

**Storytelling and Experience in John  
Berger's Works**

**Thesis Submitted to Jadavpur University  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Arts)**

**By**

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Dedicated to my parents

*Certified that the thesis entitled*

‘Storytelling and Experience in John Berger's Works’

submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of Professor Amlan Das Gupta of the Department of English, Jadavpur University, and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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Dated:

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## Preface

There are books that lend themselves to rapid reading because of their use of simple language and there are books that impede the reading process through either the density of language or intermittent digressions or both. Berger's stylistics is simple, lucid and yet his works do not make for rapid reading. This is because, it seems to me, one goes not from page to page horizontally but also pauses to plumb the vertical depth of each line. This is not to say that he loads his lines and words with multiple meanings: he makes them, in his words, "fresh", salvaging them from the banality they might have incurred through repetition within a capitalist, consumerist system. It is this quality of freshness in his vision and his writing that makes us pause, while reading his work, to make connections with our own experiences, however different they may be from the experiences that lay at the beginning of his writing. This is why reading Berger is an act of intellectual empowerment. Geoff Dyer once pointed out that Berger is one of those writers who engage you with your own intellect. The reader is encouraged to trace the lines of invisible, pre-existing constellations of meanings. They are also inspired to form such imaginary constellations on their own. The image of constellation, present in Benjamin's conception of history, is useful in understanding the non-linear and unpredictable nature of meaning of events in Berger. I found the image of the constellation in understanding another aspect of Berger's writing: the occasional, anachronistic appearance of figures from the past – living or dead, fictional or real – in his stories and how they seem to participate in an ongoing discussion about the human condition. Like stars in a constellation, they are held together by an invisible, yet continuous thread of meaning. Therefore, spectral appearances of well-known, lesser-known and unknown figures happen – some from the pages of history, some from Berger's own life – there is no hierarchy or order in the way they appear. There is

complicity among these figures, to use a word Berger was fond of using. The experience of reading Berger is similar to that of participating in ongoing conversations. There is a porosity in his telling in how characters and happenings from one story sometimes appear to emerge in another with a different guise. What Berger prioritizes is experience and moments of insight; he addresses the mystification of experiences through storytelling, but is careful that his storytelling does not generate any mystification in turn.

Berger was not particularly reverent to the idea of expertise or academic training. Like Edward Said, he perceived the intellectual as an outcast and amateur whose vocation it is “to speak the truth to power”. He shared half of the proceeds from the Booker Prize in 1972 which he received for his novel *G.*, with the Black Panthers; the other half he kept to fund his research on migrant workers, which became *A Seventh Man* (1975). He went on to live with peasants in the Haute-Savoie region and lived a life of manual labour, writing and storytelling. In theorizing aspects of his works, I have tried to recognize the mundane origins of his stories, always keeping in mind that Berger's interests would not really be compatible with any strictly academic undertaking which this thesis, on principle, is. I have been careful, to the best of my ability, so as not to mystify discussion of his works by using unmitigable theoretical standpoints. It has been a daunting but fruitful exercise to go through his wide and diverse body of work, spanning across five decades, and covering genres as diverse as stories, essays, novels, screenplays, radio presentations, epistolary collaborations, TV productions, etc., and find the common thread of storytelling which, I argue, runs through almost all of his output in one form or the other. Storytelling is an all-inclusive genre and the question, ‘what is a story?’ can be rather difficult to answer because practically everything can be a story. It would be more worthwhile to enquire what is NOT a story, and this thesis

tries to look at what Berger understands by absence of stories, or impossibility of stories in some cases.

I have also made occasional references to the present time while talking about themes common in Berger and Benjamin while trying to understand what they anticipated in their writing and what we can learn from them; what ‘outcome’ – to use a phrase from Berger’s *Bento’s Sketchbook* – of their thought is coming to be fulfilled today. Counsel or advice seems to be a common element in their storytelling. I have tried to recognize, in the form of occasional digressive footnotes and parentheses, the counsels imparted by 20th century history through the writings of Berger and Benjamin to our present time, especially in connection with how we receive and record experience today. Berger’s works are characterized by an urgency and restlessness to find a medium through which experiences can be narrated, leading him to find and improvise new forms of storytelling, notwithstanding his affinity with the archaic storyteller from Benjamin’s eponymous essay. For him, stories, or rather the activity of telling stories, create a shelter from the absurd and the unreal. In Berger, we do not really find stories that revel in the fantastical, the absurd or the unreal; stories that take us on a journey to a world of imagination and fancy. Rather, human imagination and ingenuity are celebrated as faculties that help people survive and retain hope in the face of dispossession and deprivation.

Afterlife and survival are recurrent tropes in Berger and Benjamin – tropes that I have tried to pursue in this thesis with critical rigour. So, in the final analysis, I hope that this thesis too is lent an afterlife of sorts – in what form or guise I cannot presently foresee, but I hope that thoughts and arguments contained in this thesis will contribute to other researches, studies or simply, readings.

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**List of Abbreviations**

SW1	Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926
SW2 I	Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930
SW2 II	Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934
SW3	Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935-1938

## Introduction

The act of writing is nothing except the act of approaching the experience written about; just as, hopefully, the act of reading the written text is a comparable act of approach.

– John Berger, “The Storyteller”.

One of the lines John Berger quotes from Walter Benjamin in his eponymous 1970 essay – “For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (qtd. in “Walter Benjamin” 59) – encapsulates a major theme in both Benjamin and Berger: the (in)communicability and preservation of experience. The 'image of the past' had been in danger of being lost to the amnesia of history due to confrontation with factors that will be discussed later in this introduction, and it continued to erode well into the 21st century. Berger's handling of the theme of experience never displayed any overtly philosophical rigour. It can be argued that it was a conscious decision on his part not to align his thinking with the plenitude and preponderance of Western metaphysics that had come to bear upon 20th century's codification of the subject at least since Kant. In this, Berger was following Benjamin's trajectory – one that incorporated a wide range of philosophical stances and resisted an easy categorization of the subject. There is a great overlap between the themes and subjects that preoccupied Benjamin and Berger: lived experience, art as commodity, Marxism, storytelling, historical materialism, photography and cinema. Exilic experiences feature occasionally in their works and both of them were known for choosing a writing style that is experimental, frequently fragmentary and non-linear. Both were concerned deeply about the dangers of capitalism in their times and the threat it posed to sense of history. Berger was perhaps more influenced by Benjamin than the not-so-many references to Benjamin in his works would lead us to believe. The most

well-known of these references occur in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) where, in the first chapter, he acknowledges his debt to Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935). The intermeshed nature of Benjamin-Berger thematic overlap is not particularly the subject of this thesis and therefore, we shall focus solely on the issue of 'experience' and its relation to aesthetics, commodity and primarily storytelling, and to get a fuller understanding of what Berger meant by storytelling and why he abandoned a postmodern way of writing, especially after *G.* (1972) in favour of a more traditional storytelling approach, we will place him first in the tradition of 20<sup>th</sup> century continental thought with special regard to Benjamin; and then discuss his early career as a radical art critic and his evolution into a writer of fiction. Berger's early diatribes and considerably scathing critiques of British high art and his Marxist leanings will be discussed. Berger's approach towards the subject of experience mirrors Benjamin's formulations greatly and this approach is not separable from his understanding of history in general. A discussion on the status of experience and its mystification in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is necessary at the outset.

Generally speaking, "experience" is a word that generates a wide range of meanings and emotions in people whose lives are especially informed and instructed by it. Writers, while dealing with the category of experience, have variously considered the cult, myth and mysticism of experience in cultural milieus that are not their own. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century their explorations have brought them face to face with the crisis unleashed by the incommunicability, and sometimes, the very impossibility of having experiences. In the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several writers have talked about the problems of modern experience. This can be found in Benjamin's abiding engagement with the *poverty of human experience*, Theodor W. Adorno's warning that the "rhythm of time has become distorted" (*Notes* 75) causing a threat to the very

possibility of experience and Peter Bürger's lamentation for "the subsumption of different areas of human activity under the law of rationality" (*Decline* 17) and the consequent difficulty of having authentic experience, and Giorgio Agamben's opinion that experience is inaccessible "for just as modern man has been deprived of his biography, his experience has likewise been expropriated" and that modern man's "incapacity to have and communicate experiences is perhaps one of the few self-certainties to which he can lay claim" ("Infancy" 13).

Before a scrutiny into the crises that experience apparently fell into can be examined, an inquiry into the very meaning of the word is necessary. The possibility of arriving at a concise definition is particularly beset by a certain aura that surrounds its hermeneutics and the plurality of its meanings. It is perhaps for this reason that Hans-Georg Gadamer described the concept of experience as "one of the most obscure we have." (*Truth* 355). The narratives of experience, owing to their diversity and disparate occurrences, therefore, resist any easy, normative and totalized definitional account. The dissimilitude and the frequently contradictory nature of experience belie attempts to arrive at solid, metaphysical and material conclusions.

In the decades leading up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there have been attempts by poststructuralists to challenge and undermine 'experience' as a crude and unyielding structure that is immune to the arbitrated bases of cultural relations. This idea has often been accompanied by an allegation that the experiencing subject is himself unstable and volatile. Notwithstanding these complex philosophical points of departures, 'experience' is an unavoidable part of our daily vocabulary, and the overlay between experience and our myriad narratives is so fused that it is not advisable – philosophically or otherwise – to undermine its significance. Walter Benjamin was one

of the first writers to address the issue of the poverty of experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His writings on the subject do not offer any particular theory or linear idea that can be pursued in order to reach definitions or conclusions. They are important because they point out that within ‘experience’ itself there is a great deal of plurality leading from the ever-shifting relations between the experience and the experiencer; and the case they make for considering forms of experience that the Enlightenment tradition refused to recognize. Being the insurgent inheritors of modernism, Benjamin and Berger overlapped not so much historically as conceptually, and a summary of Benjamin’s writings on the concept of ‘experience’ will act as a preamble to understanding the dynamics of ‘experience’ in Berger’s long career as a writer.

### **Walter Benjamin and the Poverty of Experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Benjamin first undertook to write on experience in 1913. In a letter to Theodor W. Adorno dated May 7, 1940, Benjamin says, “(t)here is no better example for the methodical destruction of experience than when the popular lyric is set to melody” (326). Benjamin was in exile in Paris at this time and the situation was becoming increasingly unbearable to him owing to Nazi persecution. Both Benjamin and Adorno grappled with the issue at stake – the precarious state of authentic experience as a significant marker of modernity’s decadence.<sup>1</sup> The Frankfurt School theorists found an analogy between this alleged crisis of experience in the wake of modern capitalist exploitation and Georg Lukács understanding of the concepts “reification” and

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<sup>1</sup> In Adorno’s view, with the advent of modern capitalism, the category of traditional metaphysics was gradually losing its valency, and the concept of “experience” was on the decline. Adorno thought it was necessary for the very basis of metaphysics in the modern epoch to be re-thought as a type of loss that mirrored the devastation wrought upon human life. “Metaphysical experience” as a consequence of this devastation, became exclusively involved with childhood memories and special incidents or places, in spite of the fact that such fond experiences also replicated the discontent and inadequacy that characterized all contemporary experiences.

“alienation” that later gained prominence with the unearthing of Karl Marx’s 1844 Paris Manuscripts. The depletion of experience was seen as an experience in itself by several critics like Max Horkheimer and Siegfried Kracauer. “Reification” and “alienation” were essentially philosophy-oriented terms that had their foundation in an exclusively materialist understanding of the tradition of German idealism.<sup>2</sup> The idea that experience was in crisis was however much more eclectic and went beyond materialist and economic considerations.

Benjamin’s inquiry into the question of experience eventually made him prioritize his own life experiences over any systematic philosophical scrutiny of the meaning of the term. A certain kind of ambiguity can be observed in his approach to the subject, vacillating as it does between utopian optimism and melancholic ruminations, coalescing theological issues with materialist examination. From the very start, Benjamin denounced the compartmentalization of experience into its constituent parts and imbued his holistic way of looking at the subject with a kind of a messianic ingress. Having confronted directly the breakdown of the cultural and social continuity at the wake of World War I, the foreboding feeling of an impending victory of Fascism, and the perpetual burden of exilic despair, Benjamin enumerated the crisis of experience in the modern era with melancholic austerity.

Benjamin’s early preoccupations with the topic of experience was influenced by a restive, edgy defiance of integration into middle-class respectability. Around this time,

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<sup>2</sup> The essential missions of the critical projects of Kracauer, Benjamin, and Adorno are similar: how to formulate a concept of experience in modernity that effectively considers modern mass media and technology and avoid, at the same time, the crude snares of cultural pessimism on the one hand, and unrestrained optimism on the other; in other words, how to postulate subjectivity at a time when modernity and technology seem to have destroyed any possibility of authentic experience?

he rose to become a leader in the Berlin division of the German Youth Movement spearheaded by Gustav Wyneken, immersing himself in its utopic spiritedness, which he wrote about in a 1913 essay titled “Erfahrung.”<sup>3</sup> The early beginnings of Benjamin’s more complex and elaborate handling of the subject are already present in the essay. Right at the outset, Benjamin identifies and condemns “the mask of the adult (which) is called ‘experience’” (3). This ‘experience’ which is “expressionless, impenetrable, and ever the same” (“Experience” 3) sets itself up squarely against the enthusiasm and vitality of youth: “our youth is but a brief night (fill it with rapture!); it will be followed by grand “experience” (3). For Benjamin, however, such a view on the part of the adult is characteristic of the myopic philistine “who because he never raises his eyes to the great and the meaningful, . . . has taken experience as his gospel” (4) and who “has never grasped that there exists something other than experience, that there are values— inexperienceable—which we serve” (4). Experience, when not accompanied by spirit, is not worthwhile. Benjamin advocates a superior notion of youthful experience that rejects the negative suspicion of the philistine adult and embraces the worth of the errors made by youth.

Neither the horrors of World War I nor his growing disenchantment with the Youth Movement deterred Benjamin from retaining his belief that an alternative, redemptive notion of experience was possible. His essay, “Experience” (‘Erfahrung’) is an attempt to produce an auxiliary and larger notion of experience. The search for this alternative idea of experience required overcoming the narrow confines of bourgeois rationale, and at times, turning in the direction of anarchistic and nihilistic possibilities. Nevertheless,

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin castigated Wyneken and accused him of forsaking his own ideas after Wyneken glorified war as an ethical experience in a lecture held in the autumn of 1914 on "The War and the Young".

Benjamin, like his friend Gershom Scholem, was suspicious of the way *Lebensphilosophie* had adopted and mitigated the concept of experience as *Erlebnis* with the aim of promoting the war effort.<sup>4</sup> In 1930, in his review of “Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays “War and Warrior” edited by Ernst Jünger, Benjamin maintained that “all the light that language and reason still afford should be focused upon that ‘primal experience’ from whose barren gloom this mysticism of death of the war crawls forth on its thousand unsightly conceptual feet” (320). Benjamin’s first faltering efforts to develop an alternative, redeeming concept of experience, as Howard Caygill has pointed out, can be seen in the unpublished fragments, “Aphorisms on Imagination and Color” (1914-15) and “A Child’s View of Color” (1914-15).

These early writings discern a utopian potential in the child’s capacity to perceive colours. This postulation foreshadows analogous opinions Benjamin would produce in the fields of linguistics, aesthetics, history in his later writings. While adults wilfully extract colours from the objects existing in time and space, children, according to Benjamin, have the capability to understand them as something preceding forms, which do nothing but express the rule rather than untainted essences of those objects. While drawing, children often fill the page with colour. This lets them form a unified world devoid of borders. “Children,” Benjamin observed, “are not ashamed, since they do not reflect but only see” (“Aphorisms on Imagination and Color” 51). The world, for

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<sup>4</sup> *Lebensphilosophie* signifies a philosophy which seeks the meaning, worth and purpose of life, preferring over strictly theoretic knowledge the ingenuous completeness of lived experience. The second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century saw a resurgence in German thought of the concept of ‘life’. *Lebensphilosophie* characteristically replaces inflexible abstractions with a philosophy founded on feeling and instinct, emphasizing ‘life’ as an all-inclusive totality.

children, is filled with colours. These colours suggest to them identity, innocence and harmony.

In the world of children, colours are entwined, manifesting themselves in a way that is neither isolated nor autonomous. In this world, the absence of subject-object opposition prohibits detached reflection thus allowing the child's experience of colours to be immersive and intuitive. It is a world of infinite and absolute experience. In an unpublished piece on the nineteenth-century illustrator Johann Peter Lyser, Benjamin contended that "Children learn in the memory of their first intuition" (SW1 264). The art of adults may, at times, be able to retain some of this sensitivity, but it is either tainted with the longing for something that has vanished, or a contentedness that is achieved when the longing itself has come to an end.<sup>5</sup> In cherishing the innocent vision of a child, Benjamin indirectly discards Immanuel Kant's contention that experience includes the enforcement of classification and categorisation of the diversity of sensations by the transcendental mind. It contests the supposition that there exists a sharp distinction between the experiencing subjects and their noumenal objects – a supposition which it implicitly associates with the corruption of childhood vision by the process of growing up. It also brazenly refutes the restricting of experience to knowledge produced through *synthetic a priori* judgments, that isolate metaphysical actualities as unknowable and asserts the possibility, in its place, of hypothetical knowledge of the absolute. The two machineries of Kant's interpretation of experience, namely, sensibility and the understanding, collide, and as the result of the collision, the experiencing subject, instead of holding them, itself merges into experience. The distinction between the seer and the seen dissolves. Although this dissolution lies in

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<sup>5</sup> In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger uses a Caravaggio painting to demonstrate how children spontaneously understand images in connection to their own experience as opposed to adults.

danger of a nihilistic collapsing into an uncontaminated, uncategorizable identity transcending subject and object, it ushers in, nevertheless, a new enunciation of experience. The recognition of the potential that this enunciation may have for language led to a linguistic turn in Benjamin.

Benjamin started developing his critique of Kant and the neo-Kantians whose proto-scientific reception of the critical tradition he found particularly insufficient. He produced this critique in essays such as “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (1916) and “On Perception” (1917), specifically emphasizing their failure to salvage a rigorous concept of experience before its classification. According to Benjamin, their error was to hold the knowledge of experience more important than experience itself and this perpetuated the fissure between the concept of scientific experience and the commonly held meaning of the word. Johann Hamann’s critique of the Kantian notion that thoughts of transcendent ideas exist even before they can be expressed in language influenced Benjamin to postulate that the connection with the divine happened essentially in and through a language that was more vigorous and alive than the conformist bourgeois conception of language – a conception which prioritized the word as the primary means of communication, and presupposed its object to have a factual basis, and its receiver to be a human. Benjamin’s idea of language was not restricted by means, object or receiver. He pointed out that the relation between name and thing was absolute in the divine “language as such,” in which the Creator manifested His creation by giving its constituents proper names, and these names were neither fortuitous nor conditional. In this conception, it is not the function of language to communicate anything else but only to express itself.

The loss of Adam's capacity to name things in the Garden of Eden implied a severance between postlapsarian human language and the essence of things. This waning was further worsened by the discordance produced by the advent of different languages resulting from the Tower of Babel. According to Benjamin, this led to an "over naming" of things. Language was freed from its role as a vehicle of truth, and became available to anyone who wanted to use it in order to lie.<sup>6</sup> This new potential, of course, presupposed the ability of judgment to choose between veracity and lie – an ability that was given a special position in the Kantian system. This privilege was extended to place the subject before the object as a result of Kant's enlisting of the reflective judgments to bear on aesthetic objects which sourced arguments in examples rather than rules.

Nevertheless, traces of the originary language were still discernible in its broken fragments, offering redemptive propositions of ways to surpass the melancholy resulting from the postlapsarian severance between name and thing, and to overcome the silence of a nature that was unable to express itself anymore. This is where the idea of translation gains importance. Translation offers a porosity between two languages and thereby manifests its redemptive potential through a continuum of indiscernible shifts: "Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity" (SW1 70). One language does not imitate what another has the potential to express, but rather provides an addition of sorts, each owning the other, in theory, amid the lines.

In the essay, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy (1918)," Benjamin presents an alternative way in which absolute experience might be re-established. Perception

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<sup>6</sup> For Berger, "A spoken language is a body, a living creature, whose physiognomy is verbal and whose visceral functions are linguistic. And this creature's home is the inarticulate as well as the articulate" ("Writing Is an Off-Shoot of Something Deeper").

itself is seen as a language capable of containing absolute experience, exemplified in the child's perception of colour. Amalgamating religious thought and insights derived from pre-critical philosophical tradition, Benjamin came up with, what Scholem called, "the transcausal connectedness of things and their constitution in God" (SW1 110). Benjamin suggested that the "coming philosophy" ought to reinstate a more advanced idea of experience than the one hypothesized by Kant and the neo-Kantians, by overcoming Enlightenment's limiting of experience to scientific cert and by fulfilling the approaching metaphysics to which Kantian critical thought offers a prophylactic discursive introduction. Kant himself never really sought to condense all experience to its scientific modalities, notwithstanding the historical bearing of his philosophy. Nevertheless, the neo-Kantians had only underlined "the mechanical aspect of the relatively empty Enlightenment concept of experience," (SW1 105) reducing experience to nothing more than an object of knowledge, in line with the discipline of psychology, instead of prioritizing it as the rigorous pursuit of a higher, forthrightly metaphysical knowledge. This conception of experience, for Benjamin, is embedded in religious experience which does not consider either man or god as subject or object of knowledge, but which prefigures experience on absolute knowledge, the essence of which is the primary preoccupation of philosophical inquiry. The dualism between the knowing subject and the known object that constitute the basis of epistemology, and its foundation in knowledge should be re-thought, salvaging the conception of experience from being totalized by scientific-mathematical lines of inquiry, in order to sustain the connections between the religious and the philosophical, as well as the phenomenal and the noumenal dominions. This coming philosophy must ensure, after the Kantian thinking, that a correlation exists between the concept of knowledge and a concept of experience: "Experience is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge" (SW1 8).

Among the debris of the breakdown of this unity, Benjamin saw the still-present encryptions of a long-lost accord. He also saw, among the ruins, the possibility of reading the world as a text, through an evocation of a time when atomized conception of the self had not started to impede self-effacing identification with other beings; when experience had not yet been compartmentalized. Benjamin's musings are evocative:

We know of primitive peoples of the so-called preanimistic stage who identify themselves with sacred animals and plants and name themselves after them; we know of insane people who likewise identify themselves in part with objects of their perception, which are thus no longer *objecta*, 'placed before' them; we know of sick people who relate the sensations of their bodies not to themselves but rather to other creatures, and of clairvoyants who at least claim to be able to feel the sensations of others as their own. (SW1 103)

Talking about German Romantics whose theory of criticism heavily influenced Benjamin's doctoral dissertation of 1919, and who had formulated a way of approaching the natural world that assured at least a partial recovery of what had been repressed by, and in the name of, modern science, Benjamin says:

To observe a thing means only to arouse it to self-recognition. Whether an experiment succeeds depends on the extent to which the experimenter is capable, through the heightening of his own consciousness, through magical observation, one might say, of getting nearer to the object and of finally drawing it into himself. (SW1 148)

The "magical observation" bears affinity with Goethe's notion of "tender empiria" which confidentially adapts to the object and, through immersive identification with it, transforms into a suitable theory. In other words, the art object was perceived as capable

of reflecting on the nature of its own being and this ability was given precedence over pre-authenticated verdicts on taste:

The subject of reflection is, at bottom, the artistic entity itself, and the experiment consists not in any reflecting *on* an entity, which could not essentially alter it as Romantic criticism intends, but in the unfolding of reflection—that is, for the Romantics, the unfolding of spirit—in an entity. (SW1 151)

Benjamin's admiration of the German Romantics and their advocacy of the union between observation and inward reflection; and his suspicion of what he saw as the excessively rational and subtly totalising tendencies of the Hegelian idealist system, influenced him to conclude that experience "is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge" (SW1 108) which comprises of an infinity of intersecting, continuous and added-on variations instead of a locked, dialectically sublated arrangement.

Benjamin also drew upon counter-Enlightenment writers such as Ludwig Klages who contended that the archaic survived in the modern. Of course, Benjamin did not subscribe to the radically intransigent aspects of Klages' ideas like the outright refutation of modern technology, glorification of "soul" over "spirit", and his unapologetic anti-Semitism. He discovered, in Klages' philosophy, a faith in the possibility of redeeming experience. Interestingly, Benjamin became interested in non- or pseudo-scientific subjects such as graphology in his pursuit to find alternative modes of redeeming experience. Both these subjects offered a mode of experience's survival that was lost with the onset of modernity. What is more important here is not so much a belief in the credibility of these subjects as their pre-modern appeal to the human imagination and storytelling impulses. "For example, in the constellations of the stars. The horoscope must above all be understood as an originary totality that astrological interpretation

merely subjects to analysis” (SW2 I 685). If what he called “the mimetic genius” of the ancient world, “the most consummate expression of cosmic meaning” (685) can be found today, Benjamin speculated, it would likely be in the acquisition of language by children.

Benjamin’s examination of the remains of the mimetic facility and its numerous manifestations such as astrology, graphology, children’s play, dance, emphasized the resemblances and elective affinities inherent in phenomena that transcend relationships of mere equivalence. In this, he was influenced by the tradition of 19th century anthropological theories of sympathetic magic, advanced by Herbert Spencer, Edward Tylor, and James Frazer. Modern man may partially access experiences that have been considered long since dead when he senses that mimetic forces are active in himself, “but he is transported into this very force field by his memories of childhood” (692).

Language became the most important factor behind the redemption of experience. It goes without saying that, sounds have onomatopoeic faculty to imitate the phenomena they refer to and this is how they are able to establish a resemblance between experience and language. For Benjamin, this resemblance also includes, what he calls, “nonsensuous similarities” which suggests that, in our discernment, the element which is at the origin of the identification of the resemblance is not disposed of. (SW2 I 722). He identifies a non-sensuous mimetic association in all kinds of social exchanges and behaviours. He quotes Rudolf Leonhard: “Every word – indeed, the whole language – is onomatopoeic” (SW2 I 696). In every language, words derive from objects they try to designate. A similar principle exists in inscription which is manifested in a mimetic association of the lettering to the signified. This original mimetic purpose of language and writing is redundant, rendered unrecognizable through historical transformations.

Apart from handwriting that contains intentions that the writer himself may not be aware of and which graphology is capable of revealing, the resemblance was also evident in the fact that the same thing may be referred to by words in different situations. The function of translation was to let these resemblances, borne by semiotic import, to appear on their own.

Benjamin also dealt with other expressions of mimetic experience that provided him with hope in the midst of disillusionment brought about by modernism. Of these expressions, the artistic inventions of the French surrealists were notable. According to him, the writings of the French surrealists were “concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms” (SW2 I 208). He was fascinated by their endeavour to salvage dreams from the triteness of kitsch and to consider dream kitsch as a storehouse of ancient magical urges, thereby reviving the vanished world of childhood. Benjamin fashioned himself as the “philosophical Fortinbras” of surrealism, as he later told Scholem, receiving its inheritance and transforming it to novel uses. He translated sections of Aragon’s novel about the incredible aspects of urban life, *Le paysan de Paris* (The Peasant of Paris). Finally, it was his tryst with surrealism that inspired him to embark on the ambitious and eventually unfinished *Passagenwerk*, or *The Arcades Project*, which would occasionally keep him busy during the frantic period prior to his suicide in 1940. He resuscitated the Parisian figure of the flaneur along with Franz Hessel, whose peripatetic walks through Berlin influenced him deeply. Benjamin’s study of surrealist works about the persistence of the magical in the modern provided him with a way to synthesize, however desultorily, his early theological interests and his more materialist impulses that were a result of his espousal of dissenting Marxism in the mid-1920s. He saw the possibility of “reading” passages of the nineteenth-century arcades in the way one reads passages in a palimpsestic text

unravelling the remains of the archaic in the modern urban space or constellations of meaning like the fragmented parables whose critical potential he had defended in “The Origin of German Tragic Drama”. It propelled him to ponder on the absolute that was still engrained in modernity, an idea that extended the Romantic conception of the artwork as the point where the infinite entered the finite.

Benjamin’s notion of “profane illumination” cannot be restricted to experiences induced by drugs and dreams: rather, it is “a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson” (SW2 I 209). The profanity of this kind of illumination, produced by the non-linear, montage-like juxtaposition of events, derives from the fact that their telic inclination is towards mundane joy rather than the messianic Kingdom of God. In spite of his great laudation of surrealism, and his appreciation of its non-bourgeois-humanist idea of freedom as an essential counterpart to “the other revolutionary experience, which we must acknowledge because it has been ours—the constructive, dictatorial side of revolution” (SW2 I 215).

It is doubtful whether Benjamin himself ever really experienced revolution first-hand. In spite of his increasing interest in Marxism, he always maintained distance from any existing political undertaking. In effect, rather than praising the merits of revolutionary experience, his writing gradually started to index the increasing difficulty of attaining true experience. He came to mourn the atrophy (*Verkümmerung*) and poverty (*Armut*) of experience when he was not obliging himself to contemplate dialectically about its more optimistic consequences, becoming, in effect, the most serious and determined etiologist of the crisis. In the 1920s, he devoted himself to protracting his study of that crisis beyond the reductive approach assumed by the neo-Kantians. He had critiqued

the neo-Kantian classification of experience according to scientific, mechanical variables in “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy.” By concentrating on what had vanished, Benjamin was able to augment his notion of experience beyond the dominion of mimetic resemblances and religious dogma to take in complex investigations of art, history, narrative, memory, technology, mass culture, and the definite dissimilarity between two forms of experience, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. Consequently, his ponderings assumed a political and historical colour that was principally absent from his earlier writings.

Benjamin’s handling of the subject became more and more inclined towards the historical and the political, as is manifest in his 1933 essay “Experience and Poverty,” which was published while he was still in exile. In the following passage he bemoans the loss of experience and sees it ensuing from the impoverishment of narratable stories:

Everyone knew precisely what experience was: older people had always passed it on to younger sons. It was handed down in short form to sons and grand- sons, with the authority of age, in proverbs; with an often-long-winded eloquence, as tales; sometimes as stories from foreign lands, at the fireside. —Where has it all gone? Who still meets people who really know how to tell a story? (SW2 I 731)

This older conception of storytelling that Benjamin evokes is concerned with the possibility of sustaining and transmitting wisdom of the past through adages, anecdotes, and oral accounts. Esther Leslie comments on “Experience and Poverty”: “In re-telling the tale, Benjamin evokes a mode of communicating experience – storytelling – that is becoming outmoded and, in so doing, he estranges that mode, so that he might better outline the contours of the present” (217). According to Benjamin, “There is no greater error than to construe experience—in the sense of life experience—according to the

model on which the natural sciences are based. What is decisive here is not the causal connections established over the course of time, but the similarities that have been lived” (SW2 I 553). The resemblances are grasped not essentially in terms of cosmic affinities but rather as the remains of ancient wisdom that could still be transmitted and might have practical use in the future. Storytelling has the potential to transform experience into tradition: “It turns the lesson that has been experienced into a wave in the living chain of innumerable lessons that flow down from eternity” (582).<sup>7</sup>

The shock of World War I, Benjamin argued, severed the already-weakening continuity, causing a sudden depletion in communicable experiences. He charts the aetiology thus:

For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny fragile human body. (732)

The consequent poverty of experience, Benjamin cautioned, implied a new kind of barbarism, which not only concerned the individual but also signalled the collapse of culture itself.

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<sup>7</sup> In Berger’s interview with Michael Silverblatt, Berger muses on what he perceives as an older function of books that existed in the era preceding the new media and television; he points out that young readers, in reading books, would learn how to “behave” in certain situations; and what stances to assume with regard to certain experiences. These situations might include confronting a woman who had just lost her man or finding oneself alone with a dead animal. Berger’s notion of books as having instructive potential echoes Benjamin’s evocation of the archaic storyteller figure whose telling of tales is deeply rooted in the idea of tradition and counsels that are derived from lived experience.

However, Benjamin saw a new possibility of beginning anew in the midst of this collapse: “For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right” (732). He found the impulse to begin anew in different places: in Einsteinian quantum physics, in Cubism and the works of Paul Klee, in the architectural inventions of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, and even in Mickey Mouse cartoons. The decay of the communicability of experience, unfortunate though it was, could permit the non-communicative linguistic possibilities that Benjamin had celebrated in his earlier work to make themselves manifest. Therefore, the notion of poverty of experience, he contended, should not imply that there was a general lack of new experiences. Instead, there was a longing for the freedom from experience.

Benjamin’s surprising celebration of the catastrophe of experience thematically dovetail with Rosa Luxemburg’s cautionary argument that one could choose only between socialism and barbarism accompanied by quasi-religious visions of redemption after apocalyptic destruction.<sup>8</sup> This was, however, not just a manifestation of what he saw as the “nihilistic” tendency in his thinking. Furthermore, it was indicative of the beginning of an unprecedented optimistic motif in his writing. This was fostered by his budding friendship with Bertolt Brecht. He identified Brecht’s main subject to be poverty: “This Brechtian poverty is more like a uniform and is calculated to confer a high rank on anyone who wears it” (SW2 I 370). Herr Keuner, a character from Brecht’s eponymous collection of short fictionalised commentaries on modern life and contemporary politics, perceived poverty as “a form of mimicry that allows you to come closer to reality than any rich man can” (370). Brecht, whose epic theatre generated a synthesis between the

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<sup>8</sup> In 1915, Luxemburg famously contended that a historical juncture was reached where a choice was imminent between the triumph of socialism and the end of civilization in a pamphlet written in prison.

experimental and experiential, sought to reveal what is present. Benjamin observed in his 1934 essay “The Author as Producer”: “At the center of his experiment stands the human being. Present-day man; a reduced man, therefore, chilled in a chilly environment. But since this is the only one we have, it is in our interest to know him” (779).

However, the Brechtian element in Benjamin’s work, his taciturn endorsement of modernist experimentation in theatre and architecture, did little to replace the melancholic intensity of his lament for the loss of experience. The melancholic overtones of Benjamin’s thinking deepened as situations worsened in the final decade of his life, as he struggled in his wayward exertions to overcome what he termed left-wing melancholy, and to accept wholeheartedly the labours of the destructive character. Despite the avowal of the loss of aura of the artwork with the advent of modern technologies in essays such as “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” (1935) Benjamin never really came to terms with the ambivalence that was a consequence of this loss.

Benjamin’s most evocative and nostalgic musings on experiences past can be found in his 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” partly a meditation on the work of the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, and partly a sustained attempt to chart the issue of the decline of storytelling in the modern era – a theme that he had already dealt in an essay titled “The Handkerchief.” In “The Handkerchief”, Benjamin argues that people who are not bored cannot tell stories and that there is a dearth of boredom in people’s lives in general. He writes:

Storytelling is not just an art; it is a kind of dignity – if not, as in the East, an office.

It culminates in wisdom, just as, for its part, wisdom often substantiates itself as

story. For this reason the storyteller is always someone who knows what has to be done. And to receive such counsel, you yourself have to tell him something. But we know only how to moan and groan about our worries, not how to tell a story. (SW2 I 658-59)

He also points out a second reason behind this decline: "... people have ceased to weave and spin, tinker and scrape, while listening to stories. In short, if stories are to thrive, there must be work, order and subordination. Another reason no proper stories can be heard today is that things no longer last the way they should" (658).<sup>9</sup>

Benjamin held the rise of the novel responsible for this decline as well as the modern substitution of narrative by data. He also points out the difference in the modes of reception of the novel and the story: "A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller (...). The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader" (SW3). This is in keeping with his observations, in "Experience and Poverty," about the ravages in communication brought about by the World War I. With the waning of the tendency to bequeath stories from generation to generation, what Benjamin termed the "haggadic" aspect of truth— typified by the story of Exodus recited at every Passover seder—was problematised.<sup>10</sup> Wisdom, which he saw as the "epic side of truth" and which was sourced in the storyteller's familiarity with his audience (often a community of craftsmen), was threatened too. He saw the decline of the aura in the arts happening

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin's imperative that there must be work, order and subordination for stories to be meaningful can be interpreted to mean that stories need to be a part of daily activities, especially activities that are tactile - these activities which are rhythmic in nature, prevent the listener from looking forward to the next moment and enable them to be more attentive. Furthermore, Benjamin's lament that "things no longer last the way they should" problematizes the question of afterlife of texts which will be discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

<sup>10</sup> In "Some Reflections on Kafka," Benjamin differentiates between Halakah (the true, divine Law) and Haggadah (its representation in the world).

parallelly to the decline in storytelling. The weakening of true experience, that is, experience founded on the cultic remains of magical resemblances, was articulated in the loss of aura.<sup>11</sup> The division between past and present was liable to collapse in the modern world. A distance was needed between the subject and the object to sustain this aura. The loss of that distance would imply the capacity of the object to return the gaze of the viewing subject. Benjamin saw this loss as central to upsetting the authority of the subject over the object.

In several instances, Benjamin celebrated the decline of the aura because it suggested an emancipation from cultic reliance and thus the production of fresh political perspectives. The reproduction of art by means of technology, confers on the artwork an “exhibition value” which marks the stage of its accessibility to the general public or to adoption by the masses. Photographs close distance and thereby lessen auratic remoteness. In 1934, he stressed on the notion that even the unintelligibility of information in newspapers, might be anticipating a salvation. However, there were times when he recognised its enduring critical possibilities and was concerned with its total extinction. In 1939, he contended that the replacement of the older narration by information, of information by sensation, reflects the increasing atrophy of experience. In turn, there is a contrast between all these forms and the story, which is one of the oldest forms of communication. It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. (“Some Motifs” 150)

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<sup>11</sup> Benjamin’s faith in the meaning-making aspect of storytelling echoes with Rilke’s injunction to “live the questions” and his espousal of doubt and misgiving as a stabilizing factor in life.

Storytelling, as Benjamin saw it, respects and retains the temporal distinction between subject and object, while nevertheless connecting them, it resists the breakdown of experience into a passing influence without any narrative character.

An initial categorical difference between two kinds of experience occurred in Benjamin's 1929 essay on Hessel titled "The Return of the *Flâneur*": "there is a kind of experience [*Erlebnis*] that craves the unique, the sensational, and another kind [*Erfahrung*] that seeks out eternal sameness" (SW2 II 266). While the *Erlebnis* suggested outstanding incidences, unable to produce meaningful recurrences over time, *Erfahrung* had the ability to stand the test of time. In this conception, *Erfahrungen* was very different from the scientific understanding of sensory accumulation of experience pursued by authors such as William Dilthey and Martin Buber. This conception was not aligned with the dialectical conception of experience put forth by Gadamer in the Hegelian tradition which placed a considerable emphasis on the idea of *bildung* – something that Benjamin was not particularly fond of. However, Benjamin could not entirely discard the narrative aspect of this dialectical way of thinking about experience. Flânerie comprised of narrating as much as, and perhaps more than, descriptive and frantic impressionism that was trademark of travel writing. The experience of flâneur-like viewing included not only the sense-impressions of the flâneur but also the recollection of stories heard in childhood and memories that have never been their own. Walking around the city became inseparable from 'memorizing' the streets thus constituting an experience of vertiginous intensity.

Benjamin lauded Franz Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin* (1929) as an "epic book" by which he implied the type of narrative that was more aligned with the storytelling rather than novelistic inventions. This epic quality he found in Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), which he regarded as an experimental converse of the

traditional novel. A novelist, according to Benjamin, is a solitary figure who “himself lacks counsel and can give none” (SW2 I 299). On the other hand, “in epics, people rest after their day’s work; they listen, dream and collect” (299). While novels delve into the interior/inner lives of their characters and take into consideration the author’s psychological states in some cases, epics relate in a quintessentially paratactic way the exteriority of shared experience, retaining a feeling of *durée* in their audience. Montage is particularly suitable to mode of narration because it substitutes the authorial voice with fragmentary images culled out of the debris of the modern city, and replicate the epic chronicle that conventional novels had ignored.

Mnemosyne as a muse offered Benjamin a method of connecting to the past. However, this method did not guarantee a recollection, in retrospect, what had taken place before the present in its totality as if it were a linear and totally intelligible narrative. He had misgivings for the understanding of Memory as nothing more than an anamnestic recollection of things disaffected or reified; this understanding was aligned too much with Hegelian dialectics anyway. It was based on the being of a shared, communal question of history, which identifies itself in its exteriorization in due course of time, an idea he constantly refuted as excessively idealist. Instead, he preferred the conjuring of an experience that is narrative in its inception but is not a mere desquamation of an idea originating in the subjective imagination of the author, or of a syntactic subordination in hypotaxis. The figure of the collector, who appears and disappears in Benjamin’s corpus erratically, embodies the approach to experience Benjamin had. The collector puts side by side things handed down by the collective or idiosyncratic understanding of the past, collecting and collating the scattered constellations of history. Benjamin clarifies that this approach to experience is not reliant on aura owing to a reciprocity of recognition between the subject and the object. He illustrates this by quoting a simple

but profound line from Hessel's work: "We see only what looks at us. We can do only . . . what we cannot help doing" (SW2 I 262). It is this sense of reciprocity between the observer and the observed, the experiencer and the experienced, that Berger brings to our attention through his storytelling.

Berger's aesthetics and politics of writing are reliant upon recognizing experiences that are otherwise not documented. Considering that Berger always remained informed about the major world events and the major political and economic shifts that they engendered, and considering that Berger primarily identified himself as a storyteller – even when he was working as an art critic – it would be worthwhile to take a look at the events and experiences he was responding to, especially during his career as an art critic, and how they shaped his politics.

### **Berger and Socialist Realism: The Incidents Surrounding 'The Unknown Political Prisoner'**

John Berger joined the *New Statesman*, a left-leaning British political and cultural magazine, in early 1952. It was a politically turbulent time: Diatribes and debacles about the Cold War were rampant, Moscow was still governed by Stalin; the Korean War was in its second year; on 3 October 1952, the United Kingdom conducted its first nuclear weapon test, 'Hurricane' at the Montebello Islands in Western Australia. It was in the same year that a competition was announced by the Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA). A commemorative public monument was to be built for "The Unknown Political Prisoner" – a symbolic personification of individuals who, in several countries and in various similar and dissimilar political circumstances, had ventured to sacrifice their own freedom and their lives for the larger cause of human liberation. Artists from all over the world were solicited to submit their proposals for this monument. The idea

for the monument was first stated at a Managing Committee meeting held in London in May 1951. It would be built on 'some site of international importance' The East/West Wall in West Berlin was thus allocated as the building site and the prize money to be paid to the winner was decided to be £11,500. A committee of judges was formed that included several renowned artists, critics and art administrators like Henry Moore, Herbert Read, John Rothenstein, Peter Gregory, Roland Penrose, and Anthony Kloman. Considering the turbulence on the political as well as the social front, the universalist approach and the status quo avowed by the ICA were clearly forceful. Though the committee proclaimed the general, human significance of the proposed monument, no entries from the Soviet Union or the Eastern European countries were accepted. The competition was being sponsored by an anonymous American industrialist.<sup>12</sup>

The Central Committee of the ICA was headed by Anthony Kloman, the chief ideator of the project, who was also the Director of Public Relations at the Institute. He acted as an intermediary between the ICA and the financial sponsor. The whole operation was carried out in a highly clandestine manner, and the name of the sponsor (who was later revealed to be John Hay Whitney, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the MoMa) was not revealed even to the staff with whom Kloman was working at close quarters. Nevertheless, Whitney's role in the development of this competition could hardly be exaggerated as he contributed not more than a meagre sum of \$5,000.6; the rest of the amount (approximately a staggering \$90,000) was donated by an American governmental establishment. This is barely surprising because funding of modern art and literature was quite a common expedient in the Cold War encounters, although it was also severely criticized. Taken on its own terms, Abstract art was seen to be

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<sup>12</sup> There might also have been two industrialists sponsoring the event.

inclined toward Communism, as several modernist artists were directly or indirectly influenced by Communism.

Anyway, a year later, the final exhibition of the competition was held between March and May 1953 at the Tate Gallery in London, where the entries were judged. The prize was given to the sculptor, Reg Butler, who had once been Henry Moore's assistant. When Butler's design was selected and exhibited at the Tate Gallery, the politics that underlay the prize erupted into the aesthetic domain. Butler's scale model contained three minute human figures overshadowed by a huge antenna-like tower. The maquette was criticized by many, particularly critics on the left. The very conception of the piece, the self-righteous flourish with which it was displayed implied, in their eyes, affectation and pretence which did nothing to respect the experience that it supposedly emerged out of. It triggered fierce arguments about 'the question of contemporary art as a means of communication'. The fiasco between Berger and Herbert Read was at the centre of these debates. Berger reproved it for its unconvincing assumptions, abstract mawkishness and Read, for his part, reproached Berger of propagating Socialist Realism.<sup>13</sup>

On March 1, 1953, László Szilvassy, a 28-year-old Hungarian refugee artist claiming to be a political prisoner on the run from the Communists, barged into the Tate Gallery, damaged the model and accused Butler of making a mockery of the unknown prisoners and reducing 'the memory of the dead and the suffering of the living...into scrap metal'. This event triggered Berger to sharpen his tirades against the hollowness and bankruptcy of the post-war avant-garde. In a 1953 article titled "The Unknown Political

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<sup>13</sup> Worth reading in this connection is Peter Fuller's 1988 article titled 'The Value of Art' where Fuller protested that Berger had 'denigrated the spiritual vision of Henry Moore', advocating in its place 'a pedestrian social realism'.

Prisoner” for the *New Statesman* he flung his biting sarcasm at the glorification of sham abstraction:

Imagine, on one hand the most cogent, truly contemporary and relevant human symbol of our time—the Unknown Political Prisoner; on the other a plinth in the Tate Gallery on which were arranged three screws, some bus tickets, a few matches and a crumpled paper bag. Within that contrast can be seen the enormity of the failure of the admired, so-called progressive art of our time. (338)

After the damage caused by Szilvassy, the maquette was replaced. Some visitors mistook the replaced maquette as the prize-winning sculpture. For Berger, this confirmed the farcical travesty of the competition and its redundancy with regard to political thinking, let alone political action.

Berger’s arraignment of the contest’s management was superseded by his denunciation of its very premises. The façade of ideological neutrality that the ‘memorial’ presented was not only practically untruthful, but unfeasible in principle. Aesthetics and politics, it goes without saying, were inseparably related and to contradict it was itself an ideological manoeuvre. For Berger, passing of time between the act of creation of a work of art and its reception, and a change in contexts, are required in order to view it objectively as art, and before that time elapses, works of art, “within their immediate context, are bound directly or indirectly to be weapons” (338). Art gains its validation from its ability to confront situations and experiences and becomes, as a result of such confrontation, intolerant. Berger’s later preoccupation with mysteries and ambiguities of art and appearances are a far cry from his early reduction of art and aesthetics to a tool in the extant political struggle and his refutation of individual opinion and agency when confronted with historical determinants

The response to Berger's rhetoric and contentions were angry and vociferous, to say the least: as if the dissident defilement of an artwork was not enough, the very values that the respectable ICA came to uphold were being questioned. For obvious reasons, the ICA turned belligerent. Herbert Read, having publicly declared the exhibition to be politically and ideologically neutral, derided Berger as a Soviet apparatchik. The debates raged on for quite some time and even entered the letter pages of newspapers, lending Berger a sudden, uncalled for fame and hurling him into the centre of an emergent cultural discourse. He received considerable amount of flak at the hands of not only professional critics but also general readers. Many saw his stance as an obsequiously conforming to a predetermined theory of art that is grounded in a political formulation of art as political propaganda. The renegade communist Philip Toynbee took Berger to task and went to the extent of likening Berger's rhetoric to Orwellian Newspeak.

### **The Political Climate of the 1950s**

Before the misgivings surrounding the Cold War began to spread, world-wide debates regarding the function of contemporary culture emerged, Truman Doctrine was used to appropriate art, and tags like 'Social Realism' had not assumed their potentially provocative character. In Britain the political scenario was changing fast and decisively so. Clement Attlee led the Labour Party to a landslide victory over Churchill's Tories in the 1945 United Kingdom General Elections. It was perceived by the left-leaning population of the country, by and large, as a fulfilment of socialist standards. The National Health Service Scheme was set up in 1948; major sectors of the economy were nationalized; social security systems were enlarged; education, healthcare and sustainable living were prioritized as political agenda. However, the early jubilation surrounding these developments was short-lived as doubts began to surface as to the

long-term feasibility of such steps. The bureaucratic oppression of the state industries and the demands of Labour's economic authorities, both unprofessional and specialised, raked these doubts further. Their braver designs were often consumed in the precarious balance between ethics and practicality. The Labour Party was unable to sustain most of these developments and the eventual defeat of the Labour Party in the 1951 General Elections that saw the return of Churchill as the Prime Minister, caused growing factionalism within the Party. It was evident that the unwieldy economic apparatus set up by the Labour was unable to fulfil the promises made to the voters: secure employment, social security, reasonable wages, proper housing facilities. The socialist dream was fizzling out as were the ideals on which those dreams were based.

These were intellectually and politically formative years for Berger. Berger was cautiously hopeful about possibilities that lay in the offing in the aftermath of the war. His earliest outputs were creative, and not critical, though stint as an artist and as a draughtsman, in the late 1940s, was brief. His critical sensibilities developed through his involvement with political and cultural fragmentation that the Cold War brought in its wake. Even as an art student at Chelsea School of Art, where he enrolled in 1946, Berger was concerned with the lives of the working-class. While studying at Chelsea, his association with several classmates who had seen warfare first hand and some of whom had even been prisoners of war and served on the home front like Berger himself. This early exposure, direct as well as indirect, to experiences of pain and suffering constituted a deep sense of empathy which was to be a life-long feature of his works. His classmates at Chelsea who were newly-returned from war front formed a dedicated yet energetic group of students for whom the art school provided a kind of vigour and independence from the terrors of the war. In terms of artistic inspiration, Berger was especially influenced by the Euston Road School, an academy set up before the war,

that opposed the avant-garde and instead cherished and promoted traditional, realistic conventions – the political agenda behind this being the production of broadly comprehensible and socially pertinent art. To some degree, His own art followed that agenda, with a distinct emphasis on paintings of people involved in everyday work. However, Euston Road School artists refrained from turning art into political propaganda in the manner of socialist realism. In spite of the undeniable influence, Berger looked for vigorous themes that were closer to the masses rather than the academy's typically pensive and isolated choice of themes.<sup>14</sup>

He continued painting and exhibiting his works after graduating from Chelsea but the reception of his works was discouraging. Later he observed that he had no facility when it came to painting and that to embark on each painting implied a considerable struggle. On the other hand, he was gaining increasing popularity as a speaker and writer on art. He had already been teaching at Chelsea. Alongside this, he became a lecturer at the Workers' Educational Association. While preparing for his lectures, Berger started to read art history extensively. In order to prepare for his classes, he began, for the first time in his life, a serious exploration of art history. He was also reading up communist literature extensively and his early anarchist inclinations were now becoming replaced by a Leninist and Bolshevik line of thinking.

In 1950 Berger gave radio talks on art for the BBC World Service. He sent the transcripts of these talks to the offices of the *New Statesman*. This is how he came to the notice of Kingsley Martin, the editor of the magazine, who offered him to write for

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<sup>14</sup> In Berger's view, art should be aimed at communicating to the spectator what was revealed to the artist as a consequence of seeing. For him the act of seeing always lay at the foundation of art, and separating art from that foundation was always bound to lead the artist and the viewer into an impasse. Berger adhered to this idea throughout his life, and it took different forms in his works. This was the reason behind his favouring realism over abstraction in the 1950s.

it. Berger started writing brief art reviews for *New Statesman* in 1951, and in 1952 he was made a full-fledged art critic.

Berger's early criticism reveals an allegiance to realistic attitudes over modernist ones. It would be reductive to generalize but realist art was more comprehensible and popular in its outlook than modernist art. At the start of the century, modernism had been on the rise. Modernism, Berger initially believed, distracted artists and critics from their real vocation and their partisan allegiances, through its assemblage of procedures, purposes and paradigms, which, he thought was manifest in the inscrutable and eclectic choice of gallery exhibits. The modern artist, Berger contended, was concerned primarily with the life and spirit of the times, and yet he could do no more than manage shallow imitations of the idiosyncratic stances of the painters he liked, leading to a futile and disorganised yearning.

Berger started to shape an exilic narrative voice very early. His early 1952 visit to the Young Contemporaries exhibition at the RBA galleries increased his admiration of realist art. The artworks displayed at the exhibition did not put up any grand façade of discovering any unknown genius in the artists participating; what it did was celebrate an unmediated and common approach that was particularly endorsed by the youth, focusing entirely on the mundane and even banal commonplace experiences. A third way had emerged out of the exhausted and unyielding opposition between academic art and avant-garde art – a rehabilitated practise of *social realism*. In his celebration of the spirit of contemporaneity, he summoned the young realist artists to practice their art *en plein air* out onto the street and in the most un-artistic of settings, and to let their new perceptions affect their art without prejudice or embellishments. Continuous observing preceded painting, for Berger, and art was nothing but a mode of communication

founded on imagination. Imagination empowers the artist with the ability to recognize and reveal that which is already there, and a slackness in either imagination or observation prevents art from being truly effective. Realism, with all its un- or anti-academic belligerence was becoming a popular means in France and Italy and in both the countries it was appropriated and adopted by the Communist Party.

### **Berger's Advocacy of Realism**

Berger was never a card-carrying member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, which had lost its power and influence after the war, but for some time, continued to express his sympathies for its ideologies and work. Berger's left-oriented reviews began to have an impact beyond the left. He rapidly gained a considerable following and his new readers were loyal to him. His increasing popularity led to an unexpected and rare opportunity to curate his own exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1952. It was a great chance to present, explicitly and freely, the visual connections and delineations of what he meant by realist aesthetic. The exhibition, appropriately titled 'Looking Forward,' was a visual manifesto that demonstrated considerable influence on the contemporary thinking about art. Ordinary people on the street flocked to see the exhibition and art was brought down from its pedestal of high seriousness to the place it originated from and rightfully belonged. It managed to impress critics and gallery-owners alike. Following the exhibition, scenes of working-class life, industries, street-life painted in thick, unassuming impasto became fashionable. Although Berger would later lament the dwindling of the political aspect of the Kitchen Sink, he certainly had influentially intervened in the British art scene and managed to start a movement. Berger's prodigious forte as a journalist derived from his skill to economically yet eloquently handle complex ideas within the restricted space of a weekly review. The economy of expression did not necessitate any compromise on either the passion with

which he wrote the reviews, or the concentration of his gaze. The articles had an intimate one-to-one address that made the reader become a part of the wide peripheries of Berger's vision whether they shared in his opinions or not. The experience of watching a film in a film theatre, Berger later said, was curious, for, one is, at the same time alone and with others. Reading Berger's critical corpus is a similar experience because one has the impression that Berger is speaking directly to the single reader and talking to a variety of peoples at the same time.

His first year at the *New Statesman* brought him much repute. Nonetheless 1952 was a strange year and it marked a certain inchoateness and instability in the extant cultural and political discourses. This, arguably, resulted from a simplistic ascription of modernist art to democracy, and of social realism to authoritarianism. This discursive strategy which was particularly popular in America, was at a stage that can be called politically amorphous. Writing in this context, Berger's initial reviews did not exhibit any simply discernible adherence to either of the two factions. Of course, a mainstream attitude and a proclivity for exhortation characterised his outbursts against the ennui of contemporary art, but it did not become populist at its best, and preachy at its worst.

Berger's, as well as *The New Statesman's*, manoeuvres had always relied on the hope, however diminishing, for a sovereign Western European socialist bloc. The *New Statesman's* popular pamphlet *Keep Left* tried to create an in-between space between Moscow and Washington. This was also the basis of Berger's advocacy of realism. As he saw it, realism was not radical; it was rather a middle path. In 1953, however, the possibility of having this middle path was destroyed. There were only two options left. Berger's outburst against western-liberal sensitivity mounted and as a result, his early admirers, who had liked his focused, liberal criticism, came to see him as treacherous

and started to charge him with sullyng art with doctrinaire political agenda. Berger was obliged to guard both his aesthetic and political convictions in general terms. His defence can be seen as an interim self-introspection into his role and output as a critic. It also posed a question as to the issue of political commitment within the artist-art-critic nexus. Responding to the uproar caused by his piece on Butler's "The Unknown Political Prisoner," he wrote: "Besides practising as a painter, I have tried to think about and *for* art. But I have tried to think beyond the tip of the painter's brush; and, as a consequence, it has been my concern for art, which has largely led to my general political and social convictions. Far from dragging politics into art, art has dragged me into politics" (73).

The ICA incident pointed out how easily aesthetic preferences could be politicized and how unceremoniously they can lead to ideological formations. The Cold War had intensified the cultural debates in Britain and these debates turned around the lynchpin of ideology. Differences of opinions about art made people question fundamental assumptions and loyalties. One of the most fundamental questions was whether experience of an artwork should be historicized or universalized. Yet another question was, what should be the role of the state in the formation of culture: was it justified for the state to advance its own aesthetic theories for propagandist purposes? Berger's early writing grappled with these schisms inherent in the cultural life of Britain in the early 1950s. Debates about aesthetics fell into two groups. Liberal democrat critics writing for the journal *Encounter*, which set itself up squarely against the leftist *New Statesman*, such as Herbert Read, Stephen Spender, Patrick Heron and David Sylvester, thought art should not be used as a political rheostat, that art should be autonomous and so should be the experience of its reception; and using art to propagate political beliefs would not only bring about decadence in art but would also lead to an authoritarian

dystopia. These critics and several others writing for the *Encounter* persistently and tendentiously conflated communism with fascism. For them, such conflation pervaded both politics and aesthetics. They also approached social realism with suspicion due to its supposed association with communism, and in its stead, promoted the avant-garde as a more liberating and democratic form, cleansed of politics and the need to employ art in the service of social progress. However, it was paradoxical that in spite of their promotion of individual freedom and autonomy, the liberal critics embodied a regimented and influential association.

Berger was clearly out of place in this context. Although he appealed for solidarity, it was in a personal capacity as an autonomous critic: as has been said before, he was not a card-carrying member of the CPGB, neither did his training in politics have much to do with British communism (most of the intellectual figures he considered his teachers were Central or East European). In his articles, he tried to welcome a fresh, robust spirit, the inception of which he certainly saw happening in the continent and not in Britain. With a view to giving this spirit a direction and form, he founded the Geneva Club in 1955 which intersected with British communist circles. It was an unceremonious affair and the club held get-togethers where leftist intellectuals and artists such as Doris Lessing, Lindsay Anderson, Paul Hogarth, Eric Hobsbawm, Isaac Deutscher and John Willett convened to discuss art and politics. The gatherings were also frequented by several realist artists Berger had defended. Berger's motive behind forming this discussion group was, of course, political. It is significant that prior to the New Left's ascent, Marxism was generally censured in England as being outmoded and redundant. Berger's critical stance at the Geneva Club, as well as for the *New Statesman*, was unapologetically political. While arguments were still well underway about the realism-

modernism debate and while disputations regarding the very function of art were carried out with vehement philosophical rigour, Berger held on to his Marxist leanings with conviction. The viewpoint he expressed ran unwaveringly to countermand the bourgeois art-for-art's-sake philistinism. He was driven by an urge to make art relevant to social development and political aspiration. The idea of service that Berger prioritized in art's function ran counter to the liberals' adoption self-sufficiency and autonomy as their theoretical fulcrum. While the liberals saw political propaganda and autonomous art as being mutually exclusive, Berger argued that cultural accomplishments were a by-product of a people's overall goals, interests and principles.

### **Cultural Praxis of the Working Class and the Influence of Antonio Gramsci**

The historicism of Berger's approach necessitated a constant re-thinking and re-evaluation of the idea of tradition – an idea which the liberals saw as something extensive and unhinged. The idea of tradition assumed a distinctly socialist nuance in his understanding and came to suggest a guiding presence that was produced and sustained by community, rather than an inherited legacy to be revered and conformed to by the people. Berger's advocacy of the realist tradition in art should be understood in connection with how he conceptualized the role of the artist painting in a particular tradition and the processes through which art comes about. The artist, in his view, imparts an experience through his art to people; and since the experiences contained in his art came from the social collective, his art would in turn emphasise what was communally preserved and shared. Berger brought the idea of originality under his critical scrutiny. For him, originality was not something to be held up and celebrated for its own sake, or something to be associated with the cult of personality. Instead, it implied a constant striving for expansion of the shared domains of experience.

The idea of tradition, heretofore primarily aesthetic, began to be rendered increasingly ethical and political. Veneration of the cult of genius, as Berger saw it, resulted from the absence of any vital tradition that could be either challenged or continued. It caused the artists to disproportionately glorify their individuality and the complexity of their art to such an extent that no common language of visual experience was possible. Each artist started to paint in a visual language that was quintessentially his own and was not acquiescent to general aesthetic or political communication. Berger's efforts to develop a general tradition of realist art, saw him championing humble collective endeavours over eccentric genius. This tradition would offer a vital and invigorating context for the serious, determined production and experiencing of art by freeing it from the museum-like insularity and timelessness of the extant elitist critical gaze that it was often subjected to. Berger advocated producing public sculptures and installations and argued that state establishments should provide employment to state artists rather than leave them at the mercy of capricious elite for selling their art. These artists, he argued, would prefer to be associated with working class or trade union viewers without cultural presumptions than the pretentious official art market. Berger criticised what he perceived as the general lack of opinions and political convictions in state institutions. He disparaged the Arts Council as unbiassed and impassive, and deferential, and even facilitative to, the fetishization of private property and commercialization of art.

Berger's strong partisan convictions and his tendency to politicize art and experience had their roots in his early contact with the works of Antonio Gramsci. Several of his ideas about politics and ideology were actually influenced by ideas Gramsci had himself expounded in the 1920s, that only came to wider public attention in Italy after the war. These included the idea that art should be used for the purpose of social development, that it had a role in the formation of socialism, and that the artist could

contribute to the formation of a general popular culture. It goes without saying that these ideas hurt the individualistic sensibility of the liberals. The Marxism that Gramsci advocated saw culture not as a static ideological looking glass but as something far more vigorous and intricate. His understanding of cultural identity was complex and layered. Gramsci argued that it was the role of the intellectual to educate the uneducated, rather than merely to speak or fight on their behalf. And while mainstream Marxism rallied for an international coalition of the proletariat, Gramsci valued the significance of local habits and cultures. *Prison Notebooks* were published in Italy between 1948-51. However, excerpts from them were in circulation as early as 1944. They produced assumptions about the cultural routes to the establishment of a Marxist community. Gramsci's intellectual exhortations infused new life and helped confirm Berger's own operations as a writer. He started using Gramscian tropes to critique what he saw as the dull pedantry and patronising attitude prevalent in the British art world of his time; and the mystifying, definitive assumption that the 'true' meaning of an artwork was beyond the reach of the general public. This clear demarcation between High Art and popular taste was not dissimilar to the cultural divide that Gramsci had addressed in his works. Gramsci discovered that the primary reason behind such a divide was a social distinction of sorts between intellectuals and what is known as ordinary people, and the difference in their experiences of the world. This difference could be erased, according to Berger as well as according to Gramsci, by bringing the intellectual out of his out-dated, insubstantial world of artistic genius and individualism. Berger's first-hand experience of living with working-class people shaped his anti-bourgeois stance.<sup>15</sup> What united Gramsci's counsels, policies adopted by the Italian Communist Party (PCI)

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<sup>15</sup> Berger's had spent two years in Northern Ireland among working-class army cadets, and had also spent several months drawing daily activities fishermen, construction-workers and welders.

and Berger's own ideological orientation was a desire to envision a common platform on which the artist and the worker could meet.

The final aim was to close the distance between a state-sponsored culture and the proletariat. A new aesthetic was invoked that considered the working class as a subject matter of art, and that considered the same class as the audience of the experience of such art as well. This vision was exemplified in an editorial Berger wrote just before his 1952 exhibition *Looking Forward* where he invited readers who might not have had the privilege of cultural exposure to come and see his exhibition. In the editorial he sharply criticized the chic moralising tendency of the British cultural establishment. The willingness to invite people, regardless of their class, gender, race, to comment, criticize and discuss on his statements recurs in Berger time and again, exemplified most famously in the concluding envoi to *Ways of Seeing* (BBC 1972): "But, finally, what I've show and what I've said, like everything else that is shown or said through these means of reproduction, must be judged against your own experience" (28:02-28:15). Although Berger was jeered at by self-fashioned socialites and connoisseurs, the historical circumstances of the 1950s, and the acceptability of divergent, populist ideas after the war, proved generally conducive for him. The state and media establishments recognized and displayed a willingness to work according to the shifting configurations of civil society. The gentry and aristocratic ways of life and ideals were becoming increasingly out-dated. There was a redeployment of capital and partisan authority; an enlargement of literacy and educational facilities; and, favourably for Berger, a growth of new, autonomous and free media arrangements which presented him and several leftist intellectuals to reach out to a wide audience. The new media and its possibilities began to be harnessed to bring down an elitist interpretation of culture.

Like Gramsci who, in his essay “The Southern Question,” offered an insight into the origins of Communism and Fascism in Italy in the 1920s, and the social compartmentalization of northern and southern Italy in 1926, and their relevance to contemporary debates about constructions of the state, displacements, and strategic coalitions, Berger was addressing the great social and cultural divide that was engendered in England. This divide was manifest in the great glaring absence of art galleries in London. The collective experiences of the working class, their attachment and understanding of the places where they worked and lived, were grossly elided and went without proper representation in the history of visual arts of Britain and British national culture in general. While Berger was pitching for an idea of locally produced cultural praxis, an unaffiliated elite class was safeguarding the British cultural heritage with exclusivism and entitlement. This class also promoted the newly emerging, fashionable abstractionist styles because, as Berger pointed out, the politics of abstraction implied that art could no longer be identified with any specific local space or context. The cultural elite, with their affiliates in America, also conflated avant-garde abstractionism with liberal democracy, Berger saw and critiqued it as a dangerous tendency to disregard local traditions and to homogenize all artistic productions as global commodities, potentially threatening to destroy all local and communal styles. Abstraction threatened to estrange artists from their societal connections and responsibilities producing an atmosphere of pessimism and selfishness. The domain of art became increasingly international in character, and confined itself to an elite coterie and to the pageants and art festivals it organized. As a result, the alienated general public began to suspect whether there was any meaning and value to be found in art after all.

Berger was increasingly disappointed with the British cultural establishment throughout the 1950s. He continued to depict affiliates of the academy as being deceitful, and their self-proclaimed pioneering output as nothing more than ersatz and tacky replication. Berger's critiques, overwrought and hard-boiled at times, were nevertheless prescient in anticipating the increasing obsession with wealth of the art world, which he saw as a social stratum in itself.

What is more difficult though and what Berger did originally have in common with the cultural moralizers of his times, was a hint of ethical uncertainties in an era soon to be left bereft of its principles. The tradition of Western art that he grew up with was fundamentally religious, and socialism which was like a modern religion, was starting to waver at the base. The essentialism, on which Berger's idea of culture was based, appeared to be wearing out. He began to be considered by the liberals as wistful and out-dated. Berger had his own misgivings about the question whether there would eventually be a spontaneous, popular urban art of the cities—as proposed by Fernand Léger.

### **The Influence of Fernand Léger**

Fernand Léger, was the artist, “the most developed artist of our time” (*Permanent Red* 89) to whom Berger turned for direction as the new pessimism started becoming philosophically legitimised. He observed, “Only Léger remained consistently faithful to the original spirit of Cubism” (113). Léger's paintings were discernibly cheerful, tender and expressive of solidarity. What drew Berger to Léger was the fact that “Léger began with the machine” (123). The modern machine was often turned into a fetish by the avant-garde modernists, who pictured it as a supreme, invincible entity. Léger, on the contrary, saw it brusquely as “tools in the hands of men, no longer as mere objects in themselves” (123).

Léger's cubist images were not theory-driven: the geometrical shapes were used in order to re-imagine the energy of working machinery and the blocks and pistons involved in their functioning. Léger's encounter with mechanically-produced objects was not theoretical or philosophical, but were generative of a simple query or curiosity as to how they were made. Abstract painting was only meaningful for Léger when it was related to the solidity, tangibility and distinctiveness of architecture. Berger: "It is our duty, ' he said, 'to spread light and colour' - and he meant into the mean, grimed city apartments" (123). The cubist imperative to see each object in connection with other objects surrounding it, and thereby blasting it out of its static inertia, was influential for Berger who, later, in *Ways of Seeing*, said with pithy aphorism: "Everything around the image is part of its meaning" (05:20). Léger's formal attitude to the machine assumed a humanistic overtone when "He saw that the machine had made labour collective, that its discipline had created a new class, that it could offer freedom" (*Permanent Red* 123). Léger's perception of the possibilities of the machine necessitated a "celebration of the richer human world to which industrialization would eventually lead" (123). Léger was also a part of the formative influences on Berger's thoughts on the mystification of art. In Berger's view, Léger defied every insinuation of 'Glamour'. 'Glamour', according to Berger was a pervasive factor that came to represent everything that separated people, "whether it is their 'special' understanding of art or the colour of their lipstick" (125). Léger, according to Berger, was more concerned with things that united people, and not things that separated them. Léger's view of the 'genius' can be found to be very similar to Berger's own view of it: not an enigmatic or quixotic outcast, but a man with imagination who was abreast of the experiences and the spirit of his times, and himself so effortlessly comprehensible that he could become virtually nameless: "his works as easy and yet sharp to the eye as popular proverbs to the ear" (125).

For Berger, Léger's paintings had prophetic qualities and that they embodied the future of the worker. The futurism of Léger did not amount to Utopia for Berger but was marked with an unmistakable tenderness: Léger documented human weakness and helplessness in his art and accepted these qualities through the dispositions of his figures, producing a kind of gestural *pathosformel*. For example, "His Constructeurs do not only build together: they also protect one another – as, in practice, men working on high scaffolding must" (125). Berger identified a kind of tenderness in Léger that would come to characterize his own writing, especially fiction – a kind of tenderness that "is the result of understanding human weakness" (125). In an era when art was becoming progressively nihilistic and inconspicuous, Léger offered camaraderie and confidence for Berger.

In the mid-1950s, Berger eventually fell out with several artists he had initially endorsed. And these artists – many of them were 'Kitchen Sink' painters – started to rally against Berger's interventionism. The Kitchen Sink vogue was short-lived and by the end of 1957, not long after its height of fame in 1956, its dowdy and angry appeal was on the wane. Berger dismissed the Kitchen Sink painters' works as being unserviceable, unable to see how it would help people claim their social rights. His pleas for revisiting and rethinking tradition fell into deaf ears. Socialist art and Existentialist art which had been competing with each other since the end of World War II, were eventually superseded by Abstract Expressionism. This victory was exacerbated by a growing fad of rebellious individualism in America and its expression in the arts. For Berger, it was shocking, for he saw in this development nothing but extreme despair and neurosis. In the abstractionist inventions of de Kooning, Rothko and Jackson Pollock, he saw a pitiable destruction of subjectivity, an indisposition towards struggle and solidarity. What Berger said of Pollock can be used to describe

his general stance towards the vogue of Abstract Expressionism: “Finally in desperation he made his theme the impossibility of finding a theme. Having the ability to speak, he acted dumb” (69).

### **Pop Art and Mass-media Advertising Culture**

The geopolitics of the 1950s were transforming rapidly and Berger was not unaware of the momentousness of his being a writer in a time when the first H-bombs were being tested by, first, the United States and then, the Soviet Union; when the glories of the British Empire were coming to an end; when the Suez crisis was at its peak; when the Soviets were invading Hungary; and when America was rising as a superpower.

The context and atmosphere of art had become a doldrum and, as it was practiced, art could not be brought to bear upon society or be given a social, public role to perform. In this situation, reviewing exhibitions became a futile exercise for Berger. He also saw in the situation a diminishing of the power of the critic in shaping public opinion. Consequently, he took a break from his job at the *New Statesman* and after a year away from it, he resumed office and continued to work for three more years at the magazine; however, he left his post – and England – once and for all when Kingsley Martin retired as editor in 1960.

For Berger, who started out as a crusader for tradition, arrived at the idea of absolute transformation of society through revolution only after his confidences in post-war harmony had gone. Neither the cultural transformations taking place in America nor the political ones happening in Eastern Europe could placate his antagonism. The sudden bourgeois affluence around the 1950s saw a series of diverse, but not unrelated, developments: a burgeoning of mass-media advertising culture, Pop Art, and an increase in the number of cultural studies departments in Britain. Berger had to come

to terms with his failure to achieve things he set out to achieve. His articles from around this time sometimes contain an admixture of weary resignation about the present and a wistful anticipation of a future where the arts would be integrated into a unified whole; meanwhile, grappling with the constituent parts was all that could be done. The desired unification never happened. He realized that he was mistaken in overestimating the potentials and uses of the visual arts within a social context and public life in general; and that painting and sculpture could not have as dispersive an expansion as was possible in other media such as radio, television and cinema. When these other media seized control of the modalities of popular communication, the visual arts were relegated to the background and were left entirely reliant upon the middle class. As a result, Berger thought, it was wrong on the part of critics with allegiance to socialist realism, to insist that artists should continue to come up with urgent and incisive social commentaries, because such insistence would lead the artists to become further disenchanted with their content and medium.

As the 1950s wore on, there was a volatile reshuffling of ideas on Berger's part, inspired by Marxist thought and practice in Britain, on the one hand, and a developing continental temperament of insurgence on the other. This led to a new, experimental and more "European" way of writing which followed Berger's peripatetic, exilic<sup>16</sup> life in the 1960s. It was based on a desire to live a life of a European writer, embracing both the disenfranchisements and privileges that came in its wake. In the 1960s Berger broke boundaries of established literary and critical forms and dabbled in a wide range of written and audio-visual media. Significantly, the hectic itinerary that he followed throughout the 60s involved experiencing closely the places, monuments, museums,

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<sup>16</sup> Berger had reservations against the word 'exile' because his decision to leave England was voluntary, and not forced, and therefore was a privilege.

galleries, archives and landscapes he took up as themes in his work. He spoke at rallies and did occasional teaching on the side. His early polemical rage started to mellow down as he became more tolerant toward modernism, even its American variant. Now, he revisited traditional European art with breviloquent rigour and addressed general questions about the relation between art and consciousness; between the idea of civilization and public perception of art; between contemporary artists and theorists working in different areas. The need for such parallelism came out of seeing art as a product of complex relations among historical events. The equivalents were unquestionably more suggestive than absolutist—he was aware of the downsides of approaching art as simply a scaffolding to intellectual history – but he did not waver from the conviction that advancements in the fields of science and arts were not independent of historical and ideological considerations and in fact the same history gave rise to those diverse advancements. A polemical engagement with the artists and traditions of the past was necessary for Berger to understand the apotheosis of the past in the present.

### **Rethinking Modernism**

Beside vigorously studying the Renaissance, Berger started re-thinking modernism as a transformative historical event. The paintings that lay at the beginning of modernism in the visual arts fascinated him. Cubism was its apogee. Like many critics and historians, Berger regarded the canvases made by Braque, Miro and Picasso shortly before the World War I to have marked a pivotal turning point in European Art. Abstraction did not protract Cubism, he contended. Its *formal* influence was pervasive, apparent in everything from architecture to household utensils, but the *revolutionary potential* it purported to fulfil and the historical role it was meant to play, were not

actualized. Berger had developed interest in Cubism quite early, but it took some time before he could analytically grasp the full potential of its inventions. His evolving thoughts about Cubism should not be separated from his queries about the nature of truly socialist art. Berger criticized Marxist critics for being unable to produce a clear definition of socialist art, and for failing to validate the right of the artist to carry out his own experiments in the midst of indeterminacy that characterized the times. This resulted from, as Berger perceived, a simplistic opposition between form and content. The conventional account of nineteenth-century modernism traces the movement of the avant-garde away from mimetic foundations towards a cult of subjectivity, conceptualism and untainted feelings. Although the Marxists agreed with the liberals on the nature of this development, they differed on the question of its moral directions. Berger offered a new perspective. He argued that the major modernist artists were, in some way or the other, conscious of the fact that bourgeois art and morale was laden with fragility and degradation and consequently looked forward to a redemption from this poverty of vitality at a future time: they imagined living on the brink of a revolution but they could not grasp the socio-political keystones required for it; and consequently, they invested all their zeal exclusively into their art.

Modern art, according to Berger, failed to generate any major social change. However, the first practitioners of modern art opened up the horizon for a few very significant and unprecedented discoveries, ranging from the technical to the philosophical. Radical and extreme though they often were, their raw energy had its origin in positive, productive and hopeful urges that fell into desolation after the war.

Berger's reassessment of the more 'positive' pre-war modernism, his apology that the obscurity of modern art lay in its form and not necessarily in its content, angered some

of his left-leaning friends, who branded his new interest in the movement as obsequious flattery at best and surreptitious affiliation to aestheticism at worst. For a Marxist, Modern Art was out of bounds, and even for a critic of Berger's stature to say positive things about its experimentations in England amounted to an unthinkable confusion of loyalties. Thus, Berger had again placed himself in an outsider's position.

However, this led to other pressing questions: what if the apparently implacable contradiction between realism and modernism had been a mere exaggeration or a gross simplification after all? At precisely what juncture did the modern movements betray their revolutionary contexts? Was the betrayal embedded in their origins? Berger speculated whether the first painters of artistic modernism were aware of the degradation of bourgeois standards, and whether they anticipated that a new type of man would be produced by the twentieth century. His researches convinced Berger that most of them had. He came to recognize the revolutionary fervour in these painters in their originality; they were required by their times to be original and perhaps their originality would not be needed if a social revolution had been accomplished. These issues bear testimony to a progressively critical aspect of Berger's thinking, if not to a conclusive dispensing with his political and ideological allegiances.

The rise of the New Left was a turning point in the 1960s. As social issues like civil rights, feminism, LGBT rights, abortion-rights movements, drug policy reforms became topics of intellectual discourse and political activism, the general atmosphere became more conducive for Berger's eclectic way of thinking. Several journals like *Left Review* and *Universities* came into existence that refused to perpetuate the Stalinism-Capitalism binary. It was possible to write in an unbiased, critically nuanced and unorthodox kind of a way and still be political. There was a double bind in his

subsequent projects: on the one hand, he critiqued the firm ideological hold on art that existed within the party-sponsored news editorials, on the other, he set out to liberate the artwork from the clutches of commercialism. Marxist criticism of the social consequences of commodification – commodity fetishism and alienation were invoked by Berger. He saw, like Marx, commodification as an unfortunate but inevitable process. The astounding prices of the artworks could not entirely eclipse their humanistic import.

For Berger, the real subject of a cubist painting was the way in which human sight functions, and not what the painter sees in front of him. This reversal had deep metaphysical inferences. The immobile pragmatism of static appearances yielded a new amalgamation: the Cartesian classification of mind and matter was unified by the painters in their work. This had great phenomenological implications as well. Experience was both in and of the world. Berger compared the experience of looking at a cubist painting with the experience of looking at a star: “The star exists objectively, as does the subject of the painting. But its shape is the result of our looking at it.” The numerous belvederes of points-of-view that cubism offered, its preference of procedures rather than substances, its lurid emancipation of the visual arts from archaisms and anachronism.

Among the Cubists, Berger was particularly drawn to the works of Juan Gris, whom he likened to a scientist for making some crucial formal innovations. Gris’ art built on the discoveries in the visual fields made by Picasso and Braque. Gris’ scientific appeal, according to Berger, lay in the fact that he was able, with all his powers of insight and artistic talent, to derive formulaic elements and general principals from the Cubist approach. Berger found a link between this derivation and the inter-disciplinary

influences taking place around that time involving fields as diverse as science, psychology and politics. The Cubist method was characterised by a constructive attitude to the question of experience and how it should be preserved and transmitted. The Cubist view of nature was not restricted to the resident, the individual and the conditional but that which contained within itself an essential ontological and epistemic validation, with a particularly scientific disposition. It was unusual for a Marxist to express such a wholehearted avowal of Cubist practices. With Cubism, the artist transformed himself into the subject of his own painting. However, this was not due to any egoistical valorisation of subjectivity but a consequence of regarding himself and the operations of his own sensory perceptions as an inseparable part of the nature he set out to study and observe. This amounted to a formula for Cubism which had its prolepsis in Cézanne's insistence on being loyal to nature through his faith in his own, little sensations.

Berger reiterated that by formula what he meant was an original, radical truth, which, once established, can be learned, taught and practiced by all. It was revolutionary because concurrently with the scientific findings of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by scientists such as Ernest Rutherford, Max Planck and Albert Einstein, which made possible, for the first time in human history, to suitably control of his environment, the Cubist formula assumed, in an unprecedented way, the possibility of man living in reconciliation with Nature. A fresh, new vocabulary was offered by the Cubists that provided exposure and insight to the very processes and philosophical implications of making art. Berger's enthusiasm for Cubist art can be seen in several articles he wrote for the *New Statesman* between 1959-1960. He admired Léger for inheriting the convictions of the Cubist painters. And in Cubism he saw the hope that the best art of his time need not be considered a random result of the cult of personality and genius.

### **The Influence of Writers and Thinkers from the Continent**

After he moved to Geneva in 1961, Berger took a much-needed break from art criticism and spent time writing his second and third novels, namely, *The Foot of Clive* (1962) and *Corker's Freedom* (1963). He appeared on British television from time to time and stayed well-informed about the English intellectual scenario, but was, by and large, disconnected from it. His voluntary exile and the comparative quietness of life in Geneva meant that he was now less obliged to play out social guises; there were fewer influential connections, and greater struggles to survive as a writer. However, under these changed circumstances, Berger was able to develop a new narrative voice, a quietude of sensibilities and a preparation for a more vigorous and insightful encounter with the past.

Berger became friends with several émigré writers like Frederick Antal and Peter Peri. It is from them that Berger came to know more about the Budapest-based intellectual discussion group *Sonntagskreis*, and its most respected member, Georg Lukács, whose thought had a great influence on his own initial advocacy of realism. However, in the 1960s, older polemical works were being rethought and re-interpreted producing new viewpoints. Several texts by thinkers such as Brecht and Benjamin were being translated for the first time into English.<sup>17</sup> Some of the ideas of Brecht and Benjamin even appeared to contest and problematise the authority of Lukács's thoughts. Berger struck friendship with the Austrian dissenting communist writer, Ernst Fischer. Fischer had been a fervent anti-fascist campaigner and a committed political activist and his breaking free from the fascist regime resembled the struggles of several refugees Berger had admired. Fischer, who had directly experienced the fearfulness of authoritarian

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<sup>17</sup> Several of these translations were done by Anya Bostock, Berger's wife of that time.

paranoia, represented the embodiment of an organic intellectual for Berger: a man with strong opinions about the historical phase he was living through. Fischer influenced Berger and other left-leaning writers to valorise an autonomous, anti-Soviet kind of Marxism that, rather than rejecting, enlisted the art of the modernists. Throughout this period, Berger reiterated his statement that there was a constant need for a tolerant re-examination of visual modernism on the left. Berger tried to assimilate his ideas on art that he had developed towards the end of his stint at the *New Statesman* into a demonstrably Marxist context, in order to carry out a cogent and methodical re-examination of not only modernist art, but also of the European Marxist tradition.

This renewed Berger's interest in Lukács and in how Lukács' theories had been put into practice (or malpractice). He was not uncritical: he controverted certain aspects of Lukács' thought. For example, he argued that it was the responsibility of realist art to represent the typical, to begin with, rather than the incidental: however, when the realist artist had come across the typical, that is, the right subject, the right characters, the right actions, etc., he should no longer be restricted to the portrayal of the incidental. Berger also critiqued the appropriation of realism by theorists and cultural arbiters as something that naturalism should aim to attain but did not. Berger's writing on the topic began to express increasing disgruntlement with the scheme, and presently he abandoned it. Brecht had pointed out the volatile and momentary nature of reality and argued that ways in which reality was represented should be adapted to that nature. This was echoed in Berger's refusal to arrive at any universal or total definition of realism, which in his understanding, was totally reliant upon a given situation, and whose objectives and goals were always changing.

The sixties saw several rapid transformations in society. The progenitors of the earlier avant-garde appeared in the scene with considerable prominence. The intellectuals, by and large, welcomed massive changes: the shift from print to electronic practices, written to visual culture, patriarchy to sexual heteronormativity, etc. Transformations of comparable significance were also taking place in geopolitics: revolution was underway in Cuba, the Algerian War of the Independence was coming to an end, the beginning of the Congo Crisis after the nation's independence from Belgium.

The New Left was gaining ground and so was the countercultural currents. Berger's re-examination of the modernists relied on the hope that there would be a possibility, after all, to bridge the gap between the past and the present, between tradition and modernity. The heretofore imperceptible transformations of the first half of the eventful 20<sup>th</sup> century were all of a sudden visible after the paradigmatic shifts that took place in social, political and ideological arenas. The social structures that had existed before were now redundant. The repository of tradition that Berger was drawing from was two-fold as was his critical stance: his work anticipated the future of civil rights movements and the political uprising that came to be associated with the 1968 revolutions.

### **The Revolutionary Potential of Cubism**

In his rather daring – daring because he refused to subscribe to the kind of hagiography that was commonly expected of a writer embarking on such a topic – book, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965), Berger set out to demystify the aura surrounding Picasso's reputation as an artistic genius and offer a fair evaluation of his accomplishments and limitations. The reviews of the book inappropriately exaggerated the sharpness of Berger's criticism of Picasso's fame to make it appear belligerent.

Berger's subject in the book was not Picasso. It was what Picasso came to represent for the public: the intensity of his genius, the ambiguity surrounding his political leanings, the misrepresentations of his affluence and celebrity. Through these (mis)representations he became a general symbol of Modern Art. Because of his fame, wealth and position, every misconception of his work could only result in an upsurge in a general contemporary misinterpretation of art. *The book contains* elaborate meditations on twentieth-century aesthetics, contexts, the un-situatedness of total abstraction, the philosophical and political implications of Cubism, apart from issues directly related to Picasso.

Berger argues that nothing like Cubism has ever been produced since the Renaissance. And just as it is not possible to understand 15<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance art without taking into account the parallel advancements in science, philosophy and commerce, Cubism becomes comprehensible only when it is placed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century context of modern science and progress. To drive his point home Berger draws a comparison between two blatantly dissimilar artworks: Picasso's *Still-life with Chair Caning* (1912) and a 15<sup>th</sup> century Fra Angelico altarpiece titled *The Vocation of St Nicholas*. The Fra Angelico altarpiece depicts a geometric visual arrangement of a religious moment; the perspective in Picasso's collage seems more aerial in nature. Berger finds uniqueness of vision, objectivity and clarity in both these images, ensuing from the discovery of new realities. There is a marked absence of the painters' subjectivities: "Nothing comes between you and the objects depicted – least of all the artist's temperament: subjectivity is at a minimum" (*Success* 48). The Fra Angelico altarpiece mirrors 'the promise of the new humanism' of the Italian city-states; similarly, Picasso's abstract collage was had its origin in 'the promise of the modern world'.

Berger points out that in both paintings there is an accent on the substance and texture of the objects, as if to give the impression that everything depicted in the paintings had been freshly constructed. There is also a conscious deliberation about the space surrounding the objects in each painting despite the obvious difference in the laws governing that space: “in the Fra Angelico the space is like that of a stage-set seen from the auditorium; in the Picasso the space is more like that of a landscape seen from the air” (49).

Amassing a variety of equivalents—historical, art-historical, and eventually philosophical—he persistently argues on behalf of cubism not as the progenitor of abstract art, but as an artistic detritus of revolutionary aspirations. He looks back in the spirit of historicism at the increasing eventfulness of the turn of the century Europe; the factors that helped shape modern Europe: the mass production of materials; the development of the automobile, the aeroplane and cinema; the increasing availability of the new technologies and how they began to affect the sense perceptions and how they revolutionized the experience of space and time; the idea of ‘action at a distance’ with which Michael Faraday was able to arrive at the idea of an electromagnetic field of force – he preceded James Clerk Maxwell’s mathematical definition of such a field; interjacency of things and its veneration as a crucial elemental aspect of their meaning; the scientific discoveries of quantum mechanics and the General Theory of Relativity; the coming into existence of modern disciplines like sociology and psychology. All this called for a radical rethinking of the traditional modes of intellectual inquiry. In the end, it affected all arenas of research.

There was no complacency in the Cubists faith in progress. The inventions in every field, the new modes of production and communication provided them with the tools

using which they could challenge the European tradition: “The Cubists felt their way, picture by picture, towards a new synthesis which, in terms of painting, was the philosophical equivalent of the revolution that was taking place in scientific thinking: a revolution which was also dependent on the new materials and the new means of production” (69).

The modern developments in the fields of science, technology and arts had a dark side that was too devastating to elide. This comprised the two world wars, mass exterminations, totalitarianism, the nuclear weapon, etc. It was necessary to imagine a counteracting line of thought to deal with the historical magnitude of these events and this, Berger found in Marxism. Furthermore, the fate of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was decided with the advent of monopoly capitalism and so were its apprehensions and aspirations:

Monopoly capitalism was the highest, most developed form of economic organization yet achieved by man. It involved planning on an unprecedented scale, and it suggested the possibility of treating the whole world as a single unit. It brought men to the point where they could actually see the means of creating a world of material equality. (70)

Marx and Engels had argued that industrial capitalism was an essential stage in the inexorable movement towards communism; industrial capitalism would also consolidate the foundation on which socialism could operate through a rigorous, dedicated and organized battery of workers; however, it would also necessitate the crises of joblessness and overproduction leading to revolution. Berger did not subscribe to the deterministic confidence of this theory. Nor did he approve the acquiescence to, in retrospect, the perpetual dissuasion of leftist nostalgia. Instead, he invoked a certain kind of hopefulness that would dispel the pessimism that had accumulated in

the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the social and cultural life of Europe. Although revolution never arrived on time even where circumstances for it were supposed to be the most conducive, the expectation of its envisioned coming produced a stimulus whose incidental conservation in art could stop people from accepting that the present was unchallengeable.

On the one hand, Cubism clearly held revolutionary potential for Berger, and on the other, he was not oblivious to the far-reaching possibilities of modernist *aesthetics*. In thinking about modernist aesthetics, Berger was deeply influenced by Max Raphael, who hypothesised that mingling materialism with dialectics had caused major artistic problems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's inheritance of the 19<sup>th</sup>. Writing in 1933, Raphael supposed the arrival of a truly Marxist aesthetics was nowhere in sight. Unlike Raphael, Berger considered the problem of aesthetic reappraisal resolvable; he saw in Cubism the very fusion that Raphael thought was impossible. For him, the materialism of Courbet and the dialectics of Cézanne (Raphael's schema) reached a synthesis in Cubism:

Today both examples are followed up separately. Most painting in the world now is either banally and mechanically naturalistic or else abstract. But for a few years, from 1907 onwards, the two were combined. Despite the ignorance and philistinism of Moscow in its Stalinist and post-Stalinist pronouncements about painting, and despite the fact that none of the artists concerned were in any way Marxists, it is both possible and logical to define Cubism during those years as the only example of dialectical materialism in painting. (108)

### **Interregnum: Re-examination of Marxism**

Around the late 60s and the early 70s, Berger wrote a series of essays on writers, artists and thinkers from the Continent such as Max Raphael, Frederick Antal, Victor Serge, John Heartfield and Walter Benjamin. Berger saw them as belonging to a coterie of Marxist intellectuals, if not to a single, monolithic Marxist tradition. Benjamin was particularly important for Berger because his position signalled Marxism's re-examination of itself, and it also suggested the return of the left to its foundational beliefs, its mounting suspicion of the already-consolidated ideologies and laws that operated outside the historical continuum – a period of re-examination that Berger identified as an interregnum. The reasons behind the need for a re-examination of Marxism were manifold according to Berger. Some of these were: the unprecedented level of violence wreaked by neo-colonialist enterprises on the global populace and the ensuing impoverishment of economy; the strategies adopted by the Soviet Union to form institutional structures aiming to generate public apathy towards politics, and the consequent resurgence of the issue of revolutionary democracy and its validity; the triumphs of China's peasant revolution; the relative desensitization of the proletarians towards revolutionary consciousness by consumer societies through a diversion of attention away from their local economic self-interests towards a broader and more global sense of destitution and frustration; the recognition that it was impossible to achieve socialism in one nation as long as capitalism continued to exist as a global economic order.

Berger suggested that the interregnum could be approached by beginning with what preceded it without any regard to the arguments and contentions as to what Marx actually meant. The interregnum blew up the linear continuities of determinism – the

certainty that the present is conditioned by the past and the future by the present. It was generally critical of the supposed laws of history and the general ideas of civilization and progress, and disproportionate individual political power that was always contingent on an impersonal destiny for its existence. Berger believed that each act of revolutionary uprising should originate in an individual hope of challenging the way things in the world already were. The idea of interregnum, as Berger conceptualises it and as it can be used to understand the present global crises in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, always exists in a world “where time is short, and where the immorality of the conviction that ends justify means lies in the arrogance of the assumption that time is always on one’s own side and that, therefore, the present moment — the time of the Now, as Benjamin called it — can be compromised or forgotten or denied” (*Landscapes* 59). Benjamin’s misgivings about the compromises on the value of the present coincided with his ruminations about the impoverishment of communicable experience. In his later essays, the very idea of history went through a rather perplexing and occasionally inchoate reordering. It was no longer, as had been perceived earlier, a scaffolding of sequential phases: instead, it was now conceived as an ineffable, isometric field flagrantly teeming with revolutionary prospect.

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## Chapter 1: Storytelling and the Face of the Other

This chapter focuses on the idea of storytelling as a dialogue between the writerly self and the other through which experience is constructed. It describes the role of the archetypal storyteller in archaic societies and analyses Berger's approximation of that figure in the era of late capitalism, and also within the transactional matrix of oral and print cultures. The idea of 'likeness' that recurs throughout Berger's works can be theorized to understand how storytelling facilitates the recognition of alterity.<sup>18</sup> In the ethical appropriation of the praxis of storytelling, Berger's ideas are similar to those of Immanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (1961), although this association needs to be dealt with caution, considering their very different intellectual milieus and intentions.<sup>19</sup> The recognition of the division of between the self and the other seems to lie at the source of empathy in Berger. The idea of 'likeness' constitutes this division. Examples from essays in his book, *Photocopies* (1996), conversation with Sebastião Salgado about photographing human suffering, the portrayal of Dr Sassall in *A Seventh Man* (1967) and the representation of AIDS in *To the Wedding* (1995) are used in order to understand the range of the spectrum of empathy that Berger's storytelling ethics deals with.

### 2.1 Storytelling, Empathy and the Idea of Alterity

In his 1936 essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin points out that "something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences" (83). It must be interrogated what constitutes

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<sup>18</sup> The term is taken from a Sunday Feature that Berger did for BBC Radio 3 titled "Will it be a Likeness?"

<sup>19</sup> Similar caution should be taken while undertaking to reconcile Marxism in Berger and the Levinasian responsibility to the Other.

experience and how and why it can be exchanged and shared. To share one's experience with another is to implicitly acknowledge that there is a division between one's self and the other. This is what Levinas maintains in *Totality and Infinity* (1961). The idea of alterity should always involve the recognition of the division between the one and the other. Another important word in Benjamin's ruminations is 'inalienable'. He is talking of a time when it was taken for granted that to be human was to be able to share experiences. The idea of community revolved around the ability of people to share experiences. It goes without saying that language was the vehicle which made it possible for experiences to be transmitted, circulated and be given a kind of objectivity. Visual media – painting, drawing, etching, etc – had a communal basis and their ability, with regard to communication of lived experiences, was emphasized and celebrated. This ability to communicate experiential learning was indeed a kind of asset, and immaterial though it was, it helped the community keep its stability intact. This stability contained within itself the recognition of each member of the community as the Other. This is where the figure of the archaic storyteller becomes crucial.

The storyteller always maintains a certain distance between himself and his audience. This distance sometimes is based on the fact that he knows more about life than his immediate audience, or the idea that his repository of experiences is greater and more varied than that of his listeners. Journeys – either for professional or for personal reasons – give a kind of sanction to the storyteller's authority, charm and indeed, aura. The idea of home does not essentially mean a place or a location for him and thus experiences have rendered him homeless and paradoxically have also made him 'at home' in places that are not his own. As far as his identity as a storyteller is concerned, home is something to be found not only geographically but also temporally. He can be at home in a particular place as well as in a particular time in history. About Nikolai

Leskov on which “The Storyteller” is actually based, Benjamin says: “Leskov was at home in distant places as well as distant times” (85).

In addition, the distance between the storyteller and his subjects is an integral part of his craft. It would be wrong to say that this distance lends him only a kind of impersonality – of course it does that but also, and more importantly, it renders him more available and open to experiences to come. The challenge for him, as Benjamin sees it, is how to find his way about in the world without getting too deeply involved with it. Involvement for a storyteller does not necessarily imply a personal engagement. He remains porous, flexible, indeed an ‘other’ for his subjects. Storytelling does not aim to convey information or report. Its subject matter is not pure essence. According to Benjamin, “It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again” (91). The life of a storyteller is transformed by the ingress of other lives in it. Berger’s comment that the number of lives that enter ours is innumerable echoes Benjamin’s sentiments. This innumerability or unpredictability is what on which storytelling thrives. It is a communal experience, where a community and the individuals living in it realize the infinite ways in which others’ narratives might affect them and thereby change the way in which the Other is recognized and approached.

The storyteller’s position within his community is ambiguous. He is at once a part of it and an outsider. This is especially true of Berger who always maintained that he was an outsider in the French peasant community where he chose to live most of his life – an outsider who had become an intimate. Benjamin: ““Leskov,” writes Gorky, “is the writer most deeply rooted in the people and is completely untouched by any foreign influences” (101). He also adds: “A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of craftsmen” (101). By Berger’s time, especially by the time

Berger started to write consciously in the storytelling mode, the storyteller figure had changed a great deal. Berger as a storyteller wrote about not only the people of the community where he lived but also several other primarily European communities. He was more of a *porteur* than a journeyman or a master craftsman, and the aesthetics and subversive strategies came to pervade his genre-defying literary and critical output.

The storyteller figure, as Benjamin understands him, is a man of the world. His experiences have conferred a kind of authority on life-lessons and for this reason, he has counsels to impart. The wisdom that he has gained from his experiences has given him a kind of power with which he can weave counsels into the fabric of his narratives.<sup>20</sup> The archetypal, pre-modern storyteller who would have a first audience in the community where he lived, was sometimes able to, by the virtue of being more ‘experienced’ than the others, able to counsel the members of his community. This experience is extremely rare in Modernism. Benjamin elaborates this point in his essay:

An orientation toward practical interests is characteristic of many born storytellers. More pronouncedly than in Leskov this trait can be recognized, for example, in Gotthelf, who gave his peasants agricultural advice; it is found in Nodier, who concerned himself with the perils of gas light. (86)

In a conversation with Berger, Susan Sontag pointed it out how singularly unique is the experience that Berger has of narrating the stories about the peasants he lived with to the peasants themselves. However, it must be clarified what Benjamin means by ‘counsel’. He says: “After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel,

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<sup>20</sup> In an archaic setting, the experience of the storyteller seems to confer on him an aura of wisdom and knowledge which makes him vulnerable to mystification. Berger, in approximating the figure from oral tradition to print, has to create an apparatus where, through innovative performative techniques, the authority of the narrating voice is made subservient to the experiences being narrated.

one would first have to be able to tell the story” (86). Evidently, there is an open-endedness to imparting counsels as the story is always in a state of unfolding. It is never complete. Since it is always being handed down, it is impossible to totalize it – its infinity manifests itself in the fluidity with which it passes from generation to generation, from place to place. Storytelling offers a kind of symbolic framework for understanding the question of alterity, the necessity to recognize and respect the otherness of the Other, to prevent the subsuming of the Other as well as the totalizing of it.

The decline of storytelling and the resultant decline in the ability to share experiences can be attributed to the rise of the novel according to Benjamin. He points out:

The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. (87)

There is also a telling comment on the short story:

We have witnessed the evolution of the “short story,” which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings. (93)

Benjamin could not have foreseen the advent of e-books and audiobooks. However, in these cases too the narrative entity stays intact. When we read a novel off an e-book reader, or listen to an audiobook version of a novel, the novel as a textual entity does

not change – its chapter divisions, episodes and sections remain intact. An e-book reader is a physical entity that has substituted the book only to the extent that it can ‘contain’ several non-tangible ‘books’ at the same time. The experience of reading an e-book is not very different from that of reading a book in terms of the time it takes to read (which may slightly vary) and the fact that both an e-book and a book need to be accessed visually – they need to be in front of the reader for him/her to be able to read it. In the case of audiobooks, there is an intervention of a disembodied voice (or voices) that substitute the narrator or the characters. The experience of listening to audiobooks is comparable to listening to Western concert music where the performers are bound to play note for note what the composer has written. There might be slight moderations depending upon how the conductor interprets the sheet music but there is no overall change in the performance. The dependence of the novel on books obviously suggests its inescapability from the domain of written words. Audiobooks are based on written words because they are read out, not improvised. Novels have often been read and enjoyed in solitude. Possibly the activity of writing a novel too is lonelier than the activity of story-telling. These solitary activities imply a certain kind of secrecy or a privacy that belies the communal nature of storytelling and story-listening. Benjamin:

A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader. (For even the reader of a poem is ready to utter the words, for the benefit of the listener.) In this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it, as it were. Indeed, he destroys he swallows up the material as the fire devours logs in the fireplace. The suspense which permeates the novel is very much like the draft which stimulates the flame in the fireplace and enlivens its play. (100)

Georg Lukács sees in the novel "the form of transcendental homelessness" (*Theory* 41) and at the same time, for him, the novel is the only art form which includes time among its constitutive principles. It may be argued that the process of writing, transmitting and reading of a novel, involves a kind of totality. Benjamin points out: "To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living" (87). The novelist for him is himself uncounselled and therefore cannot counsel others. The storyteller, on the other hand, improvises and improvisation, in the sense that it contains a certain kind of unpredictability, is a fairly counselled response to the narration of experience.

Benjamin shares his observations on the emergence of another form of communication whose advent threatened not only storytelling but also novel-writing, namely, information:

On the other hand, we recognize that with the full control of the middle class, which has the press as one of its most important instruments in fully developed capitalism, there emerges a form of communication which, no matter how far back its origin may lie, never before influenced the epic form in a decisive way. But now it does exert such an influence. And it turns out that it confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way, and that it also brings about a crisis in the novel. This new form of communication is information. (88)

Storytelling, unlike information, does not lay claim to verifiability. Benjamin observes:

The prime requirement is that it appear "understandable in itself." Often it is no more exact than the intelligence of earlier centuries was. But while the latter was inclined to borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible. Because of this it proves incompatible with the spirit of storytelling. (89)

There are more ways than one in which Benjamin is anticipating the internet here, but for the moment we can focus on just one of those ways: the speed and the sheer volubility of information in the internet era. There is an increasing demand for exact and instantaneous information which has brought about in its wake unprecedented possibilities of lapsing into the banality of excess and unnecessary data. Benjamin's observation that information lays claim to verifiability is reminiscent of Sir Philip Sidney's ascription, in his *Apology for Poetry*, of a certain kind of superiority to the poets than historians on the ground that poets, unlike historians, are not bound to tell the truth – they have no obligation to veracity and hence they cannot lie. In a story, there is an admixture of fact and fiction but often it is hard to tell where one ends and the other begins.

“Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories” (89) – Benjamin's comment is more relevant today and to add to it, news has become so instantly accessible that we no longer have to wait for the morning's newspaper in order to access it. The proliferation of news has become so fast that there is no sense of waiting and one lives in the presence of constant occurrences, near or far. In an interview with Susan Sontag, Berger states his main aim behind writing stories: to retain the meaning of lives lived by men so that it is not lost or forgotten. In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, he compares the storyteller with a channel that helps experience pass from one place to another, bringing it to wider attention. It can be argued that information is never lost. Even if it is lost, that loss is temporary and information can always be retrieved. The world of information is horizontal because one is constantly waiting and anticipating the next information which is laid out in a forward-looking axis. Waiting has vanished from the horizon of human experience. The sense of anticipation creates an anxiety to process as much information as possible but

consciousness cannot immediately synthesize that much information. Information of the past, present and future, is laid out as on a straight line. The vertical and thoughtful delving into the nature of information is not possible because all it contains is pure essence and the way in which each piece of information appears to be complete in itself defines it as a self-contained, totalized entity. On the other hand, stories are not self-apparent. There is practically no end to interpretations of a single story. The vertical drift is infinite. Benjamin succinctly sums up this contrast: “In other words by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (89).<sup>21</sup> As such, information does not come with explanation. As Benjamin sees it, information must be self-explanatory – a totalized unit. Stories do not come with explanations and they recognize and respect the infinity of the possible explanation at the time when the story is told and at a future unforeseeable time as well.

How to listen to a story? Just to possess the faculty of hearing is not enough. Just as the British filmmaker Peter Greenaway once said, “Just because you have eyes, it doesn't mean you can see,” (*Rembrandt's J'Accuse*) it may be understood that listening is more than hearing. It calls for attending to something which is taking place right now, to be available in and for the present moment as much as possible. Benjamin's prescription for intensive listening is self-forgetfulness: “The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory” (“Storyteller” 91). This gives rise to several questions that have a certain Levinasian import: what is self-

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<sup>21</sup> One is provoked to address the issue of media's appropriation of the storytelling form for falsification of actual meanings of events, or for distracting public attention away from events calling for immediate action.

forgetfulness? Is the act of self-effacing listening conducive to the acknowledgement of the alterity of the storyteller and the infinity of his position? The storyteller, while telling the story, immerses himself in the story and forgets himself. This is how the selfhoods of the listener and the teller are subsumed within the narrative itself. The fact that the storyteller improvises his narrative as he tells it prevents the listener from 'totalizing' the experience of listening to the story. The ways of telling and the ways of interpreting a story are infinite. Information, unlike stories, is vulnerable to totalization. Ideally, the storyteller should prevent himself from totalizing his stories and their range of meanings. To use Levinasian nomenclature, the telling of stories falls within the purview of 'the saying' rather than 'the said'. Their interpretations as well as their many meanings are always already in a continuous process of unfolding. The essential undertaking of Levinas's thought is the effort to signify a relation with the other person that is irreducible and incomprehensible – something that he discovers in what he notably calls the 'face-to face' relation. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas defines the word 'ethics' as "the putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other (Autrui)" (43). Ethics, for Levinas, is the critical interrogation of the independence, impulsiveness and cognitive endeavour of the ego that tends to subsume all otherness within itself. Ethics suggests an irreducible otherness or 'exteriority'.

In a traditional setting, the storyteller is surrounded by the faces of his listeners. They look at him, his gestures, the movements of his hands, the shifting expressions on his face as he tells stories. This being (or beings) exterior to the storyteller can be defined, after Levinas, as 'face', as "the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me" (50). Approaching the other is accompanied by the acknowledgement that total(ized) recognition of the other will be impossible: the Other cannot be recognized for who he or she is. However, a discovery of partial similarity

happens sometimes accidentally. This discovery is like a message sent by the Other. In Berger, sending and receiving such messages form a constellation of meanings. Reading is akin to tracing the imaginary lines between events in history and the synapses of recognition that the storyteller has been a witness to. The face, both human and animal, real and imagined, recur in Berger's works as a physical embodiment of an appeal to be seen and to be recognized. Sometimes the faces offer a sort of a *pathosformel* of nonverbal notations, to borrow a term from Aby Warburg. For example:

There is a special facial expression which, painted, exists only in Caravaggio. It is the expression on Judith's face in *Judith and Holofernes*, on the boy's face in the *Boy Being Bitten by a Lizard*, on Narcissus's face as he gazes into the water, on David's as he holds up the head of Goliath by the giant's hair. It is an expression of closed concentration and openness, of force and vulnerability, of determination and pity. Yet all those words are too ethical. I have seen a not dissimilar expression on the face of animals—before mating and before a kill. (*And Our Faces* 85)

Berger establishes an ethical relation with his subjects. He writes in *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*: "Often when I shut my eyes, faces appear before me. What is remarkable about them is their definition. Each face has the sharpness of an engraving" (12).

This is followed by a long passage which is important to quote in its entirety in order to understand the import of the word 'face' as Berger conceptualizes it:

None of the faces is ever familiar to me. Usually they are fairly still, but they are not static images; they are alive. They are like the face of a person thinking. They are clearly not aware of my watching them. Yet I am able to make them look at me.

“Make them” is perhaps too strong a term: it requires no great effort on my part. Instead of simply watching a group of them, I have to concentrate my attention on a particular one and then she or he, as frequently happens in daily life, looks up and returns my gaze. Their optical distance away from me is normally about three or four meters, but when one returns my gaze, her or his expression is such, its intensity is such, that our faces might be only a few centimetres apart.

The expression, although modified by the face’s character and age, is always similar. Its intensity is not a question of emotion, or of pleasure or pain. The face looks straight at me and without words, by the expression of the eyes alone, it affirms the reality of its existence. As if my gaze had called out a name, and the face, by returning it, was answering, “Present!” (13)

The affirmation of the reality of the existence of the face is, very tellingly, wordless. In the interview with Michael Silverblatt mentioned earlier, while sharing his observations on linear time, Berger says:

I have difficulty in talking in an intelligible way about time, about anyway linear time because somewhere deeply in my – I am not sure whether to say in my imagination or in my soul – somewhere deeply it seems to me that all instants coexist, and if you ask me about writing stories or novel... the aim is that every incident, every word, every silence, above all every silence in that story coexist, is instantaneous in the same instant...this is the sense of urgency that I have when trying to write and it's also actually something that I feel when I am not writing and not thinking about writing and when I am living. (22:01)

In order to ensure the coexistence of different instants and in order to avoid totalizing the possibility of words, silence must be given a space to exist and as Merleau-Ponty

lyrically affirms, "we should be sensitive to the thread of silence from which the tissue of speech is woven" (*Prose* 46). Levinas' proposition is that the relation to the Other cannot be abbreviated to a complete understanding and that this relation is ethical, and that it constructs the experience of what we perceive as a subject or a self. In the idiom of transcendental philosophy, the face is the provision for ethics to be possible. Levinas distinguishes between two types of otherness, differentiated by 'autre' and 'autrui' in French. 'Autre' signifies anything that is Other. 'Autrui' refers to the other human being with whom the self is involved in an ethical relation, even though it remains a debatable issue to what degree, if any, can we extend Levinasian ethics to non-human beings, for example animals. In Berger, the subjectivity of the narrative persona engages in a relation with the exteriority of experiences it seeks to understand. This affects the differentials of 'Othering' in various ways. *Bento's Sketchbook* (2011), Berger's book on Baruch Spinoza, is a good example of how this happens.

In *Bento's Sketchbook* the narrative persona assumed by Berger and the imagined figure of 'Bento' (Baruch Spinoza) coalesce to form a third character or a voice that pervades the entire book. The book itself is constituted of brief observations on issues ranging from the colour of blueberries to profiteering, interspersed with quotes from Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677) and Berger's own drawings of his immediate surroundings. Berger comments on these things as he thinks and writes about Spinoza's centrality to his own ethical thinking: "As time goes by, however, the two of us – Bento and I – become less distinct. Within the act of looking, the act of questioning with our eyes, we become somewhat interchangeable. And this happens, I guess, because of a shared awareness about where and to what the practice of drawing can lead" (*Bento's Sketchbook* 6). Superficially it might seem that contemplating deeply about a person makes it possible for the thinking subject to affect an amalgamation of his identity and

the identity of the person being thought about. However, it would be nearer the truth to say that the underlying basis of this observation is a recognition that the writer is often called upon, as it were, by the subject he has chosen to write about, and is reminded that he can never totally represent the subject and that the alterity of the subject must always be respected. Berger's notion of the narrative persona and the subject becoming "interchangeable" probematizes the issue of ethical responsibility towards the other which involves recognizing the other as having an exteriority, an infallible and ungraspable 'otherness'. It is easy to misread Berger's perceived 'shared awareness' as a totalizing gesture of effecting an absolute identification between Spinoza and himself on matters related to ethics, and the following arguments can caution us against any such misreading:

1) Berger, in making a fusion between the narrative voice and the subject being written about, lends a certain kind of performativity to the narrative and hence reinforces his status as a storyteller. This performative stance, of course, negotiates between oral storytelling and storytelling in print.

2) The presence of the performer or storyteller means that there is a one-to-one relation between the narrative voice and the subject(s) – a presence that can never be elided. This 'first-person' presence of the storyteller with its own subjectivities and idiosyncrasies, acknowledging its own fallibilities, prevents any kind of totalizing that would have been brought about by a book on Spinoza written in the third person. This is reiterated by the fact that the narrator comes across as an inquisitive and close reader of Spinoza rather than an expert on his works.

In Berger, the author's authority is always conferred by the subject he is writing about. Just as he cannot totalize the subject, dealing with as he does only fragments of the

subject's life and works, his authorial position cannot be totalized either because he is not restricted to any particular genre, subject, style, as a writer. It would be incorrect to say that he straddles the worlds of fiction and non-fiction with ease because he does not consider these two categories as being mutually exclusive. Therefore, even when he writes art criticism, he takes recourse to storytelling strategies that are pliable to the needs of the subjects being written about. This is how he tries to prevent any notion of totality creeping into the activity of writing.<sup>22</sup> The very purpose of writing seems to be the unleashing of the infinite possibilities (of interpretations and uses) inherent in experiences.

A parallelism seems to exist in Berger's works between different forms of human activities, as a recurrent trope which, when pursued to its logical conclusion, can prove to be very useful in providing insights as to how narrativity really operates in his works. The deliberate association between the activities of writing and drawing, for example, offers a commentary on Berger's storytelling strategy. This association, and therefore the dilution, of one of form communication through its involvement with another, is another way of relinquishing narrative control over subjects. While talking about drawing, Berger's narration always assumes a present continuous form. In other words, the narrative eye, instead of describing the drawn object, follows the actual process of drawing in real life. For example: "Drawing now involves subtracting as much as adding. It involves the paper as much as the forms drawn on it. I use razor blade, pencil, yellow crayon, spit. I can't hurry. (8)" In a way, this nearly-physical intervention parallels the storyteller's shifting to and fro between storytelling and criticism. It also

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<sup>22</sup> We must remember that Berger does not make his self-effacing strategies as a narrator visible. A constant critical surveillance is at work throughout his storytelling oeuvre which ensures that the persona of the narrator/critic/storyteller/listener is always acquiescent to the ethical responsibility towards the other.

creates a rupture in the traditionally held distinction between the role of the artist and the role of the critic. If we consider Levinas's view here, art presents us with images; and on the other hand, criticism involves concepts. These images, offered by art, are appealing but not exactly valuable. The domain of art seizes the temporal dimension inherent within the images and brings being to a halt and doubles it. As a result, characters in a story, for instance, sometimes undergo an unending disquiet, incarcerated in a merciless interval of aesthetic disengagement. This disengagement, because it consoles rather than poses a challenge and makes evident the ways to confront that challenge, is often construed as a prevarication of responsibility. The onus lies with the critic to re-connect this evasiveness to actual history by gauging the expanse between art-generated mythology and real existence. Levinas' idea that criticism is the basic, intrinsic ability for human dwelling – to the extent that the term itself implies a primeval association with the other – is continuous with Berger's humanistic interest in the lives of others. Critical intervention for Berger is not necessarily discontinuous with his storytelling pursuits: it is an unbidden response that a writer comes up with, when he feels compelled to take action or engage in a polemic on the subject or when he feels he has the tools – ideological and intellectual – to address a crisis. The difference between criticism and storytelling lies not so much in the use of language but what they do to writing, as he points out in the Silverblatt interview:

Every word in that story is made fresh or ... say, clean. Arguments cannot do that. I mean, written arguments cannot do that ... poetry is the supreme example of that, when the poem is really good, but stories also do that and because it is so, so, so important today too, because we are surrounded by words that have been hijacked, made utterly filthy ... contradicting their own sense and the words with which

people deceive themselves to and then which ... actually leads to evil – evil acts ...  
because evil works with words. (47:23)

Going back to the subject of drawing and its rich connection to writing, one example of the kind of ‘drawing-writing’ that Berger often performs (where he describes the process of drawing in words and lends the description the appearance of a story), is his drawing of Maria Muñoz. Drawing has in common with storytelling the idea that the materiality of the medium as well as the experiential context need to be recognized: “The effort of my corrections and the endurance of the paper have begun to resemble the resilience of Maria’s own body. The surface of the drawing – its skin, not its image – make me think of how there are moments when a dancer can make your hairs stand on end” (14). As Berger ascertains it, ‘corrections’ in a drawing resemble Derridean ‘writing under erasure’: each line is essential because it contributes to the overall meaning of the drawing and yet is ‘cancelled’ or have its authority undermined by the presence of other lines. In a drawing, some lines are made to appear diminished by making other lines bolder. They remain all the same, sometimes as palimpsests and sometimes as traces, but most importantly as acknowledgement of the infinitude of the drawn object and the infinitude of the relationship between the drawn object and the drawing subject. Four activities can be discerned that are underway while Maria Muñoz’s portrait is being drawn by Berger: dancing, looking (at the dancer), drawing, looking (at the drawing). These activities are accompanied by the activity of thinking voluntarily or involuntarily by the person who is drawing. While drawing Muñoz, Berger is reminded of Degas bronzes and drawings of nude dancers (in particular, one called Spanish Dance). The act of remembering certain forms in extant artworks may point to a kind of ‘literacy’ or habit that Berger has imbibed from viewing Western Art; and may even indicate his subconscious recognition of certain similar gestures and

attitudes. In *Bento's Sketchbook*, Berger's account of drawing Muñoz is preceded by the finished drawing – the final outcome of infinite looking towards which the drawing-writing narrative had been inexorably moving. While reading the account, one keeps going back to the drawing and thereby something of the performativity of the written piece is transmitted to the act of reading as well. The invitation made by this kind of writing to the lives of others, and the question of exteriority of the experience of the Other, are dealt with more thoroughly in Berger's 1996 book, *Photocopies*.

## **2.2 Documenting the Lives of Others in *Photocopies*: Towards a Theory of 'Likeness'**

*Photocopies* is constituted of short, vivid sketches based on lived and imagined experiences. No indication as to their having any actual basis in reality is made evident in the book. The narrative tactic adopted in writing these sketches relies heavily on visual images. A certain sense of mobility characterises the way in which the visual images are arranged, and therefore, one has the impression of hovering over and into the experiences, and indeed into the spatio-temporal dimension that the experiences occupy in the sketches. In other words, the narrative voice works like a camera that can go anywhere because it is freed from its spatio-temporal restraints. At the same time, it is attended by a sense of being strongly grounded in one place, in one time. There is, in each sketch, a great level of concentration and a feeling of being intensely in the present moment. This is because the sketches operate through a mechanism involving two contradictory impulses – the desire to be in the present moment and the desire to be in other places and at other times. These impulses are governed by a Levinasian desire to be hospitable to the Other, to find a kind of liberation, paradoxically, in being a hostage to the Other.

The identity of the 'I' that carries the narrative forwards and backwards, forming a sort of constellation of narrated experiences, is not comprehensible: it could be a fictional narrative persona, or it could be Berger himself writing about his own experiences. It could be either imagined or real. The function of the storyteller is to rupture the boundaries of the real and the imagined. Narrative, as Berger conceives it, is a tool where the real and the imagined are enmeshed to a point where they cannot be separated. This raises some important questions about the very category of experience itself. What is the nature of the relation between narrativity and experience? Do all experiences lend themselves to narrative rendition? For Berger, the more inclusive the experiential categories of the otherness of the Other, the more conducive they are to formation and communication of usable counsels. Experience is generally inclusive of the act of imagining but always for Berger, imagining in relation to reality. In each sketch in *Photocopies*, Berger sets the basis of the reality on which the imaginary excursions will be carried out.

Like most of the stories in *Photocopies*, "A Young Woman with Hand to Her Chin," is a sketch, a portrait and a story. It is about a young woman who was an émigré musician. She had been brought up by her grandmother, a country woman from Ukraine. The relationship between the woman and her grandmother involves a kind of practical education that is meant to be passed down from generation to generation. From her grandmother, this young woman had learnt how to kill chickens, feed geese and look after her father was a concert cellist. Her mother a pianist. What caught Berger's attention was probably the fact that she had the gift of storytelling: "She could tell stories for a month" (35). Storytelling is continuous because it connects individuals to traditions, and individual experiences to collective experiences. And therefore, "She had her own and her grandmother's fund to draw from. Funny, true, untrue" (35).

Rather than the epistemic validation of experiences, Berger relies on the telling and the way it gives imagined/fictive accounts a semblance of truth, thereby making the telling effective. The point of contact between the woman and the narrator began when he started a drawing of her, just after her practice session. Along with the music she had been playing, her physicality comes to the fore when the narrator starts describing her. He says that he “will never be able to separate the pathos of that sonata from the smell, like drying grass, of her sweat” (36). The impressionism and the synaesthesia of such descriptions amplify the subjectivity of the narrator. The movement of the story resembles not that of a narrative but that of a drawing. This is partly because it does not have any plot in any commonly understood sense of the term. The arrangement of descriptions is visual and sometimes non-linear. It is, again, an instance where one form of activity (writing) is influenced by another (drawing). The impulse of drawing, according to Berger, comes from the hand and not from the eyes. Drawing can therefore be perceived as something more tactile than visual. Although the activity is directed towards a time when the drawing will be viewed by spectators or the artist himself, the impulse which gives rise to it is tactile. It is a way of getting close to the object, to try and understand its contours, the way the object presents itself to the surrounding space and its relation to other objects surrounding it. Drawing involves an attempt to bridge the gap between the visual and the tactile and create a space where these two sensations merge to produce a unique kind of perception. “Sometimes I think everything is a question of aim,” (36) Berger says. The aim in drawing is to attain a likeness. While drawing the young woman, the narrator discovers a certain “precious” asymmetry in the eyes. He is filled with a desire to touch this “asymmetry”. This makes us wonder, how can something so abstract as asymmetry (or for that matter, symmetry) be touched? Can it be held even if for a moment? In a way, it can be ‘touched’ only when the

physical act of drawing is underway – neither before the drawing starts nor after it is completed – and that is why the activity of drawing is entirely concerned with the present moment. It provides the artist with a kind of concentration that is unique, rare and necessary.<sup>23</sup>

Drawing – although the activity unfolds in time –is really about a kind of vertical plumbing of the depths of a visual presence, and is unlike the horizontal or linear movement of random visual and textual information that often constitutes how we use the internet. Drawing involves looking, re-looking, correcting endlessly, which is why it is never complete – it is incomplete when it begins, it is incomplete when it is being made, and it is incomplete when the artist stops working on it. The internet, unlike drawing, is totally devoid of tactility. “If I could only touch it, place it, with my stub of charcoal without giving it a name...” (36) Berger says about the asymmetry of his subject’s eyes. In the virtual world of the internet, things give the illusion of tactility but withhold the prospect of any physical contact. In this, it is like the genre of oil painting – a theme Berger takes up in *Ways of Seeing* – that offers verisimilitude but disallows identification with the objects portrayed. The internet also names everything. Its *raison d’etre* is naming. A drawing can be carried out in an amorphous ineffable zone where names have not yet been imposed.

Drawing implies a relation between the subject and the object. The subject is aware of the object. His experience of the object, if it is in front of him, accumulates as the details pile on in the form of lines or jottings or scribbles. If the object is drawn from memory, the subject’s perception goes back in time; his consciousness retains some details and

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<sup>23</sup> The intensity of concentration that drawing requires is particularly instructive in a time when we are perpetually surrounded by screens and endless stream of visual images that they offer.

other details are furnished by imagination. While drawing from life, when both the subject and the object are present in the same frame of time, within each other's proximity, imagination works in a different way. There are three relationships possible between the drawing subject and the object. They are as follows:

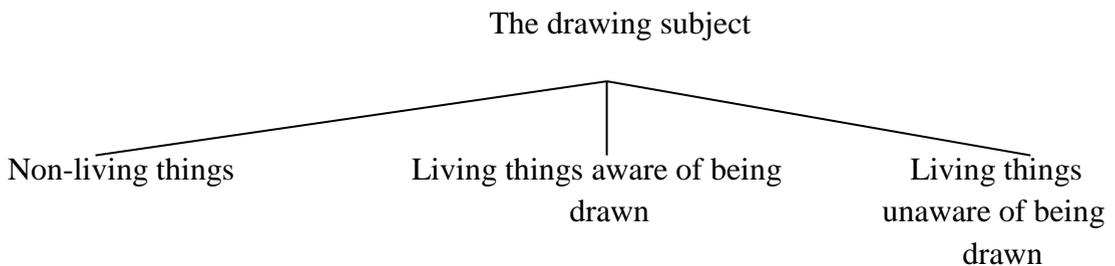


Fig. 1: Three possible relationships between the drawing subject and the object

In the story “A Young Woman with Hand to Her Chin,” Berger describes the second situation. In a moment of intense visual reception, the relation between the drawer and the drawn is rendered reciprocal: “She of course knew I was drawing her. She was sending something out to meet my aim, if what was sent out didn’t miss my aim but touched it, there was a chance of a good drawing” (36). This is a kind of collaboration between the artist and his model. The two-way traffic between the viewer/artist and the viewed/drawn object makes possible the emergence of ‘likeness’. This thing that is ‘sent’ to meet the artist’s ‘aim’ is, again, amorphous and ineffable: “One can see whether it’s there or not, but it remains a mystery” (36-37). Thus, it is subjective and though not entirely incommunicable, every attempt at communicating it must acknowledge the impending failure of the endeavour. It is not akin to physical resemblance. In fact, identical reproduction of an object is the opposite of ‘likeness’. So, it may be inferred that in order for ‘likeness’ to occur – and it occurs magically and arrives unexpectedly – the artist must strive through a process that involves certain degree of looking, re-looking and correcting. Photographs are complete in the sense

that they are exact visual reproductions of the things photographed. Therefore, 'likeness' can be seen to depend upon a certain process of production, of bringing the artefact to its final culmination through work or labour. The curious incompleteness of a drawing constitutes a 'likeness'. In this, 'likeness' is something approaching total resemblance but always failing to attain it. This is why "no drawing, however good, can be more than a trace" (37).

While drawing the woman and nearing the end, the narrator has the following realization: "I began to sense that the evolution of the drawing of her corresponded with another evolution. Each mark or correction I made on the paper was like something bequeathed to her before she was born" (37). These 'parallel' narratives of the drawing in the present, and the past inheritance of one's being before one was born – direct to an atavistic conception of memory: "The drawing was dredging time. And its traces were, like chromosomes, hereditary ones" (37). The act of 'dredging' brings to mind Benjamin's image of the constellation: events revealing themselves in flashes and forming connections and patterns by bringing up experiences clear from the inexorable onrush of time. This realization coincides with the young woman suddenly saying to Berger: "I elect you as my other father..." (37) After the (incomplete) drawing is finished, she studies it and becomes "completely herself and only twenty-one years old" (38). Figuratively this represents a merger of the 'life' of the drawing' and the 'afterlife' of the object – which is the drawing itself. This leads to yet another 'life' of the experience when after "two days later she returned to Odessa with her portrait, and I kept this photocopy" (38). It is not clarified if a photocopy (also the name of the book) is constitutive of 'likeness' but in the case of the story in question, perhaps it is, because it is associated with the experience of the drawing and more importantly the act on the woman's part of returning the drawn image in the photocopied form.

Empathy is inseparable from Berger's approach towards the Other. Empathy is something which, to use a metaphor from *Bento's Sketchbook*, grinds the lens of his observation. In several of his sketches/stories he suggests that there are lessons in ingenuity and wisdom that can be learnt from the experiences of the poor and the downtrodden. In one such story titled "A Man Begging in the Metro," his main subject is Henri Cartier-Bresson who is 86 years old but who looks much younger "as if he had a special contract with time passing" (67). The way Berger describes his eyes, corresponds to his own way of seeing: "They are totally exposed – not through innocence, but through an addiction to observation. If eyes are windows on to the soul, his have neither panes nor curtains, and he stands in the window frame and you can't see past his gaze" (67). The word addiction suggests a kind of helplessness, an irrational desire for a certain activity or thing. Cartier-Bresson's addiction to observation, as Berger perceives it, excludes thinking and probably it signifies a way of looking at things or receiving visual impressions that evades any form of invasive *a priori* notions.

Cartier-Bresson points out to Berger a particular view from a window. He says "Monet and Renoir ... painted the view from this window here. They were friends of Victor Choquet who lived in the flat below" (67). Victor Chocquet's first apartment was on Rue de Rivoli that overlooked the Tuileries Garden. Several of Monet's paintings such as *Vue sur le jardin des Tuileries* (1876) were based on the view from the windows of the same apartment. Henri Cartier-Bresson shows Berger a reproduction of Monet's Palais Royal and then asks him then to look out the window.

Cartier-Bresson, while showing the narrator the scene and its reproduction acts a guide to 'likeness'. Passage of time has done nothing to change the view. What happens in

the act of looking from the same spot at the same time, with the intervening years remaining in the consciousness of the viewer, is momentous and fills the viewer with a feeling of aura that is beyond the reach of photographic reproductions. The eyes confront reality of the present moment, with the awareness that the spatial dimensions are the same as that of the past. This is reminiscent of Benjamin's delineation of aura in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935): "What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye while resting on a summer afternoon-a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch" (14). Cartier-Bresson says, "Photography doesn't interest me anymore" ("A Man" 67). This is understandable because he is now more used to inhabiting spaces and times more tangibly than photography would allow. The only thing that interests him about photography, he says, is "the taking aim" (68) Taking aim suggests assuming a particular stance in relation to the visual world. We may see this as being analogous to Berger's own formulations regarding the approaches he takes towards the question of experience. An experience for him is never complete and therefore it is always elusive. His stance as a writer towards various experiences is modified and affected by the very variety of those experiences. Cartier-Bresson shares an anecdote about how Georges Braque once gave him a Zen Buddhist treatise on archery. "It's a state of being, a question of openness, of forgetting yourself" (68). The 'openness' refers to the creation of a space where the subject and the object can uninhibitedly interact with each other without any mediation. Photography sometimes is characterised by this 'openness' to otherwise ungraspable moments. Although it is not an art of self-effacement but the photographed/photographic moment is evanescent. It may be argued that everything

depends on where the camera is stationed and the geometric correlation between the lens and the object(s) being photographed. Once the photograph is taken, this correlation is eternalized.

Cartier-Bresson draws an analogy: “It’s like what mathematicians and physicists call elegance when they’re discussing a theory. If an approach is elegant it may be getting near to what’s true” (68). The elegance that is being talked about is a kind of intuition and applied to the field of photography, it can refer to the sense of a photographer that tells him when to click the photograph or his decision to select what he sees as the ‘right’ moment out of the innumerable moments that lay at his disposal. Of course, this applies to a certain kind of photography where objects are not planned and positioned. Every photograph therefore is preceded by a decision. He quotes from Cezanne: “When I start thinking, everything’s lost. What counts in a photo is its plenitude and its simplicity” (68). The expression ‘When I start thinking, everything’s lost’ stands out because a large part of Berger’s seeing has a very interesting and complicated relationship with thinking. Thought for Berger is something instinctive and at the same time, a disciplined habit, and in either case, it is characterised by attentiveness. In his introduction to Berger’s *Understanding a Photograph*, Geoff Dyer describes this attentiveness by quoting a line from a D. H. Lawrence poem: “Thought is a man in his wholeness, wholly attending” (4). The difference between thinking about objects and looking at them is reduced. Berger would probably subscribe to Picasso’s comment, “I paint forms as I think them, not as I see them” (Jones).

Cartier-Bresson is a character in this story who is not very different from any character in Berger’s stories about peasants. More than biographical information or his achievements as a photographer, what interests Berger is his own interactions with and

understanding of Cartier-Bresson. Like many of Berger's sketches, "A Man Begging in the Metro" gives the impression that the story is unfolding in the present and that the narrator is witnessing and experiencing it first hand. Thus, we get the description of a painting by Louis, Cartier-Bresson's favourite uncle, and the description of drawings by his father and grandfather which delineate topographical landscapes of familiar places – a kind of trajectory of lived experiences – and the impression of Cartier-Bresson's heritage of a family of observant artists. He quotes from a letter Einstein addressed to the wife of the physicist Max Born in October 1944: "I have such a feeling of solidarity with everything alive that it doesn't seem to me important to know where the individual ends or begins..." (72). This fragment of insight derived out of a quote is typical of both John Berger and Walter Benjamin. The comment by Einstein that Cartier-Bresson refers to in the story, about the solidarity of everything alive, is continuous with his own remark about Alberto Giacometti: "a man like him makes you realize it's worth being alive" (74). Both Berger's and Cartier-Bresson's works affirm and celebrate vitality.

Cartier-Bresson succinctly summarises the photographic mode of perception, and the intentionality of the photographer: "When you look through the view-finder, ...whatever you see, you see naked" (72). It would be worthwhile to understand the kind of nakedness that he talks about here. In Berger, nakedness recurs as a trope but assuming different associations in different contexts. In the story titled "A Bunch of Flowers in a Grass" Berger describes a person named Marcel, who is probably a farmer. He spent four months every year in the *alpage* with his cows and whenever friends visited him, he used to ask them about life in the village below. His interest was similar to that of someone enquiring about the latest episode in a TV serial. About his life in the mountains, Berger says:

Up there, the question of solitude doesn't arise after a while – because one's naked. Naked one becomes aware of another kind of company. I don't know why this should be so. But it's a fact. Of course Marcel wasn't physically naked. On the contrary he didn't undress even to go to bed. Nevertheless, after a week or two alone in the *alpage*, the soul goes naked, takes off its jacket – and one is no longer alone. This is what his eyes told. (92)

The two forms of nakedness – one mentioned by Cartier-Bresson and the one that characterizes Marcel's life in the mountains – correspond to each other. In saying that the viewfinder helps one to see everything naked, he is ascribing a certain kind of power to the photographer. Clothing/nakedness is of course, a metaphor. To see someone/something naked is to know them for what they actually are. The difference between nakedness and nudity that Berger talks about in *Ways of Seeing* is relevant here. Nakedness has got nothing to do with voyeurism and the pleasure that is derived from objectifying an unclothed body. Marcel's nakedness is reminiscent of the poem "A Coat" by W. B. Yeats:

I made my song a coat  
 Covered with embroideries  
 Out of old mythologies  
 From heel to throat;  
 But the fools caught it,  
 Wore it in the world's eyes  
 As though they'd wrought it.  
 Song, let them take it  
 For there's more enterprise  
 In walking naked. (Poetry Magazine)

The nakedness of Marcel can be interpreted as a basic condition of the human experience. This condition, when achieved can develop into a perception which allows us to objectively understand our experiences: it helps us experience ourselves in the act of experiencing. An elemental identification with nature is a prerequisite for the perception of this 'nakedness'.

Berger's attention is caught by the 'maternal' handwriting of Cartier-Bresson. The adjective 'maternal' can be understood to be synonymous with sheltering but it is hardly ever applied to handwriting, unless, of course poetically. Berger 'checks' the handwriting with Cartier-Bresson's photographs, especially the photographs of children. He argues that "only a mother can be that unsentimental and love without illusion..." (73). He also points out that there is something in common between the decisive, instinctive moment of the photographer clicking a photograph and a mother's instinct for her offspring which is "visceral and immediate" (73). Then he wonders "whether this is instinct or message?" (73) Here, it must be asked, what is a message? And where does it come from?

The interface between the saying and the said, between the infinite and totality – to use Levinasian terms again – is mysterious because it is beyond representation. Perhaps the message that Cartier-Bresson talks about has its source in this interface. The presence of a message implies the presence of a sender and a receiver. However, the way Berger understands it, the occurrence of a message is sporadic in that it does not ensure that it WILL BE received and that the act of sending it is often not deliberate and intentional. Furthermore, it lacks the linearity of transmission that characterizes most messages while they are being sent or received. A structure of haunting governs the sending and the receiving of messages.

While returning from Cartier-Bresson's apartment, Berger comes across a man begging in the metro – a man in his early forties leading his handicapped wife by the hand. Berger hears him say: “You don't know...what it's like loving a handicapped woman – I love her most of the time, I love her at least as much as you love your wives and husbands” (75). At that very moment, Berger instantaneously glances towards the door expecting Cartier-Bresson to be there. The impulse to photograph the beggar along with his wife makes him think of Cartier-Bresson. However, it is also the ‘message’ that this moment gives rise to that needs, for Berger, to be eternalized. For him it is a photographic moment and in a curious way it included the comment made by the man about loving his wife. By implication, therefore, a photographic moment is not entirely visual. What is common between photography and drawing is the activity of looking constantly. Cartier-Bresson described it as “a spontaneous impulse which comes from *perpetually* looking, and which seizes the instant and its eternity” (75).

Berger constantly makes references to actual people in his fictional and non-fictional works. Often, they appear due to his sudden involuntary act of remembering. It is of great importance that this act almost always takes place in the present moment, that is to say, he is frequently reminded of certain aspects of an actual person while experiencing the present moment. While writing a narrative account of his act of remembering or experiencing, he often interpolates it with references that take the reader into the past. The references to Giacometti are subjective. They are meant to reiterate Cartier-Bresson's comment about Einstein's letter. When Cartier-Bresson says about Giacometti, “Despite all the hell of this life, a man like him makes you realize it's worth being alive” (74), it is an echo of the solidarity with everything living that Einstein had felt and had written about. We sense that it is the same kind of solidarity that works as an impetus behind Berger's writing.

### **2.3 Storytelling and Narrative Empathy: The Pain of Others in “Photographs of Agony” and “A Tragedy the Size of the Planet”**

Developments in the field of cognitive science in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has made it possible to examine whether human variances in mirror neuron activity can be changed by exposure to art and aesthetics, and to literature, and has helped to study empathy at the level of the cellular activity. It has also helped in speculating about the more constructive and beneficial aspects of human empathy. The words that are near-synonyms of empathy are sympathy, pity, kindness, compassion, and benevolence but there has been a considerable amount of extant literature on empathy considering its conceptual and functional distinction from the above-mentioned words which have not really received the same theoretical and critical attention that empathy has. Characteristics of empathy can be found in theories of the sublime.

The literary trajectory of empathy overarches not only the unprompted sharing of emotional states in every period of history, but also doubts about its effectiveness and its involvement in the ethical domain. The wider implications of the activities of viewing or reading works that involve the emotions have also been questioned in every literary era. The status of literature as a medium of communication of experience and shared emotional responses depends, to a considerable extent, on the attitudes and positions assumed by the readers about social class, gender, age and generic preferences.

It is important to separate empathy from a wide range of other emotions that may have much in common with empathy but is essentially distinct from it. In certain situations, we may find ourselves feeling emotions for others in pain, that may not be connected to empathy at all. It is a matter of speculation whether this happens especially when

one is confronted with the suffering of someone belonging to a different community or tribe. In the essay, “The Affective Fallacy,” (1954) W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley refuted the reduction of handling of readers’ emotional reactions to nothing more than psychologizing. In the area of narrative studies, the works of Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux have fostered an interest in understanding the position of affect with regard to cognition as well as the role of emotions in critical discourses. It has been suggested that readers are better empathizers because of their ability to assume different roles which permit them to understand causal connections in a narrative more effortlessly.

Narrative empathy involves sharing of feelings, emotions and role-taking inspired by the activities of reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining accounts of others’ experiences. Narrative empathy often shapes the aesthetics of production as well as of reception. Narrative empathy takes into consideration narratological types, narrative contexts, actants, spatiality and temporality, and settings. The complexity and diversity of narratological concepts prevent an easy equation between empathy and character identification. Of course, identifying with a fictional character may induce spontaneous, narrative empathy but empathy can also be seen to precede character identification, as argued by Suzanne Keen in her book, *Empathy and the Novel* (2007).

Research on empathy has prioritized fictional narratives over nonfictional ones. This is not to say that nonfiction does not encompass narrative empathy. Commentaries, theories and analyses have focused primarily on the novel, cinema and, to a limited extent, drama. Brecht’s disparagement of the elicitation of audience’s empathy preferring alienation effects was to the point of offsetting the theorizing of reception in performance studies.

Narrative empathy differentiates itself, firstly, from two connected but separate phenomena: sympathy and personal suffering. Sympathy denotes an emotion experienced for a being that is related to, but is not totally identifiable with the being's feelings. Simply put, sympathy is feeling FOR the other and not feeling WITH the other. The readers' narrative empathy makes them feel the emotions and sensations represented in the text through a kind of attention whose direction is outward. There is no warrant that sympathy always captures the experience of narrative empathy. Personal distress caused by hostile conflicting empathetic sharing can cause an evasive reaction (a kind of attention whose direction is inward). Overidentification can result in extreme personal anguish and can even cause the reader to terminate the narrative operation itself. Berger never wrote explicitly about narrative empathy but the stances he assumed with regard to visual arts, photography and writing evince a strong, yet unstated, preoccupation with the pain of others. With regard to photography, two examples can be taken out of innumerable pieces dealing with the theme, to illustrate his abiding engagement with empathy and the ways in which it can be narrativized: "Photographs of Agony" (1972) and "A Tragedy the Size of the Planet: Conversation with Sebastião Salgado" (2001).

"Photographs of Agony" is an essay about Berger's experience of reading in the newspaper about extreme agony suffered by Vietnamese people during raids and bombing carried out by the American air force. Berger describes the various kinds of bombs dropped by the air force and the sophistication with which they operate and the devastations they are capable of unleashing. One of these kinds of bombs is capable of inflicting harrowing physical pain – a kind which "is full of plastic barbs which, having ripped through the flesh and embedded themselves in the body, cannot be located by X-ray" (41-44). The mode of suffering inflicted by this particular bomb involves

visceral intervention leading to slow and painful death. There is also a deferral in the process of affliction: from the moment the bomb is detonated to the moment it brings about the afflicted person's death. It may be said, this deferral is echoed in the lapse of time between the act of taking a photograph (of agony) and the act of viewing it in the newspaper or any other media. Berger says, however, that "there are no pictures from Vietnam in the papers today. But there is a photograph taken by Donald McCullin in Hue in 1968 which could have been printed with the reports this morning. It shows an old man squatting with a child in his arms; both of them are bleeding profusely with the black blood of black-and-white photographs" (41). The text of Berger's essays is not accompanied by the picture and therefore the reader is left to imagine the scene all by himself. There are two forms of spectrality in work here: firstly, by choosing not to include the photograph, Berger creates a space for the reader/viewer to imagine such a scene by making him scamper mentally through similar images that they must have come across earlier thereby creating a structure of visualizing the unseen; and perhaps more importantly, the image that is imagined does not belong to the Vietnam War in the first place.

Berger observes that in recent times, it has become usual for certain popular newspapers to publish war photographs which would have been earlier considered to be shocking or sensational, and speculates that there must be a demand on the part of the viewers to be "shown" the truth about the horrors of the war. This implies a direct correlation between the visual and the factual: to see is to believe. Berger's reflections on the growing proliferation of images of depravation and cruelty and violence address the general conditions governing the reception and assimilation of such images – images that depict experiences that we cannot immediately relate to, experiences that are not ours – and points to a basic contradiction inherent in such kind of viewing or receiving.

This contrast is between the condition surrounding the experience depicted in the photograph and the condition surrounding the viewer when he is seeing the photograph. The deferral between the creation of the image and its reception by the viewer constitutes the awareness that the experience being depicted is a thing of the past, even though it may be very recent. What is the reason behind the growth of such images in the media? Berger continues to speculate in his essay: "Alternatively, one might argue that these newspapers believe that their readers have become inured to violent images and so now compete in terms of ever more violent sensationalism" (42). This raises a question: does constant exposure to violence, albeit through images, reduce one's capacity to feel others' pain? Such images may fill us with despair but at the same time urge us to take an action, and if we are unable to do so, it may lead to frustration and helplessness. Berger notes: "We try to emerge from the moment of the photograph back into our lives" (42). The contrast between the moment of the photograph and 'our lives' is immense. The photographic moment differs in case of each photographer. In McCullin's case, according to Berger, it is one that records unexpected moments of extreme suffering, of people being wounded, people crying out in pain, of death. For Berger, McCullin's photographs disrupts the uniform flow of time to bring out these moments that seem grossly out of joint, atemporal and in some sense, ahistorical.

The viewer is aware of the fact that such moments are probable and are probably taking place elsewhere in the world and it is this awareness and even the anticipation of such moments in the media that separates them from other experiences of time. The act of taking the photograph, that is, the act of separating the photographed moment from the continuity of time, implies a violence.<sup>24</sup> The awareness of the double violence of the

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<sup>24</sup> Berger talks about the word trigger which is appropriately applied to both rifle and camera and whose significance goes beyond the mechanical.

photograph – one, involving the violence with which it separates the moment from other moments, and two, the violence of the experience captured – are accompanied by a basic inadequacy: “Those who are there in the situation being photographed, those who hold the hand of the dying or staunch a wound, are not seeing the moment as we have and their responses are of an altogether different order. It is not possible for anyone to look pensively at such a moment and to emerge stronger” (43). The photographer’s response to such situations and their own photographic documentation of such situations may vary. For McCullin, the contemplation of these moments is both dangerous, dynamic and functional. The purpose behind war photographs is to raise awareness about the brutality that is happening elsewhere and to coax the viewer to do something about the situation; ideologies and activism, political or otherwise, are therefore not separable from a photographer’s work in the area of war documentation. Either the viewer does something about the situation or not, the discontinuity manifested in the photograph makes him realize his own moral inadequacy. Berger says, “In both cases, the issue of the war which has caused that moment is effectively depoliticised. The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition. It accuses nobody and everybody” (44). There may be a possibility of a political awareness generated by the photograph. It may urge the viewer to confront reality:

Usually the wars which we are shown are being fought directly or indirectly in ‘our’ name. What we are shown horrifies us. The next step should be for us to confront our own lack of political freedom. In the political systems as they exist, we have no legal opportunity of effectively influencing the conduct of wars waged in our name. To realise this and to act accordingly is the only effective way of responding to what the photograph shows. (44)

But this possibility is beset by the “double violence of the photographed moment” and this is why these photographs “can be published with impunity” (44). Berger touches upon a very significant area of photojournalism and photography in general: the ethical considerations of photographing the afflicted, the diseased and the dying. By way of example, let us consider the case of Kevin Carter.

In 1993 the South African photojournalist, Kevin Carter went to Sudan to document the effects and extent of the famine that was ravaging the country. After a tiring day of taking photographs in the village of Ayod, as he was starting out for a nearby bush, he heard the sound of whimpering and as he drew near, he came across an extremely emaciated child who had collapsed on the ground from hunger on the way to a United Nations feeding centre half a mile away. As Carter started to prepare to take the child’s photo, a vulture alighted nearby. Before he had set off to take photographs, Carter had purportedly been advised not to go too close or touch the victims because of the contagious diseases they might be carrying, and consequently he could not carry the child to a safe place. He tried to shoo the bird away but to no avail. He stood there for about 20 minutes in the hope that the bird would take to its wings, but it did not. He stood there and watched as the child tried to crawl her way toward the centre. He took a photo of the child. It was published by The New York Times. Many readers expressed their concern for the child, eager to find out what happened to her and criticized Carter for his passivity. A debate grew around this photograph about the role of the photographer in such dire situations: whether he should just take photographs or intervene, and if he should intervene, when should he do so? The presence of the photographer in a situation of crisis is therefore critical: it makes him reconsider his ethical positions, and therefore forces him to take a decision. Nevertheless, remaining passive is also a decision and involves assuming a critical stance. The words crisis and

critical are etymologically connected. Until the 1620s, the word 'crisis' had exclusively medical connotations. It implies, "'decisive point in the progress of a disease," also "vitaly important or decisive state of things, point at which change must come, for better or worse" (Etymonline). Thus, it involves the recognition of a moment with the prospect of an impending change.

This theme is powerfully dealt with in Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). It is a theme that Sontag returned to throughout her writing career. In this book, she revisits and revises some of her earlier observations, even challenging them. These observations were about essential claims about the worth, potential and importance of the photograph in modern life. *Regarding the Pain of Others* sees Sontag approaching photography from a primarily ethical perspective, taking into account images of war and anguish, and contemplating on empathetic potential of human beings. In an oft-quoted passage from the book, she says that "there are many uses of the innumerable opportunities a modern life supplies for regarding—at a distance, through the medium of photography—other people's pain. Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge" (13). However, as she points out, the power of the photograph can hardly be underestimated. She claims that it is possible for us, through the medium of photography, to see the pain of others. The act of seeing may be thought of as witnessing, either voluntarily or forcibly. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, photographs have come to be seen increasingly as a construct that may be unreliable and its erstwhile status as an epistemologically irrefutable entity has fallen into disrepute. The possibility that a photograph might be doctored had always existed but the suspicion regarding the ability of a photograph as an epistemic validation of an event is relatively new. As a medium of representation, it is no longer beyond doubts and suspicion, just like any other existing representational media. It needs to be

admitted that Sontag's conviction that something becomes real by being photographed probably does not hold good any longer in the age of post-truth. But at the same time, it must be acknowledged that it is still among the most appealing and immediate forms of representation that exist, and thus its automatic alliance with news.

Sontag reminds us that experiences are basically mediated through images, that is, experiences that are happening elsewhere – experiences at a distance – suggesting a detachment and offering a freedom to the consumer of the images to choose whether or not to engage with the experience in any meaningful, consequential way. The onus is on the consumer, the viewer of such images to respond to the experience being represented in a photograph in their own way. This is not true only of the photographic image but also of live coverages happening in real time. John Durham Peter points out: “most observers do not know they are witnesses when the event is happening: they are elected after the fact. A vast quantitative difference separates what we experience and what we are summoned to witness” (*Media Witnessing* 40). Photographers are distinguished from the ordinary, unaware observers in that they are often consciously called upon to take photograph the experience of anguish. In choosing to go to a war zone, for instance, a photographer is making a conscious decision to be available to ‘witness experiences’ and not essentially ‘experience’ them himself. His act of witnessing is a conscious one and there is no retrospective configuring of the observer-witness involved.

Carter's predicament resulted from the fact that in his case, he was placed in a situation where he was ‘summoned’ in two ways at the same time: as a photojournalist and as a being with ethical responsibility toward another. The tragedy of the moment resulted from the un-resolvability of the conflict. And it is the constant exposure to this un-

resolvability that probably drove Carter to take his own life. Carter won a Pulitzer for his photograph, but he never got over the trauma resulting from witnessing human suffering in its most unbearable and extreme form. In July 1994, he committed suicide. The note he had left behind read: “I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings & corpses & anger & pain.” We can think of Simone Weil here although the milieus are completely different. In both cases, the empathy with the suffering of others outweighed their conviction that they could actually contribute towards the betterment of the situations. The viewer is forced into a situation where he HAS to act. He has to keep making decisions continuously about what he does and what he chooses not to do, and the context in which he makes his choices is by and large governed by modern representational and communicative technologies – technologies that might be fraught with ambiguities at times.

Even when we are watching or witnessing an event at a distance, either spatial or temporal or both. With or without knowing it, we are implicated morally and this happens through the transformation, as it were, of the lens of the camera into the human eye watching the events at a remove, in relative comfort. The media academic John Ellis has described the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the century of witness.<sup>25</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought about great and essentially irreversible transformations in the way we see and perceive things, especially things that are not immediately part of our own experiences. The 21<sup>st</sup> century, so far, has in fact amplified this kind of seeing to such an extent that now most of the images that we come across are not at all part of our immediate experience or reality, thereby creating a visual simulation that aims to substitute the act of ‘being there’ or being available physically to experience something. This has led to the

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<sup>25</sup> See Ellis, John. “Interview with Professor John Ellis.” *Global Media and China*, vol. 2, no. 2, June 2017, pp. 113–121, doi:10.1177/2059436417725206.

necessity of rethinking the very character of human empathy and how it works in the virtual media. The endless proliferation of images, and overexposure to images of others suffering, have caused, it can be argued, a kind of desensitization towards the pain of others.

An underlying theme that runs through all of these issues is attention. The word has valency in a wide range of disciplines, but its essential meaning remains the same: to attend to something consciously, to be available to a particular moment and establish a connection between the self and the object of contemplation. It may sound like an inordinately overarching claim but Berger's entire oeuvre can be seen as a study of attention and its various manifestations. There is warrant for it in his preoccupation with the factors – material and ideological – guiding the viewer's attention to and reception of art in *Ways of Seeing*; in his embracing of an older form of storytelling directed at holding the attention and apperception of the audience; in his experimental, postmodernist narrative inventions in *G.* where the narrative voice creates a mesh of interlinked images which call for the reader's attention to re-engage with itself anew; in the summoning of a consumerist audience to attend more closely and of course, more politically, to the experiences of the farmers in his *Into their Labours* trilogy. Finally, in Berger's later writings which totally defy any literary categorization, and which reveal a persistent yet unspoken emphasis on the necessity of attending to things as they are and things as they manifest themselves. He wonders whether the visible world is structured like a language and prescribes an undividedness of attention in the way one should make sense of what one is confronted with. According to Sontag, "There are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing" (*On Photography* 3). Berger's career represents a trajectory involving both grammar and ethics of seeing but also a desire to dismantle them in the process. His writings have dealt powerfully with

political, ideological and other determining factors that affect our reception and understanding of human experience and phenomena, but there has always been an undercurrent of capricious pondering: can there be pure seeing devoid of any influence? This is exemplified in the section from *Ways of Seeing* where he asks children to respond to Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (1601) in order to bring out not only uncluttered meanings that the image may contain but also the ambiguities that it is fraught with – the sexuality of the central figure, that is Christ, in the painting being the primary one.

Berger engaged in a conversation with Sebastião Salgado in 2001 about the role of photography in conditions of depravity and desperation with regard to the publication of the latter's book, *Migrations*. About Salgado he says: "He was trained as an economist, and one day he asked himself whether pictures might not reveal as much or more than statistics" ("A Tragedy" (48). Berger had always held great faith in the ability of photography to articulate things that may go otherwise unsaid. Statistical data do not constitute transmissible experience. If we think of statistics as a kind of language, it hardly ever produces ambiguities wilfully. Photographs derive their strength from ambiguities about the exact nature of the situations or people photographed – something is always left to the imagination and conscience of the viewer. This is why photographs are more engaging than mere facts and figures. The ways in which statistical data and photography are interpreted differ vastly. Salgado's photographs, as Berger interprets them, give precedence to their documentary nature over their aesthetic considerations. What are the aesthetic options available to a photographer working in a situation of great human suffering and oppression, we may ask. One may argue that the aesthetics of photographs of agony is decided by the degree to which it is able to convey the experience that the photographer decided to capture. A writer, working in a medium

that is greatly different from that of the photographer, may approach the question of aesthetics differently. Thus, Berger's clarification of his own position as a writer: "I try to put into words what I see" (48).

The book, *Migrations*, a result of Salgado's extensive traveling for six years, and visits to forty-three countries, and the migrations he came across as a ubiquitous state of affairs everywhere he went – a phenomenon he connects with globalization. In fact, he sees and wants the readers of his books to see, the faces depicted in the book as faces of globalization, faces of globalized people. In the conversation, Berger emphasizes on the commercial aspect of globalization that has steadily risen since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the geopolitical adjustments that it entails. Globalization means many things. He talks about a rather late development: the increasing exchange of ideas and information (along with goods) across the globe. To him it is "a view of the world, it is an opinion about man and why men are in the world" (52) whose very premise is fraught with inequality: "One in five of all the people on the globe benefit from this system. Four in five suffer in different degrees from the new unnecessary poverty" (52). The radicalism of the modern economic system tries to proclaim that no alternative exists and thereby tries to consolidate itself as the only available option. This has resulted in rapid disintegration of countries in Africa and rampant exploitation of the indigenous population and their production, and an increase in the number of refugees. Commodities produced by African people exploited for cheap labour have their prices affixed in the western world by trading companies who are indifferent to the basic needs of the poor and are driven by an exclusivist urge to profit, causing impoverishment and inequity.

It is significant to note that Salgado knew these people in a personal capacity; this personal contact renders his photographs more intimate and urgent; because the anonymous divide that often separates the photographer and the photographed, is erased. Salgado's empathetic approach towards photo-documentation has a visible affinity with Berger's method of "going closer". It allows both of them to study a people, a place, situations over a large tract of time:

I came to Rwanda the first time, 1971, as an economist. I came to work in the tea plantations, and the tea plantations had a very equilibrated way of life. Rwanda was not an underdeveloped country, was not a poor country, was a developing country. When I came back to this tea plantation recently, all was burnt, all was destroyed. All the effort that all these people made was lost. These people were in the road, in the death. (53)

Salgado, being a photographer, has to face a challenge: if he gets so attached to a particular community or group of people, how can he document their pain objectively? And more importantly, how can he move on to other communities or groups? He is able to do both – that is, factual and detached documentation of poverty or oppression, and moving from project to project, situation to situation – because of a quality of affirmation in his photographic approach that Berger identifies as follows:

In a strange way, in all these pictures, one feels in your vision the word 'Yes', not that you approve of what you see, but that you say 'Yes' because it exists. Of course you hope that this 'Yes' will provoke in people who look at the pictures a 'No', but this 'No' can only come after one has said, 'I have to live with this.' And to live with this world is first of all to take it in. The opposite of living with this world is indifference, is a turning away. (54)

Berger refers to the total confrontation of the reality of a situation as it is, the acknowledgement of cruelties being inflicted and the causes that lie at their base – a sense of urgency that we find in his writing as well.

Both Salgado and Berger refuse to be anything but specific while talking about pain of others. Salgado's photographs in the book are propelled by the difference he saw in the living conditions of the Rwandans when he visited them after decades: stability of the Rwandans in the early 70s were replaced by migratory transition in the aftermath of the civil war and genocide in the 90s. Photographs are taken in order to elicit a response from the viewer, and as a photographer, Salgado expects that response to be pro-active: "If the person looking at these pictures only feels compassion, I will believe that I have failed completely. I want people to understand that we can have a solution" (53). Salgado's photographs are images of migrants who do not understand why they are on the move: "They are not the reason for their being there; it is other things" (53). This lack of comprehension should be, according to Salgado, fulfilled by the viewer who should question the "other things" and try to find a solution to the problem.

Salgado's book constitutes photographs from migrants from different countries. In his understanding, everything that occurring on earth is connected. Most of the hardships and crises faced by people he has photographed result from the widening gap between rich and poor. This is coupled with the easy obtainability of information, and Third World population growth, the mechanization of agriculture in the name of modernization, by widespread urbanization, systematic devastation of the environment, bigotry in domains of nationalism, ethnicity and religion. The fact of migration is a major consequence of the socio-economic and environmental spasm that the world is undergoing.

It takes hardly a second to see a photograph but that second signifies a moment when the convulsions the world is facing today can be conveyed to the viewer. The function of the photographer is to render that moment as clearly as possible for the viewer to understand the experience behind the photograph. His function is primarily to recognize a human in the most dehumanizing of situations where only another member of his community – if it has still survived as he has – can recognize him. Berger invokes Simone Weil in order to understand the nature of this recognition and summarises her thus: ““There are only two services which images can offer the afflicted. One is to find the story which expresses the truth of their affliction. The second is to find the words which can give resonance, through the crust of external circumstances, to the cry which is always inaudible: “Why am I being hurt?””” (*An Anthology* 67)

In some cases, the moment of the photograph is also a moment of meeting of glances. The interface of the photograph becomes a meeting place for the photographed subject looking at the camera and the spectator looking at the photograph. Many of Salgado’s subjects do not comprehend the larger reasons behind their suffering, and yet, perhaps in the awareness that they are being photographed, there is an appeal to be heard, an appeal for explanation of the crises they are in. Salgado realises this: “They were frightened, uncomfortable and humiliated. Yet they allowed themselves to be photographed, I believe, because they wanted their plight to be made known. When I could, I explained to them that this was my purpose. Many just stood before my camera and addressed it as they might a microphone” (“A Tragedy” 54). We are reminded of Levinasian ethics: “the Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me” (*Totality and Infinity* 207) and “. . . the face presents itself, and demands justice” (204). The presence of the camera entails a double obligation – one as a human being and the other, as a photographer.

One significant example in Berger where a person obliges the Other exclusively through professional practice and sheer expertise is *A Fortunate Man* (1967). In this account of Dr Sassall, medical practice works curiously as way of reaching out to the afflicted and insulating the subjectivity of the doctor (and rendering him mysterious at the same time).

#### **2.4 Medical Knowledge and Experience in *A Seventh Man*: The Doctor as a Clerk of Records**

Berger moved to Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire in 1955 after his marriage to Rosemary Sibell Guest. It was during this period that he was introduced to the local doctor, Dr John Eskell, who later inspired him to write *A Fortunate Man*. Berger and Eskell became friends, and would often play bridge with another writer and friend of Eskell, Victor Anant. It was Anant who suggested that Berger write a book on Eskell. Berger's marriage to Sibell Guest eventually fell apart and he started a relationship with the writer and critic Anya Bostock. After travelling together for some time, Berger and Bostock moved to Geneva in 1962. Probably they visited Eskell from time to time. Eskell and his wife moved in a wide social circle that had many of the Eskells' and Berger's mutual acquaintances.

In *A Fortunate Man*, the fictionalized 'Dr Sassall' substitutes Dr Eskell. Dr Sassall provides an interesting point of departure for Berger because of primarily ethical reasons. *A Fortunate Man* is a portrait of a general physician working in the Forest of Dean. It focuses on his role as a doctor and his relationship with his patients. Its subject is empathy and it raises an important question: to what extent can a doctor be empathetic toward his patients and still not be moved enough to treat them well? The written texts and the photographs (taken by Jean Mohr) in *A Fortunate Man* perform different

functions in the book. The texts deal with mostly ethical considerations and they are interspersed with philosophical observations. The photographs present the here-and-now. The textual and the photographic elements in the book complement each other and collaborate to create a third dimension of narrative activity. This collaboration between words and pictures is structured like a conversation; "building on, rather than mirroring, one another" (Francis).

In the book Sassall is recognised as an "outstanding physician as well as the enthusiast of an unfashionable ideal – the Renaissance dream of aspiring to universal knowledge and experience" (1). Incidentally, for Sassall the fulfilment of this aspiration can take place only in a small village with a limited number of patients, to most of whom he is personally known. Indeed, to know everyone and to be known by everyone on a personal level, to become a part of their lives, to be relied upon are part of his aspirations. To this extent, he wants to occupy a rather 'totalized' existence in the Forest of Dean, not only as a GP but also, and more importantly, as an important member of the fraternity.

The ethical considerations of *A Fortunate Man* include the recognition of the privileges of the protagonist as a doctor. Apart from his obvious privileges as a medically trained man who has received knowledge to cure people through his training, he is also privileged to exercise where and how practices as a doctor. Privilege implies a superiority over others which can be social, economic, or anything resulting from access to knowledge in one form or another. In so far as privilege is related to power it is oriented towards action – it manifests itself in an ability to do something. Therefore, it also suggests an ethical response to the lack of privilege. What is foremost in establishing an ethical relationship with the other is the recognition of the ingenuity

amongst people in a given society. It falls upon the self to recognize and acknowledge such privilege that is endowed with, which is followed by a call to act.

Generally speaking, a doctor's power and privilege derive from his medical knowledge and his ability to cure ailments through diagnostic and prescription of the necessary medicines. He possesses the pathological knowledge required to understand the human body in a certain way which his patients cannot. A doctor, when visiting a patient, is able to diagnose and to tell the patient physical/physiological details about the patient's body that the patient is unable to know by himself, thereby placing himself in a superior position with regard to knowledge and establishing an intimate relation with the patient's body which the patient is unable to fully fathom. It is obligatory in the medical profession to observe symptoms, pathological and physical aberrations and arrive at conclusions about the nature of a patient's afflictions, and administer medicines and prescribe medical tests. To put it straightforwardly, the doctor is more concerned with discerning the physical bases of pain, that he tries to quantify as far as possible, rather than the pain itself. He is not obliged to feel or empathize with others' pain. In fact, his medical knowledge and training is supposed to approach the pain felt by his patients with detachment. This objectivity is laudatory because pain is seen as a mere result of a set of homeostatic imbalances that can be alleviated through a variety of treatments. Generally speaking, doctors are predisposed to promoting the notion that pain is an unwanted external factor that distresses the body and can be only got rid of through expert assistance. This approach to pain, disease and medicine tends to see the human pathology with atomistic specializations. Privilege for a doctor suggests an ability to take decisions on the patient's behalf to restore, in ways that he sees fit, the body to its former balance.

In *A Fortunate Man*, Dr Sassall offers Berger a unique example of a doctor whose practice of medicine includes the prioritizing and recognition of the physical, emotional and even the socio-economic coordinates of his patient's being. This approach of trying to understand people in their totality and this resolute, unvarying availability of the doctor for his patients set him apart and place him in the league of physicians in older societies where their position was not different from that of magicians. The availability of Dr Sassall to his patients is not restricted to professional ethics or obligations. Neither is it a mere charitable, altruistic endeavour. Dr Sassall's availability primarily suggests an openness and self-effacing willingness to be there to experience events, pathological or otherwise, first-hand, to know the limits and possibilities of his chosen profession with regard to human pain and suffering. The decision to be available for his patients all the time suggests that Dr Sassall is left with little or no time for himself. However, a deeper understanding of how he related his self to his profession reveals that in his eyes, there is no contradiction between the personal and public selves. Propelled by a desire to experience the lives of others, he thinks it necessary to 'know' a persona as a person before he or she can be diagnosed. Thus, a priority is given to the totality of a person's being over formulaic diagnosis of ailments. Dr Sassall's somewhat over-ambitious confrontation with a person's 'totality' is dubious from the start because of the lack of the means required to undertake project such as this; and more importantly, such confrontations are beyond the scope of his profession. This is the reason why he trusts the limits of his profession and questions the very role of a physician in a community that relies on him and eventually assumes the role of a *porteur* in the sense that he becomes a confidant for the people of the community in diverse ways. Each new experience calls for a different stance and assumption of a position that would be most suitable for its reception and recording. The desire to expand his knowledge through

acquisition of experience is continuous with the gradual immersion of the self into the lives of others. This immersion should be thought of in terms of time, that is, Sassall's rigorous practice as a doctor and being available for his patients imply that he is left with little or no time for himself or his wife; and that his consciousness is perpetually occupied with medical practice and resultant experiences. There are two broad impressions that one gets while reading the book: one, Dr Sassall is the only physician working in the Forest of Dean; two he knows each of his patients individually.

As a boy, we are told, Sassall was influenced by the books of Joseph Conrad, finding in them a lure of the 'unimaginable'. Conrad's fictions were populated with heroes who were taciturn, in control of themselves and yet outwardly inconspicuous. Berger's emphasis on the Conradian imagination is relevant to his description of Sassall's desire for experiences: "The quality which Conrad constantly warns against is at the same time the very quality to which he appeals: the quality of imagination" (52). The "instrument" or the field where this imagination operates for Conrad is the sea which harbours an internal, inherent, insurmountable contradiction: "it is to the imagination that the sea appeals: but to face the sea, in its unimaginable fury, to meet its own challenge, imagination must be abandoned, for it leads to self-isolation and fear" (52). For Sassall, the village where he works as a physician offers an alternative to the Conradian sea. Although it cannot be grasped in its totality, Sassall's medical imagination relentlessly pursues the unattainable idea of knowing its members in the totality of their being. For him, the idea of service is the practical, practicable name that can be given to the unavoidable obligation to be there for the other. The community of villagers is not the Other because to think of it as the Other would imply stripping it of its heterogeneity and autonomy. The Other, for Sassall, is anyone who calls on him and asks for help. Sassall answers this 'call' by recognizing the Other with all his or her

'Otherness' and infinity. Therefore, he asks the person he has set out to cure questions that go beyond the purview of his medical practice and tries to know him/her as a person instead of reducing him to the status of a patient. However, the imagination that propels him to know, understand and connect his patient's experiences, feelings, and even economic conditions to their physical/ psychological conditions, incites his Faustian desire to understand and synthesize experiences in their entirety. As Berger understands it, Sassall's conceptualization of service contains a double-bind: on the one hand, it represents the traditional ideas upheld by the privileged section of society that has confronted the challenges of professionalisms as the basis of an efficient practice of their craft; on the other hand, his service also represents the responsibility (and response-ability) that some are entrusted with, towards other people. In Sassall, responsibility takes a precedence over efficiency, though this is not to say that he is lacking in skill: in fact, according to Berger, he is a good doctor. He attends refresher courses at hospitals from time to time in order to upgrade his knowledge and keep himself updated about recent developments in his field; he also reads several medical journals regularly to the same effect; he expresses disgruntlement at not having certain equipment at his surgery which he feels are vital to his practice. He is driven by an insatiable appetite for knowledge. Whether this knowledge is medical or the knowledge of individual people from the community he lives in, is a question that is worth taking up. Sassall gains individual knowledge through his interactions with the people over the years. His penchant for knowledge leads him to insights that lie beyond the scope of his profession.

For instance, while treating one of his patients, a young girl, he has the impression that she wants to talk about something, for she never looks at him directly and keeps casting anxious glances at him, when he questions her, he is unable to gain her confidence. Few

months later, Sassall comes to know that she has been suffering from insomnia and asthma, which eventually worsened. Sassall is convinced that she is suffering from extreme emotional stress despite the girl's and her mother's (who had also been Sassall's patient) insistence that she has no worries. Sassall discovers the explanation of the girl's ailment accidentally two years later while he is out on a maternity case. There are three women neighbours in attendance and while having a cup of tea with them in the kitchen, he strikes up a conversation with one of them who works in a mechanized dairy in the nearest railway town, where the girl with asthma used to work. He comes to know from her that the manager of the dairy had an affair with the girl with asthma. The manager had initially promised to marry her but later, overcome by guilt and religious doubts, had abandoned her when Sassall meets the girl and her mother next, he asks the girl directly about the incident, but she does not answer him. Instead, she freezes "like an animal who realizes that it is impossible to bold" (23). Her asthma continues to worsen after this and eventually causes her lungs to deteriorate. It is the opportunity to know this girl as a person and the knowledge of the reasons behind her physical affliction that provide Sassall with an insight into the life as lived in the community and as a result his role as a "clerk of the forester's records" is consolidated gaining a precedence as it does over his role as a doctor. The paraphernalia of information related or unrelated to a person's medical history can constitute a 'story' about her. Sassall's openness to these 'stories' is constitutive of his recognition of the otherness of the Other, and at the same time, a perpetual re-thinking of the role of a physician working in a given community.

As it has been already pointed out, Berger's stories often begin with descriptions of spaces. In one of the sketches in *A Fortunate Man*, Berger evokes the image of an autumnal morning. The evocation, brief yet, vivid, serves the purpose of inexorably

positioning the reader in the place from where it is being described. The coldness of the air and the floorboards, the sharp tang of a hot cup of tea, the sound of crunching gravels outside the house, the smell of toast, the small grains of toast on the block of butter, the “soft and very precise” (24) sunlight outside, constitute a description which points at how the narrator’s empathetic stance works. These descriptions surround the narrative about the woman who is the protagonist of the sketch. Her pain is evident from her ashen-coloured face, her sunken cheeks and her eyes that are shut tight in pain. Her pain is alleviated when Sassall injects morphine into her upper arm. Sassall performs his duties as a physician and his performance is methodical, carried out on the stage that is already set. His movements are composed unhurried and meticulous. They are almost theatrically designed and rehearsed to ensure comfort to the patient. After administering morphine, he cleans away the little droplet of blood from her arm. The colour of the woman’s arm is compared to the “colour of stone or bread, as though it had acquired the colour through its scrubbing and baking” (26). The metaphor is unmistakably ironic because of its reference to bread: in the context of a sickness. As Sassall prepares a syringe for another injection, the eurhythmic arrangement of the whole performance is prominent. Berger describes Sassall’s act of giving another injection to the patient as follows: “After half the injection he paused, holding the syringe in the loose fold of skin as if it were the skin’s feather, and with his other half he felt her neck to check the strength of her pulse in the artery and the degree of congestion in the jugular vein, he then completed the injection” (26).

There are two kinds of interventions in this scene: one, intravenous and the other, tactile. Both are guided by the decision on the doctor’s part to comfort and console the sick through his presence and his actions. He tries his best to assure the sick that he is with him/her in the latter’s suffering and that the pain the sick person is undergoing is

not unique and entirely recognizable. Elsewhere in the book, Berger gives and exposition of this unwavering presence that Sassall's medical practice and its ethics involve:

Once he was putting a syringe deep into a man's chest: there was little question of pain but it made the man feel bad: the man tried to explain his revulsion: 'that's where I live, where you're putting that needle in.' 'I know,' Sassall said, 'I know what it feels like. I can't bear anything done near my eyes, I can't bear to be touched there. I think that's where I live, just under and behind my eyes.' (50)

As a physician, Sassall considers it his responsibility to make his patients comfortable during tests and treatments. However, empathy precedes this responsibility and the identification that happens between him and his patients is not essentially professional in its impulse. Furthermore, there is a subtle theatricality involved in the way he places himself in the patient's position and by reminding him that the doctor is also, after all, human and is vulnerable to pain. This act of empathetic approach is based on an unyielding sense of responsibility toward the other.

Sassall's service in the Navy as a surgeon was the happiest experience of his life because he "was dealing with very real distress and on the whole making a success of it" (54). It might apparently seem very selfish and even callous to glorify the act of 'making success' out of others' distress and by and large, contradict the empathetic principles lying at the basis of Sassall's professional work. This goes on to show the very nature of empathy in general and the complexities inherent in it: if the empathetic principles are grounded in the idea of altruistic selfless service, is it also possible that in serving the other, the self is serving itself? For a person like Sassall whose entire life revolves around medical practice, the idea of endless acquisition of knowledge of

diseases is the driving force; it leads him to simplify his patients as beings who are afflicted with disease(s) and as a result, it also makes him simplify himself by being nothing more than a doctor who is out to cure his patients or to make well-concerted and well-meaning attempts to do so. This ‘simplification’, if it can be called that, involves reducing the identities of the people involved to doctor and patients. Albeit, this reduction constitutes only the first stage of the treatment process and is characterized by a detached objectivity that is a prerequisite, at least to Sassall, for an accurate diagnosis. Later, the life experiences of individual patients are taken into account and are made to merge with their medical histories thus presenting a picture of the patients as ‘others’, as human beings in their ungraspable but recognizable entirety. Therefore, Sassall’s twofold process of serving others is driven by on the contrary movements of standing back and closing in, reminding us of Berger’s interpretation of Van Gogh’s approach to his subjects while capturing them in his paintings. The simplification of his patients for the sake of diagnosis, is followed by releasing them, as it were, to an infinity of interpretativeness but the identity of the doctor remains restricted to his role of a necessary healing presence. There is also a transcendental self-awareness on the part of Sassall: “He saw himself as a life-saver” (54). His skills as a doctor are predicated upon his ability of taking decisions. This idealistic self-image gives way to a more mature and taciturn understanding of his own vulnerabilities as a doctor of the contingencies impending upon human experiences in general.

After World War II, Sassall married and chose to practice in a remote village under the National Health Service, becoming the junior partner of an “old doctor who was much liked in the district but who hated the sight of blood and believed that the secret of medicine was faith” (54). In ways more than one, Sassall’s subsequent practice provides a counterpoint to the emphasis on faith upheld by his senior. He does not hesitate to

effect surgical interventions wherever it is needed and he is quick in taking decisions. This is how he demystifies the idea of faith as secret of medicine – by changing himself in critical situations directly, acknowledging the visceral manifestations in a patient, rather than a perpetual, inflexible reliance on intellectual exercise; by visiting and attending to patients at their homes, rather than having them over at his surgery; and by establishing a vigorous relation between his characteristic ways of interventions and others' bodies (and others' lives in general).

After the death of his older partner, Sassall found another doctor with whom he could share his practice. He divided the practice between the other doctor and himself so that both of them were able to work with their own surgeries. This gave him more time to “observe himself and others” (60), and with this extra time in hand, he began to read (particularly Freud) and analyse himself and his character traits and their origins. It proved to be a painful process and for approximately six months, he lost his sexual potency as a consequence of his resurrected memories. The reason behind Sassall's desire to psychoanalyse himself and delve into his subconscious is unknown and it is unclear as to why Berger did not sufficiently question him on this. Berger speculates that this “decision to examine within himself the basis of what up to now he had projected outwards as ‘the unimaginable’, or whether he entered a period of crisis and therefore decided to look more closely at himself” (60). It may be theorized that a person living a life solely for others may become tired after a point of time and decide to delve within his own psyche out of a desperation to resolve the self-other conflict, or to find something in his own being or existence that lies beyond his altruistic self-fashioning.

Susan Lanzoni's book *Empathy: A History* (2018) begins with a question from an essay by Andy Clark and David Chalmers: "Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?" (1) This is relevant to Sassall's empathetic relation with the world around him and his efforts at analysing his memories are perhaps directed towards answering this question. Sassall's medical practice and his 'records' of the foresters' lives can be perceived as an extension of his self. Empathizing with different people having different physical or mental conditions can create tension within the self because it involves a continuously shifting role-playing – moving in and out of different personalities. The protean/performative aspect of being a physician and the intense self-identification produce exhaustion that is more mental than physical. How Sassall's patients see himself is more complex than how he sees his patients; he appears to be complex, inscrutable. Of course, he is acknowledged as a good doctor, in possession of all the diagnostic and clinical skills that are required; his patients consider themselves fortunate to have him on a very elementary level; he is easy to talk to; he is a good listener, always willing to attend on a patient; but at the same time, he is "moody, difficult to understand when on one of his theoretical subjects like sex, capable of doing things just to shock, unusual" (63). The ambiguity of Sassall's presence does nothing to reduce either his popularity or reliability. Ambiguity also governs the confrontation that he has to undertake while dealing with the patient as "a total personality" (62).

The infinite intangibles that are liable to be considered if one pursues such an approach are not easy to deal with, and are disposed to make a physician forego his medical skills and knowledge to enter a zone of 'unimaginability' where experiences have to be confronted without any training or skill whatsoever. Medical knowledge provides the mere basis of the imagination which is required for one to be transported to the threshold of the 'unimaginable'. Both Sassall and Berger stress on the importance of

imagination. Sassall advises one of his patients: “the fact that you’re crying means you’ve got imagination. Of you didn’t have imagination, you wouldn’t feel so bad” (33). Imagination as a liberating force and an empowering factor is integral to empathetic approach. It is also central to role-taking ability of the empath. Imagination and empathy are factors that lie at the very origin of the desire to recognize the Other in all its infinity and ambiguity, and the unconditional being there for other people. Sassall's great distrust of common-sense results from his unwillingness to accept formulaic ways of ‘understanding’ people, experiences and the world in general, and his suspicion regarding the epistemic validation such formulae, in the first place, produce. Sassall apparently rejects both the commonly held definitions and types of ‘common sense’ while formulating his medical strategies with respect to the experience of illness. The first kind of common sense which is sometimes celebrated and upheld as the good sense, can be defined as the ability to perceive things as they are, and doing things as they should be done. The second type, often designated as ‘folk wisdom,’ represents “unreflective knowledge not reliant on specialized training or deliberative thought” (Faulton). Sassall confesses: “It has failed me in almost every occasion I have used it – and God knows how often I have fallen and still fall for the trap” (62). The pre-judicial component in common sense may help a physician reach convenient inferences but the very tendency of common sense to totalize an event in terms of meaning, to have the assumption that everyone should possess and use it, are aspects that Sassall’s philosophy of medical practice purports to challenge.

In order to establish the uniqueness of Sassall’s position, Berger delineates the contours of the usual doctor-patient relationship: “The primitive medicine-man, who was often also priest, sorcerer and judge was the first specialist to be released from the obligation of procuring food for the tribe” (64). In certain agricultural societies he was also an

occasional farmer who received frequent remunerations in exchange for his medical service which was considered to be more of an art rather than science. Nevertheless, in other tribes he was, what would now be termed as a professional, working full time and leading a rather lonely life. He was often rich owing to the donations freely made by patients according to the seriousness of the case, success of the treatment and social position of the patient. He generally evoked awe in his patients and the community he lived in. Like the itinerant storyteller, the physician was a craftsman in Ancient Greece, going from town to town to treat patients, physicians in bigger cities had permanent surgeries and were paid annual salary and allowed a special tax that assured the, steady income even in times when there was no work. The Hippocratic physician enjoyed a certain kind of financial security although Greek society looked down upon professionals who worked for money and as a result the social standing of the doctor was not very high. However, he was conferred more respect than other craftsmen because health was considered to be an indispensable asset.

Sassall's assumption of the idiosyncratic role harkens back to the figure of the archaic, itinerant storyteller or craftsman whose primary impulse was to listen to and record experiences. The ancient physician would also sometimes try to impress people by dressing up in lavish clothes or perfuming themselves and sometimes by exhibiting their specialized medical instruments. The spectacular and the performative aspects of the archaic practitioner of medicine have something in common with the archaic storyteller whose performances/repertoire involves an amalgamation of the gestural with the aural. The actual presence of the storyteller amongst his group of listeners matters and this presence, much like the reassuring presence of the doctor beside the sick, constitute a certain kind of aura which is potent to the extent that it has certain kind of influence over the listeners. The activity of telling a story often requires an

intimacy between the storyteller and his listeners: “In remembering, in dreaming, in entering a story, tellers and listeners find joint communion in an eternal present” (Merrifield 148). The physician’s moment of inspecting/diagnosing a patient take place in a similar ‘eternal present’ where the consciousness of the doctor and the consciousness of the patient are focussed entirely on the recognition of the illness/ailment. The body is the site where the process of recognition mostly begins.

Diagnosis presupposes the patient giving the doctor access to his/her body. This access is exclusive and often peremptory if the need arises, and “we only grant such access voluntarily to lovers” (64). The doctor who is “a comparative stranger” (64) presupposes this access as a prerequisite for his work but is checked from considering it a privilege. It is not only medical ethics that prevents one to distinguish doctor-patient’s intimacy from that of the one existing between lovers: “The conditions under which a doctor is likely to examine his patients are always sexually discouraging” (68). What both kinds of intimacies have in common, however, is the quality of physical closeness and the concentration on the present moment. Intimacy, by definition, does not necessarily have to be restricted to closeness as Berger points out elsewhere: “in reality total strangers, who will never say a single word to each other, can share an intimacy – an intimacy contained in the exchange of a glance, a nod of the head, a smile, a shrug of a shoulder” (Some Notes on Song). The comforting presence of the doctor also constitutes the implicit assumption that he will not take advantage of the intimacy he is given access to. According to Berger, the origins of such intimacy lies in our childhood: “We submit to the doctor by quoting to ourselves a state of childhood and simultaneously extending our sense of family to include him” (68). This is the reason why the presence of the doctor suggests that the patient in turn is given an access to a fraternity. The ‘in-feeling’ (literally, the *Einfühlung*) is given full play with such an

access, thereby establishing an empathetic bond between the doctor and the patient. Empathy and intimacy are therefore inseparably related as far as the doctor-patient relationship is concerned, one of the reasons behind this relation being the fact that both empathy and intimacy imply a one-to-one involvement between beings. The association is, by and large, based on trust and this is the reason why the presence of a doctor often suggests the prospect of being welcomed into a fraternity. One of the many comforts provided by this presence derives from the doctor's experiences with other patients, other illnesses or perhaps other patients with identical or similar illnesses: the idea that others have undergone the same illness is reassuring because that connects the patient with a 'fraternity' of patients of sorts and thereby takes away the uniqueness and unknowability/mystery of a particular ailment. The doctor works as a mediator/negotiator between the patient and his prospective recovery or the impossibility of recovery. At the risk of glorifying the figure of the doctor, Berger observes: "When we call for a doctor, we are asking him to cure us and to relieve our suffering, but, if he cannot cure us, we are also asking him to witness our dying. The value of the witness is that he has seen so many others die" (68). The priest was once responsible for witnessing deaths and this act of witnessing was considered more important than performing prayers and last rites. Death is conferred a certain kind of sanctity when it is observed or witnessed and the figure of the doctor whose experiences with death and dying have been manifold is best suited to the act of witnessing. Witnessing goes beyond the spectacular and the visual aspects of the dying process. Philippe Ariès notes:

The vile and ugly death of the Middle Ages is not the only sudden and absurd death, it is also the secret death without witness or ceremony; the death of the traveler on the road, or the man who drowns in a river, or the stranger whose body is found at

the edge of a field, or even the neighbor who is struck down for no reason. It makes no difference that he was innocent, his sudden death marks him without malediction. (11)

One of the reasons why the doctor offers people the assurance of fraternity is not restricted to the living – the dead constitute the infinity that the ‘unimaginable,’ suggests to their minds as much as it suggests to the mind of the doctor. In the fractured (by illness) imagination of the patient, the doctor suggests the figure of a *passer* between life and death. The fracture that illness causes to the imagination also affects and distorts the self-consciousness of the patient. It is the responsibility of the doctor to recognize this distortion and “to compensate for these broken connections and reaffirm the social content of the invalid’s aggravated self-consciousness” (*A Fortunate Man* 69). The word fraternity, therefore, contains several layers of meaning, for it involves both the community of patients suffering from the same illness and the society at large of which the patient is a vulnerable part. The patient’s expectation of a fraternity is unformulated all the same but the expectation is fulfilled when the doctor recognizes him or her and the affliction on both physical and psychological levels. The word ‘recognition,’ – an important word for Sassall as well as for Berger – value and general though it is, specifically construes the diagnostic strategies that a doctor decides to adopt. According to Berger, the very basis of good diagnosis is the willingness to take into account all the possibly relevant facts that involve “emotional, historical, environmental as well as personal” (73) information about a patient’s condition. The holistic approach assumed by the good diagnostician thus discounts any possibility of reducing the patient to a formulaic set of physiological and pathological symptoms. This is the reason why the process of diagnosis can never be turned into a totally mechanical interpretation of medical data or symptoms. Recognition, the basis of

diagnosis, is essentially human, the humanistic foundation of Berger's own practice of writing is at work here. In Sassall, he finds a kindred spirit who refuses to reduce people to quantifiable medical data. In Sassall's modus operandi of 'reading' patient's situations by taking into account everything – environmental, emotional, historical, physical – that surrounds them, he finds an echo of his own art-historical view that “everything around the image is part of its meaning” (*Ways of Seeing*). Recognition of the patient implies support on the psychological level. By recognizing a patient in his or her entirety (that is, by attempting to take into considerations all the extra-pathological factors that might be responsible for his or her ailment) the physician tries to assure the patient that his or her illness is neither unique nor undefinable. This is the reason why patients expect their doctors to give their complaint a name. The act of naming the disease is a form of confining and depersonalizing and separating it on a metaphysical level, from the patient who is afflicted by it.

To approach a patient's illness and the factors responsible for it, the physician needs to consider the role of unhappiness and the factors of emotional and mental turbulence. Since these factors are not easily quantifiable, and since there are no easy ways of differentiating between cause and effect, GPs, in general place less emphasis on them and according to Berger, “estimates among GPs of how many of their cases actually depend on such factors vary from five to thirty per cent” (74). Yet, unhappiness as a major deleterious factor cannot be ignored. Most unhappiness has something in common with illness because it marks the patient off as being unique and isolated. The patient gradually fails to find any external confirmation of his being and consequently withdraws into his own private self and becomes increasingly lonely. Examples of other men with similar predicaments offer hope and alleviates any notion of uniqueness that the patient may harbour in his mind. Recognition on the part of the doctor, therefore,

suggests the recognition of the connection between the patient and other men with similar problems, and this recognition can also help the patient, eventually, to recognize and come to terms with an aspect of himself that he has not confronted before. According to Berger, the doctor can begin to make an unhappy man recognized only in an indirect way by presenting himself to the patient as a “comparable man” (76). He points out: “The unhappy man expects to be treated as though he were a nonentity with certain symptoms attached. The state of being a nonentity then paradoxically and bitterly confirms his uniqueness. It is necessary to break the circle” (76). The doctor makes a space available to the patient where the latter can recognize himself in the doctor through the communicability and comparability of experiences. Everything the patient says to the doctor, related or unrelated to his medical condition, must be familiar to the doctor – or at least, that is the impression that the patient should get. The doctor needs to have an accurate self-knowledge and sufficient imagination in order to subtly assure his patient that no illness/unhappiness is unique, and no experience incommunicable. The “constant will of a man trying to recognize” (76) in Sassall is what contributes to his empathetic makeup. This will organizes its presence in the midst of crises that patients are going through and is embodied in the sensitive and compassionate gestures of the doctor, for example:

It is as though when he talks or listens to a patient, he is also touching them with his hands so as to be less likely to misunderstand: and it is as though, when he is physically examining a patient, they were also conversing. (77)

Touch is an extension of the empathetic presence that Sassall offers his patients. It is also the most sure and unmediated way of reassuring the patient that the doctor belongs to the same human plane as he, and thus ease any form of diffidence that the patient might feel while telling the doctor about his problems. Touch also has metaphysical

implications: it is a facility that lies at the body's outermost limits. Tactile experiences constitute the foundation of the ideas of labour and craftsmanship and in Sassall's case it reflects an intense desire to reach out to his patient's experience. He knows the value his touch has for the patient and the range of experiences – pathological or otherwise – that it can give him access to. Later, he may have to use his equipment the patient and perhaps even use them to operate on him and carry out surgeries, but the most basic and human contact between him and the patient begins with a touch. Esther Leslie, while reflecting on the relation between experience and storytelling in Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" (1936) says: "True experience is conceived as close and practiced knowledge of what is at hand" (6).

For Sassall, recognition of the patient is inseparable from a persistent consciousness of his own selfhood and its extensions. When he began his career, Sassall was the central character in any emergency that would occur, owing to his mastery and skill. Later in his career, as Berger sees him in *A Fortunate Man*, he lets the patient be the central character. Through his recognition of his patients, he sets an example for them that has the power to help them recognize themselves. And extreme form of empathy is exercised when "he becomes the patient by offering him his own example back" (77). He has to reverse this extreme empathetic 'becoming' every time a patient is cured or 'improved' after having been cured although it enriches his experience: "patient succeeds patient whilst he remains the same person, and so the effect is cumulative" (77). The steady accumulation of experiences and personalities implies that not only is his sense of mastery enhanced by his idealistic pursuit of universal knowledge but also that the passeur-like assumptions of different identities at regular intervals have a problematic effect on his own sense of selfhood. The willingness and the ability to play different roles and assume different identities are aspects of the universal man that,

according to Berger, have been steadily eroded by the division of labour in capitalist society. Sassall's aspirations towards becoming a universal man are devoid of the delusions of grandeur: egotism and conceit are replaced by an immense appetite for experience in all forms. What is most curious about this appetite is that it co-exists with an imagination that tends to set him up squarely against the impossibility of satisfying that appetite. Experiences offer themselves in ever-shifting forms, resisting easy quantification and archiving. In a rather theatrical gesture that acknowledges the endless variety of lived and imaginative experiences and the infinite ways in which they may be received and recorded, Sassall has a predilection for taking on different identities. Sometimes, this is manifested in a puerile way:

For example, he enjoys dressing up in 'uniforms' for different activities and wearing them with all the casualness of the third-year expert: a sweater and stocking cap for working on the land in winter: a deer-stalker and lace leather leggings for shooting with his dog: an umbrella and homburg for funerals. (78)

In each case, with every costume that he wears and with every persona that he assumes, there is an empathetic projection of his self onto those identities – a movement which is in contradistinction to the kind of empathetic identification that takes place when he is seeing a patient and he 'becomes' the patient. The protean eccentricities of Sassall offers him occasional freedom from having to play the role of a doctor and that role is so deeply ingrained that without these occasional excursions, he would probably be totally closed within his own self. Berger cautions the reader: "If you met him outside his area, on neutral ground, and if he didn't begin talking, you might for one moment suppose that he was an actor" (78-79). There may be a latent exhibitionist in Sassall but as a doctor, he has no audience and it is only he who can assess this exhibitionism. According to Berger, Sassall is totally driven by knowledge: "Knowledge almost in the

Faustian sense” (79). The human interfaces offered by diagnosis of patients, dressing in costumes, are the primary sources of knowledge and the mode of access and acquisition of the knowledge is primarily empathetic in nature. The definition of empathy requires re-thinking here: the German term *Einfühlung* from which the English word ‘empathy’ has been derived literally means ‘feeling into’ and suggests a form of projection of oneself into another body or situation or circumstance with the intention of understanding the feelings of being in that other body or situation. Therefore, empathy, and especially the motive to access knowledge through empathy, presupposes perspective-taking on both mental and physical levels. Sassall’s theatrical aesthetics does not imply a preference for mere craft and science: “Sassall, unlike Paracelsus, is neither a theosophist nor a Magus; he believes more in the science than in the art of medicine” (79). Sassall, however, belongs to the same “vocational tradition” (80) as Paracelsus. A tradition constituting doctors who simply want to experience: “They are driven by the need to know. The patient is their material” (80). This is not to say that in the process of diagnosis, in his pursuit of knowledge, Sassall dehumanizes them. While listening to his patient’s conditions and anxieties, he repeatedly says the words ‘I know’ and he says them with sincere empathy, and at the same time, it is a signal that he wants to know more. His curiosity is directed towards the complex explanation of the patient’s condition and the full extent of his own potential as a doctor.

While dealing with the self-other dialectic and the resultant perspective-taking in his narrative, Berger is confronted with the question: “What do his patients expect of him publicly when they are not ill?” (88-89) The question points to a deeper social issue: how is a doctor perceived by his patients outside his profession and what other identities can a doctor assume in relation to his identity as a doctor? Obviously, there can be no general answer to this question. The community described in *A Fortunate Man* is

economically depressed: there are no industries as such and less than half of the male population work on the land. Owing to the diversity of their professions, they belong neither to the proletariat nor a conventional rural community: “Most earn their living in small workshops, quarries, a wood-processing factory, a jam factory, a brickworks. Most earn their living in small workshops, quarries, a wood processing factory, a jam factory, a brickworks...” (89). They are simply known as ‘the foresters’ in the districts surrounding Gloucestershire. Berger’s collective portrayal of them as “suspicious, independent, tough, poorly educated, low church” (89) people is, of course, interspersed with individuated character sketches involving Sassall’s interactions with the patients. Outside their individual medical histories and constitutions, they are, by and large, seen as a community with specific and predictable characteristics. An overriding feature that the foresters share with many of the communities and people Berger mostly wrote about in his lifetime, is geographical movement: “They have something of the character once associated with wandering traders like tinkers” (89). It may be argued that Berger’s interest in people and communities whose mode of existence is itinerant in nature stems from the idea that geographical displacement, either forced or voluntary, makes the itinerant travellers adopt an ever-shifting perspectival relationship with the terrains they cover or temporarily inhabit. Itinerancy is a part of Sassall’s professional praxis and his medical imagination, he is always on the move and available to the exigencies of his patients and has very little social life of his own, except with the villagers. Berger’s description of Sassall’s position amongst the ‘foresters’ is contiguous with that of his own amongst the inhabitants of the French village he chose to live in: “With the ‘foresters’ he seems like a foreigner who has become, by request, the clerk of their own records” (89).

Pages 90 to 96 of *A Fortunate Man* is constituted of unattributed images of ‘foresters’ that come right after Berger’s conferral of the cognomen ‘clerk of the foresters’ records’ on Sassall. This succession or rather juxtaposition of text and images is performative because the photographer, Jean Mohr, emulates Sassall in keeping a pictorial record of some of the ‘foresters’ at a particular point in their lives. Significantly, in these photos, the subjects are conscious that they are being photographed and face the camera frontally. Early on in the book, Berger tells us that permission from Sassall’s patients has been procured to photograph them and use their photographs in a book. Their pictorial representation, their visual presence and their gaze through the photographs are comparable to the call of the Other to be recognized in their anonymity and recorded with their unnamed representation. An osmosis/symbiosis of sorts is effected where the art of photography is made to emulate medical service (as practiced by Sassall). This contributes to the organic essence of the book and to the humanistic beliefs underlying its conception by revealing an essential continuity among ostensibly different forms of activities that are oriented towards recognizing human experiences in all their diversity. What Joshua Sperling says of Berger in *A Writer of Our Time* (2018) is true of Sassall: “For Berger, experience was the truest fund of knowledge – and knowledge, in turn, for it to be worth anything, had always to lead back and into experience. It had to be put to use. Knowledge is there to help us enter, however brashly or modestly, the historical process” (18).

Sassall is conscious of his image in the eyes of the villagers and this consciousness forms a counterpoint to the way in which he perceives himself. He has liberated himself from the obligations of social etiquette by simply becoming unconventional. By unconventional he has also wished to become more approachable to the villagers to become their equal and yet this has paradoxically consolidated his privilege as Berger

aphoristically points out: To your equals you cannot say anything: you learn very precisely the form and the area of their tolerance” (97). In spite of the apparent unconventionality and even eccentric inscrutability of his personage, Sassall’s presence is totalized. His expectation that “anybody can say anything to him” (97) and the supposed liberty of his patients to address him in any form they like, suggests his singular authority and his ‘total’ (and totalized) exemption. He recognizes his patients in their infinity, that is, taking into consideration all the innumerable imponderables that may have led to their ailments. In return, he also expects to be recognized, but the kind of recognition he wants differs qualitatively from the recognition that his patients have of him. He asks for a personal recognition, one example of which is provided in the book: there was a medieval castle in the village with a cavernous moat round it which was used as an unauthorized dump. It was overgrown with trees and bushes. Sassall set out to transform the moat into a garden for the village. He gathered round himself a battery of people including farmers and road makers and worked hard on the project and while it was underway Sassall had frequent technical discussions with the villagers involved and these conversations veered towards other avenues and consequently a social intimacy was formed between Sassall and the villagers. This is a comment on how working together first involves talking and how, at a later stage, “the talk transcends the job” (98). Communicability of experience, thus, often has a basis in common, shared labour. The issue of recognition can hardly be generalized and is deeply rooted in larger contexts of culture, society, economy and language. As Berger illustrates, the English are relatively inarticulate due to the existence of an inherent inclination toward puritanism and shyness which threatens to obscure a more vital development. Berger attributes this inarticulateness to cultural deprivation: “They are deprived of the means of translating what they know into thoughts which they can think.

They have no examples to follow in which words clarify experience” (99). Berger alleges that the famed, proverbial English heritage has been superseded and in spite of the fact that the English are technically literate, they have deprived themselves of the chance to find and unleash the potential of a written cultural legacy. Berger also clarifies that his lack should not be thought of strictly as a dearth of literature. He generally defines culture as a “mirror which enables the individual to recognize himself...” (99). In a curious way, in holding up a metaphorical mirror to the community he lives in, and in helping its members to recognize themselves albeit in a strictly pathological context, Sassall embodies the function of culture as Berger delineates it. One is also reminded of Geoff Dyer’s encomium of Berger:

A substantial part of the emotional and contemplative experiences of the English remains “unnamed” according to Berger and as a result the primary mode of self-expression for them, is actions-oriented which leads to many of them having ‘do-it-yourself’ hobbies. They find it relatively easy to have conversations about anything that describes or is related to action, especially “action considered as technique or as procedure” (99) or the external processes involved. This renders their conversations somewhat depersonalized as they reveal very little about the experience of the speakers involved in them. This does not imply, however, a lack of warmth or friendship and people often make connections of the subject matter of their conversations, thereby transformation their various shared skills into a collective experience. Sassall had to learn the ways of the villagers after he came to stay with them and their shared language of communicating experiences. In spite of Sassall’s learning this ‘language’, he is not seen as an equal by the villagers. He remains, by and large, an outsider who has come to live with them but not an outsider who has any ulterior motive of exploitation. Curiously enough his patients perceive Sassall as an outsider who belongs to their

community – a sense of belonging which does not confer equality. His privilege is acknowledged by everyone and this privilege has more to do with “the way he can think and talk” (101) rather than the amenities and comforts he is endowed with. This concerns not only educational prerogatives but his intellectual disposition in general that makes him, above all, a sympathetic and attentive listener. When villagers talk to him, they share local news with them, for instance, and listen to his opinions that are, more often than not, unusual. What the villagers find impressive is not so much the content of his thought but the style of his thinking. They recognize a basic difference between the way he thinks and the way they think: they rely on common-sense whereas he does not. Berger defines common-sense as apart of “the home-made ideology of those who have been deprived of fundamental learning, of those who have been kept ignorant” (102). Common-sense is static owing to the fact that it cannot instruct itself by the questioning its underpinnings and in this it is distinct from philosophical spirit of inquiry. It is sometimes oppressive because it is used by many to betray their instinctual impulses. Sassall considers his own intuitions as the point of departure for his inquiries. The villagers recognize the absence of common-sense in the world of Sassall’s thoughts and this is the primary reason why they open up in his presence and give vent to their instinctual feelings and uncensored thoughts, something which they are unable to do in their regular course of life. Sassall characterizes this act of giving verbal expression to innermost un-commonsensical thoughts as ‘self-indulgence’ and he acknowledges having them himself. In making a space available where his patients’ ‘self-indulgent’ observations will be listened to and received, he is exercising an empathetic gesture. His willingness to listen is driven by his desire to know what is not apparent, not immediate or on the surface. This desire is accompanied by, however, an attempt to face the very limitations on the act imposed by the fact that life is brief and

man is mortal: “Using his own mortality as another starting point he needs to find references of hope or possibility in an almost unimaginable future” (103). The spectral hope that eludes Sassall has its basis in the incompleteness inherent in his medical interventions and the recognition of the futility of his epistemological endeavours. However, there is also an irrepressible hopefulness that underlies all his actions as a doctor and a member of the community that derives from his recognition of an essential equality among things. This is what prevents him from passing judgments on the essential nature of things. His empathetic approach to the surrounding world implies the possibility of a kind of amalgamation with beings both living and non-living. This way of thinking has a bearing on the question of identity: harbouring a notion of an identity which is, by and large, constructed and floating, how does the self understand itself in its difference from the other? The following observation by Sassall offers a partial answer to this question:

I’m encouraged by the fact that the molecules of this table and glass and plant are rearranged to make you or me, and that the bad things are perhaps badly arranged molecules and therefore capable maybe of reorganization one day. (103)

He recognizes the impossibility of being certain about anything and although as a doctor he relies primarily on scientific methods, he does not discount the roles played by luck, speculation, intuition, etc.

Sassall’s generally speculative stance and his inclusive way of thinking demand access to greater amount and variety of experiences and as Berger points out, “to arrive at general decisions and theories one needs to travel in order to gain experience” (103). The villagers do not travel to big cities from Forest of Dean, at least in the time that Berger captures in his book and therefore they have no access to bigger cities where

theories are established and general decisions are taken. Consequently, they see it as a mark of privilege to be able to be a part of decision – and policy-making that take place in the cities. Sassall's status of an 'outsider' is laced with this privilege. Intellect is perceived as a facility whereby the State controls the people who have no ability to affect the general decisions taken on their behalf. This perception somewhat mystifies Sassall's position at least in the eyes of the villagers. Berger's book is an attempt to elucidate the fact that Sassall's presence amongst the villagers is anything but exploitative. Anyway, Sassall's privileges include his ability to enter (and come out of) the lives of others. This allows him to access and salvage aspects of experience that have not been oppressed by common-sense. The villagers see Sassall's choice to practice in remote village as a part of his privilege to remain indifferent to fame. In spite of the inequality, the villagers are proud of Sassall, his way of thinking and his efficiency as a doctor.

Sassall's position has much in common with that of an archaic storyteller: he is a clerk of the forester's records, not an arbiter of their destiny, and to be so is a question of privilege as such. The records are not meant to be judged by a higher authority, neither are they complete: they are kept so that the villagers can consult them from time to time. They are an intimate documentation of Sassall's 'seeing' his patients and of his witnessing their travails. This is exemplified in the way he often begins conversations with his patients by asking them: "Do you remember when...?" (109) He takes it upon himself to remember not only the medical history of his patients, but also the trivial details of their life-experiences. He represents them for themselves by making them understand themselves better, acting as he does, as a mirror of consciousness for the community at large Berger describes this representative aspect by pointing out that he "represents some of what they know but cannot think" (109). While producing a

narrative representation of Sassall, Berger is cautious so as not to make any claim to represent Sassall the way Sassall represents the villagers. He is aware that his own subjectivity may distort Sassall's account and also acknowledges the impossibility of fully validating that account. The admission that the writer cannot claim to represent another person or a community in its entirety in his narrative, but only in parts, is of course central to Berger's own storytelling ethics. Furthermore, Sassall's presence and practice amongst the inhabitants of the village can be seen as a sort of an evolving project about growing self-consciousness of the villagers. Storytelling can also serve a similar function. It can instruct the imagination, as well as the faculty of critical self-introspection, of the members of a community.

Levinas, while formulating his concept of the Other, emphasizes the notion of 'the face-to-face relation' and its social valence. This has certain obvious ethical implications: human beings have responsibility towards one another that is manifested in the face-to-face encounter. The human face orders and ordains us and insists on us giving and serving the Other. This face-to-face encounter prohibits reduction of the Other to 'sameness' and instead induces a sense of responsibility for the Other within the self. The relation between the self and the Other is intrinsically asymmetrical. When the Other appears in the form of a face, Levinas says, it insists: "thou shalt not kill me" (Bergo) with all its nudity and defencelessness. The other appears to the self in the form of faces that appear one at a time.

By the very dint of their being doctors and their training as medical students, physicians are insulated to the pain of others. This particularly happens, according to Berger, when they first start dissecting the human body in their second year as medical students, by implication, a certain aspect of empathy stands in an inverse relation to anatomical or

surgical knowledge. A question is raised: does the knowledge of the human body and its functions prevent one from empathizing totally with a person in pain?

With the increasing specialization in the field of medicine comes an increasing objectivity in the way the human body is seen and the way in which an illness is quantified and diagnosed. Human suffering is localized through this specialization and the very notion of pain is put into question: it is worthwhile to ask whether or not, with such an increasingly scientific quantification of ailments, their causes, their metastases, their cure, does the word pain mean the same? With such a growing scientific perception of illness, what does it mean to empathize with the pain of another? Doctors are, of course, trained to take a professional view of suffering – their ‘professionalism’ lies in their ability to prevent themselves from identifying and empathizing with their patients’ conditions. Furthermore, a doctor’s ‘experience’ is enriched by the number of patients he sees. The quantity of cases effects a certain kind of erasure of the personalities of the patient. Berger notes: “The sheer number of their cases discourages self-identification with any individual patient” (112). Sassall, as we find him in Berger’s book, does not conform to the conventional objectivity maintained by doctors. This is possible owing partly to the fact that he works in a relatively small community which provides him with the opportunity to know his patients personally. Interestingly, it also accelerates and benefits his identification with their experiences of pain. Berger observes him in dejected isolation, weeping helplessly: “...when he was unaware of my presence, I saw him weep, walking across a field away from a house where a young patient was dying” (112). His dejection and guilt for not being able to save a patient comes from the sense of failure affecting his whole being – not only as a doctor but also a human being. In turn this is a consequence of his approach (as a doctor and more importantly as a fellow human being) to the human condition in general – an approach

that characterizes Berger's writing as well: "He never separates an illness from the total personality of the patient – in this sense, he is the opposite of a specialist" (113). The total personality includes the physical as well as the mental health of the patient. Since Sassall's service is directed towards a total understanding of a person, the connections amongst a person's body, mind, living conditions and life experiences are stronger and more immediate than any other doctor would assume. This is why he equates the act of sending a patient to mental hospital with abandonment. The value of his vocation derives from his ability to be present at the moment, to attend to the moment of suffering (and death) in person. The crisis ushered in by illness manifests itself through a moment and the process leading up to that moment. As a doctor, he can make interventions into the processes: "He can speed it up, slow it down, he can 'play for time'. But he cannot turn the sea into dry land" (126). To Berger, his resemblance to a mariner is unmistakable: "He can appear to be the controller of time, as, on occasions, the mariner appears to rule the sea" (126). This control is, after all, illusory. Doctors usually have a heightened awareness of death that is not only informed by the knowledge of the physiological stages of dying, but also the metaphysical aspects of it (which, however, they try to conceal). The doctor's presence and his act of witnessing a patient's suffering (and perhaps his eventual death) suggests a certain degree of intimacy. The same moment of intimate witnessing is lived and perceived differently by the doctor and the patient and "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" (131). Sassall tries to align the patient's subjective coordinates of time and space with his own subjective experience of the patient's suffering. His empathetic tendencies are so acute and his passion for knowledge so intense that "he sleeps easily but, at heart, he

welcomes being called out at night” (131). His passion to know the possibilities of medicine and pathology is a part of his empathetic orientation and it so pervades his life (or his ‘time’) that the subjective experience of his patients tend to become his experience. This, his life is constructed anew again and again through this empathetic proliferation of the subjectivities of the sick and the dying. The processes involved in his empathetic assumption of a stance whereby he tries to merge his subjectivity into the ‘time’ of the patient in anguish constitute a repertoire of sorts: “to construct, to relieve, to cure, to understand, to discover with the same intensity per minute as those in anguish are suffering” (131). The aspiration to accomplish all of these things strikes Berger as impossible but he points out that Sassall’s spirit is indomitable and his aim unwavering. Levinas’ articulation of responsibility and his idea that the self is a hostage the Other, are at home in Sassall’s constant aim to do more than he can to cure, to relive, to be there: “Sometimes the aim, as it were, releases Sassall, but mostly he is its slave” (131).

Limits of knowledge for Sassall, however, are temporary at a given stage and can be pushed further by, more than anything, “cumulative effect of his imaginative ‘proliferation’ of himself in ‘becoming’ one patient after another” (143). Experience, for him, has more to do with reflection than endurance. We are reminded here of the Benjaminian distinction between the two meanings of experience – *Erfahrung* (the type of transmittable experience that is accrued over time), and *Erlebnis* (the kind of experience that is lived through and is unintegrated. In ‘experiencing’ his patients’ suffering, he also ‘experiments’ with medical situations and possibilities. These experiments may take technical forms, for example, he once observed: “Reserpine, given as a sedative appeared also to cure chilblains and so might be useful in the treatment of gangrene” (143). They may also take a more contemplative form involving

thought-exercises and philosophical introspections the contrast between himself and his patients disheartens him but he never forgets it, for it is a reminder of his privilege which he is obliged to acknowledge. This acknowledgement is a part of his responsibility towards the Other, represented by his patients. And elaboration of this privilege, as it appears to Sassall:

Their backwardness enables him to follow his cases through all their stages, grants him the power of his hegemony, encourages him to become the ‘consciousness’ of the district, allows him unusually promising conditions for achieving a ‘fraternal’ relationship with his patients, permits him to establish almost entirely on his own terms the local image of his profession. (144)

The contradiction between his privileged understanding and sensibility and his underprivileged apparently provide him with a justification for his occasional depression. His developed sensibility is a prerogative, as well a responsibility: “Sassall is more sensitive to his patient’s interests than the patient himself” (146). The service he provides to the patients is always inadequate in his own eyes. The ideal he has set up for himself is unreachable because his efforts as a doctor cannot match, let alone alleviate the degree of suffering undergone by his patients. And yet, in spite of the pervasive sense of failure: “Like an artist or like anybody else who believes that his work justifies his life, Sassall – by our society’s miserable standards – is a fortunate man” (147). He differs from an artist in that unlike an artist who can give himself up to his visions, he needs to remain observant, precise, patient and attentive. The demands of the medical profession make him stay within bounds and in him Berger identifies quite a few conflicts, the foremost of which is the fact that his subjectivity is insulated and closed off due to the rigours of his medical practice; in other words, he functions as a clerk of the foresters’ records and enters the lives of other (of course with the noble

aim of healing them) but he does not share much about his personal life with anyone. Sassall is a private man but his spartan idea of service almost comes to erase his personal life. He always remains the doctor in the eyes of the Forest of Dean folks and even though there is a deep sense of empathy engrained in his service to them, the line between the doctor and the patient is never really crossed. Therefore, in Berger's telling he comes across as a man who is devoted to the idea of service to the extent of self-effacement. The book raises the following question: is Dr Sassall propelled by latently individualistic idea of noble service or pure human empathy? If the obligation to be there for the Other is understood to be a spectrum, *A Fortunate Man* occupies only one end of it. We get a more tender and personal, albeit fictional, account of love and empathy in *To the Wedding* (1995).

### **2.5 Narrating Illness in *To the Wedding* (1995): Ethics of Representation and Narrative Empathy**

*To the Wedding* is narrated from the point of view of a blind *tamata* seller called Tsobanakos. *Tama* refers to a kind of votive offering common in the Eastern Orthodox Churches. *Tamata* are typically small metal plaques, made of base or valuable metal, generally with an imprinted image representing the person for whom the prayer is offered. *Tamatas* are usually offered to a religious icon or a saint as an acknowledgement or reminder of a supplicant's specific need, or in thankfulness for a prayer answered. Tsobanakos describes them as follows: "All of them are as thin as linen and each one is the size of a credit card" (4). Berger's typical interest in etymology surfaces when Tsobanakos points out that the word *tama* comes from the verb *tázo* which means to make an oath. The idea of exchange is built into the idea of *tamata*: people pray for consecration or relief in exchange for a promise made.

*Tamata* may contain a diverse range of images that can be interpreted in various ways. A heart may signify a prayer for love or a cardiac ailment. Eyes may symbolize an eye condition, hands or legs may indicate diseases of the limbs, a pair of wedding crowns may imply a prayer for a happy marriage, a torso for illnesses of the body, and so forth. Prayers usually accompany *tamata* rituals. For Tsobanakos, the narrator, *tamata* are fitting objects to sell for a blind man because one *tamata* has to be recognized from another not by sight but by touch. The novel takes the form of a story within a story. Jean Ferrero, a railwayman comes to Tsobanakos to buy a *tamata* for his daughter, Ninon, who is suffering 'everywhere'. The novel brusquely changes its perspective to Ninon's narrative. Ninon, a young woman in her 20s, comes across a man working at a restaurant and he catches her fancy. After talking to this man for a while, she lets herself to be seduced by him and eventually makes love to him the same day. She comes looking for the man the following day only to be told by the chef that the man was an escaped convict and that he had been arrested by the police.<sup>26</sup> Ninon spends her time traveling around Europe and, on a visit to an exhibition in Verona, meets Gino, the son of a scrap-dealer from Lombardy, earning his living as an itinerant salesman. They fall in love eventually. During her courtship with Gino, Ninon notices persistent cold sores on her lips and resolves to see a doctor when they do not go away with time. She is prescribed some tests by the doctor (Dr Gastaldi) and when the test results arrive, Nino discovers, to her utter dismay and devastation, that she is seropositive, that is, she has AIDS. She realizes that she contracted the disease while having sex with the man at the restaurant and feels extremely embittered and livid. She sequesters herself and breaks off contact with Gino who desperately tries to establish communication with her. She

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<sup>26</sup> Berger then fractures the narrative to describe the separate journeys of Ninon's parents – Jean and Zdena – to her wedding.

tells Gino, eventually, that she has contracted AIDS. When she says this, she fully expects to be rebuked and abandoned by Gino, but to her amazement, Gino proposes marriage. Ninon refuses but Gino perseveres in his attentions. Finally, after her friend Marella convinces Ninon, she agrees to get married to Gino. The wedding preparations begin and it is decided that the wedding will take place in Gorino, a town south of Venice where the river Po meets the sea. Jean and Zdena make their separate journeys to be there. The wedding scene itself — a vivid blend of banquet, fest, love, romance, and family accord is an affirmation of life despite the grim presence of disease and death.

Without being too overtly philosophical, the novel is existentialist in conception, dealing as it does with the issues of meaning of life and futility. The geographical landscape that provide a background for the novel is persistently a wasteland. Jean Ferrero, travels on his motorbike through enormous tracts of land and impassable darkness. As he comes closer to the place where his daughter is going to get married, the landscape becomes increasingly bleak. The motorbike journey signifies the closing in of the narrative, indeed a closure. As the landscape darkens and a certain grimness overcomes Jean Ferrero's paths, there is the awareness of foreboding doom. However, even at the furthest edge of this existential doom, there is meaning to be found. The main corpus of the narrative is constituted of Ninon's account of her experiences leading up to the wedding alternating with Tsobanakos' chronicles of the arrangements made by Jean Ferrero and Zdena for their journeys to Venice and the journeys themselves. Jean sets out from his home in southern France on a Honda motorbike, while Zdena boards a bus from Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, which has been a home for her since the fall of the Communist government in Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution.

After Ninon is diagnosed with AIDS, she receives support, compassion and sympathy not only from Gino but also from her parents, friends, and doctors. However, everyone else sees her with unconcealed revulsion. She travels to Milano to find out about a new drug, and after arriving in the city she pays a visit in one evening to see the piazza. After she comes out of the cathedral she takes a stroll through the arcades before a big dog, off its leash, bounds up and starts pawing her. The dog's owner, after assuring Ninon that the dog will not harm her, asks her if he can take her out for a drink. When she refuses, he grabs her arm. She attempts to fight him off, but he forces himself down on her, and finally in out of helpless desperation she tells him that she has AIDS. He throws her to the ground immediately and with such force that she loses her consciousness. When she comes back to her senses, she finds him still there, shouting curses. A middle-aged couple were passing by at that moment. When Ninon asks them for help, the man with the dog warns them by saying: "You know what she is, the man with the dog yelled, she's a slut with SIDA and she wants to spread it, contaminate, infect, that's what she wants to do" (117). Infuriated, the middle-aged woman slipped her heavy handbag from her shoulder and raised it to strike Ninon but is restrained by her husband who says it is none of their affair. Ninon narrates this incident to Jean later with great agony and adds: "The worst wasn't their words. The worst was how they hated. They hated everything about me. Like somebody says they love everything about you, they hated everything. There was nothing left over" (117).

Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1988) grew out of the experience of her battle with cancer. It was an urgent intellectual response against the perpetuation of cultural myths about cancer and their negative effect on patients suffering from the disease. Sontag noticed that in the following decade, the secrecy and shame associated with cancer came to be replaced by AIDS, to a great extent, as the illness most vilified by society.

Sontag contends that the metaphors attached with the ailment not only propagate the stigmas associated with it, but also contribute in stigmatizing patients afflicted with it, causing social ostracism and trauma and rendering the disease and its contraction more devastating. Sontag concedes that the metaphorizing illnesses is not new, but she points out that AIDS provided the readiest opportunity for "metaphorizing" in the 1990s. The fact that there was a growing number of AIDS patients amongst intravenous drug users and homosexual men contributed to stigmatization and stereotyping of AIDS patients. Social perception of AIDS patients is one-sided: the patient is solely held responsible for the patient's contagion resulting from certain seemingly unsafe habits such as sexual deviancy (although AIDS is a heterosexual disease) and use of illegal drugs.

AIDS is perceived as a retribution for an individual's transgression. The emergence of AIDS as a major health concern transformed the attitudes towards the discourses of illness and medicine in the 1990s, and engendered many doubts and misgivings about AIDS. The verdicts on AIDS and patients suffering from it can be still traced subtly in any discussion, and Sontag argues that dissociating the guilt and shame that have come to be associated with the perspectives of this disease, and erasing the martial metaphors from discussions about AIDS, will help generate a fruitful discourse on AIDS and eventually benefit those who have are suffering from the illness.

To explain her views on the many metaphors accredited to AIDS and diseases more generally, Sontag uses several comparisons among AIDS, cancer, and illnesses that have been considered deadly in the past. She points out how major terminal illnesses subsume a patient's entire identity. Earlier, this was especially true of cancer. More than the medical nitty-gritties and diagnostic aspects of the illness, the social impacts of the disease were emphasized and the disease was seen as a disgraceful and

stigmatized condition, so much so that, its mention was often absent from obituaries, and the details about cause of death were not disclosed to the public. In her book, Sontag argues that AIDS has come to substitute the social implications of cancer, and that people suffering from AIDS now undergo a similar, or worse, stigmatization that cancer patients once used to suffer. AIDS has several stages like syphilis, of which the third is the deadliest, and both AIDS and syphilis have a span of dormancy before development. However, whereas syphilis has been occasionally romanticized – many artists who suffered from syphilis, were perceived to have drawn their inspiration and originality from the effects of the disease on the brain – no such recompensing or redeeming aspect has been provided for AIDS. Susan Sontag was writing at a time when AIDS and its status as a terminal ailment were yet to be fully understood.

Sontag scrutinizes a theory concerning comparative acuities of illnesses. She trusts that those illnesses that society perceives as most petrifying are not the most extensive or the most fatal, but those that are perceived to be dehumanizing. As an example, she cites the rabies phobia that plagued 19<sup>th</sup> century France: rabies was essentially extremely rare, and yet was terrifying because people believed that it had the power to turn humans into raving beasts. Fewer people have died of cholera than smallpox, but the "the suddenness with which it struck and the indignity of the symptoms" turned it more terrible. (*Illness* 38-39)

According to Aristotle: "Metaphor is the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy" (*Poetics*). Sontag locates the application of the definitional transferred term to pathology in military and warfare. After it was revealed that diseases were triggered by pathogens, the related metaphors assumed a military association, and military metaphors have ever since governed

discussions about medical conditions. Sontag says: "Disease is seen as an invasion of alien organisms, to which the body responds by its own military operations, such as the mobilizing of immunological "defenses," and medicine is "aggressive," as in the language of most chemotherapies" (97). According to her, this unleashing of martial terminology is a one of the reasons behind the stigmatizing of several illnesses and those who are afflicted with those illnesses.

AIDS, according to Sontag, is linked with the notion of a disease as an intruder, replete with all the military paraphernalia of defence and war. Sontag emphasizes that it is easy for a society that has become habituated to waging ideological wars to hypothesize waging a war against an ailment. The images of AIDS often assume an exceptional character, particularly in reference to the "alien takeover" of the cells of the patient by the intruder. Furthermore, its transmission is often metaphorically compared to pollution. This produces a rift between the general populace and the AIDS patients who are seen to imperil them, and revives an issue not talked about in the modern era: the idea of disease as retribution. This notion is strengthened by the fact that AIDS is sexually transmitted. As AIDS, unlike cancer, is not contracted arbitrarily, AIDS patients are made to feel guilty, ashamed and responsible for their own condition, undergoing the agony because of their own conscious actions.

"Plague" is the principal metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic is understood," (46) argues Sontag. When AIDS is perceived as infecting a "risk group", it harkens back to "the archaic idea of a tainted community that illness has judged" (46). Plague is thought of as an affliction that has arrived to agonize the people of a land from somewhere else. AIDS is mythologized as something to have come from the "dark countries", and something to have spread as a contagion in the West.

Sontag contends that AIDS has produced a new idea of illness, where a patient's illness begins as soon as they are infected, even if they do not exhibit any symptoms. Furthermore, AIDS proved the growing notion that, with the major inventions taking place in the field of modern medicine, no diseases were incurable any longer, leading a revival of the notion of disease as punishment with a minor change: whereas previously it was employed to hypothesize castigation of a society, now it was modified to be a punishment of an individual or a group. Sontag also discusses how the emergence of an incurable sexually transmitted disease like AIDS put an end to, to a considerable extent, the culture of sexual liberty that had existed since the 1970s.

The logical conclusion of Sontag's handling of symbols is that there exists a contentious claim for the "rhetorical ownership of AIDS" (46); preventive and therapeutic measures be protracted to the domain of meanings to eliminate those that impose stigma on the patients. She attributes the military trope of viral invasions to the advent of modern medical thinking concerning the germ theory of illness and the pursuit of antibiotic drugs. However, what Sontag presents in her book is, in essence, an 'idea' of AIDS. Every serious ailment exemplifies an opposition between collective cultural denotation and the continually specific meaning of the lived experience of misery undergone by patients, their family and friends, and also the professionals who provide them with care. The extreme anguish suffered by AIDS patients, the loneliness that results from an almost absolute obsession with nothing but survival as an individual, as a living creature, transcend the 'idea' of AIDS.

The experiences of AIDS patients, greatest in terms of suffering as they may be, can hardly be totalized. Each patient suffers anguish in their own way and each, to draw a metaphor from Sontag, leaves behind the realm of the healthy – passes through a zone

of enfeebling indeterminacy and waiting, and begins preparing for death. It can be argued, contra Sontag, that military metaphors can also benefit some patients and that it is slightly presumptuous to assume that metaphors in general are harmful. For instance, in his short, poignant journal, kept over the course of several months, Emmanuel Dreuilhe, published as *Mortal Embrace: Living with AIDS* (1989), military images prevail: AIDS is a tank crushing everything that comes in its way; AIDS patients, who are mostly male, are symbolized as soldiers who wear mental chastity-belts; the author obstinately battles the compulsion to desert, that is, to die. Dreuilhe witnesses his friends, neighbours and his lover yield to the disease. He expresses wrath, anguish, terror and hope as the illness gradually overcomes his body and his private life. However, he finds some solace in the act of writing the journal which is like a military allegory of the experience of a warrior in battle. He explains that what is jeopardized for the experience of AIDS patients is having to survive under immeasurably menacing circumstances: Dreuilhe's acknowledgement in writing the book, contains a tiny reference to Sontag: "this American edition is the result of the kind and patient efforts of Susan Sontag, Richard Howard, and Steve Wasserman" (2). This AIDS patient's idea, like the soldier's perception of battlefield, has its focal point prejudiced by the real-world demands of survival to salvage a practicable ethical standpoint, but it renders the narrative vital. Dreuilhe exhibits a marked intolerance for commentators on AIDS to an extent that he seems to argue that it is not possible to write about AIDS unless one is suffering from it:

This plague has attracted the inevitable swarm of AIDS researchers, officials, businessmen and journalists, and they are the ones who have monopolized the media. We people with AIDS, who devote each waking moment to our own survival, have been unable to prevent those loquacious experts from stealing our

thunder and robbing us of the only thing we have left: our illness . . . (they) have accumulated a considerable store of information and conclusions about our genes and our mores, our mode of socialization and our myths, but in so doing, they've lost sight of our humanity. (3)

He even speaks of a kind of authority that is bestowed by the contraction of the disease and we wonder if the anticipation of impending death contributes to the urgency to tell what AIDS is really like, the way it is experienced by an AIDS patient: "I can't stand it when civilians talk about AIDS. What do they know about it? How can they claim any authority when they're completely untouched by it, without a simple wound or symptom?" (3)

This ushers in the debate about whether it is possible for an individual to talk about extreme anguish being suffered by another, whether every experience is communicable, or more importantly, comprehensible.

Dreuilhe espouses the very metaphor Sontag critiques:

My personal war began two years ago when I was mobilized by AIDS. . . . On this same corporal survey map, I could also indicate the organs once believed lost to the enemy retaken after bitter fighting, backed up by an artillery barrage of antiviral and sulfa drugs, chemical weapons in that trench warfare which has kept me pinned down for almost two years now. (6-7)

Military symbolism helped Dreuilhe survive and gave reassuring meaning to a battle that is otherwise battle, filling him with the resolution to not give up without resistance.

Dreuilhe points out:

Even more than our immunity, it's our confidence that the virus has destroyed. We no longer believe in ourselves or in all those who have betrayed and deceived us. .

. . . For me, AIDS was first of all the experience of solitude. . . . That's the state to which AIDS patients should aspire: to throw themselves so deeply into the struggle in which they are embroiled that peace and fear melt away, allowing better instincts to prevail over panic and despair. Fight, not flight. (8)

Coming back to Sontag, possibly because of the aspect of her experience with cancer that she chose not to reveal in her writings, Sontag must have understood the difference between the idea and the experience of AIDS.

Reading Dreuilhe simultaneously with Sontag poses a question: can only AIDS patients write about AIDS? This is related to a larger question: are there experiences that can be written about by only those who have undergone them? How much epistemic and experiential validation are required to substantiate narrative claims of writers addressing the most devastating illnesses and the direst of conditions? The questions become even more trenchant when the narrative concerned is fictional, involving fictive characters suffering illnesses that are real.

Coming to Berger, the gruesome, physically debilitating aspects are elided. The novel focuses on how AIDS affects her and the people around her and her relationship with them. It is significant to note that the novel describes the early stages of Ninon's affliction – her life before and after contracting AIDS, and the juncture at which the novel ends we are presented with a wedding – the most traditional and comedic form of happy endings. Although the narrative proleptically looks forward to a future where Ninon's pathological condition will worsen, it stops short of the envisioning of Nino's death. The moments leading up to the unnameable moment of death are described with lyrical fervour:

She will not be able to speak any more. To put a few drops of water into her dried mouth he will have to use a syringe. She will not have the strength to move anything, except her eyes, which will question him, and the tip of her tongue to touch the drops of water. He will lie beside her. And one afternoon she will find the strength to raise her arm so that her hand rests in the air. He will take her hand in his. The turtle ring will be on her fourth finger. Both their hands will stay in the air. The turtle will be swimming outwards, away. And his eyes will follow her into ever. (201)

Tenderness for the narrator of the story consists in the ability of the loved one (Gino) to recognize his beloved just the way she was even when she is dying. Berger, at the cost of aestheticizing the unspeakable horror of AIDS, seems uphold love as a symbolic antidote to the dehumanizing powers of the disease and as a force that bestows dignity to the dying even when the nature of death is the most excruciating and disfiguring. At the wedding, there is no apparent revulsion on the part of the guests, particularly because there are no visible manifestations of the disease as such. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag talks about how patients suffering from disfiguring illnesses face more social ostracism than patients whose illnesses do not show any physical manifestation. The challenge posed by the idea of dealing with AIDS in a fictional narrative is primarily ethical because the inventiveness associated with the act, if not dealt with caution, may run counter to the very 'realness' and urgency of the disease. Representation of AIDS, like the experience of AIDS patients, cannot be totalized. In other words, there can be no single way of representing an experience which is undergone in different magnitudes and with different degrees of agony by different people. The literary author dealing with it in a fictional format must develop certain strategies of representing the disease in connection with social valences lying outside the fictionality of his art.

Berger's strategy of representing AIDS in *To the Wedding* involves inventing numerous voices whose narratives converge on the character and the experiences of the protagonist who has AIDS, in a rather oblique way, with the result that the actuality of the disease is never discussed. The voices create a montage which is almost cinematic in its operation and effect. The predominantly aural thrust of the narrative is created by a melange of ever-shifting voices that come and go throughout the novel without introduction or announcement. These voices have their rationale in the supernatural ability of the central narrator, Tsobanakos, to hear voices: "I remember most of what I hear, and I listen all day but sometimes I do not know how to fit everything together" (3). The indiscriminateness of hearing is not, of course, conducive to storytelling and hence he has to select and he selects "words or phrases which seem to ring true" (3). The act of wilful and discretionary selecting lends the presence of Tsobanakos in the novel considerable degree of authority. His voice works like a narrative container harbouring the other voices in the novel. He does not refer the reader's attention immediately to the pressing issue of Ninon's contraction of AIDS, but instead he jettisons a series of voices that he has 'heard' to form narrative tributaries of sorts that lead to the unnameable and the so-called abomination that is AIDS. While understanding the representation of AIDS in the novel, Tsobanakos' intense listening seems to be the key. Intermittent as they might be, it is worthwhile to review their instances in the novel:

I heard his clothes squeaking as he pulled out a wallet from his pocket. He was wearing leather trousers and a leather jacket. (10)

I will think of her, I said, arranging the money. And as I said this, I suddenly heard a voice. His daughter must have been elsewhere in the market. Now she was beside him. (12)

Voices, sounds, smells bring gifts to my eyes now. I listen or I inhale and then I watch as in a dream. Listening to her voice I saw slices of melon carefully arranged on a plate, and I knew I would immediately recognise Ninon's voice should I hear it again. (12)

Then I heard the voice which had reminded me of the slices of a melon. The same voice but belonging now to a girl of eight or nine. (18)

When I woke up in my room the next day I touched the chair with my clothes on it, and again I heard Ninon's voice as sharply as if she had climbed up a ladder from the street and was sitting on the windowsill. (21)

Let up, you hog! I hear a woman's voice hiss at him. (30)

I hear the whirr of a big hairdryer and the singsong exchange of women speaking in Slovak. Among them, Zdena. (39)

In the same way he begins by presenting their pain. Presenting it to the statue. Through his shoulder blades I hear the words. (53)

The words I hear now are spoken by a chorus of voices. (59)

I heard a woman's voice in Homeric Greek: It's so long, Kallias, since you sailed. (65)

I go outside to where the taxis are waiting and there I hear a man's voice. I don't know whose it is. (102)

I hear a glass object being polished. (113)

The motonave is out of my hearing, and the water makes no noise at all. All is silence now. (123)

I hear a second voice, whispering. (160)

I hear a knife being sharpened and men's laughter. (172)

Tsobanakos' blindness has rendered his listening more acute. He is fond of quoting ancient verses in appropriate contexts. Quotations used in a narrative framework has a twofold function: their inclusion create a kind of resonance within the text with what immediately comes before and after them without the obligation on the author's part to make any direct utterance; and, they help the narrative in which they are used to be connected, albeit in an unfinished, unresolved kind of a way to the original context from which the quotation is drawn. Tsobanakos' good memory and perceptive listening reiterate his role as a collector of stories. He claims to remember most of what he hears, and the fact that he listens all day and the sheer outpouring of verbiage around him makes it difficult for him to craft a narrative out of all the 'heard' material: "sometimes I do not know how to fit everything together. When this happens I cling to words or phrases which seem to ring true" (165). He recounts how the story of Jean Ferrero began with Ferrero looking for a tamata. Ninon's disease is not revealed at the outset.

Apart from the overarching presence of Tsobanakos' voice, there are two other voices that drive the narrative of *To the Wedding* forward – those of Jean and Zdena as they travel separately across Europe to the fishing village situated where the river Po meets the ocean. While Jean rides his motorbike through the Alps and across the Po valley, Zdena, embarks upon her journey from Czechoslovakia, the country she fled during the Soviet clampdown at the wake of the Prague Spring of 1968 and to which she went back when Ninon was six years old. We hear, in the course of reading the novel, Ninon's voice too. She is characterized as a beautiful, independent, strongminded, young woman craving for new experiences in life. Of course, her life changes totally

after she comes to know that she has AIDS. Her attempt to break off her engagement with Gino is symptomatic of the irreversible change and isolation brought about by the disease: she becomes an individual whom society is going to abandon sooner or later and before it does so, she prepares for the abandonment by erasing the notion of a future that she had so lovingly envisioned with Gino. The narrative structuration of the novel is performative. Tsobanakos' narration is aimed to contain the other voices and prevent them from getting lost, dispersed in a way that is parallel to the way a *tama* would 'contain' a prayer. Tsobanakos elucidates this connection in his brief clarificatory postlude: "The tama of a heart in tin was not sufficient. I was troubled from the moment the signalman said "Everywhere" and I knew—or I thought I knew—what it meant. Another tama was needed, made this time not in tin but with voices. Here it is. Place it by the candle when you pray..." (202) This trope of maintaining a barrier between the interior and the exterior recurs throughout the novel. For instance, music is used as a metaphor for a palliative that soothes the afflicted by protecting them from the harsh forces that are raging within and without. Palliative metaphors in the novel are employed to keep the barrier intact against any kind of fluidity that would contaminate the sanctity of the body as social and biological entity.

Susan Sontag contends that AIDS has a double metaphor of invasion and contamination. Elizabeth Grosz, while discussing the issues of bodily fluids and contamination in her book, *Volatile Bodies* (1994), employs the notion of 'dirt' in Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966), Jean Paul Sartre's idea of 'viscous' as presented in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and Julia Kristeva's concept of 'abject' delineated in *Powers and Horrors* (1980). Douglas claims that dirt subverts normative borders and "befuddles order" (Groz 192). There are similarities between Kristeva's categories of abjection and Douglas' notions of upsetting order. Kristeva hypothesizes three classes

of abjection: abjection to food or the dread of corporeal integration, abjection to waste (displayed in fear of death and the cadaver, and abjection to significations of sexual difference. Fluids are integral to an understanding of contagion: “fluids attest to the permeability of the body”: a kind of fear that the body will collapse into this other body (Grosz 193). Fluids diffuse the corporeal charting of how we figuratively comprehend or construct our bodies and envision their limits. For Sartre, the viscous signifies an interstice between solid and liquid. Fluidity operates schismatically within the ‘body’ of stories in the sense that there is a constant interaction between the tropes of porousness and permeability. The dignity of Ninon’s ailing, disintegrating body is preserved by her loved ones as well as the author and narrator of the novel in different ways. Ninon’s parents and her lover treat her the same as before without any overt pity and superfluous kindness. “Tenderness is a refusal to judge,” (sdeslimbes 15:04) Berger says elsewhere, and in *To the Wedding*, tenderness takes on exactly this character: Ninon is not judged for contracting a disease that is usually associated with sexual promiscuity and deviancy. The writer of the novel and the narrator exhibit tenderness in being able to craft a mode of narration that is non-invasive and sensitive to the suffering of Ninon. The overarching symbol of this tenderness in the novel is the *tama* and how it figuratively arrests fluidity (or contagion) and ‘contains’ the organ that is affected by disease. The same trope of containment is visible in Ninon’s interpretation of models of ancient Egyptian homes at the exhibition in Verona that she visits with her friend, Marella:

I look at everything. As if they lived next door. The numbers in the street are a bit crazy. They’re 3000 B.C., and we’re A.D. 2000, but there they are next door. I find a model of one of their houses: kitchen, bathroom, dining room, garage for the chariot.

The walls have niches for your body. Niches cut out to fit the shoulders, waist, hips, thighs ... like cake tins which mould sponge cakes, but these are for bodies in all their beauty. Bodies to be protected like secrets. They loved protection, the Egyptians. (46)

Protection, preservation and sustenance are recurring themes in Berger's work that are represented in various forms, both abstract and tangible. Sometimes the power that protects the fragile is also the power that illuminates. The narrative of *To the Wedding*, with all balmy tenderness, conceals the indignity to be brought about by AIDS but also recognizes the pain. This dual function of tender narrating, ubiquitous in Berger's fiction and non-fiction is demonstrably exemplified in a passage from *Once in Europa*, where the narrator describes the blossoming of a wild poppy and how it opens its bud followed by the gradual changing of the petals' colour from light pink to scarlet: "It is as if the force that split the calyx were the need of this red to become visible and to be seen" (111).

Coming back to the fluidity-containment dialectic, fluidity operates in the novel primarily through voices. The narrator weaves a texture where the thread of each voice overlaps and intersects with other voices. With a touch of magical realism, Berger lends his primary narrator, Tsobanakos, the ability to hear voices travelling on the ether like radio waves in real time from places where he is not present physically; Tsobanakos is also given the power to listen to voices from distant times. This supernatural ability to be anywhere sonically is reminiscent of Berger's description of the ubiquity of the film camera in his analysis of Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929). The entire narrative of the novel is full of sensuous details that impinge on the consciousness of the blind narrator. We are made to experience the world as it is experienced by him – a

world abounding with voices, sounds, smells and tactile sensations. Tsobanakos figures as a radio receiver, who collects voices and then transmits some of them back at the readers, lending the novel its aural/oral storytelling air and its dreamlike, fluid quality.

Throughout the novel, voices appear to be narrating events that are taking place concurrently, but they are actually not. These voices interweave a contrapuntal texture of utterances and fragments that help unfold Ninon's story: the meeting of her parents, her childhood, her sexual encounter with a stranger that leads to her seropositivity, her preparation for her early death. They also perform an empathetic function in the way they generate a corpus of tender perceptions. Empathy is perceived as a capacity to give, to offer unconditionally, to make providence for. Ninon realises that her capacity to empathize has been taken away with the affliction. She says with heart wrenching agony: "I have nothing. All, all, all, all, all I had has been taken. ... The gift of giving myself has been taken away. If I offer myself, I offer death" (79).

The point in the novel where we leave her, her condition will worsen but Gino is solidly grounded in the present and therefore he refuses to abandon Ninon. The idea of marriage becomes coincidental with the wedding. His resoluteness, his refusal to abandon her, and his commitment to their marriage pushes back against the future. Gino lives in the moment, and in this moment, there is nothing but his love for Ninon and his determination to marry her.

Jean's motorbike ride through the Po valley gives Berger the opportunity to describe evocative details in concurrence to the natural world – birds, the river Po, the shifting lights and colours, the wafting breeze in the trees; and, also, to stand witness to the plundering of nature along the river, the emerging towns and factories, the pollution of the river and garbage-strewn banks. Through this landscape, "Driver and motorbike

pass through, attuned as if they were a single creature, like a kingfisher when it flies low over the water” (44).

In Torino, a woman tells Jean that the river Po underneath them is polluted. The pollution of the river offers a sort of a counterpoint to the AIDS contamination. The Po has a significant role in the novel. Gino crosses its perilous waters to guide Ninon safely to a marooned island. The river harbours eels, whose story is related at a momentous instant at the wedding, and it is also where the fishes come from. The river also offers a location where the wedding can take place. Jean’s motorbike ride to his daughter’s wedding parallels the movement of the Po and at the cost of sounding clichéd, it may be said that the river signifies the journey of life. It also represents the movement of the narrative that is hurtled towards the future, inexorably making its way across the topographies of experiences to the sea, which is actually the closure. The idea of closure is conflated with the idea of containment and this is precisely the reason behind the concluding reference to the *tama* as a symbol of the ‘body’ of the narrative.

Federico, Gino’s father, comes to know about Ninon’s illness, he tries to talk Gino out of the marriage. His interior monologue is also a helpless plea to Gino: “You want to give this Frenchwoman everything you can. Then separate things out. You love her. She’s going to die. So are we all. She’s going to die soon. Then be quick. You can’t have children, you can’t risk passing that abomination on to another generation” (100). When he fails to convince him, out of extreme desperation, he plans to kill Ninon. He justifies his plan: “She’ll be spared a lot of suffering, she’s condemned anyway. And like this Gino will be saved” (100). The possibility of the emergence of Federico as an antagonist with the potential to upset the happy ending (Nino and Gino’s marriage) is prevented by a metanoia on his part. When he sees Ninon, he is filled with deep

tenderness and pity and empathizes with her pain: “I got too close, Gino, I saw the pain in her eyes, so much pain there was no room for more. Then she started to laugh and I couldn’t do it” (101). This brings to mind, but in no way resembles, the scene where Ninon visits the man from whom she got AIDS in prison. When she sees the man’s present condition which has worsened due to the progress of AIDS, she realizes that she is going to fall into a similar situation in the near future. Federico reconciles to the fact that his son is going to marry a woman suffering from AIDS and accepts it tenderly. There is an ambiguity about the following passage and, given the seemingly random and unprepared appearances and disappearances of voices within the narrative, it is not entirely confirmed whether it is spoken by him: “The ancients believed that metals were engendered underground, all of them, engendered by the coupling of mercury with sulphur. Use a *capote*, Gino, and marry her. You’ll be marrying a woman, not a virus. Scrap isn’t trash, Gino. Marry her” (101). The porosity of the narrative is reiterated by such ambiguities and heighten the sense of aporia.

*To the Wedding* is a novel about overcoming. Tsobanakos overcomes his blindness. He was not always blind, just like Ninon was not always afflicted with AIDS. This is probably why he empathizes with her and understands what it feels like to be impaired in one’s life suddenly, and the incredible changes an impairment brings about. After he became blind, he started selling *tamas*. Before his blindness, what he used to do, he does not reveal: “What I did before I went blind, I’m not going to tell you. And if you had three guesses they’d all be wrong” (2). Jean overcomes his private demons by reconciling with the fact that his daughter is going to die, and by making his way to the wedding, on his motorbike. Sometimes these ways of overcoming take gestural forms. For example, Zdena attributes meaning to the minutest of actions, like the act of sleeping on Ninon’s bed. She constantly arranges the contents of her handbag before

starting out for the wedding, seeing it as a task to give it an order of sorts: “At present she is taking objects one by one out of her handbag and placing them methodically on her lap or on her folded coat” (23). Zdena visits a bird-call (bird call imitation instrument) seller to buy a device that would produce the calls of a song thrush and when asked by the seller as to why she is buying it, she answers: “A thrush sings outside my house every morning and I hope your invention will—how can I say? —speak to the thrush in my daughter’s head!” (23) This she does in order to make Ninon, who will leave her home to live with Gino, feel at home after marriage. This is one way of overcoming, on Zdena’s part, the tragedy of her daughter’s impending death. The characters in the novel do not deny the inevitable future but they try to confront the question ‘what can they do now?’ with momentous intensity. In *A Fortunate Man*, Berger asks: “What is the value of a life saved?” (164) and in *To the Wedding*, the question transforms into “What is the value of a life lived?” with Berger retaining all the sense of empathy and compassion that he celebrates in the personage of Dr Sassall in the former book. The novel can be read as a response to the idea that bad things can happen to good people. This response is twofold: first, the religious connotation of *tama* as a votive ritual offering reiterate the need for prayer that may or may not be fulfilled; second; the very novel as a narrative text may be seen as a literary stance to unforeseen tragedy. In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, Berger talks about the function of literature in helping an individual develop a stance, a behaviour toward certain situations: “Something that people don't talk about very much. And may be...of course it has actually changed a great deal because of the new media and television. But until 50 years ago, it seems to me, there was another function of books – way more superficial but at the same time, very important, which is that, when you were young in reading books you also learnt how to behave in certain situations” (38:04) Towards the beginning of the novel, Tsobanakos first hears Jean’s voice asking to buy a *tama*.

Subsequently, another voice enters Tsobanakos' auditory compass and he realises that Jean is now joined by his daughter who has just bought a pair of sandals from another part of the marketplace. Tsobanakos hears her say, "Maybe I bought them for my wedding, the one that didn't happen" (*To the Wedding* 39) Thus, perhaps the wedding did not take place after all and perhaps the entire novel is a fictive re-imagining of events. The possibility that the entire novel may have been Tsobanakos' fictional account of two people he met at the marketplace, and likelihood that the novel is doubly fictive, jeopardizes the 'happy ending' status of the novel and poses a question: is the act of marrying an AIDS patient too incredible to happen in reality?<sup>27</sup> – that too, a wedding which takes place with total boisterousness and vitality.

Sociologically speaking, marriage plays several roles. In most cases, it makes the social identification of children possible by consolidating kinship bonds to a mother, father, and near or distant relatives. In the novel, the marriage that is being depicted, and that serves as a fulcrum round which the narrative turns, is understood to be short and childless. And yet, there is no sense of incompleteness. In fact, there is a sense of superabundance of food, music and dance at the wedding. The wedding guests behave just the way they do at other weddings. Ninon's disease is totally forgotten in the riotousness of the party:

The wedding guests are becoming a single animal who has fed well. A strange creature to find in a widow's orchard, a creature half mythical, like a satyr with thirty heads or more. Probably as old as man's discovery of fire, this creature never lives more than a day or two and is only reborn when there's something more to celebrate. (197)

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<sup>27</sup> This question, however, is asked through Tsobanakos' narrative which itself is fictional.

This prospect of joy, is deepened by the food and by the band which plays loud music “to keep out the din of the world” (193). Again, the image of containment predominates. Music empathetically contains and protects the festivity by drowning other sounds exterior to the wedding. In fact, there is an incredible image of music entering Ninon’s body and metastasizing like an antidote:

The beat enters Ninon’s bloodstream defying the number of lymphocytes, NKs, Beta 2s. Music in my knees for Gino, her body says, music under my shoulder blades, across my pelvis, between each of my white teeth, up my arse, in my holes, in the curly black parsley on my crotch, under my arms, down my oesophagus, everywhere in my lungs, in my bowel which goes down and my bowel which comes up, there is music for Gino, music in the little bones of my fingers, in my pancreas and in my virus which will kill, in all we fucking can’t do, and in the unanswerable questions my eyes ask, there is music playing with yours, Gino. (137)

The characters resist the inimicality of the world and try to find meanings in their life and activities. Notwithstanding its grim subject matter, at the end of the book the tenor is one of hope and glory. Despite Tsobanakos’ blindness, there are cinematic impulses in the narrative that begin to be increasingly prominent as the narrative nears its end. As Ninon and Gino dance gleefully at their wedding, Tsobanakos meditates on a filmic evocation of flickering sequences from their future. The tonality of this meditation does not differ very much from the tenderness which lace the description of the wedding, despite the fact of Ninon’s worsening physical condition. The images evoked by him are one of homely warmth and joy:

Gino will push her in a wheelchair like the one the fisherman’s brother-in-law has, when she doesn’t any more have the strength in her legs to walk, and Federico will invent and weld on to its armrests a special table so she will be able to eat in the chair.

Now she touches Gino's cheek and turns to dance alone for him. Poised like a bird facing the wind, she lets herself veer and be swept back over the same spot again and again and again whilst her hands pluck the rhythms from the air. (199)

Empathy as presented in the novel is dynamic, orienting itself with activities and movements, however insignificant they might seem at first, and outspreading their possibility beyond the ethics of narrative empathy. The novel presents a different way of dealing with ethical criticism in relation to the issues of attention and response to the depiction of anguish, and a mode of carrying out a deconstruction of the role of the reader as an empath. In large part, it is reminiscent of Emmanuel Levinas' emphasis of endless responsibility towards the inaccessible other and the prioritizing of moral commitment over knowledge.

Empathy – usually understood to be the capacity to comprehend and share the emotional state of another—is frequently regarded as a critical basis for ethical action. Empathy is generally contingent on apparent likeness, a feeling of sameness; it is easier to empathize with a member of one's community or species. However, when it comes to establishing an ethical connection and showing empathy towards the Other who is fundamentally different from us, the task becomes a somewhat more demanding. In *To the Wedding*, goes from being a member of the community of the unafflicted to being a member of HIV-affected community. This change in the medical-ontological status problematizes the approaches of the empaths around her: they have to reorient their empathy from a feeling they exhibit for someone who is their own to a responsibility that they shoulder towards someone who is still their own but at the same time is afflicted with a disease that is an abomination and that must be kept out of the community's biopolitical peripheries. This reorientation presupposes a certain dynamism on the part of the characters who are close to Ninon in the novel. This

internal, psychological empathetic configuration and reconfiguration is paralleled by the movement of the narrative and the shifts of topographies, situations, etc. The movements related to dance and music are particularly significant in how they influence the narrative, choreographing scenes, dialogues, descriptions as the narrative unfolds. The culmination of this choreography takes place in the wedding dance which signifies an irrepressible celebration of life and love. The following *rembetiko* (A Greek musical form) offers a paean to life:

Drive Death out of the yard

So I don't have to meet him.

And the clock on the wall

Leads the funeral dirge. (189)

Berger's description of the novel's ending is dreamy, montage-like and almost minimalistic. It is also elegiac in the sense that it celebrates life over death – or rather a death that is about to happen – and meditates on the meaning of life as it is lived in the present.

To conclude, the novel is as much about the possibility and the limitations of understanding the pain of another as it is about AIDS. It has autobiographical elements that are characteristically diffuse: Berger's daughter-in-law contracted AIDS and eventually succumbed to the diseases. However, these elements are beyond the thematic scope of this chapter. Berger deals deftly with the issues of narrativity, tenderness, empathy and disease in this novel and seems to argue through his narrative that, although experiences of others suffering cannot be either communicated or comprehended in their entirety, one should not stop assuming and formulating different stances or attitudes to the pain of others with the full knowledge that the other is eternally inaccessible.

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## Chapter 2: Storytelling and the Spectral Afterlife of Texts

This chapter discusses the continuing afterlife or survival of experiences through storytelling in the light of Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Task of the Translator" where he identifies translation as one of the two ways of ensuring the survival of a text. Berger is always conscious of the unforeseeability of the nature of reception of a text or its transformation in the future. This is in line with Benjamin's ideas about the significance of historical events manifesting themselves through a network of experiences and events (to use his image, constellations) in a non-linear way. Derrida's distinction between the future and l'avenir is also used to theorize certain key passages in Berger. The idea of 'likeness' is further theorized in this chapter to discuss Berger's discoveries of visual links between works such as Alborta's post mortem photo of Guevara (1967), Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632) and Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1490). This has affinities with Aby Warburg's *pathosformel*, a kind of gesture language or vocabulary of visual tropes that recur throughout images and icons in Western Europe. This chapter also discusses different roles of the storyteller: as a witness to death and disappearance, and an inheritor of fragmented experiences: the counsels received from dead people in the highly autobiographical *Here is Where We Meet* (2005), the struggles of peasant life in *Pig Earth* epitomized by the figure of Lucie Cabrol; as an editor and compiler of prison letters.

### 3.1 Translation and Survival: Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"

At the outset of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator", there is a startling, quasi-aphoristic and somewhat counterintuitive statement: "No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener" (69). This oft-quoted statement, with its typical Benjaminian epigrammatic intent, serves as

an appropriate point of departure for the subsequent argumentation in the essay that is devoted to critiquing the notion that the relationship between a work of art and its receivers is linear and quantifiable. Furthermore, it is an apposite way of making a case for the practice of translation as a valid mode of transmission of a text to unforeseen and unforeseeable situations. The intention behind the creation and transmission of a text, according to Benjamin, does not take into consideration the question of an ideal receiver whose eventual reception of the text, following a linear trajectory of informational transmission, would give the text its necessary completion. The work of art or the text – and Benjamin primarily focuses on the literary text – does not reach its destiny upon being received by an intended audience: the intention active behind the processes of creation is more concerned with the complexities and contingencies involved in the continuing afterlife of the created object rather than a simplistic set of efforts carried out by the author to adduce certain specific and calculated responses from the audience or the reader or the spectator. Translation is a mode which “issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife” (71). The intention behind the original is primarily characterised by a desire to be propelled messianically into a future that is indistinct and beyond the reach of the translator’s understanding.

To the extent that the idea of futurity is suitably uncategorisable in its relation to the structures of reception, Benjamin’s remark, “no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” can be interpreted in another way: perhaps Benjamin’s actual implication behind this pithy sentence is that the intention of the original work of art looks forward to a time when the generic relations between art forms and their traditionally appointed receivers (poem-reader, picture-beholder, symphony-listener) will no longer have the same valence as they have been understood to have so far, and that one form of art will be received by an audience

meant for another form of art. Benjamin is perhaps also emphasising the importance of the experience that lies before the act of creation. In fact, Benjamin's own approach to writing is often marked by free and idiosyncratic incorporation of eclectic melanges of fragments, anecdotes, quotations, apparently unstructured digressions and almost ubiquitous display of brilliant albeit highly eccentric scholarship that is difficult to categorise in terms of genre. "Insight," says Leon Wieseltier in his Preface to *Illuminations*, was for Benjamin "a variety of intoxication" (ix). And what were more important to him were the afterlife of the insight and the multiplicity of forms it could be allowed to assume in the future. Benjamin's refusal to write rigorous philosophy, it can be argued, stemmed from the realisation that the kinds of experience that interested him could only be written about in the free-essay form that allowed him to be provocative, elliptic and witty. Furthermore, the nature of his "insight" demanded a radically different approach to writing. The remark from "The Author as Producer" that "the tendency of a literary work can be politically correct only if it is also literarily correct" (80) is symptomatic of the literary tendentiousness of his own writing. One broad theme that arises out of not only his writing but also his life is the theme of survival. This theme underlines his final and futile gesture of ensuring the survival of, what his friend Gershom Scholem thought was, the early manuscript of *Passagen-Werk* before he committed suicide in 1940 at Port Bou in Spain. In "The Marvels of Walter Benjamin", J.M. Coetzee remarks:

By his heroic if futile effort to save his manuscript from the fires of fascism and bear it to what he thinks of as the safety of Spain and, further on, the United States, Benjamin becomes an icon of the scholar for our times. The story has a happy twist. A copy of the Arcades manuscript left behind in Paris had been secreted in the Bibliothèque Nationale by Benjamin's friend Georges Bataille (New York Review).

As a writer Benjamin constantly looked for modes of expression that would ensure survival of certain memories and experiences threatened in the face of obliteration by ravaging forces of capitalism. Benjamin as a collector of experiences relied primarily on the art of storytelling for the transmission of knowledge that he has salvaged as a historian. The lyrical image of seeds in his essay “The Storyteller” exemplifies his intent as a collector of endangered experiences. Between the bequeathment of what has been received and the inheritance of what is salvaged, there is inevitable transformation. It signifies the juncture, for Benjamin, where the work of art as a compendium of experiences gets its political and aesthetic validity. It is also the interstice where the afterlife of the work of art is unleashed to an indefinite future. Criticism and translation are two intellectual modes that lend a work of art its afterlife. Of these two modes, Benjamin accords a more important position to translation with regard to the question of afterlife. He asserts that “the concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life” (“Task” 71). The recognition of the historicity of a work entails understanding and releasing the vitality inherent in it. Translation, as Benjamin understands it, approaches the work as if it were a living organism. He makes a case for the life of a work of art that is “not limited to organic corporeality” (71). A discussion about this kind of conceptualisation of “life” or the being of an aesthetic/literary work is necessary to understand the potential relevance that Benjaminian idea of translation can have for storytelling as a mode of preservation of experience. To call Benjamin a storyteller would be farfetched but the extent to which the tendentiousness of his oeuvre has in common with traditional storytelling cannot be underestimated.

The word ‘afterlife’ generally refers to a metaphysical condition that can be conceived as lying outside, beyond or after the duration of lived time. The life of a living thing

follows a trajectory that is unilinear and is hurtled towards the future: it has its origin in birth and end in death. However, it is only one of the many trajectories that life follows. The perception and retention of sense-impressions by the consciousness, the operations of memory, the ways in which experiences influence the interaction with the same or other living organisms, undermine the idea that life is nothing more than an accumulation of data over the passage of unilinear time. The possibility of reducing life to a set of definitions is further complicated by the incalculable number of lives that interact with and influence the life of an organism. The philosophical category of experience has its origin in the interaction between the lived times of two or more living things. The experiences may assume a variety of forms, ranging from the materialistic to the spiritual. Memory and dreams may have important parts to play in how experiences are structured. The interaction between the lived times of two living things may be direct or mediated, empirical or rational; and there may exist a relation between them of cohesion or collision. Meaning and mystery, therefore, remain the twin ingredients of life: meaning, because the convergences of experiences can be recognized and understood; mystery, because the likeness produced by such convergences occurs in a flash and can never be predicted or measured. It is not possible to talk about life in a general and abstract way. Life of a plant or a tree manifests itself differently from the life of a human being. The life of every living organism is governed by a set of laws essentially involving its biological possibilities and limitations. It goes without saying that the lives of two creatures belonging to the same species have certain things in common. Although, their lives are similar, they are not identical. Biologically, they are restricted by an identical set of genetic codes and structures that decide the extent of the empirical experiences that they can acquire either actively or passively. Yet, each member of a given species experiences the world in a unique manner. We

may say that the restriction imposed is a factor that hinders their active agency to experience (or experiment with) the world, whereas the uniqueness and variety of their experiences have their origin in the capacity of the organism for passive acceptance of empirical data. It can be argued that the impulse to envision an 'afterlife' derives from the desire to actively experience the world beyond the immediate limitations imposed by biological and genetic imperatives.

If we extend this formulation to include the 'life' of a literary text, the field upon which a text comes alive and starts to operate becomes apparent. The life of a literary text begins with its birth in the act of writing which is followed by the mechanical processes involving transmission and circulation of the text. The first life of the text is completed with the reception of the text by its immediate audience. The word 'immediate' can come to imply the intended readers if the writer has any, or the readers who read the work while the writer is still alive if the work is published during his lifetime. The notion of a total and all-inclusive reception of a literary text is fallacious and the contingencies involved in the reader-writer interface, incalculable. To go back to the earlier qualification of the living organism as an entity whose desire to envision an 'afterlife' derives from the limitations imposed by its specious conditions, literary texts can be perceived as having an organic life of their own in their ability to transcend the specificities of the conditions of their immediate production, and in their capacity to cross over to a rather incalculable zone of messianic possibilities. The crucial word in Benjamin's deadpan formulation – "*No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener*" is 'intended'. The *intentio* of the text is not predicated upon its reception – reception is something that is considered too final, too calculative by the text. The subject-position of the text is invested with an organic life that allows it to choose the modes that will salvage it into its continuing afterlife. And

in so far as the question of intention does not include the liability to bridge the gap between the ontological positions of the text and its reader, the life of a text is always and already its afterlife.

Benjamin identifies translation as a mode and points out that 'translatability', or the law governing the translation, recognizes and selects the potential translator for the text. This idea that the translator rather than selecting, is selected implies that the text is given a subjective power and agency with which it unlocks the infinite sets of literary, aesthetic and political possibilities that its author could not have foreseen. The mechanical reproduction of a work of art performs a similar function in that it unleashes the political potential in the work while demystifying the aura surrounding it. However, the use of a text or a work of art is governed by the extent to which the text or the work of art lends itself to being used. 'Translatability' cannot be entirely equated with 'reproducibility' because translatability of a text is not affected by the temporary unavailability of translators, whereas, reproducibility is totally dependent upon the availability of material means of reproduction. When a work of art is created, the idea of its reproducibility is restricted to the available means of reproduction. And before the advent of photography, as Benjamin has shown, the work of art used to be surrounded by an aura characterised by uniqueness. It is only when photography as a mode of mechanical reproduction appeared on the scene that the question arose whether reproducibility was an inherent characteristic that was already there or was it something that came into existence with the coming into existence of photography. The political implications of mass production and mechanical reproduction are great. A work of art can be political in its conception, or it can be used in order to perform certain political functions, or both. But political consideration is only one of the many considerations of reproduction. Since the consideration of the ideal receiver does not prove fruitful, we

may say that reproducibility of a work of art is more subservient to technologies to come. The idea that reproducibility oscillates between the reproductions made heretofore and the unforeseeable forms of reproductions to come, create a structure of haunting. The predictable futurity of things as well as the wholly unpredictable and unscheduled arrival of what Derrida would call *l'avenir* informs this structure. Yet, both translation and reproduction – not only mechanical but also technological and digital – are factors that influence the work's itinerary. Benjamin sees this trajectory as a series of phases: "The history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame" (71). The idea of fame is based upon historical recognition or a belated understanding of a work. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin situates fame within the matrix of a work's continuing life: "Historical "understanding" is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the "afterlife of works," in the analysis of "fame," is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general" (460).

Benjamin distinguishes between bad translation and good translation. According to him, inferior translation is "the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content" (70).<sup>28</sup>

Translations are not varieties of the original but the arena (position, ground, theatre) of the original's *fortleben* (afterlife). They comprise the original's unpredictable afterlife

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<sup>28</sup> If translatability can be equated with the narratability of experiences, Berger's mode of storytelling is arguably more suitable than that of someone like Kenneth Clark whose *Civilisation* (1969) Berger set out to attack in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), because what we find in Berger's writing is the experience that gave rise to the work of art and not a history of its possessions and the commercial minutiae related to the work – in Benjamin's language, the inessential content.

or the stage(s) of endurance. The suffix *fort* suggests that the life (*leben*) of the translation is at a remove from the original – a displacement that is both spatial and temporal. In the words of Betsy Flèche, “The translator disappears, the original text and its author fall away and the unimportant in the translation's separate life” (“Art of Survival” 4).

### **3.2 The Metaphysics of Experience and the Craft of Storytelling**

Coming back to Berger – his conceptualisation of the idea of fame of works of art is an extension of and a variation on this theme, and read in conjunction with Benjamin’s idiosyncratic and peripatetic ideas, can offer potentially productive discursive points of departures, notwithstanding the wide difference in historical examples that Benjamin and Berger base their arguments on. Berger’s emphasis falls on moments of recognition, or rather on the momentousness of recognition: the interface between the experience of the creation of a work of art and the experience of a reader/listener/viewer accessing it. The ‘fame’ of a work of art, for Berger, is not restricted to the history of its ownership, the commercial valuation it undergoes in its various stages of reception, the prizes and accolades bestowed on it: its significance lies in the transmissibility of the experience that oversees its creation and its unforeseen assumption of a humanistic value in a future time. For Berger, who remained a Marxist till the end, fame is related to the recognition of the dignity of experience and the labour that is invested to transform that experience into a work of art. Criticism, which Benjamin characterises as “another, if a lesser, factor in the continued life of literary works” (“Translator” 71), becomes a vital mode for Berger for the preservation of the dignity of labour and the need for recognition. The primacy given by Berger to the ‘use value’ of a work of art over its ‘commercial value’, to use Benjaminian phrases, is echoed in the following

remark by Hannah Arendt in her introduction to *Illuminations*: “Posthumous fame is one of Fama’s rarer and least desired articles, although it is less arbitrary and often more solid than other sorts, since it is only seldom bestowed upon mere merchandise” (1). The question of afterlife and the belated recognition that underlies that question is summarised in a passage from Berger’s Preface to *Portraits*, remarkable because of its use of the present tense (a fixture of Berger’s writing) and the economy with which it describes his *modus operandi*:

Having looked at a work of art, I leave the museum or gallery in which it is on display, and tentatively enter the studio in which it was made. And there I wait in the hope of learning something of the story of its making. Of the hopes, of the choices, of the mistakes, of the discoveries implicit in that story. I talk to myself, I remember the world outside the studio, and I address the artist whom I maybe know, or who may have died centuries ago. Sometimes something he has done replies. There’s never a conclusion. Occasionally there’s a new space to puzzle both of us. Occasionally there’s a vision which makes us both gasp – gasp as one does before a revelation. (i)

The reference to the apparently innocuous act of leaving the museum or gallery is reminiscent of how he describes storytelling in *Bento’s Sketchbook*: “Outcome: like coming out of a house or residence, coming out into the street... how the listener or reader or spectator leaves the story to continue their ongoing lives” (71). Stories, to extend this metaphor, constitute the space where the experiences are housed and hence their relation to architectural organisation of inhabited space is integral to their telling. Often, with Berger, stories begin with an idea of place. The outcome of a story, like the

afterlife of a work of art, is incalculable.<sup>29</sup> So is the plurality of their origin: “The number of lives that enter our own is incalculable” (*Here is Where We Meet* 161). The function of the storyteller is to release the energies latent in the stories and propel them towards a future where the significance of stories is created anew historically and politically.

If translation is a mode which allows the text to be salvaged from time to time in the form of afterlives, it can be said that the life of a text can co-exist along with its afterlives. In this sense, the prefix ‘after’ can be understood to be a presence that manifests itself through translations and criticisms and activates, as it were, the life of the text and prevents it from lapsing into stagnation that comes with calculated reception. It assumes what Derrida, in a footnote to Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” calls a “spectral logic of inheritance and generations, but a logic turned toward the future no less than the past, in a heterogeneous and disjointed time” (*Specters* 228). The idea of reception in Berger is amorphous because it is not predicated upon linearity of temporal sequence of events. The notion of the “ideal receiver” is replaced by the figures from the past or the future with whom the storytelling voice engages in a dialogue. Very frequently this dialogue is visual or auditory. The addresses to Rosa Luxemburg, Yasmin Hamdan, or Nazim Hikmet are instances where Berger’s dialogic intent becomes apparent: by engaging their works or particular aspects of their being with his thoughts, he attempts to reach an amorphous and ineffable zone where the joints of time and space are unhinged; where, to use Benjaminian parlance again, a certain kind of messianicity comes to replace homogeneous empty time. Often these addresses and invocations to dead historical

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<sup>29</sup> From the perspective of writing or telling of stories, however, the afterlife of stories does not matter so much as their ending. All stories begin with their end, Berger observes in his interview with Silverblatt.

personages are accompanied by an assumption that there is a commonality and communicability of experiences across time and therefore the experiences underwent by these personages and the ones being witnessed at the present time are connected.

Peter Hitchcock has pointed out that “If Berger sometimes seems less concerned with the authority of his narrative voice, he does not let go of its gnawing status within his world of seeing” (“Sensing Class” 15-16). It may be argued that he allows this voice to be pliable, flexible and spectral by letting other voices from the past or the future to inhabit it. The way the stories are organised in his books, often through an interlinked network of geographically proximate experiences, evoke an architectural accommodation of wandering voices. This gives the storytelling voice of Berger its haunted and ‘time-less’ quality. Berger himself has consciously tried to avoid authorial interventions: “In a way, it seems to me that the more the writer can retire, the more the reader can come into that space that the storyteller, the writer, occupied and be really close to what is being told” (*A Touch of Grace*). The narrative voice gains a kind of elusive authority when it tries to negotiate what Hitchcock calls “the incommensurable space between the intensely local and the philosophically global” (16). As a storyteller, Berger’s immediate audience were the peasant community about whom he wrote. In being able to narrate the stories to people about whom the stories were written in the first place, Berger’s position as a storyteller was rare. Susan Sontag has pointed this out in an interview with Berger: “If you are actually reading your stories to people who know the characters on whom they are based of course you have an experience which is extremely rare for a contemporary writer” (*Everything has its first time*, 00:43:51). This explains why Berger’s stories often presume a feeling of intimacy between the teller and the listener. The individual listener or the reader is given a primacy with regard to interpretation and this is accomplished through a gesture of self-effacement.

Berger comments on the presence-absence dialectic of the storyteller's position, the modification of which is a part of the storyteller's craft: "There is a strange dialectic in storytelling, I think, which is that the less the storyteller insists upon his own presence, and goes away, the more he leaves the space for the reader and that's very, very important – this kind of complicity, this sort of wink with the reader" (Everything has its first time, 00:45:23).

The experience of reading Berger's books constitutes the act of re-imagining how the original audience must have received the stories. The written words are an approximation of what is spoken. In that the voice of the storyteller shelters all the other voices and makes them audible to the listeners/readers, it is inclusive and hospitable. At the same time, the hospitality of the storyteller to experiences is marked by ghostliness due to its occasional assumption of prosopopoeic stances with regard to dead characters and also because of its doing away with linear, homogeneous time. As Paul de Man remarks, "it is the figure of prosopopoeia, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech ("Autobiography as De-facement" 926). The storyteller by making this apostrophe borrows his authority from the dead. Paul De Man remarks in "Autobiography as De-Facement":

Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a de-facement of the mind of which it is itself the cause. (81)

Berger's books are, in effect, spectral remains of the experience of storytelling and story-listening. To realise how this pre-modern form of storytelling has come to

influence his fiction, the question of voice – both the narrative and the narrated – needs to be understood in terms of not a given form but as an amorphous presence that remains beyond the control of the storyteller. The storyteller is the tracker of the voice that tells the story. Berger observes: “The problem about telling a story is to find the voice that tells that particular story and until you find that voice you can't get inside the story and that voice has to do the story. I mean, it is the story's way of coming back. Sometimes it takes a long time to find. Sometimes it comes quickly” (WhoAreYouDude, 36:14).<sup>30</sup> The transformation from the oral to the written, of course, brings about certain changes in how the stories are accessed and how the aural is replaced by the visual as the primary mode of access. The interpolation of drawings, empty spaces, blank pages, constitutes not only Berger’s poetics of writing but also inform the reader’s act of reading. The text, or rather the book, with all its tangibility and tactile impressions, marks the culmination of a long process of production.

The storytelling voice in Berger is also very cinematic because the visual framing and editing that go into the telling of a story often give the impression that the voice, like a camera, never stays at one place for long. Also, the speaking voice seems to merge into the setting at times. In other words, the voice is made disembodied first and then is made to merge and identify with objects and the *mise en scène* in general. So, the inanimate objects, places and things are imbued with a speaking/narrating quality, as if they have witnessed and recorded the incidents that have taken place in their vicinity. Then, there is also the question of scale. The perspective often zooms in and shows phenomena that is ordinarily ignored or passed over carelessly. One is reminded of Berger’s quotation from Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*:

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<sup>30</sup> In that the arrival of the voice is unpredictable, it has something in common with Berger’s notion of ‘likeness’ as discussed and theorized in Chapter 1.

Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I co-ordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you.

(*Ways* 17)

The perspectives adopted with regard to storytelling range from the anthropomorphic, the animalistic, the nomadic, to the cinematic. This allows the author to re-imagine and re-create perspectival stances of non-human forms and thereby construct a narratorial structure where the storytelling voice can assume a *paqueur*-like mobility and shape-shifting quality.

While talking about the Chauvet cave paintings, Berger says:

Their space has absolutely nothing in common with that of a stage. When experts pretend that they can see here ‘the beginnings of perspective’, they are falling into a deep, anachronistic trap. Pictorial systems of perspective are architectural and urban – depending upon the window and the door. Nomadic ‘perspective’ is about coexistence, not about distance (*Portraits* 42).

Berger’s own storytelling perspective is often nomadic in the sense that it accommodates the co-existence of impulses and experiences separated by time and space. The cinematic technique of montage is often instrumental in making this accommodation possible.

The liberation from the boundaries of space or time can be understood to have deeper ramifications when applied to understand history because it suggests an interrogation and consequently replacement of the idea of progress and unilinear model of historical time. The realisation of this liberation disrupts the unity of historic conjoined time and renders itself historically unspecifiable in the process. A linear sequence of historic

events which elides oppression of people is vindicated in the name of progress. The historical materialist brushes history against the grain and breaks open the linearity of historical continuum by ushering in messianic time. He posits that causality is not a given but an idea that is constructed in hindsight and something that is predisposed to alterations. A partial redemption of the past ignored by the historical idea of progress is feasible by looking at history as a constellation, rather than a single line.<sup>31</sup> The historicism of events and experiences the voice narrates are confronted with historical materialism in a way that is reminiscent of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History". The telling voice is released from the historicist trappings of hermeneutics and relativism by an understanding of time which is monadic in the sense that it upsets the linear view of time and reconfigures the idea of historical causality as something constructed in hindsight and not something given. Berger extends Benjamin's model of history as a constellation and uses it to construct an image of storytelling – a specifically primitive form of storytelling, the essence of which according to him is still relevant:

We are both storytellers. Lying on our backs, we look up at the night sky. This is where stories began, under the aegis of that multitude of stars which at night filch certitudes and sometimes return them as faith. Those who first invented and then named the constellations were storytellers. Tracing an imaginary line between a cluster of stars gave them an image and an identity. The stars threaded on that line were like events threaded on a narrative. Imagining the constellations did not of course change the stars, nor did it change the black emptiness that surrounds them.

What it changed was the way people read the night sky. (*And Our Hearts* 8)

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<sup>31</sup> Berger evokes the constellation image thus in his conversation with Silverblatt: "In some kind of way, isn't it to do with the fact that the events related form a kind of, well, one could say magnetic field or one could say constellation with a certain symmetry and that in that magnetic field in that constellation – this is ideal what I'm saying now – every word in that story is made fresh" (sdeslimbes 48:01).

The image of constellation suggests that it is not the sequence of historic events that matters but how one event is related to another. This is akin to Berger's spectral evocation of images recognising each other:

It's as though across time, images, I mean it sounds strange to say it, but images recognize each other. Or pay tribute to each other. But you know, then you say, how can images do that? And is it the photographer who did it consciously? But it looks as if it isn't quite like that. It has to do with coincidences. Coincidences are what Einstein called "God working incognito" ("Looking at the World").

Understanding the meaning of the events always comes with a sense of belatedness or even a sense of failure. The traces of the fading imaginary line between clusters of stars may sometimes elude the viewer. The messianic time does not hold the promise that its messianicity will reveal its content. Derrida's formulation of the 'arrivant' is relevant here:

The *arrivant* must be absolutely other, an other that I expect not to be expecting, that I'm not waiting for, whose expectation is made of a nonexpectation, an expectation, when a certain knowledge still anticipates and amortizes in advance. If I am sure that there is going to be an event, this will not be an event (*Echographies* 13).

### **3.3 Storytelling, Historical Consciousness and Spectrality**

In Berger, historical experiences of a certain era forms constellations with another one. The storytelling imagination leans toward a locus where the intersection between these experiences occurs. This also influences the richly intertextual, allusive and often collaborative way of composing. As Marsha Bryant says: "Berger and Mohr constantly work with the idea of "montage" or "constellation" ("But thought is also the attempt to

heal the wound through concepts in their constellation”) (*Photo-textualities* 147). The ‘time of the now’ – the time in which the discovery of convergences is taking place coalesces with Messianic time. Both Benjamin and Derrida do not delineate the shape of the Messianic prophecy or the event to come. The general position for Benjamin, Derrida and Berger is a refusal to give content to the Messianic promise, or to determine the shape of the messianic event, preferring instead, in Derrida’s words a “waiting without horizon of expectation”. (*Specters* 168)

The uncertainty of the event is unimaginable from the point of conjoined, purposive conception of time because this form of time rests on the idea of presence (past-present, present-present, and future-present), which in effect imbues each event with determinate content. On the other hand, disjointed time, by upsetting linearity and our impression of the chronological system, unlocks the prospect of envisaging an a-temporal or ‘time-less’ event that stays on always already as being external to the course of history.

Even though the knowledge of the future-to-come is never available in its totality, we can nonetheless assert its heterogeneousness and, in the process, receive the other without doubtfulness and diffidence. This is the reason why justice is always discontinuous; its continuing absence is persistently felt within the arena of conjoined linear time. A predetermination of the essence of justice, according to Derrida, often leads to the acquirement of law. He reflects:

Within this non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility, those who *are not there*, those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question...what will come in the future – to come? (xix)

Justice is not a direct consequence of forgoing the demands of disjointed time, all the same; it only expedites the heterogeneity essential for being respectful and responsible toward the other. In *Pig Earth*, a vision of an awaited justice is demonstrated by the character of Saint-Just, who occupies a rather shadowy position in the story with regard to the main plot involving Lucie and Jean. In her 'second life' Lucie was unable to save him, although she gave him shelter, protecting him from German officers. In her third life, he makes a post-mortal appearance, this time as one of the dead workers building the house for Lucie. The kind of justice that Saint-Just talks about is not restricted by law. He says with idealistic hope in *Pig Earth*: "They only escaped for a moment. You can't be so sure, can you? Justice will be done" (173). His reappearance indicates a gesture where he returns the hospitality offered to him by Lucie by helping her build a house. This is a truly spectral gesture. Lucie's hospitality returns in a different form. In retrospect, then, Lucie's act of providing Saint-Just a place to hide anticipates his presence at the end: somehow, he too has 'survived'. This is a dilatation of the opposing movements of what Berger sees as the dialectic of justice and survival: "Opposing the movement of the peasant's thoughts and feelings about a justice in the past are other thoughts and feelings directed towards the survival of his children in the future" (xvii).

Survival has its own logic. In order for an experience to survive, it needs to be accompanied by a form and it also needs interactions with other forms of experience. These interactions sometimes bring about transformation. The writer or the artist ensures the survival of experiences by creating a space where events shed their spatio-temporal facets and generate fortuitous resemblances and convergences. One of the ways in which survival is ensured is a surreptitious complicity that the dead forms with the living:

The dead surround the living. The living are the core of the dead.

In this core are the dimensions of time and space.

What surrounds the core is timelessness” (“Twelve Theses” 5).<sup>32</sup>

The idea that heterogeneity exists in the relation amongst the past, present and the future and that the living, the dead and the unborn are related in a way that is not linear, prefigures the absent presence of the ghostly, the spectral. Belief in the existence of ghosts is not a necessary precondition for getting affected by them. Although the credibility of the spectre cannot be ascertained, there is no doubt that it is an influential figure. The authority of the spectre derives from the very undecidability of the question whether it exists or not. In this, it resembles the idea of the future. Just because the future has not yet come into existence does not mean that it is not real. The future assumes reality when we think that it will come to exist at a later time. The same holds true for the past. Whatever has gone by, just because they are no longer there, does not mean that they never existed and that they are not real. Our perception of reality therefore encompasses what is apparently non-existent and to that extent, it also includes the unreal. The generations that have gone before and the generations that are about to come are ‘real’ in this sense. The dead and the unborn share an ontology where their existence is composed of compliance between life and death. The figure of the ghost with all its ontological ambiguity challenges the very schism between existence and non-existence and thereby assumes a subversive power. A location (and the presence) of a ghost cannot be specified in terms of time and space. Derrida raises this question in *Specters of Marx*: “What is the mode of presence of a specter?” (46) The spectre or the ghost (taken synonymously) confounds the idea of fixed identity, time,

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<sup>32</sup> Survival is often dependent upon what Berger calls ‘likeness’.

place, presence and all that metaphysics considers to be unequivocal and definite. Deconstruction rejects any idea of a past where ghosts had not existed. Metaphysics reduces and restricts the absent presence of ghosts to the arena of literature in order to establish a control or surveillance over them. By limiting the possibilities of spectrality to the aesthetic and the literary zones, and by allowing it free play strictly within those zones, a sharp demarcation between the literary world of ambiguity and the 'real' world of science is created. Thus, literature becomes a location of spectrality. Berger's storytelling attempts to show that no gap exists between the literary understanding of the real (stories as a shelter from the absurd) and the empirical conceptualisation of the real. Of course, in doing this, a particular kind of experience is emphasised where the dead coexists with the living. The following section from *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* elucidates this point:

In traditional societies, everything that made sense of the world was real; the surrounding chaos existed and was threatening, but it was threatening because it was unreal. Without a home at the center of the real, one was not only shelterless, but also lost in non-being, in unreality. Without a home everything was fragmentation.

Home was the center of the world because it was the place where a vertical line crossed with a horizontal one. The vertical line was a path leading upwards to the sky and downwards to the underworld. The horizontal line represented the traffic of the world, all the possible roads leading across the earth to other places. Thus, at home, one was nearest to the gods in the sky and to the dead in the underworld. This nearness promised access to both. And at the same time, one was at the starting point and, hopefully, the returning point of all terrestrial journeys.

The crossing of the two lines, the reassurance their intersection promises, was probably already there, in embryo, in the thinking and beliefs of nomadic people, but they carried the vertical line with them, as they might carry a tent pole. Perhaps at the end of this century of unprecedented transportation, vestiges of the reassurance still remain in the unarticulated feelings of many millions of displaced people. (56)

When Berger expresses his debt to the peasants he has lived with most of his life and compares them to the only teachers he has ever had, we understand why his view of the dead is different from any other art critic of his time. His anti-academic stance in relation to art and production is a result of what he perceives as a scholarly demarcation between the actual and the fantastic. Derrida's arbitrary comment holds good for Berger's stance: "There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being" (*Specters* 11).

Spectrality therefore comes to suggest a non-dissent between the being and the non-being, the real and the non-real. It must be noted though that what Berger means by the 'real' comprises the absent presence of the dead and the yet-unborn. The 'presence' of a ghost throws the question of 'what is' into disarray. In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, Berger paraphrases a section from a letter written by Rilke to Balthus after Balthus had lost his pet cat, Mitsou: "Loss has a very strange and not contradictory relationship with the opposite of loss which is possession. And in fact, when we lose something or somebody, if that thing we have lost is important, we begin to possess it internally more strongly than when we "possessed" it externally" (sdeslimbes, 41:07).

The idea of justice is one of the points which the concept of spectrality, as Derrida understands it, drives towards while gaining increasing political agency. Derrida reads the spectral remnants of Marx's communist vision and as a promised model of democracy to come, the vision is yet to be fulfilled. An international alliance of workers as envisioned by Marx must preclude limitations imposed by spatial and temporal considerations. Marx's vision cannot be located in a future that is either determined or determinable. There were and there still are communist governments in certain countries and just because the fall of Soviet communism and the advent of neoliberalism have ensured the diminution of the scope and prospect of its original aims and principles, does not mean that it has ended. To presume the death of communism, to be certain about its irrevocability is to imply that ghosts do not exist and to deny the pervasiveness of the revolutionary possibilities of communism. This presumption also includes the belief that communism's erstwhile threat to unimpeded functioning of the free-market economy has come to an end. The threat of global nuclear war which had made it hard to envision a future came to characterise the period when communism still held an important place in the sphere of politics and governance. The decline of communism coincided with reassuring and securing the future. But this act of guaranteeing the future is not possible "without reducing in advance both the future and its chance" or "without totalizing in advance" (*Specters* 37). A total conviction about the opposition of life and death, being and non-being, actuality and ineffectuality forms the basis of the claim to knowledge of the future. This faith in a discernible future drives out any possibility of the existence of ghosts. However, faith of any type always falls short of the definite or the objective and therefore it is always spectral in character so much so that it comes to render the very difference between the actual and the in-actual spectral. Derrida differentiates between the future and *l'avenir* whose arrival is totally

unanticipated and unprogrammed. Reality as an experiential construct is constituted by this unpredictability, this ‘to-come-ness’ of the Other. Derrida confers this ‘other future’ an ontological primacy: “So if there is a real future beyond this other known future, it's l'avenir in that it's the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival” (Derrida in Dick and Kofman, 53).

Political thought, of whatever kind it may be, generally includes the idea of future in the formulation and implementation of decisions. Certain idealism characterises the way in which the idea of future is configured and which is opposed to the thought that the future should be a continuance of the present – a belief embodied in the famous line “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it” (*Feuerbach*).

The promise of the formation of an international association beyond the control of nations, united against undistributed privilege and authority, against free flow of capital, is emancipatory:

Not only must one not renounce the emancipatory desire [of Marx's promise], it is necessary to insist on it more than ever, it seems, and insist on it, moreover, as the very indestructibility of the “it is necessary.” This is the condition of a re-politicization, perhaps of another concept of the political’ (*Specters* 75).

If the promise of Marxism, the fulfilment of which is awaited, were to be envisaged exclusively in the here-and-now, in the present time, in terms of our present ability to make speculations regarding what the future will look like and in terms of our empirical understanding of the past, it would decrease the strength of that ‘emancipatory desire’. Not only the future but the present and the past are inestimable as well. The opposition between the apparently calculable present and the incalculability of the future is

unhinged with the approach of the figure of the ghost. This figure prevents the seeming unfeasibility of Marx's promise from being reduced to a figment of romantic idealism. The emancipatory desire of Marxism, for Derrida, is not merely a desire for autonomy on the part of a political faction or nation but a desire for emancipation that surpasses imagination. It is in its surpassing the Capitalist desire or the desire for the emancipation of the capital through economic flow unregulated by unions, land rights and national laws. Although Marxism and deconstruction cannot be conflated, certain claims to the spectral and the ghostly are similar to both thoughts and the former influenced the latter in ways more than one. Derrida writes: "Deconstruction would have been impossible and unthinkable in a pre-Marxist space" (92). In *Specters of Marx* Derrida tries to acknowledge the spectrality of the emancipatory desire inherent in Marxism which he feels has not been adequately done. Marx himself did not think of ghosts as being compatible with his ideas. When the phantom has been demolished, what we are left with is the real:

When the ghostly body (*die gespenstige Leibhaftigkeit*) of the emperor disappears, it is not the body that disappears, merely its phenomenality, its phantomality (*Gespensterhaftigkeit*). The emperor is then more real than ever and one can measure better than ever his actual power (*wirkliche Macht*). (163)

The spectrality of the Marxist desire for emancipation was not adequately recognised by Marx himself. Derrida distinguishes Marxism from other political ideologies on the ground that Marxism inheres within itself a revolutionary evocation of an unprogrammable future and a revolutionary emancipation of the present from the thralls of a programmed future. The un-foreseeability of the future which opens up and emancipates what is to come is, for Berger, latent within the art of storytelling. The free and often indiscriminate amalgamation between Marxist thinking and metaphysics in

Berger's writing has faced occasional criticism. His views on Marxism and its use in understanding labour migrations and the working conditions of the proletariat and peasants are as central to his writing as is the question of the human soul (as is very clear from *And Our Faces, My Heard, Brief as Photos*). According to him:

In Marxism there is absolutely no space for ethics. None whatsoever. Philosophically speaking. There is no space for ethics. This is a huge lacuna. And maybe this is why under the name of Marxism, if not following the letter of Marxism, so much evil could be done. And if there's no place for ethics, there's no real place for aesthetics either. (WhoAreYouDude, 17:49)

Spectrality informs Berger's politics as well as his storytelling voice. The correspondences between A'ida and Xavier in *From A to X* (2008) are reminiscent of Derrida's idea of postal metaphor. The act of sending a letter to a particular address is always fraught with the possibility of its not arriving at all, or arriving at an address that is different from the one to which it was intended to be sent. This possibility exists in spite of the fact that every postal service offers the assurance that the letter will be sent to the correct address. Therefore, the act of sending a letter to someone is accompanied by the possibilities of it getting delivered to the intended person, the loss of the letter in transit, and the accidental conveyance of the letter to a wrong address. The possibility of the letter's intended arrival is contained within a structure that also paradoxically contains the possibility of its being lost or being sent to a different address. The arrival-non-arrival schism is an attribute of the gesture of sending/posting a letter that informs this structure. In so far as in a given instance a letter DOES get delivered to the intended address, its arrival is in a way fortuitous because technically the possibility of its non-arrival, although slim, was always there. If there had been no setbacks regarding the timely and unerring delivery of letters, the need for a trouble-free postal service would

not have existed. That is, it is precisely the apprehension that the postal accidents may occur that makes one evoke the idea of intentionality within the matrix of postal sending-arriving. This necessitates re-thinking the very notion of arrival. Non-arrival is a structural prerequisite that informs all kinds of written and verbal communication. The postal metaphor is a demonstration of the act of writing itself where the relayed message, standing in for the sender, is disposed to be changed or misunderstood. This is true, for Derrida, of all systems of signification. In case of *From A to X*, this is built into not only the exchange of letters between A'ida and Xavier but also the bequest of those letters by the author. The very fact that the author (who is also the compiler of the letters) has received the bundle of letters accidentally underlines the point that postcards or letters, however much they are thought to be personal, intimate modes of sharing experiences and emotions, can go astray and be received elsewhere. Furthermore, this accidental reception confirms what Derrida calls in *The Post Card* (1980) 'adestination' which posits that all texts are bound to arrive at a destination – either the intended one or an unintended one.

In what seems to be an appropriation of Heidegger's idea of destining, Derrida conjectures that writing emanates through an intricate process of transmissions and relays as in a postal chain. A deconstruction of this chain or network distends the idea of time and breaks open its sanctioned linearity by unravelling errors, and the non-homogeneous circuitry involved in the movement of time. Berger's storyteller is a receiver of messages that get delivered, whose act of receiving is attended by the acknowledgement of the fact that there might have been messages that were irretrievably lost and messages that might be re-configured. The authority and sometimes the cogency of the messages are dismantled and rescinded by the inherent plausibility for error in the postal system. Telling stories is equated with the attempt to

deal with what Hermann Melville would call “the ungraspable phantom of life” (Moby Dick 19). Berger’s comment on his role as a storyteller typically brings up the association of conveyance and preservation, for instance, in the following remark: “I see myself exactly like that. Exactly like a porter. Yes, who brings things in to store them like one stores for the winter” (WhoAreYouDude, 23:38). This is reminiscent of the image of the seeds from Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” where stories are compared to seeds that have survived from an ancient time and that still have managed to retain their germinative power. However, the hibernation of stories also transforms them and the storyteller cannot be entirely certain about their destination. The telling of stories has the sense of failure built into it and the teller tells the stories despite the fact that it might be inconsequential. Therein lies the subversive potential of storytelling as a mode of transmission of experiences. It is akin to the idea of protest that Berger formulates in *Bento’s Sketchbook*: “it is an inconsequential redemption of the present. The problem is how to live time and again with the adjective *inconsequential*” (80).

Afterlife is a constant trope in Berger’s writing which is inseparable from the transmission of experiences. However, there are certain texts which engage with this idea more directly. It goes without saying that all of these texts deal with the concept differently thereby extending its theoretical scope. This includes *Image of Imperialism* (1967), *Pig Earth* (1979), *Here is Where We Meet* (2005), *From A to X* (2008) and *About Songs and About Laughter* (2015). A scrutiny of the representation of spectrality and afterlife in these texts will reveal Berger’s understanding of literary practice in connection with a wide range of experiential categories.

### **3.4 Image of Imperialism: The Afterlife of Che Guevara's Death Image**

The essay on the death image of Che Guevara is about how political struggle and rebellious insurgency assumes ubiquitous presence through a certain kind of death, or rather, a certain approach toward death. The transformation of Che into a legend took place in his lifetime. As Berger points out, "Nobody knew for certain where he was. There was no incontestable evidence of anyone having seen him. But his presence was constantly assumed and invoked" ("Image" 3). Spectral invocations were made whenever and wherever the need for rebellious solidarity was required to fight imperialism, rendering Che "invisible and ubiquitous" (3). Berger comments on the metaphysical significance of Guevara's death: "Now he is dead. The chances of his survival were in inverse ratio to the force of the legend" (3). The force of his legend was strengthened through and after his death. Berger quotes from *The New York Times*: "If Ernesto Che Guevara was really killed in Bolivia, as now seems probable, a myth as well as a man has been laid to rest" (3). The unbelievability and the mystery surrounding whether he was indeed dead suggested by the word "if", was a part of this myth. The myth has its second life in the image of Guevara's corpse. According to Berger, the treatment of Guevara's corpse by his captors showed that they feared it. What does it mean to fear a corpse of a rebel? The way Berger narrates what the captors did with the dead body clearly shows their confusion: "First they hid it. Then they displayed it. Then they buried it in an anonymous grave in an unknown place. Then they disinterred it. Then they burnt it. But before burning it, they cut off the fingers for later identification" (3). The confusion results from having to deal with a situation where the death of Guevara's corporeal existence unleashes a kind of afterlife which is invincible. Hence, the necessity to display it as a spectacle and have photographs taken of it, in order to 'tame' Guevara's spirit and presence in some way.

The afterlives of Guevara's death image are incalculable. Berger finds a parallel in Rembrandt's painting of *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp*. Structurally and compositionally the images are similar: "the placing of the corpse in relation to the figures above it, and in the corpse the sense of global stillness..." (5). Both of them are images of examination and display and both are characterised by a sense of objectivity and detachment. Both Rembrandt and the photographer are onlookers and witnesses to the act of examination. They may or may not be examining the bodies in question but, their presence is what gives the act of examining a metaphysical sanction. The function of both images is same: "More than that, both are concerned with *making an example of the dead*: one for the advancement of medicine, the other as a political warning" (5). Both of the images feature a single dead body surrounded by people alive. What is perhaps more important than the corpses on display is in what relation they lie to the people surrounding them and the photographer and the painter who made a record of the moment. There is a sense of universality that marks the situations:

Doctor Tulp is demonstrating the ligaments of the arm, and what he says applies to the normal arm of every man. The colonel with the handkerchief is demonstrating the final fate – as decreed by 'divine providence' – of a notorious guerrilla leader, and what he says is meant to apply to every guerrillero on the continent. (5)

The tendency to demonstrate and generalise, in both the instances, results from a need to see the situations as typical, understandable and therefore controllable. Both the images are intended toward bringing information to a definite and unequivocal conclusion – in the painting's case, anatomical; in the photograph's case, Guevara's death.

Berger draws another parallel between Guevara's death image and Mantegna's painting of dead Christ. He does not hide the emotional basis of such a comparison: "The emotions with which I came upon that photograph on the front page of the evening paper were very close to what, with the help of historical imagination, I had previously assumed the reaction of a contemporary believer might have been to Mantegna's painting" (6). The emotions generated upon viewing a work of art or a documentary photograph for the first time are intensely related to the extent to which the viewer has allowed to be immersed in the experience that the artwork or the photograph depicts. If the immersion is total, the viewer may immediately call up in his mind other experiences that according to him are relatable to the one he is immersed within. And although these experiences may be separated by centuries, they call up one another: "If I see the Mantegna again in Milan, I shall see in it the body of Guevara" (6). Mantegna's dead Christ and Che Guevara's corpse have something in common: "the tragedy of a man's death completes and exemplifies the meaning of his whole life" (6). Berger sees Guevara not merely as a military strategist and guerrilla leader: his understanding assumes a metaphysical character. For Berger, Guevara is an embodiment of a decision: "Guevara found the condition of the world as it is intolerable" (7). The recognition that the world had become intolerable was made in retrospect. Understanding the full measure of the truth that lies behind this intolerability took place only after the struggles for national liberation began. The full extent of the intolerability of the world can be understood only after resistance against the oppressions that cause the intolerability has been put up. The belated understanding fuels this resistance. As Berger puts it, "Truths are not constantly evident in the circumstances to which they refer. They are born – sometimes late" (7). In *Bento's Sketchbook*, there is a fuller elaboration of this idea of intolerability. To find the intolerable tolerable is shameful and detrimental to political

resistance – a realisation that propels one to protest:

(E)very profound political protest is an appeal to a justice that is absent, and is accompanied by a hope that in the future this justice will be established; this hope, however, is not the *first* reason for the protest being made. One protests because not to protest would be too humiliating, too diminishing, too deadly. One protests (by building a barricade, taking up arms, going on a hunger strike, linking arms, shouting, writing) in order to *save the present moment*, whatever the future holds.

To protest is to refuse being reduced to a zero and to an enforced silence. Therefore, at the very moment a protest is made, if it is made, there is a small victory. (79)

The inability to act, resist or change results from, it may be said, what Zygmunt Bauman calls “a divorce between power and politics” (“Education” 303). According to Bauman, power is the ability to get things done, and politics is the ability to decide which things need to be done.

Guevara envisaged his own death as continuous with and an outcome of his struggle against imperialism. The afterlife of a revolutionary is as much a part of the revolution as are the stratagems and techniques adopted in his struggles. “His envisaged death became actual. The photograph is about this actuality” (“Image” 8). Instead of bringing the Guevara myth to an end, therefore, the photograph managed to do just the opposite: it helped to perpetuate it and keep the legend alive. The photograph, a visual record and a documentation of having witnessed the event first hand, transports the image into an indeterminable future where it may assume political significance. The fact that the image has gained a cult subversive potential is in fact ironic because the photographer’s original intention was quite different. George Galloway pointed out that “one of the greatest mistakes the US state has ever made was to create those pictures of Che’s

corpse. Its Christ-like poise in death ensured that his appeal would reach way beyond the turbulent university campus and into the hearts of the faithful, flocking to the worldly, fiery sermons of the liberation theologians” (“Should Che Be and Icon? Yes”).

Thus, the picture has contributed to the posthumous appeal of Che Guevara through a visual comparison with Christian iconography as well as a secular one. The apparition of this image comes to haunt images and experiences from the past that share visual correspondence with it. This image makes the viewer go back to earlier images in history and by forming a constellation of meanings amongst those images, it shows how historical understanding derives out of a reading of not events in themselves but of the messianic time where events and experiences are connected in a non-linear, monadic framework.

The image of Guevara’s corpse, demonstrative though its original intentions might be, calls for a decision regarding the nature of his revolution and his place in history. Guevara’s envisaged death was part of or a natural outcome of his revolutionary life. In Berger’s essay, the image’s afterlife forms a constellation with Mantegna’s Christ and Rembrandt’s unnamed corpse thereby integrating the Guevara myth into messianic time. Roland Barthes:

The photo is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body which was there proceed radiations that come to touch me, I who am here. The duration of the transmission doesn’t matter. The photo of the departed being comes to touch me like the delayed rays of a star. (*Camera Lucida* 80)

Berger, while justifying his comparison between the photograph and the two paintings, says that “paintings, before the invention of photography, are the only visual evidence we have of how people saw what they saw” (“Image” 9). It is evident that here Berger

has in mind a particular kind of realistic painting where the painter's role is restricted to copying or imitating the world that is visually available to him and his success as a painter is measured by the extent to which his artistic imitation resembles the objects in question. paintings are therefore for him visual records of witnessing, observing and disseminating. He also goes on to point out that "a painting, or a successful one at least, comes to terms with the processes invoked by its subject matter. It even suggests an attitude towards those processes. We can regard a painting as almost complete in itself" (9). The 'attitude' assumed by a photograph toward the processes that are involved in bringing about the photographic image into existence is different: it involves a direct confrontation between the object or the situation being photographed and the camera. The question of truth value and therefore the status of the photograph as a mode of preserving documentary evidence are consolidated through this confrontation. A photograph captures, indeed takes captive what, Roland Barthes' identifies as "the *necessarily* real thing that was placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (*Camera Lucida* 76). "Painting," on the other hand, for Barthes, "can feign reality without having seen it" (76). There is no denying that the object in the photograph was there physically. The photograph is a reminder of its presence in the past and (perhaps) its absence in the present. The result is what Barthes calls a superimposition of past and reality. He highlights the spectral dimension of the way in which the objects of photography come to affect the viewer:

The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here, the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed. (80-81)

The experience of viewing a photograph, then, constitutes two moments: the moment when the photograph is taken and the moment when the photograph is viewed. Insofar as these two moments are separated by time and yet the ways in which the act of looking at the photograph brings them on the same experiential plane, a photograph can have a spectral effect on its viewer. The past comes to haunt the present. It also assumes an unspecifiable futurity at the moment when it is taken because it lends itself to uses that are beyond the immediate conception of the photographer. The uses may be political, aesthetic or ritualistic. Benjamin's thesis about the role of mechanical reproducibility of artworks in their political potential holds good for the afterlives of photographs as is evident in Guevara's death image. Behind the political character of the afterlife of the image, there is a pliability which makes it available to various forms of subversion.

### **3.5 The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol: Afterlife and Survival**

Spectrality is a form of life, a posthumous or complementary life that begins only when everything is finished. Spectrality thus has, with respect to life, the incomparable grace and astuteness of that which is completed, the courtesy and precision of those who no longer have anything ahead of them.

— Giorgio Agamben

The story recounted in "The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol" is that of a woman born in a peasant community and whose account embodies the struggles faced by women born in her situation who try to find an identity outside the community. It prefigures the struggle against the "absurd" that Berger talks about elsewhere<sup>33</sup> – and also a kind of resistance against gender subjugation. The urgency behind the telling of Lucie's story

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<sup>33</sup> In a TV presentation titled "To Tell a Story" Berger engages in a dialogue with Susan Sontag and explains his idea of stories as a shelter from the absurd.

lies in the need to find a voice that survives repression and erasure – a voice that will speak of peasant experience. The story begins apparently a third-person narrator describing Lucie's birth and growing up. Lucie's desire to see the world outside her village is manifest in her occasional disappearance. When her brother comes back from Paris, she is naturally inquisitive and asks him questions about the Eiffel Tower:

Did you climb to the top? Lucie asked Emile.

What top?

The top of the Eiffel Tower!

You go up by a lift, Emile said. Lift?

Yes, lift.

What's a lift? she asked. (101)

She is also frequently rebellious and impulsive. One incident describes Lucie hurling litres of milk into Henri's (another of her brothers) face when he taunts her for not knowing what a lift is. The cheese maker, to whom the milk belonged, tried to hit her but she escaped. When the story reaches the ears of Marius a Brine, Lucie's father, he starts to beat her.

It is only when the narrator begins to describe the arrival of a circus to the village that we realise that the story is being narrated in the first-person voice and not a third-person one. It is, as if, until the circus arrives, the reader was trying to find the voice narrating the story. Jean's appearance as a first-person narrator happens precisely at the moment when the ringmaster asks for volunteers and he rushes forward from the audience thereby emphasising the notion that the storyteller is always on the look-out for voices to narrate his stories and that the voices – embodied in the figure of Jean in this case –

sometimes volunteer to tell the stories.

The fact of Lucie's small stature is emphasised from the very beginning of the story and hence her difference from the others. She is made fun of and humiliated on several occasions for this. Lucie's birth is described in great detail. Water, an image recurrent throughout the novel and in several other books by Berger, is a part of the conditions surrounding her birth. The reference to water in different forms emphasises the fluidity of events and the act of channelling its flow parallels the storyteller's act of channelling experiences. For instance: "Beside the house is a stream which Henri, the grandfather, channelled to drive a saw" (95). Water seems to be a constant and inconspicuous presence ranging from the domestic *mis en scene* to the topological paraphernalia: "The water was already boiling on the stove in the kitchen" (95). The narrator while recounting the moment of Lucie's birth reminisces about the time she was fourteen. The juxtaposition of two different times and two different events is part of the narrative strategy that Berger adopts in order to establish a thematic continuity between events:

She was fourteen and I was three years older. She walked upstream, watching both banks. When she prodded with a stick under a stone, two dark shadows slipped across the river to the other bank. From that moment onwards she never shifted her gaze. She tucked her skirt into its own waist-band and without looking down for an instant she waded across. There she stood absolutely still. The water flowing round her thighs made the same noise as it does flowing round two small stationary rocks.

(95)

Lucie was born with a dark red mark on her forehead which was believed to be "the mark of the craving" (96) – a superstition common among the villagers that when a pregnant woman craves for something special to eat or drink or touch, and is denied

access to the object of her craving, the next time she touches her body, the touch may be printed on the same place or the embryo in her womb. For Lucie, it is a “touch” of fate that she has to bear for the rest of her life. It is an event from her “first life” that spills over into her next lives. This mark, along with her tiny size, the tendency to frequently disappear at ease and at her own will, distinguishes her from the rest. The distinction is maintained throughout her story and is a central part of her survival. The inability, or rather the unwillingness, to conform to the standards expected of a woman born in a peasant household is also an aspect of her survival and resistance. With the curious habit of disappearing, Lucie symbolizes the state of peasantry itself, as Berger understands it, occasionally disappearing under changing and hostile economic conditions and re-appearing with unpredictable doggedness to survive. The game of disappearance and re-appearance is integral to the strategies of resistance adopted by the peasants for survival. Figuratively, this is akin to the ways in which a text, in its itinerary through modes of translation and criticism, moves in and out of public memory. Lucie’s occasional disappearance also point at the ungraspable and ineffable aspects of peasant experience. Conceivably, this is one of the predicaments Berger faced as a writer who was writing as an outsider and as an observer of peasant life. All experiences cannot be grasped totally and given a narrative form. The activity of writing contains a built-in acknowledgement of failure to understand the disappearances of certain characters, events and their reluctance to manifest themselves fully for narrative documentation. This sense of failure is relatable to the task of the translator whose craft contains the implicit recognition that it cannot convey the content inherent in the pure language which precedes all acts of linguistic translation. Talking about Benjamin’s predilection for the figure of the translator, Paul De Man says: “One of the reasons why he takes the translator rather than the poet is that the translator, per definition, fails. The

translator can never do what the original text did. Any translation is always second in relation to the original, and the translator as such is lost from the very beginning” (“Conclusions” 80). Using this translation metaphor to explicate the ideas of un-graspability or un-narratibility of certain experiences would suggest that acknowledgement of a particular kind of failure is central to both the practices of translation and storytelling. In this context, disappearance and going astray are themes that emphasise the need to integrate absence within the spectrum of experience.

The narrator of “The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol” remembers a day in August several years ago when Lucie was six and when she went missing for a whole day. When she came back in the evening – by that time her father had organised a search-party – she had brought a hat full of mushrooms with her. This incident anticipates Lucie’s future vocation as a collector and seller. Disappearance leads to a kind of harvest and time spent in close proximity to nature in search of mushrooms. Lucie Cabrol’s story and her ambiguous relation with the narrator are emblematic of the survival of certain kinds of experience. The urge to narrate these experiences may have its origin in a compulsion to confess. Jean’s inability to accept Lucie as his wife and his long absence during the time of her struggle propels him to tell her account. However, in telling her story, Jean is also telling his, but his narrative is more elided and aleatory than Lucie’s. The art of writing incorporates the gesture of recognising the value and dignity of experiences. It is not only an account of Lucie’s deprivation and subsequent empowerment but also a narrative of absences and distances. The seduction that Lucie enacts for Jean is symbolic of the attraction that certain situations and events hold for a storyteller: “The note, written in her large flowery hand, simply said: If you want to hear more, I have more to tell you” (*Pig Earth* 146). In many cases, impossibility is built into that attraction. Lucie, apart from being a character in the story, is also a figurative repository

of experiences whose lure the narrator cannot resist. These experiences are a culmination, we may say, of the experiences of generations of peasants who have struggled against forces bent on eradicating them. The seduction of such experiences for a storyteller is based on an impulse to know what kept them alive so long and also to judge them against his own experiences of travelling and migrations. The possibility of transforming the experiences that have been handed down to him through his imagination and narrative craft is another aspect of the lure, the power of which can hardly be underestimated.

Jean's story of migrating to South America for work parallels that of Lucie's leaving the village in order to earn livelihood as a seller. Jean's second life is spent outside Europe where he busies himself with making money. It is a life that is deliberately kept outside his narrative. The increased distance between him and Lucie is not only geographical at this stage but also mental: "After I arrived in Buenos Aires I seldom gave her a thought. If she came to mind at all, I congratulated myself on my luck in escaping her guile" (124). The fact of escaping is essential to Jean's second life in Argentina. In the afterlife that they live away from each other, Jean and Lucie become economically prosperous. Towards the end of her "second life" she is even filled with a sense of possession and entitlement and a feeling of satisfaction after having achieved success on her own, after having been dispossessed by her brothers: "I have renamed the village, she said. I have renamed it Chez Cocadrille!" (135)<sup>34</sup> Whereas Jean's move to South America can be termed immigration, Lucie's movement back and forth between the village and the city and the long hours of her commute do not qualify as immigration as such. However, it brings about a change in her identity and she becomes

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<sup>34</sup> Cocadrille is a nickname she received when she was very young.

an immigrant in a different sense. In spending more time in the city in pursuit of success as a seller and coming back to her village only to collect whatever she is going to sell in the city make her look at natural offerings as commercial objects. Their value becomes increasingly and exclusively commercial in her eyes and her defiant loneliness heightens this sense of immigration: “I haven’t had a visit for three years... she was speaking as if to herself” (130).

Metaphorically, Lucie is one of the border-crosser figures, one of the *passeurs* in Berger’s works. The defiance shown in the face of adversity, the resistance to forces that restrict identity to a specific time and place characterises her being. And yet, she is full of tenderness, fragility and even awkwardness, which is expressed in her romantic pursuit of Jean. The village and the surrounding landscape are transformed into the microcosm of her life:

We are surrounded by natural frontiers: snow, mountains, rock walls, rivers, ravines. For centuries we have also lived near an invisible political frontier. Where exactly it runs, changes according to the force of foreign governments and armies. This frontier divides the rich from the poor, and it is the easiest of all to cross. The threat of being flogged, of exile, of execution, of being sent to the galleys, has never deterred men or women from crossing it and smuggling. (140-141)

Just before the end of the war, two *maquisards* arrive looking for shelter in the village. Despite her brothers’ protestations, Lucie offers them refuge and protection. She attends to the wound one of them has received. Offering hospitality comes naturally to her. The idea of home is constituted by the condition of hospitality. A place becomes a home when hospitality is extended to outsiders or strangers by the person living in that place, even if that place does not belong to her. Lucie offers the soldiers protection, refuge

and care in spite of knowing that it might bring harm to her and her family when the German officers come looking for the soldiers. They disguise themselves as distant cousins of Lucie, pretending to work on the farm with Lucie and her brothers. One of these maquisards named Saint-Just makes a spectral return at the end of “The Third Life of Lucie Cabrol”.

Jean, after having spent twenty-five years in Argentina, goes to Montreal and there becomes rich for a while. He opens his own bar where he would sometimes tell his customers stories about Lucie and the village where he was born. This is one example of how telling stories about real events or narrativizing actual experiences can help the teller to distance and come to terms with those events.

Lucie’s familiarity with the topography of the village is great and there is a sense of tacility that characterises her association with it. She carries it with her, as it were, wherever she goes: “The smoothness of the train made her feel sick: it was as if the earth no longer existed” (137). The topography is marked by a sentience that Lucie is able to respond to. Sometimes she is almost identified with her surroundings. The characteristics of the territory become the extension of her own being: “She smelt of the floor of a forest into which the sun never penetrates” (130). When Jean comes looking for her, he is able to figure out that she was in the room by the smell of a beast: “The room smelt of boar. Otherwise there was no sign that she had been there” (156).

The ending of the novel brings this idea of reciprocity sentience through the image of Jean waiting for Lucie whose ‘presence’ he cannot distinguish from the surrounding landscape.<sup>35</sup> The geographical place inhabited by the villagers, the land for cultivation,

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<sup>35</sup> One is reminded of Wordsworth’s Lucy here: No motion has she now, no force; She neither hears nor sees; Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course, With rocks, and stones, and trees.

the peripheral forests – all of these spaces constitute a place where the intersections between the home and the world, the living and the dead occur. The dead may be gone physically but their presence is felt by the peasants strongly. This necessitates certain gestures of respect to be shown either in a ritualistic or in a personal way. The peasant way of perceiving the ubiquity of personified death is exemplified in the near-fatal account narrated by P  p   in the story “The Wind Howls Too” from *Pig Earth*, which, interestingly comes right after a description of the skinning of a pig:

Last night,” he said, “I was dragging some wood down with the mare, when I felt death was behind me. So I turned round. There was the path we’d come down, there was the walnut tree, there were the juniper bushes, there were the boulders with moss on them, a few clouds in the sky, the waterfall in the corner. Death was hiding behind one of them. He hid as soon as I turned round. (44)

The way P  p   recounts his encounter with death makes it sound mundane. The presence of death, for him, is continuous and absolutely harmonious with everyday occurrences. It is not in conflict with the ways of peasant life. The word “so” in “So I turned around” sounds almost obligatory and gestural. There is no fear, or dramatisation or overt sentimentalism in the way death makes its presence felt. The dialectic of appearance-disappearance, a constant fixture in Berger’s writing, plays itself out with spectral effects in the way death partially reveals itself. The presence of death lurking in the background and the distribution of this presence amongst the trivial, the ordinary and the mundane territory of a peasant habitat makes it acceptable, even commonplace. There is no horror or noticeable surprise expressed at the presence of death. In a sense, death is given a shelter. It is contained, controlled and tamed. The very act of personifying death is an act of taming it, giving it a name, universalising it and thereby making it familiar. Death is given a space to operate that is inhabited by the living. By

not locating it to a specific space, or assigning it a particular place (such as the necropolis), the operational field of death is conferred a kind of eternity and at the same time an immediacy. Death thus becomes obvious and continuous with lived experience.

### 3.6 The Storyteller as Death's Secretary

The story titled "The Great Whiteness" from *Pig Earth* contains an anecdote:

Lloyse, Arthaud's wife, was killed by a boulder which fell from the top of the rockface. They were both asleep in their bed. Where the boulder first hit the earth, it made a hole big enough to bury a horse in. Nevertheless the boulder continued to roll down the slope. Slowly. When it reached the house, it didn't crash right through it. It just broke through one wall and crushed half the bed. Lloyse was killed outright and Arthaud woke up, unhurt, beside the boulder. This was twenty years ago. The boulder was too heavy to move. So, clearing the wood and rubble away, Arthaud built another room on the other side of the house and in this room he now slept.

(20-21)

In *Pig Earth*, anecdotes are used in order to elucidate certain aspects of peasant life (or rather, certain general conditions under which peasants everywhere live and work) that cannot possibly be elucidated while maintaining an objective, detached narratorial standpoint. It is not that Berger places himself as a character in the stories, but his "listening" presence lends the stories a sense of verisimilitude. One gets the impression that the stories are being narrated by an insider who is allowed some access to the lives of the peasants. At the same time, the narrator's detachment, and his refusal to assume any other role than the observer and recorder of peasant life, help us identify him with Berger's position within the peasant community where he lived: "an outsider who has become an intimate" (Arda, 10:13). The function of anecdotes in traditional storytelling

practices is significant. The act of sharing an anecdote evokes a feeling of intimacy between the storyteller and his audience. Berger uses anecdotes as a narrative device by which he summons up a shared sense of intimacy and familiarity and sustains the impression that the storyteller is privy to secrets and stories and legends that could not have been known without his deep involvement with the community he is writing about. Furthermore, since the origins and veracity of anecdotes are sometimes deemed dubious or unimportant, anecdotes are similar to stories because of the unquantifiable alliance of reality and invention that characterise them. Storytelling, as Berger conceives it, thrives on the idea of inventing in relation to truth which renders the question of topicality of the stories problematic. He sees this as a kind of ‘displacement’ of experiences: “Why will it be fiction? Because it will exist both everywhere and nowhere. And it is that displacement of place and time which makes something fiction it seems to me” (Everything has its first time, 00:32:11-00:32:21). Anecdotes are functional and the contexts in which they are shared, the points they illustrate are usually more important than the question of their truth-value. Since the question of veracity is diluted, the author is given a license to fabricate his stories beyond historical accuracy. This also allows the author to avoid the tag of a biographical writer. Further, anecdotes, because of their brevity, often create the impression of being fragments of a larger repository of wisdom. This in effect perpetuates the image of the storyteller as a carrier of wisdom and sometimes this image lies in danger of becoming mythologized or mystified. In order to prevent this from happening, Berger assumes certain strategies. The compressed and pithy nature and the illustrative intent of anecdotes ensure their survival and their adaptation in different contexts. In Berger’s works, the impulse behind the anecdotal passages is comparable to the Benjamin’s image, in “The Storyteller”, of “seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the airtight chambers of

the pyramids and have retained their *germinative power* to this day” (90). The “germinative power” of the stories lies in their ability to illuminate and connect experiences that are apparently disconnected and un-relatable.

Coming back to the anecdote about the death of Lloyse, it gives us an image that is recurrent in Berger’s storytelling practice: the co-existence between the living and the dead. It is an unusual situation where the living is literally made to live in close proximity to the dead. Morbid though this co-habitation may seem, it reveals the villagers’ acceptance of and subservience to the forces of nature and the unpredictability that entails from living in close proximity to those forces. It is more important to understand the feelings and emotions that are absent rather than the ones that are present in Arthaud’s coexistence with his accidentally buried wife. There is no sense of revulsion or horror. There is no feeling of inconsolable grief. There is quiet resignation to one’s fate. Read figuratively, this anecdote illustrates the perception of death within the French peasant community with which *Pig Earth* is primarily concerned: the presence of death is accepted as part of peasant experience and every death in the village is followed by an afterlife of sorts where the significance of the dead progressively changes but is never effaced. The impulse behind the personification of death arises from a need to give it a concrete form and thereby accept it and give it a place in the world of the living. In varying degrees, the act of personification also allows for ‘taming’ death in order to make it appear less strange and hence less dangerous. Death is allowed to enter the world of the living, the world of human and animal activities, as a stranger who has become an intimate. Several ritualistic practices are carried out to this end. Berger’s narratives do not always describe these in full detail. These rituals are understood to be important to the extent that they contribute to the peasants’ resistance towards change. Since change is seen as a threat – as exemplified

in the suspicion of the peasants when a tractor/water pump is introduced in the village – it must be countered by adhering closely to the existent customs and rituals. One of these customs, it appears in *Pig Earth*, is the awareness that death is a figure who, in spite of being a stranger, has become, with its lurking presence, an insider who is in complicity with the topography of the village. The spatial dimensions of the stories' landscapes are haunted by the dead. The passage dealing with Lloyse's death illustrates the occasional nearness between the living and the dead. The erratic topography of the landscape and the limited human access to it make it a place where the path of the dead and that of the living are liable to cross.

There is an uninterrupted relation between the idea of “taming death”<sup>36</sup> in Berger's fiction and the idea of home-place as a site of control, as there is a direct relation between sites of lived and working experiences and the sites of recognition between the living and the dead. Home is often envisioned as an enclosed space in Berger's writing. This image of an enclosed space sometimes assumes rectangular forms, for example: “The village cemetery was rectangular with high walls round it and wrought-iron gates” (*And Our Faces* 7). The rectangular shape of pages is often invested with spatial significance and viewed as a space that houses stories. Often, Berger uses blank spaces and visual forms interlacing with words to help the reader conceive “the unsaid” visually. Ineffability is a trope in Berger and the non-opposition between the said and the unsaid, the visible and the invisible is often extended to include within its definitional periphery, the relation between the living and the dead and the yet unborn. The section titled “Once in a Story” in *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, begins with the recognition “We are both storytellers” (8) which is contiguous with Berger's statement in a radio interview that “across time images recognise each other”

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<sup>36</sup> See Philippe Ariès' *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1975)

and his subsequent elaboration of the idea of the historical relation between certain visual forms and manifestations from different eras. His use of the image of the constellation is reminiscent of Benjamin: “Those who first invented and then named the constellations were storytellers. Tracing an imaginary line between a cluster of stars gave them an image and an identity” (8). This can be connected with the image of weaving in Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller”. The storyteller weaves an imaginary thread across a cluster of events and ideas to give them coherence (but not linearity) and significance, thereby bringing together experiences that might be otherwise separated in space and time. This is one of the ways in which the storyteller alters space and time. The storyteller figure in Berger’s works sees experiences as monads that sometimes offer themselves to flashes of recognition when their interfaces are brought in close proximity by the storyteller.

In the introduction to *Pig Earth*, Berger says, “Peasant life is a life committed to survival” (xi). The idea of survival, according to him, unites peasants everywhere, although what he is primarily concerned with is lives of farmers in rural France and their “disappearance” through emigration. *Pig Earth* is on one level a literary homage to the survival of peasants and the activity of writing stories about that survival is an extension of the labour invested by the peasants towards the survival. The stories are also compelled to be written by the urgent realisation that “for the first time ever it is possible that the class of survivors may not survive” (xi). This is also accompanied by the need for an alternative form of discourse: “Productivity is not reducing scarcity. The dissemination of knowledge is not leading unequivocally to greater democracy” (xxvi).

The topography of the village and the space surrounding described in *Pig Earth* it primarily has two features: paths and forests, apart from habitation. Occasionally, Lucie

ventures into forests alone, often crossing great distances. This sometimes leads her to situations where there are no paths. For example:

One September morning in 1967 she set out early. The place she was making for was a high forested plateau, about eight kilometres away from where she now lived. When a pine tree falls in that forest, struck by lightning, or its roots are torn out of the earth by a gale, it lies where it fell until its wood turns grey, stifled by snow in winter and burnt by the sun in summer. There are no paths there. (123)

The image of the dead tree powerfully reinforces the idea that the presence of the dead surrounds peasant life. The absence of paths implies that Lucie has ventured out into a territory that is unknown and untrodden and therefore full of possibilities of revelation. The pathless forest with its mystery and sense of the unknown symbolically is a metaphysical space where the idea of presence (of traditional wisdom, knowledge, experience) has been transcended. Lucie moves into this region where experience is created anew and her movements are suggestive of the overarching themes of the story – freedom and survival. In the introduction to *Pig Earth* Berger says:

The image of a path is apt because it is by following a path, created and maintained by generations of walking feet, that some of the dangers of the surrounding forests or mountains or marshes may be avoided. The path is tradition handed down by instructions, example and commentary. To a peasant the future is this future narrow path across an indeterminate expanse of known and unknown risks. (xviii)

The indeterminate expanse is aporetic and a confrontation with which requires a re-orientation of received wisdom. The life of the forest and the life of the characters interpenetrate each other as is exemplified in the following passage: “It is said that large mushrooms are large from the moment they first appear. One morning there is nothing,

and the next morning the mushroom is there as large as it will ever be. A small mushroom is not a young large one. It will stay small, as the Cocadrille stayed small” (127-128).

The impression that the author tries to convey repeatedly throughout the book is that there is an organic relation between nature and human beings living in close proximity to nature. One of the aims of the passages devoted to the close observation of natural and human phenomena is to unveil latent energies at work in the correspondences amongst sentient beings, the surrounding topography and the disembodied observer. Talking about Millet’s influence on van Gogh, Berger says in the essay “Millet and the Peasant”:

He made dozens of paintings copied closely from engravings from Millet. In these paintings Van Gogh united the working figure with his surroundings by the gestures and energy of his own brushstrokes. Such energy was released by his intense sense of empathy with the subject. (84)

Berger’s interest in Lucie as a subject derives from her ability to empathize with her surroundings and people who are in need of refuge and care. As a storyteller, he feels a need to shelter the experiences of one who has provided shelter to others.

The first life of Lucie Cabrol gives an account of her birth and growing up with her parents and her brothers. Her difference from her brothers is emphasised from the beginning as is her habit of disappearing from time to time. The act of disappearing is synonymous with the condition of peasantry as Berger sees it. But Lucie disappears only to appear again. This encapsulates the persistence of the peasants in surviving impediments just when one thinks peasants as a class have vanished with a changing economy, it appears again. The story Lucie Cabrol is a story of survival.

The third life of Lucie begins with Jean reminiscing about an incident from his childhood. He recounts how one morning when he was taking the cows to the slopes of the mountains to graze, his father asked him to leave a particular cow named Fougere behind. "Fougere looked anxiously around her, her ears full out like wings. By this afternoon, I said, you will be dead" (153). The narrator, or rather the ghostly voice of the narrator, does not say it but we may assume that this is Jean's first encounter with the idea of death. Jean's first encounter with death comes with the death of an animal. The authorial voice, like in several other places in Berger's works, assumes a prosopopoeic stance whereby an empathetic relationship is established between the human speaking voice and the vision of the animal. Also, this suggests a kind of meta-corporeal experience where the voice has to first disembody itself and then enter the body as it were, of the animal and see through its eyes. This figurative disembodiment, followed by sensory incarnation, is part of the structure of haunting. Further, the minimalistic and elemental kind of life lived by the peasants and the complete lack of sentimentality are suggested by the sentence that immediately follows: "She started to eat the hay in the manger" (153). The idea of impending death is immediately followed by the act of eating symbolising the opposite of death, that is, vitality. The clarity of perspectives that peasant life offers, for Berger, makes us look at death with unsentimental objectivity and as being continuous with life.

After Cocadrille's death, the villagers concur that it was her fearless nature and her precarious way of living that led to her eventual murder. Her singularity of character, as well as her independence that separated her from the rest of the villagers and from her family, are retained beyond the grave and the ubiquity of her ghostly voice are characterised by an unchangeability that Berger perhaps finds in peasantry. As in life, so in death, she disappears only to appear again. And she is received by Jean with no

overt sense of fear or revulsion, but with perfect naturalness of disposition, perhaps also with a due sense of anticipation: “It was in the cemetery that I first heard her voice. I had no difficulty in hearing what she said, although she was whispering” (153-154). The clarity of Lucie’s disembodied voice announces her survival and the commencement of her third life to Jean. The voice of Lucie, even before she appears physically, from beyond her grave takes Jean by surprise. The voice is audible only to him. The audibility is restricted to the listening presence, as it were. It is her way of singling out the receiver to whom she will address the remainder of her story. Berger has said that the most crucial part of storytelling is finding the voice. The voice is spectral because there is a non-opposition in it between listening and narrating. The voice is where, the listener and the speaker figuratively meet. The voice of Lucie comes through to Jean in the midst of funerary silence. It is the voice of a ghost. The voice informs Jean that the thief who stole her money is in the cemetery. It is privy to information that the living cannot know. We become aware of the presence of a third character who remains entirely invisible throughout and haunts the narrative of the last life of Lucie Cabrol with all his spectrality because the conditions surrounding Lucie’s death and the theft of her money remain entirely unspecifiable and mysterious. The characteristic unreliability and vagueness of Lucie’s narrations make it all the more difficult to surmise how and why she was killed.

“You will hear me, Jean, you can hear me if I say Jean, can’t you” (154). The way she addresses Jean, singles him out from other men, gives his narrative voice exclusivity. She speaks to him and no one else and in narrating Lucie’s account, Jean gives it respect, a gesture of hospitality extended to the dead, to make the experience of the dead count. This is how the storyteller borrows his authority from the dead. Outside the cemetery, Edmond and Henri stand by “the wall traditionally reserved after funerals for

the closest of kin” (154). With a characteristic gesture of empathetic observation, the narrator comments on the significance of the wall which is beyond the architectural: “If stones could feel, the stones there would be blood-red from the pain felt by many of those who have leant against them” (154). After the rituals have been performed, the crowd disperses and the mourners and visitors go out. Jean declined several invitations to drink in the cafes and “hurried away in order to lead her voice back home, where we could be unobserved” (154). The image of leading or guiding the voice home brings in all the associations of the *porteur*, preserving and carrying the repository of collected experiences to a place of safety. The abstract idea of home assumes a concrete form when Jean goes to the house in which Lucie had planned to live with him after they got married. But Lucie’s voice does not follow him. It is one of her acts of frequent disappearance. He listens to her voice again the following night: “At La Toussaint the cemetery was full of flowers, and many people stood at the feet of the graves of their loved ones trying to listen to the dead. That night I heard her voice again” (155). The act of listening to the dead by the living implies the gesture of showing respect to the other, and stresses a non-oppositional, continuous relation with the other. Non-opposition as a general trope is of considerable interest to Berger, especially in relation to his interpretation of the peasant situation. For instance, he points out that “in the conversation and the thinking of urban people of a certain formal education, the word 'but' is really quite important... But in the talking that goes on in peasants' heads, the word but is extremely rare and it is usually 'and'; because they are used to living with contradiction” (sdeslimbes, 00:23:21-00:23:43). He goes on to illustrate this point: “So, we nourished our pigs, we loved them - not 'but we ate them': 'and we ate them'. And you can multiply that a thousand times because this different use of language, I think, has to do with a different attitude towards duration” (00:26:29-00:26:56). Living with

contradictions is integral to the peasants' survival as a class. The deference towards and the ascription of a certain kind of authority to the dead characterise this 'different attitude towards duration'. Lucie's voice informs Jean that "All over the world the dead drink at La Toussaint" (*Pig Earth* 155). The voice has an authority that Jean's voice clearly lacks. She also informs Jean that La Melanie has come and that she is making some coffee: "the dead forget the living, I haven't forgotten yet" (155). Lucie's comment on the memory of the dead is a reinforcement of the idea that it is the responsibility of the living to seek out the dead in order to be conferred some authority with regard to the narratability of experiences. This is because experiences or the true significance of them is relevant for the world of the living as well as that of the dead.

Lucie remains alone, as in life, so in death. On her second meeting with Jean after her death, she asks him as to why he had wanted to kill her. She asks this as if she is certain of Jean's desire to kill her. Throughout the narrative, Jean hardly ever reveals such a desire. Lucie's self-assured confidence regarding this matter speaks through the narration of Jean. Towards the end of "The Third Life of Lucie Cabrol" the magic realism of the narrative assumes great intensity where, in a dream-experience, both the dead and the living characters are shown to have congregated to build a house for Lucie and Jean. The construction of the house and the collective participation of the villagers in it signify a gesture of hospitality – a hospitality of a special kind because it erases the limits brought about by death. It is all the more significant because the dead, for once, has chosen to remember the living and has offered their assistance in building the home whose symbolic significance can hardly be underestimated. The idea of the dead remembering the living returns in *Here is Where We Meet*, where Berger's peripatetic storytelling imagination takes him to different periods in his life as if they were places.

### 3.7 *Here is Where We Meet: Learning from the Dead*

*Here is Where We Meet* (2005), which consists of eight short impressions of places, begins with the description of a Lusitanian cypress in the centre of a square in Lisboa, which serves as a metaphor for shelter and providence. Berger's books often begin with the act of organising space into an image of a shelter. Linguistic evocation of space often precedes the entry of characters. The poem written on the notice-board beside the tree introduces the dual theme of ubiquity and transformation: "...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 evokes a line from *Once in Europa*: "Do you know...what the trees say when the axe comes into the forest? When the axe comes into the forest the trees say: 'Look! The handle is one of us!'" (59) The tree, after it has been transformed into wood, survives in diverse forms. The diversity and randomness ensure its continuing afterlife.

The narrator finds his mother, Miriam (who, we learn a little later, died fifteen years earlier), sitting on a park bench with a "demonstrative silence" (2) and wonders to whom the silence is addressed. The idea that a silence has an addressee is embedded within the art of storytelling because every story is directed towards its listener; the meaning and the implication of every story is dependent on the interpretation of the silence that the storyteller chooses to interpolate his stories with. The addressee, for Berger, may exist in the present or in the future or even in the past. As he claims, the story is based on the experience of the narrator chancing upon his mother's voice in the city of Lisbon. He says "I had the impression of not inventing it, but listening to it" (Carta Blanca, 00:26:11-00:26:13). The narrator's account of his meeting with his dead mother is analogous to the logic of dreams because in his dreams he forgets that she is dead. Their meeting and their peregrinations throughout the city of Lisbon are symbolic. Their movements draw a kind of arc around the architecture of the city and

make its interiors a part of the narrative space. The narrator's mother takes his arm and guides him to the top of the Mae d'Água staircase. Symbolically, this becomes the point of departure of the story.

The name Mae d'Água is suggestive. It means literally 'mother of water' which is indicative of the idea that the structure is the source of life which is symbolised by water (not only for its fluidity but its ability to take different forms). It marks an appropriate place for the commencement of their sojourns that are yet to unfold. It evokes the image of a structure that oversees the supply of water which can then be used differently by the citizen or can take different forms. The aqueduct was the main water reservoir for Lisbon. Having been rendered redundant by present technology, it stands as a relic of the past, a historical remnant – precisely the reason behind Berger's interest in it. His fascination with the Águas Livres also stems from its status of a survivor that withstood the devastating earthquake that hit Lisbon in 1755. Since the aqueduct is not longer in operation, its structure holds an architectural or perhaps even an aesthetic interest for the visitor the city. Its spectacular aspect received a fresh lease of life after it stopped functioning as an aqueduct.

*The inspector for the water channels, Fernando, shows the John around and leads him through the Águas Livres the "temple-like" building of the reservoir which can hold 5,000 cubic metres of water. Fernando's interest does not lie in the architecture but the water that flows through it:*

His private passion was for the water on its long, solitary, unnatural, improbable journey from its sources. A journey underground, over ground, and through the sky.

Up there in its ducts the water had to be kept cool and well mixed, tranquil, and transparent, with the correct amount of light so that it did not become turgid. As

soon as we were on the steps climbing up from the reservoir to the aqueduct, he slowed down. (*Here* 47)

Water, a recurrent image in Berger's works, is symbolic of movement and transformation. Fernando who likes to live alone away from the crowds, is fond of the water that flows through the architecture. His interest is that of an antiquarian and his eccentricity is clearly evident in the way he thinks of the water as having a life of its own: "Fernando considered the water in the aqueduct as something alive, that had to be protected, fed, cleaned out, looked after – almost like an animal in a zoo" (47). Being a prototype of the *passeur* figure, he is primarily intrigued by the carrying capacity of water and the fact that it can take different forms. An extraordinary attachment with flowing water characterises his life and like any form of attachment in Berger, it is marked by a certain sense of reciprocation: "I think he had the impression that, like an otter, the water recognised him when he approached" (47).

"The dead don't stay where they are buried" (3) Miriam says and clarifies that her posthumous situation has got nothing to do with religious conception of eternal life beyond death: "Heaven is all very well, but I happen to be talking about something different!" (3) The idea of an afterlife uncluttered by religiosity comes across in the conversation that follows:

Is Father here?

She shook her head.

Where is he?

I don't know and I don't ask him. I fancy he may be in Rome.

Because of the Holy See?

For the first time she looked at me, the little triumph of a joke in her eyes.

Not at all; because of the tablecloths! (5)

We may say that this is actually the idea of the dead co-existing with the living. There is no overt spirituality or nostalgia in the narrator's meeting with his mother. The narrator expresses no surprise, no disbelief, and no great joy upon meeting her. The narrative space is organised in such a way that the characters – the living and the dead – can inhabit it physically and have verbal communication. In *Here is Where We Meet*, the characters gain precedence over places. The reader is made to travel imaginatively to the places described in the stories solely because the writer's memory of the people he meets (or wants the reader to meet) is inseparably connected to the spatial arrangements and geographic/demographic features of the places. The meeting between John and his mother is sudden and is comparable to 'a likeness'. A 'likeness' as Berger understands it, cannot be planned. It cannot be bought or sold. A likeness manifests itself, asking to be recognised, with what the narrator sees as a "demonstrative silence". It is easy to look at paintings on the radio, Berger says ironically, because on the radio one can listen to silence and each painting has its own silence.<sup>37</sup>

In its unpredictability Berger's idea of likeness has something in common with Derrida's idea of *l'avenir*. The future is unprogrammable. There is a similarity between the ideas of presence and likeness. For Berger, presence suggests the idea of company (of the dead and/or the living) or accompaniment. Of course, Berger's conception of presence must not be confused with the metaphysics of presence that Derrida aims to deconstruct. Coming back to Derrida's lines mentioned earlier in this chapter:

In general, I try to distinguish between what one calls the future and "l'avenir". The future is that which - tomorrow, later, next century - will be. There's a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, l'avenir

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<sup>37</sup> Berger speculates on this rather synaesthetic phenomenon in the radio presentation "Will it be a Likeness?"

(to come) which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future beyond this other known future, it's l'avenir in that it's the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival. (Derrida in Dick and Kofman, 53)

This has also a lot in common with Berger's idea of a song leaning toward the future when it will be heard or given shelter by existent physical bodies: "A song whilst filling the present hopes to reach a listening ear in some future somewhere. It leans forward further and further" (About Songs).

The dead, as envisioned in *Here is Where We Meet*, "can choose where they want to live on Earth" (4). This makes them not only ubiquitous but also flexible to several kinds of transformation. "There aren't many cities left with trams, are there?" (7) The sound of trams constitutes the audio of Lisboa. It is a vehicle of transport that can carry its passengers not only from one place to another but also from one time to another. And since trams are vanishing from major cities all across the globe, they come to suggest essentially a thing of the past. The image of a tram and its sound is transformed into a metaphor. Etymologically, the word metaphor has its origin in the Greek word 'metaphora' which means 'carrying over' or 'transfer'. Lisboa is "a meeting place" precisely because of its latent ability to bring about convergences between two times, and thereby allow the people who have met to be transported elsewhere. In this case, the trams of Lisbon, or more specifically, the fact that there aren't many cities left with trams, take the narrator and his mother to a time when they would board a number 194 tram from East to South Croydon and back every Wednesday. The narrative enclosure of this past, therefore, has double bind: first, we are led by the narrator on his journey to a city which he is visiting, and second, the journey is stretched to encompass the

temporal shift towards the memories evoked by its sounds and images.

An analogy drawn by the narrator's mother is cinema: "It takes you up and brings you back to the same place. That's one of the reasons why people cry in the cinema" (8). "So we hold hands," Berger says in an interview with Isabel Coixet. The audience – "they are going places. And in the theatre things are coming to them" (Carta Blanca). In an interview with Elia Suleiman, Berger expressed his fascination with the cinema derives from the fact that inside the theatres, everyone is together and yet each is looking alone.<sup>38</sup> The coexistence of two time-frames inside the story makes this journey back and forth possible. The present where the meeting takes place is superimposed on to the past events evoked by the activity of roaming around the streets of Lisboa.

The azulejos tiles of Lisbon, that cover the walls of the city, "speak of the fabulous things to be seen in the world" (10) and have a special relationship with the visible world. The surface of the tiles constitutes whatever that is visible and draws attention to itself. And when the attention closes in, penetrating the images on the surface, the physical surface itself becomes apparent: "the crackly white ceramic surfaces, their vivacious colours, the mortar joints around them, the repeated patterns" (10). According to the narrator, all this paraphernalia of "whatever is behind them or beneath them" will remain "invisible and hidden for ever!" (10) The revelation-concealment dialectic reminds us of Berger's observations on the Chauvet caves where he focuses on the intersection between three time-frames: the past, spread over a period of several centuries, when the cave drawings were made, the discovery of the caves in 1990s and a future time when the caves will be sealed off and when they will no longer be available to human access. The idea that the visible can be employed to conceal the invisible is

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<sup>38</sup> Filmed in early 2011 by Mike Figgis in Paris.

appropriate to the themes of the story. One of the functions of storytelling is to make the invisible visible - to keep looking unless limits of the visible become apparent. Hence the image of illumination often accompanies the activity of storytelling.

The phrase “it’s too late”, which the narrator’s mother is fond of using quite often, seems to the narrator to refer to “the way time folds ... the folds ensuring that some things can be saved and others cannot” (12). Storytelling begins with the acknowledgement that everything cannot be salvaged. The feeling or mood that the city of Lisbon comes to embody for the narrator – *saudade* – is consequence of the realisation that everything cannot be saved. Lisboa is a favourite stopover for the dead. The narrative oscillates between the past and the present. Several pieces of information about the life of the narrator’s mother are revealed as they walked round the city together, for instance, the fact that she was married and divorced long before she met the narrator’s father. The narrator’s memory goes back to a chance meeting with the man his mother was married to before, a man called Alfred. She met him in the Tate Gallery where she was looking, as on every Sunday, at watercolours by Turner.<sup>39</sup> He remembers that Alfred gave his mother something in a packet. His mother reveals that it was a packet containing letters that Alfred wanted to give her because he was a tramp by then living on the street and had no place to keep them. He could not bring himself to destroy those letters and therefore he wanted to give them back to her. After she got back home, she destroyed them immediately. Their destruction embodies the idea that the past cannot be salvaged in its entirety and the occasional individual agency involved in deciding what needs to be saved and what does not.

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<sup>39</sup> This is reminiscent of how the two main characters of *A Painter of Our Time* (1958), John and Janos, are brought together by the experience of looking at Goya’s *Dona Isabel* in the National Gallery.

We discern Berger's interest in visual aspect of the city from the way he describes it. There is an openness with which the city allows vision to access its interiors. This is evident from the way Praseres, an old cemetery, is organised architecturally so as to allow the onlooker to see the "abodes of the departed" (28). The visual field changes when the reader is taken to the market, Mercado da Ribeira: "Seen from its interior, the Mercado da Ribeira resembles a pagoda, a pagoda constructed of carved stone, glass and metal" (29). Berger comments on the engineering feat that went into the making of the marketplace. It constitutes a way to let in daylight and simultaneously offer shade from summer heat. The concealment-revelation schism is evident here. The visual dialectics of light and shade inside the marketplace figuratively reiterates the tropes of revelation-concealment, meaning-mystery. From the way this dialectic is brought into effect throughout the story, it is discernible that it acts as an underlying theme behind the conceptualisation of a meeting place for the living and the dead. This meeting place re-orientates the way metaphysics positions the idea of 'presence'. Miriam's presence, ghostly yet not disembodied, appears and disappears throughout the story. She acts as the photographic eye that guides the narrative voice and for its medium it uses the necessary factors of light and time. What Berger would call unforeseeable consequences is a part of the afterlife of the visual record. Disappearance is built into the visuality of the narrative and therefore Miriam does not accompany John throughout the story – occasionally he is left alone to discover the city further all by himself. The final scene of the story where she steps over the water duct of Mae d' Agua, up on the walkway before fading away into the distance, is emblematic of the "folds of time" that simultaneously allows and hinders experiences to be salvaged:

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 re-appeared I could scarcely distinguish her” (55).

It can be compared to Lucie’s occasional disappearance. Figures are often embodiments of ideas and historical testimony: their occasional disappearance or rather the very un-specifiability of their position with regard to appearance or disappearance suggests that the meaning of events cannot be understood in its entirety and sometimes a belatedness or ‘afterness’ – to use Gerhard Richter’s phrase – invests them with mystery. The storyteller figure often seen as an inheritor of traditional wisdom has to relinquish his authority in Berger’s fiction. The only authority he is in possession of is the authority borrowed from Death, and that he is always in the danger of losing. To think of the metaphor of translation in this context, it implies a kind of death of the original and the resultant transmission of its afterlife. As Paul De Man pointed out in a lecture: “The process of translation, if we can call it a process, is one of change and of motion that has the appearance of life, but as life as an afterlife, because translation also reveals the death of the original” (“Conclusions” 85). In an interview with Bernard Stiegler, Derrida talks about the anagrammatic relation between the words ‘specter’ and ‘respect’ and remarks that the respect for the alterity of the other dictates a respect for the ghost. The law of the other is based on the respect for the revenant: “There is no respect and, therefore, no justice possible without this relation of fidelity or of promise, as it were, to what is no longer living or not living yet, to what is not simply present” (*Spectralities* 42). Miriam reminds John in *Here is Where We Meet*: “And if you want to respect life, you have to draw a line” (7). Drawing the line between mysteries and revealed truth is essential to storytelling and involves being respectful towards experiences.

In the story titled “Kraków”, the narration is composed of a series of descriptions of appearances through which the city makes itself accessible, and through which it offers its spatial and temporal dimensions to be read by the passer-by. For Berger, the places he describes in *Here is Where We Meet*, are also of historical interest. The narration constitutes of both descriptions of the present experiences undergone by the narrator and references to certain historical events or themes which may contain some valence for the present. By placing temporally different frames of references, Berger attempts to bring into effect a convergence of experiences. One has the impression of inhabiting a narrative space where different time-frames co-exist, like different yet typical architectural designs in a city. Of course, the conjuring up of such convergences and its narratorial arrangement is idiosyncratic and personal. To read the stories in *Here is Where We Meet* is to share in the idiosyncrasies of the author. However, in the book are not only documents of the author’s wanderings and personal records of his study of appearances, but also a prescription to the reader to approach the phenomenology of visual appearances by considering the role played by the concatenation and comparison of experiences in making sense of the visible world.

The structuring of the space where the stories take place in *Here is Where We Meet* prefigures Berger’s logic of archival preservation:

(It is) another way of people who lived in the past who perhaps are still living or perhaps are dead being present. This seems to me absolutely one of the quintessential things about the human condition. It’s what actually distinguishes man from any other animal: living with those who have lived and the companionship of those who are no longer alive. Not necessarily the people that one knew personally, I mean the people perhaps whom one only knows by what they did, or what they left behind, this question of the company of the past, that’s

what interests me, and archives are a kind of site in the sense of like an archaeological site. (Quoted in *Portraits*)

For Berger, the activity of writing implies assuming a stance towards the visible world. This stance necessitates the formulation of a particularly flexible and fluid array of styles that can be adapted to absorb and represent a wide range of visual experiences. The story titled “Kraków” begins with a characteristic reference to architecture. The correspondence between urban architecture and the architectonics of writing are brought into play. The descriptions in the story are concerned primarily with interiors and contours of the city, and they are made from the point of view of a traveller. Hence the viewpoint is never static. As the traveller moves around the city, the coordinates between his arc of vision and the architectural configuration keep shifting. The overarching reason behind ‘choosing’ (Kraków as the place where the em-plotment of the story takes place can be apparently ascribed to the fact that it was “the only Polish city which survived that war without serious destruction to its buildings” (75).<sup>40</sup> The thematic thread of survival runs through all the stories in the volume. And like elsewhere in Berger’s fiction, here too the idea of survival is connected to the afterlife of events and experiences. The space where “Kraków” begins is a *pension*. The first visual impulse in the story is felt within the architectural confines of this pension which acts at the same time as a *raison d’être* for the mnemonic recollection of the story of Ken on whom the story is really based, and a symbolic en-structuration of a space which has witnessed a convergence of experiences. It is envisioned as a camera or a chamber of images: “In the pension, as in a convent or a monastery, there was a sense inside each room that the two windows which gave on to the streets had been contemplatively looked through for several generations” (75). The act of looking through is central to

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<sup>40</sup> This is problematic since the mode of writing is apparently retrospective and has the narrator reminiscing about the experience of meeting a dead person.

how the narrative is fabricated. A part of the narrative strategy lies in the ways in which the storyteller places and manoeuvres the narrative lenses through which the reader establishes a visual connection with the places that form the basis for the stories.

While describing an open market-square named Place Nowy, the narrator says a line that is apparently ambiguous. On the one hand, it points to an atavistic aspect of experience, and on the other, it highlights the narrator's belief that certain pre-suppositions with regard to his relation to certain experiences are spontaneous and obvious: "I have never been in this square before and I know it by heart, or rather I know by heart the people who are selling things in it" (76). Here the emphasis is on the word 'and' which suggests a lack of surprise and mystery. It follows from this that the narrator builds his statement on the conviction that knowledge (or whatever is meant by knowing a place "by heart") is not always based on empirical experiences. This is, however, given no basis and there is an implicit suggestion that the reader understands, without any textual support whatsoever, this recognition of a kind of similarity or likeness discovered by the narrator. It can be argued that this tendency in Berger's writing – the assumption that the reader knows what the narrator elides – is related to his idea of complicity. It can also be argued that the main reason behind this complicity is part of Berger's political tendentiousness and that is a part of his subversive strategy.

Each story in *Here is Where We Meet* has its own speed. Each meeting is preceded by descriptions of places. There is a sense in which the descriptions guide the narrative voice to the place of meeting. Almost all the characters mentioned in the book have instructed the narrator, John, in the past about life. One of the major characters who had a lasting impression on John is Ken. John finds him in *Kraków*. Ken "looks at home here this morning although he is not Polish" (78). This is symptomatic of Berger's own desire to be at home everywhere – an urge that George Lukacs would identify as

“transcendental homelessness” (*Theory* 41). However, with this remark, Ken is introduced as a passeur who has the ability to be at home wherever he chooses, who is not daunted by distances. He is a passeur figure in two ways: he shared with the narrator what he knew, he passed on knowledge derived from lived experiences (although he never told the narrator “how he learnt what he knew” (78). What he knew was largely based on the many journeys which he undertook and the disparate array of roles he assumed while travelling from one place to another:

Wellington, New Zealand, Paris, New York, the Bayswater Road, London, Norway, Spain, and at some moment , I think, Burma or India. He earned his living, variously, as a journalist, a schoolteacher, a dance instructor, and extra in films, a gigolo, a bookseller without a shop, a cricket umpire. (79)

We can see why this maverick protean figure fascinates Berger. There is something of his own border-crossing approach in Ken. Like Berger, whose writing is never restricted to one genre and for whom the act of writing itself is a subversive tool to defy rigid categorisation, Ken is a shape-shifter, a passeur who is always on the move. Like Berger, who never went to university and who credits his free style of writing to his lack of university education, Ken is unwilling to be tied to one profession.

Whatever has been erased and made faint by fading memory and passage of time, is restored by the act of building a portrait of Ken and in this act of restoring, resurrecting the presence of Ken, the actual information about his career plays an insignificant role: “Maybe some of what I’m saying is false, yet it is my way of making a portrait of him for myself as he sits in front of me in the Place Nowy” (79). It is a personal portrait that is painted by the narrator in order to situate the character better in the present moment and have conversations with him. This idea of portrait-making as a substitution for what has been lost is exemplified by Berger’s storytelling aesthetics in general and it suggests

a participation in the transmission of the afterlife of the memory of a person or an artwork.

Sharing happens both ways. John shows Ken his sketchbook. There is an overt anachronism involved in it. The painting in question is Leonard da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine*. John has made a drawing from it which he shows to Ken. Ken thinks it is a "little too upright" (80). The moment of sharing this visual image evokes another moment: the moment when the drawing was being made at the Czartoryski Museum. When the drawing was being made, the moment of its creation was propelled towards the present encounter between John and Ken and Ken's opinion of the drawing. It is one of the many illustrations of the theme of "towardness" – the idea that an experience reaches its fulfilment elsewhere when it is made to converge into a moment of unfolding of another experience (in this case, a chance encounter with the dead).

The story titled "Madrid" begins with the narrator waiting for his friend, Juan, in the lounge of the Ritz Hotel in Madrid. While waiting he observes a reception that "is being held to launch the new Venezuelan economy, which, supposedly, now depends on Spanish investors". He observes the body-language of the guests: "surf-riding smiles, controlled eyes and a way of tilting themselves forward like the figureheads once carved on ships" (144). Juan is late and while waiting for him, the narrator meets his childhood tutor, Tyler. The event of meeting Tyler, who is long dead, in the moment before Juan arrives breaks open the continuity of linear time. The uncertainty of meeting debunks the idea of a set future and reinstates the notion of Derridean *l'avenir* which is totally unpredictable and unforeseen. Tyler comes in the form of an *arrivant*, spectre whose sudden return makes John's childhood and the present time converge. Telling Tyler's story is a gesture of respect on John's part and this respect is a valid response to the alterity of the spectre.

One of Tyler's advices to the young Berger is as follows: "When you shade a drawing, you do not scribble. Is that clear? You shade carefully, putting one line beside the next and the next and the next. Then you crosshatch and that way your lines weave the sketch together" (157). Drawing remained a permanent preoccupation with Berger. The generic interplay between drawing and writing is evident in several of his books. Tyler's advice of "putting one line beside the next" can be thought of as an instruction in composing lines, of not only a drawing but a written text.

Tyler lived in two rented rooms on the ground floor of a large house with a rose garden. He clearly had a fondness for flowers: "On the windowsills of the two rooms he grew flowers in wooden boxes. On the mantelpiece, there were often plant-cuttings in tumblers, each with a little label attached to it, with its name written in his meticulous rounded handwriting: Red Champion. Sweet Sultan. Phlox. Larkspur" (153). This is an indication that Berger's interest in flowers and their Latin names, as evident in his writing, began at an early age with his lessons with Tyler. He reminisces: "It would have given him pleasure if I had been able to remember the Latin name of just one of them" (153-54). The elaborate passages devoted to description of flowers and plants and animals and insects in his work are somewhat childlike, intent on capturing the phenomenal world as it appears to a child with all its newness and mystery. The story "Madrid" is an impassioned portrait and a tribute to a man who taught Berger to look at the world, kept vigilance over his first visual contact with the world as it were and oversaw the intimate process of ascribing names to things. The residual impressions of this early education in looking have come to mark all of Berger's narrative descriptions of the natural world and human interactions with the natural world.

For a person who grew up to be a writer, memories of learning alphabets for the first time is important: "It was in the Green Hut before the eyes of Tyler, now eating his sandwiches decorated with parsley in the lounge of the Ritz Hotel, Madrid, that I first learnt to write. Earlier, at a nursery school, I had learnt to form the letters, all of them, from A to Z" (150). Again, there is a convergence of two places and two times. This serves to underline the idea that an event that took place in the past and its significance should be measured not merely by the position it occupies in a person's memory but the intensity with which it affects the present: we can think of Berger's descriptions as a kind of re-enactment of the activity of learning to form the letters for the first time. The spatial and temporal differences between the act of looking and the act of describing are reduced to a minimum. Words and phrases are brought together to serve the purpose of retaining the freshness of first viewing. The ghost of Tyler and the activity of learning the alphabets in the Green Hut accompany the eyes of the narrator every time he begins the task of collecting visual impressions. The intensity of first viewing is important to Berger because the sense of sight, for him, always tries to configure the visible world in an ever-continuous present: the moment of viewing is marked by the twin movements of distance and closeness and is constituted always by the constellational conception of time. The stories in *Here is Where We Meet* are therefore not about ghosts from the past. They are about a certain perspective of time which is laid out as space that makes the encounters between people from different times in the author's lives possible.

### 3.8 *From A to X: The Storyteller as a Compiler of Letters*

In "The Storyteller", Benjamin talks about three locations from which stories emerge: the rural, the maritime and the urban. Berger, in *From A to X*, goes beyond this tripartite scheme and includes the prison as an experience-affirming site from which stories may also emerge. *From A to X* is composed of letters that A'ida writes to her

lover Xavier who is in prison, some unsent letters written by Xavier and a few scribbles that he makes on some of A'ida's letters. It is a book that is epistolary not only in form but also in intent. The letters lean, as it were, towards a time when they will be read, and the experiences that gave rise to the letters, understood. The book is structured around the experience of reading letters. The voice that is embedded within that experience is that of A'ida. The function of this voice is not only to tell but also to listen. A'ida's letters not only describe her life but also, perhaps more importantly, they are intended as a listening presence to accompany Xavier in prison. Perhaps this is the reason why Xavier scribbles his thoughts at the back of A'ida's letters. The letters "listen" to his thoughts when the act of scribbling is carried out and then the traces inscribed on them are made part of the ongoing afterlife of A'ida's letters. It is a kind of narrative collaboration that A'ida and Xavier engage in, although Xavier's contribution comes in the form of his scribbles and occasional unsent letters.

There are two versions of reality that come off in the letters: the immediate reality of the situations and people in A'ida's life and the reality of the political and global economic order of Xavier's jottings. These complimentary views of the world – the immediate and the general, the sensuous and the abstract, the close-at-hand and the out-of-reach, collaborate to constitute a sense of the real that is defended as a mode of resistance to the factors that try to disorient and dislocate the lives of prisoners. Human displacement, delocalization and imprisonment are the major themes of the book:

Delocalisation. Refers not only to the practice of moving production and services to where labour is cheapest, but also to the plan of destroying the status of all earlier fixed places so that the entire world becomes a Nowhere, and a single liquid market.

Such a Nowhere has nothing to with deserts. Deserts have stronger profiles than mountains. No desert forgives. Flying over Haserof so low – undercarriage retained – the tips of two blades of the propeller were buckled back. Discovered it only on landing at Faz. I was still learning.

This prison is not Nowhere. (23)

The desire for union and the willingness to live despite a future that is unforeseeable are evident in the way A'ida tries to integrate Xavier in a past which contains both real and imagined events. A'ida's epistolary narrative is punctuated by her changing perception of time, or rather, the time of their companionship – the time between them that they earlier had the power to affect. The lovers are in a relationship and yet there is no physical contact. The prospect of union is thrown into grave uncertainty. All they are left with is past memories of companionship. This, along with the present separation and absence transform, for them, the idea of space, its limits and possibilities and how they occupy it physically. This in turn affects the perception of passing time: "The word recently has altered since they took you. Tonight I don't want to write how long ago that was. The word recently now covers all that time. Once it meant a few weeks or the day before yesterday" (10). The experience of Xavier's imprisonment and the displacement it suggests for their relationship affects the way A'ida thinks about her own life. It suggests displacement to her as well, because her perception of ageing is thrown into confusion: "There are times when I believe I have a few more months to live before dying after a long life; at other times I feel like an eleven year old, waiting to find out about almost everything" (13). Time is laid out as space in a way which is reminiscent of the Derridean way of coalescing two mutually exclusive generic types or meanings in *différance*. She recollects things that she and Xavier did together and

narrates them in her letter. She also imagines things they could have done and narrates them as if they actually happened. This is one of her many ways of doing away with the linearity of prison-time. The verdict of two life sentences for Xavier follows the logic of this linear conception of lived time. A'ida's letters are a protest against it. The afterlife that she gives him is form of justice that is not restricted to law: "I think of you as the hero in a story I once heard. Not a story I'm inventing, a story I once heard in a bus before they ordered us to get down. I couldn't invent you, if I lived a hundred lives" (24). Imagining, or the very realisation that one is still able to imagine, is a step towards empowerment. Inside the prison, it is the last thing that one can hold on to: "When they next confiscate everything from you, before banging you up in the pit, tell yourself, my on-the-ground lion, the story of how we flew in the CAP 10B. Listen to my voice telling it. Our two versions will be one then" (56). The act of telling oneself a story and recreating an event that never took place despite the oppressive conditions is emancipatory and it looks forward to a moment of solidarity when the "two versions" of the imaginative experiences will be collated. The relationship between the past and the future is neither linear nor uni-directional. Faced with the inconsequentiality of things, the only response is stories. Hope is not directed towards the future where its fulfilment awaits, but it is turned back towards the past which still contains revelations to help A'ida and Xavier endure the intolerable present. It is this irrepressible hope that makes them envision a meaning that is to be found looking back at time and unhinging it: "At the instant before we die, perhaps time makes an about turn, mi Guapo. Perhaps at that instant looking backwards offers all the promises of the future. Perhaps the past becomes pregnant if the future is barren!" (75-76)

A'ida's references to people she meets are marked by certain idiosyncrasies. A closer look at these references also reveals a gesture of tenderness. She often offers assistance

to the people she meets. For example, in one of her letters she mentions meeting Alexis: “He still has the same wart by his left nostril. (Salicylic acid ( $C_7H_6O_3$ ) would remove it, applied daily, but never on the skin around it)” (24). Stories of friendship and comradeship are offered by A’ida to Xavier to make him feel at home, to place him at the heart of the “real”. She recognises Xavier’s loneliness and tries to alleviate it: “Neighbours have moved in whom you don't know. I'm sending you a couple to keep you company. When they've left, I'll come” (29). A certain impulse to “send” characterises A’ida’s letters to Xavier. For example, she ends one of her letters by describing a dream that she saw and by expressing her desire to send the colour blue as a kind of attachment along with her letter. The desire to make Xavier ‘see’ what she saw marks her letter, to share in the there-at-handness of perception: “Despite the white frost, the blue of the plums was sunny and incandescent. Make no mistake about it, it wasn’t the blue of any sky, it was the blue of small ripe plums. And their blue is what I send you in your cell tonight as I write in the dark” (11). One of Berger’s many collaborative works is titled *I Send You This Cadmium Red*, a book produced with John Christie where the writers exchange letters sharing with each other certain colours accompanied by their meditations on those colours. Elsewhere in *From A to X*, A’ida says, “Colours exist to provoke desire” (75). We might imagine the absence of colour inside Xavier’s prison and how A’ida’s letters with their vivid images and references to colours are directed towards sustaining and sheltering desire. This is a gestural act of what Berger understands as tenderness, which is always accompanied, for him, by hospitality. Secrecy, which is conceived as an interface between what is revealed and what is concealed, is a part of this hospitality. Secrets cannot be presented for the very fact that they cannot be appropriated linguistically. There is a certain quietude with which a secret guards itself unwilling to relinquish its uniqueness. The epistolary

exchange between A'ida and Xavier preserves this secrecy by creating an intimate and evocative picture of everyday life despite the fact that they are living apart, despite the immediate fact of Xavier's imprisonment. A'ida's narrative impulse is cinematic: "Let me tell you what I can see at this moment" (29). Her letters to Xavier are a compendium of totality of things outside prison, beings in the world. What marks this totality is a relatedness of events and being. This also signifies a real-time relay of her immediate surroundings to Xavier's prison. The only medium through which the relay is possible is epistolary writing. The unavailability of physical contact compels the letters to carry an added element of the sensuous that evokes a world outside the prison – not only outside the prison-space but also outside prison-time.

The writer as a compiler of the letters is endowed with the responsibility of recognising and respecting the intimacy of the exchange and extending his hospitality to the experiences of A'ida and Xavier by giving them a shelter in the form of a book. The recognition and the respectful gesture are constitutive of the processes through which the book came about. The compiler of the letters is also the *passeur* in this book. His role is similar here to the role of John, the narrator of his first novel, *A Painter of Our Time*, who takes up the responsibility of arranging the diary entries of the fictional Hungarian painter, Janos Lavin. Incidentally, when *A Painter of Our Time* came out several readers thought that Lavin was a real painter – an effect that was not entirely fortuitous. The question of veracity – whether what is being narrated actually happened – is thrown into disarray by deliberately confounding the notion of a stable reality. What matters is not what actually happened but how the very idea of happening or event may be re-thought, thereby questioning the ways in which the artifactuality of events can be integrated within the category of human experience.

A'ida's voice is emblematic of Berger's idea of sympathetic listening. The letters embody and carry that voice to Xavier's prison where it speaks to him and listens to his experiences. Describing his experience of writing the book Berger recounts how the experience of reading the letters is inseparably related to the voice of the letter-writer: "Letters although perhaps never read out loud are inseparable from the voice of that person. So I had a kind of A'ida's voice somewhere in my imagination" (Coixet y Berger, 00:21:30). The voice initiates an intimate dialogue between her experiences and his. Xavier's prison is transformed into a chamber (or, to call up an etymological association, a camera) and A'ida's voice becomes the lenses through which negotiations between the two worlds separated by prison walls are made possible. Seeing through glass is a motif in Berger. We can think of *Bento's Sketchbook* and how Spinoza's profession of lens-grinding interests Berger. The act of seeing through glass, especially the lenses of a camera, involves delimiting the scope of what is visible (or, what may be considered to be visible) thereby re-orienting the relationship between the eye and the visible world. The thrust of A'ida's descriptions is visual and they are accessed through the letters she sends to Xavier – letters meant to be read in prison. So, our experience of reading the letters is accompanied by a strange feeling of displacement: we are inside the prison, with Xavier, reading A'ida's letters and at the same time we are aware of the belatedness of the act of reading because the letters were written and read a long time ago. The introduction to the book ends with the lines: "Wherever Xavier and A'ida are today, dead or alive, may God keep their shadows" (3). The act of "keeping" the "shadows" or recognizing and respecting their experiences is performed by the compiler of the letters in collaboration and complicity with the reader. A'ida and Xavier are both dead and alive, we could say, while the activity of reading their letters is underway. The two time frames – the past and the present – are

made to converge, giving the narrative a ghostly quality. And yet, there is a constant urge to embody the transmissions of experience, to give a body or a shelter to the voices that share the experiences of survival. The idea of hospitality is primarily concentrated upon a desire for corporeality. And this desire is a resistance against the abstraction, the facelessness of global financial system. The first step toward the attempt to envisage a body is to re-imagine the written text as a speaking voice: “I stare at this paper I’m writing on and I hear your voice. Voices are as different from each other as faces and far more difficult to define. How would I describe your voice to someone so they could infallibly recognise it? In your voice there’s a waiting – like waiting for the train to slow down a little so you can jump” (159).

The interactions between the graphemes and the phonemes that take place on the surface of the letters while A’ida is reading them, parallel the play of absence-presence of the epistolary voices that we hear while reading the book. The book as a textual entity becomes a complex repository of all the voices that speak through the letters compiled in it. The physicality of the book, the surface of its pages and the recurrence of drawings and blank spaces – all go on to create a physiology of the body that the voices come to inhabit. There are references to the idea of a self-contained body – we can think of the prison in this way – or a self-sustaining system constituting an organised network of signals and actions throughout the book. For example, A’ida’s pharmaceutical preoccupations make her envision a kind of homeostasis or equilibrium that is lacking in the lives of A’ida and Xavier, using a neurobiological metaphor: “Neurobiologists now know every living body consists – along with all its physical components and substances – of a ceaseless network of messages, and that these guide the activities of the body’s cells so as to maintain possible well-being and stability – what they call its homeostasis” (159). The image of guiding the activities of the body’s cells calls to mind

the activities of the prisoners inside their “cell” – the pun is unmistakable here – carried out in order to keep their sanity intact.

The apparently offhand references to historical events and people are meant to position the narrative firmly in the midst of current world events and the passage of time, the spectrality of which reveals itself in the convergences of meanings. The intent is to show a kind of non-linear continuity and similarity between different situations in history that urged people in different ages to come up with responses that might be similar, or stances assumed with regard to moral, political and economic problems. One of the few notes made by Xavier reads as follows: “The Inuit poet, Panegoosho, dropped in and started to talk about people he knew as a child. They did not even try to be beautiful, only true, but beauty was there, it was a custom” (38). In observing this continuum, there is recognition of solidarity amongst people engaged in resistance against different forms of oppressions. Another note, a few pages earlier, reads as follows: ““The schoolmaster (whose thick glasses a herder broke) quoted this to us: “The loveliest things we no longer see are sunlight, clear stars on a dark night, the full moon, and summer fruit – ripe cucumbers, pears, apples.” Written only yesterday the schoolmaster said, only 2,500 years ago” (28). Xavier quotes Aeschylus, not as a historical reference point but as choric presence commenting on the situation at hand: the transformation of soldiers into agents of repressive force perpetuating violence on unarmed civilians is in itself an indication of the shift in the political operations. The problem that is to be confronted is, however, not this transformation but the question of definition: what is a soldier? Xavier still “remember(s) the time when soldiers were warriors, when mothers, however anxious, were proud of their soldier sons” (39). But now “soldiers have been transformed into bastards” (39). In a world increasingly dominated by financial capital, social identity gets disoriented, leaving behind a gap

between what one was supposed to do and what one is actually made to do. The result is a kind of shame and a falling-apart of professional ethics and identity. Xavier's notes and unsent letters often contain an evocative yet un-nostalgic image of a past which communicates with and comments on the current condition of the world. And therefore, the figures from the past that he invokes are perceived to be contemporaries of sorts. They provide an intellectual comradeship to Xavier and teach him about how to confront the intolerability of the present situation. There is a subtle parallelism between these absent 'comrades' of Xavier and the real people from A'ida's world. Ved, for example, who is one of A'ida's new neighbours, acts as a foil to A and X's correspondences. He can neither read nor write as a result of which he cannot write letters to his children back home. The prerequisite of literacy is a factor and a privilege governing the modes in which experiences are shared. However, he talks to them over the telephone. There is no mention in the novel whether A'ida and Xavier have telephonic conversations. A'ida asks Ved about his family: "Where did you say they were? Far away and here – he lays a hand on his heart. They're all in different places and they all meet here" (30). A meeting place – a place of convergence such as the 'here' that Ved refers to is a recurrent image in Berger.

In one of her letters A'ida writes: "Every kind of love adores repetitions because they defy time" (41). In so far as both romance and storytelling by and large thrive on rituals, repetitions are integral to the conception of storytelling – especially oral storytelling – as an act of extending hospitality. Whereas, the improvisatory tendencies in traditional storytelling demands variations and alterations for each new performance, a story as a narrative entity thrives on a combination of repetitions and improvisations. Often, the basic plot remains the same but minor details are added or altered, depending upon the composition of audience before which the storyteller is performing, time-constraints,

political or ideological considerations, etc. The factors responsible for the changes between two different performances of the same story are unspecifiable and incalculable and thus the ontological status of a story in terms of narrativity and sequentiality defies the metaphysics of presence and rethinks the relation between experience and narrativization of experience. Oral storytelling is more amorphous in the sense that change is an unavoidable component in its transmission. On the other hand, storytelling in print, especially the novelistic kind, is resistant to semantic changes. The afterlife of storytelling in print thrives more on interpretations and translations, as Benjamin suggests. The afterlife of oral storytelling is, on the other hand, dependent upon the variations and repetitions brought into effect by the tellers and the individual adaptations and perhaps even idiosyncrasies of the tellers, gestures and bodily articulations that are constitutive of its continuing life. Of course, in case of storytelling in print, the publication of a book is sometimes followed by the release of audiobooks read by the author himself. If a listener happens to listen to an audiobook after the death of the author/narrator, the experience of listening assumes a spectral dimension. The disembodied recorded voice of the dead narrator suggests, then, two things: one, a displacement of time where the original temporal frame is made to collide with the present – the time of recording with the time of listening, thereby suggesting a removal or even deferral of the corporeality of the speaker; two, a re-constitution of a structure of haunting where the voice of the narrator is brought within the sensory arc of the listener through technology leading to an imaginative re-embodiment and re-incarnation. Interestingly, repeated listening of the same audiobook may turn the experience banal, although figuratively speaking, one cannot read/listen to the same book/audiobook twice: interpretations proliferate every time we read a text. Berger tries to address the spectral nature of his narratives and to replicate the first-hand-ness of

experience in his stories by negotiating a transaction between the voice and the print.

*From A to X* can be read starting anywhere one chooses to.<sup>41</sup> The compiler exercises his freedom in the arrangement of the letters and this freedom is shared by the reader. The letters evoke a sense of continuous present which the reader shares but at the same time he is left to wonder what eventually happened to A'ida and Xavier. The double entendre of being trapped by a continuum of present time suggested by the letters and the constant reminder of the belatedness of the epistolary exchange is central to the spectral nature of the book. While reading the letters we find ourselves placed somewhere between the inside and the outside of the prison where Xavier is incarcerated. A'ida's thoughts are almost always cast in the direction of Xavier. The fabrication of the story, therefore, contrives an inside-outside schema based on the two distinct spatial figurations that the two characters occupy. Textual clarification is not offered as to the definition and allocation of this schema, thus making it possible for the prison to be called an 'outside' and A'ida's world (as described in her letters) to be called an inside, and vice versa. The main emphasis is on the porosity of the structure that separates the inside from the outside. The passage of the letters is used as a form of resistance and so is the passage of memories that unhinges the narrative from the shackles of linear time. This does not mean that the act of sending letters is accompanied by the certainty that the letters will be received by the person intended. This is exemplified by A'ida's sending extra soaps to Xavier in the expectation that he will get some. Some may be lost or stolen in transit. This uncertainty which is built into the sending or transmission of messages mirrors Derrida's concept of postal metaphor.

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<sup>41</sup> The final page, however, which is a diagram for an escape plot, is supposed to come at the end.

The free play of meanings that emerges from improvisatory storytelling and its affective potential are haunted by the ghostly storytelling voice, whose absent presence renders it spectral. In Berger's books, the storytelling voice is spectral because it is a residual inheritance of certain older figures, such as the travelling journeyman or the master craftsman or the flâneur. The attempts of the voice to inscribe on the page the materiality of its physical being in the form of scribbling or doodles – drawings mostly of hands – “All stories are also the stories of hands” (68) – and occasionally calling attention to the materiality of the act of writing, enhances the spectral nature of the voice. This bodily intercession is manifest in the drawings in *From A to X* which bridge the incorporeal space between Berger's acts of making and incorporating the drawings in his book and A'ida's epistolary transmission of them to Xavier. The fictive haunts the real, the dead haunts the living and presume a response. This is a frequent trope in Berger. An example of this haunting occurs in “Boris is Buying Horses” from *Once in Europa* where the metaphysics of presence is punctured by the intervention of the character, Boris, in the moment when the story is being written: “I told you once, he says, that I had enough poems in my head to fill a book, do you remember? Now you are writing the story of my life. You can do that because it's finished. When I was still alive, what did you do?” (36) Boris' spectral return suggests a kind of vigilance that the dead keeps over the process of writing. The storytelling voice brings to the fore the contradiction of time: events separated by the passage of time and events taking place at the same time. Spectrality in Berger is a result of this contradiction. An event or a character does not become spectral when and because it is separated from its origin, but when the recognition is made of its separation from and convergence with its other, its absence.

One of A'ida's friends, Ama, had a lover called Rami who was killed probably because of his involvement in political insurgency. One day she recounts to A'ida how the previous night she had seen a film on the TV at her friend's place and how the protagonist of the film resembled Rami. She says: "If there wasn't only one Rami, if Rami wasn't unique, then he isn't dead! How can I mourn him if he isn't, isn't unique? And I need to mourn him!" (106) Rami's spectral afterlife as a character in a film keeps his death from becoming meaningful in Ama's eyes: "This means Rami died for nothing!" (105) His ghostly re-appearance as a character in a film makes him look somewhat banal and takes away his glory of martyrdom leaving Ama, the woman who loved her when he was alive, to wonder how to mourn a figure who has apparently come back from the dead albeit in cinema. Another character in A'ida's letters, Manda, is a music teacher. She had once "rescued" A'ida "from the despair of first-time prisoner" (41). The hospitality is returned by A'ida through her continuing friendship and affection for Manda. The "story" surrounding the beginning of their friendship is cherished by A'ida and preserved through occasional repetition. Repetition in this regard becomes a way of renewing contact with what is "real" and familiar: "Every kind of love adores repetitions because they defy time" (41). A'ida narrates to Xavier how in Lamasga she and other employees were allotted six hours compulsory work sewing uniforms and on how she met Manda on her first morning, who chose to take the empty place beside her. We can sense why A'ida is so fond of Manda's story: it contains a narrative of embodiment, of corporeality. The symbolic act of taking the empty place beside A'ida is a gesture of hospitality. It signifies for A'ida an event that shelters her from the emptiness shelters her from the emptiness of despair. The sheltering corporeality of Manda is pictured in the first moment of A'ida's seeing her: "I saw her approaching like a crowded bus that had crossed the Sierra; all the passengers, who knew each other after the long journey, were joking inside her" (41).

In her letter to Xavier, A'ida mentions that Manda has learnt to play the lute. Lute seems to provide her with a sense of belonging. To extend this understanding a bit, the act of playing the lute places her in solidarity with all those who love playing the instrument and find shelter in its sound: "She pretends that playing a lute can give her an entry to somewhere she wants to be. Some institution. Some committee. May be some building" (42). The materiality that music offers to Manda is nothing short of the architectural materiality that goes into the making of a building. A shelter against the absurdity of the world. The relationship between a lute and the music it produces can be seen as that of a haunting – a relationship established by the musician who plays the lute.

In the BBC radio presentation titled "About Songs and laughter" Berger quotes Johnny Cash: "I could wrap myself," said Johnny Cash, "in the warm cocoon of a song and go anywhere. I was invincible." The experience which gave rise to a song is preserved and disseminated in spectral form. The presentation is structured like an address which begins by describing an impulse to draw. There is a convergence of three art forms in this radio programme: music, drawing and storytelling. All of them are directed toward the piece of music performed by Yasmin Hamdan. These forms approach the disembodied emanations of the music and try to give them a body or a shelter. Music, as conceived by Berger, can be thought of as a message or a series of messages that need to be coded into certain forms in order to be transmitted to some other place or time where they can be deciphered. Although, the piece of music remains abstract and amorphous, it is able to manifest itself viscerally by acquiring from time to time 'bodies' of singers or instruments:

A song when being sung and played acquires a body and it does this by taking over and briefly possessing existent bodies. The body of a double bass, standing vertical, whilst it's being strummed. The body of a mouth organ cupped in a pair of hands

hovering and pecking like a bird before the mouth. Or the torso of the drummer as he rolls. Again and again it takes over the body of the singer. And after a while, the body or the circle of listeners who, as they listen, gesture to the song, are remembering or foreseeing. (“About Songs”)

The act of composition of a piece of music anticipates the moment when it will be performed for the first time in its entirety. In live performances, songs are produced out of an interaction between the body of the instrument and the body of the performer that involved a great deal of physical energy. The dynamics of the music is dependent on the dynamics of the interaction between the body of the performer and the body of the instruments. The verb ‘takes’ suggests a temporary haunting of the body of the performer or the instrument. After the haunting is complete, the performer or the instrument becomes a complete embodiment of the music and they are indistinguishable. The song passes on from one body to another.

In *From A to X*, the interplay between the spectral afterlife of music and the corporeality of the musical instrument offers the thematic fulcrum around which the narrative of Manda revolves. The schism of presence and absence that loosely structures the epistolary exchanges between A’ida and Xavier is underpinned by the corporeality and spectrality of lived experiences. The narrative is aimed at deconstructing the metaphysic that keeps the spectral and the corporeal apart. According to Manda, “As soon as you hug a lute, it becomes a man! You’re playing a man. You feel it immediately” (42). The corporeality offered by the lute to the music comes to signify an idea of interdependence, even a kind of companionship, for Manda.

One of the stories within stories in *From A to X*, narrated by Manda, is based on her belief that “in the beginning...there were two names, no more, a name for women and a name for men” (43). This in a way refers back to the originary rupture that forms the

basis of Berger's conversation with his mother in *Here is Where We Meet*: "There was a mistake at the beginning, she continued. Everything began with a death...The Creation began with a death." There is a conceptual parallelism between what Manda says about language and Berger's mother's opinion that "the births happened – that's why there's birth – precisely because they offered a chance of repairing some of what was damaged from the beginning, after the death. That's why we are here, John. To repair" (51). This "damage", to put it theoretically, is a division of the unity of experience into binaries. The narrativity of experience unleashed by storytelling is one of the ways in which the contingencies of experience can be demystified. Berger's stories and writings on art are in a way an autobiography of his seeing eye, a passionate record of things seen and felt and carried. He has elsewhere likened the genre of autobiography to orphanhood: "Autobiography begins with a sense of being alone. It is an orphan form! (*Rendezvous* 46) Orphanhood can be equated to the idea of exile since both experiences recognise the absent presence of a bond to a tradition, to parents.

The activity of naming, like storytelling, is underlined by a need to preserve and propagate. In the history of naming things and people, as names became more and more strange, unfamiliar and various, the sounds those names produced became increasingly active in preserving the quintessence or ethos of the names or the aural experiences from which the names derived. Coming back to Manda:

As time went by, the names given to people across the entire world became more ingenious and more various, until most of them no longer recognised one another. Yet, unlike other words, people's names, however strange-sounding and unfamiliar, possess, whenever we hear or pronounce them, a common sound. It's not in the syllables, it's not A'ida. It's not Karim. It's not Shasno. It's not Ybarra. The sound is something that surrounds the names. (*From A to X* 43)

The words that stand out are “recognised” and “surrounds” reiterating the idea that names, and by implication the gesture of giving a name to something or someone, endows that thing or that being with a potential to survive and transform. This way of perceiving sounds as something that surrounds names reminds us of how “songs put their arms around historical time” (Some Notes). For Berger songs gain their urgency in a time when the shared language of prose as a form of discourse has ceased to exist. Levinas says in *God, Death, and Time*: “Death is the disappearance in beings, of those expressive movements that made them appear as living, those movements that are always *responses*... Death is the *no-response* [sans- réponse]” (9). Storytelling is a partial response to the deprivation of speech by death and the storyteller, as Berger states, has borrowed his authority from Death.

The scribbling and jottings made by Xavier vary from the objective, stating plain facts, to the hopeful. Most of them are not addressed to A’ida. They are not addressed to anyone in particular. They can be read as annotations to news received in prison of the state of the world. But read together in conjunction with A’ida’s letters, they help situate the story firmly in the present, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Xavier’s annotations read like relevant scraps of information salvaged from the ever-continuous current of news.

Bolivia. 12 million acres of land given to landless rural workers. Another 142 million hectares will be redistributed, if plan works out, to 2.5 million people. A quarter of the population. Tonight, Evo Morales, you are here with us. Come and sit in my cell that measures 2.5m x 3m. (*From A to X* 17)

Xavier’s gesture of inviting Morales to his cell is a way of extending solidarity and gratitude. It is also a gesture of hospitality. By imaginatively inviting a political leader

to his cell, Xavier is transforming the prison into a place where companionship and comradeship is possible, a place which is not a Nowhere. In Berger's works the description of a moment where events and people separated by time and place, converge and are made part of an ongoing present is a permanent attribute. More than anything, this convergence signifies the idea of refuge, a space whose 'reality' is not constructed by time and place. Quotations, fragments of thoughts from the past are re-contemporised, as it were, the moment they are found and used: "Wait a moment for I want to find a quotation which I think is in a notebook I kept when I was studying pharmaceuticals in Tarsa.

It has taken me two hours to find it, but here it is, from nearly two thousand years ago" (49).

The collection and use of quotation are Benjaminian. They are not interpretations or commentaries. The significant thing about quotations is that they are left to stand alone. It signifies a kind of survival. Also, quotations are torn out of their context sometimes and thus they have a kind of subversive energy. The logic with which a quotation is selected is the same as that of a photographer selecting a particular angle or a perspective out of the many possible angles and perspectives at his disposal. The afterlife of a quotation is manifested in the act of transforming it into a quotation in the first place, and by adapting into a context that might be different, helping it to connect two different experiences by showing a commonality of affect between them.

Xavier quotes Chavez: "After almost 200 years we can say that the USA was designed to fill the entire world with poverty – whilst giving it the name of Freedom..." (44) The lapse of 200 years is necessary to understand and declare with certainty the implication of an event taking place at the present time. Thus the "event-ness" of an event is

constituted of not only the present time in which it is taking place but also its incalculable manifestations in the future. Xavier quotes Marcos: “Only for the powerful is history an upward line, where their today is always the pinnacle. For those below, history is a question which can only be answered by looking backwards and forwards, thus creating new questions...” (130)

The theme of embodiment is a recurrent feature of the novel, as the following passage illustrates:

Through the window far away on the other side of Dimitri’s house I can see a dog walking slowly and sniffing the earth. Like me, he is looking for something and doesn’t know what. Let’s say he is looking intently, all his senses alert, for a surprise. And I’m looking for words to tell you how I’m with you. (45)

The act of writing letters for A’ida is an invitation to form. Finding the suitable vocabulary to communicate with Xavier has the element of surprise that results from a recognition of the relationship between form and content. The idea of form as a shelter is conveyed through an architectural metaphor:

As soon as a woman is living in a room, its ceiling curves... To have the effect, it’s not enough for a woman to visit a room, she has to live in it. It’s a phenomenon like weather, it has to go on for months...A man lies down on the floor of such a room, and the ceiling, instead of being above him, comes beside him, fits his body. (45)

The image is that of a correspondence between a woman and her surroundings.<sup>42</sup> There is an empathetic and affective relationship between the space surrounding a woman and her emotional situation. Spatiality of the “living room” that A’ida talks about is seen

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<sup>42</sup> It is reminiscent, in a way, of Berger’s personification of Geneva as a readily hospitable being offering fragments of stories to passers-by left behind by past travellers.

as being compliant to emotive factors as opposed to the Xavier's prison that is contained within a different kind of architecture which is not pliable to affect or emotion. Architectural arrangement of space, and the correspondence that humans living in that space, are common in Berger. Narrativity is imagined as a kind of space that is arranged and utilised through storytelling. The above-mentioned passage evokes an image of shelter and hospitality. This evocation by A'ida is directed towards providing a metaphoric shelter for her desire for Xavier and at the same time, it is a resistance against the reduction of absence into nothingness. The literary devices she uses in her letters to Xavier are, figuratively speaking, material aspects of the hospitable and inhabitable architecture that she wants to present to Xavier.

The activity of writing letters and thereby engaging in storytelling is also aimed at bringing out the sentient nature of things. The experience of imprisonment cuts the prisoner off from the world of the senses. Sensations of taste, colour, fragrance, especially the ones related to the natural world, are considerably diminished. A'ida's letters to Xavier are full of references to the sensuous details of the outside world. They are especially marked by the sensation of tactility. The sensation of touch that A'ida wants to convey to Xavier in prison is a kind of resistance against the erasure of affect that imprisonment entails in prisoners. Nature is shown to be benevolent and empathetic although the economic and political systems are inimical to human suffering. Prosopopeia and personification are two figures of speech that govern the representation of Nature as a sentient and sympathetic presence. In Berger's fiction, the liquid nature of the narrative voices makes it easy for the narrators to merge and identify with the surroundings. For instance: "The sun is low in the sky. The sun is short-sighted. It doesn't spot what changes. The folds of land falling from the mountain stay the same. The sun knows them" (46).

The letters are conceived as codes that only Xavier will be able to understand. There is an element of secrecy associated with the letters. They are an intimate record of A'ida's life and a valid piece of historic document of the times A'ida and Xavier are living through despite being fragmentary in nature. Identity is seen as having certain secrets built into it. These secrets imply the impossibility to pin down and analyse one's identity. The function of imprisonment is to reduce a prisoner's identity to the alleged crime which led to his imprisonment. A'ida's letters are a resistance against that reduction: "They have put you where you are to separate you from these secrets. So I'm sending them to you, as the sun goes down. They can't read them, you can so can – your A'ida" (46). The exchange of letters counterpoints the codification of formulae and the reduction of identities to numbers and abbreviations through the promise of revealing secrets. The repeated (and perhaps inconsequential and yet hopeful) acts of guarding the secrets are a protest in itself, sometimes with an implicit threat of violence: "If you like, mi guapo, I can tell you their formula!  $(Na, Ca)_8(AlSiO_4)_6(SO_4, S, Cl)_2$ " (52).

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### Chapter 3: Migration, Homelessness and Exile

In an interview, when asked about the underlying themes in his works, Berger said: “The first underlying theme from which I can't get away - because it's not something you choose, it is a kind of obligation, a kind of compulsion. I think, the first one is probably to do with the experience of immigration, but in the very broadest sense of the term ... people being displaced, if you wish, either voluntarily or forcibly” (Arda, 01:21-01:33). Chapter 3, Migration, Homelessness and Exile, discusses the relation between storytelling and displacements in the experience-affirming and experience-denying situations. *Lilac and Flag* (1990) and *King* (1999) describes what looks like Edward Soja's concept of *postmetropolis* whereas *And Our Faces, My Love, Brief as Photos* (1984) tries to envision the idea of a place, a lost home through a series of address. This chapter discusses briefly the economic factors behind the production of such spaces and how Berger's storytelling confronts the experiences of dispossession, homeless, and indeed, placelessness. The final part of the chapter discusses the question of commitment with regard to art and politics in Berger's first novel, *A Painter of Our Time* (1958) and tries to explore the relation between exile and political agency.

#### 4.1 Documenting Forced Migration: Fractured Identity and Homelessness in *A Seventh Man*

“What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.”

—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

The 2010 reissue of *A Seventh Man* (originally published in 1975) begins with the remark: “It can happen that a book, unlike its authors, grows younger as the years pass” (7). The decision to reissue the book presupposes its potential relevance to the present time. With the passing years, despite the obvious and increasing redundancy of

statistical data provided in it – drastically outdated after the collapse of the Soviet Union – two factors have withstood the test of time and have arguably become more pertinent now than when the book was first published in 1975 – the need for solidarity amongst migrant labourers and the attitude or the stance adopted by the writer and the photographer in recording their experiences of displacement. The reliance of Western Europe’s economic structure on the steady influx of migrant workers in the economically calamitous decades following World War II has been well-acknowledged.<sup>43</sup> The representation of migrant existence in *A Seventh Man* is more pertinent than ever as an insightful rejoinder to the upsurge of current anti-immigration idiom. The book was originally conceived as a documentary film, seeking to record the everyday lives of male migrant workers in the northern European industrial regions.<sup>44</sup> Its structure considerably retains the essence of a filmic narrative. Berger and Mohr were aided competently by Sven Blomberg and Richard Hollis in the project. The written text and the photographic images are arranged particularly around the movements of those workers who were mobilized out of the economically backward areas of Southern Europe into the towns and factories of Western Europe.

Many readers who approached the book from an academic point of view failed to regard the empathy with which the book’s conception was invested. It was only after the book was translated into “Turkish, Greek, Arabic, Portuguese, Spanish, Punjabi ... it began to be read by some of the people it was about,” (8) thus fulfilling the original aim of the makers of the book. Berger and Mohr did not set out to craft anything with the grand

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<sup>43</sup> See Rist, Ray C. “Guestworkers and Postworld War II European Migrations.” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1979, pp. 28–53, doi.org/10.1007/BF02686477, 10.1007/BF02686477.

<sup>44</sup> About the exclusion of the female migrant workers, Berger says: “Among the migrant workers in Europe there are probably two million women. Some work in factories; many work in domestic service. To write of their experience adequately would require a book in itself. We hope this will be done. Ours is limited to the experience” (12).

overarching ambition of universalising migrant experience. Today the impression that the reader forms while reading *A Seventh Man* is a flattening of the intervening decades of migration narratives into an indictment of steadfast resilience and universal oppression and pain.

*A Seventh Man* raises a question that is essential to the current debates about migration – whose pain is legitimate? Collecting, codifying and processing of biometric information like fingerprints and iris scans and pencilling in diagrams and maps establish and put into effect the legitimacy of the migrant’s identity as a worker but the processes involved in legitimising his status exclude his suffering. Berger’s concern is primarily empathetic and driven towards the experiential aspect of migration: “A man’s resolution to emigrate needs to be seen within the context of a world economic system. Not in order to reinforce a political theory but so that what actually happens to him can be given its proper value. That economic system is neo-colonialism” (45).<sup>45</sup> In the 2010 foreword to the book, Berger calls this economic system “economic fascism” – a structure which greatly benefits German, French and British economies. The book tries to suggest that it is feasible, if not uncomplicated, to believe that another’s distress deserves attention, kindness and compassion even if one has profited or gained social and economic advantages from that distress. It is increasingly problematical, though not unattainable, to endeavour to intercede and to assuage that pain.

*A Seventh Man* is a curiously amalgamated image-text entity whose multipart and fragmentary nature echoes the disarray and fragmentation of the people it is about, and

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<sup>45</sup> The term ‘neocolonialism’ entered English vocabulary after World War II to denote the enduring dependence of earlier colonies on foreign nations, but its connotation quickly expanded to apply to places where the influence and control of developed countries were exercised to carry out forms of exploitation reminiscent of colonial abuse—for example, in Latin America, where foreign rule had come to an end in the early 19th century.

consists of bits and pieces of oral statements, anecdotes, somewhat eccentric anthropometric/physiological illustrations of the bodily exertions and exhaustion caused by cyclic labour on the migrants, critical analyses that look into the *Gastarbeiter* attitude, and open condemnation of racist, bigoted politicians.<sup>46</sup> After the World War II, there was a growing dependence of Western European states where capitalism had reached an advanced stage, on migrant labour to expand their economies further. In Belgium, France and Switzerland, migrant workers constituted about twenty-five percent of the industrial labour power. In Germany and Britain, one manual labourer in every seven was an immigrant, as Berger has pointed out. The images in the book focus on the most subjugated members of the labour force in the 70s, the migrant workers who were placed far below the indigenous workers in terms of pay, social security, status, rights, promotion schemes and lodging environments. These workers, unlike many of their counterparts in Britain, had no right to settle or bring their families. The images can be divided into two categories: the working and living conditions in the host country, and the poverty-stricken places from where the migrants arrived. There is a correlation between the two. For instance, the impact of the sudden discharging of workers at Volkswagen registered more acutely in the rural communities of Anatolia, or places that Western capitalist economy had systematically underdeveloped, than in West Germany where Volkswagen factories were located. They were constantly brought in and sent back according to the industrial needs of the host countries. They came from Greece, Portugal, Southern Italy, Spain, Turkey and the states of the former Yugoslavia. In most cases they were not protected by trade unions and their dispossessions by exploitative labour regimes were frequently passed over in silence.

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<sup>46</sup> *Gastarbeiter* (literally “guest worker”) refers to migrant workers employed by the German state between 1955 and 1973.

Monopoly capitalism, according to Berger, subjects all classes and all nations to similar modes of exploitation but strengthens the differences between them in terms of technology, ways of living and working, and culture.<sup>47</sup> The differences are something one would imagine on which capitalism thrives. In the 70s, the growth of the world market and the consequent annexation of industry, commerce, navigation and railways ensured the rise of the bourgeoisie and increase in capital. This also meant the steady relegation of other classes to the background and a change in the geopolitical landscape and the subjection by the bourgeoisie of the country to the rule of the towns.

There is, in *A Seventh Man*, like in many other books by Berger, an edgy and visceral struggle between poetics and politics that does not really yield to easy formulations. This struggle occupies an intellectually engaging interstice between fiction and non-fiction. This informs Berger's Marxist-humanist concern for the experience of migration. He studies the effect that the neo-colonial system has on, not only the economy, but also the being of the individual working as a migrant worker, and his studies yield results that he presents in terms of a melange of statistical data, poetry, social reportage, interviews and standard Marxist analyses. There are a number of parallel narratives that unfold in the book. The description of the migrant worker – the protagonist whose life experiences embody the general struggles of all other migrant workers – is accompanied by objective, informational commentary. Berger briefly alludes to the vocabulary of the 70s global financial order and takes one term at a time: 'metropolitan', 'advanced', 'developed' and most significantly the term 'underdevelop'. The term 'underdeveloped' or its more acceptable euphemism

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<sup>47</sup> From the perspective of Economics, Monopoly capitalism thrives upon concentrating market shares where competition is inadequate or non-existent. As such the term designates a stage of capitalism where monopoly control is extensive and unambiguous, despite the presence of the ideological fabrication of free markets and competition in public discourse. Banks are generally involved but procedural control is concentrated amongst stockbrokers and influential individual industrialists and business magnates.

'developing' was used to describe economies which were agricultural or under-industrialised. A critical approach toward this vocabulary exposes the exploitative ideology operating behind it. Berger points out, "The only serious contribution to this semantic discussion has been made by the Cubans, who have pointed out that there should be a transitive verb: to underdevelop. An economy is underdeveloped because of what is being done around it, within it and to it. There are agencies which underdevelop" (25).

The photos alternate between the close-ups of migrants and long-shots of village territories and urban spaces. This constant movement between closing in and moving out parallels Berger's writing technique. Seeing reality from close up and from afar is built into the dialogue that is set in motion between the urban and the rural. For instance, "the inhabitant of the modern metropolis tends to believe that it is always somehow possible to scrape a bare living off the land..." (28). The peasant, on the other hand, knows that it is not possible: "Nature has to be bribed to yield enough" (28). The romantic idealisation of nature by capitalism and the belief that the city lives off a surplus produced in the countryside are part of the exploitative rhetoric that victimises migrant workers in the cities. Since capitalist ethic sees poverty as a result of the lack of enterprise and productivity, underdevelopment is ludicrous in its eyes. The barrenness of the land, for instance, leads to rural poverty and peasants who were tillers of the soil are forced to graze cattle. The disguised social basis and implication of this poverty is unyielding. The economic relations intervening between the peasants and their lands are constitutive of the factors that contribute toward making the land barren. This involves the share-cropping system, the systems of land tenure, the money-lending system, the marketing system, etc. Sometimes the peasants are forced to leave their villages and find jobs in the city as unskilled labourers. The decision to leave, however,

comes much later. “Every day he hears about the metropolis” (27). All cities suggest a single image to his mind – a place which holds promises for him and his family. He does not have a clear idea about the nature of this promise or its future fulfilment. The shape of the half-understood promise offered by the city has been carved for him by other migrants who have been to the city. He has also noticed a certain sense of secrecy with which the peasant-turned-migrants guard their experiences. These experiences are shareable only amongst those who have been to the city to work and for whom the act of migration suggests a discontinuity with the life lived in the village. They are the  *passeurs*  who cross borders to work, either legally or illegally. When they come back, they bring secrets with them that only other migrants can understand and share. The act of migration is a resistance against the stagnation brought about by underdevelopment. Migration occurs as a result of not only desperation but also an active agency to do something about the situation of stasis that the migrant was born into or was forced to confront.

The migrant’s leaving is accompanied by a sense of the unknown. About the place he is going to, he has a vague idea. He does not know whether he will return triumphant or defeated. About the village he is leaving behind, he feels a strong and unprecedented attachment. His decision to leave has been approved and supported by his family members because they feel that all of them are going to benefit from it. It is a hopeful act and at the same time, an act of desperation. While leaving he takes a road which “itself is a passing of stories, with its listeners in the grass on the either side” (37).

When he arrives in the city, it appears to be different from the image he had harboured in his mind. It is larger and more populated than he had thought and there is a kind of will that is required to pass through it. The language that people speak here is the same

as the one he speaks but it sounds different to him. He comes across things unfamiliar which give rise to a feeling of wonder and at the same time an obvious feeling of discomfort. Gradually he gets to meet more people like him, people who have come from afar to do work that is similar to his, and he begins to share his experiences.

In the metropolitan cities the forms of deprivation that the migrants are subjected to go unseen. Migrants live a ghostly existence with no clear sense of belonging – physically present yet unseen and unrecognized. Their memories of the places they come from are incompatible with the incomprehensibility that their workplaces offer. They understand that the work they are required to do does not involve thinking. Their sense of ‘achievement’ is solely restricted to the pay packet they receive and what it does for their family members. The manual work is mechanical, repetitive and ‘mindless’. A British worker at Fords is quoted saying: “You don’t achieve anything here. A robot could do it. The line here is made for morons. It doesn’t need any thought. They tell you that. “We don’t pay you for thinking” they say” (103). The migrants become ghostly because they are not counted as human beings with the ability to think or improvise – human beings with desires and fatigue and yet they are indispensable. One single migrant worker is replaceable but migrant workers as a group and their usefulness is absolutely crucial. The unthinking manual labour that he is committed to in the factories begins to affect him physiologically and psychologically. “He begins to watch his arm, as if it were being moved by what it is holding instead of by his shoulder” (103). He becomes extensions of machines he is made to operate. Traditions, history, political theory are employed in such a way that the categories of ‘normal’ and ‘normative’ are coalesced and questions regarding what is happening to the migrant workers are either passed over in silence or repressed. This silence is what characterises the migrant’s experience. Inside the factories he soon gets used to a stream of repetitive

noises: “stamping, boring, pressing, beating, the scream of hydraulic tools, the shock of substance hitting substance, and one substance grating against another...” (108). When he leaves the workshop, these noises are so persistent in his head still that he can hear nothing else. “Silence here is deafness” (108). Metaphorically it is also the silence of history which has sanctified the norms as absolute.

Berger and Mohr deliberately avoided producing an ‘academic’ book restricted to analyses of facts and figures. What makes *A Seventh Man* ‘human’ is the incorporation of fragments of direct experiences, and the unhinging of the formal, generic structure that the subject usually demands and instead establishing a free-form, inclusive narrative style that looks/reads like, at the same time, a family album and a piece of social reportage.

The first couple of images in the book are that of roads and thoroughfares, seen here in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2.

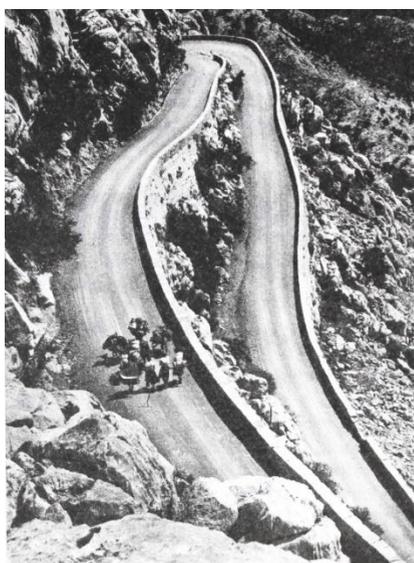


Fig. 1. Roads and thoroughfares in *A Seventh Man*  
Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010. Verso, London. p. 14



Fig. 2.  
Roads and thoroughfares in *A Seventh Man*  
Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010. Verso, London. p. 14

Even before we see the pictures of migrants, we are presented with the roads that they will take to reach the cities of their destination. The roads are anonymous and they are objectively photographed from a distance. The first photograph is that of a road that leads out from the village and the second one is that of urban overpasses. The anonymity and the ubiquitous nature of the images foreshadow the migrant's experience in the city: nobody really knows him, and his activities are restricted to the ones that are expected of him as a worker. The accompanying poem by the Hungarian proletarian poet Attila József, from which the book gets its title, reads like a prologue to the book.<sup>48</sup> Berger read this poem out in an event organised by Subcomandante Marcos, where he likened the poem to a "message" and remarked that "many many messages come from the absent and the dead". The second verse of the poem is particularly relevant to the book:

When you must fight to survive,  
let your enemy see seven.  
One, away from work on Sunday,  
one, starting his work on Monday,  
one, who teaches without payment,  
one, who learned to swim by drowning,  
one, who is the seed of a forest,  
and one, whom wild forefathers protect,  
but all their tricks are not enough:  
you yourself must be the seventh. (15)

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<sup>48</sup> In Germany (and in Britain) one out of seven manual workers is an immigrant, Berger subsequently points out.

Survival, an issue which is central to the experience of the migrant labourer as described in the book, can have two implications: endurance of a trial that threatens to erase one's identity reducing him to a replaceable machine, and the preservation of shareable experience despite antagonistic and disorienting conditions. Talking about the community of peasants in 1980s France as a class of survivors, Berger says in the introduction to *Pig Earth*: "The word survivor has two meanings. It denotes somebody who has survived an ordeal. And it also denotes a person who has continued to live when others disappeared or perished" (xiv). This is relevant to the description of the migrant worker. In its examination of the economic structures and their impact on individuals, *A Seventh Man* is divided into three segments: "Departure", "Work" and "Return". The economic structuration and its ideological underpinnings are constituted by global financial capitalism's forceful incursion into the economically backward nations of Europe like Turkey, Portugal, Spain, and Greece and the erstwhile Yugoslavia and the working condition and rights of migrants within the economy of the industrial countries. Berger's examinations are accompanied by statistical information (now outdated), economic theories, and historical facts.

In order to establish as it were the materiality of the medium, Mohr places an image of a Belgrade street photographer next (Fig. 3).

It is an autobiographical image. The man in a worn-out coat and cap and cigarette hanging at the corner of his lips could be Mohr himself. His face has the look of a veteran street magician. Two figures – one a young man and a boy – look out of the photograph at the viewer. In the intersection between their gaze and ours, two moments are brought together – the moment of the photograph being taken and the moment of our looking at it.



Fig. 3 A Belgrade street photographer  
 Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010. Verso, London. p. 14

Interestingly, two photographs are being taken - one by Mohr and the other by the unnamed street photographer. The photo taken by Mohr we can see, the one by the street photographer we cannot. The interplay between the seen and the unseen thus underlines the thematic conceptualisation of the book and Mohr and Berger's works in general. The images in the book are metaphorical in the sense that they bring us things from experiences happening elsewhere geographically or temporally. And to this extent they suggest a replacement or substitution. The substitution is not of the experience but

of the medium. Photography is an art of partial return. As the makers of the book understand it, it is an intimate and empathetic record of having seen, witnessed and felt. The moment of taking a photo anticipates the innumerable, incalculable moments in which the photo will be viewed and reviewed.

Poetics of writing fuses with the central polemical arguments to produce a notation of human suffering that is at once topical and universal. The aim is not to theorise but to get as close as possible to the experience without interfering or being patronising. Berger substitutes the abstract language of economics with a more empathy-oriented approach while dealing with the experience of migration. This is where metaphor comes in. The use of metaphors helps Berger empathize more with the migrant's experience. Berger states in *A Seventh Man*: "Metaphor is needed. Metaphor is temporary. It does not replace theory" (45). The word 'metaphor' has its etymological roots in the Greek word *metaphora* which literally means 'a carrying over'. The way Berger refers to it, metaphor has something in common with the figure of the migrant – needed, temporary and does not replace theory. The narrative voice shares an experience with the reader: "A friend came to see me in a dream. From far away. And I asked in the dream: 'Did you come by photograph or train?' All photographs are a form of transport and an expression of absence" (17).

The photos of the Italian masons (Fig. 4) contain a feeling of repose albeit a short one. They are of men who are posing for the photographer in between work. Although their expressions are different, their eyes have an alertness that often characterises the demeanour of migrants arrived in a new city.

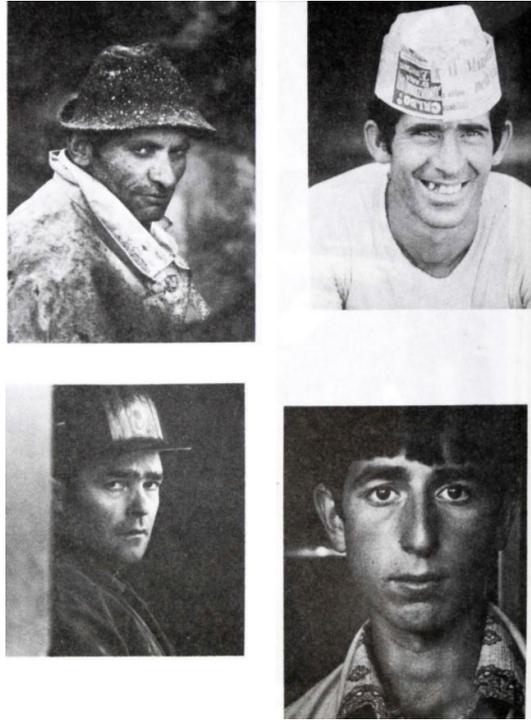


Fig. 4 Italian masons

Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010. Verso, London. p. 14

The experiences of the migrant workers described in the book are embodied in the movements and activities and perceptions of a single migrant worker referred to as ‘He’ and the photographs are structured around his story. At a particular point of the story, he takes out a photo from his pocket. It is an evocative photo of a boy in rain (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 A boy in rain

Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010. Verso, London. p. 14

Folded inside the pocket of the jacket of his migrant worker father, it signifies absence. The photo may be ten years old but the absence that it defines is timeless.

The book aims to make visible this sense of absence that photos may sometimes describe. It operates on two levels: one of the statistical data and one of experiential narrativity. Apart from the incalculability of the afterlives of the photos a different kind of incalculability is confronted: “In north-western Europe, excluding Britain, there are approximately eleven million migrant workers. The exact number is impossible to estimate because a probable two million are living and working without proper papers, illegally” (21).

Against this incalculability is pitted the mundane calculable and calculated minutiae of the lives of the worker and his family members: one of the boys making charcoal, he himself felling and cutting wood which he takes to the nearest market village, seven-hour away from his place, with the hope of selling, the wood fire burning in a hollow of earth near the centre of the room where they live, his wife making bread that is thin and unleavened, the three younger children, their grandmother, a baby and an ox whose pronounced ribs tell of malnutrition, the lack of furniture except for a milking stool and a cradle and the flock of sheep who sleep under the bed where the family sleeps. The picture that is painted with words and with economy of expression is one of poverty and desperation. The sparseness of the description makes it more vivid. Such descriptions which are very common in Berger’s writing, especially in his trilogy *Into their Labours*, are reminiscent of painterly depictions of peasant experience by artists like Vincent van Gogh and Jean-Francois Millet. The production of such images includes the relationship between the seeing eye of the painter or the photographer and his medium.

Berger set out to document and define what he saw as a “new phenomenon of millions of peasants migrating to countries with which they have had no previous connection” (12). The book concentrates on the experience of European migrants in the 70s and deliberately leaves out immigration to Britain from its former colonies such as Pakistan, India, Caribbean, and North Africa, with the following disclaimer supporting the exclusion:

In order to define as sharply as possible the new phenomenon of millions of peasants migrating to countries with which they have had no previous connection, we have concentrated here on the migrants who come from Europe. This is also why neither images nor text refer directly to Britain, where the majority of immigrants come from former colonies. The distinction is an artificial one, but it makes for a clearer focus. (12)

One might assume that if the book was written today, it would consider the influx of migrant labour coming to Britain from Eastern European countries.

In the 1970s, unskilled workers migrating out of Portugal in search of jobs in France came up with an ingenious system to make sure that they reached their destination safely and to prevent themselves from being swindled by smugglers. Prior to their departure, every prospective migrant worker would take a photograph of himself, before tearing the picture in two equal halves (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 Photo of a migrant worker torn in two halves

Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010. Verso, London. p. 14

He would keep one half and give the other half to the smuggler or the 'guide'. When the worker reached France, he would mail his half of the photograph back to his family in Portugal to prove that he had been escorted safely over the border and across the frontiers; the 'guide' would then visit the family with the half of the migrant's photograph to verify that it was he who had escorted him, and it was only then that the family would pay the \$350 after being assured that their kin had safely reached his destination. "The migrants crossed in groups of a hundred or so. Mostly they travelled by night. Hidden in lorries. And on foot" (49).

They are indeed like passport photos. Only, they are more compelling even though more anonymous. The diagonal split across the man's forehead, eyes and chin exacerbates the photo's spectral quality. Torn in two incomplete halves, it encapsulates the migrant's experience: the unfinished sense of belonging, the disorientation of his identity as a human. It is an image of absence and ghostliness. "The migrants who sleep buried in cellars belong to them. They are there, but they are not seen" (103). In bringing

together the halves of the unknown and 'faceless' migrant worker on the page of his book, Berger symbolically counteracts the erasure of identity and subjectivity that migration entails.

By and large, the thrust of the book is formed by a sense of waiting and of living in a time that has fallen between two regimes, as it were, when industrial capitalism is slowly being replaced by finance capitalism. The fact of the book's growing 'younger' has bridged the gap between its first publication and Berger's 2010 foreword. It also marks the migrant's dream of passing from precariousness to something approaching refuge. In the original text too, Berger attempts to compare what migration had meant in the past and what it meant in the 70s. In the segment titled "Work," Berger draws parallels between earlier migrations that assisted in building industries in and giving economic impetus to wealthy European nations and the current ones. He discusses in particular the Irish migration to Glasgow and Liverpool, after the famine of 1845-7, after what he sees as the destruction of their agriculture by British land policies. He also talks about the slave trade, the Poor Laws, child labour, factory conditions, the Armageddon of 1914-18.

He depicts the living conditions in migrant worker quarters and the narration gradually transforms into a kind of imaginary, disembodied, stream-of-consciousness voice-over:

the wet floor of this place leads to the way out, down the stairs into the street, along the walls of the buildings on one side and the wall of the traffic on the other, past the railings, under the glass and artificial light to the work he does: that floor to clean: that hole to punch: that ingot to lift: that casing to beat: that gearbox to fit in; the job done, an identical or almost identical job takes its place, the same job, but a different floor, a different hole, a different ingot, a different casing, a different

gearbox; they must be different because he has just done the job, and now he has to do it again, and after that again and again. (91)

The quarters are incarcerating, dimly lit, overfull and yet lonely. The narrative harkens back to the migrant population of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the one hand and anticipates the problems faced by the migrants today on the other. The metaphors and associated photographs evoke the present day scenario of Syrian immigrants taking shelter in Tempelhof hangar in Germany or immigrants living inside container camps made by converting shipping containers, while the languid queues outside employment offices prefigure the current refugees waiting in line seeking asylum outside Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales, the State Office for Health and Social Affairs in Berlin which is the primary contact centre for recently arrived refugees.

The migrants that Berger deals with have certain restricted and inadequate rights, reliant upon the kind and impact of the labour that he is able to offer. Some of them are members of a workers' union, although the migrant workers are considered substandard by the indigenous workers. Some of them can take time off and visit city centres on Sundays and cook their own meal. All this is relatively more difficult today; especially mobility within the metropolis is made arduous by their assignment to the suburbs of the city, where public transportation is not always available. In hindsight, the nameless migrant workers do not appear as desperate and as oppressed as the population that is migrating today.

Today, to find an inhabitable shelter is more difficult and the risks involved in migrating, a lot higher than what it was in the 70s. In 2017, according to a report by International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Missing Migrant Project, the number of incidents concerning migrants, including refugees and asylum-seekers, who died or went missing in the process of migration towards an international destination was

recorded to be 6,163. In 2018, the number of migrant fatalities in the first three months has been recorded to be 871.<sup>49</sup> There may be a lot more incidents that have not been recorded. In 2016 the ‘disappearance’ of 10,000 migrant children after arriving in the EU made headlines across the world. *The Observer* citing data furnished by Europol, the EU’s criminal intelligence agency, saw a direct connection between the fact that several thousands of migrating children had gone missing after enlisting their names with EU state authorities and the suspected involvement of a criminal infrastructure that was targeting minors. Brian Donald, Chief of Staff at Europol, said, “Whether they are registered or not, we’re talking about 270,000 children. Not all of those are unaccompanied, but we also have evidence that a large proportion might be”.<sup>50</sup> These children making long and perilous sea voyages, often unaccompanied, are extremely susceptible to life-risks. According to reports by UN DESA, 2015 and ILO, 2017, out of the 244 million international migrants of 2015, 150 million were labour migrants.<sup>51</sup> The situations have become a lot more difficult than what Berger describes in his book. About the migrant worker, Berger says, “He has come to the metropolis to sell his labour power” (86). A few pages later, he says, out of a sudden upsurge of empathy, “To live he can sell his life” (90). African migrants are literally selling their organs to organ-traffickers, unable to pay people-smugglers, as the testimony of an Eritrean former smuggler revealed in 2016.

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<sup>49</sup> “Missing Migrants Project.” *Iom.int*, 2014, [missingmigrants.iom.int/](http://missingmigrants.iom.int/). Accessed 9 May 2019.

<sup>50</sup> “10,000 Refugee Children Are Missing, Says Europol.” *The Guardian*, 30 Jan. 2016, [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/30/fears-for-missing-child-refugees](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/30/fears-for-missing-child-refugees). Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

<sup>51</sup> “United Nations Population Division | Department of Economic and Social Affairs.” *Un.org*, 2017, [www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/index.asp](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/index.asp). Accessed 18 Mar. 2018.

The stories in *A Seventh Man* are an indictment on estrangement and elimination. Berger's portrayal of the daily travails of migrant workers is a compelling illustration of the present crisis: crossing the frontiers and subsequent reduction to bare life. Although the text is resolutely and categorically a reflection on labour, it quietly circumvents several issues that might add to its continuing significance in the present time: the political turbulence in the countries where migrants came from and the trenchant political economies that forced them to move out. The scenarios may have changed but the exploitative logic of industrial to finance capitalism has only intensified over the years. Berger was writing at the time when Greece and Portugal were recovering from the devastating effects of dictatorships in those countries: in Greece the vicious Regime of the Colonels or the Junta (1967-74) was being overthrown; in 1973, the Carnation Revolution was bringing an end to Estado Novo, a corporatist totalitarian regime in Portugal.

To migrate to Germany, France, Switzerland, or the UK then, even temporarily, meant to send home remittances and save money and escape instability, while doing the "hardest, most disagreeable, and less well-paid jobs": working in asbestos and rubber processing facilities, or in construction. As Berger notes, "it is he who has built the roads which will lead him to a new life. Roads, autoroutes, tunnels, airstrips, fly-overs (90)". The source countries of labour migration have not changed – Algeria, Greece, Libya, Spain, Syria, Turkey and Slavic nations – and the constant influx of labourers have been integral to the evolution of economies in the host countries.

*A Seventh Man* merges verse and polemic, fact and myth and conspicuous portraits of migrants and their situations; it almost seems stridently similar to today's imagery. Mohr's images of anxious migrants waiting in line (Fig. 7), in huddled groups against

barricades strangely anticipate current pictures of people waiting outside “hot spot” dispensation centres. (Fig. 8)<sup>52</sup>



Fig. 7. Departure, Railway station, Istanbul, 1974  
Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010. Verso, London. p. 14



Fig. 8. Waiting outside “hot spot” dispensation centres  
Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010. Verso, London. p. 14

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<sup>52</sup> With regard the European Agenda on Migration, the European Commission suggested the building up of a novel Hotspot system in order to facilitate instant assistance to the Member States that are facing immoderate emigration pressures at the EU’s external boundaries.

The section titled “Departure” talks about the influence of global capitalism, peasantry and the lives of peasants, and how it wears away various characteristics of “traditional society,” and erasure of ways of life that had gradually evolved over centuries, since the beginning of the domestic regulation of agriculture, decline of agricultural labour, and consequently the transformation of peasants into workers and migrant labourers, migrating to industrial metropolitan centres in search of subsistence.

The section titled “Work” concentrates on the transformation of peasants to workers and how that transformation affects their lives, perspectives about the nature of work and about themselves. The arrival at the city is accompanied by loneliness and powerlessness. The class transformation of the peasant to proletariat is contingent upon not only economic factors but also includes cultural reallocations. Their thoughts are directed toward the future and “their expectation of change, their humanism, is gathered into hopes of individual and family achievement” (148).

For some there is also a sense of excitement in leaving:

A French peasant: Nobody wants to live in the country any more. In the city they dress like princes; they drive their cars; and they see nothing and they understand nothing. My system is to study everything: nature, plants, animals (including us) and the climate. (71)

But the general feeling of incomprehensibility prevails. Three situations:

He arrived without papers. When the greetings were over he looked at his cousin inquiringly, without saying a word. Outside in the unheard of streets there were shouts he did not understand. (92)

Language difficulties are a frequent cause of accidents, many of which occur because people cannot read warning signs or understand warning shouts from workmates. (130)

A worker one day threatened to shut him in a cooler. He did not understand the words the man was bellowing, but it turned out to be a joke (138)

The unfamiliarity that the migrant must confront upon arriving in the metropolis has its basis, amongst other things, in the language of the system which according to Berger is abstract. In the epistolary book, *From A to X* (2008), Xavier who is imprisoned for political insurgency, writes: “IMP WB GA TT WTO NAF TA FTAA – their acronyms gag language, as their actions stifle the world” (70). And thus, the need for metaphor is felt in order to confront and resist against the proliferation of the abstraction of a language that the economic system in question stimulates.

In many cases the feeling of alienation in a new place amongst native workers propel them to form solidarity amongst themselves. Much of their helplessness and seclusion are the consequences of dismissal by the prevailing indigenous populace, particularly the resident working class, and passivity of trade unions to address their problems. Political solidarity of the migrants is difficult to achieve because of these levels of fragmentation. Berger remarks:

This is why the working class, if it accepts the natural inferiority of the migrants, is likely to reduce its own demands to economic ones, to fragment itself and to lose its own political identity. When the indigenous worker accepts inequality as the principle to sustain his own self-esteem, he reinforces and completes the fragmentation which society is already imposing on him. (*Seventh Man* 145)

The section titled “Return” is composed of Berger’s intimate dialogue with the figure of the immigrant. This is the most personal section in the book and refers to some of the major themes that he has taken up throughout his long career as a writer. A Yugoslav migrant says: “To go home? Of course. As soon as I can” (209). The desire to return

is attended most of the times by hope. But this hope to return or to reorient oneself can also be psychologically incarcerating, because in many cases, the return as imagined by the migrant never takes place. The idea of home, as he had conceived it, no longer exists and therefore the return is only spatial: “The final return is mythic. It gives meaning to what might otherwise be meaningless. It is larger than life. It is the stuff of longing and prayers. But it is also mythic in the sense that, as imagined, it never happens. There is no final return” (220)

As a consequence, sometimes migrant workers are left with no sense of belonging or identification: they cannot go back to the rural communities they come from and re-become peasants and neither can they accommodate themselves in the metropolises: “Because the village has scarcely changed since he left, there is still no livelihood there for him. When he carries out one of his plans, he will become the victim of the same economic stagnation which first forced him to leave” (221).

For Berger, impulses behind writing the *Into Their Labours* trilogy and *A Seventh Man* are the same. The former deals with the impending disappearance of the peasant class in France and the latter deals with the spectral existence of migrants and their survival. All of these works are solidly grounded in the times in which they were written and yet they presciently comment on some of the most important political questions of our time, and gain relevance in the era of post-truth politics and large-scale immigrations leading to new urban subjects. Berger’s relocation to the La vallée du Giffre was fuelled by his decision to know peasants as a class of survivors better and to preserve their experiences in stories “before they were gone from the earth”.<sup>53</sup> The ethical assumptions behind his

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<sup>53</sup> Marzorati, Gerald. “LIVING and WRITING the PEASANT LIFE.” *The New York Times*, 29 Nov. 1987, [www.nytimes.com/1987/11/29/magazine/living-and-writing-the-peasant-life.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/29/magazine/living-and-writing-the-peasant-life.html). Accessed 6 June 2019.

writing take into consideration his position as an outsider who the peasants came to trust and accept.

Since the publication of *A Seventh Man*, the subject of immigration in Europe has gained increasing concern and attention with regard to European politics. Recent assessments by the United Nations state that there are 244 million international migrants worldwide, constituting 3.3% of the world's population.<sup>54</sup> Migrant workers make up a large percentage of the world's international migrants, with the majority of them residing in high-income nations and many occupied in the service sector. The number of internal migrants is over 40 million and the number of refugees more than 22 million. Never before has global displacement been so high.

The first-generation immigrants along with their children presently make up a significant "minority" and are thus fast altering Europe's cultural and religious framework. Immigrants constitute at least 10 percent of the population in several European nations.<sup>55</sup> This percentage excludes their children who were born in the host countries. Previous source nations like Greece, Ireland, Spain and Italy have been transformed into host nations for immigrants. Twelve percent of Spain's population, for instance, is composed of immigrants. All these changes have faced severe criticism from the right-wing political parties who try to generate anti-immigrant sentiment focusing on high unemployment rates amongst native population and social unrests in the "no-go zones". Nativism is on the rise and resistance against immigration is the sole

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<sup>54</sup> Nations, United. "244 Million International Migrants Living Abroad Worldwide." *United Nations*, [www.un.org/en/desa/244-million-international-migrants-living-abroad-worldwide](http://www.un.org/en/desa/244-million-international-migrants-living-abroad-worldwide). Accessed 10 June 2018.

<sup>55</sup> "First and Second-Generation Immigrants - Statistics on Education and Skills." *Ec.europa.eu*, [ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=First\\_and\\_second-generation\\_immigrants\\_-\\_statistics\\_on\\_education\\_and\\_skills](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=First_and_second-generation_immigrants_-_statistics_on_education_and_skills). Accessed 5 Jan. 2020.

agendum common to extreme right-wing movements in some of the western European countries.

Notwithstanding the written text, photographs have the capacity to stand on their own, as Berger remarks in *Another Way of Telling* (1995):

In this book we have built a sequence of, not four, but a hundred and fifty images. It is entitled 'If Each Time - '. Otherwise there is no text. No words redeem the ambiguity of the images. The sequence begins with certain memories of a childhood, but it does not then follow a chronology. There is no story-line as there is in a *photo-roman*. (284)

Although *A Seventh Man* does have a general chronology (Departure-Work-Return) the photographs can be “read” beginning anywhere the reader chooses to. There is a narrative but it is not strictly linear, making the category of ‘sequence’ problematic. Yet there is a strange way in which each image refers to the cluster of images in its immediate vicinity. Their organisation in the book is intended not to be spatio-temporal but is imbued with an associative energy wherewith the images are given a power to have a kind of communication with each other. The act of reading the words and images unleashes this energy. This is true of most of Berger and Mohr’s collaborations. “In a sequence of still photographs...the energy of attraction, either side of a cut, does remain equal, two-way and *mutual*. Such an energy then closely resembles the stimulus by which one memory triggers another, irrespective of any hierarchy, chronology or duration” (288). The idea of sequentiality, after the images have been viewed and after their energies have been unleashed, is unhinged, which up until the moment of reading had served only as a prop to support the general structure of the book. If any notion of the sequence exists, it is, according to Berger, akin to the field of synchronicity or co-

existence resembling the field of memory. This, as a result, demands active involvement of the subjectivity of the reader in making meaning of the text and the images. The reader is allowed a space and the opportunity to make correlations and connections from the clusters of images that the book offers.<sup>56</sup> The photographic and statistical information become a gateway to understanding the lived experiences of the migrants only because of the availability and the accessibility of this space. The specificity of the photographs give way to a kind of understanding that permeates the local and the topical. This substantiates the aim of the book: to create a political dialogue and promote solidarity amongst migrant workers everywhere. Many of the photographs in the book appear without captions/descriptions. This sometimes has a generalising effect (Fig. 9, Fig. 10 and Fig. 11).



Fig. 9. Photo without caption  
Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010.  
Verso, London. p. 22



Fig. 10. Photo without caption  
Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010.  
Verso, London. p. 23

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<sup>56</sup> Sometimes this is even a physical space in the form of the white space of the page intervening between images.



Fig. 11.

Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010. Verso, London. p. 27

The information about these photographs appears right at the end of the book in the “List of Illustrations”. This seems to suggest the malleability of the structure of the book and a reinforcement of the idea of “space” provided to the reader: the reader can choose to have the specific information about a particular photograph or see it as an anonymous entity forming a part of the image-text-story narrative. This spatial deference of information makes the relation between the photographs and written words collaborative rather than illustrative. In some cases, however, information about photographs IS present, where they are immediately needed as part of the description of a particular situation or context (Fig. 12).



Fig.12 Reception Centre for Migratory Workers, Geneva

Source: Mohr, Jean. *A Seventh Man*. 2010. Verso, London. p. 78

Apart from his collaborations with Berger, Mohr has also worked with Edward Said on the book *After the Last Sky* (1986), a poignantly subjective book about Palestinian life and identity that is at once an examination of the irretrievable past and a document of people in exile. He has lived a great part of his life in Geneva but has travelled with his camera far and wide to document human deprivation. Mohr visited Palestine for the first time in 1949 and since then his empathetic depictions of the daily lives of Palestinian people, their exile and their struggle for survival have continued. One of the striking features of his photographs is the fact that they tell us very little about him: he does not have signature touches or identifiable styles. His seeing eye is always and invariably subservient to the subject he is documenting. And since he does not have any premeditated structure to receive visual impressions, he is more receptive to the idea of allowing the subject to choose its own photographic perspectives. In his photographs there is a sense of being taken by surprise. Berger has commented upon this and it is something that complements Berger's own slow, assured, unhurried ways of seeing things: "Often alarmingly, and occasionally miraculously, the world is continually startling. The photos Jean has taken all his life are the product of an alertness that comes from being startled" (9). Watchfulness and sincerity characterise Mohr's interest in migration, exile and homelessness. Collaborations by Berger and Mohr can be compared to a composite lens through which the reader looks at the experiences at the margins. The "secret of narration," to quote a phrase from *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* lies in the grinding of the lens. (31) For them, the logic of documentary photography is inherently definite. It consists of the specific existence and characteristic of things and people and places that are being documented. The photographs of migrant workers describe them in different situations – leaving their villages in Spain, Turkey or Greece, arriving in the industrial areas in France, Germany or Belgium, queuing up

for medical examinations, assembling in the railroad stations on Sundays to meet other people who may have come from the same country as them. Though the migrants are anonymous, the places they come from and the places they are going to are not. The “List of Illustrations” emphasises the need to acknowledge the reality of the workers but by being placed at the end of the book, ensures that the visual impact of the photographs and the arguments that the photographs and the text develop are not superseded by data. Appearances, as Berger says, become the language of a lived life.

In “The Storyteller,” (1936) Walter Benjamin identified two kinds of archetypal storyteller figures – the resident master craftsman and the travelling journeyman. Berger and Mohr enact these roles in documenting the lives of workers. They bring back these experiences that they have recorded and preserved, and pass them on so that they can be shared and empathised with; so that they aid solidarity amongst people oppressed by similar conditions elsewhere. Their work is as self-effacingly devoted to their subject matter as possible but as Benjamin has noted “traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (92) – something of a shared sense of poetry tinges their collaborative work. To conclude, the following passage from *A Seventh Man* sums up the empathetic impulse behind writing this book and serves as a counsel and a lesson in empathy for anyone faced with the conflict between methodological concerns and ethical ones:

To try to understand the experience of another it is necessary to dismantle the world as seen from one's own place within it, and to reassemble it as seen from his. For example, to understand a given choice another makes, one must face in imagination the lack of choices which may confront and deny him. The well-fed are incapable of understanding the choices of the under-fed. The world has to be dismantled and re-assembled in order to be able to grasp, however clumsily, the experience of

another. To talk of entering the other's subjectivity is misleading. The subjectivity of another does not simply constitute a different interior attitude to the same exterior facts. The constellation of facts, of which he is the centre, is different. (97-98)

#### **4.2 Postmetropolis, Dispossession and the Idea of a Place: *Lilac and Flag* and *King***

In many of Berger's stories, metropolises play a crucial role. Cities are seen as places, partly real and partly imagined, and almost always as a space of convergence of remembrance, aspiration, and hopelessness, that take place in the backdrop of late capitalism and various forms of resistances against capitalism. The last part of the *Into their Labours* trilogy, *Lilac and Flag: An Old Wives' Tale of the City* (1990) is set in the severe urban anonymity and realism of Troy, an invented, hyperreal Metropolis. *Here is Where We Meet* (2005) offers a mélange of novelistic writing, essay and memoir where the narrator (Berger himself) meets people from his past (people who have died) in several European cities such as Lisbon, Geneva, Madrid, London and Krakow. The urban setting of the novel *King: A Street Story* (1999) is exacting and hostile. It is worthwhile to consider if Berger 'totalizes' or universalizes the experiences of the poor and the homeless he writes about in several works, and to read Berger's writings on resistance in their proper contexts. His fictive or semi-real wanderings across the cities are also movements back and forth in time and place. Edward Soja finds an overriding critical interest in Berger in the convergence of space and time, thus offering us "a balancing of history and geography, lineage and landscape, period and region" (*Postmodern Geographies* 22). Soja, in his book, seems to have been particularly taken up with an aphoristic statement in Berger's *The Look of Things* (1972) which he quotes recurrently in *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) and *Postmetropolis* (2000): "it is space not time that hides consequences from us" (*Postmodern Geographies*, pages 22, 23, 61;

*Postmetropolis* pages 165, 166). *Lilac And Flag* offers a critique of the process of urbanization which Henri Lefebvre had already identified as a process integral to the perpetuation of capitalism in *The Urban Revolution* (1970). This process also includes the gradual erasure of the distinction between the city and the country by creating integrated spaces that can be termed, after Soja, postmetropolis. These spaces are formally complex due to concurrent deterritorialization and reterritorialization and dismantling of extant urban realities and the re-orienting the city along new socio-economic lines. Production of postmetropolises erases the idea of place and of the territorially identifiable social communities. Consequently, a new spatiality develops where the boundaries between the interior and the exterior have become indistinct.

In *Lilac and Flag* and *King*, cities represent the processes involved in urbanization that strategically blur the divisions between the country and the city, by creating cohesive spaces across national terrains, leading to the inevitable relegation of the poor to political powerlessness.<sup>57</sup> This is in line with David Harvey's notion of 'accumulation by dispossession' – monopolization of wealth and power by a few by divesting the public and private beings of their means or land. Berger's approach effects a synthesis between cultural geography and literary narrativization while critiquing the demographic and sociological impact of late capitalism and trying to formulate a response that resists glib solutions offered by aesthetics and politics and that, in spite of grappling brazenly with its own internal contradictions, is capable of providing insights and illuminations.

Berger's primary interest in his *Into Their Labours* trilogy is resistance to oppressive socio-economic structures and the possibility of retaining hope in situations of

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<sup>57</sup> In the 1960s, Henri Lefebvre had considered cities integral to the survival of capitalism.

depravity and indignity. Another impulse on his part is to understand the porous nature of the interstices between the country and the city and how one interpenetrates the other. The first two books of the trilogy describe and offer a documentary narrative of life as it is lived in a peasant village in the French Alps and how that life unfolds and changes its course with increasing contact with the metropolises. The reader stands witness to the conflict between an attitude of survival and traditional continuity of the village on the one hand, and that of the market forces of the capitalist external world on the other; between the peasants' defence of a sense of history and spatio-temporal experiences on the one hand and the experiences of time and place as perpetuated by late capitalism, on the other, that appears to celebrate the destruction of the past thereby producing a fragmented vision of modernity.

In a 1999 essay on Hieronymus Bosch, Berger explores the preoccupation with death, damnation and sin, and assuming a synchronic approach to historical processes, he is able to get deep insights into what he sees as predictive imminence in Breughel's *Triumph of Death* (1562) as he compares the dreadful scenes of the horrors of the Nazi death camps to Hieronumus Bosch's gut-wrenching evocation of Hell in the third panel of the Millennium Triptych (c. 1500) What Berger says about the phantasmagoric, horrific images of woe and isolation as pitted against a perspective-bending backdrop of unmitigated gloom, is applicable to the condition of historical amnesia caused by the advent of finance capitalism:

There is no horizon there. No continuity between actions, no pauses, no paths, no pattern, no past, future: only the clamour of the disparate, fragmentary present. Everywhere there are surprises and sensations, yet nowhere is there any outcome. Nothing flows through: everything interrupts: a kind of spatial delirium. ("Hieronymus Bosch" 76)

The lives of peasants as documented by Berger, therefore, offer a perceptible reminder of an alternate way of life, and exhibit certain affinities with Brecht's fictive examination of peasant history to throw into sharp contrast capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production. This affinity is also present in these authors' conceptualization of peasant life as the medium through which the general experiences of the poor and the downtrodden can be represented. The marginalized and the superfluous culture represented by the soon-to-be extinct peasantry embodies, however, a resistance to the 'modern' forms of capitalist expansion, and its disjointed understanding of history, and also uncovers and savours a specific moment of redemption and hope.

*Lilac and Flag* offers a documentary of the lives of the children of the peasants from the first two books of *Into Their Labours – Pig Earth* and *Once in Europa* – as they disperse in metropolises and confront the absence of continuity in modern life, the disappearance of the division between the urban and the rural, the outcome of forced migrations to urban centres, and the agony and anonymity of life lived in the fringes. In the book, Berger assembles images from the industrial and post-industrial cityscape of Troy; a 21<sup>st</sup> century megapolis that represents all the anonymity and mechanization associated with big cities in the future. In spite of the futuristic thrust in the description of the uber-city of Troy, Berger cannot let go of certain phenomena that have characterised both the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries such as enforced urban rearrangement, enormous poverty, conspicuous economic disparities, and the cold-bloodedness of the powerful. Berger describes Troy with an imagistic vocabulary that is increasingly relatable with respect to 21<sup>st</sup> century urban space:

It is possible you have been to Troy without recognising the city. The road from the airport is like many others in the world. It has a superhighway and is often blocked.

You leave the airport buildings which are like space vessels never finished, you

pass the packed car parks, the international hotels, a mile or two of barbed wire, broken fields, the last stray cattle, billboards that advertise cars and Coca-Cola, storage tanks, a cement plant, the first shanty town, several giant depots for big stores, ring-road flyovers, working-class flats, a part of an ancient city wall, the old boroughs with trees, crammed shopping streets, new golden office-blocks, a number of ancient domes and spires, and finally you arrive at the acropolis of wealth. (170)

In *Lilac and Flag*, Berger's the main characters earn their living by a variety of activities such as working on a building site in a place called Mond Bank, offering to measure blood pressure of people passing by, selling coffee out of a thermos, working as dancers in a strip bar, and illegally trading stolen passports. Troy embodies a place that has lost all sense of history and suggests a kind of strange interregnum stripped off all sense of futurity or unfolding, as exemplified in the following snippet from a conversation between Clement and his son, Sucus:

And what we live now is what? asked his son.

Don't ask me. I don't know. It's not history. It's a kind of waiting. (41)

This is symptomatic of a global situation of great ontological threat where the past and the future are erased in complicity with ideologies emerging under finance capitalism that focuses all its attention on the present with a mentality of brazen profiteering. This accelerates the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor and produces divisive and discriminatory attitudes. The upsurge of financialization in the 1980s along with governmental deregulation transformed the financial system into one of the focal points of redistributive activity resulting in neoliberal modernity's exploitation of the labour class is, and the further facilitation of the capital class. Berger describes it in *Bento's*

*Sketchbook* with economical precision: “The division between the poor and the relatively rich becomes an abyss. Traditional restraints and recommendations are shattered. Consumerism consumes all questioning. The past becomes obsolete” (77). Deprived of the past and the future, the modern subject under speculative capitalist market forces is left with the present and the enormity of the capitalist tendencies to profit in that present moment. This leads to a certain kind of metaphoric blindness to the world around the subject who is made to see only what these forces make visible.<sup>58</sup> In the mythic city of Troy, the visions of ‘somewhere else’ and ‘or else’ are unevocable. Of course, this entails from the fact that the novel is narrated from the perspective of the oppressed, through the experiential lens of those who are considered to be failures and superfluous detritus of society. Berger’s hopefulness, however, shines through the depictions of dehumanizing alienations in the novel and distinguishes itself from mere optimism, and he manages to uncover moments of great tenderness and grace.<sup>59</sup> The allegorical narrative in *King* also continues this strain of affirmation in the face of dispossession and despair, albeit with different narrative architectonics.

Across the ages, literary allegorical tradition in Europe has been a constant source of conjecture and speculative thinking in general. Particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century allegory has assumed a specifically indeterminate status with regard to its generic and technical validation. It has been a subject of great speculation as to whether its temperament was derived from the performing arts, such as theatres of antiquity and the German mourning play (*Trauerspiel*) – one of Walter Benjamin’s main preoccupations – or from theological precincts? Talking about allegory would entail the inevitable

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<sup>58</sup> In order to counter this blindness, Berger takes recourse to drawing which helps the drawer and the viewer engage with the visible world anew and thereby reclaim their authority and identity.

<sup>59</sup> The difference between ‘hope’ and ‘optimism’ forms a part of the conversation between Berger and Sebastião Salgado in *The Spectre of Hope* (2002).

questions: how do its modes of denotation work, and what are the demands they make of their audiences or the assumptions they are liable to make regarding them today, considering that these modes have been subject to noticeably influential historical changes, and the fact that allegory has fallen into relative disuse in the age of mass media.

Frederic Jameson's propositions a dialectic that is strong enough to bind the multiplicities that mirror our biological individualisms, our engagement with shared communal history and class struggle, and our estrangement from an incorporeal new world of data and increasing abstraction. He had earlier said with tongue-in-cheek humour: "Allegory happens when you know you cannot represent something but you also cannot not do it" (*Jameson on Jameson* 196). This comment refers to the occasional difficulty, or even impossibility, of the representation of the actual interpersonal truths of capitalist societies, due to the fact that "(t)he culture of new capitalism is attuned to singular events, one-off transactions, interventions" (Sennett 178). Berger identifies, allegorically as well as anachronistically, the evils of capitalist societies in Bosch's hell: "The culture in which we live is perhaps the most claustrophobic that has ever existed; in the culture of globalisation, as in Bosch's hell, there is no glimpse of an elsewhere or an otherwise. The given is a prison. And faced with such reductionism, human intelligence is reduced to greed" (*Shape* 100). In theorizing the fundamentally allegorical state of international politics today, Jameson recognizes the problematic nature of formulating any all-encompassing assessment of the contemporary world system: the incommensurable alliance between class struggle in the numerous national circumstances and the predominant image of the capitalistic forces operational on a global level.

### 4.3 Poverty of Experience and Experience of Poverty: Street-life in *King*

In *King*, Berger develops a different kind of allegorical structure in order to bring to light the world of the superfluous people that market forces refuse to see. These people wander through the city but are not its part. They are only noticed when they commit a crime. In *Consuming Life* (2007), Zygmunt Bauman talks about the vulnerability of the 'underclass' in contemporary consumer society, in what he terms 'liquid modernity', which underscores flexibility as symptomatic of the present time. Globalization condenses the growing mobility of capital and socially privileged, leading to stratification of the present consumer society. He also points out that for the poor mobility is not a convenient choice, and that spatial segregation is coterminous with social isolation. Bauman points out that there is a growing tendency on the part of the well-off sections to isolate themselves volitionally in groups like residential communities, while the poor are consigned to the imposed ghettos, where they are categorised and regarded as an unwanted and unusable underclass.<sup>60</sup> The growth of the underclass in USA (where *King* is supposedly set), according to Bauman, is symptomatic of the condition everywhere; the indignity suffered by this class is ubiquitous. Bauman writes:

People are cast in the underclass because they are seen as totally useless; as a nuisance pure and simple, something the rest of us could do nicely without. In a society of consumers - a world that evaluates anyone and anything by their commodity value - they are people with no market value; they are the uncommoditised men and women, and their failure to obtain the status of proper

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<sup>60</sup> Bauman proposes an substitute to pull neo-liberal welfare state apart, which is the introduction of a system that will ensure dispensation of basic income to workers and the replacement of the work ethic by a craftsmanship ethic.

commodity coincides with (indeed, stems from) their failure to engage in a fully fledged consumer activity. (*Consuming Life* 124)

In “Why We Look at Animals?” (1980), Berger said: “What distinguished man from animals was the human capacity for symbolic thought, the capacity which was inseparable from the development of language in which words were not mere signals, but signifiers of something other than themselves. Yet the first symbols were animals. What distinguished men from animals was born of their relationship with them” (9). Allegorizing the narrative of *King*, therefore, and having a dog to narrate the story would imply an empathetic desire to go as close as possible to the experience of street life. Berger makes several narratorial adjustments like using fragmented passages, verbless sentences, etc. to give the reader the feel of a partial, inchoate and disjointed experience of a dog’s ever-ambulatory perspective, and more importantly to avoid mystifying the narrative or making it sound overbearing. At times the narrative diffuses into King’s arc of vision to produce a verbal equivalent of first-person low-angle camera.<sup>61</sup> For example: “They want to embrace, I can see, but their backs are too stiff, they cannot easily bend forward. So they bend their knees, both of them, until their knees touch and hold them up. Then, with their necks out, they kiss each other on the cheek” (70). The following passage may be also considered in this connection, with all its anthropomorphic dog-human configurations:

Walking prudently along the sidewalk, avoiding the gutter on one side and the building entrances with their surveillance video cameras on the other, I look across the street at Vica’s Church of Santa Maria. Its columns are like the fingers of a hand on which the tower is resting its chin. Behind the ears and the head, white clouds

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<sup>61</sup> There are several references to knees in the story as an occasional reminder that it is narrated from the visual perspective of a dog.

are being blown from the west. The expression of the tower is one of amazement. Its mouth is wide open. Watching the Church of Santa Maria, I don't notice where I am walking. I realize it too late. (72)

King can read, speak and understand human alphabets but his interactions are instinctual, not linguistic. It is not unusual to speculate, after one has made some progress with the novel, to wonder if King is actually an embodiment of dehumanized street life. At one point, he mentions an ancestor, also called King, who “believed the word *humanitas* came from the verb *humare*, to bury. The burying of the dead is what he meant. Man's humanity, according to him, began with a respect for the dead” (21). And then he realizes: “Yet you—you, King—bury bones too, don't you?” (21) This evidently an allusion to Giambattista Vico's *The New Science* (1725) where he says: “This humanity had its origin in *humare*, "to bury" (which is the reason we took the practice of burial as the third principle of our Science), and the Athenians, who were the most human of all the nations, were, according to Cicero, the first to bury their dead”.<sup>62</sup> Through references like this, he draws up a comparison between an absent *humanitas*, “which meant the disposition of men to help one another,” (22) and the current dehumanization brought about by merciless profiteering by agents of capitalism.

One would expect a story narrated by a dog to be laced with a certain kind of frivolity that belies serious discursive standpoints, but in his novel *King Berger* not only achieves to engage the reader's attention and ethical disposition with pressing issues such as poverty, capitalism, homelessness and exile, but also carries out serious inquiries into

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<sup>62</sup> “Full Text of ‘the New Science of Giambattista Vico.’” *Archive.org*, 2016, [www.archive.org/stream/newscienceofgiam030174mbp/newscienceofgiam030174mbp\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/newscienceofgiam030174mbp/newscienceofgiam030174mbp_djvu.txt). Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

the narratorial and empathic potentials of anthropomorphic storytelling. King, the canine character-narrator of the novel describes the lives and living conditions of an assortment of poverty-stricken squatters living in a wasteland beside the thoroughfare of Saint Valery, that includes his owners – the knowledgeable yet depraved Vico and the unrestrained and passionate Vica – and Jack, the unauthorized proprietor of the settlement. The narrative movement follows the movements of the homeless characters, amalgamating the narrator's recollections of the past with the events taking place in the present; occasionally allowing the squatters to explicate their histories, and to narrate how their experiences of homeless and what caused them to be so. Berger produces a striking background for the assortment of characters that comprise of a desolate building facetiously nicknamed Pizza Hut and a gorge called the Boeing because fragments of an aircraft had accumulated there. The novel is predominantly composed of human dialogues held together by King's narrative and witnessing presence. He underwrites the variety and vicissitudes of human experiences in the novel and occasionally provides details that range from the wise to the playful. The style of the narrative is deceptively sparse and disjointed. This is true of the characters as well and informs the unmistakable political undercurrent of the text which emerges out of the experiences of superfluous, poor and homeless people driven out for the sake of economic expediency. Jacques Rancière refers in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, to Aristotle's definition of the citizen as "someone who has a part in the act of governing and being governed" (12). As Rancière says: "However, another form of distribution precedes this act of partaking in government: the distribution that determines those who have a part in the community of citizens. A speaking being, according to Aristotle, is a political being. If a slave understands the language of its rulers, however, he does not 'possess' it" (12). For Rancière, then, the political is based on the "part of no part" (12),

the uncouted and the invisible, which is that aspect of social structuration that is bereft of voice, place and representation with that particular society. Other entities speak for them. Berger's novel can be seen as an attempt to empower the dispossessed to reclaim their language and since this is done within a fictional setting and not a full-fledged sociological one, its rehearsal and revolutionary potential can be discussed only in terms of literature.

As Slavoj Žižek describes the situation:

In short, political conflict is the tension between the structured social body in which each part has its place, and "the part with no-part" which unsettles this order on account of the empty principle of universality, of what Étienne Balibar calls *égaliberté*, the principled equality of all people qua speaking beings - up to the *liumang*, "hoodlums", in present feudal-capitalist China: those who (with regard to the existing order) are displaced and float freely, without work-and-residence, but also cultural or sexual, identity and registration. ("Robespierre")

At the identificatory interstice between the part with no-part and the Whole or the Universal lies basic sign of politicization, visible in all major democratic phenomena, often resulting in odium, and even phobia, for the free-floating part with no-part. As Berger writes: "The hatred which the strong feel for the weak as soon as the weak get too close is particularly human; it doesn't happen with animals. With humans there is a distance which must be respected, and when it isn't, it is the strong, not the weak, who feel affronted, and from the affront comes hatred" (*King* 24).

King is a stray dog who hangs around city scrapyards some near the Elf garage in the vicinity of the expressway m.1000. Berger's deviant magical realist representation of homelessness, more of a 'street story' than a novel, outlined from the viewpoint of a

clever talking dog. The canine plane is played off against the visual plane at the apertures between two dissimilar aspects of the visible that Berger assigns to the dog vision. Berger's life-long preoccupations with visibility has led him to consider the innumerable visible orders other than the human. In a short essay on Pentti Sammallahti titled "Opening a Gate", he observes that in many of Sammallahti's photographs there is at least one dog, offering to open "a gate – for here everything is outside, outside and beyond" (16).<sup>63</sup> He also recognizes Sammallahti's ability to capture a certain kind of fleeting light that reveals the time of day or season when the photographs were taken: "the light in which figures hunt – for animals, forgotten names, a path leading home, a new day, sleep, the next lorry, spring" (16). The Sammallahti photos Berger had, were taken with a panoramic camera, such as is generally used in photogrammetric aerial and topographic surveys and hence represent ways of rendering the invisible visible. He claims that the constant exchanges with the set of daily often-familiar and sometimes unexpected and novel appearances that surround us habitually every day that confirm our being in our lives. However, Berger's main interest here is the sudden, unexpected visual encounter with another visible order which intersects with the normal, every day visible order and yet is unrelated to it. It can be likened to the unexpected and unintended visual experience that happens between two frames of a film – a part of the visible that was possibly "destined for night-birds, reindeer, ferrets, eels, whales ..." (17)

According to Berger, the 'normal' visible order that humans have grown habituated to, co-occurs with other orders. Very significantly, Berger says: "Stories of fairies, sprites, ogres were a human attempt to come to terms with this coexistence" (18). In literary-

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<sup>63</sup> Berger had some of the photographs taken by Sammallahti in his collection.

critical terms, one can speculate whether the use of magical realism might be an aesthetic attempt to uncover and deal with this coexistence. The dog's visible order in *King* can be understood from this perspective. Interstices exist between different sets of the visible order and dogs, "with their running legs, sharp noses and developed memory for sounds, are the natural frontier experts of these interstices" (18). The eyes of dogs – it is not difficult to see now why he chooses the story of *King* to be seen and narrated through the eyes of a dog – for Berger, are "attuned both to the human order and to other visible orders" (18). Dogs serve as guides because of this special porous ability to move between different visible orders, claims Berger. Indeed, *King* serves as a guide in the novel – not an authorial omniscient guide but instinctual perambulatory one – and this is why like in Sammallahti's photographs, in *King*, "the human order, still in sight, is nevertheless no longer central and is slipping away. The interstices are open" (19). In the novel, Berger attempts to temporarily check the human perception, to communicate an animal empathy of human grief, a kind of empathy that is closer to that of a child. *King* always wants Vico and Vica to return to the place where they came from – a kind of mythic home, and should they fail to do so, he is ready to welcome them into this parallel order of things that will provide them refuge in the midst of "part of no part order" homelessness. As Andy Merrifield tells us, Berger decided to have the story of *King* narrated by a dog after he visited homeless shantytowns in Alicante, Spain (122). The stray dogs seemed to provide solace and comfort to the humans left alone by other humans in power to grovel in their irredeemable despair. As Berger writes with characteristic tenderness: "A bark is a voice which breaks out of a bottle saying, I'm here. The bottle is silence. The silence broken, the bark announces, I'm here" (*King* 20).

The experience of survival for peasant appears, for Berger, to be better suited to confront the expansion and amplifications of corporate capitalism in all its viciousness than an incessantly renewed, exasperated hope of revolution. He conflates the idea of resistance to that of survival in *Hold Everything Dear* (2007), and wonders how to begin framing an answer to the question of what can be done at the present time and speculates if the answer lies in attending to the moments of life lived in all simplicity; and to the value of being alive at a specific time and place. Kings' presence sustains the hope of survival and validates the meaningful response to the powers that be that try to erase any possibility of meaning by producing and sustaining *aporia*. In the way he deals with the condition of life lived in the uber-polises described in *Lilac and Flag* and *King*, Berger evokes circumstances in which the real, the possible, and the impossible intersect, consequently generating a ghostly appropriation of assumed realities. The environment for the possible can only appear when the author exercises his discretion to select from textual depiction of the real world, because to have the real and the possible and yet, at the same time, keeping the distinction between them involves a process that can only be documented in fiction. However, Berger refrains steadfastly from attempting to create a balance between representations of the oppression of the poor and depictions of their occasional heroism. Because of his greater focus on the oppression, he makes it easy for his detractors to criticize him for accentuating the helplessness and passivity of the downtrodden and their failure to surmount their oppression. On the other hand, if he had celebrated the heroism and courage more unequivocally in the novel, he could be subjected to accusations related to envisioning certain exciting yet non-existent political possibilities. Having said that, although Berger's meditations on the meaning of life under late capitalism may occasionally appear inconsistent theoretically, they never fail to move the reader and make them more aware and take stock of things in their own way.

#### 4.4 The Idea of a Place: *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos and Railtracks*

Berger exhibits a fascination with the interstices between space and time throughout his career, as it has been identified by Edward Soja and as it has been already discussed earlier.<sup>64</sup> A major example of his engagement with these issues is *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief As Photos*, an intimate, personal book containing poetry of quietude and prose of seething emotions. In it, he firmly balances subtle correspondences between ancestry and landscape, history and topography, period and region, the book opens with an announcement: "Part One is About Time. Part Two is About Space" (1). The first part is titled *Once*, the second *Here*: there is no sense of hierarchy involved in the placing of these sections, allowing them to co-exist with convergent synchronicity.

With historicism coming to an end, Berger boldly rallies for a topographical way of looking at time, by spatializing critical thinking and by envisioning a postmodern geography of political aesthetic. This is important, he feels, with the increasing expansion of modern means of communication, the sheer vastness of modern power, the extent of individual responsibility extending to global events, the indivisibility of the world brought about by globalization, the inequity caused by uneven economic development across the world, the increasing exploitation, so on and so forth. Berger feels that the crux of postmodern geographies involves the "crisis of the modern novel" (*Look of Things* 40) which has entailed a transformation in the way stories are narrated, making it is difficult to "tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time" (40). This has brought about a lateral mode of narrating the story-line resulting from an awareness of the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities:

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<sup>64</sup> *Postmodern Geographies* 22

(Instead of being aware of a point as an infinitely small part of a straight line, we are aware of it as an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the centre of a star of lines" (40)

Berger used his analysis of the conditions and factors responsible for the transformation of the modern novel, and the change in the context of meaning and interpretation as an analogy to explain the historic import of portraiture, which was so frequently in the past the visual epitome of authoritative ancestry and social and class hierarchy, has undergone such vivid changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The shifting context centers on the schisms of spatiality/historicity, simultaneity/series, geography/biography. Berger thus generates a series of conjectures that describe the postmodern turn against historical determinism and urgently calls for a need for a narrative of spatiality instead of a narrative of historicity. These insistently postmodern geographical opinions are discernible in the acknowledgement of a deep and critical reshuffling of contemporary life, entailing momentous transformations in human perceptions. This reshuffling, for Berger, comprises an essentially radical rethinking of narrative modes originating in a new realization that one must take into consideration "the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities" (40) to come to terms with the visual world. The cool certainty of a sequentially unravelling plotline can no longer be relied upon, neither can we totally trust an increasing accrual of history trooping straight towards denouement. A present-day portraiture, unlike a one from the bygone era, does not cursorily refer directly to a powerful lineage, to elicitation of legacy and tradition. Our perspectives are, as it were, held hostage by simultaneities, as it were, and these simultaneities intercede and encompass our viewpoint outward through an inestimable number of lines linking the subject to an entire world of analogous occurrences, thus convoluting the sequential stream of

meaning, equivocating the fable-like threading out of one event following another. The new forms should now necessarily include an openly geographical as well as historical arrangement and prediction.

To prove his point, Berger perceptively locates the reframed narrative in a prevailing context and understanding of geographically irregular ontogenesis, into a radial assemblage of lines and surfaces joining every history to a horizontality that extends across the earth in its control, indivisibility, corruption, and injustice. The understanding of the unevenness of geographical events and the rejuvenated awareness of our individual political obligation for it as an invention that we have brought into existence together spatializes the on-going moment and unravels the perceptions that can be gained from a closer analysis of present crisis and reorganization in aesthetics and in scientific, philosophical and literary practices, in everyday life and in the circumstances of all human beings as they exist all over the world in all their dissimilarity and inequality. The most illuminating critical insight is produced by the understanding of a reflective restructuring of modern life and a clear awareness of geographically – as opposed to historically – erratic developments, where human geography (and rethinking the notion of transversality) offers the chief interpretive perspective.

The reaffirmation of the importance of space in critical social theory does not imply a facile incompatibility between spatialization and temporalization of the critical glance; neither does it suggest a hostile relegation of time and history to the background. Rather, it is a beckoning of an opportune interpretive equilibrium amongst formation of human geographies, historiographical constructions, and social composition, accompanied by a recognition that history has up till now been

recognized as the chief and advantaged means of critical exposé and discourse, and the contention that this privileged means, which has hitherto suppressed the critical potential of the spatiality of social being, is not valid anymore. It goes without saying that, for Berger, this line of thinking contests the perceived supremacy of historicizing of critical thought, not the significance of history. Berger observes that any current narrative which discounts the immediacy of the spatial aspect is inadequate: “Any contemporary narrative which ignores the urgency of this dimension is incomplete and acquires the oversimplified character of a fable” (40). Walter Benjamin's representations of the archaic storytellers, the one who is a traveller and the other who stays at home, echoes in Berger's meditations on human spirituality, the connections between the questions of geography and historical awareness.

Berger draws attention toward an urgent need to rearrange critical social thought, a re-constitution which can help demystify the hitherto concealed auxiliaries of human geographies, in particular the predominant and imprisoning spatializations of life lived in a society that have come about with the rise of capitalism. To develop these spatial arenas of perception and to generate an even more compelling attribution of postmodern critical human geography to the instrumental spatiality of the modern world, storytelling and its latent political potential may be rethought, as Berger does, especially towards the latter half of his writing career.

*Railtracks* (2013), a collaboration between Anne Michaels and John Berger, is structured like a conversation between the two authors, their names condensed to J and A, suffusing their personages of repute and accomplishments with a fictional timbre. On the one hand, *Railtracks*, with its highly anecdotal interpolations and musings on the transformation of train stations through the ages, is not addressed to history. It is also

a minimalistic exploration of the nature of human transport, and of the interstices of the internal and external world. *Railtracks* is a singularly meditative collaboration about distances, exile, migration, partings and reunions. The transmission of the stories – ranging from the industrial to the metaphysical – in the book is performative in that it parallels and replicates the movements of railway tracks between terminals, across time and across acquired and traces of lost meanings. This corporeal and experimental dialogue is juxtaposed with evocative photography of Tereza Stehlíková, registering its own moody atmospheric route by train through the forested, wintry topography of Southern Bohemia.

A suggestive quote both at the beginning and conclusion bookends the text and thematically summarizes it: “It is the sound of vanishing, the music as it plays itself to silence, the train as it travels away, a voice left on magnetic tape. A photograph of a ghost is sound” (5) These quizzical, synesthetic and often melancholic descriptions refer to kinds of loss and separation. The line is followed by the presence of a relatively more emotive and informal voice which fetches the narrative to the present tense:

Walking with you down the platform. The 8.26 for Laramie. In the minute that’s left we still have to do everything. I hurry ahead faster than the train.

This way, for a fraction of a second, I’ll see you approaching again. (80)

The lines describe loss using metaphors of archaic technologies (trains and magnetic tape). Itself poetic in their conception, the voices allude to poetry in its relation to distances and specifically its ability to close distances. The narrator “A” reminisces about messages left on an answering machine:

You read to me in the middle of the night, poems from Russia and Czechoslovakia and Poland and Buenos Aires [...] Sometimes there was piano music [...] Because

you left these messages while I was asleep, it was as if you were keeping watch.

Because, thousands of miles away, you said, 'come close.' (9)

The spatializing thrust of the dialogue is unmistakable. Berger describes London King's Cross Railway Station in typical postmodern spatialized geographical terms:

This is the wedge, a narrow triangle between two terminal railway stations, King's Cross and St. Pancras.

From these two stations the old lines went north. To Manchester, Inverness, Leeds, Liverpool, Glasgow.

King's Cross opened in 1852. It possessed the largest station roof of its time. The design of the roof was modelled after the Czar's riding school in Moscow. Before it was King's Cross, this site was the village of Battle Bridge, named for the struggle between Queen Boudicca and the Romans in the year 61. They say Queen Boudicca is buried under platform eight.

50 acres were clearer to make way for St. Pancras Station, the hotel and the goods depot.

Three thousand houses were demolished: Somers Town, Agar Town, Skinner Street, King's Road, Brill Street. Demolished, from Euston Road to Camden Square, all workers' homes known as slums. (14)

The dialogical orientation of the book's narrative assumes quite a few shifting tonalities: sometimes the conversation sounds like an intimate chat between two lovers, sometimes they resemble the voices of newscasters, next to each other but looking straight at the camera, with the spatiality of the narrative extending radially beyond the here and now. The address of the voices is aimed to salvage certain things from the past

for their idiosyncratic meaningfulness and for a kind of collector's value, that is reminiscent of Benjamin's preference of the figure of the collector over the figure of the historicist in texts like "On the Concept of History" and "Convolute H" from *The Arcades Project*. In "Convolute H" the figure of the historicist who attempts to retain all historical miscellanies in their apportioned systems in time and space, is set up squarely against the figure of the collector who eclectically regroups and pairs historical fragments in associations that may not have much to do with their real chronological connection. It is the collector, and not the historicist, according to Benjamin who recognises with precision, the exigency of the past – the likelihood that history might not have advanced in a certain way, that other possibilities were also conceivable, but were prevented from being realised.

In "Convolute H," Benjamin relates his meditations on history to the ideas of use value and exchange value. He recognized that it was customary for several critics of capitalism to propagate their arguments under the aegis of use value, and in opposition to exchange value – contending, for instance, that capitalism is unfair in its emphases on profits, and its blindness to the necessity of acknowledging and satisfactorily recompensing the valuable, practical and material contributions of labour to the economy. In this context, deliverance would follow from a raise of use value to its suitable and deserved social position. Nevertheless, Benjamin assumes a different position by repudiating, not only the capitalist who pursues nothing but profit (exchange value) in material goods and labour, but also the critic who perceives nothing but the use value in the same things. Benjamin offers, in their place, the archetype of the collector – a figure who is interested in things neither for their use value, nor their exchange value. The collector establishes a rather unrealistic relationship with the objects he chooses to collect – and it is exactly this unrealistic approach that contests

the serviceable utilitarian association with objects and with people that, according to Benjamin (and according to Adorno and Horkheimer) signifies the chief marker of unfreedom and oppression engendered by capitalism. The collector is therefore an effective metaphor for Benjamin, clinching a relationship to history, and formulating an approach to production and consumption in the modern world. Berger and Michaels' elegiac evocation of the world of the phone box, the cobbles, the steam, the high ceilings, the cast iron is a gesture of reclamation consistent with the relationship to history that Benjamin proposes. One of the major themes of the book is the part that industrial developments have played in peoples' emotional lives. Rail tracks have transported people through the horizontality of natural frontiers, connecting them to the earth and their fellow humans as well.

The book progresses gradually along its own track through biographical references to the collaborators' lives: it charts briefly Berger's early life and his relationship with the railway and how the rail network used to be a part of his initial occupation as a painter; these reminiscences are interspersed with recollections of Michaels as she employs the *topos* of Union Station as a point of departure to describe the history of her own migrant family. Rail tracks offer the writers to revisit their past: 'our lives glimpsed like back gardens... as the train draws out.' Generally speaking, rail tracks become the metaphor for life and both Berger and Michaels recognize the limits of that metaphor. The physical peripatetic wandering is played off with the historical to the accompaniment of poetry: Berger takes us through the first coroner's court to be built in London with all its intriguing history, the 'Hardy Tree' and the death of Maurice Margot and this traveling through time is accompanied by unavoidable political references.<sup>65</sup> Each little

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<sup>65</sup> 'Political' to be understood here in its connection with the original Greek word for a city state, *polis*.

anecdote is related with the political specifics of the time and, perhaps more importantly, the time of Berger himself, bringing the reader's consciousness to face the interstice of different times and puncture the historicism of conventional accounts of railway networks and cultural geography in general. Michaels' voice aids this puncturing and unleashes the specific terminus, to use a railway metaphor, to the universal. She says: "before clocks there were church bells. And in each day's ringing, eternity" (40).

#### **4.5 Art and the Exilic Experience: *A Painter of Our Time***

Berger's *A Painter of Our Time* (1958) reconnoitres the themes that became his chief concerns throughout his career, the foremost of which is the connexion between the artist and society. This theme is examined in the novel with all its political implications and is outlined by the unending interrogation of the ontological issues of exile and assimilation in modernity. The novel explores the impasse confronted by Janos Lavin, a Hungarian expatriate painter living in London during the 1956 Uprising. It is organized around the unearthing of his diary, which is comprised of four notebooks of drafts by his friend John (a fictionalized version of Berger himself). These drafts would be chiefly attractive to any archivist. Lavin is a committed communist, but has left Hungary and come to London in search of artistic fulfilments. He is gifted, but mostly unrecognised and his work is perceived as outmoded. The book unlocks with John visiting his studio. Lavin has vanished without a trace and John tries to find out the reasons behind Lavin's mysterious disappearance. He comes across a diary complete with Lavin's musings. The story unravels as we read Janos's entries which are intermittently supplemented by John's remarks. As Lavin's diary unfolds, we come to know about his opinions on art and politics, understand

the tensions in his relationship with his wife Diana and his compatriot émigré Max, and, most importantly, learn about his lasting but extremely private rapport with his old friend Laszlo, a poet and a revolutionary who remained in Hungary during the politically turbulent times, and whose execution expedited Janos's return. Eventually it is this diary that transforms into the novel, with John's comments adding informational and thematic counterpoint to Lavin's journal entries. Gradually, with Lavin's quotidian entries, mostly about art and the paintings he has been working on, and John's comments and elucidations about Lavin's life, his status as an émigré, his past, his work, and most importantly, his politics, a story begins to emerge.

In the midst of Janos's exile in England he finds himself surrounded with an intimidating and shallow environment which contains his self-centred and somewhat cagy colleagues at the art school where he teaches, otherwise polished gallery directors and critics who are "slaves to a divine trollop" (33). The English weather adds to his feeling of being far away from home. Referring to the fog, he says: "It is this that makes me feel most a foreigner. I hate it so much." (99) Lavin's neighbour, Mr Hancock, an improbable butcher and an amateur painter, is the only person Janos takes a liking to, because he is the only person in Lavin's entourage who is not a part of "the hegemonic discourse of metropolitan culture" (147). There is a continuous comparison in the novel between England and Hungary. Lavin infuses the memory of his early life in Hungary with all the attributes of fundamental unity, ethical and social integrity, and this memory is brought to bear upon, and thereby condemn, England as essentially disjointed, intangible and duplicitous nation. The amalgamation of politics and art, which Berger rather challengingly depicts as the source of real experience, is located as either a figment in Lavin's memory or an indistinct sprint in the context of the impending

revolution in his country of origin. Exile apparently does not diminish Lavin's sense of dignity, and therefore he does not reveal any need for consolation. The sole emotional sustenance he insists on is the facility of *flânerie* through the city and to contemplate the lives of its populace. Social integration does not seem particularly necessary for him: in fact, estrangement appears to augment the acuity of his observations, and ironically sustains his hope of self-sufficiency.

Prior to his arrival in England, Lavin was a revolutionary in Hungary. He left, while others remained and fought – in some instances foregoing their own artistic aspirations in order to serve the new socialist state. Lavin has faith in the socialist struggle, but the question that is raised is, how is he contributing to the socialist cause while living in London creating paintings that no one is interested in? This question pervades the book and constitutes Lavin's essential dilemma. He is not worried about his work not getting the attention it deserves. He is contented with being unsuccessful. His art is not socialist in nature or purpose, and he is occasionally bothered that should it reach his own people back in Hungary, it would be derided as an art serving nothing but bourgeois ideology. What is the purpose of art? – this question has dual implications in the novel. For Lavin this question is important because of his political past and his *émigré* status. For the reader, however, it has larger and more universal implications: what purpose does art generally serve?

Lavin reveals frequent interest in theories of art and Communism. At one point in the novel, Lavin begins a serious inquiry into how cubism allows the artist to see an object before him from different perspectives at the same time. This is, of course, draws on Berger's own interest in Cubist practices and inventions – an interest which later produced the major essay, "The Moment of Cubism" (1967). And the realization that there can be an art form that can effect a convolution of space and time, or, in other

words, spatialize the being of an object at a given time by rendering it visible from different perspectives, is continuous with Berger and Benjamin's preoccupation with finding substitutes for the historicist model, as discussed above in connection with Berger and Michaels' *Railtracks*. As Berger (and Lavin, in the book) understands it, Cubism allows the painter to access instantaneous visual topographies that are usually manifested in sequences, unfolding in time. Curiously enough, Berger, in the way he frames the narrative, generates a similar kind of instantaneousness: 'reading' Lavin's journal through John's narrative we get one perspective; and John's comments offer another. Two perspectives, unfolding in different time-frames, are made to converge in the act of the reader reading the novel, effectively producing a cubist synthesis.

The loss of his homeland, exilic separation from it has made Lavin reliant on it for his identity. He finds himself amongst people who are unfamiliar with the trauma of being uprooted, and unlike them, in his case, it is the exile's loss of nationality that not only confirms his nationalism but paradoxically consolidates his sense of belonging. It is only when he has exiled himself to another country, he realizes the true meaning of home. This exilic affirmation of the idea of home echoes Berger's notion that "when we lose something – if that thing that we've lost is important – we begin to possess it internally more strongly than when we 'possessed it externally'" (sdeslimbes, 26:04). Lavin quips: "I never fully realized that I was Hungarian until I came to England" (71).

Janos' friend and fellow expatriate, Max, plays a foil to him. Max is a permanent refugee who practically sets his refugee identity aside, shielding it by asserting beforehand that, each of his present performances is only a perfunctory repetition, a mere shadow of what he was once capable of, or a meagre indication of what he could be. However, exile without resumption is degeneration for Janos, and in a convoluted

way, he discards the position of exile which necessitates an utter denial to partake in the present. Lavin says: “There is a time when every refugee lives in a no-man’s-land. He must. Yet his mind is not there. It is backwards in regret, forwards in fear or hope. But Max has camped there in a no-man’s-land now for twenty years” (50).

The formation of Janos's identity in England is thus shaped by the response against the perpetuity of loss which solidifies the identity of a permanent refugee, and also a rejoinder against the imagined completeness of identity that authorizes the citizens' challenging vision. For Janos, identity is in the vacillation between the opposites of denial and assertion.

The novel takes its inspiration from Berger’s formative years as a painter and art critic, when he moved in the circles of European refugees. In his 1988 afterword to *A Painter of Our Time*, Berger submits that the theatre offers the most analogous prototype for understanding the to the fictional scheme of the novel: the novel itself was conceived as a stage where real people whom Berger actually knew could play the characters that propelled the imaginary set of events forward. Lavin is a merged character based on the Hungarian sculptor Peter Peri and the Dutch painter Friso Ten Holt, who were Berger’s mentors. Peter Peri belonged to the same generation as Janos, and to Berger, physically looked like Janos. In the essay “Peter Lazslo Peri” (1968) Berger clarifies the parallelism between Peri and Lavin:

Something of the meaning of being such an exile I tried to put into my novel *A Painter of Our Time*. The hero of this novel is a Hungarian of exactly the same generation as Peri. In some respects the character resembles Peri closely. We discussed the novel together at length. He was enthusiastic about the idea of my writing it. What he thought of the finished article I do not know. He probably thought it inadequate. Even if he had thought otherwise, I think it would have been

impossible for him to tell me. By that time the habit of suffering inaccessibility, like the habit of eating meagre vegetable soup, had become too strong.

I should perhaps add that the character of James Lavin in this novel is in no sense a portrait of Peri. Certain aspects of Lavin derived from another Hungarian émigré, Frederick Antal, the art historian who, more than any other man, taught me how to write about art. Yet other aspects were purely imaginary. What Lavin and Peri share is the depth of their experience of exile. (170)

The dramatized unhinging of history in *A Painter* can be seen as an attempt to deal with a historical era (the Hungarian revolution) and the question of intellectual engagement through the spatialized lens of geographical displacement in the form of exile. The refugees Berger became friends with early in his life, offered a foil to the English character. In a conversation with Janine Burke, he says:

It so happened that more than half of the artists I knew, mostly older than myself, were refugees from fascism. Jewish, but not all. People who had left Nazi Germany, Austria, Poland and come to England just before the war. I lived in a circle of refugees and there was a kind of complicity and understanding between us, despite our different experiences. These people had survived because of England, and England, compared to what they'd left, was democracy, freedom. But there was something that distanced them from the English and made them feel foreign. I knew what it was. The English refusal to recognise pain. For the refugees, pain was inevitable, even a spur to creativity. It was what we had in common. Out of that experience came the character of Janos.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> "Art Monthly: Article: Raising Hell and Telling Stories – John Berger Talks to Janine Burke"

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## Conclusion

Meanwhile, how to live this present? What conclusions to draw? What decisions to take? How to act?

—John Berger, *Meanwhile*

Berger's grappling with issues ranging from the political to the metaphysical reveals a persistent and dual conviction in arriving at decisions and confronting mysteries. If there is one message that can be derived out of Berger's lifework, it has to be the idea that no final conclusions can be drawn, as he says at the end of *Ways of Seeing* (1972): "What I've shown, and what I've said... must be judged against your own experience" (28:02-28:15).

Berger's identification of himself as a storyteller has a double bind: it was a conscious decision to abandon the postmodern aesthetics which he so notably mastered in *G.* (1972) and embrace an older and essentially oral form of storytelling that we discern in *Into Their Labours* onwards; later in life, he identified his output, both fiction and non-fiction, prior to *G.* as having things in common with storytelling. He never provided elaborate explanations as to why he thought so. Berger's settlement among the peasants influenced his format of storytelling. Different forms of human activity influencing and interpenetrating each other is a recurrent trope in his writing. Post-*Into Their Labours* storytelling was of a kind that had its epistemic and empirical bases firmly grounded in the activities and experiences he saw around him. Most of the characters were drawn from real-life people and actual incidents, perpetually in recognition of the porous nature of the interface between life and art. In an insightful conversation with Michael Silverblatt, he points out: "Actually I don't know so much about literature. And I don't know so much about books," and that he is "trying to go from life to page" (sdeslimbes,

10:04). The activity of writing transforms the *topos* of the rural geography he describes in his stories into a kind of metaphysical *topos* where the past, the present and the future converge. This spatialized convergence of people and experiences from different times informs his storytelling which in itself sometimes gives the impression of unfolding not in time, which narratives generally do, but in space, giving his audience a distinct feeling of watching an image (a painting or a photograph) instead of reading or listening to his stories. In 1999, he made a site-specific collaboration with Simon McBurney to create *The Vertical Line* – an evocative merger of installation and live performance and a vertically spatialized exploration of time – 30,000 years to be precise.<sup>67</sup> In *The Vertical Line*, Berger, McBurney and the actress Sandra Voe embarks on a journey inscribing a descending line through time 30 metres underneath central London.<sup>68</sup> As they are led through the darkness of centuries, visitors hear them through installed microphones expressing their wonder at the immense depth of time, the tangible presence of the past, the ancient images discovered in the Chauvet Caves in Northern France, and the reminiscence of the art school in Holborn where Berger was a student, with a tantalizing narrative thread running through these experiences. One visitor remembers: “We moved through these abandoned zones by instinct, guided by the ghost voices of an older man, a younger man and a woman broadcast over the tannoy; by the dead sound of George Formby, the World Service and the wind”.<sup>69</sup> The CD of *The Vertical Line* begins with Berger’s voice echoing across the depth of the tunnel like a sonar. The very absurdity of opening question accompanying the footsteps that seem to be approaching from the opposite end of the dark tunnel – “Can you hear me in the

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<sup>67</sup> “The Vertical Line.” *Www.artangel.org.uk*, [www.artangel.org.uk/project/the-vertical-line/](http://www.artangel.org.uk/project/the-vertical-line/). Accessed 8 Oct. 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Simon McBurney also collaborated with Berger along with Anne Michaels on a similar site-specific projected titled *Vanishing Points* in 2005.

<sup>69</sup> gvannoord. “John Berger and Simon McBurney – the Vertical Line.” *Gerrie van Noord*, 4 Nov. 2015, [gerrieat.work/2015/11/04/the-vertical-line-john-berger-and-simon-mcburney/](http://gerrieat.work/2015/11/04/the-vertical-line-john-berger-and-simon-mcburney/). Accessed 5 Dec. 2017.

darkness?" – sets the tone of the piece; darkness does not belong to the sonic category, silence or noise does. This deliberate confusion of the spatiotemporal as well as the synesthetic flipping of the audio-visual is symptomatic of Berger's kind of storytelling. It is difficult to ascertain how this actually affects the audience of his stories and whether this is a deliberate ploy on his part to begin with. Be that as it may, such ambiguities are fecund and add to the richness and thought-provoking character of Berger's fictional and non-fictional utterances. They also open up a participatory space for the reader, in an act of empowerment, really, where a dialogue can be established. What Elisabeth Young-Bruehl says of Hannah Arendt in the following passage is true of Berger: "Insofar as the past has been transmitted as tradition, it possesses authority; insofar as authority presents itself historically, it becomes tradition." But when the past is not transmitted as tradition, it can be freely appropriated; and when such free appropriation presents itself historically, it becomes the occasion for dialogue" ("Hannah Arendt's Storytelling" 183)

Today the spaces of dialogues exist in super-abundance. At the end of the first part of *Ways of Seeing*, Berger can be seen as anticipating YouTube: "The images may be like words but there is no dialogue yet. You cannot reply to me. For that to become possible in the modern media of communication access to television must be extended beyond this present narrow limits" (28:41-28:47). In many ways, we have surpassed the age of 'access' that he talks about, and have entered a period in history where endless proliferation of random data impedes our ability to meaningfully engage with moments and emotions. The vertical plumbing of the depths of moments that Berger so passionately advocates in his works is rendered problematic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by a society of consumers horizontally skimming data surfaces; and a general lack of attention in all fields.

In French the words attention (*l'attention*) and waiting (*attente*) are etymologically connected. Waiting has disappeared from our cognitive horizon. Berger as “a man in his wholeness wholly attending” (“Thought” by D.H. Lawrence) seems particularly relevant today.<sup>70</sup> In November, 2016, just before Berger’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, Will Gompertz, Arts editor with the BBC, visited him at his home in Paris. He asked Berger: “Is there a right way, and therefore, a wrong way of looking at art?”<sup>71</sup> Berger replied: “It’s quite disturbing to watch the public, people come in, they stand in front of a painting, they take a picture and they move on”. Gompertz also showed Berger a photograph of Hillary Clinton during one of her presidential campaigns in Orlando, Florida, where everyone in the audience turned their backs on her not out of disrespect but in an attempt to capture a historic moment by clicking selfies, thereby being inside a photo frame with Clinton.



Figure 1: Hillary Clinton poses for selfies at an event in Orlando, Florida on Sept, 21, 2016. Photo: Barbara Kinney

<sup>70</sup> Thought. “Thought by D H Lawrence.” *Allpoetry.com*, [allpoetry.com/poem/8510371-Thought-by-D-H-Lawrence](http://allpoetry.com/poem/8510371-Thought-by-D-H-Lawrence). Accessed 8 Aug. 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Gompertz, Will. “Author and Art Critic John Berger at 90.” *BBC News*, 1 Nov. 2016, [www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-37834092](http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-37834092). Accessed 2 Jan. 2017.

When asked by Gompertz to comment on the photo, Berger said: “I understand your showing it, because it tells us something about our time, the way we try to survive in it, and make sense of it, which is very thought-provoking. But you'll have to wait for a long time for the thoughts to be expressed by me,” thereby reiterating the connection between attending to and thinking about experiences, and waiting for them to be apparent. Simone Weil once said: “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity”.<sup>72</sup> With the hijacking of attention by a culture of consumerism, the span of contemplation moves between one commodity to the next, thereby rendering consumers increasingly incapacitated to retain meanings or be critical about them. As, Zygmunt Bauman points out in *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (1998), the meaning of the word ‘poor’ – once taken to imply one who is unemployed – now designates a flawed consumer who buys little or does not buy at all. This new kind of approach to poverty (and wealth) also has entailed a loss of the ability to be attentive to others’ pain, and the way in which humans relate to artworks and recognize empathetic potential in them. Returning to the general discussions about art, commodity, meaningfulness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Berger (and Benjamin) may provide some insights into a) the current problem of decreasing attention span; b) the politics of distraction engendered by ruling ideologies. Storytelling practices appear to have a significant relevance for these issues both as a mode of resistance to the powers that be, and a medium appropriated by national and local governments to propagate lies. Reading Benjamin’s lesser-known texts on the subjects of attention and distraction offers valuable understandings.

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<sup>72</sup> “Simone Weil 1909–43 French Essayist and Philosopher.” *Oxford Reference*, 22 Sept. 2016, [www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00011371](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00011371). Accessed 12 Aug. 2018.

Generally speaking, within the spectrum of apperception, distraction and contemplation occupy two opposite ends. A rigorous increase in distraction caused by random heterogeneous sensations impinging on the senses, may cause a stimulus overload leading to an unassimilable flux of sensations. On the other hand, contemplative immersion in experience, if taken to its perceptual extreme, threatens to collapse into a state of oblivion where the subject's perception, solipsistically engaged with the object of its contemplation, banishes self-awareness and alertness of the mind. In Benjamin's works, the dialectical interplay between contemplation and distraction sporadically surfaces from time to time with increasing political urgency. The evolution of the dialectics is neither linear nor systematic, as is characteristic of Benjamin. However, Benjamin is consistent in his disavowal of the unresponsiveness that often transpires as a result of the temporary respite from political agency offered by the twin extremes of distraction and contemplation.

Benjamin's formulations are propelled by a desire to mobilize these two extremes into a constructive dialogue that will ascertain the role of perception with regard to political inquiry. Human perception, as Benjamin maintains in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction", is influenced by socio-cultural changes that are in turn dictated by historical changes. Whereas the bourgeois art-lover is absorbed by the artwork he self-effacingly contemplates, the masses absorb the work of art into themselves in a state of distracted reception. With the onset of mass culture, the ways of receiving and using art underwent major transformations. An example of this transformation, for Benjamin, is the cinema: "Reception in distraction – the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception – finds in film its true training ground. Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception" (40-41).

As the word “shock” with all its sensorial connotations indicates, film, “being based on successive changes of scene and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator” (39) does not allow the viewer to recede into a state of engrossed contemplation. The crucial significance of film, according to Benjamin, lies in usefulness in training the viewer’s mind for reception in distraction. In the era of internet and social media, viewers consuming multimedia data have become increasingly immune to such “shocks” and in fact, the categories of distraction and contemplation have come to be fused in a strange way where the sheer volume of data that is offered to the viewers makes it easy for them to get either totally focussed or totally distracted. However, Benjamin’s use of the word “shock” is also reminiscent of Brecht’s epic theatre. Benjamin surveys Brecht’s pioneering formulation of audience response in essays such as “The Author as Producer” (1934) and “What is Epic Theatre?” (1939). He focuses on the element of astonishment or surprise in Brechtian dramaturgy that is actuated by the strategy of interruption in the form of songs, gestures and screen legends. Benjamin’s primary interest is in the political utility of sustaining a detached alertness in the audience instead of a contemplative identification. In a short piece called “Theater and Radio” (1932), he briefly summarises it thus: “Epic Theater challenges the theater of convention. It replaces culture with training, distraction with group formation” (“Work of Art”, 305).

A similar intent may be found in “Bekränzter Eingang” (1930), a review Benjamin wrote of an exhibition by his friend Ernst Joël. Benjamin points out how in order to shake the disinterested visitors out of their impassive reception of the art-works, incoherent and bizarre annotations are made to accompany the images in a Dadaist fashion. By moderating the visitors’ attention between the unreflecting and passive extremes of contemplation and distraction, this apparatus, like Brecht’s, facilitates the

assimilation of data received in a state of distraction into habitual perception and thereby encourages a dialogue between the artwork as an object of solitary contemplation and its reception in mass-reproduced forms within a culture of distraction.

The dialectical interplay of the categories of apperception such as contemplation, distraction, attention and habit in Benjamin's insights into mass culture is analogous with Berger's use of storytelling as a medium of recognition, understanding and communication of experience. Benjamin's line of inquiry into the politics of contemplation and distraction can be pursued methodologically while researching the significance of reception in Berger's storytelling. Like Benjamin, Berger places a great emphasis on the critical faculty of attention. For Berger, storytelling provides valuable insights into the evolving nature of human perception and how it is shaped by the changing material conditions in the age of corporate capitalism. A passage from *Bento's Sketchbook* (2012) offers an insight into the dynamics of attention in the process of storytelling:

In following a story, we follow a storyteller, or, more precisely, we follow the trajectory of a storyteller's attention, what it notices and what it ignores, what it lingers on, what it repeats, what it considers irrelevant, what it hurries towards, what it circles, what it brings together. (72)

In oral storytelling, the listener's reception of the story also includes the paraphernalia of the storyteller's physical gestures, movements of hands, etc. Each teller has his unique style, his distinctive and carefully-crafted manner of presentation. The listener listens to the story, follows the movements of the eyes and the hands of the storyteller and in the process inherits the experience of the story. Tactility is central to this

inheritance. The image of the hand recurs in traditional storytelling and so do the metaphors of weaving and pottery. In Benjamin's conception of storytelling, as Esther Leslie points out in her essay "Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft", tactility is central to an authentic knowledge of the world:

True experience is conceived as close and practiced knowledge of what is at hand. The hand touches, has practical experience of life. Recurrent in Benjamin's delineations of experience are the words tactile, tactics, the tactical, entering German, as it enters English via the Latin *tangere*, touch. To touch the world is to know the world. (6)

Benjamin sets aside film and architecture as art-forms that are received in a state of distraction and through a collective, and in this he anticipates the internet. The film, according to him, has a "percussive effect" on the spectator whereas architecture is received "tactilely and optically". It can be added that the reception of architectural art-forms is analogous to the ways in which publicity images are received and their subtle and subliminal messages are absorbed by the masses. Graffiti artists often rely on this general faculty of distracted reception to transmit their images. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger devotes a section to the analysis of the use of photographs and paintings in advertising. He explains how reputed icons from traditional oil paintings are used in publicity stills and advertisement images to lend them prestige and glamour. His criticism is directed against the seemingly random juxtaposition of images that are mass-produced and mass-received. He chooses, by way of example, an issue of the Sunday Times Magazine where publicity images for shaving soaps and beers are followed in close succession by photographs of refugees from East Pakistan fled to West Bengal. Berger observes on this permutation: "Text which accompanies the photographs says that these refugees deserve more help than any others in the world.

The writer appeals to the public conscience. But if I turn the page again, the inadequacy of such appeal becomes obvious” (“Ways of Seeing” 24:11-24:17). He draws our attention to the disjointedness of the images and the incoherence of the experience of flipping through such a magazine. The production and reception of such a magazine are part of the same culture. Experience of the refugees is not recognized for what it is. The magazine makes only a vague, unsubstantial reference to the existence of this experience. By placing this reference within a matrix of completely unrelated sets of images and words, the experience of the refugees is diluted and mystified. Berger’s advocacy of skepticism with regard to the reception of such disparate and unrelated imagery is continuous with Benjamin’s emphasis on the need to strike a balance between habit and attention in order to integrate a critical stance within the process of apperception.<sup>73</sup>

Benjamin’s emphasis on the importance of attention and alertness as a remedy to the equally non-committal extremes of contemplation and distraction in an age of industrial capitalism is in agreement with Berger’s conception of storytelling as a medium of recognition and demystification in the age of financial capitalism and neoliberalism. In an alert listening to a story, one listens to not only what the storyteller chooses to say but also the unsaid. Meaning is constructed often from fragments. The storyteller does not explain but hints and signals at the possibility of a set of meanings thereby creating a collaborative space where the reader is invited to participate in the process of meaning-making. It is not the task of the storyteller to explain. There is an illustration of this in Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller” (1936). He alludes to a story involving the Egyptian king Psammenitus and the Persian king Cambyses in Herodotus’ *Histories*

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<sup>73</sup> The *Ways of Seeing* book ends with the injunction: “*To be continued by the reader*” (p.166)

and explores the question why Psammenitus, after he had been beaten by Cambyses, stood impassive and silent at the sight of the humiliation of his daughter and son but was strangely moved to great despair to see his servant being taken prisoner. Herodotus offers no explanation. The lack of explanation opens the story up, as it were, and makes its mystery and ambiguity available for posterity. Benjamin contrasts between information whose value “does not survive the moment in which it was new” (90) and story which “preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” (90). The “unfolding” of the story takes place in time along the twin axes of meaning and mystery. Berger says in *Appearances*: “(M)eaning and mystery are inseparable, and neither can exist without the passing of time” (64).

The image of the constellation occurs in the works of both Benjamin and Berger as an apparatus that links apparently unrelated events and occurrences and the arrangement of which triggers a spark of recognition. Berger’s evocative statement on the nature of perception in ancient storytelling:

Those who first invented and then named the constellations were storytellers. Tracing an imaginary line between a cluster of stars gave them an image and an identity. The stars threaded on that line were like events threaded on a narrative. Imagining the constellations did not of course change the stars, nor did it change the black emptiness that surrounds them. What it changed was the way people read the night sky. (*And Our Faces* 8)

The motif of constellation crops up extensively in Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* signifying the correlation or the resonance that sometimes takes place when the historian places a number of unrelated historical events in conjuncture.

To a large extent, the art and politics of storytelling depend on selection of material and its presentation. In listening to a story, we listen to not only what the storyteller chooses to say but also the unsaid. Meaning is constructed often from fragments. The storyteller does not elucidate but make suggestions and gestures at the possible emergence of a meaning thus creating a collaborative space where the reader is invited to participate in the process of meaning-making. And “meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development. Without a story, without an unfolding, there is no meaning” (*Appearances*, 64).

Storytelling, for Berger, is a mode of narration that is self-reflexive, critical and is based on the pursuit of the teller’s attention. There is also a question of inheritance. The storyteller’s telos is concerned about not only the closure of the story but a successful bequeathment of his narration whereby the listeners are transformed into potential storytellers. Again, to think of Benjamin’s contemplation-distraction dialectic, the storyteller, as conceived by Berger, is someone whose narration, by being constantly self-referential and by constantly reminding the listener of the materiality of the medium in which it is narrated, sustains a necessary critical alertness in the listener, so that, the listener neither feels invited to participate in a contemplative immersion in the experience of the artwork nor is he left unguarded and vulnerable to the irresponsible, distracted consumption of mass-produced images like any uncritical reader of the *Sunday Times Magazine*.

It is simplistic to say that when mechanical reproduction (and in our time, digital) makes an artwork accessible to the masses, the distinctive aura of the artwork which surrounded its unique presence in space and time is destroyed. The changes in perception that are necessitated by mechanical reproduction of the original work of art

are much more complex than a one-dimensional schism between the aura of the original and the accessibility of the reproduced. The reproduced image can be manipulated, transformed, and distorted to suit contexts that may have nothing to do with the material conditions under which its creator made the artwork, or the opinions he formed of it after having completed the task of creating it. In the face of its transmissibility and reproducibility, the original recedes into a kind of remote loneliness that often pervades their residence in museums and art galleries. According to Benjamin, aura is “a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (“Work of Art” 23). Distance is integral to the sustenance of the aura. The aura is dispelled when the exhibition value of an artwork begins to replace its cult value and the viewer is allowed to “get closer” to the artwork. However, it can be argued that after having peeled off the mythical overlay that constitutes the aura of an artwork, technological reproduction does not render it immune to mystification. Mystification takes new forms. Two divergent processes take place. First, reproducibility, instead of merely undermining the authority of the original artwork, in a curious way consolidates its unique and authentic physical existence in a specific place and time. In other words, when the plurality of copies is pitted against the uniqueness of the original, the plurality often lapses into banality. This is truer of digital reproductions. This results from an awareness of the infinite adaptability of the reproduction which can be configured and re-configured into various contexts. As a result, the value of the actual artwork is stratified into two distinct types: the reproducible use value of the copy and the collector’s value of the original. Second, the uniqueness of the genuine, tangible original, instead of leading the audience back to the real contexts that oversaw its production, is itself led by a set of assumptions that is made to look like the only parameter by which its value can be judged. Authenticity and ownership are two of

these assumptions. Whereas the manual reproduction of a painting can be termed a fake, to bring charges of forgery against a mechanically reproduced painting makes no sense: “(W)hereas the authentic work retains its full authority in the face of a reproduction made by hand, which it generally brands a forgery, this is not the case with technological reproduction” (21). The mechanically reproduced copy is more independent of the original, as Benjamin points out. On the question of authenticity, therefore, the original must contend with the manually reproduced fake and not the mechanically reproduced copy.

After having proved the authenticity of an artwork, experts begin the task of appropriating and apportioning its value. Commercial value and artistic value are conflated and the price of a painting is appropriated on the basis of the power and prestige of its last owner. Berger points out that our understanding of an image – an image that is presented as a work of art – is affected by a series of assumptions concerning beauty, truth, genius, civilization, form, status and taste. This leads to mystification and hinders the viewer from appreciating art for what it is and what it can reveal about its history. Consequently, the only historical information that populates museum catalogues often exclusively constitutes the history of ownership and acquisition. The experiences that gave rise to the artwork are often suppressed.

According to Berger, “Mystification has little to do with the vocabulary used. Mystification is the process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident” (*Ways of Seeing* 15-16). He takes a typical entry from a book on Frans Hals by Seymour Silve on Hals’ portrayal of the Regents and Regentesses of an alms house in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch city of Haarlem, and shows how the author has embarked on an elaborate analysis of the slouched hat of one of the Regents and his possible drunkenness, citing

medical opinion to prove that the Regent's expression could be a result of facial paralysis, and thereby drawing attention away from the confrontation that, according to Berger, matters most: "In this confrontation the Regents and Regentesses stare at Hals, a destitute old painter who has lost his reputation and lives off public charity; he examines them through the eyes of a pauper who must nevertheless try to be objective, i.e., must try to surmount the way he sees as a pauper. This is the drama of these paintings. A drama of an 'unforgettable contrast'" (15). This strategic shifting of focus which can result in concealment or revelation of deeper meanings, is conceptually related to the way the camera can select and maneuver the images that it shows us. Benjamin reminds us that "in photography it can bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens (which is adjustable and can easily change viewpoint) but not to the human eye; or it can use certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, to record images which escape natural optics altogether" ("Work of Art" 21). Berger illustrates this politics of selection in *Ways of Seeing* by showing how the movement of the lens can shape our interpretation of a painting.



Figure 2: *The Procession to Calvary* (1564) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Source: [www.wikiart.org](http://www.wikiart.org), [www.wikiart.org/en/pieter-bruegel-the-elder/christ-carrying-the-cross-1564](http://www.wikiart.org/en/pieter-bruegel-the-elder/christ-carrying-the-cross-1564).

He takes the example of Bruegel's "The Procession to Calvary" (1564):

In the right foreground John and Mary and the mourners of Christ. Christ carrying the cross is in the middle distance carried forward by the crowd which is making its way to the place of the crucifixes far away on the right where a circle of onlookers has already gathered. If you look at the whole picture you see that it is about grief, about torture, and above all about the callousness, the eager inquisitiveness, the superstitious drive of the crowd. If it sets out to be a religious painting, it is oddly a secular one. (*Ways of Seeing* 14:36-14:52)

When the camera zooms in on a particular area of the painting and enlarges it, the meaning changes. For example, by isolating a few sections or selecting a few details, it is possible to make the painting look like a devotional picture:



Figure 3: Detail 1 from *The Procession to Calvary* (1564) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Source: [www.wikiart.org](http://www.wikiart.org), [www.wikiart.org/en/pieter-bruegel-the-elder/christ-carrying-the-cross-1564](http://www.wikiart.org/en/pieter-bruegel-the-elder/christ-carrying-the-cross-1564).

With a different camera movement, it can be shown as an example of a landscape painting:  
painting:



Figure 4: Detail 2 from *The Procession to Calvary* (1564) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Or an account of social customs and costumes:



Figure 5: Detail 3 from *The Procession to Calvary* (1564) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Source: [www.wikiart.org](http://www.wikiart.org), [www.wikiart.org/en/pieter-bruegel-the-elder/christ-carrying-the-cross-1564](http://www.wikiart.org/en/pieter-bruegel-the-elder/christ-carrying-the-cross-1564).

Meaning, therefore, depends on the ‘ways of seeing’ and these ways, in their turn, depend on how we receive those images through technological reproduction. Much of the telling of the history of an image depends on the author’s selection of details. Just as in a story the main narrative interest lies in following the attention of the storyteller and the trajectory of his mental associations, the camera in reproducing images and simultaneously highlighting one detail and downplaying another, composes visual stories that are often ideologically driven. The art and politics of selection, therefore, assume a significant role in telling stories because they often reveal the connection between the artist/author and his medium; and also the relation between the artist/author and his historical context. Every photograph, for example, is a record of having seen and having selected. Berger says: “Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights” (*Ways of Seeing* 10). It is interesting to note that when Benjamin, using imagery drawn from nature, illustrates the unique apparition of a distance which, according to him, characterizes the aura, he takes recourse to a vocabulary which is reminiscent of both the sequential recording of visual notations by a camera and the arrangement of diegetic spaces in a story: *To follow with the eye* (emphasis mine) – while resting on a summer afternoon – a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch (“Work of Art” 23).

Berger’s relevance extends beyond the politico-aesthetic discourse. In 2014, Gender Research Institute at Dartmouth (GRID) organized a programme where Berger and Noam Chomsky were invited to participate virtually. Chomsky was requested to comment on a recorded text called *Meanwhile* that Berger had sent in.<sup>74</sup> Chomsky

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<sup>74</sup> Gender Research Institute at Dartmouth (GRID). “GRID: Times of Crisis - John Berger and Noam Chomsky (4/22/14).” *Www.youtube.com*, 30 May 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qCaW1\\_4LBQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qCaW1_4LBQ). Accessed 10 Aug. 2015.

entered the proverbial labyrinth through its exit. He chose the following lines – and particularly the phrase “listening to the earth” – from Berger’s text as a point of departure for his response: “For fellow prisoners the opposite is true. Cells have walls that touch across the world. Effective acts of sustained resistance will be embedded in the local, near and far. Outback resistance, listening to the earth” (13). Berger had begun by searching for a word to describe the contemporary world: “To say it’s unprecedented means little because all periods were unprecedented since history was first discovered” (2). Chomsky repudiates by arguing that “the current moment should be considered unprecedented in very significant respects. For the first time in history the humans are now in a position to destroy the species and much of life with it” (GRID 1:12:35-1:13:05). Chomsky, however, agrees with Berger about the importance of “listening to the earth” albeit interpreting it in a somewhat more ecological way than Berger had probably conceived. The way he interprets it appears to be of particular relevance today and neither Berger nor Chomsky could have foreseen the urgency it would acquire in less than 6 years from the time when this virtual dialogue was being hosted by GRID. The ecological, demographic and political issues that are staring at us in the face, demand a kind of attention that is unprecedented. Berger’s prolific, diverse and huge body of work has lessons to offer in terms of how to engage oneself with immediate local issues and be aware of their larger universal implications at the same time. Geoff Dyer once described Berger as “someone who engages you with your own intellect”.<sup>75</sup> This description is crucial because it not only comments on the attention-inducing aspect of Berger’s writing but also on the possibilities of storytelling in general.

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<sup>75</sup> The British Library. “Geoff Dyer on John Berger.” *Soundcloud.com*, 19 Mar. 2015, [soundcloud.com/the-british-library/geoff-dyer-on-john-berger](https://soundcloud.com/the-british-library/geoff-dyer-on-john-berger). Accessed 18 Mar. 2018.

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