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In Praise of John Berger (Part Two)

“Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one.” – John Berger

Alan Riach and **Alexander Moffat** continue their conversation on the work and legacy of John Berger, who died on 2 January.

Alan: I was thinking there are two aspects to what we’re saying, one is about what Berger tells us about any specific artist or works of art of the past, the other is the weight and edge of application today of what he says about art, history and people.

Sandy: Yes, but the fiction and the political essays also work through everything he says about art and artists, and you’re right, it’s finally about how it applies now. In the introduction to the last major collection of his writing, *Landscapes* (2016), there’s an awfully pertinent observation: “Emigration, forced or chosen, across national frontiers or from village to metropolis, is the quintessential experience of our time. That industrialisation and capitalism would require such a transport of men on an unprecedented scale and with a new kind of violence was already prophesied by the opening of the slave trade in the sixteenth century. The Western Front and the First World War with its conscripted mass armies was a later confirmation of the same practice of tearing up, assembling and concentrating in a ‘no-man’s land’. Later, concentration camps, around the world, followed the logic of the same continuous practice.”

Now, that connects with *A Seventh Man* (1975), his documentary book with the photographer Jean Mohr about migrant workers in Europe in the 1970s. This is still, nearly half a century later, terribly relevant and helpful if we want to understand the relation between power and money, on the one hand, and human beings and human priorities, so badly exploited in the encompassing international economy. It should have been compulsory reading in 2016.

Alan: In the 1970s, this book tells us, the industrial European countries depended for their production on importing “22 million hands and arms” to do the most menial work. The whole work addresses this situation: “Why are the owners of those arms and hands treated like the replaceable parts of a machine? What compels the migrant worker to leave his village and accept this humiliation?”

Sandy: Of course, the issues surrounding migration have changed since then but what's happening now is a consequence of the same structures of power: "the migrant worker experiences, within a few years, what the working population of every industrial city once experienced over generations. To consider his life – its material circumstances and his inner feelings – is to be brought face to face with the fundamental nature of our present societies and their histories." So as the book demonstrates, "the migrant is not on the margin of modern experience; he is absolutely central to it. To bring this experience directly to the reader we need political analysis and poetry."

Alan: And this connects with Wole Soyinka, who says in his book, *Of Africa* (2012), that most people would identify the Holocaust and Hiroshima as the two most horrific "leaps" in the human story, but there is a third: Slavery. Of the first two one might say hopefully, "Never again!" (even though their effects stay with us) but the third, it seems, is not only an atrocity of the 18th and 19th centuries but continuingly, "an elusive, insidious, and seemingly eternal human condition". Later in the same book he gives an example of this in a different context: "The right of women to veil or not veil, is not in question, indeed is not the question, the question being whether or not any practice is transparently founded on choice, or imposition." Now that takes us from the Holocaust and Hiroshima to everyday occurrences and the nature of how we make choices, and what things are imposed upon us. Berger brings this to the present moment, and makes it clear that we are each one of us always complicit in all that's taken place in the past precisely because we have a responsibility to understand it, to move forward from it. Which is history, but is also the "work" of art.

Sandy: Democracy depends on that ability to choose. But how do social structures of power make that possible, or try to curtail it?

Alan: Berger actually elaborates on that notion, in the essay, "The Soul and the Operator": he says that "the principle of choice" has been hijacked by the market but there's a deeper question: "Democracy is a political demand. But it is something more. It is a moral demand for the individual right to decide by what criteria an action is called right or wrong. Democracy was born of the principle of conscience." Conscience and understanding allow you to make the choice. And that's why the arts are so important.

Sandy: For me, one of Berger's greatest essays is "Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible" (1995) where he asks, "Consider any newsreader on any television channel in any country. These speakers are the mechanical epitome of the disembodied. It took the system

many years to invent them and to teach them to talk as they do. No bodies and no Necessity – for Necessity is the condition of the existent. It is what makes reality real.” Today, “Necessity” no longer exists: “All that is left is the spectacle, the game that nobody plays and everybody can watch. As has never happened before, people have to try to place their own existence and their own pains single-handed in the vast area of time and the universe.” So what does the “work” of art (in this case, painting) offer? “Painting is, first, an affirmation of the visible which surrounds us and which continually appears and disappears. Without the disappearing, there would be perhaps no impulse to paint, for then the visible itself would possess the surety (the permanence) which painting strives to find. More directly than any other art, painting is an affirmation of the existent, of the physical world into which mankind has been thrown.” Then he says something crucial: “The modern illusion concerning painting (which post-modernism has done nothing to correct) is that the artist is a creator. Rather he is a receiver. What seems like creation is the act of giving form to what he has received.”

Alan: Is there a specific example to demonstrate this?

Sandy: All great paintings are examples of this process, but yes, looking at a portrait of The Marquise de Sorcy de Thelusson, painted by David in 1790, he asks, “Who could have foreseen in her time the solitude in which people live today? A solitude confirmed daily by the networks of bodiless and false images concerning the world. Yet their falseness is not an error. In the pursuit of profit as the only means of salvation for mankind, turn-over becomes the absolute priority, and consequently, the existent has to be disregarded or ignored or suppressed. Today, to try to paint the existent is an act of resistance instigating hope.”

Alan: He’s taking that 18th-century instance and then bearing down hard on the contemporary world. To do that, he has to concentrate not on the painting as object or commodity but its process, both in its own creation, canvas and pigment and brushes and brushstrokes, but also the whole historical context. That’s what allows him to make the comparison with the contemporary. It’s a strategy he uses again and again.

Sandy: Berger came to Scotland in 1982 as one of the judges for the MacDiarmid Memorial Sculpture competition. He found time to visit the Painting Studios in the Glasgow School of Art, a visit fondly remembered by Ken Currie and Malcolm Dickson who were students at the time. We also spent an afternoon in the National Gallery of Scotland. I asked him which painting would he wish take home and the small Rembrandt self-portrait was his answer. Ten years later, in 1992, he published an essay “Rembrandt and the Body” where he says that “the

self-portraits are something more. He grew old in a climate of economic fanaticism and indifference – not dissimilar to the climate of the period we are living through. The human could no longer simply be copied (as in the Renaissance), the human was no longer self-evident: it had to be found in the darkness. Rembrandt himself was obstinate, dogmatic, cunning, capable of a kind of brutality. Do not let us turn him into a saint. Yet he was looking for a way out of the darkness.”

Alan: In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger draws attention to the contrast between two self-portraits by Rembrandt. The first, from 1634, shows him aged 28, in the year of his first marriage, with Saskia his bride: he is smiling, his eyes are dancing, his arms are raised, his mood is happy. He’s the proud husband anticipating the pleasures his bride will bring him, and he depicts her equally predictably. The material world that is their context affirms and reassures. But the painting is formulaic and superficial: it’s an advertisement for youth, wealth and good fortune, and it is heartless. Thirty years later, Rembrandt reverses the tradition of self-portraiture in an image of the painter as an old man: the eyes are hard, they stare out at you quizzically. Existence itself has become a question.

You can hear that question in the terrible, arresting phrase that opens the third movement of Stravinsky’s violin concerto of 1931 and the musical exposition that follows it. You can feel it in *King Lear* or a few other great tragedies. You can see it again in the astonishing series of drawings which Picasso produced in the mid-1950s. In most of these drawings, a young woman, usually naked and desirable, is shown beside various self-portraits of Picasso, old, ugly, small and absurd. In his book, *Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965), Berger summarizes: life, nature, sex, universalised in the various women, stand beside age, the collapsing distortions of the body, the lurid absurdity of masks that do not conceal but echo the identity behind them. The old man becomes a clown, then a monkey, a baboon, a monstrous little dwarf, while an acrobat like Harlequin reminds him of the lost agilities of unreclaimable youth. The drawings are Picasso’s confession of despair, of loneliness and grief. It is not a social vision Picasso presents, like that of his countryman Goya, but rather a personal vision, like Rembrandt’s, a depiction of the extremity to which his own life has taken him.

Yet what Berger draws our attention to in the later Rembrandt self-portrait is a quality of human sympathy untainted by self-pity. It’s one of the most difficult, but necessary things. It’s related to something in Sorley Maclean’s poem “Hallaig” where personal and social tragedy come together but something else begins to happen: a remembering accompanies the

disintegration. There's a kind of re-imagining, a strange joy. In "Hallaig", Maclean evokes the memories of a cleared township on his native island of Raasay, in the Hebrides. The central line of the poem is: "The dead have been seen alive." And when we look at Rembrandt, listen to Stravinsky, study Picasso, read MacLean, what gives us authority and encouragement comes through, something essential, part of that recognition of what tragedy is. In Berger's phrase, that quality of inspiration is what all art delivers: the intimation of our own potential.

[Boxed off:]

John Berger in his own words:

The entire world altered fundamentally in the 1990s. It was then that the agencies, the lobbies, the multinational organizations of speculative financial capitalism became the supreme decision-makers concerning the evolution of the globe.

Hope engenders political vocabularies. Hopelessness leads to wordlessness. Most official discourses and commentaries are dumb concerning what is being lived and imagined by the vast majority of people in their struggles to survive. The media offer trivial immediate distraction to fill the silence...

Those who are ready to protest against, and resist, what is happening today are legion, but the political means for doing so are for the moment unclear or absent. They need time to develop. So we have to wait. But how to wait in such circumstances? How to wait in this state of forgetfulness?

We will learn to wait in solidarity. Just as we will continue indefinitely to praise, to swear and to curse in every language we know.

John Berger, extracts from *Confabulations* (2016)

Where to start with Berger (the essential books): *Permanent Red* (1960); *Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965); *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays* (1969); *The Look of Things: Selected Essays and Articles* (1972); *Ways of Seeing* (1972); *A Seventh Man* (with Jean Mohr) (1975); *The White Bird* (1985); *Keeping a Rendezvous* (1992); *The Shape of a Pocket* (2001); *Confabulations* (2016); *Landscapes* (2016).