.

<sup>9</sup> Berger, 'Between two Colmars' in *Selected Essays*, 325.

ordered car bomb attack in 1976. It is little wonder that the bullish hope expressed in 1969 had been converted into a pessimistic reading of the short and mid-term future and a chastened need for endurance. Throughout the period in which Berger was to write about the survival qualities of peasants and their scepticism of linear (and thus revolutionary and teleological) time, Berger's sense of entrenchment increased, as 'governments of the ideological right, committed to an extreme form of business egoism and laissez-faire, came to power in several countries around 1980', Thatcher and Reagan principal among them.<sup>10</sup> From his rented farmhouse in the Haute Savoie, Berger continued to deal directly in his essays with what he saw as a darkening wider world: he published on specific events, such as torture in Chile and the velvet revolutions in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and more broadly about capitalism's impoverishment of experience, in 'Why Look at Animals?', among many examples. He published a poem about Letelier in *Keeping a Rendezvous* (1992), and wrote about the military coup in Turkey in 1980 in *And Our Faces My Heart, Brief as Photos* (1984):

Thousands have disappeared without news. To date at least eighty have died under torture. It is probable that one of the five I'm looking at is being tortured today.

Drafts of *Once in Europa* show that it was to have a small section about the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>11</sup> Berger's 'retreat' into the mountains did not, then, coincide with disengagement with the outside world. In Berger's own account it was, alongside the many other complex and unknowable reasons people do things, a strategy, not a betrayal. Simultaneously the direct threat to the life of those around him lent his work on the peasants a political intensity.<sup>12</sup>

Another prevalent idea that followed Berger into the mountains is that in order to represent the peasant experience of survival, he needed to 'completely relearn the art of narration'.<sup>13</sup> This is his own claim, and many critics are happy to validate it, using Walter Benjamin's distinction between the novel and the story as a

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<sup>10</sup> Eric Hobsbawm *The Age of Extremes* (London: Abacus, 1995), 248-9.

<sup>11</sup> John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/43.

<sup>12</sup> This 'intensity' has been noted by Edward Said, 'Bursts of Meaning' in *Reflections on Exile and other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 149.

<sup>13</sup> Berger quoted by Andrew Hislop in the interview 'Peasant Wisdom?' *The Guardian*, October 9, 1983.

starting point to approach the relationship between Berger's earlier work and the peasant texts.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, there are intriguing passages of *Pig Earth* where Berger's debt to Benjamin is particularly clear. For example, Jean's summary of the decades of his life in 'Lucie' (163) reproduces the rhythmic presence of death that Benjamin finds in the passage in Johann Peter Hebel's 'The Unexpected Reunion', in which decades of time are also described in a paragraph. Benjamin praises the repeated allusion to death, which he states 'appears in it with the same regularity as the reaper does in the processions that pass around the cathedral clock at noon.'<sup>15</sup> In the similar length of time between Lucie saying his name twice, Jean sails to the Land of the Dead, sees the mass slaughter in industrial abattoirs, hears of his father's death, witnesses the epidemic in the shanty town, sees Gilles's death and hears of his mother's and then Ursula's death. Each reference to death is similarly spaced, the frequency increasing slightly towards the end.

The stylistic shift in *Pig Earth*, Berger's own announcement of it, and the critical response all work together to produce an oft-repeated narrative that places the movement from *G.* to *Pig Earth* as pivotal in the oeuvre, the defining transition which divides it in two. I wish to complicate this idea. General similarities of technique and purpose strike me. *G.*'s pockets of stolen rebellion escape a different era of political despair and impending disaster. In an appeal to publishers for ongoing support to finish *The Book of Leporello* (*G.* in embryo) Berger wrote:

A DJ [Don Juan] arises as a political figure in periods of political stagnation. His sexual exploits cannot simply be dismissed as a substitution for political ones: they are, given certain social circumstances, a direct if inarticulate expression of his social situation. I believe that this was true of the original DJ legend in Spain, of a possible DJ, belonging to the privileged classes, in 1900, and of millions of people today.<sup>16</sup>

In Berger's own terms, seducing women in 1900 is a direct political act, and hay-making by hand in 1977 can be seen similarly. Part of the work the books perform is to show why. Bourgeois conservatism is repeatedly momentarily defeated in *G.*, as

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Geoff Dyer's and Andy Merrifield's chapters on *Pig Earth*. The Benjamin essay to which they refer is 'The Storyteller'.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 94.

<sup>16</sup> John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/12

are capitalist production relations in *Pig Earth*. The idea persists in Berger's creative imagination: in *To The Wedding* it is the flow of time itself (leading inexorably to death, and quickly in Ninon's case) that is being resisted when Gino skillfully rows Ninon across the fast-flowing Po to an island protected from the current.<sup>17</sup> The figurative significance of space in *Pig Earth* grows out of the beds and patches of grass on which G. is enveloped by his lovers.

The least problematic encounters G. has with women are with Leonie and Nûsa, both young peasant migrants. In *A Fortunate Man*, Sassall admires the practical skill and creativity of the inhabitants of the Forest of Dean in the moat-clearing project,<sup>18</sup> and his choice of practice is in part based on an earlier experience:

In Rhodes he taught peasants elementary medicine. He saw himself as a life-saver. He had proved his skill to himself and his ability to take decisions. With this proof came the conviction that those who lived simply, those who were dependent upon him, *possessed qualities and a secret of living which he lacked*.<sup>19</sup>

Berger's texts valued aspects of rural life long before *Pig Earth*, and the repository of knowledge and experience that it represents was latent within the earlier work. It is late capitalism, and urban, tech-heavy life that Berger sees as threatening our relationship with animals, for example, thought through in 'Why Look at Animals', but embodied much earlier in *Clive*.

That capitalistic modernity is to blame for a corrosion of human experience is presented as a truism in Berger's texts as it is in many Marxist thinkers before him. This is a powerful thread in twentieth century thought; nevertheless in 'A problem of perspective', in *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams shows how the pastoral values of 'yesteryear' have always just been lost, are always just beyond reach, regardless of whether one looks back from modernity or from the Norman invasion, and as such we should not too readily accept such thinking.<sup>20</sup> In this context, Pfeil, Merryfield and Quillan have noted the presence of Heideggerian

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<sup>17</sup> John Berger, *To The Wedding*, 91-5

<sup>18</sup> John Berger *A Fortunate Man*, 92-3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 50, my emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> Raymond Williams (London: Hogarth, 1993), 9-12. Raymond Mazurek also cites *The Country and the City* in the context of *Pig Earth*. See 'Totalization and Contemporary Realism: John Berger's Recent Fiction' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (25:3), 1984, 137.

motifs and concerns in the peasant texts. Berger cites Heidegger in 'Seker Ahmet and the Forest', an essay first published in *New Society* in 1979 and republished in *About Looking*. Beyond a wonderful reading of Ahmet's painting 'The Woodcutter', Berger's endorsement of Heidegger's thought was equivocal: 'it is unimportant here how obscure or meaningful one judges Heidegger's contribution to modern thought to be', he hedged.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Dasein's relationship with death, with technology and with time chime with Berger's own, and some of Heidegger's favourite tropes - the forest and clearing, the pathway, manual labour, the woodcutter - directly correlate with Berger's literal subject-matter.<sup>22</sup> In *Lilac and Flag*, the final part of *Into Their Labours*, the obsession Sucus inherits from his father of revealing a hidden truth through examining a word's etymological root is a distinctly Heideggerian turn. In Heidegger's work and Berger's writing about peasant experience much of what is held as valuable and much imagery seems to coalesce; nevertheless I have reservations about the suggestion that Berger's text borrows Heideggerean metaphors. For example, Bruce Robbins asserts that 'it is characteristic of [Berger's] writing, and of the lingering wonder with which it can be read and reread, that the agency which takes Danielle away from her native mountains should be represented by a Heideggerian woodcutter,' (in 'The Time Of Cosmonauts' in *Once in Europa*).<sup>23</sup> Importantly, however, Pasquale is not a peasant; he is obliged to use machines to work; is a seasonal migrant who dreams of being a merchant, and is someone who finds in the forest hardship, danger, uninsured accidents and exploitation as an industrial piecemeal worker. He is obliged to enter the forest, reluctantly, knowing the risks, and any similarity to Heidegger's woodcutter - finding and revealing paths and creating clearings - goes entirely unemphasised, as the trees, 'slippery as fish' (96), are piled up and await the helicopter that he and his co-workers marvel at the price of hiring.<sup>24</sup> Instead it is the steep craggy slopes of the depopulated (and deforested) alpage pastures above which press forth as the powerful landscape of the story, in which the obscurity and namelessness of the relationship between

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<sup>21</sup> Berger, 'Seker Ahmet and the Forest' in *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 93.

<sup>22</sup> For a broad overview of Heidegger's thought see, for example, George Steiner *Martin Heidegger* (London: Fontana Press, 1987). Berger recommends this 'admirable' book for those unfamiliar with Heidegger's life's work in 'Seker Ahmet and the Forest'.

<sup>23</sup> Bruce Robbins, 'John Berger's Disappearing Peasants' *Minnesota Review*, Number 28, Spring 1987 (New Series), 67.

<sup>24</sup> John Berger, *Once in Europa* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 106. All subsequent references to be made within the body of the text.

Marius and Danielle is played out, and in which 'sounds, like distances, are deceptive' (97).

Readings of *Pig Earth* and *Once in Europa* often close off the text in some way. For example, Peter Hitchcock perceptively reads the *Trilogy* as an investigation into the origins of the working class, and for him the opening description of the poppy at the beginning of the story 'Once in Europa' is emblematic. The story opens

before the poppy flowers, its green calyx is hard like the outer shell of an almond. One day this shell is split open. Three green shards fall to the earth. It is not an axe that splits it open, simply a screwed up ball of membrane—thin folded petals like rags. As the rags unfold, their colour changes from neonate pink to the most brazen scarlet to be found in the fields. It is if the force that split open the calyx were the need of this red to be seen. (112)

Hitchcock rightly finds here a figure for the class-consciousness that develops in 'Once in Europa', figuring the 'complex process of identification in which the sense of work as proletarianization will become manifest.'<sup>25</sup> I agree that the text charts the factory attracting a working population, and as peasants like Odile move to towns and work in factories, more discussions about class and politics occur and systems of thought come into contact with each other. Félix takes the communist paper for labourers and agricultural workers (8). In Venice Marietta introduces Bruno to Marx (187) and Gramsci (189). Stepan's father is an anarchist and Michel a socialist. Nevertheless, the poppy also wriggles free from this context back towards the world depicted in *Pig Earth*. It references the spots of blood that drip from the hanging

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Hitchcock 'Work Has the Smell of Vinegar': Sensing Class in John Berger's *Trilogy* *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 47, Number 1, Spring 2001, 19. Hitchcock mentions the quotation mark that appears at the end, but not beginning, of the opening 'poppy' paragraph. He reads it thus: "The story "Once in Europa" in *Once in Europa* begins in the middle of things (perhaps that is why there are no quotation marks at the beginning of the opening paragraph that ends with them)." (19) The solitary quotation mark appears in the first edition (the US Pantheon edition, 1987) and is reproduced in the first UK Granta edition, 1989. The Granta edition, however, is a facsimile edition, reproducing the exact layout, page numbers and typographical errors of the original. The 2000 Bloomsbury edition corrects the errors, and the quotation mark, which is the only one in the entire text due to Berger's aversion to them, has been removed. A dedication has also been added, 'For Nella' which suggests that Berger had some influence in the publishing process. None of this is definitive; on balance I am inclined to read the mark as a typographical error.

See also Peter Hitchcock, 'They must be represented? Problems in theories of working-class representation' in *PMLA: publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (115:1) 2000, 20-32.

cow's livers in 'A Question of Place' which are 'the colour of poppies when they first blossom, before they deepen and become crimson' (2). The representation of the poppy's insistence on opening echoes another death in *Pig Earth*, that of Pépé's pig, whose 'blood gushed out' 'as if it had been waiting to do just that' (50). Both blood and petals acquire a strange agency in these descriptions, and it is the same colour that is awaiting its revelation. The description of the poppy contains subtle allusions to the death of two animals from the previous collection and so to the relationship between human and animal death that *Pig Earth* establishes, and in doing so invokes death even as flowering brings to mind birth: opening and closing a life-cycle and reminding us that again and again it is through the natural surroundings and their relationship with animals that the peasants comprehend life. These associations resonate minimally with Hitchcock's reading, but do register with the theme of the unknowable nature and inextricability of birth and death that form the basis for Odile's experience of her life.

The poppy is also represented as vividly *itself*. From the green shards falling to the earth to the membrane-thin petals, the narrative delights in the extraordinary materiality of the world that surrounds its characters. Odile is subject to compulsions that she has no control over, and her words at the end 'there is nothing more to know' suggest not class-consciousness but an understanding of her own life as beyond the reach of knowledge. The political reading of the figure coexists unprivileged as part of the network of different ways of thinking. The act of transformation links much of this: of the hidden to the revealed, or the reverse; the alive to the dead; unborn to born; apolitical to politicised, but neither here and rarely more widely do these movements describe a linear progression, and often they cross-contaminate each other in these texts' richest moments. To relate these transformations solely to a political context is to deny, both the representation of the poppy, and the work in which it appears, many aspects of its complexity.

*Pig Earth's Bodies*

Berger states that the stories in *Pig Earth* were written in the order in which they are published, and characters become progressively more elaborately drawn throughout the text. However, the earlier stories already display well-formed ideas of the relationships that build between people, animals and the land throughout the whole book. In the first piece, 'A Question of Place,' the unnamed peasant oversees the slaughter of one of his cows; the blood from the cut throat fans out across the floor to resemble 'an enormous velvet skirt whose tiny waistband is the lip of the wound' (2). For a moment, until the creeping blood pool erases the image, the dead cow (referred to throughout as 'she') is dressed like a grotesquely inverted woman, her waistband her neck. She is then lowered on her back into a trolley that looks like a 'very large open work pram' (2-3). The mother and son in the abattoir 'work like tailors' (3) and the hide is described as an 'unbuttoned coat' (3). The description of the cow, then, produces a number of human associations: she wears clothes, is fitted for a coat by tailors, is a baby placed in a pram. The spots of blood underneath the livers are likened to 'poppies when they first blossom' (2), an image of both new life and the natural world. This resemblance also fades as the figured poppy matures and turns crimson. The associations with the slaughter seem restless, establishing it as a site of rapid change.<sup>26</sup> The cow changes from alive to dead and from cow to meat on her journey from the rural to urban poor and then from meat to money.<sup>27</sup> Her figurative proximity to several human and natural contexts begins a process which continues throughout *Pig Earth*.

In 'The Wind Howls Too', another relationship is presented through the similes surrounding the carcass of the pig:

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<sup>26</sup> Raymond Masurek reads this moment differently, equating it to G.'s narrator's wish not to become 'a prisoner of the nominal'. See 'Totalization and Contemporary Realism: John Berger's Recent Fiction', 139.

<sup>27</sup> Abattoirs, of which Berger describes himself as 'something of an expert' in *Keeping a Rendezvous* (49) also attract the most startlingly figurative prose in *A Seventh Man*. In the industrial scale, urban abattoir the carcasses 'hang like tree trunks' from which a 'natural' 'red stream' flows. The 'bled forest opens onto a highway' (133). Here the movement of the imagery is reversed. The deft movements of the skilled slaughterers, which connected the rural with the urban in 'A Question of Place', are replaced with the huge scale which brings to mind the forest, at least until the carcasses process down the line.

When his belly was opened, it was like the mouth of a cave.

Pépé once admitted to me that he had dug for gold. During one summer he and a friend had got up two hours earlier every morning to go and dig there. They found nothing; but he showed me the shaft, should I ever wish to continue working it. It was hidden in a moraine on a steep wooded slope, where the boulders, the tree roots and the soil itself were all covered with a thick green moss. Whatever you touched there was like the fur of an animal. (52)

Here there is a subtle movement: the pig is likened to the cave mouth, a feature of the landscape, the association with which leads André to remember his grandfather's gold mine, another subterranean place.<sup>28</sup> The area around the mine is like fur, completing a metaphorical circle, in which animals are understood in terms of landscape, which in turn can be understood in terms of animals.<sup>29</sup> The pig relinquishes its mysteries during the breaking down of its carcass, as the butchery 'made visible all that makes a pig a living, growing animal' (52). The mine preserves and transforms the pig's mystery (particularly given the treasure that may or may not be concealed within it) and deepens the strong association of the pig's death with Pepe's grandfather's. The significance of the connection between human life and that of other living things remains unspoken apart from its figurative inscription. Having forgotten about it, the pig's head surprises André and provokes his grief, for reasons he understands neither as a child, nor looking back narrating his story. Instead he howls, making a pre-verbal noise, like the wind, as the title tells us, but also like a wolf or a dog.

Until 'The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol', *Pig Earth* appears far more interested in the bodies of its animals than of its humans. André's narrative lingers on the skin calluses of the pig's knees (51), its lungs reminiscent of 'two sprays of pear blossom' (53), its undiscovered strength (49), its face reminiscent of a fat, 'untanned' 'man of leisure' (51). We encounter the red tip of the he-goat's penis (27) in 'The Great Whiteness', his entire body shaking at orgasm (27). After the birth of Moselle's calf 'a dribble of viscous uterine water hung from her vagina', which

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<sup>28</sup> Echoes of the mine appear in 'The Time of the Cosmonauts', see *Once in Europa*, 85.

<sup>29</sup> The correspondence of the 'anti-clockwise spirals' (28) of the semen inside Hélène's goat with the 'whorls' (28) of snow is a similar connection between interior and exterior, the land and farm animal.

moments before has 'spread as easily as a haversack' (20). 'Addressed to Survivors' begins with a description of the cow named Rousa:

she gave the impression of being a reddish-brown cow who had just waded across a river of milk. She had had four calves. Four times a perfectly formed animal with reddish-brown and white fur, the stumps of horns, hooves, eyelashes, teeth, ears, sexual organs, had grown in the matrix of her wide haunches and been expelled. Four times the birth had released a flow of milk into her immense udder which was like a full moon coming up behind a hill. (60)

The river of milk which Rousa has fancifully waded through to get her colouring is internalised, brought into her udder by her pregnancies, which in turn is like the moon - a complex entangling of the cow, the landscape, and wider galaxy. It is Hélène who is led by her goat (not the reverse) up the mountainside towards the great whiteness (25).<sup>30</sup>

In comparison with the relish with which the text conveys the rich physicality of its animals, human bodies are sparsely and neutrally described. (The exception is that men in this book piss liberally in gutters and fields.) Joseph's face, 'wrinkled like the skin of baked milk', (62) is a rare visual simile. Hubert is 'a large man, but very meticulous' (17). Hélène is a woman of seventy-five (24) and beyond the sensation of the first snowflakes of the season prickling her tongue like sherbet (27) and swollen fingers (28) she remains without description. Catherine has 'long arms' and a 'tall body' (30) and the skin beneath her shoulder-blade is white and soft (34). Humans have bodies that make little impression on their surroundings; they certainly do not evoke the landscape in the same way, substituting with mountains, moons or mines. Catherine, her brother and her friend are all so thin that their coffins would fit into the narrow trench they dig (32). On occasion human bodies even tend towards the immaterial. Martine describes Joseph as 'as thin as a shadow' (64) and in turn Joseph describes his Patronne's body as 'vague but full like a cumulus cloud' (66).

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<sup>30</sup> As discussed in relation to *The Foot Of Clive*, Berger returns to this idea of animals as 'frontier experts' leading humans to what he will call 'the different sets of the visible' in the much later essay 'Opening a Gate' in *The Shape of A Pocket*.

Lucie Cabrol's body is quite different. At the beginning of 'The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol', the last story in the collection, her birth is described: it is very quick (104), associated in the mind of Jean, the narrator, with the sight of Lucie trout-fishing with her hands, a complicated trope that both equates her new-born body with fish-like qualities and pre-figures the extraordinary qualities (cunning, speed, access) her size seems to confer on her. By the second page, when her 'tiny body, the colour of a radish' is held upside down and a dark red mark is found on her forehead (105), Lucie's body has already attracted more attention than all of the other human bodies in the preceding stories combined. The narrative hinges on her physicality, finds animal figures for her throughout, pays mind to her breasts the size of spoons, her dirty feet, the sex she has, her birth, her strength, her teeth. Jean measures her body limb by limb with his own. Her body undergoes significant change - from birth, childhood, through to old age and then back to youth in her third life. Several associations from earlier stories resonate through her: Pépe's last thoughts are about being an old crow who looks down on humans and has access to both the distant past and future, and in her second life Lucie appears have become like this crow - the deep, feminine voice of her first life (118; 120) replaced by one repeatedly described by the verb 'caw' (136; 138; 142; 151) as she lives high above the village, looking down on it. 'Like a crow,' states Jean of this second Lucie, 'she noticed everything' (153).<sup>31</sup> In her second life she smells of boar (142; 169). Lucie is like a humming-bird (114); Jean refers to parts of her body 'with the words we used for animal parts' (120) whilst they have sex for the second time; she plays the back end of the cow elephant; her legs are as 'lean as the forelegs of a cow' (138); she picks wild cherries with 'her eyes shut like an owl' (154); she cocks her head to one side in suspicion, 'like a blackbird when it is about to smash a snail against a stone'.<sup>32</sup> The similes with various animals continue in a situation reminiscent (in frequency, if not mood) of the piling up of animal figures in *The Foot of Clive*. The most obvious of these allusions is the 'Cocadrille', the mythical, malevolent creature born from a cock's egg incubated in a dung heap that can kill with a stare. Her nickname marks her as different, threatening and magical.

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<sup>31</sup> Pépe may hold to Berger's sense of animals as unchanging, which is why he attributes the crow access to the past and future; as Berger states in 'Why Look at Animals,' 'each lion is Lion, each ox is Ox'. John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?' *Selected Essays*, 261. (First published in *New Society*, 1977.)

<sup>32</sup> Berger has recycled this, consciously or not, from Janos's diary in *A Painter of Our Time*: 'It is difficult to get [John's] suspiciousness. Always a bit like a bird breaking a snail on a stone' (118).

It is not just Lucie who attracts these associations. An invisible dam has been broken, and all characters in 'Lucie Cabrol' are subject to similar descriptions, beginning with the pig-like prostitute Jean sleeps with in the army (119); the maquisards are described by Edmond as dogs, and Lucie as having caught their fleas by metaphorically (and possibly actually) sleeping with Saint-Just (132), whose wound is like 'beef' (126); Lucie describes her brothers as 'straight as a goat's hind leg' (131) and she rides Jean as if he were a horse (120). The violently-dead chalet-builders make the same noise ('tchee tchee hissssss' (171)) as grasshoppers (183).

Human births, sex acts and deaths go unrepresented until Lucie, with the exception of Pépe's scantily described death and a few that occur off-screen, as it were. Lucie's death (her skull 'split' with an axe (165)) subtly echoes the symbolically significant moment in the butchering of the cow in the first pages of the text: when the 'son *axés* the breast bone' (3, my emphasis), he transforms the cow from animal to meat, 'just as the tree is transformed into timber' (3). Lucie is not just killed but transformed (into her third life) at this moment, and both she and the slaughtered cow are killed for money. She herself contributes to the associations, pouring cow's milk over her breasts: strangely, though effectively, seducing Jean. Milk is important to her. She is milking and cheese making in the alpage when they first have sex, she sees raspberry picking as a kind of milking, the berries like nipples and she thanks the canes by addressing them as 'sows' (138). In her second life she gets up in time to milk the cows that she no longer has.

We read the unrelenting comparisons of Lucie's body with animals through the frame of the preceding stories, in which the bodies of animals are keys to comprehending the landscape and also gatekeepers of mystery, of that which exists immaterially, beyond comprehension or articulation. Thus Lucie's body is charged with those resonances also, and they propel her into her third, ghostly life. Jean, unlike any character before him, follows a person, not an animal, into this intangible space; it is Lucie's unique privilege to be able to lead him.

### 3

*Pig Earth* is a text of transformations, passageways, hidden entrances. What it values most of all are the moments and places where these present themselves. In 'The

'Great Whiteness', two experiences of time are presented against the steepness of the slopes. The urgency of inseminating the goat before conditions make it impossible ('there's still time!' exclaims H  l  ne (24)) is a rush against the inevitability of the changing seasons, reinforced by the 'rushing' of the stream (25). This is in contrast to the goat who 'ambled lightly' (24) towards the 'unhurried' (26) he-goat who waits, as hope fades, 'for something to pass' (27). What passes remains unknown, indeed we do not know whether it is a physical thing moving through space or a moment in time. Snow falls slowly but inexorably; the goat's thrusts (when they eventually come), are 'as rapid as the falling flakes were slow' (27). The route home is less steep, and the urgency is gone. The story is bookended by death, with the visit to the graveyard at the beginning and the boulder killing Lloyse at its conclusion. Goat and old lady pass a boulder which some time before had fallen from the rock face and then rolled 'slowly' until it hit Arthaud's house, killing his wife. Arthaud builds another bedroom on the other side. The boulder falls suddenly but then moves slowly, and now is permanent, an echo of the he-goat who has stood 'motionless as a boulder' (27) until his thirty fast thrusts. Fast and slow, life and death, contingency and permanence are represented as coexisting, and the unpredictable steepness of the mountainside gives the story its closing metaphor for this.

There are places where perhaps the strain is too much, and the mechanism too evident: high on the alpage Joseph and Martine lie either side of Rousa's head where she has come to rest after rolling one hundred metres down the slope. They stare at the milky way that looks like a goose, the lights of the village that look like grains of sugar and think of their respective youths. They conceptualise Joseph's appearance as a birth (70), play music addressed to the dead and unborn, and sing songs in voices that sound like pine trees. These connect with the dying cow, the past and future in personal and impersonal senses, the forest, the galaxy, the village and each other. In both 'The Great Whiteness' and 'Addressed to Survivors', it takes the steepness of the landscape to provide the circumstances for the final moment in which transformation comes into relief. These stories represent the power of the steep mountain slopes, not just to shape the life lived on them, but to figure it. Rousa the cow echoes her mental descent into madness by rolling physically downwards. She has rolled from sanity to insanity, from life to imminent death, from living cow to meat. It is the physical expression of this that allows Martine and Joseph to be witnesses and experience their own night of liminalities. If Rousa had

rolled another ten metres she would not have been able to stop herself, and consequently would not have been sellable as meat; the distinction means little to her but much to Martine and Joseph. It also means that as they wait out the night with her, a now immovable object, she is still within a few metres of the change in incline and further descent, prefiguring her trip to the slaughterhouse the next morning.

It is the energy of the slopes that each story in turn represents as propelling the narrative towards previously invisible frontiers and transformations. André's father has mysteriously died under a sledge on a steep path in 'The Wind Howls Too'. Pépé points out the spot as the place where André's father gave up - suggesting a history and suicide which remains mostly hidden. Jean breaks his arm and shoulder and narrowly avoids a drop to his death after Lucie disappears for the last time. In 'An Independent Woman', when Catherine wakes on the third, critical day in the search for the well, sure that the men will not return, the mist over the village reminds her of real fog:

The worst thing about real fog is that it hangs square like a curtain. Vertical and horizontal. The best about it lifting is that all the slopes are revealed and *everything is precipitous*. (36, my emphasis)<sup>33</sup>

The steepness of the slopes, when suddenly revealed to Catherine, has been transferred to everything else as well: it does not appear to be, or seem, but 'is' precipitous - the word connoting steepness, dangerous height and headlong motion. Catherine welcomes such potential. Marcel leads his captive inspectors down a track next to which is a steep escarpment, the prospect of falling over which does not scare the younger inspector, so convinced is he that he is being led to his death in any case (94). He will push their car over it and watch until 'finally it came to rest on its side and snow started to cover it' (95). In her second life, Lucie lives with a sheer drop behind her down to the Jalent river below. (In another of the echoes her story makes with the rest of the book, her roadmender's house is next to a giant rock, bringing to mind Arthaud's house (140).) 'So you've seen the ledge I live on!' (161) she exclaims to Jean. Her first life begins with a log rolling down the slope,

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<sup>33</sup> This is an alteration from the only surviving manuscript version of the story. In that the line reads 'there is nothing which is not precarious - except the sky'. John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/32.

'galloping' (104) like an animal, and rolling surprisingly far after the slope levels out, continuing with little jumps and kicks.

We can add the mountain slope to the imagery of transition in Berger's oeuvre that we find so prominent in *G.*, with its plane crashes, ladders, tumbles and riding-accidents. It is a motif that recurs in much of Berger's best work, all the way to the aqueducts, lifts and swings that populate *Here Is Where We Meet*. Berger's texts are full of gravity, as a force to be overcome, to submit to, be changed and killed by. *Pig Earth* does not require fairground swings or aviation competitions. The land itself contains the potential, and the text is organised through a network of ascending and descending images that relate to it.

The higher up the location in the stories of *Pig Earth*, the more chance that significant events happen. Lucie and Jean have sex high above the village, only the stars above them, the village far below. There is apparently a historical precedent for this as a transgressive space. According to Berger, young men and women looking after animals on the summer alpage were by common consent given free sexual license, to the extent that the Bishop of Annecy tried to stop the custom at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> Up there the birds fly at hand-height 'like a line of stitches' (116), as if sewing together invisible borders, recollecting in reverse the mother and son working like tailors to break down the cow at the beginning of the book. Joseph and Martine are also up on the alpage. In Lucie's second life, Jean must climb high above the village to see her. The text explicitly acknowledges the significance of the mountains; 'in the mountains, the past is never behind, it is always to the side' (163) remarks Jean. Slightly later, he states 'I know that it is easy in the mountains to see things that others cannot see' (172) - a statement that might simply refer to the lack of obstacles to vision, but equally could be about madness or other kinds of revelation.

As a domestic-scale counterpoint to the slopes, the text uses the ladder as a way of thinking about navigating between high and low. Ladders feature as an everyday object (Lucie climbs one to the loft in the roadmender's house); as a mythical object (when he visits Lucie, the Curé speaks of Jacob's ladder, by which angels moved between heaven and earth. 'They trod the gradual rungs of the ladder' (143), he says); and as a metaphor in perhaps the strongest poem in the text, 'Ladder' (41-42). In the poem, a dead ewe eaten by voles and crows lies at the foot

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<sup>34</sup> So Berger tells Andrew Hislop in an interview 'Peasant Wisdom?' *The Guardian*, October 9, 1983. He surely approved.

of the ladder, and butterflies 'climb the blue sky' beyond the 'lightheaded' (42) topmost rung. Above the ladder's head the butterflies' wings change colour from white to blue 'and they disappear/ like the dead'. 'Descending/ and ascending/ this ladder/ I live' (42) declares the speaker, echoing, and also reversing, the phrasing describing Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:12, 'behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.' The two ends of the ladder are the imaginative bookends of the text.

It is repeatedly stressed that when the characters are at the top of the mountain, nothing is above them but the blue sky or stars. At the other end of the scale, Lucie is called 'a child of the earth' (142) by the curé, and Jean notes her forest floor smell (142) and that her feet were black with dirt (117). She takes a year to move into the loft of the roadmender's house, telling Jean 'the idea of sleeping half-way up to the sky, in the cold, didn't appeal to me. I prefer to sleep on the ground, don't you?' (148). Nevertheless, she does move up, and it is from there that she descends in her would-be wedding outfit and is 'half-way down the ladder' (161), bizarrely re-enacting the angels on Jacob's ladder, before Jean realises she is proposing to him. Lucie also takes a small ladder with her when she forages, in order to reach the branches of trees (154). She is continually ascending and descending, heading higher to forage, and always wishing to return to the village below. In her third life, Lucie leads Jean to the clearing where the chalet is being raised, and when the work is finished Jean climbs the ladder to reach the roof. 'As long as I can climb up a ladder and lift one foot above the next, I need no help' (187), he says. Around him butterflies 'continued to flutter and climb, close and open their wings' (189), as at the top rung of the poem's ladder. When Lucie leaves him, and he realises that she has gone for good, he notices the stars above him, as so many characters in *Pig Earth* do, and then misses his footing, and the ladder becomes 'a *precipitous* slope' (190, my emphasis) on which he both returns to the living and nearly dies. The two motifs merge, the controlled vertical movement on the ladder giving way to the dangerous impetus of the slope, which nearly kills Jean as it has successfully killed Rousa, André's father and Lloyse before him. It is not the last ladder of the book. Jean returns to the roadmender's house, climbs the ladder himself and tells us that Lucie used to dream a young handsome man had climbed it and got into bed with her. In its final incarnation, the ladder is a vehicle for companionship and sexual fulfillment, never used.

Much is made of the materiality of *Pig Earth*, of Berger's transformation of himself from urban intellectual to shit-shovelling peasant. He had to learn 'how to go lower', states Merrifield, for example.<sup>35</sup> But the book is equally as preoccupied with the lightheaded end of the ladder and the movement upwards as it is fascinated with the matter at the bottom of it, and spends its time describing the passage between the two. In this Berger's text has at least one clear antecedent. 'What a lark, what a plunge', writes Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway*, a book which J. Hillis Miller asserts 'is organised around the contrary penchants of rising and falling...these motions are not only opposites, but are also ambiguously similar.'<sup>36</sup>In this sense at least, *Pig Earth*'s invites an association with modernist concerns and aesthetics as much as *G.* does. Reaching to the stars and plummeting to the graveyard are the two transformative movements in *Pig Earth*. 'Descending/ and ascending/ this ladder/ I live' states the narrator of 'Ladder', but the voice might be speaking more widely for the narrative method of the whole text.

#### 4

##### *Once in Europa*

'The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol' extends and completes *Pig Earth*, and it also - with its themes of love, loneliness and emigration - provides a bridge to the second volume of *Into Their Labours*. As with 'Lucie', the animals have receded into the background and it is the people who are in focus. *Pig Earth* concerns predominantly older characters; the abattoir owner, Hélène, Catherine, Nicolas, Jean-Francois, Pépe, Joseph and Marcel are all elderly, and for them the types of events described in *Europa* - falling in love or wanting to, having children or wanting them, occurred long before the stories have opened. 'Lucie Cabrol' is different because this earlier phase of life, never resolved, continues into old age (and beyond). *Europa* concerns much younger characters; Félix, Boris, Danielle, Odile and Bruno are all at least a generation younger, and the indications suggest a generation later - for some aspects of life have shifted, and machinery is now a much more accepted part of working

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<sup>35</sup> Merrifield, *John Berger*, 66.

<sup>36</sup> Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*, 185.

the land. The insemination process has become formalised and bureaucratised (26), and no longer involves climbing a slope at the onset of winter. Félix uses a tractor (without Marcel's reservations) (19), has a milking machine (18) and an electric fence (26).<sup>37</sup> That these machines replace labourers, wives, daughters and shepherds points to the depopulation of the village. The fullest expression of this vacancy is the haymaking; it is the event chosen to be emblematic of the life and Berger uses it to introduce himself in *Pig Earth*. In the past it had been a longer process involving many people and ending with a crowded celebratory supper. Now, as the narrative briskly follows Félix's first year of solitude following the death of his mother, Albertine, 'with the new machines he did not have to work harder than in the first half of his life; the difference now was that he was finally alone' (27).

The breakdown of the haymaking community, and Félix's inability to find a woman left who will be the wife of a peasant, is not blamed on the new technology. If anything, the narrative implies that the reverse is true (at least locally), and machinery fills the gap left as the people disappear: the day after Elaine dies her husband Marius buys a milking machine (87). Albertine reminds Félix that a schoolteacher can't milk cows.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it is this atmosphere of desolation and abandonment in which *Europa* opens, symbolised by a plague of moles, which leaves crops looking healthy from the surface, but ruined below it. The collection also opens with the dressmaker, Delphine, weakly echoing the tailor-like movements of the abattoir workers in 'A Question of Place' at the beginning of *Pig Earth*. The work of the artisanal slaughterer, which brings to mind the gestures and movements of the tailor, has been replaced by the tailor herself, come to stay, albeit she is a factory-worker who makes dresses in the spare time that a salaried, hourly job allows her. Delphine is the first of the women in *Europa* unsuited to the men still tied to the land, and available to them only for short liaisons and what-might-have-been reveries. She is joined by Boris's blond, Marie-Jeanne, and Marietta, the Venetian. The women peasants have more freedom in love as one by one they abandon the menfolk; Danielle follows Pasquale to Bergamo and Odile chooses factory workers Stepan and Michel as partners. Both cease to be straightforwardly

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<sup>37</sup> John Berger, *Once in Europa*. (New York: Pantheon, 1987). References to *Once in Europa* are to this, first, edition and will be made within the text. The first UK edition was published two years later by Granta in 1989. *Another Way of Telling, And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* and *Lilac and Flag* were all published first in USA, all by Pantheon. One possible reason for this is explained below, see footnote 39 of this chapter.

<sup>38</sup> The text never explains why it is that, given that Félix is obliged to use the new technology anyway, it would now matter if his wife had been a teacher.

peasants as a consequence. They tell their own stories (Danielle only in part) and in the process become the first female narrators in Berger's oeuvre.

Salman Rushdie complains that Berger's negative version of migration fails to acknowledge that 'migrants may become mutants, but it is out of such hybridization that newness can emerge.'<sup>39</sup> What is most interesting about this criticism is how inconsistently true it is. Acutely the case for texts such as *A Seventh Man* and *Lilac and Flag, Once in Europa* is predicated upon exactly the kind of fertile mutation that contact between peasant and worker produces. One of the things that makes *Europa* a rich and complex text is that it values deeply the new relationships formed between the besieged peasant and exploited worker against the backdrop of the industrialisation of the mountains: as Michel exclaims at the end of 'Once in Europa': 'It's only in hell, my love, that we find each other!' (180). It is one of a number of references to hell in the text. The joke told by the young drummer which forms the last line of the book - 'Hell is where bottles have two holes and women have none' (192) - prevents us from unambiguously taking Michel's pronouncement as the wider view of the text: Hell in that moment is posited as a jokey nowhere, as husbands and wives lean their heads against each other, exhausted but together, on the bus ride home.

Workers and peasants approach each other with suspicion and desire in *Europa* and discover new compatibilities. The backdrop may be uglier, lives may be twisted into shapes unfamiliar to the world of *Pig Earth* and young peasants may both scorn the ways of their fathers and fear for the future, but the text is consistently reaching to describe a new wonder which appears to arrive alongside the destruction of tradition, and the dangerous, alluring and as yet unnamed vista that widens in front of this later generation of peasants. At the same time, old secrets are foregrounded, such as Michel's fire-cutting. In *Europa*, characters are redeemed in often odd ways: Félix's solitude and depression finds music and with it companionship and a new place at the centre of such festivities as still exist; Marius is understood and remembered by a talkative bird; Boris's story transforms his death from that which might befall a neglected sheep to that caused by an all too human broken heart.

*Europa* is much more interested in writing than is *Pig Earth*. The stories are more aware of themselves as literary objects - an internalisation, as it were, of the

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<sup>39</sup> See Rushdie's review of Geoff Dyer's *Ways of Telling* collected in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 209.

explanations and afterwords of the earlier volume and a move back to the self-aware modernism of *G.* *Europa* repeatedly dramatises the imperfect transformation of matter into words, in response to, and as modification of, the preoccupation with bodies of *Into Their Labours* as a whole. Bodies turn into breath in *Europa*, landscape into pages, people into characters. Odile, as she steps onto the glider, feels 'like a word in the breath of a voice' (113). Stepan vanishes (leaving neither a grave nor ashes) when he dies in the furnace ('he had disappeared...there was no body' (150)) and to his son Christian he exists only as a name and story. Marius is remembered, after the narrative has turned from the alpage to a Bergamo grocer's shop, in the words 'Marius à sauva!' (74) spoken by the blue rock thrush imitating the voice of Danielle.

The narrator of 'Boris is Buying Horses' identifies himself as a writer, who lives in the area (like Berger himself), and whose books are in the local shop. In the representation of the writing process at the beginning of 'Boris' the narrator is passive and receptive. The dead Boris tells him that the story of his life is now ready to be written; the narrator refuses Boris's attempts at conversation, and instead writes (42). The books of the narrator are named at the end of a list of objects for sale in Marie-Jeanne's gift shop:

skiers in bottles, mountain flowers under glass, plates decorated with gentians, miniature cowbells, plastic spinning wheels, carved spoons, chamois leather, sheepskins, clockwork marmots, goat horns, cassettes, maps of Europe, knives with wooden handles, gloves, T-shirts, films, key rings, sunglasses, imitation butterchurns, my books. (39)

The books are emphasised by being positioned last. The other items include the miniature, the artificial, the tacky, disposable and the useful - a pleasingly odd assortment of bedfellows for the literary text. The presence of the books on the list suggests the fact of their commodity nature.<sup>40</sup> 'Boris' both belongs to and is contrasted with these other condensed, manufactured representations, the text

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<sup>40</sup> There may be a material reason for this. *Pig Earth* was published by Writers and Readers Cooperative, set up in 1975 in London by Berger, Richard and Lisa Appignanesi, Glenn Thompson and others. In 1980 Berger also published *About Looking* with the Cooperative. By 1984, financial pressures had led to its break up and Thompson had moved the press to the USA and remade it as a capitalist enterprise. To publish in England, Berger had to go back to a commercial publisher, Granta. Perhaps this was on his mind when highlighting the commodified nature of his work in Boris. For more detail on the history of Writers and Readers, see de Bolla, 79-80.

seems to be saying of itself. It also asks us to consider the relative positions of the narrator and Marie-Jeanne, whose name contains within it yet another version of 'John', and thus another reference to the author. She stocks his books, and the narrator writes about her. They are both outsiders who have settled, they both have the intimate outsider relationship with the area, have gained material and material wealth from it and its people. In a single-sentence paragraph, the narrator states: 'The uncle of all cattle dealers once told me: A ram like Boris is best eaten as meat' (42).<sup>41</sup> It echoes the original sentence that the story sets out to refute: 'Boris died like one of his animals' (39) by equating Boris with a sheep. The meaning, presumably, is that Boris is so untrustworthy that he should not be dealt with until he is dead, as he is at the beginning of the story, presenting himself in the narrator's imagination as subject matter. It is also a sentence that brings to mind the initial description of butchery in *Pig Earth*, and evokes the potential exploitation and inevitable consumption by the narrator of his material. Anxiety is manifest in 'Boris', it appears, about the circumstances surrounding its existence.

At the outset, the narrator of 'Boris' wakes one morning, 'years ago' (40), to find the pastures white. Whiteness in *Europa* is closely associated with the blank page and with the moment of writing.<sup>42</sup> It often takes the form of snow in *Europa*, and the first seasonal snow in particular is a catalyst for change and creation both in 'Boris' and for Félix in 'The Accordion Player' to begin playing the accordion in the cowshed. Odile, from her vantage point on the hand glider, sees the 'white page of the world below. Like the traces of tiny animals in the snow, the scribbles of what I knew as a child. Nobody else could read them here' (115). She sees 'our shadow...moving over the white snow, Christian, [which] looks like the twenty-seventh letter of the alphabet, something between a D and a L' (175). As she flies above her vast white page, Odile is both the narrator of her story and reader of the landscape and life below which forms its subject. Her reading of these shapes and signs are often uncertain or inconclusive. Christian, in the present of the story, points 'at something below. He is wearing the white woolen gloves which I knitted for him. I can't make out what he is pointing at' (141). Odile's failure to identify

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<sup>41</sup> Single sentence (and very short) paragraphs are often arresting in Berger's work. My favourite appears in 'The Accordion Player' in *Europa*: 'The dog ate the mole' (7).

<sup>42</sup> It is a motif positioned at the very beginning next volume, *Lilac and Flag*: 'Three butterflies rise from the field like white ash above a fire...I begin to think of Zsuzsa - or perhaps she begins to think of me. A second butterfly comes down and covers the first; the second is Sucus. The two of them, wings spread, quiver like four pages of a book open in the wind' (4).

what is being gestured towards is in keeping with the other ambiguities represented in the text, in which gestures can be too vague, or things too far away to carry a clear meaning. The white heron she sees later, 'was tzaplia, a creature from far away with a message...of its message I was ignorant' (156), another uncertain symbol of communication, a messenger with an unknown message. The shape that their shadows form, though expressed in terms of the alphabet, is illegible. The letter is not deformed as such; instead it is an uncertain addition to the alphabet. It reminds us of something the text is equally keen to represent: that this transformation from matter to text is not always simple or smooth; sometimes it will be closed, sometimes mystery will be preserved or opened in the process. There is no word for Marius's relationship to Danielle's baby, which is both the justification of the story and assurance that the story must remain open.

Something between a D and a L is also, in the name 'Odile', an 'I'. The flight, the page and the shadow it is inscribed upon are all parts of her simultaneous attempt to narrate and comprehend her life story. The graphic motif pulls in seemingly opposite directions at once: on the one hand to an enigmatic inscription (the twenty-seventh letter), on the other hand to a piece of writing that is able to reach the centre of Odile (or at least 'Odile') and her identity. 'At Cluses', she states, 'I learnt that words belong to writing. We used them; yet they were never entirely ours' (123).

Snow - thick, blank and brutal throughout *Pig Earth* and *Europa* - also connotes death. The 'Two Bears' story Stepan tells to Odile begins with the bears' fur 'all white with hoarfrost' (140), and it is covered in this snow that they will both wake from hibernation to their deaths. The story has a kind of coda: 'the blood of the two bears stained first their fur and later the snow' (141); it is unclear, because of Berger's refusal to use inverted commas for speech, whether Odile is relating this as the last words of Stepan's narrative (after the 'punchline' of 'Bagged two of them!') or adding it herself. The bears' blood bleeds onto the page-like snow and becomes part of Stepan's story. He identifies himself with the male bear, Mischka, whose death prefigures his own. Odile is able to reconcile herself to the lack of body when Stepan dies because it is 'like it happens in an avalanche' (150).

The snow falling outside at the end of 'Boris' is said to create a pain in your skull like concussion (63). Boris himself, dead, stands at the door with a jacket on

'white as a mountain' (41). We find an echo of the danger and potential of the precipice in Boris's journey to the narrator's door via rescuing his sheep:

It was crazy to climb by myself. Yet who would come with me? I couldn't see the path for the snow. If I'd lost my foothold, there was nothing, nothing at all, to stop me til I reached the churchyard below. (41)

The posthumous Boris has already reached the churchyard below: the choice of village landmark is not randomly chosen. Boris's continued or renewed presence relies upon the narrator's words, the process here dramatised. The snow which covers his jacket evokes together his death and the blank page, ready for inscription.

Writing and death figure here as the counterparts on which the emblematic richness of the snow turns. Stories are told at the moment of death, Berger repeatedly insists. Writers are 'death's secretaries'.<sup>43</sup> There is a strange motion which runs through this, reminiscent of the animal-landscape-animal movement in *Pig Earth*. The text describes snow and snowfall, which it understands as a page on which writing will be produced. The same can be said for death: the text describes a death, which in turn provides the impetus for writing.

Snow figures prominently in the extraordinary story of the two hunters that Régis tells Odile (126-7). Two hunters, Jean-Paul and Jean-Marc are in the forest at Peniel, sixteen hundred metres above sea level. Peniel is the alpage that Danielle and Marius also spend the summer at, and the forest where Pasquale and his colleagues fell trees. Jean-Paul sees something by an uprooted spruce and they head 'deeper into the forest' until Jean-Marc can see it too. Jean-Paul refers to it as female in his question - 'can you see her now?' As they make their way towards the tree, the snow is up to their waists. Jean-Marc asks 'Alive?' and Jean-Paul answers by exclaiming 'I can feel it from here!', neutralising or correcting the feminine grammatical person. Jean-Paul disappears, and Jean-Marc hears him laughing and then sighing. Jean-Marc knows what is happening (more certainly than we do), so averts his eyes and looks at the treetops. He counts to five thousand, which must mean that a considerable amount of time passes, perhaps half an hour. Jean-Paul has not reappeared. Jean-Marc can also feel 'it', and hears a dripping, and 'falls forward onto his face and starts to laugh. His laugh too becomes a sigh'. The story finishes there,

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<sup>43</sup>See John Berger, 'The Secretary of Death' in *Sense of Sight*, (New York: Vintage International, 1993).

and Régis, who is drunk, asks Odile what she thinks the men were doing. When she doesn't know he exclaims that it is the 'lying-down waltz'. What the 'lying-down waltz' refers to isn't made explicit, although in a different context it might well unambiguously refer to the sexual act. If this is what Régis means, he is closing down the meanings of his highly ambiguous story, reducing its strangeness. What the hunters find is withheld, never explicitly stated, but it is something with apparently magical qualities, like a mythical woodland creature, perhaps, and something that they simultaneously recognise, fear and find exciting. The unnamed thing is feminised, alive, and can be felt from a distance, suggesting alternative modes of perception. The dripping that Jean-Marc hears is enigmatic, but perhaps suggests that it is heat emanating from it that they can feel. There is clearly a sexual connotation, with the men taking turns and Jean-Marc averting his eyes, and the sighing bringing to mind orgasm. But the laughing is strange in this context, as is the practicality of being waist-deep in snow, of then falling head-first into it. That Jean-Marc averts his eyes suggests that whatever is to be experienced there is private; this does not seem to be a story about homosexuality or group sex, although what happens between them is a kind of shared secret, a gift, and intimate as such. The disappearance of Jean-Paul after he has pushed forward through the snow, not to return, suggests that the story might also be about death, and an earlier manuscript version suggests this more strongly, also undercutting Régis's own sexual interpretation.<sup>44</sup> If there is another person, or animal, or angel, or nymph

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<sup>44</sup> In the only version of this story in the archive, it seems to be more clearly about death, and without the sexual element. Its context has been changed, and there were originally three hunters, not two. Berger both simplified and rendered more enigmatic:

Three men, whom Joseph would not name, on a Sunday morning several years before, were following the tracks of a wild boar, across the snow, near the edge of the forest near La Paz. The tracks were easy to follow. Each time the wild boar had put down a foot, he had left a space like a pig's trotter in the snow! All three men had their guns with them.

One of them stopped and, pointing, said to the others: Look over there?

What!

At the foot of the spruce, the one that's fallen. Do you see, by the roots?

The boar?

No. Something else.

What?

Can't you see?

It was a big tree, a good two metres in diameter, and its roots, now in the air, were as tall as wide as a room.

Strange, said the second man, how the wind chooses one tree and not another. It doesn't always take the smallest.

What's there? Insisted the third hunter, I can see nothing but roots and earth and snow.

Look again! said the first.

In God's name yes! said the second.

present, then the ellipsis used to describe her presence is marked. The snow the men wade through and lie on substitutes for her. It is the most prominent feature of the story and becomes associated with the sexually or charged and deathly acts of lying down and sighing. Snow in *Europa*, something like the gravitational potential of the slope in *Pig Earth*, has a transformative force. In this story within 'Europa' it is the site of an ambiguity in which sex and death and secrecy all conjoin powerfully.

Whiteness, spilling out beyond the confines of snow, appears with great frequency towards the end of the story. Whiteness is also in Odile Blanc's name, as she and Stepan discuss:

Blanc? Blanc means white like milk?

Not always - not when you order vin blanc!

White like snow, no?

Not the white of an egg! (134)

Here the text dramatises the reader's journey through the meanings of whiteness. 'Odile' is also the name of the black swan in *Swan Lake*, thus the blackness of Odile's given name and the whiteness of her family name are held in tension. The ballerina in *Swan Lake* must play both parts, and is thus a deeply ambiguous presence. Berger's Odile is a transgressive character, following her own desires and making decisions disapproved of by her family, the wider peasant community and factory authorities alike. Her independence is viewed as a mixture of wantonness and naivety. Blackness must also point to death and the mourning clothes Odile will come to wear. It is a black buck rabbit (117) which when it is finally killed she cannot eat because she has hated it so much. The factory is also associated with the colour black, in contrast to the whiteness of mountainsides it is surrounded by, with smoke from its chimneys a 'black viper standing on its tail' (114). There are other oppositions, transformations and inversions of black and white. The teacher draws 'on the blackboard the course of the river. His was white on black and the one

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What? What? shouted the third.

The other two did not reply, they were already plunging through the deep snow towards the tree.

The third hunter, who stayed on the path, heard the first say: Is she alive?

The second hunter approached nearer to the tree. I can feel the warmth from here, he said.

Be careful, screamed the first, but he was too late.

(John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/43.)

below is black on white. 'The river goes through the factory.' (115) Odile notes the graphic representation is an inversion of how things really are. The waterfall is described as 'white coal' (115). The manganese bread in the factory turns from white to black as the two hunters story is told, reinforcing the stories theme of transformation (126-7) and obliquely relating to (and tying together) Odile and the intrusion of the factory into peasant landscape and lives.

Before the trip to Paris, which Odile and Michel will never complete but which will begin the second phase of their relationship, Odile buys white net gloves to go with her white shoes (166), (reminiscent of those Camile is bought in *G.*) and a white kitten gets hit by a car, 'her white mouth a little open and her tongue scarcely less white than her teeth.' (167) The trip provokes in Odile an

impression that we had lost our way: we were not going to arrive in Paris, Michel's prosthesis was not going to be adjusted, we were in a land apart, which we had come across by accident, without meaning to, and without realising it...with this idea, yet peacefully and to the sound of the rain, I fell asleep. (172)

How do we read all this contiguous and repetitive imagery? The impulse is strong to search for the schema into which it all fits or an originating figure upon which all the others build or lead to. Such an impulse is rebuffed by the text, and dramatised by Odile's inability to read the symbols of her life. Repetition, as J. Hillis Miller has argued, as well as generating meaning can 'inhibit the too easy determination of a meaning based on the linear sequence of a story.'<sup>45</sup> The repetition of images or events resist interpretation, in that they may not be reduced neatly to a single figurative meaning. 'There are always in fact a group of such significant details which have been left out of any reduction to order. The text is over-rich', as Hillis Miller puts it.<sup>46</sup> We see in the repetition of the colour white, and its branching associations, that the text is doing work that it also does on other levels. The insertion in the narrative flow of a strange story about hunters, for example is linked non-schematically to the larger narrative it is enveloped by; it helps to create the sense of the exorbitance of the life that Odile narrates for us and tries to understand

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<sup>45</sup> Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

herself as she does so. A sense of coherent or logical meaning of their lives is out of their reach, and out of ours, but richly so. If much of the figuration in *Pig Earth* serves to express the Savoyards' relationship with their world, in *Europa* it serves to express the relationship between the stories and that world. Lucie does not narrate her own story, as Odile does. It is Jean, 'Lucie Cabrol's narrator, who shapes the narrative of her life, dividing it into three. He is no longer a peasant, having lived his life abroad, returning to the village to retire. When Odile bumps into Michel again after Stepan's death, he tells her, with some awareness of his life as a narrative, 'now I'm beginning my second life' (158). The change in contexts and the clash of cultures provide *Europa* and its characters with perspective on itself. It is that distance which Odile's flight dramatises as she reads the landscape of her life below, and tries to both extract meaning from it for her story and re-embodiment Stepan for their son.

'Once in Europa' is the story that takes most from *G.*, and does most to convince us that, as the peasant texts share so much with earlier works, no fundamental rupture has taken place. Odile narrates her story to her son Christian from the hang-glider they are both flying on over the village that Odile grew up in. This allows Odile the perspective of spatial as well as temporal distance from her story, and creates the sense that the present moment she is narrating from is dynamic; she is joined temporarily with her son, free in a similar temporary way as flight operates in *G.* She is also looking down on the village in the same way that those who find themselves on the alpage in *Pig Earth* do. Odile has moved from the mountains down to the towns and cities below, but it is in the sky once more that she is able to narrate her story. It is not that such height confers her explanations for life. Indeed the flying helps to convert her experience, indeed the world, into language, but also preserves distance and mystery. The white page, the heron's unreadable messages, the uncompleted journeys all point to Odile's final words as she sees the heron messenger again. 'Tell them, Christian, tell them when we land on the earth that there's nothing more to know' (180). We do not know who 'them' is, and although the story ends with a sense of revelation and finality, it is never quite articulated and refuses to be paraphrased.

*Keep tears/my heart/for prose.*

Another facet of Berger's work during the period in which he was writing *Pig Earth* and *Once in Europa* has been almost entirely overlooked. Berger tells us he has been composing poems from the age of twelve, but in the first twenty years of his published writing he showed a reluctance to publish them as part of longer, predominantly prose texts.<sup>47</sup> There are three poems by Berger published as a part of larger works written before the move to the Haute Savoie: one begins *Permanent Red*, and the other two are fifteen pages apart in *G.. Pig Earth*, by contrast, contains eight of Berger's own poems. *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, rewritten and assembled from various earlier texts in 1983 and published in 1984, contains well over twenty. This new-found willingness to use the poetry corresponds to a new-found productivity: of the poems in *Pages of the Wound*, a selection of published and unpublished poems written over forty years, *half* were written from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties. The pair of poems which bookend the stories in *Once in Europa*, published 1989, signify the waning of this particularly productive period of poetry writing; the preparation of *And our Faces* is the high water mark. It strikes me as an important absence that no critical account exists of why poetry emerged as a significant presence in the work at this time. That this period of poetry coincides with his move to the Haute-Savoie, and that so many of his poems are about peasants, isn't an explanation in itself: there are, however, the beginnings of an answer here.

Two publications by Amnesty International in 1983 prompted Berger to write about the properties of poetry. The first, *Evidence for Torture in Chile*, is a report on the escalation and systematisation of torture that Pinochet had spent the preceding decade refining with the help of the CIA.<sup>48</sup> The second text is a collection of poems, *Missing*, by Ariel Dorfman, Allende's cultural advisor until the revolution, and a writer, academic and human rights activist.<sup>49</sup> Berger's response to these two texts is an article for *New Society* entitled 'The Hour of Furnaces' (republished in *The*

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<sup>47</sup> Berger states he has been writing poems since the age of twelve in the forward to *Pages of The Wound* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994). The book has no page numbers.

<sup>48</sup> *Evidence for Torture in Chile* (London: Amnesty International, 1983).

<sup>49</sup> Ariel Dorfman, *Missing* (London: Amnesty International, 1983).

*White Bird* [UK]/*Sense of Sight* [US] with the new title, 'The Hour of Poetry'). In the magazine version, it is accompanied by a clandestine photograph of a Columbian torture cell, in which restraints dangle from the ceiling and the shirtless back of a man leans away from the camera, the blinds closed behind him. Berger quotes an extract of a Dorfman poem:

They took him  
just for a few hours  
they said  
just for some routine  
questioning.

After the car left,  
the car with no licence plate,  
we couldn't

find out

anything else  
about him.

But now things have changed.  
We heard from a *compañero*  
who just got out  
that five months later  
they were torturing him  
in Villa Grimaldi,  
at the end of September  
they were questioning him  
in the red house  
that belonged to the Grimaldis.

They said they recognized  
his voice his screams

they say.<sup>50</sup>

The article begins with Berger describing himself standing outside the Pax hotel, Annmasse, near Genève, which was the regional Gestapo headquarters during the Second World War. Berger places himself in the position of the loved ones of victims, staring helplessly at the blank front of the building. It seems to represent the imaginative space from which Dorfman is writing, and is an important image to which Berger will return. The essay continues:

In the face of the monstrous machinery of modern totalitarian power, so often now compared to that of the Inferno, poems will increasingly be written. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many protests against social injustice were written in prose. They were reasoned arguments written in the belief that, given time, people would come to see reason; and that, finally, history was on the side of reason. Today this is by no means so clear. The suffering of the present and the past is unlikely to be redeemed by a future era of universal happiness.<sup>51</sup>

The last sentence here represents a strengthening of the sentiments that call for the need for endurance found in *Pig Earth's* historical afterword. Making the distinction between poetry and prose, Berger associates prose with reason, more specifically as a means for communicating reasonable thought. Thus poetry must be something other than this. To write or speak poetry, for Berger, is to choose to speak unreasonably in a form inherently unreasonable. In moments when reason can reasonably be used to predict future happiness or triumph then prose is the thing. Poetry and a certain kind of pessimism, it seems, go hand in hand: a world, for Berger, increasingly governed by monstrous power cannot be reasonably approached. Berger continued by asserting the unique qualities of poetry as he saw them. 'Poetry speaks to an immediate wound', he wrote:

Poetry's impulse to use metaphor, to rediscover resemblance, is not for the sake of making comparisons nor is it to diminish the particularity or any particular event; it is to discover those correspondences of which the sum

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<sup>50</sup> John Berger, 'The Hour of Poetry' in *Sense of Sight* (New York: Vintage International, 1986), 246.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

total would be proof of the indivisible totality of existence. To this totality poetry appeals.<sup>52</sup>

Behind this remarkable statement appears to be Walter Benjamin's various essays defining and redefining the word 'correspondence' in his discussions on language (not just poetry). In 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', Baudelaire is read as revealing both the fractured nature of modern urban experience and using examples of poetic correspondence to attempt to recover some sense of coherence and unity with the past. In Beatrice Hanssen's account, 'Benjamin did not cease questioning the reduction of language to a handy tool, to the instrumentality of logic and discursivity, or to the technical view of linguistics'.<sup>53</sup> The properties Benjamin is resisting in language as such are very similar to the properties Berger identifies (perhaps schematically or heuristically) in prose. For Benjamin, language, 'once released from the correspondence model of truth, might provide the path to another realm of possibilities, to the recognition of altogether different "correspondences."<sup>54</sup> Touching on mysticism, Benjamin was interested in what could be done *in* language, not just *through* language:

what distinguishes all of his language work is that, from its inception, it was guided by a large-scale theory about the changed structure of experience (Erfahrung) and of perception. Pursuing this theory, he meant to release a more authentic existentialist way of being in the world.<sup>55</sup>

Coherent experience of the world has been lost, for the Benjamin of 'On Some Motifs...!', because of modernity: the shocks endured by the man in the crowd and the machine labourer. The correspondences that Baudelaire finds between otherwise unconnected moments in time in *Fleurs du Mal* were an attempt to rescue in language something from 'the breakdown which he, as a modern man, was witnessing'.<sup>56</sup> There is a clear resonance here with Berger's thinking as found in 'Why look at animals' and implicit in *Pig Earth*, which reflect the same set of

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 250.

<sup>53</sup> Beatrice Hanssen, 'Language and mimesis in Walter Benjamin's work' in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 55.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>56</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 177.

anxieties about the erosion of experience at the hands of modern life, and the partial redemption Berger finds in peasant life. That poems appear at this moment is perhaps therefore no surprise: Berger is writing in the spirit of (Benjamin's reading of) Baudelaire and attempting to demonstrate the coherence of peasant life. And yet Berger's account of this uses the very specific and urgent context of torture; the salvaging work to be done is against a particular monstrous separation.

The Dorfman poems that Berger quoted have no metaphors in them at all. The simplicity of their language points to a view of the world that has been catastrophically reduced to very simple distinctions, such as those between dead and alive, hope and despair, missing and found, incarcerated and free. In contrast, Berger's poems in *Pig Earth*, with the exception of the emblematic 'Ladder', are almost entirely composed of metaphoric correspondence. The poems are compressed examples of the unifying chains of association within *Pig Earth's* stories, with the human consciousness inserting itself into the chain by living within it and coming to be aware of it. The idea that poetry speaks to the 'indivisible totality of existence' resonates more readily with Berger's own poetry about peasants in *Pig Earth*, for example, the poem 'Village Maternity':

The mother puts  
    the newborn day  
        to her breast

turnips  
    like skulls  
        are heaped  
            house high

before the blood has been washed  
        from the legs of the sky (59)

This poem is built on a network of metaphoric correspondence, in which the new born day is likened to a new born child, the harvest of turnips becomes a memento mori, the red of the sky at sunrise is like postnatal blood. The poem insists on the relatedness of the harvest, childbirth and death.

Berger chose to discuss poetry within the very different context of torture, however. In 'The Hour of Furnaces' the poetic act attempts 'to bring together what life has separated or violence has torn apart...it is the continual labour of reassembling that which has been scattered'.<sup>57</sup> Berger also suggested here that a poem is like a prayer, not to God, but to itself. It both pleads for and embodies the hope that this fusing together might be possible. The act of writing *in* poetry, not writing *through* prose, for Berger, is to appeal, to pray, to the specific qualities of poetry.

Berger recycled the 'Hour of furnaces'. Roughly the second half appears at the very end of *And Our Faces*.<sup>58</sup> In this edited version Dorfman's poems and the extreme urgency of the context are gone. Poetry now speaks to separation in a broader sense, a sense that can both appeal against the distance from a lover, specifically 'My heart', the sometime addressee of *And Our faces*, and more generally the experiences of economic migrants separated from their families. Torture is not entirely absent, however; Berger standing outside the Hotel Pax is retained, moved to the beginning of the book with the photo of the Turkish trade unionists who are being tortured. *And Our Faces* makes its own additional claims for poetry: in the section 'Once', which we are told, is about time, Berger writes 'the poet places language beyond the reach of time: or more accurately, the poet approaches language as if it were a place, an assembly point, where time has no finality, where time itself is encompassed and contained'.<sup>59</sup> Berger's own poetry, then, both attempts to amplify themes that appear in *Pig Earth*, and the spatial metaphor speaks to a wider justification for remaining in the mountains in the first place: that the fifteen years from 1974-89 constituted an unreasonable era to be endured, an era of powerlessness in the face of seemingly inexhaustible might and brutality of the new world order. The helpless relative standing outside the security agency building is one of Berger's chosen motifs.

Berger's view of poetry resembles a theme in his work that goes back at least as far as the lovers on the bed in *G.* - a preoccupation with privileged spaces in which time and space relate to each other and to the individual, in different and differing ways, and which provides escape from the wider world. For Berger, writing in poetry is different because it is not representing this place but claims,

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<sup>57</sup> Berger, *Selected Essays*, 249.

<sup>58</sup> John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief As Photos* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 95-99.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

mysteriously, to be it. Or, at least, for nothing is quite stated as definitely as this, appeals to, approaches, hopes to become, this place. It is a poetic gesture that claims to be a material act. It appears to be born from the experience of a moment when describing something is not urgent enough, and no other action is available.

Just as dramatically, in 1989, his poems all but disappear from Berger's texts. This is the same time as peasants stop being a major subject, the year the Berlin Wall fell and the velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe occurred, a year of which Berger wrote 'A reunion has occurred. The separated are meeting - those separated by frontiers and centuries.'<sup>60</sup> It is as if an imaginative distance has been closed. The verbal image of Berger standing outside the Hotel Pax has been replaced by reproductions of photos of warily optimistic Eastern Europeans taking part in mass demonstrations.<sup>61</sup> A belief in political opportunity had been (temporarily) reignited. The images of a bed dragged into the middle of the room with snow covering everything outside, the hands surrounding the flame, were no longer required, seemingly. Instead people step out together onto the city street.

Three poems survive into later texts. One is a response to the dropping of Napalm in Kuwait during the first Gulf War. Another was written earlier, immediately after the assassination of Letelier, by car bomb in 1976.<sup>62</sup> The last lines read:

once I will visit you  
he said  
in your mountains  
today  
assassinated  
blown to pieces  
he has come to stay

It is published twice: firstly in Berger's essay in *About Time* (1985) and in *Keeping a Rendezvous* (1992), once in a text about time, and then in one about place. It is a poem in which the idea that poetry as such speaks to a wholeness corresponds to a

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<sup>60</sup> John Berger 'The Soul and the Operator' in *Keeping A Rendezvous*, (London, Granta, 1992), 236. The essay was first published the Swedish newspaper *Expressen* in 1990 under the title 'Keeping A Rendezvous'.

<sup>61</sup> *Keeping a Rendezvous* reproduces James Nachtwey's picture for Magnum, 'Prague, November 1989'.

<sup>62</sup> The third is in *Another Way of Telling*, 292.

subject-matter in which the fragments of the dead man, 'blown to pieces' reassemble in the poet's mind, and at his mountain home. The poem is much older, and belongs to the earlier period. The fact of its publication in 1992 already points to the waning of the wave of excitement after the velvet revolutions. Berger's later essays, in particular those in which politics is particularly prominent, such as those in *Hold Everything Dear*, feature other people's poetry heavily. His own poetry, as incorporated into his prose works, has not yet re-emerged. But if Berger's poetry all but disappears from his longer, predominantly prose works, the important idea of writing *as* a protected space we can visit (not merely describing such a space) is retained, reworked and transferred. The titles *Keeping a Rendezvous*, *The Shape of a Pocket*, *Here is Where We Meet* make visible its transformation into a rhetorical strategy, this time in prose. The text no longer a prayer to itself, a place where the sum indivisibility of the world is glimpsed, but a meeting place, to which the reader is invited.

7

## Dancing on the ruins, spectres of hope:

### *Here is Where We Meet*

1

Sometimes it seems that, like an ancient Greek, I write mostly about the dead and death. If this is so, I can only add that it is done with a sense of urgency which belongs uniquely to life.<sup>1</sup>

Berger's first proper ghost is Lucie Cabrol, and with her the violently dead of the village. The peasant narrator in 'Lucie', Jean, who unexpectedly hears Lucie's voice at her funeral, has much in common with *Here Is Where We Meet's* John. Both are old and unsettled, both place themselves in the hands of the dead, following them, acknowledging that they know much less than their guides. After Lucie, Sucus, Naisi and Hector board a white ship after they die at the end of *Lilac and Flag*. We encounter all these characters first as alive, and when they die we follow them into their afterlives. The reverse is true of *Here*: we never encounter a character alive before we meet them as a ghost. Death is not a narrative end point (a third act or coda), but a beginning.

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<sup>1</sup> John Berger, *Photocopies* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 127.

Berger was thinking in terms of ghosts earlier than this, however. About *The Book of Leporello* (which became *G.*), he wrote 'what mediates between...different presents? Our own awareness of the past. Or what used to be called ghosts,<sup>2</sup> expressing the past as a kind of haunting. In the notes to *G.* (his historical novel), he also wrote underneath the R. G. Collingwood quotation ('All history is contemporary history...')<sup>3</sup>:

I host to ghosts [sic]. ~~They are often nearer to me than the living.~~ Do not ever doubt that examples persist and continue. I in full conscience and in face of the worst that I can imagine can vouch that they do.<sup>4</sup>

This scrawled note, barely legible, with its strikethrough and awkward grammar, nevertheless suggests an immediacy and personal relationship with this ghostly sense of history: it is both a conceptual and intimate haunting. The 'host[ed]' ghosts are guests or parasites, positioned between Berger and the living, mediatory presences, standing on the threshold of presence and absence and life and death, and connecting different historical moments. It is this sense of the ghostly that most resonates with *Here's* ghosts.<sup>5</sup>

At the beginning of *Here*, an old man stands alone in a scruffy square in a down-at-heel part of Lisbon.<sup>6</sup> The protagonist-narrator, John, resembles Berger more closely than any of his characters since John in *Painter of Our Time*, published forty-seven years previously. They are two of Berger's loneliest narrators, the least sure about what they know or what they should be doing and the two characters most involved in dramas of indecision. *Painter's* John narrates his own personal crisis whilst editing his friend's, whereas *Here's* John seemingly has writer's block. *Here's* John spends much of his time a stranger in various European cities, his solitude intermittently disrupted by the dead. These contacts intervene in a life that

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<sup>2</sup> John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/12. The quotation is from a draft letter written to publishers describing *The Book of Leporello*, the book which was to become *G.*.

<sup>3</sup> That appears in the final text on page 54.

<sup>4</sup> John Berger archive, MS 88964/1/12.

<sup>5</sup> *G.* was on Berger's mind when he undertook work on *Here*. He recycled the description of cherries in *G.*, which are the last thing *G.* eats before he dies (302), which appears as one of the fruit remembered by the dead in Chapter 4 of *Here* (106-7). Similarly, the description of the melon in *Here* (103-4) is in the notes for *G.*, though not the published text, meaning presumably that Berger sifted through his notes on the earlier book when writing the latter. John Berger archive, MS 88964/1/12.

<sup>6</sup> John Berger, *Here is Where We Meet* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005). All references to this edition, and in the body of the text.

appears to come from, and returns to, no location and to no person or people in particular. With the early exception of his happy visit to his daughter, named, like Berger's, 'Katya', there is little indication that John has roots in the present. He is a wandering figure, homeless in the sense that he never mentions or visits home. Alpine peasant villages do not feature in this text, even as a distant point of reference. Letters show that Berger undertook many, if not all, of the journeys John makes in *Here*, roughly between 2001-4.<sup>7</sup> Correspondence from grateful friends and charmed new acquaintances suggests that Berger rarely travelled alone, and was not short of company on arrival. He writes to them after he has returned home in order to check facts.<sup>8</sup> Travelling companions and conviviality are mostly omitted from *Here* until the book's final pages; in the meantime a very different atmosphere emerges.

The sense of solitude contrasts with, or perhaps complements, the book's first image, that of a notional crowd of a hundred people sheltering under a Cypress tree, whose supported branches extend out across a square like a 'gigantic, impenetrable, very low umbrella' (1). The tree is a Lisbon landmark; John is in the Praça do Príncipe Real.<sup>9</sup> Opening a book full of porosity, permeated borders (where going to the fish market is to enter 'another kingdom' [29]) and compromised binaries (alive/dead, past/present, ahead/behind, here/there, et cetera), the impenetrability of the tree's canopy alludes to the fact that for all this, *Here* is a text in which everything and everyone, in whatever state, remains on the earth, with no apparent escape or release to a higher realm (what- or where-ever that may be). 'Heaven is all very well but I happen to be talking about something different' (3), states Mim, dead, who could be speaking for the book as well as for herself. Nor does anything or anyone descend to save characters, dead or alive, as will be repeatedly emphasised. We begin on the 'precipitous' (the word echoes *Pig Earth*,) hills of Lisbon, (11) travel up and down in lifts, scale aqueducts and theatre rigging and look down upon both Geneva and Morskie Oko lakes. We thus reencounter the familiar verticality of the peasant books, in which narratives stretch from the village graveyard up to the alpage, upon which the stars look close enough to touch.

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<sup>7</sup> John Berger Archive, MS 88964/5/15.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Berger visited Krakow in spring 2001. He emailed Bo Persson, a Krakow resident, in August asking what he knew about the fate of Jews in Krakow and the specifics of the area and orphanage around Place Nowy, all of which feature in the published chapter.

<sup>9</sup> And is mentioned in Fernando Pessoa's Guide to Lisbon, which Berger makes reference to in drafts of the manuscript. John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/65.

Beyond this lies some kind of hinted at, metaphysical other space in which the dead, or some aspect of them, disappear. In *Here*, however, this verticality does not carry the same transformative charge. Its many butterflies (strongly associated with the dead in this text as well as in *Pig Earth*) do not fly upwards from the top rung of the ladder until they can no longer be seen but settle down onto outstretched hands, or are fixed images painted on walls, undisturbed for 30,000 years. In high places, characters look down from where they have come. Despite numerous invocations of religious saviours and religious thinkers, including Jewish messianism, Christian resurrection, angels, Jacob Boehme's idiosyncratic mysticism and many others, with which characters perform localised forays into the spiritual, the book also emphatically resists such movements, stops short of validating or endorsing any particular metaphysics, and the saviours never materialise. Such things are suspended, as is John. The impenetrable Cypress tree above is the emblem for this.

The book's most important represented movements take place on the horizontal plane; its coordinates are fixed vertically, but prone to constant expansion outwards. The text moves across the surface of the earth, from place to place in Europe, stopping points in what is, retrospectively at least, conceived of by John as a journey: 'We've arrived - if you are with me. We're going no further' (159), he states, at the beginning of the last full chapter, the 'if' expressing a slight anxiety that the presence of his reader is as chimerical and uncertain as that of the ghosts in the book. In the sparse representations of the sky: 'the white of the buildings outstaring the blue of the sky' (26), 'the shadows from the clouds' (35), the nomadic clouds of Geneva blown 'from Italy, Russia or France' (58), there is little to suggest an immaterial realm above. The aqueduct, up in the sky, has a vaulted *roof*; pigeons look like 'sky-samples *brought back to earth*' (97, my emphasis) and are discussed for their ability to fly *across* the world and back again, contrasting with the eloquent rising and falling of G.'s dancing, mating pigeons. *Here* is a book where bridges are more frequent than ladders or mountains, and are the equivalent sites of transformation: thus Mim, crossing Vauxhall Bridge to meet Alfred, becomes Miriam, both an alternate version of herself and prophet; the aqueduct, bridging the Alcântara Valley, is where she walks from view at the end of 'Lisbon', weaving in and out of golden light, visible and invisible in turn; the Pont D'Arc crosses the Ardèche to the Chauvet cave, in which a sense of linear time is 'sabotage[d]' (139) and 'the company in the dark' is discovered; in the early 1930s, John's father crosses

the homemade drawbridge which 'leads nowhere' on the Ching to 'borrow [John's] innocence' (185) in a temporary escape from his post-traumatic stress; on the bridge over the Szum the two times and places merge for John. The book's horizontality is also emphasised by the description in 'The Szum and the Ching' of the difference between the mountains (closely associated with the peasant texts) and the flat expanse of the steppe:

It's hard to say what changes in the sky when driving Eastwards after Berlin. You begin to notice whatever is vertical against the flatness of the plain in a different way...here [the sky] is announcing that, after another few thousand kilometres, the plain is going to become the steppe - and on the steppe distance becomes as dangerous and challenging as altitude in the mountains...on the mountains the ferocious cold is due to the altitude; on the steppe it is due to the distances, the horizontal extent of the continent. (159)

The plain, with its echoes of the steppe, is the final setting of the book, a landscape of risk (and possibility) as 'dangerous and challenging' as the mountains. 'After crossing the Oder this extent, this extension, is *promised*', (160, my emphasis) notes John, as it always appears to be in *Here*.

There is a peripheral exception to all this, the celestial Alfred, Mim's first husband, who appears in John's conversation with his mother in 'Lisboa'. She states, 'if ever a man should go straight to heaven, it was Alfred. He was a saint' (24). 'He's not in Lisboa,' she continues, implying perhaps a causal connection between this and his saintliness, and he is also deified by John, who, in an ironic mood, calls him 'Jupiter' (24). Alfred, who ends up as a kind of Croydon sadhu, 'liv[ing] just on virtue' (26), might be the only person who escapes upwards after his death, through the Cypress tree canopy, as it were, by-passing the book's horizontality. In life he looks upwards, (as so many characters do in *Pig Earth* when the narratives in that book are reaching beyond the tangible). It is with Alfred that Mim performs one of only two brief instances of star-gazing in this book, (22) until she gives him up for the more down-to-earth business of having a family (22). Her telling of this to John is a curious and affecting moment. The book requires another two hundred pages before another character looks up (234). In this first instance, Mim and Alfred are

naked together 'like Adam and Eve' in their garden, playing the prelapsarian couple. Mim chooses to end the relationship, and so steps out of the figurative garden, as well as out of the real one in Croydon in which she will remain childless. Her resulting family, the narrator (one of those children) along with the book he narrates, are thus framed by this post-Edenic context, all the product of Mim's rejection of life lived *as if* paradise. This is an early and important decision, and one that is difficult, and which causes pain and regret when brought up by John. The episode resonates in a book which follows characters who explicitly live in a world conceived of as broken, painful and suffering, whether they are dead or alive. By leaving Alfred, by walking out of the Croydon garden, Mim chooses not to remain separate from this, and to have children, and thus accept the conditions of ordinary life.

None of the dead whom John meets bear any resemblance to Alfred, and they, like John, remain on the ground. Even when dealing with ghosts, the materiality of their continued experience of the world is emphasised: 'Do we have to find an espadarte,' asks John, getting it all wrong, 'or can we just think of one like we're doing now? What are you saying?' the ghost of his mother retorts incredulously, 'I told you, it has to be marinated in lemon juice and olive oil!' (34). Nevertheless, Mim in Lisbon can cook a fish for John's father and he can eat it in Rome (or wherever he is), something that shows that John, and we with him, are yet to fully grasp the rules of the dead's continuing presence on the earth.

At the outset of the encounters with ghosts in *Here* John sees 'an old woman with an umbrella' (2); as she approaches he realises that she is his mother, dead fifteen years. Like Berger's mother, she is called 'Mim'.<sup>10</sup> Mim's umbrella brings to mind the description of the Cypress tree and invites us to think about the connection between the dead woman and the imagined sheltering crowd.<sup>11</sup> John quotes a few lines from the poem on the noticeboard which stands in front of the tree: '...I am the handle of your hoe, the gate of your house, the wood of your cradle, and the wood of your coffin...' (1). The poem suggests that from a certain perspective, all life, from beginning to end, is encompassed within the tree's range

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<sup>10</sup> According to a South African newspaper article about a work trip his parents undertook in 1951 that Berger saved (John Berger Archive, MS 88963/10/1). Berger also writes about his mother's death in the essay 'Mother' in *Keeping a Rendezvous* (London: Granta, 1992), 43-52.

<sup>11</sup> The (living) woman John mistakes for his mother in front of the statue of Dr. Martins is also holding an umbrella, although it is raining on this day, not 21 degrees as on the first day of the story. 'You should have brought an umbrella like me!' she declares (38).

of uses and associations. The items in the poem - cradle, coffin, house and gate - are all things made of wood that both protect and contain. The book seems ambivalent about these dual properties, and plays on the tension between them. 'You can either be fearless, or you can be free, you can't be both' says Mim (21). 'The notional crowd of one hundred people are protected and restricted by the impenetrable canopy.'<sup>12</sup>

During their conversation on the aqueduct, above 'a couple of unfinished streets and some houses which were being lived in, though still being built,' (49) John's mother presents a somewhat oblique origin myth: 'The creation began with a death' (50), she states, elaborating,

Do you see? she suddenly said. Everything is broken, slightly broken, like the rejects from the factory they sell cheap, at half price. Not really damaged, only rejects. Everything, - the hills, the Sea of Straw, the child's swing down there, the car, the castle, everything is a reject, and has been so since the beginning. (49-50)

Mim is not only talking about the human-made world being a reject here - the land and sea themselves are included - but nevertheless the simile of the factory reject speaks of human labour and production, and is placed in the everyday context of finding household goods at a bargain price. It has been the situation since the beginning, we are told, but it is also figured as a misshapen product of industrial manufacturing. It is also unclear whether Mim is describing the whole world, or just the immediate environment, and thus it is hard to gauge just how large the pronouncements are that she is making. An early manuscript of the story begins:

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<sup>12</sup> 'One hundred' is an important number for *Here*. Mim tells John that one hundred of the dead travel in the lift of the Lisboa Tramway Company in Santa Justa (9); John and Ken see one hundred pigeons in the square (97), and one hundred guests go to Mirek and Danka's wedding (209). John is for the most part outside of these groups of one hundred. He is a wedding guest, but a peripheral one, watching and describing, talking to Felix, the dead saxophone player. This structure appears in earlier Berger: throughout his life, G is separate from, but proximate to various revolutionary mobs; separate, and separated out, even when he is in their centre. Jean, the returning narrator of 'Lucie Cabrol' is led to, but is separate from, the community of the dead in Lucie's third life; at the beginning, John in *Painter* is presented as an witness outsider, excluded from Janos's thoughts because he is merely a theoretical revolutionary, and repeatedly finding the streets of London empty. These characters that resemble Berger have certain traits in common: they are solitary, searching people, doubtful of their ability to read signs and situations correctly, and look to others (Janos, Lucie, the dead, in varying degrees of intensity and drama) for authority. Dramatising uncertainty and peripherality has been a recurring aspect of Berger's more personal fictions.

On a steep hill a little higher up is the Garden of the Botanical Museum, which Pessoa, in his Guide to the city, claimed as the most beautiful garden in Europe, comparing it to Eden. The garden in the square below [where John is] is considerably more modest.<sup>13</sup>

'Lisboa', and the book, was going to open with John positioned outside Eden's walls, a fallen man, and this provokes a grander context for Mim's words. In the published version this has been replaced with the Cypress Tree, a more ambiguous and encouraging figure, perhaps, of protection and enclosure, not banishment, and the allusion to the Old Testament fall is reduced from framing the whole story and book to a detail of Mim's past. This is much more in keeping with the text's refusal to embrace any of the metaphysical explanations it introduces.

Mim's solution to the 'factory seconds' nature of the world is to repair some of what has been broken. 'Let a few things be repaired', she states. 'A few is a lot. One repaired thing changes a thousand others' (51). The example she gives is lengthening a barking dog's chain so it can lie down in the shade, which leads to a series of other benefits that make life more pleasurable and harmonious for people in an expanding vicinity. 'There are certain things which, to be repaired, require nothing short of a revolution' (52) counters John, stating a radical political approach to acting in the world which is presented as opposing Mim's. 'So you say, John' (52), she replies sceptically.

Mim's words are strongly reminiscent of a very particular version of Jewish messianism that Walter Benjamin deploys in his essay 'Franz Kafka'.<sup>14</sup> For Benjamin, 'The Little Hunchback' is Kafka's motif for the 'distorted life', in which everything is out of shape. The Little Hunchback, Benjamin tells us, 'will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, of whom a great rabbi once said that he did not wish to change the world by force, but would only make a slight adjustment to it.'<sup>15</sup> This preference for changing the world by slight adjustment (as opposed to by greater force) is very similar to the preference Mim displays in her disagreement

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<sup>13</sup> John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/65.

<sup>14</sup> It is inconceivable to me that Berger had not read this essay. It is collected in *Illuminations*, first translated in 1968 and the book that precipitated interest in Benjamin's work in the English-speaking world and almost certainly Berger's source for the essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', upon which the first episode of *Ways of Seeing* was based. Kafka is mentioned a number of times in Berger's essays. Walter Benjamin is cited by John as a critical antecedent in *Here itself* (90).

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka' in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 129-30.

with John. Mim's explanation may be local to a Lisbon suburb, contingent, and her own, but the backdrop of brokenness also exceeds the specific context in which she is speaking.

The book catalogues the past by way of massacres, earthquakes, Jewish ghettos and mass graves. 'Genève' is situated as taking place 'last summer while Bush and his army and the petrol corporations and their advisors were ruining Iraq' (63), the latest expression of unrelentingly catastrophic history, in the face of which, the book implies, we all suffer.<sup>16</sup> And yet John's practical response to Mim's words suggests he has understood the words as directed towards him personally, not the world. Rather than embark on a more abstract social project, he seeks to repair his relationships with the dead, and finds the capacity to write again in the process. The location of the conversation is indicative of the difficulty of deciding the scope of what is being discussed. *Here* repeatedly emphasises its mundanity and the smallness of its scale; nevertheless, John and Mim are also speaking on a 'mysteriously' durable, earthquake-proof (44) aqueduct, high above the ground, on the top of which they can see across the valley to the Atlantic ocean, all suggesting grandness. Mim is explicitly aligned with 'Miriam' (23), Old Testament prophet. To get to the water, John goes through a 'temple-like building' (47), which his guide, Fernando, who is coming to the end of his career (48) does not like, because 'too many speeches had been made there' (47). The conversation is framed and reframed: it explicitly takes place beyond and above the temple-like building (home to speech-making), suggesting that it will not have much to do with any kind of institutional discourse; but although the aqueduct is a solitary place, it also offers a wider view than anywhere else in the city, which begins to resonate with what is being said and the wider concerns of the text.

Mim's suggestion to John to repair is a gesture that emulates the promise of Benjamin's tinkering messiah. However, as mentioned, in this book the permeable boundaries from which some messiah might return across seem closed. Shadows and echoes, performed by people - not gods or kings - are the best that can be hoped for. Several things that John does may be read as his attempt to repair things, most obviously his advice to Hubert to organise and archive Gwen's work, for no apparent practical purpose (125). He tells a story for Juan (Munoz) about pocketknives, which he never got around to doing before Juan died suddenly

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<sup>16</sup> The invasion took place in 2003.

(193).<sup>17</sup> The sorrel soup John cooks for Mirek, Danka and Olek is Ken's recipe: during their meeting he has asked John to make it 'tomorrow' (92); because Ken disappears it is a tomorrow which never comes, leaving John to return to his pension and weep into his pillow. But he does make the dead man's soup, perhaps in the hope that, emulating Mim's preparation of the espadarte for John's father, Ken will be able to eat it too.

## 2

Directly after meeting his dead mother in the opening pages of the text, John recounts a dream in which he needs to phone his parents' flat 'because I've missed a connection' (3). He is not, 'at that moment, where I'm meant to be' (3). John has his address book, but he cannot find the number and fails to remember or guess correctly. 'This corresponds with the truth that in my waking life I have forgotten the telephone number of the flat in which my parents lived' (3), he tells us; in the dream he forgets that they are dead. The dream speaks of multiple losses: the ability to communicate, to locate oneself, to remember perhaps even to trust oneself. In it John is separated: from his parents, from the person or people he is meant to be meeting, from knowledge, a sense of order, understanding and control. Having missed his connection, he appears to be in some kind of limbo, ill-prepared and let down by his memory. Of course, the attempt is futile from the outset: he is trying to phone up the dead. The dream, then, enacts the opposite of a meeting place, forms an introductory counterpoint to all of the encounters to come, and it also affirms John's subconscious need that these unlikely meetings with the dead satisfy, or perhaps have the possibility of satisfying.<sup>18</sup>

John's disconnectedness thus begins before he meets a ghost, but not before he is dreaming about the dead. In one sense these meetings calm this unease; in another his disconnection grows after he begins to see them. The ghost is inherently

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<sup>17</sup> Berger and the artist Juan Munoz were friends. Berger was directed in a performance of Berger's text 'Will it be a Likeness?' in Frankfurt, in 1996 (the text appears in *The Shape of a Pocket*). Munoz died unexpectedly in 2001, four years before *Here* was published.

<sup>18</sup> Others have read John as both lonely and otherworldly. 'Old man Berger...without a mother, without those friends and mentors whom he has outlived or outgrown...is alone: *Here is Where We Meet* is an orphan form, a book born out of a sense of loneliness, perhaps a recognition of Berger's own mortality, his irreconcilable homesickness...his presence unnerves...[he is] an unlikely angel' writes Andy Merrifield. *John Berger*, 154.

a disruptive force. Jacques Derrida, using Horatio and Marcellus confronted with the ghost of Hamlet's father as his example, outlines this for us:

the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter. There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reappearance of the departed.<sup>19</sup>

The spectre is a particularly vivid instance of the always already occurring disruption 'between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life'.<sup>20</sup> John's ghosts are these 'paradoxical incorporations'; similar enough to real people to be mistaken for them more than once, they drink beer (87), flick through sketchbooks (80), but weigh nothing (9). Sometimes they are invisible, and they appear and disappear without warning. All of this unsettles the material substance of the places John meanders through. There is a temporal aspect to this also: face to face with the specter, 'we feel ourselves being looked at by it outside of any synchrony'; time becomes 'disarticulated, dislocated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down, deranged, both out of order and mad'.<sup>21</sup> *Here* contains particular expressions of this. At the end of 'Lisboa', Mim ends her conversation with John by getting to her feet and entering the covered part of the aqueduct. Inside, where light is golden and it is quieter, they stand facing each other, 'perhaps,' thinks John, 'for the fifteen years since her death' (54). She walks away, appearing to get younger (55) (there is also an earlier moment in their meetings where her voice becomes that of a seventeen year old girl [18]). Mim occupies several different times: she presumably will continue to have some kind of presence as a 'reapparition of the departed' in the present in her chosen city of Lisboa, albeit apparently invisible and inaccessible to John. She is also walking back into John's past from which she has been temporarily conjured, returning to her position of departed

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *Specters*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *Specters*, 20.

loved one. She is also walking backwards in the timeline of her own life, getting younger with each step. Her diminishing figure in the distance is also a familiar trope, a cliché at the end of films in which walking towards the horizon connotes walking into the future that exists beyond the scope of the narrative. As a revenant she must also occupy a structural 'to-come' that all returning figures inhabit: a thing whose identity is based on a return always remains in some sense a figure of the future. Most of the ghosts John meets do not recur, although once one has appeared, there is always the possibility, indeed expectation, of more, and they come thick and fast in the final (full) chapter, 'The Szum and the Ching'. Mim, however, does return in the very last pages of the book, in a modified reproduction of part of the conversation between herself and John. This moment on the aqueduct points to the coming of the host of other ghosts, which Mim asks John to do them the courtesy of noticing. Mim occupies, signals or symbolises all of these times, and yet the aqueduct, with its narrow stream of water moving inexorably after her blends these different times by representing them as a single 'stream'. John tells us 'I let my hand trail in the water which was flowing after her' (55), an image that situates him behind Mim as water and time flow directly after her. We might ask in what 'time' John is behind her in such a way? The simple, (perhaps forlorn) action meets a richly complicated set of times. A stable, 'normal' sense of forward-flowing time is peacefully but intensely shaken.

Aligned to the disruption is a feeling of melancholy, embodied in the recurring dream, John's tear-stained pillows, the sadness of those he meets and his writer's block, all of which results in his time-torn wandering. '*Suadade*' writes John in *Here*, is 'usually translated as nostalgia, which is incorrect. Nostalgia implies a comfort, even an indolence such as Lisboa has never enjoyed.' (13) Instead, for John, '*suadade*' is an emotion he knows well and experienced throughout his childhood, 'the feeling of fury at having to hear the words *too late* pronounced too calmly' (13) another moment in the text when Berger emphasises the significance of an inability to act, in this case a sense of frustration at the passing of time retained from childhood.<sup>22</sup> The book's grief is both historical and personal. Tyler's story is unhappy, for example, involving some kind of loss, denoted only by an unexplained

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<sup>22</sup> The ghost of Fernando Pessoa toasts 'saudosismo' in Antonio Tabucchi's novella *Requiem*, which, with its solitary narrator and ghostly characters shares similarities with *Here*, which Berger acknowledges: 'The Italian writer Antonio Tabucchi, who loves Lisboa deeply, spent a whole day with the dead here' (13) narrates John. See Tabucchi, *Requiem* (New York: New Directions, 1994), 101.

photograph of a woman by his bedside, and possibly ending in suicide. 'The man who taught me to write was the first person to make me aware of irreparable loss' (156) states John. John's father suffers from the trauma of fighting in the First World War. Ken weeps at his shame for the desire John's teenage body incites in him. Friends die suddenly (193); the mother of a friend lies in bed dying (129).

Chapter '8½' is the strongest hint that John's journeys are linked to writer's block. It reiterates, and thus reemphasises, a conversation in which John expresses doubt and confusion about his work: 'I risk to write nonsense these days...I'll never know what I've found' (237), he tells Mim, in an oddly-phrased pronouncement, the use of the infinitive making him sound like a non-native English speaker, and giving the sentence a jarring quality. Writing here is a process of discovery which nevertheless remains unknowable to the writer, even after the act of creation. '8½' alludes to the Federico Fellini film of the same name, a prominent theme of which is the disorientated director's stalling and uncertainty whilst attempting to tell a highly personal story. In 8½ this artistic confusion renders Guido disconnected from the 'real' world (of wives, girlfriends, producers, critics and a huge rocket ship set he is building on the beach) as he surrenders to evocative childhood memories (Saraghina dancing the rumba on the beach) and dreams, such as the one in which his parents scold him in turn, and which ends with him helping his father back into the grave.

There is a gap in *Here*. 'If you want to find out something I didn't tell you...this is the time and place to ask me' (4) states Mim early on. 'Is Father here?' (5) John responds. His father is not one of the ghosts that John encounters. Although Mim doesn't know where he is, she guesses that he is in Rome; the lack of a Rome chapter suggests John has not attempted to find him, or does not narrate his failure to do so. John's father, who like Berger's father fought in the First World War, features heavily in John's memories in 'The Szum and the Ching' and is discussed with Mim in 'Lisbon'.<sup>23</sup> On this topic John's narrative takes on a more reverent tone:

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<sup>23</sup> I am not sure if John's father is named in the text. The confusion arises in a conversation between Mim and John in which Mim states 'Alfred worshipped me. Do you understand? He made me feel very beautiful. Your father was a more manly man; Charles worshipped me from afar.' (24) It appears, therefore, that John's father is named 'Charles', which makes the double use of 'worship', referring to the two different men, strange. In manuscript versions of the novel, however, 'Alfred' is named 'Charles' throughout, and the decision to change the name must have been taken relatively late. I thus wonder if the appearance of the name Charles here is an oversight by either Berger or his publisher, and that it should read 'Alfred'. It seems unlikely that Berger would have changed the

(I'm writing this with a worn pencil whose marks are so faint that I cannot reread the words in the evening light, for what I am saying, twenty-five years after his death, can still only be said in a whisper.) (186)

John's father is the only other character who is represented as both being haunted (he enjoys bridge because 'the game allowed him to recall certain easy moments with the dead, who otherwise haunted him' [85]) and as being a ghost himself, although not one John meets in old age. In an enigmatic passage John states:

...he could share with me, as he could share with nobody else, *the ghost life* of his four years of trench warfare and he could do so because I already knew them; they were, in the strictest sense of the term, familiar to me. (186-7, my emphasis)

This is Berger at his most uncompromisingly oblique and suggestive. 'The strictest sense of the term' is a phrase, it seems to me, which invariably draws attention to a word, without clarifying its meaning. What might the 'strictest sense' of a word ('familiar' in this case) be? There is a strange grammatical disagreement between the object, the 'ghost life' (singular) and the plural pronouns ('they', 'them') of the following sentences which must refer to the years of warfare. 'Familiar' derives from the same root as 'family', originally 'householder'. The sense might be that John sees his father's ghost life as part of the house, or family, that John was born into, or that in some way his father's experience has passed down to him as an inheritance. A manuscript draft has a slight variation to the line: 'because I already - in some inexplicable way - knew them; they were, in the strictest sense of the term, familiar to me'.<sup>24</sup> That unsympathetically excised admission that what John is saying is inexplicable, even to him, shows that it is not just we who are grasping to understand. Ghosts have been disrupting the reasonable working of the world for John since childhood, and he is still searching for ways to express this. Among the

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name of the character of Mim's first husband at a late stage and then used the changed name for John's father (Charles is not Berger's father's name; in a newspaper article (See note 7) Berger senior goes by the initials S.J.D.), unless to do this was the reason for the change in the first place. All other members of Berger's family seem to have been given their real name in the book: Mim, Katya, etc. We cannot know, but my guess is that it is an error not spotted by Berger and understandably not recognised as a mistake by the copy editor.

<sup>24</sup> John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/71.

definitions of 'familiar', is that of the 'familiar ghost or spirit' (or just 'familiar'), a kind of personal spirit advisor or the ghost of a family member or friend. As John crosses the bridge over the Szum, vertigo strikes, and the two times blend into one.<sup>25</sup> Despite this, John does not speak with his father. 'You should have listened more to your father' (4), chides Mim, perhaps understanding that the chance has passed, and the book resounds with this half-explained childhood encounter.

To be open to the dead - to hear or see them - is to be privileged or afflicted, but either way it separates John (and his father before him) from other living people. The position John occupies seems most extreme when he hears (but cannot see) Mim in a café.

She laughs again. A cascading laugh like the sound of a stream that has broken its banks. I hear it as an invitation to dance, to dance on the ruins, so I push back my chair, and with my arms held up like a ballroom dancing partner, I take a step towards where I think she is. The embassy employees look up, mouths open. I sit down. (43)

Perceived as alarming by other customers, John slips briefly into a world of his own; making a significant break from those around him and a break from the presentness of the present moment. That Mim isn't bodily present here emphasises John's solitude. He is not even dancing with a ghost; he is dancing with the voice of one, thus another step removed from presence. Other than Audrey resting her head on John's shoulder (128), John does not touch any of the dead, and this is another aspect of his separateness. The ruins he wishes to dance on are perhaps the ruins of his relationship with, or memory of, his mother, or the ruins created by the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, or of the catastrophic wider human history mentioned in the book, or the inexorable reduction of everything to dust. In this instant the city figuratively transforms around him into a broken, defunct space. Dancing on the ruins (without music, and with an invisible ghost) is a romantic, almost baroque, expression of futility, the action of someone elegantly accepting that they have no

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<sup>25</sup> In *Vertigo* by W.G. Sebald the narrator experiences the symptomatic dizziness when in the presence of ghosts. Convinced he has seen the poet Dante, for example, the narrator follows him until 'I began to sense in me a vague apprehension, which manifested itself as a feeling of vertigo' (Sebald, *Vertigo* [London: Vintage, 2002], 35). It is another text that has strong affinities with *Here. Vertigo* and *Requiem* (see note 22 above) are clear antecedents for Berger's text in ways that deserve further investigation beyond the scope of this reading.

other way left to act. And yet, it is momentary, lightly handled, more enigmatic and quietly humorous than such an account suggests, and so both evokes large concepts and interpretations and resists their grandiosity. There is a lyrical lightness to dancing on the ruins, and in any case, it only lasts a moment and is never mentioned or repeated.

This is not to trivialise John's predicaments in the book. He is able to do things in the world, but his actions seem to be drawn from a limited range: he can make soup, visit his daughter and graveyards and move easily from place to place. Melancholia and the inability to act are strongly linked in the book, the most straightforward example of which is Hubert's uneasy custodianship of Gwen's work. When John meets the ghost of an old lover, Liz, on the Polish highway, it causes him to reflect: 'What brought us together?...it was an unspoken acknowledgement of the same sadness...A sadness that was like the crazy howl of a dog at the full moon' (168).<sup>26</sup> He expands on the cause of their sadness:

The passionate present is invariably too short for style. Liz, aristocrat that she was, borrowed from the past, and I borrowed from a revolutionary future...Yet when we looked deeply into one another's eyes, defying the risks involved in this, of which we were fully aware, both of us came to realise that the times being borrowed from were chimera. This was the sadness. This was what made the dog howl. (169)

For John, then, his sadness as a younger man is linked to the revolutionary future that he both put his faith in and also came to realise was a chimera. Liz's ghost tells him he was 'addicted' to history. (170) 'There were days on end, you remember, when we got rid of the vulgarity of History. Then after a while, you'd go back, deserting me, again and again' (170) she says, expressing something very similar to the proposition of G.'s sexual encounters and dramatised in John's pseudo-sexual relationship with Audrey amidst the falling bombs in 'Islington', although neither of these other instances represent the sense of reproach that Liz expresses.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *A Painter of Our Time* is dedicated: 'To Liz, my wife.'

<sup>27</sup> In an interview transcript emailed to Berger for approval by Paul Bonaventura on 30 October, 2001, Berger stated: 'In the past two days I've been writing a story about myself. Not often is my writing autobiographical, but this is. I'm about 18 and for a whole summer I sleep with a girl of about the same age, but we're not lovers. We don't even want to make love. It's not that we're frightened, but we're devoted to passing the nights in each other's arms. How to describe that?'. This

In its present, as it were, beyond John's youthful faith in a revolutionary future, *Here* is a narrative in which action is mostly reduced to small, doubtful, symbolic acts. Mim tells John that hopefulness amongst the dead is like depression amongst the living: 'one of its terminal symptoms is a desire to intervene again in life, and for us that is fatal' (40). Although Mim is speaking about the dead, her words resonate with John and the people around him whose ability to influence the situations they find themselves in seems highly impaired. For example, the woman John mistakes for Mim is lighting a candle for her dead husband, a gesture of uncertain practical value: 'our candles will go on burning, doing whatever they can, without us,' (39) she says. John lights some, too. He also prays 'in the church under the limestone cliffs' (129) for Anne - something that also seems to be linked to an inability to act: 'if I could, I would have sent her the sound of the Ardèche with its unwavering yet imprecise promise' he states.<sup>28</sup> The depression that Hubert feels in 'Islington' is based on his mourning for the looming future in which he will be unable to do things, (124) and the vastness of this future renders him inactive in the present.

This entirely reasonable worry about the inability to act in a future that will not contain us, also dramatised by the depressive 'hopefulness' of the dead, sits alongside into the idea of John's revolutionary promise being a chimera, perpetually (but also never) to come, whatever one does. Once more, however, this account of the text risks sounding far grander than the work itself, in which such things are softly spoken, and are introduced alongside cups of green tea and gentle stories of aunts.<sup>29</sup> And in Hubert's case it really is only a small adjustment that is needed to improve things. He is already a prodigious cataloguer (of plant seeds); he only needs to employ the same skills with his late wife's work. It is a solution that walks the line between practical and symbolic, as are many of those John (and the later Berger) produce.

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did not make it into Bonaventura's published article, which appeared in the *New Statesman*, on 12 November, 2001. John Berger Archive, MS 88964/6/4.

<sup>28</sup> Anne's circumstances closely resemble those of Simon McBurney's mother, Anne McBurney.

<sup>29</sup> The only moment of heavy-handedness is the full page devoted to 'The number of lives that enter our own is incalculable' (161).

The entrances of *Here's* ghosts share certain characteristics with each other. Mim is an old lady on a park bench, whom John recognises only when she gets up and walks towards him; in a later meeting he mistakes her for a child who has pushed him in the back (17); in Krakow, Ken is a customer like any other at a table in the market (78); in the Ritz hotel, Madrid, Tyler is mistaken for a guest descending the staircase. He does not come and sit with John, and engages in conversation with other guests as one of their number (146); Liz is a motorist on a Polish motorway, who pulls up alongside John at a red light (167); Felix the saxophone player is a musician at the wedding, whom John only recognises when he addresses him as 'Comrade'; (217) only Audrey, who places her head on John's shoulder as he walks alone in Islington thinking about her (127) is seemingly invoked by him. Otherwise, John meets his dead masquerading as, or initially indistinguishable from, the living and he double takes, as it were.<sup>30</sup> They wait for him to notice them, impossibly out of context, and no one else is aware; one needs to know that these people are dead. We find a similar thing in a short story, *The Red Tenda of Bologna*, published as a book two years after *Here*.<sup>31</sup> *Bologna* reads like a supplementary chapter, featuring an indistinguishable John undertaking another leg of the same meandering journey around Europe. In *Bologna*, this John meets his dead paternal uncle, Edgar (who is mentioned very briefly in *Here*).<sup>32</sup> The meeting is part of the familiar pattern. John discovers Edgar posing as the owner of the linen shop, from whom he has just bought the cloth:

I pick up the purchase, take out three 20 Euro notes from my wallet and go to pay, holding the notes up high, above my head. The owner leans forward and down to take them from me, and our eyes meet. I recognize him. He

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<sup>30</sup> This does not apply to the famous dead that he also encounters, Jorge Luis Borges and Rosa Luxemburg.

<sup>31</sup> John Berger, *The Red Tenda of Bologna*, (London: Drawbridge Books, 2007). Subsequent references made in the body of the text.

<sup>32</sup> Edgar ran 'a very modest employment agency in South Croydon' (7) and thus shares some biographical information with Corker from *Corker's Freedom* (Corker's agency is in Clapham, a different part of South London). He is mentioned in *Here* when John sees a resemblance to the statue of Dr Martins: 'Dr Martins looked somewhat like my Uncle Edgar - who was my father's elder brother, a man of learning who never stopped learning, a man of ideals who never despaired, a man whom everyone, including my mother, treated as a failure, a man with a wart on the middle finger of his right hand where he held his pen writing hundreds of pages of a book that nobody ever read or published' (36).

pretends not to recognize me. His conspiratorial expression is familiar. The last time he put it on was when I had given him his tie and was saying goodbye to him in the hospital. Behind his bifocal glasses the swiftest flicker of one eye (his left) says: I'll see you round the corner - when the time comes. (52)

In *Bologna*, Berger gives a stronger hint of the model upon which John meeting the dead is based: Edgar instructs John to visit the church of the Santa Maria della Vita, in which a *companionato*, a lamentation sculpture, shows biblical figures mourning Christ, amongst them 'John the storyteller and evangelist' and Mary Magdalene, consumed within a 'hurricane of grief' (69). The unusual inclusion of the epithet 'storyteller' in St. John's name is significant; we have seen in previous chapters of this study how Berger chooses to align himself with other writers and writer characters. The epithet 'storyteller' is an unmistakable claim for brotherhood, particularly as St. John and Berger share a name. According to John's gospel, and to Niccolò dell'Arca's sculpture, Mary Magdalene is witness to both the death and resurrection of Christ. According to the Gospel of John (20:12-17), and retold by Berger in *Bologna*:

the night after next [Mary Magdalene] will be alone in the same place. The tomb will be open. Christ's body will have disappeared. Only the shroud and head-cloth will remain. And she will ask the gardener where he has placed the crucified body so she may find it and tend it. And the gardener will look at her and she will instantly recognize him. (71)

In John 20:15, Mary mistakes Christ for the gardener. This is strongly echoed by John's meeting with Edgar and, in a more muted way, the structure of revelation of most of the encounters with the dead in *Here*. By juxtaposing the verses of John the Evangelist with his own encounter in Bologna, John aligns himself with both the grieving Mary and the storytelling John, witness to and narrator of resurrections.<sup>33</sup> Of course, *Here's* John's dead do not live again, nor is Uncle Edgar the Son of God.

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<sup>33</sup> Resurrection was certainly on Berger's mind as he wrote *Here*. 'Ascension 40 days after the Resurrection' he obliquely scribbled in the bottom left hand corner of a page of notes for 'The Szum and the Ching', seemingly without connection to anything else on the page. John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/70.

As ghosts, they shadow the resurrection. Berger is once more evoking a particular metaphysics and suspending its significance. It is the book's characteristic gesture. We see something related to this when Mim walks away from John at the end of 'Lisboa'. It is with remarkable care that the narrative marks her departure:

She approached the cascade of light from the first stone lantern. Either side of her, the water reflected sparks that bobbed up and down like floating candles. When she entered the gold, it hid her like a curtain, and I did not see her again until she re-emerged from the light on the far side. She had become small because of the distance. She seemed to be walking with increasing ease; the further away she got, the more sprightly she became. She disappeared into the next golden curtain and when she reappeared I could scarcely distinguish her. (55)

As Mim walks away she becomes smaller and smaller, but also is in turns visible and invisibly golden, seemingly younger, surrounded by candles that remind one of the candles John lights in front of the statue of Dr Martins and of remembrance candles in general. Several transformations are happening here, different states being entered and re-entered. The golden light recalls the celestial iconography in renaissance art, and Mim's disappearance into the golden light might suggest that she enters heaven. But she always reappears out of the light, again visible on the aqueduct, weaving, as it were, across the two sides of a border. As she moves further away John becomes less able to discern what is happening to her, and so her final disappearance is left open, the narrative seemingly bringing her to the point of some kind of ascension, but also refusing to complete it. The movement is also horizontal, as she walks across the aqueduct that bridges the valley below.

*Here* and *Bologna* contain the remnants of belief. This lost faith in the revolutionary future is perhaps the central instance (for John, at least), with a patchwork of religion-based instances satelliting it.<sup>34</sup> Mim's plea about fixing what is broken atop the Agua Livres aqueduct ('you and us, we are here to repair a little

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<sup>34</sup> In 2005, the year *Here* was published, Berger wrote an essay, 'Ten Dispatches about Place', the form of which, with its numbered sections ranging from a sentence to a couple of pages, echoes Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. For Berger here, Marx can be used to critique disaster capitalism, but falls short of explaining the experience of time in a field of donkeys, or Spinoza's idea of eternity being now, not something awaiting us. ('Ten Dispatches About Place' in *Hold Everything Dear* (London: Verso, 2007), 119.)

of what was broken' [51]), as we have said, strongly echoes a particular idea of rabbinical messianism that Benjamin mentions in his essay on Kafka, without any sense of a messiah actually coming.<sup>35</sup> The small repairs that Mim advocates are not to be performed by a Messiah-king, but performed by ordinary people as best they can. Uncle Edgar may appear as Christ appears, but he is not the Son of God, but the ghost of a small time employment agent. To pray in church seems to be without any belief in God, the work the lit candles do uncertain. Early in 'Lisboa', John relates his childhood arguments with his mother:

...the two of us would be drawn, helpless, into a maelstrom of perdition and lamentation, silently crying out for an angel to come and save us. On no occasion did an angel come. (6)<sup>36</sup>

Neither is political salvation coming, for John or anyone else. The Austro-Hungarian father of the house next door in Gordon Avenue, disgraced in some way, spends his time gazing into the middle distance 'waiting for the message to come which would rectify the error. It never, of course, came.' (192).<sup>37</sup> At another point John seems to claim himself as a Christ-like figure: towards the beginning of 'The Szum and the Ching' John discusses the painting, *The Polish Rider*, probably by Rembrandt. (John at this moment is a different kind of Polish rider, not a Pole riding, but riding his motorbike in Poland). John speculates that the painting is of a Polish dissident: 'If the painting was of Jonas Szlichtyng it offers an image of a Christlike figure, who is a man, only a man, setting out, mounted on a horse, to meet his destiny.' (166) John wishes to choose the painting as an epitaph (171), thus equating himself (in his posthumous future) with the 'Christlike' figure depicted. This evokes a connection with Christ and simultaneously suspends it among layers of simile and framing. 'Jonas', we realise, given how many times Berger has played this favourite trick of his, is also the Polish form of 'John'.

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<sup>35</sup> This idea of the messianic, by the way, is not to be confused with Benjamin's more famous idea of 'weak messianism' that appears in the 'Theses on the philosophy of history', to which Derrida also alludes in *Specters of Marx*.

<sup>36</sup> Berger is quoted by Paul Bonaventura as saying: 'Consider what would happen if, instead of thinking one is marching towards a kind of heaven, one becomes aware that one is living in a kind of hell. Would one's reactions be so very different? I don't think so'. (Paul Bonaventura 'Master of Diversity', *New Statesman*, 12 November, 2001.)

<sup>37</sup> This last sentence is a late manuscript addition, penciled onto the word-processed version. See the John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/71.

Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, asks what can be salvaged from Marx after the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union dissolved and Francis Fukuyama had proclaimed the end of history.<sup>38</sup> He takes the 'messianic eschatology' (73) of both Marxist critique and religion and the qualities inherent in their manifest end point, in which it is no longer possible to believe, and with considerable caution, suggests the following:

While [a messianic eschatology] is common to both of them, with the exception of the content...it is also the case that its formal structure of promise exceeds them or precedes them. Well, what remains irreducible to any deconstruction, what remains as undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction is, perhaps, *a certain experience of the emancipatory promise*; it is perhaps even the *formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism*. (My emphasis)<sup>39</sup>

Derrida is tentative ('perhaps', 'a *certain* experience of', et cetera), and reasonably so, given the impalpable nature of what he is trying to describe. Nevertheless the thinking here, and indeed the circumstances in which he was thinking it, bring us close to naming what Berger dramatises in *Here*, which repeatedly finds examples of various endpoints found to be chimeras - a post-revolution utopia, angels settling arguments, political pardons arriving, messiahs and resurrection, et cetera - and yet refuses to relinquish the hope the possibility of these endpoints engendered. Late in the book, just before John points up to Andromeda, he states things he knew as a child: 'Everywhere there's pain. And, more insistent and sharper than pain, everywhere there's a waiting with expectancy.' (234)

The intangibility of what is being described here often makes Berger's attempts to describe it outright difficult to comprehend. We get passages such as this in which Mim, once more on the aqueduct, says:

Think of a bottomless pit, think of a nothing. An absolute nothing. In it there's already an appeal - are you following me? A Nothing is an appeal for Something. It can't be otherwise. Yet the appeal is all there is; there's only a

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida delivered *Specters of Marx* at the 'Whither Marxism?' conference at the University of California, Riverside, in April 1993.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 74.

naked crying-out appeal. A yearning...The something which is made can give no support to anything else, it is only a desire. It possesses nothing, nothing is given to it, there is no place for it. Yet it exists! It Exists! (53)

The homeless, naked 'appeal' (the word appears four times in the above passage) finds us in similar territory to 'a certain experience of an emancipatory promise' - the appeal for what is not yet there. Both the 'promise' and the 'appeal' exist prior to, and without content, indeed, they *are* content. The book appears to suggest that we must be satisfied with the knowledge of this. John replies that this sounds like Jacob Boehme, Sixteenth-Century German mystic, another figure that, like Baruch Spinoza, Berger might be attracted to because his thought suggests that heaven and the divine are not distant but in all things on earth. 'Stop dropping names' (53) scolds Mim, once more undercutting the possibility that the text, or John, is able to schematise or settle on a single answer.

Berger told Paul Bonaventura in a *New Statesman* interview in 2001, conducted at the time when he was composing 'Islington':

I can't accept human liberation as something that can be finally gained, I think it's something that has to be constantly and eternally struggled for. Paradoxically, it's in the worst situations - the most 'hopeless' situations - that the struggle is at its strongest. Not so much in terms of achieving human liberation, but of preserving human dignity in the present.<sup>40</sup>

What is expressed here is not new in Berger. The epigraph of *A Painter of Our Time*, a quotation from Maxim Gorki, reads: 'Life will always be bad enough for the desire for something better not to be extinguished in men'.<sup>41</sup> We see here a similar tension between desire and hopelessness, a continuous yearning in the present for a never-appearing future. John's self-reflexive examination of his life is conducted from a position very similar to those he describes. *A Painter of Our Time* also contains a splitting, manifested as a time gap from which a slightly older, wiser John can examine himself. *Here* extends this idea greatly, finding it (with Derrida) located in religious belief and practise, not confined to radical politics. Political and historical disappointment is thus reconfigured as part of a wider human experience.

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Bonaventura 'Master of Diversity', *New Statesman*, 12 November, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> The epigraph is in most editions, including the first (Secker & Warburg, 1958). The most recent reprint, by Verso (2010) omits it.

The book also reaches back in time before the beginning of history. The chapter 'Le Pont D'Arc', in which John visits the 30,000-year-old Chauvet cave paintings, describes what remains of the prehistoric world, and expands the timeline of the text hugely.<sup>42</sup> It suggests that all human activity, whatever its primary purpose, can also be addressed to the future that will, even after thousands of years, find it and feel the affinity. At times, the future in this book is a vast void that we are unable to act in or influence, but that we can address our present actions towards. In this context Hubert's cataloguing appears to be addressed to the future, and on the evidence of the Chauvet cave, he has reason to believe that the future will receive it.

For John, Chauvet is evidence that Cro-Magnon people, as nomad hunters, had a different relationship to time and space:

For nomads the notion of past and future is subservient to the experience of *elsewhere*. Something that has gone, or is awaited, is hidden elsewhere in another place. ...What has vanished has gone into hiding. An absence - as after the departure of the dead - is felt as a loss but not as an abandonment. The dead are hiding elsewhere. (141, emphasis in the original)

Here we see 'place' taking precedence over 'time', or time as spatialised (and the horizontality of the book finding its central figure). It has been a recurring motif in Berger's oeuvre from *G.* onwards ('I have little sense of unfolding time...I see fields where others see chapters' (137) muses *G.*'s narrator) and the spatially understood relationship suggested here between the living and the dead is a microcosm of what the book as a whole dramatises. The paintings, he continues, were 'hidden in the dark so that what they embodied would outlast everything visible, and promise, perhaps, survival.' (142) This is another enigmatic phrase, in which darkness (specifically, in this instance, the dark cave) is a place of concealment, where the dead are hiding - their distance from the living being understood in space, not time. One must know to cross the bridge to discover them. Anne, herself absent (and dying) elaborates:

What they painted is like a map, Anne says.

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<sup>42</sup> Berger visited the Chauvet caves in 2002. He wrote an article for *The Guardian* (12 October, 2002), reworked parts of which find their way into 'Le Pont D'Arc'.

Of what?  
The company in the dark.  
Who are where?  
Here, come from elsewhere...(142)

The paintings, when approached with a torch, or 30000 years later, with a flashlight, illuminate a map of the dead and absent in their hiding places, offering the means with which to apprehend their otherwise invisible presence. The conclusions John draws from his visit to the Chauvet cave provide a way of understanding the visits he receives from the dead. He is privileged, for reasons he doesn't question; he is able to see in the dark, or able to tempt the dead briefly into the light. Anne and John's suppositions about Cro-Magnon culture are another space for metaphysical speculation that Berger introduces, along with references to Benjamin's messianism, Jacob Boehme, and the others. The text seems more willing to embrace this Cro-Magnon version: it is not institutionalised, it emerges from a humbler, less certain culture (at least in John's account) in which humanity (or its antecedents) has not yet claimed mastery over the environment. The notion that the dead are hidden, not absent, suggests that they can be revealed, or reveal themselves. Berger is also punning on 'dark' and 'D'Arc', which is made more noticeable by the choice of title; crossing the bridge, indeed crossing any relevant bridge, will result in finding oneself in the company of those in the dark, amongst the dead, who have been waiting patiently.

#### 4

Around the same time as he was writing about specific, familial ghosts in *Here*, Berger was using the ghost as a trope to describe other things. One was 'hope' in seemingly hopeless situations, what we might name (after a film Berger made with the photographer Sebastiao Salgado) the 'Spectre of Hope'.<sup>43</sup> The other is a kind of group, or collection of groups, without organisation or obvious material reality, on which nevertheless Berger seemed to place a good deal of importance. We might name it 'the company in the dark' after Anne's name in 'Le Pont D'Arc' for the dead

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<sup>43</sup> Sebastiao Salgado, *Spectre of Hope* (2000). The full film, narrated by Berger, is available on YouTube.

who are hidden rather than absent and finds expression more generally in *Here*, where the near-companionless John gets glimpses of the company the dead keep with one another, huddled weightlessly together in the lift, but also sharing material things like food, over distance. As the names of Berger's later works suggest (*Keeping a Rendezvous*; *The Shape of a Pocket*; *Here is Where We Meet*), encounters are important to Berger at this time. On the back cover of the Bloomsbury edition of *The Shape of a Pocket*, Berger writes:

The pocket in question is a small pocket of resistance. A pocket is formed when two or more people come together in agreement. The resistance is against the inhumanity of the new world economic order. The people coming together are the reader, me and those the essays are about - Rembrandt, Palaeolithic cave painters, a Romanian peasant, ancient Egyptians, an expert in the loneliness of certain hotel bedrooms, dogs at dusk, a man in a radio station. And unexpectedly, our exchanges strengthen each of us in our conviction that what is happening in the world today is wrong, and that what is often said about it is a lie. I've never written a book with a greater sense of urgency.<sup>44</sup>

For Berger here, reading the text is a form of action, which both constitutes membership of a group, however loose, and activates a site on which readers and writers, and dead artists, meet.<sup>45</sup> It is a rhetorical strategy, straddling poetic and practical acts, and which builds throughout *Photocopies*, *Shape*, and *Here*, as these texts accumulate people Berger professes love for, whom he draws in, along with us, as addressees. Three of the essays in the *Shape of a Pocket* are addressed to Marisa Camino.<sup>46</sup> 'The Chauvet Cave' opens 'You, Marisa, who have painted so many creatures and turned over many stones and crouched for hours looking, perhaps you will follow me' (35). The opening paragraph of 'Michelangelo' contains the sentence 'I picture you in your faraway Galician kitchen restoring a painted

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<sup>44</sup> The quotation is in inverted commas in the original and specifically attributed to Berger.

<sup>45</sup> In this it has some affinities with Jacques Derrida's idea of the 'New International', which he puts forward in *Specters of Marx*, which is a 'link of affinity, suffering, and hope, a still discreet, almost secret link...without title, and without name, without coordination, without national community...the friendship of an alliance without institution amongst those who, even if they no longer believe or never believed in the socialist-Marxist International...'. *Specters of Marx*, 107.

<sup>46</sup> Marisa Camino subsequently collaborated with Berger on a series of drawings exhibited in Cork (2005) and Madrid (2007). She is also credited with the photograph of her and Berger in the US edition of *Photocopies*.

Madonna for a small village church' (97) and it ends with 'I'll send you Salgado's photo of Galician women wading into the Ria de Vigo, searching in the month of October for shellfish at low tide...' (101). 'Brancusi' begins 'Thank you for the painting, Marisa, I've put glass over it' (123). Marisa is thus a recurring presence in the book, addressee, but also correspondent engaged in acts of exchange. She is the second-person addressee of these essays, which are constructed as if part of a letter sequence. As if to underline the importance of this idea of the letter, the collection also contains two letter sequences between Berger and Leon Kossof, and Berger and Subcomandante Marcos, as well as an open letter to the then Mayor of Lyon, Raymond Barre.<sup>47</sup> Marcos's and Kossof's words illustrate the idea that the rest of the book is a dialogue, although Marisa is silent throughout. Nevertheless, the reader is encouraged to feel as if he or she is one among other correspondents, not a solitary reader.<sup>48</sup>

Marisa first appears in *Photocopies*, a book which attempts to collect together people whom 'Berger' has loved, and employs multiple addressees in order to emphasise the sense of company. 'A Woman and Man standing by a Plum Tree', the opening chapter of *Photocopies* (1995), describes a reader, Marisa, visiting 'Berger' unannounced.<sup>49</sup> They have met once before at a public reading in Madrid, at which Marisa, attendee, gave 'Berger', the writer on the stage, a picture, presumably at the signing afterwards. The woman is enigmatic: she drives a patched up old yellow car, lives with many animals, she is clean but unkempt and unforthcoming. During this second meeting they talk 'of nothing' (4), have dinner, and as it is raining hard outside, 'Berger' and an invisible other ('we' (6)) insist she stays the night.<sup>50</sup> In the morning Marisa asks if she can take a photograph, using a homemade pinhole camera; the resulting image is reproduced in the text (fig. 21). Marisa is an important figure in this company, or pocket. She is a reader, first and foremost, who becomes a subject of the books. Her passage from reader to addressee is emblematic of a journey implicit in much of late Berger: one might read Berger and then meet him,

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<sup>47</sup> Both *Photocopies* and *The Shape of a Pocket* end with words by Subcomandante Marcos.

<sup>48</sup> Berger expresses this in a different way in conversation with Michael Ondaatje organised by the Lannan foundation. Berger declares that the cinema is the most important form for his writing because it is experienced in the dark, together but also alone. One cannot look at a painting or read in such a way. The spectators' collaboration with the narrative and each other, is, for Berger 'the most encouraging'. See <http://player.mashpedia.com/player.php?q=AyEhADdOaBY&lang=>

<sup>49</sup> The appellation 'Berger' is what I will use to designate the John Berger figure in all of these texts, even those that explicitly claim to be factual accounts.

<sup>50</sup> Presumably this is a reference to Beverley, Berger's wife, with whom he lived until her death in 2014.

drive to his house and be greeted as a one of the gang. And yet, of course, all of this for us takes place on the page, and the photograph that might be expected to lend tangibility to the encounter (in itself doubtful) invests it with the opposite.<sup>51</sup>

Of the photograph Berger writes:

Our traces remain, yet they are far less substantial than those of the tree and they are two-faced: it would be hard for a third person to decide whether we were leaving or returning, were in the process of appearing or disappearing, whether we were alive or were ghosts. (77)



FIGURE 21

Marisa Camino, Untitled photograph, (before 1995). An original print is in the John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/53, and is reproduced in *Photocopies*, 1.

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<sup>51</sup> The photograph is reproduced terribly in the Bloomsbury edition (the book is only printed as paperback in the UK). An original print is in the *Photocopies* folder of the archive (John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/53). It is much clearer. The reproduction doesn't show that the environment in which Berger and Camino stand is sharp and detailed. One can make out the points of leaves, blades of grass silhouetted against the puddle that clearly reflects the shapes behind it and the planks of wood that comprise the shed in the background. The environment has great depth and solidity; in contrast, because of the length of the exposure the figures, particularly Marisa, are seemingly insubstantial, like Victorian photographs of ghosts.

The fragility of this relationship between reader, writer, other readers and long dead subjects, manifests itself through the proliferation of ghosts and the ghostly. Ghosts abound in *Photocopies*. Along with the photograph of Marisa and 'Berger', the 'Passenger to Omagh', Kathleen, is playing the Ghost of Christmas past in the school play. 'These are but shadows of things that have been', (20) she quotes to him; in 'Woman with a dog on her lap', the narrator hears the laughter of the dead Angeline (13); we learn in 'An old woman with a pram' that the narrator's mother believed that 'birds carried messages from the dead' (32); 'Street Theatre' concerns a street performer dressed as a scarecrow, his arms 'crossed against his chest like those of a corpse in a coffin' (88). He acknowledges a boy who gives him money: 'the solemnity of the gesture reminds [Berger] of certain painted resurrections' (89). Among these another is particularly striking: 'Berger' recalls the circumstances of the death of an artist friend, Abidine (Dino), who died of cancer.<sup>52</sup> 'Berger' awakes in the middle of the night intuiting that his friend has died, and prays to become the lens of a telescope which will allow the angel accompanying Abidine to see him 'more' (129), an extraordinarily strange thought, perhaps a dream-thought, in which the ability of an angel to see the newly dead is in question, in need of support, and obliquely important. The death is confirmed in the morning, and the story ends with 'Berger' remembering a series of paintings Abidine made of faces (see fig. 22):

Images of countless faces, each person distinct, but together in their energy similar to molecules. The images, however, were neither sinister nor symbolic. When he first showed them to me I thought this multitude of faces were like the letters of an undeciphered writing. They were mysteriously fluent and beautiful. Now I ask myself whether Abidine had not travelled again, and whether these were not already pictures of the dead? (130)

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<sup>52</sup> Abidin Dino, (his first name spelled without the final 'e') was a well known Turkish artist who died at the age of 80 in Paris in 1993 from throat cancer. A drawing he made of Berger is reproduced on the front cover of the Turkish translation of *Photocopies*.



FIGURE 22

Abidin Dino, *Yüzler* (faces) (1992).

Dino's pictures emblemise the relationship with company that Berger's books from this time seem to propose: the faces are close together, are potentially not faces at all but instead dissolve into a kind of pattern. They may be faces of the dead, emerging or disappearing into the ground of the painting. 'Berger's reading asks if the crowd is comprised of people who are alive, or dead, or not a crowd at all, but exists only as words, the letters of an undeciphered writing.

Berger's introduction to David Levi Strauss's *Between the Eyes: essays on photography and politics*, which appeared in the same year as *Here* was published, contains another ghost. I quote at length this remarkable passage:

I write in the night, but I see not only the tyranny. If that were so I would probably not have the courage to continue. I see people sleeping, stirring, getting up to drink water, whispering their projects or their fears, making love, praying, cooking something while the rest of the family sleeps, in Baghdad and Chicago. (Yes, I see too the forever invincible Kurds, 4,000 of whom were gassed, with U.S. compliance, by Saddam Hussein.) I see pastry cooks working in Teheran, and the shepherds, thought of as bandits, sleeping beside their sheep in Sardinia; I see a man in the Friedrichshain

quarter of Berlin sitting in his pajamas with a bottle of beer reading Heidegger and he has the hands of a proletarian. I see a mother in Ghana, her name is Aya, which means born on a Friday, swaying her baby to sleep; I see the ruins of Kabul and a man going home; and I know that, despite the pain, the ingenuity of the survivors is undiminished, an ingenuity which scavenges and collects energy, and, in the ceaseless cunning of this ingenuity, there is spiritual value, something like the Holy Ghost.<sup>53</sup>

Here we have a certain merging of the figures of the company of the dark and the spectre of hope. In the dark, Berger sees the connection between widely dispersed people. The hope here is Berger's; the connection between the people is their 'ingenuity', which 'collects energy', and has a 'spiritual value'. It is 'like', rather than actually being the Holy Ghost, however, and Berger again is evoking and denying a metaphysical certainty to help him express what he means. Beyond its specificity, the Holy Ghost is another instance of the ghostly appearing in Berger's thought. Its qualities help express this sense of hope, alongside life conceived as ceaseless struggle and pain, as delicate and intangible, between presence and absence, the real and imaginary, here and there, now and then, possible and impossible. In these examples, it is these ghostly expressions of hope and organisation that have, by the late nineties, begun to overlap with or supersede the belief in political revolution that Berger was already beginning to doubt in the late 1950s (in *Here's* version of events), which received another knock post-1968, and which was extinguished after the optimism embodied by the velvet revolutions in the early 1990s had begun to dissipate into the misery of the Balkans conflicts.

*Here* is where we meet these different but related uses and senses of the ghost as they infiltrate the personal ghosts Berger uses to write about his past. In *Here*, what John finds come the end of his searching seems to satisfy him: it is a text, as we have said from the beginning, which has an impenetrable barrier (emblematised by the opening figure of the Cypress Tree) that prevents the dead from heading up to heaven (or wherever) and prevents a saviour from descending ('on no occasion did an angel come' [6]), and in which an inability to act seems to provoke the risk of hopeless melancholy. But the book's final full chapter ends with an anticipated return: of Mirek, Danka and baby Olek. John has also 'arrived' (159).

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<sup>53</sup> John Berger, 'Introduction' to *Between the eyes: essays on photography and politics* by David Levi Strauss (New York : Aperture ; London : Thames & Hudson, 2005.), x-xi.

When his family of friends appear it is a return in a number of ways - they are not just returning to the house, but coming home to Poland, ending their lives as wandering Seventh Men (and Women), a situation that inhibits their ability to act in the world (according to *A Seventh Man*).<sup>54</sup> The decision to settle in the house which has only previously been 'uninhabited but visited' (200) is a figure of a kind of permanence replacing contingency, and, with its many stories, sad histories, and butterflies in every room, also expresses a desire to live life alongside the dead.<sup>55</sup>

Several symbolic things happen in the final pages of 'The Szum and the Ching.' Baby Olek, (whose strength and vitality is emphasised) is the last to ride on the indoor swing (dead Rosa Luxemburg before him) in a symbolic reconnection with the living, present world. John and Camilla, the literal girl next door in Gordon Avenue, and another ghost in this moment, look at the stars together ('That's Andromeda, Camilla replies, I've told you many times' [234]). This (the third to last page) is the first moment since the appearance of Alfred that the narrative has pointed us to the stars, and represents another reconnection or reopening. The moth (moths are referred to earlier as 'night butterflies' [229]) that touches John's hand in the darkness suggests continuing, but also fleeting contact with the dead in a house now full of the living (235). After 'The Szum and the Ching' ends, chapter '8½' finishes the book with an affirmation: if John's implied writer's block represents his inactivity and perhaps his political sense of hopelessness, commensurate with Hubert's, then, in exactly the same way as for Fellini's film and *Painter*, the book is the cure for the illness it depicts, and to reuse James Wood's phrase, 'a document of its own making', in which living with ghosts is reconciled with living, and with writing.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> On a manuscript page for 'The Szum and the Ching' is the note: 'Outline of M.'s life. 7th man.' In the novel Mirek is a migrant worker; his and Danka's story is a story of homecoming (John Berger Archive, MS 88964/1/70).

<sup>55</sup>The manuscript adds 'the here-today-gone-tomorrow house', strengthening this idea of making permanence out of impermanence.

<sup>56</sup> James Wood, Introduction to *Nausea*, (London: Penguin, 2000), vii.

## Drawing Conclusions

'So - let's try to draw, hmmm?' states Berger to camera at the beginning of a life class, charcoal pointing to the ceiling, a twinkle in his eye.<sup>1</sup> What would a portrait of Berger's literary oeuvre look like?

I have from the outset insisted on the distinctiveness of each work read in this study and the importance of reading them as such, so I want to avoid homogenising them here into a handful of concluding generalisations. A huge variety of work is considered in this study - in form, tone, style, influence, subject matter, genre, et cetera - written against across five decades of huge political, social and cultural change, through marriages and divorces, children and grandchildren, and periods of intense collaborative friendship; in Hampstead, Geneva, Parisian suburbs and the converted animal shed of an Haute Savoie farmhouse.

I argued in the introduction that Berger's critical millstone has been (until at least the mid 1980s) to be read narrowly as a Marxist writer, or (and there is considerable overlap) to be explained in his own terms. Some later critics, like Nikos Papastigiadis, have read Berger in order to illustrate a wider historical idea - in his case that of exile as the definition of modern experience. Some have tried to tell a coherent story of the entire, evolving body of work. None of this should be rejected outright, and yet I hope to have shown in this thesis that the work itself, closely

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<sup>1</sup> Channel 4. *Today's Nude*, 2009.

read for its contingency, particularity and specificity is resistant to such strategies. The richness of Berger's work demands a different approach. With such reading as I have attempted to do, I suggest, major themes emerge that have been consistently underemphasised. To give just one example, Berger's work features an obsession with animals. The relationship between humans and various animals (particularly mammals) is given its first and most elaborate expression in *The Foot of Clive*, a text in which animals are used dramatically and figuratively (from the menacing presences of the ward's dogs, Dai's eating from the stomach of the deer, Ken's identification of the Dalmatian as competition for Eleanor's sexual favours, et cetera) to put pressure on the human lives in the book. Later on in the oeuvre, passages about animals, such as the seemingly suicidal drowning dog in *Corker's Freedom*, and the killing of the two horses in *G.*, often disrupt or disturb the text, resisting easy explanation or assimilation. Understandably, animals feature heavily in the peasant texts, and are crucial to the moments in *Pig Earth* in which the characters, with the help of the precipitous slopes, find fleeting access to an un- or under-defined metaphysical otherness. Lucie Cabrol is the only human able to lead another to these spaces, and Jean is fascinated by her animal-like body. In *King*, the confusion as to whether the narrator is a dog or a human suggests another way that animals feature in the work. Accompanied by the many birds and butterflies that fly across Berger's pages and the symbolic and dramatic charges they convey, the representation of animals is a deeply inscribed feature of Berger's literary imagination. It is little remarked upon.

I could have chosen many other examples: Berger is a consistent and inventive writer of himself, both dramatising and referring to himself by naming characters 'John' and its etymological cousins, among other strategies. His fiction is also fascinated by representing the problems of searching, discovery and doubt. At its richest, the work contains within it both the impression of a search and the restriction of that search by the limits of what is knowable, readable, legible, or interpretable. This aspect of his writing also pulls in the other direction: *Painter* and *Here*, and perhaps (more obliquely) *A Fortunate Man* are 'documents of their own making', and thus end with resolution and closure. In these texts, the resolution is found in the act of writing seen as work. If Berger's oeuvre can also be characterised by uncertainty, it has also consistently found its firmest solutions or resolutions in the act of writing, whilst also retaining a fascination and openness to the mysteries

of creativity. He is also a writer of patterns of figures that, by the latter stages of the work, exist in an idiolectic vocabulary of symbols that shift and alter somewhat with every iteration. He is an inventive writer of dreams, and an original writer about sex, and a writer seemingly energised by working between genres and traditions, and by probing the spaces between various oppositions: the material and metaphysical, the present and the absent, life and death, historical and personal. None of this yet receives due prominence in the critical portrait of the work.

Equally, it is in the overlapping of the above and more as they come together in a given passage or text that has proved to be the most exciting and fertile critical territory for this thesis, and it is these possibilities that the best approaches to Berger must allow for. The curtains are drawn back (to paraphrase G.'s narrator) when a particular text is opened and the act of reading begins. This is where a 'literary Berger' appears, largely unfamiliar to criticism, and which I have tried to begin the process of drawing out.

Berger wrote almost nothing that can be described as literary criticism. The exception is 'The Recipe of Ulysses', published initially in *The Guardian* in 1991. Berger's reading of Joyce's text values its 'illegality', 'liquidity', 'immensity', 'erudition' and sense of play.<sup>2</sup> He emphasises its transgressiveness, the coexistence of the material and immaterial within its pages ('offal with flecks in it of the divine'), its exuberance and exorbitance.<sup>3</sup> According to Berger, Joyce showed him,

before I knew anything, that literature is inimicable to all hierarchies and that to separate fact and imagination, event and feeling, protagonist and narrator, is to stay on dry land and never put to sea.<sup>4</sup>

There are no representations of sailing in Berger's fiction (the sea is G.'s watery grave), but flight *is* one of its most characteristic features. Taking off and leaving the firm ground behind - however briefly, on whatever scale - is a vital impulse in the work, and, a manifestation, I suggest, of what Berger prizes in literature generally. As a reader, I agree.

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<sup>2</sup> John Berger, *Selected Essays*, 468.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 468.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 469.

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