

John Berger

A interview from fragments

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After the Army you went to art school, and then you taught drawing. Which proved the more educational? Being a student or being a teacher?

“Because every tradition has broken down, students are presented with the work from half-a-dozen civilisations and then told to get on with it. Various teachers can pass on various methods or demonstrate their own personal *ad hoc* solutions, but very seldom is any consistent line of purpose or development established in a school. As a result, students can neither conform nor rebel. The majority simply flounder and their flounderings are called ‘experiments’.”

Where did you learn your art history?

“Before I answer that I should say that I see scholars as the invisible menders of history who, in my opinion, can teach very little about painting as such: for that, go to museums and studios.

In my own case, I had the good fortune to become an unofficial student of Frederick Antal. He was my teacher, he encouraged me, and a great deal of what I understand by art history I owe to him. His masterpiece remains *Florentine Painting and its Social Background*. Certain aspects of the hero of my first novel, *A Painter of our Time*, derived from Antal.

The other influence was from Max Raphael whose 1933 book, *Proudhon, Marx and Picasso*, has just been issued in English by Lawrence and Wishart. I dedicated my own book on Picasso to Raphael. His life was austere. He held no official academic post. He was forced several times to emigrate. He earned very little money. He wrote and noted without cease. As he traveled, small groups of friends and unofficial students collected around him.”

By the mid-1950s you were writing art criticism for the “New Statesman” which is where I first saw your name. What was it like to be a Marxist fallen among Fabians?

“Every week after I had written my article, I had to fight for it line by line, adjective by adjective, against constant editorial caviling.

But precisely because of the pressures – professional, political, ideological, personal pressures – it seems to me that I needed at that time to formulate swift but sharp generalisations and to cultivate certain long-term insights in order to transcend the pressures and escape the confines of the genre.

When I collected some of these articles in 1960, I published them under the title *Permanent Red*, by which I meant that I’d never compromise my opposition to bourgeois culture and society.”

How did bourgeois culture receive your first novel, “A Painter of Our Time”?

“It didn’t receive it at all. Stephen Spender compared it with Goebells’ novel, *Michael*. My publisher, Secker and Warburg, was also publisher for *Encounter*, which was getting CIA money. Secker and Warburg withdrew the novel.

But it wasn't only political censorship. When I reviewed a falling off in Henry Moore's work, the British Council actually telephoned the artist to apologise for such a regrettable thing having occurred in London.

The situation opened up and my novel *G* won both the Booker and the *Guardian* prizes in 1972. And the BBC permitted my *Ways of Seeing* series as a response to Lord Clark's *Civilisation*.

The ABC still hasn't shown "Ways of Seeing", unless it was one wet Saturday in place of the football. You've stopped writing regular criticism. Should we take that as a criticism of criticism?

"Criticism is always a form of intervention: intervention between the work of art and its public. In most cases, very little depends upon this intervention. Occasionally, however, criticism can be creative – not so much by virtue of its quality of perception as by virtue of the circumstances upon which it may act. I used to believe that the only justification for criticism is that it allows us to see more clearly. Now. I accept that what a critic can do is to try to reveal and describe causes and consequences, and so be a guide to action. He is neither a final judge nor purveyor of armchair appreciation. He is a moralist applauding talent turned to maximum human advantage, condemning wasted talent, as in the case of Jackson Pollock. The harshness of my judgements is not meant to be Olympian, but useful: if bad consequences are emphasised, fewer may taken the paths that lead to them.

If we don't work on the assumption that truth is salutary, we shall cure no one and nothing."

It is possible to "cure" art criticism and art writing generally which so often muddles our understanding. Do art books serve any useful purpose?

"Too often, no. The pictures, which the reader can see in the reproductions, are painstakingly described – as though for an inventory. They're treated as stock. Into this description are then inserted the phrases that confer genius on the producer of the pictures. The phrases mount like an incantation. The writer becomes a kind of priest as auctioneer.

What's said isn't untrue. It's simply irrelevant. There's a total inability to see the work in relation to any general human experience."

Your own writing is very different. That distinctiveness was what I noticed first when I read "Permanent Red". Your prose had the rigour that the structuralists only talk about. For them, rigour became rigor mortis. But your writing combines passion and logic, metaphor, and, well, I suppose, mathematics. Your imagery is sometimes drawn from geometry. 'Co-ordinates' crops up more than once.

"I, more than most, appreciate the difficulty of writing about painting in words and the need for images and metaphors. Some say of my writing that it is too overburdened with metaphor and simile: that nothing is ever what it is but is always like something else. That's true, but why is it so? Whatever I perceive or imagine amazes me by its particularity. I'm deeply struck by uniqueness of each event. From this arises my difficulty as a writer – perhaps the magnificent impossibility of my being a writer. How am I to convey such uniqueness? The obvious way is to establish uniqueness through development. The uniqueness of an event and be explained by its causes and effects. But I have little sense of unfolding time."

I agree that you keep worrying about the question of time but I can't accept that you have no sense of its unfolding, of cause and effect. Really, there's a theorem-like quality to your best prose. Yet, it's full of

surprises and not at all like those syllogisms we learnt about 'If all A is B, All B is C'. Who taught you to write like that?

“I suppose it must have been Marx. He wrote history in a way that tore through the seamless web so beloved by scholars. The mode of discontinuity demonstrated by Marx’s thinking has now become an essential part of the modern means of communication. Discontinuity is now intrinsic to our view of reality. Every articulation of his thought involved a connection between opposites. Simply to call this dialectical may miss the point. His words do not accumulate to confirm one another; each articulation supersedes the preceding one. But in Marx’s mode of reasoning, the degree to which each superseding phrase of the thought modifies the orientation of the preceding one is fresh, because it plays upon a novel notion of discontinuity. His model is not that of an edifice erected stone by stone, or phrase by phrase, but a pivotal balance like that of a pair of scales or a see-saw. From paragraph to paragraph, one proceeds by leaps from point to point.”

Perhaps this is the moment to ask you about your Marxism, to ask

“Before we do that, and I’m happy to take up that question, may I tell you about an experience I had in 1969, after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia?”

Please ...

“I’d gone to a Stockholm conference where a Czech student leader had an unusual attitude to the words he was using. Crudely, one might describe it as follows: he had learned to speak as a child - later he had seen whole vocabularies falsified and rendered meaningless: he had come to mistrust all words; slowly and recently, active individual choices had begun to recharge words with meaning for him. It was as though he had learned to speak for the second time. He spoke fluently and cautiously.”

“Fluently and cautiously”. That’s the best summation of your prose I’ve heard, which perhaps is why the Czech student impressed you so much. Do you have rules for writing “fluently and cautiously”?

“Not to become subtle. The privilege of being subtle is the distinction between the fortunate and the unfortunate.”

There’s another constant feature of your work: moralism. Your Puritanism. It’s something very English about your writing, like Edward Thompson’s whose emotional range is less controlled than yours. Does yours have a church base too?

“Not really, but I do find it hard to believe, when I think about the last 200 years, that it was exactly during this period, which has been nothing less than infernal, that the notion of Evil as a force was abandoned. There’s one other element. I’d long ago taken the measure of my life and realised that only by fighting that Evil could I give my life meaning.”

And that’s why your art criticism is so polemical, if not as savage as Ruskin’s?

“Stupid people often accuse Marxists of welcoming the intrusion of politics into art. On the contrary, we protest against the intrusion. The intrusion is most marked in times of crises and great suffering. But it’s

pointless to deny such times. They must be understood so that they can be ended: art and men will be freer.”

Surely artists in countries such as ours are free to paint whatever they like. What’s their difficulty?

“It’s the difficulty of seeing men – including themselves – whole again: the difficulty of recognising what all men have in common, and of having confidence in what they wish to be.”

That’s not a particularly class-based view of the artist’s role. More generally humanist than specifically Marxian.

“The artist sets out to improve the world – not in the way that a reformer or a revolutionary does – but in his own way, by extending what he believes to be the truth, and by expressing the range, the depth of human hopes. In a climate of disillusion, it becomes very difficult for him to desire or believe in even his kind of improvement. As a result, his art also becomes trivial, he begins to mistake the means for the end.”

And isn’t your position in danger of making the end so generalised that it becomes another of those ideas that everyone can accept and no one does anything about? Surely means and ends should fit together more closely, even for artists, if they are to be considered useful?

“What matters are the needs that art answers. The question I ask is: does this work help or encourage people to know and claim their social rights? An artist’s way of looking at the world can have meaning for us and can give us pleasure because, I believe, it increases our awareness of our own potentiality. A valid work of art promises in some way or another the possibility of an increase, an improvement. Goya’s way of looking at a massacre amounts to the contention that we ought to be able to do without massacres.”

Now you’ve swung away from the work of artists as artists towards their social and political tasks. The means and end are breaking apart again. Your artist sounds like an agitator who has abandoned making art.

“The function of the original artist is to renew the tradition to which he belongs, at a time when most artists, doubting the continuity of their own way of life, want to destroy all continuity.”

You’re still not being very specific. Which traditions do you want to continue? Impressionism? Surrealism?

“Critics should always look their hobby-horses in the mouth. Yet despite this warning, the more I think about the art of the last and the next forty years, which is the minimum time-span with which any critic should concern himself, the more I’m convinced that the question of Cubism is a – probably the – fundamental one.”

Precisely what is it in Cubism that attracts you? You keep returning to it in your writings. One of your books was called “The Moment of Cubism” and in your study of Picasso you say that Cubism was the great exception in his life.

“Yes, it gave him the possibility of going outside himself.”

But what was it in Cubism that made his ‘going outside’ possible?

“To answer that, I’ll have to go back to Cezanne.

Cezanne observed that if he moved his head a little to the right he saw a different aspect of what was in front of him from what he would see if he moved his head a little to the left. Every child discovers this by lying in bed and closing each eye alternatively. Every painter must have observed it since painters first drew from nature. The difference was that Cezanne thought it mattered. Before Cezanne, every painting was to some extent like a view seen through a window. Courbet had tried to open the window and climb out. Cezanne broke the glass. The room became part of the landscape, the viewer part of the view. The real subject of a Cubist painting is always the same, and it is the function of sight itself.”

And that’s your obsession too. Even more than Cubism, the question of seeing is the theme in all your work. Seeing is your theme.

“And that’s how it usually is for writers. And for painters. When one studies an artist’s life as a whole, one usually finds that he has an underlying, constant theme, a kind of hidden but continuous subject.”

And yours is about looking?

“Yes. Though not as technique. There’s a widespread assumption that if you’re interested in the visual, your interest must be limited to a technique of somehow treating the visual. And that’s what’s forgotten is the meaning and enigma of visibility itself.”

It’s just occurred to me that your writing is Cubist in the sense you’ve described. That its discontinuities arise from shifting your line of approach.

“I see fields where others see chapters. And so I am forced to use a method which searches for co-ordinates extensively in space, rather than consequentially in time. I write in the spirit of a geometrician. One of the ways in which I establish co-ordinates is by way of metaphors.”

Is there another source for this approach in your experience with drawing? You taught drawing for a while and your prose, even your novels, contains drawings which continue the line of discussion and go far beyond illustration.

“It’s a platitude in the teaching of drawing that the heart of the matter lies in the specific process of looking. A line, an area of tone, is not really important because it records what you’ve seen, but because of what it will lead you on to see.”

Do you write as if you were still drawing?

“For the artist, drawing is discovery. And that’s not just a slick phrase, it’s quite literally true. It’s the actual act of drawing that forces the artist to look at the objects in front of him, to dissect it in his mind’s

eye, and put I together again; or, if he is drawing from memory, that forces him to dredge his own mind, to discover the content of his own store of past observation.

How does that relate to your interest in photography where the photographer's opportunity to dissect is limited, perhaps impossible?

“The photograph works on time rather than space. It's a moment,. The choice of that moment judges all others. In that sense, it is like drawing and has to some extent replaced drawing but its impact is much wider so that it's reasonable to ask questions like ‘Did you come by photograph or by train?’ And the photograph has partially displaced memory. A photograph of a boy in the rain, a boy unknown to you or me, conjures up the visual presence of an unknown boy. To his immigrant father it would define the boy's absence.”

Granted that photography isn't an undifferentiated thing and that you've used photographs as an integral element in your books. In “A Fortunate Man” and “A Seventh Man”. Jean Mohr's photographs are made to say things that you refrain from putting into words. Yet isn't it true that the camera has opened a path to totalitarianism by invading the private and the personal? And doesn't public photography live off human misery?

“The truth is that most photographs taken of people are about suffering, and most of that suffering is man-made.”

You obviously believe that photography can be used to help overcome that suffering, otherwise you wouldn't use it so much.

“Most crying wrongs cry until there are no more victims left to suffer them.”

That's a pessimistic view.

“No. Just a statement of fact in this century of barbarism. My irreducible optimism was expressed by Gorky when he said that ‘The world will always be bad enough for the desire in man to make it better never to be extinguished’.”

I accept that that is the burden of hope but I can't help feeling that your growing interest in peasant life is more than a retreat, but is an admission of defeat. Certainly a retreat, if you like, from the urban proletariat after the heady days of '68 in Paris and Prague and almost everywhere else. You now live in a French village and your latest book, “Pig Earth”, is the first installment of a promised trilogy about rural life.

“What you're suggesting may be true at a personal level but my place of residence doesn't represent political nostalgia. On the contrary, living amongst peasants makes any such nostalgia impossible. Only city dwellers can believe that rural life is outside the destructive process of capitalist progress. That belief is another privilege possessed by the naïve weekend tripper.

In a global context, the peasantry is being destroyed. Multi-national corporations have created agribusiness. Ex-peasants make for the cities where, in the Third World, they form a mass of static vagrants. Closer to Europe, they used to be used as a reserve army of labourers, as guest workers whose

experience I analysed with Jean Mohr in *A Seventh Man*. But the current economic collapse has cut off that line of escape, if you can call it that.

The significance of the peasant of this global scale lies only partly in the fact that most of the successful revolutions this century have been fought by peasants: Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam, Cambodia, Algeria.

Now, the imminent destruction of the peasantry has a direct lesson for political life in the urbanised centres. The forces destroying the peasant mode of survival have already denied one kind of optimism offered about life under capitalism. Productivity is not reducing scarcity. The dissemination of knowledge is not leading to greater democracy. The advent of leisure has brought mass manipulations. The economic and military unification of the world has not brought peace but imposed genocide. The peasant suspicion of “progress” as it has been imposed by corporate capitalism is not altogether groundless.

And it’s therefore possible that the peasants’ long experience as survivors, as victims if you like, may be better adapted to an uneven, uncertain struggle than the impatience generated by urban industrial society.”

I detect in what you’re saying traces of something you used to argue about in art historical terms. I am thinking about the relative significance of Picasso and Leger. Twenty years ago you contrasted them by saying that Picasso is the painter of today while Leger is the painter of the future. Leger, you wrote, had accepted the solidarity and the vulnerability of the proletariat, while Picasso, remained the “vertical invader”, who came up through the trap-door of feudal Spain into modern Europe, specifically Paris. Now you seem to be more in tune with Picasso’s position as the peasant grappling with the present.

“Whatever I wrote was written twenty years ago and I’ve been writing art criticism long enough to be proved wrong. Yet I’m not sure what you mean and to the extent that I follow you, I’m not sure that I agree. Certainly, I’ve lost none of my admiration for Leger. He’s an epic painter who was so in tune with his times that he could almost be considered anonymous. Picasso, on the other hand, was, first and foremost, a personality. A real genius. A lifelong prodigy who was able to see and imagine more suffering in a single horse’s head than many artists have found in a whole crucifixion.”

I wasn’t thinking of Picasso’s personality so much as what you’d written about is having an early 19th-century approach to his art rather than a 20th-century one. Picasso as peasant, perhaps.

“I’ve never thought of Picasso as a peasant. He thought of himself as a ‘noble savage’. As the primitive who challenged society by his creativity and not by his creations; he valued his work rather than his works.”

In preparation for this encounter, I re-read, yet again, your “Success and Failure of Picasso”, and was struck, yet again, by what a magnificent book it is. And thought what a pity it was that it had been out of print throughout the 1970s when so many people got to know you through “Ways of Seeing” which presents a lopsided view of your approach to art by emphasising art as possession. The Picasso book does everything you’ve tried to do in art history, social criticism, and in your novels, and it does them more convincingly than anything else. So, if I had to single out one virtue above all others in your writing, it would be your title which dared to apply the world “failure” to Picasso.

“The title did mention ‘success’. But yes, Picasso failed when he lacked subjects. When he found his subjects, he produced a number of masterpieces. When he didn’t find his subject, he produced paintings which eventually will be seen as absurd. They are already absurd, but nobody has had the courage to say so for fear of encouraging the philistines for whom all art, because it is not a flattering looking-glass, is absurd. At most, Picasso’s failed pictures can shock. They shock like seeing a candle blow itself out.”

In what sense could he also be a success?

“He did not lie. He didn’t allow his personal desperation to destroy his vitality or his delight in energy. He didn’t become politically – and therefore humanly – cynical. He never, in any field, became a renegade. Because he was undefeated, he remains a living reproach.”

Like the peasantry? And like yourself. Have you thought about writing a more explicit autobiography than you’ve done in your history and novels?

“I’ve thought about it. Who isn’t attracted to autobiography where all the events over which you had no control are at last subject to your decision. But no. It would only need the false notion of personality that has degraded so many artists this century. Picasso remains a great artist because he produced great works; the art markets want to have it the other way around: if it’s by Picasso, it must be valuable, that is, expensive.”

You’re not afraid to rank works of art?

“My own theory is weak about the relation existing between the exceptional work and the average. Nevertheless, the refusal of comparative judgements about art ultimately derives from a lack of belief in the purpose of art. One can only qualify X as better than Y if one believes X achieves more, and this achievement has to be measured in relation to a goal.”

What, for you, is that goal?

“As I’ve said, to make us aware of our social rights.”

So we must rank the works, not the artists.

“That is why I was pleased that you interrogated my writings instead of interviewing me.”

You don’t feel cheated? That I’ve plundered your creativity by putting this dialogue, if we can call it that, together out of quotations from your books?

“Not at all. The Cubists introduced manufactured objects into their art and promoted collage. If you’re right about my being a Cubist critic, then I can hardly complain if you follow their example.”