

## Reading Outward

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He's locked me out—everything he tries to communicate defies the idea that we'll ever understand each other. Thinking about John Berger has led me to an impasse. At best now, I can think through him—I can contemplate time and distance and language the way that he teaches you to in *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*. I can look through the lens and attempt to feel what it is to be one of Death's many secretaries, caught in the metaphysical, caught between the time of the body and the time of consciousness. I can compose my entire life into a series of interludinal picture-moments that break up the stream of philosophical reckoning—but with a blank page, it all seems useless, as though I am standing locked outside his door, cold, waiting to be let in. He is too enormous, too sweeping. *And Our Faces* traces the history of, defines and redefines, and explores the impossibility of defining time, space, language, art, life, love, death—in short, everything that matters.

With the question burning—how to approach?—I'm half listening to a Tuesday afternoon lecture. In the time it takes an elderly German professor to digress into a storm over the etymology of the prefix “para” as it occurs in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and for my well-intentioned classmates to pervert the Socratic method by turning the discussion into a semantic argument over whether the birds perched on an African rhinoceros really are, scientifically speaking, parasitic, my drifting mind has started flipping through memories frozen like slides—Berger's fault. His thinking is contagious. His images flicker somewhere so deep in my head that his memories sometimes get confused with my own. A shoreline, a cemetery, a vase of lilacs set in front of a mirror. He uses words the way a painter uses oils, capturing in his sentences not only information, but also the way the light imbued the room, the way the colors conveyed the landscape's movement. He turns pages into photographs. A renowned art critic, Berger spends, naturally, a considerable portion of the book discussing pictures—the art or the error of “capturing” a moment in painting, the role of time in images and the role of images

in time. Of Van Gogh, he writes that the man's mission was "to go ever closer, to approach and approach and approach" (75). Berger's writing is so clear, so succinct, so reverent of each carefully-chosen word, it sanctifies its subject; nowhere is this clearer than in his description of the artist generating an almost transcendent image. In just looking at Van Gogh's paintings, he writes, we are taken "as close as any man can, while remaining intact, to that permanent process by which reality is being produced" (75). Berger the poet is similarly engaged in creating reality. "Poetry appeals," he writes, "to this . . . indivisible totality of existence" (97). "Appeal" is a disquieting word, suggesting a struggle, an unfulfilled need. Or does he mean that the appeal is a connection, a reaching out, a bridging of distance in and of itself?

This idea of an approach suggests an asymptote; we can follow this path to infinity, getting ever closer but never actually arriving. It plagues and fascinates Berger that we live at the cusp of reality without ever quite reaching it. We construct images and stories, concepts of time and space, all in an attempt to reach this reality which we seem to be immersed in and yet blind to, yet these very constructs also distance us from what is real. This notion of alienation becomes one of Berger's major points of reckoning, and he will return again and again to the idea of separation and its converse: the urge to return home. He quotes Novalis, "Philosophy is really homesickness, it is the urge to be at home everywhere" (54) and calls emigration "the quintessential experience of our time" (55). We live in a state of unbreachable distancing that thrusts human consciousness into a crisis of impossible return.

"Well, this and \$2 will get you a ride on the subway," my professor likes to point out. At the moments of greatest abstraction—which are frequent in a class entitled "Language and Reality"—he asks us to stop, to breathe, to realize that in practical terms, philosophy is pretty useless. Then, only then, can we keep talking about it.

But Berger disagrees. His concerns about existence are not intellectual, sterile distractions—he is homesick. On the gut level, on the real, tangible level, on the dirty socks and a leaking pen and a clanging in the radiator level, he is wrapped up in these uncertainties. He does not write with the detachment of a scientist or even a novelist. By writing about distance, Berger is trying to transcend it, to bridge, to reunite. In all of his words, we can feel the writer's catharsis and his needs.

With Van Gogh's drive to approach, Berger sympathizes. According to Berger, this essential separation is what drives the visual artist. When Van Gogh painted an image, Berger opines, he was actually *constructing* each shape, each object of furniture, "fitting them together, *joining* them, as if this

*being joined* constituted their reality” (74). All visual art, to Berger, is a manifestation of this drive to bridge separation. In “Distance,” he argues that “the visible brings the world to us” (50). That which is seen and even that which is unseen are our greatest link to reality. Once a Buddhist friend, giving me a crash course in meditation, told me, “Close your eyes, but keep looking. You are *seeing* outwards, in every direction, infinitely.” In a sense, these two kinds of seeing compensate for the feeling of isolation.

On some days, I read a sense of awesome loneliness in these texts; on other days, the dozens of times the word “hope” and its synonyms appear fill me with optimism. Which of these readings is right? Both, neither? But these are my questions, not Berger’s. Berger does not read equivocally. He writes with complacency and assurance. A kind of tenderness leaks in when he describes a painting: “a small pear tree in flower, the act of the sap rising, of the bud forming, the bud breaking, the flower opening” (74).

Berger’s conviction has worked its hypnosis on me. While Professor Ulfers is still trying to elucidate the meaning of “para” in between protests that the discussion can go no further until he admits that *fleas* would be a sounder example, I am cataloguing moments in my life when Berger’s “distance” resonated. The moral breakdown that calculus gave me in high school. One simple derivative problem finally drove me into the ground, not because I was still entertaining any godforsaken hope of passing the class, but because I was alone with those numbers, those demons, and they were defeating me. I called a friend long-distance at his university and when, after he’d calmly, rationally talked me through the steps, and the solution was still wrong, I screamed at him to fuck off and threw the phone down. Seconds passed. Psychosis receded. The need to make reality conform to our constructed understanding of it is a staggering one; I think, now, that I might have experienced a microcosm of the universal neurosis that occurs when we realize that truth is a fugitive, that *we can only ever approach*. When we have constructed a set of rules—be it logic, religion, the steps to solve for  $dy/dx$ —and when the answer, the given, comes out wrong, when the empirical does not or cannot abide by the rules we have set, we feel like the world has been ripped apart. I called him back to apologize, to try to explain that something much less trivial, much more sinister than fatigue or frustration was at work on my consciousness. He told me I should lay off the derivatives for a night.

Having finally disentangled himself from the rhinoceros tangent, Ulfers moves on to discuss the significance of “dt” in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Either I’ve been paying more attention than I realized, or our streams of thought have undergone some metaphysical synchronization. *Dt*, he explains, other than

standing for “delirium tremens,” the shakes and hallucinations of terminal alcoholism, is also a term in calculus.  $Dt$  is the change in time, or as Pynchon writes, “a time differential, a vanishingly small instant in which change had to be confronted at last for what it was . . . where velocity dwelled in the projectile though the projectile be frozen in mid-flight, where death dwelled in the cell though the cell be looked in on at its most quick” (105). Maybe Berger would groove with this; I start paying more attention. Ulfers explains that this paradox of measuring “frozen” time was explained by Zeno’s model of the arrow: to say that an arrow in flight is, at a given point in space, at a given “point” in time is a fallacy, because the arrow never *is* at a point; it “is” always already at the next point. And this is what Berger has been trying to tell me, I realize: when we try to tie down reality, put it into the boxes and filing cabinets of words and calculus and linear time and telephone correspondence, something never matches up. We can calmly ignore the discrepancies—continue measuring the arrow at point X even though all “points” are imaginary—pay our \$2, get off at 42nd Street and forget—or we can panic, throw the phone away, rage against the fact that we cannot get a grip on the real.

Or, we can be John Berger, who claims that language is “potentially the only human home” (95), who believes that words do have the power to bring us into contact with reality.

Thinking in Berger’s language now, I frame my memory-pictures with headings that start with the word “Once.” *Once in Normandy. Off the coast at low tide, shin-deep water stretches interminably towards the horizon. Behind us, a grassy wind-punched slope climbs, steep, its summit hidden from view. Beyond it lies the American cemetery, manicured arsenic green resting under thousands of identical white markers. The moment before returning home after months of separation is vertiginous. The coastline at Omaha is famous for all of those who never went home, who stayed at the top of the hill. Below the glassy layer of sand, invisible divots from thousands of bullets, long since sunk miles below the surface or washed out to seas.*

His memories are tangibly memory-inducing, but have I gotten any further? Does he defy our approach just as reality does?

Still. I hold him like a blanket, over my shoulders, on my lap, under my back. When he writes, “The boon of language is that *potentially* it is complete, it has the potentiality of holding with words the totality of human experience” (95)—as though perhaps only language has the power to reconcile all distance, all alienation, the homesickness left from emigration, the questions unanswered by philosophy and metaphysics—I realize that perhaps my trouble with Berger stems from an impulse to look *into* his words—the way one

reads a technical manual, or the Bible, or Dostoevsky, where all the answers are self-contained in the text, if only we look deeply enough—when in fact, Berger wants us to look *out* through his words. To be locked out and to stay there, looking, looking outward, seeing into the omnipresent vastness.

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**WORKS CITED**

Berger, John. *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*. New York: Vintage Intl, 1991.

Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.