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John Berger's Knowledge, or Listening in to the Voice of the (Female) Image

In the introduction to his 1979 novel *Pig Earth*, John Berger declares, ‘this trilogy has been written in a spirit of solidarity with the so-called “backward”, whether they live in villages or have been forced to a metropolis. Solidarity, because it is such men and women who have taught me the little I know.’¹ *Pig Earth* is the first of the three novels, collectively known as *Into their Labours*; together with the other two – *Once in Europa* (1987) and *Lilac and Flag* (1990) – the sequence picks up the themes of *A Seventh Man* (1975), Berger’s documentary account of migrant labourers, but he has taken a different approach, and reimagined his material as fiction. Berger the documentarist and social historian has adopted here the role of the griot or bard, a keeper of a community’s memories, and decided to tell their stories, weaving a rich fabric around certain characters, and following them and their descendants through the vicissitudes and displacements of their lives. The overarching theme of the trilogy is labour: the books’ epigraph (the same in each one) comes from the gospel of St John, ‘Others have laboured and ye are entered into their labours.’ (John 4:38). The knowledge that Berger is collecting through his subjects, as he sets out to honour them, is knowledge of survival on the land, in an Alpine valley, as well as knowledge of love, of family and sex, but not only. The books also follow their subjects as they leave for work in the big city and its satanic mills, and vividly recreates the lives of several women.

There are no women in *A Seventh Man* (only pin-ups on the workers’ walls and a few glimpses), and almost none in his earlier book, *A Fortunate Man* (1967). Fiction cleared a way for Berger to bring women into the light; in a novel, he could explain (away) the macho code that prevailed by featuring female characters – luminaries – who defy it and show up its hollowness, often infusing the prose with an erotic charge that’s more familiar from high romanticism. In *Pig Earth*, the Cocadrille, an outcast figure in an already marginalised community, radiates erotic magnetism; in local lore, the nickname recalls the basilisk,

which kills anyone with its stare; she is a Medusa, and witchlike in her unrivalled understanding of natural properties, able to amass a fortune through an unerring nose for mushrooms. She is one of several enthralling and poignant, even tragic figures, around whom Berger arranges anecdotes, fables, horrors, journeys, loves and vendettas. I say *arranges*, rather than *invents*, because Berger uses the word to express his approach to an image he is exploring: 'I hope you will consider what I *arrange*, but please, be sceptical of it.'²

The books are categorised as novels, but they are poised in an in-between territory of memory and arrangement. This intermediate genre between memoir and imagination doesn't presage auto-fiction, though Berger is writing about his own experiences living in the remote Jura, and he is present in the stories as a secret sharer, an eavesdropper, a watcher. Berger's relation to his material resembles a photographer's, selecting and arranging images for a spread on the page, as he did so effectively in collaboration with Jean Mohr on both *A Fortunate Man* and *A Seventh Man*. He attends to others' stories of their lives with intimacy, sympathy and, yes, love. The strong filiation that Berger announces he feels with his subjects places them within his own memories; he is like the storyteller who ends the tale with the words, 'I was there and drank mead and beer; it ran down my mustache ...'³ We are made privy to his knowledge, and we are persuaded to trust him.

Ways of Seeing was an epiphany for me as for so many others when it aired in 1972; Berger's delivery – the confiding tone, the grainy voice, the very slight lisp, the steady gaze – held me enthralled. I can still see him in close-up, larger than life in my mind's eye, and still hear him in my head. There were many moments of pure illumination, but the episode on the nude made the deepest impression on me at the time and spurred on my interest in writing about images of women – as I did in my 1976 study of the Virgin Mary, and later, in *Monuments and Maidens* (1984), about national symbols such as Liberty and Britannia.

In the trilogy, Berger took up the challenge he set out in that programme and can be seen attempting to think of the person inside the female sign or image. The women in *Pig Earth*, *Once in Europa*, and *Lilac and Flag* are being thought through rather than gazed at. To achieve interior depths of representation, he adopts various narrative methods: the women speak, giving an account of what they are living and feeling; Berger tracks their inner thoughts through a lavish use of *style indirect libre*; he offers witness from others to throw light on their lives; he addresses them as 'you', as if they were there, in front of his eyes – and ours. The sensitivity of his portraits is carried by prose that is demotic, taut, minimally punctuated as if unpolished, and more agile

for this semblance of spontaneity. We feel we are being given confidences at close quarters, as if Berger were passing on the story to us personally, just as he did when broadcasting. The medium of television met his desire to affiliate with viewers across borders of age, class and education; in the trilogy, he was developing a print version of orality, which is hard to do (Angela Carter also succeeded in this, in spite of a rarefied lexicon, around the same period and from similar socialist convictions). The texture of this narrative style leads again and again to scenes of acute insight into his neighbours, peasants, shepherds, foragers, casual labourers and their hardships, triumphs and sorrows – when I first read them, as they came out, I had misgivings about Berger's attachment to the land and its timelessness; such an approach felt nostalgic, even traditionalist. But rereading the books for this essay, I often felt choked and weepy under the spell of his portraiture.

In the title story of *Once in Europa*, Berger voices Odile and tells her story. Towards the ending, his prose develops an ecstatic edge, because she is addressing her son, Christian, as he pilots a glider through the sky – in this symbolic ascension out of this world she recalls her losses and her struggles, to which Christian is the supreme witness. His father, Stepan, Odile's lover when she was only in her teens, was a migrant worker in the local steel works and disappeared – altogether swallowed up by the hellish furnace; Odile was pregnant and the baby posthumous; she raises him on her own until she meets again and marries Michel, a co-worker of Stepan's who has lost both his legs in another accident. Baldly summarised, her experiences sound melodramatic, but the pace and the intensity of Berger's storytelling keep moderating the horrors into empathy. Her life also conveys with quiet fury the major socio-political theme of the trilogy: the migration of labour from agriculture to industry, and the cost to human lives that follows.

Odile as a character is also the centre of two different and powerful love stories. She expresses, in her own voice, Berger's concept of womanhood, and consequently reveals the difficulty of Berger's enterprise and its ticklish relation to current debates about who may adopt the persona of another and speak in that voice. As Odile glides through the heavens with her son, she turns to address her daughter, Marie-Noelle, born to Michel several years after. She begins to talk to her of what it is to be a girl:

Look in a mirror if you pass one this afternoon ... look at your hair which you washed last night and see how it invites being touched. Look at your shoulder when you wash at the sinks and then look

down at where your breast assembles itself, look at the part between shoulder and breast that slopes like an alpage – for thirty years still this slope is going to attract tears, teeth clenched in passion, feverish children, sleeping heads, work-rough hands. This beauty which hasn't a name. Look at how gently your stomach falls at its centre into the navel, like a white begonia in full bloom. You can touch its beauty. Our hips move with an assurance that no man has; yet they promise a peace, our hips, like a cow's tongue for – her calf. This frightens men, who knock us over and call us cunts. Do you know what our legs are like, seen from the back, Marie-Noelle, like lilies before they open!

I will tell you which men deserve our respect. Men who give themselves to hard labour so that those close to them can eat The rest are pigshit.⁴

Odile goes on in this vein, laying before her daughter (and the reader) more trenchant comments on sexual difference.

Determined to do justice to his subjects, Berger had to face the traditionalism of the labouring poor and their conservatism, especially regarding men and women's proper roles in life. But he consistently argued that liberal suspicion of working people's politics was mistaken, that peasants, male and female, had reasons for their obduracy and resistance to change. His trilogy performs an act of enchanted metamorphosis, through the humanity of his subjects, his complex braiding of their stories and his acts of ventriloquism.

The third book of the trilogy, *Lilac and Flag*, carries a subtitle 'The Old Wives' Tale of the City', signalling Berger's desire to identify with the proverbial anonymous and unlettered narrators of local lore and fairy tale, and to place his fiction in that lineage. He also speaks through his heroine, Zsuzsa, who has adopted the name Lilac from a song she likes. In another scene of redemptive eros, Zsuzsa invokes the mysterious power she embodies to her lover Sucus, whose name means juice but whom Zsuzsa has dubbed Flag. Berger writes:

She was standing ... naked. She was wearing only her earrings, big enough to pass a lemon through.

It's as familiar to us as bread is, or the sky. It seems we've known it without a name all our lives. We start trying to find a name for it, very young, on the way to the village school. We ask the statue of the Madonna, we ask the cows, and the moon, but none of them can give it a name. All I know is how it goes through us. Some of us more than others, but, even if only for a moment, it

passes through all of us. Sometimes scarcely noticed. Sometimes remembered for ever. It's a kind of a power. But not the power men pump themselves up with. Perhaps this is why it has no name. It goes through us and joins us with the beginning of everything. It offers us the earth, more than the earth, the sky, heaven. When it's happening we know it. We know it in our tubes and our knees, our hips and the palms of our hands. We become desirable. The man's desire follows. Yet they can never begin it. They haven't the invention. Each time they have to begin with one of us. Then, all that has happened is forgiven. We become love. This is why they hate us, those with power. They hate forgiveness. Whilst it's happening, time stands still. Later in our lives, time takes its revenge on us, as it doesn't on men. It can't forget that something in us once forced it to stop. When all is forgiven, there's no more place for power or time. So they glare with hatred at our love.⁵

I'm quoting Zsuzsa's speech in full, because trimming it selectively would lose the enraptured rhythm of Berger's prose. What follows in this, the concluding book of the trilogy, is a story of passion as intense as her words promise, until, caught up in the dangers of migrant workers' existence, their lives end in tragedy.

I hear echoes in these passages of writers who were near contemporaries of Berger's; male authors with whom I didn't otherwise associate him at all. I catch a note of idolisation of women that's rooted in a kind of sex mysticism that would clash strongly with post-war feminism and, indeed, with Berger's own sharp insights into the nude and its negation of women as persons. Poets and artists who had been through the First World War and had fought or lived through the Second, share a way of seeing women that's intensely yearning and mystificatory. Robert Graves (b. 1895) is the dominant figure, with his learned and eccentric study *The White Goddess* (1948); David Jones (also b. 1895) wrote the magnificent book-length poem about the First World War, *In Parenthesis*, and later inhabited an enchanted world of faery and Arthurian maidens; Ted Hughes (b. 1930) grew up during the Second World War, with a father who had fought at Gallipoli; J. G. Ballard (also b. 1930) dramatized his childhood in a Shanghai prisoner of war camp in *Empire of the Sun* – these towering figures are haunted in their work by an ever-elusive life force they find incarnate in divine and monstrous lovers and mothers, and in their lives often cast real women in these archetypal binary roles. Idealised, these figures forever beckon from an enchanted elsewhere, but are almost always found

wanting in the here and now and tend to tip into the demonic. The psychological roots of this worship are multiple, but forced separations, solitude and sexual longing caused by war and displacement must count among the causes. When, as now, millions of people are on the move, mostly unwillingly, and among them thousands of men who have been forcibly separated from their loved ones, this idealisation of women and their bodies, which endangers women as persons, is likely forming again.

Berger (b. 1926) was too much of a cultural materialist to fail to understand that he himself might be caught in the ideological frame of his epoch; he celebrated the people of the Jura for their skill, hardiness, stoicism and courage, and found they held a concept of Woman, close to the eternal feminine, which he channels in the novels through his female protagonists. At least, if we believe he was truly capturing their knowledge in that spirit of intense, loving solidarity he invokes, then he is relating what he found and offering its philosophy, a form of Lawrentian vitalism. It is a view that startled me; I'd failed to notice it at the time of publication – I've been sensitised in the intervening years – but Berger's channelling of Odile and Zsuzsa still strikes me as an honest attempt to do justice to them and the structure of their world, to report (to photograph as it were) with the instruments he had at his disposal what they and women like them go through. His novels would not have the value they have as testimony had he not represented, through Odile and Zsuzsa, sexual difference in these mythic and traditional terms. Odile's vision of her daughter's body may trouble a reader now, but it shows what cultural norms were then and how powerfully they dominated their time, involving women themselves in this mystique. It is crucial that writers, while they are putting forward their vision of alternative values, as Berger is doing in *Into their Labours*, are still allowed to belong unwittingly to their own time, because in this way their work will be revealing to readers later and not pretend matters were otherwise. Berger's attempt to speak in a woman's voice, a woman talking to her son and daughter, strikes me as true to the storyteller's calling: I is an Other, but also, I contain multitudes. Nor should Berger's ambition to convey the lives of his neighbours in the Jura uplands be subject to charges of appropriation, even if his own form of labour did not arise from the same necessity; and when he gender-switched in his storytelling, he was laying himself down as a bridge for us to cross, which is the best gift a storyteller can give us. Just as my eyes were startled into fresh ways of seeing by his famous programmes, so I have found Berger's 'old wives' tales' to be courageous ventures, helping me stretch the little that I know.

Notes

- 1 John Berger, 'Introduction', *Pig Earth*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), pp. xi–xxvii (p. xxvii).
- 2 John Berger, *Landscapes: John Berger on Art* (London: Verso, 2016), quoted in Niharika Dinkar, 'Remembering John Berger', *Social Scientist*, 45:1/2 (January–February 2017), 93–96 (p. 94); <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26380334>.
- 3 Aleksandr Afanas'ev, 'Baba Yaga', in *Russian Fairy Tales*, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 363–5 (p. 365).
- 4 John Berger, *Once in Europa*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 148–9.
- 5 John Berger, *Lilac and Flag*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 117.