‘A Present Moment, More Present’: John Berger’s Politics of Intensity

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I.

‘We are both storytellers. Lying on our backs, we look up at the night sky. ... 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.’1

In conversation with Michael Ondaatje, John Berger remarked that the capabilities of cinematographic editing have been influential on his writing2. He identified cinema’s ability to move from expansive vistas to close-up shots as that to which he most related and aspired. Certainly Berger’s work is infused with a sensitivity to how long views, the narratives of History, breathe only with the addition of ‘close up’ stories of human relationships, that tell the story again but from a different angle, like different tracings of the same constellation. Indeed, it is not only that different lines might be traced between the stars, but also that a different story altogether can be told when one begins with the lovers lying on the ground gazing up. And let us let them be lovers, although Berger does not exactly say so, if only because it is his forte to weave stories of love into the movements of human and natural history. Ondaatje is his soul mate in this respect, envisioning the intimate complexities of, for example, the lives of the labourers constructing the Bloor Street Viaduct in *In the Skin of a Lion*, who spread the tar so that the smell of it ‘seeps through the porous body of their clothes’ and the black of it is ‘permanent under their nails’3. Those who constitute the infrastructures of urban life the world over, in other words, who burrow and climb and hammer out the systems upon which we all rely; these are the lives depicted in Diego Rivera’s murals that Ondaatje says he thought of often in the writing of his novel, and that lend a ‘furious democracy’ (in Ondaatje’s words) to both men’s writing, even at its most tender.

The character in *In the Skin* to whom Ondaatje gave the name Caravaggio was partly inspired, he tells us, by Berger’s essay on the painter. There, Berger writes of a feeling of ‘complicity’ with Caravaggio, the ‘painter of life’ who does not ‘depict the world for others: his vision is one that he shares with it’4. If Caravaggio banished daylight in order to intensify his focus - for ‘the chiaroscuro reveals violence, suffering, longing, mortality, but at least it reveals them intimately. What has been banished ... are distance and solitude’5 – one might say that Berger’s writerly inclinations and sensitivities echo the resultant ‘overall intensity, the lack of proper distance’6 for which Caravaggio was so criticised, and which Berger so admires. This intensity is not a simple theatricality, nor a search for something truer to life, but is a philosophical stance that concerns political equality, akin to some extent to Rancière’s thesis. Rancière challenges the way that aesthetic sensibilities are thought to be unevenly distributed. Thus he argues that the aesthetic sensibility of the squatter in a poor suburb of Lisbon, as portrayed in Pedro Costas’s film *In Vanda’s Room*, who wishes to clean the table in his home despite the imminent destruction of the whole suburb scheduled for bull-dozing, approaches the heart of the matter better than righteous attempts to employ artistic intervention to explain economic inequality or attempts to mobilise audiences through making them aware of unjust structures of domination or pitiful experiences of subordination7. As he scrubs at the table, the man quietly demonstrates his aesthetic sensibility, his equality. Berger, too, sees in the smallest of gestures something important and urgent. ‘Getting close’ is for him, as for Robert Capa, the way to get a better picture. But it is not for the sake of the picture that he seeks such proximity. If the ‘underworld’ was a world of tension and theatre, he comments in relation to Caravaggio’s paintings, it is in part because in these small gestures - even in a glance - one can sense a whole ‘life’s desire’8. It is this desire, the yearnings that are not necessarily articulated as such, that draws Berger’s attentions; oftentimes, these are political demands, they bespeak political inequities.

Elsewhere, Rancière has discussed an attention to minutiae through James Agee and Walker Evan’s (1941) *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*9. There, Rancière finds a focus on the quality of each sensible event as aspiring to spur the ‘recognition of an art of living’ in the ‘handiwork of the poor’10, describing it as a Proustian poetics that is committed to unfolding ‘the truth of one hour imprisoned in the triviality of a utensil or a fabric’11. Agee’s struggle with journalism as a task was due not least to its insistence on the selection of details, whereas he – borrowing from Proust, and like Whitman, Woolf, Joyce - found *every* moment in every life vertiginous with interconnections, and so every detail bursting with an inexhaustible totality12. If Agee struggled with forms of representation emerging around him at that time, such as John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*13, he was himself understood as part of a swathe of intellectuals motivated by a kind of cultural democracy based in a Whitmanian art ‘attuned to the vibrations of universal life’, and which came to be famously critiqued by Clement Greenberg and others espousing a Marxist approach. These critics sought a more structural, less ‘indulgent’ analysis based on the analysis of capitalist relations14.

Read against this older debate, one staged between those who became nevertheless understood as different guises of a unity - ‘modernism’15 - Berger’s writing is intriguing, blending a Marxist sensibility with an attention to gestures, scenes and personal stories that manages to avoid a sense of self-indulgence. The intensity of Berger’s work, in contrast to Agee’s writing, hesitates to allow the creation of intensity to slide into an easy discourse of the ethical. In his discussion of Caravaggio, Berger is explicit about this avoidance. In the incomprehension of Caravaggio’s Matthew who answers Christ’s pointing finger with his own ‘who me?’ or in Judith’s face as she beheads Holofernes, Berger sees a facial expression peculiar to the painter’s work: ‘an expression of closed concentration and openness, of force and vulnerability, of determination and pity. *Yet all these words are too ethical*. I have not seen a dissimilar expression on the face of animals – before mating and before a kill’16.

II.

‘The flower in the heart’s

Wallet, the force

Of what lives us

Outliving the mountain.

And our faces my heart, brief as photos.’ 17

At the cemetery in Santiago, at the monument to the detained-disappeared and the ‘politically murdered’ from the period of military dictatorship, I take dozens of photographs. The main wall of names has a message carved across the top that precisely links human love to geological time: ‘Todo mi amor está aquí y se ha quedado pegado a las rocas al mar a las montanas’ (All my love is here and remains within the rocks, the sea and the mountains). I must step back to capture the full length of the monument.

The whole cemetery is vast; it is an enclosed area of 86 hectares built in 1821 by the order of Bernard O’Higgins. Alexander Wilde has commented that if it is a site of social and personal memory ‘it is also a repository of Chile’s *political* memory, including the 17 year military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and Chile’s prolonged “transitional democracy” since 1990’ to which, like a huge open air museum, it bears ‘mute witness’18. In the years of the dictatorship, the cemetery became a site for the expression of resistance and solidarity, with annual marches that ended at Patio 29 towards the far side of the cemetery, where many killed for their political beliefs were buried in unmarked graves19. Key funerals taking place in the cemetery, such as that of the student Rodrigo Rojas Denegri who was murdered by police in 1986, continued to gather dissent from across the social and political spectrum20. Here, Allende was reburied in 1990. The monument I photograph is becoming somewhat less a focus of social resistance, becoming ‘incorporated into national history’ as the Pinochet years are becoming part of a longer narrative21.

Many of the photographs I take are of the niches of what are in effect open mausoleums on either side of the wall of names.22 Loved ones have left flowers – some real, most synthetic – as well as many photographs and even notes. Some messages are carved in stone, while others are written in biro on scraps of paper, like notes left on the kitchen table: ‘Nelson, Hoy 2 de octubre se cumplan 41 anos de tu asesinato y todavia no se hace justicia tus asesinos – andan sueltos. Esposa y hijos.’ (‘Nelson, Today 2nd October is 41 years since your murder and still your murderers have not been brought to justice – they walk free. Your wife and children’) [Figure 1]. Reading this note, I recall Berger’s own wanderings in a cemetery on the small Hebridean island Gigha as noted in ‘And our faces, my heart...’ Of the simple carvings on the gravestones, the names and the precision of the dates of birth and of death, he wrote that these were surely not addressed to the living, who would recall these simple facts, but to the already deceased. They are ‘letters of recommendation to the dead, concerning the newly departed, written in the hope that they, who have left, will not need to be renamed’23. But the note in Santiago – a small supplement to the marble name and dates - to whom is it addressed? It speaks of a personal story, of the passage of time endured, a wish to be able to convey different news across an impossible divide. ‘Our stories are not read by the dead.’24

At another niche, a photographic portrait, mounted onto the marble. It has been joined by two recent colour photographs of young children, tucked into the rim - grandchildren perhaps - as if being shown to the deceased. Elsewhere a black and white photocopy of a wedding portrait has been taped up, two happy faces smiling happily out from the back of a car [Figure 2]. The weather and the passage of time has the faces in many of the photographs fading away; some mourners have taken measures against the natural elements, laminating their messages, or covering them with plastic. Some have disappeared completely, leaving abstractions I find somehow just as moving as the preserved images [Figure 3]. ‘Our faces, my heart, brief as photos.’

On several occasions Berger takes pains to differentiate how photographs of loved ones figure depending on our relationship to the one portrayed there. In *A Seventh Man*, he put it simply: ‘A photograph of a boy in the rain, a boy unknown to you or me. Seen in the dark-room when making the print or seen in this book when reading it, the image conjures up the vivid presence of the unknown boy. To his father it would define the boy’s absence.’25 Currently, my research often takes me to spaces where I am explicitly or implicitly prompted to wonder about lives cut short. Like Berger when he visited Ramallah and stood before the posters showing faces of those who had died in the Second Intifada26, I have stood in front of walls of faces transforming public structures into something as intimate as a wallet of private papers and pictures, reading their stories, wondering about their lives. ‘What we mourn for the dead is the loss of their hopes’, Berger wrote27. That my wonderings are of a different order from those intimately related to these faces I have no doubt. The *desaparecidos* and murdered are made present for me in such photographs, their stories are told and the photographs ‘illustrate’ those stories in various ways. But for those who mourn them, it is surely true that it is their absence that is felt. (And I myself choose never to carry photographs of my own children when I travel such distances, for I know how painfully their unknowing images can flood the loneliness, exacerbating the slowing of time and the depth of the nights I spend apart from them). Back at home, the photographs I have taken of these faces line up on my computer, meeting each other and mingling with pictures of my own family captured in celebrations and holiday snapshots, often disturbingly similar to those images that the families of the disappeared or murdered display at demonstrations, in spaces of memory or indeed, tucked into the niches at the cemetery.

III.

‘This small corner of the landscape – which I had never particularly noticed before – caught my eye and pleased me. Pleased me like a particular face one may see passing in the street, unknown, even unremarkable, but for some reason pleasing because of what it suggests of a life being lived.’28

Writing about a small hillock on which stood three neglected pear trees, John Berger describes his pleasure at noticing this vista, before moving on to describe a dramatic sense of being watched himself, of the landscape watching, even tracking, him. It is as if the life of the land, the branches and leaves of the ailing trees, the valley beyond, the harvested fields, the vegetation and the movements of the weather, became fully present, and Berger himself became interconnected with each of the complex systems moving around him. Walter Benjamin, jotting his thoughts on a scrap of paper, described his understanding of ‘aura’ with just such a sequence, one in which a normal human reaction to being watched, that is, to glance up or back at the direction of the gaze, is extended to Nature:

‘To experience the aura of an appearance or a being means becoming aware of its ability [to pitch] to respond with a glance. This ability is full of poetry. When a person, an animal or something inanimate returns our glance with its own, we are drawn initially into the distance; its glance is dreaming, draws us after its dream.’29

In his experience of becoming-landscape, Berger is so ‘drawn’: ‘I was aware of an inequality. I was less present than the corner of the landscape which was watching me.’ And later: ‘I was everywhere, as much in the forest across the valley as in the dead pear tree, as much on the face of the mountain as in the field where I was raking hay.’30 He writes in a way reminiscent of Deleuzean philosophy31, with no separation between what is contemplated and the ‘contemplative soul’, as motions of particles and sensations mingle and pass through sensibilities, such that they may cause little spasms, contractions, in a process Deleuze terms ‘passive synthesis’. Contractions are impersonal; they are not moments to be actively gathered or deployed.32 They point only ‘to the primary sensibility that we are. We are made of contracted water, earth, light and air – not merely prior to the recognition or representation of these, but prior to their being sensed’33. Each of us is, then, a bundle of contractions, arising improbably from an impersonal swirl of life forever in movement, forever risking or flirting, if you prefer, with non-individuated existence. Reading Berger, it seems that he somehow attunes himself to the swirl and even awaits it, training his attentions to the movements and contours that may at any moment offer a sense of an extended participation, an intensity that gathers one up while simultaneously dispersing one’s very sense of the here and now into a broader ecology of movements and relations.

IV.

‘Our words seem to resonate in a present moment more present than those we normally live. Comparable with moments of making love, of facing imminent danger, of taking an irrevocable decision, of dancing a tango. It’s not in the arena of the eternal that our words of mourning resonate, but it could be that they are in some small gallery of that arena.’34

Another hillock, this time in Ramallah. In this introduction to the translation of Mahmoud Darwish’s poem *Mural*, John Berger speaks about his visit to the grave of the Palestinian poet. After the death or murder of a loved one, he writes, words resonate differently, existing in ‘a present more present’ than usual. Again, Berger speaks of an intensity that arises because we exist only with others, sustained because of and for others. When we feel that connection, and not only through the experience of death but also in love, with joy, there is also an intensification of time, an intensification that makes time momentarily ‘stand still’. This is a politics of intensity close to Benjamin’s, who was so formative in Berger’s thinking. The context of the Palestinian struggle makes this ‘present more present’ deeply resonant with Benjamin’s description in the 16th and 17th theses of the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, where Benjamin writes of a present in which ‘time stands still and has come to a stop’35. Thinking, writes Benjamin, involves a flow of ideas and their arrest, a ‘crystallisation’, a ‘messianic cessation’ which by another name is a ‘revolutionary chance in the fight for an oppressed past’, that may be taken in order to ‘blast a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework’36. Where such a chance can be grasped, there is a mode of recognition that halts the dissolution of all events into a homogeneous History. Remembrance of the work of the poet Darwish is also recognition of the Palestinian struggle, it is a lifework that speaks of an oppressed past that is thereby given a chance of being remembered. Not to allow that oppressed past to be covered over by a History; this requires an on-going task for those in each present, to continue to listen out for the past’s relevance to present configurations.

It is intriguing - if typical of him - that Berger, more idiosyncratic than most, would add ‘dancing a tango’ to his list of ‘more present than the present’ moments. Elsewhere, in *The Shape of a Pocket*, Berger mentions the work of the celebrated Argentine poet Juan Gelman, whose poetry he also links with the experience of a present ‘full of tension’, a present where the pain of mourning means ‘there is only the present, only the immense modesty of the present’37. Knowing Gelman’s story, that his son and pregnant daughter-in-law were among the *desaparecidos,* Berger cites the poem ‘Cherries (to Elizabeth)’ in which a woman ‘is washing furiously / with blood / with oblivion / to ignite her is like putting a gardel record on the phonograph’38. Gardel, the great tango legend, is on the gramophone, and Berger imagines a dance taking place; he writes that Gelman’s is a poetry ‘in which the martyred come back to share the pain of those bereaving them. Its time is outside time, in a place where pains meet and dance ... Future and past are excluded there as absurd.’39

Berger may well not have known at the time he wrote this essay that Gelman’s search for his granddaughter finally ended in 2000, when she was located in Uruguay, having been taken from her mother and given away to be brought up without knowledge of her true parents’ identities. He was able to reconnect with her during the years before his death in 2014. When Gelman was searching, he wrote a poem about not being deluded by grief, about maintaining hope. Berger quotes some lines from it40.

Berger’s own hope breathes life into his essays, despite their attention to the global operations of power, the contemporary ‘prison’ in which ‘we’ live41. Against the lament that often pervades his writing, he still finds a ‘small cargo of hope’ (as he comments in the conversation with Ondaatje). He finds that hope, above all, in human communication that reaches out despite all that mounts up against its possibility. In Ramallah, he laughs with the young boy who, watercan in hand, wants to show Berger his plot of fruit and vegetables: ‘We are both – God knows why – living at the same moment’42. As Rancière says of the letter in Pedro Costa’s film *Colossal Youth*, which is an amalgam of letters from Cape Verdean immigrants and a letter sent by Robert Desnos to his lover from a Nazi camp, and which returns like a refrain throughout the film, Berger’s essays belong to a wider circulation. They are letters from the world, offered back in an intimate form that makes it available to ‘us’ anew ‘like a song they can enjoy, like a love letter whose words and sentences they can borrow for their own love lives’43. But like cinema, Berger knows that essays in books have their limitations. He knows they will not in and of themselves be sufficient to rebalance the inequities of the present. Yet he writes for a future-to-come, for the contours of a configuration that is present, if only virtually, that may yet come about. As A’ida writes in *From A to X: A Story in Letters*, to her imprisoned lover: ‘The future that they fear, will come. And in it, what will remain of us, is the confidence we maintained in the dark’44.

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3. Ondaatje, M. (1987) *In the Skin of a Lion*, London: Picador, p.29

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5. ibid., p.81

6. op.cit., p.83

7. Rancière , J. (2009) *The Emancipated Spectator*, Translated by G. Elliott London: Verso, first published in French 2008, p.80

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9. Rancière , J. (2013) *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, London: Verso, p. 254-5

10. ibid. p.255

11. op.cit., p.255

12. op.cit., p.255

13. Rancière , J. (2013), op.cit., p.259. John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* was made into a film by John Ford in 1940, a year after its publication. Agee considered its ‘unreality’ insulting to the people whose lives its portrayed.

14. Rancière , J. (2013), op.cit., p.262

15. Rancière , J. (2013), op.cit., p.262

16. Berger, J. (2005/1984), *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos,* p.85

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21. Wilde, A. (2008), op.cit., p.165.

22. There are two mausoleums on either side of the wall, one for the *detenidos-desaparecidos* and one for the *ejecutados-políticos* with many fewer niches than there are names on the wall, but with fewer still occupied.

23. Berger, J. (2005/1984) op.cit. p.44

24. Berger, J. (2005/1984) op.cit. p.44

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38. ibid., p.161

39. op cit., p.161

40. op cit., p.164

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Images

All images: Vikki Bell, 2014