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Fiction and Freedom: the Novels of John Berger

Fiction is for John Berger what philosophy is for Jean-Paul Sartre, "a method of investigation and explication."¹ Berger's novels, written largely in an unadorned style and factual tone, are both analytical and didactic, often virtually indistinguishable from the critical essays collected in *Permanent Red* and *About Looking*.² Furthermore, Berger, who has acknowledged his indebtedness to Sartre and Camus,³ applies that method to the very problems preoccupying Sartre in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, that is, the place of existentialism within the encompassing structure of Marxist thought and the possibility of individual freedom given that "the mode of production of the material life in general dominates the development of social, political and intellectual life."⁴ Berger's protagonists—the artist-*emigre*, Janos Lavin, the aging employment agent, Corker, and the deracinated Don Juan, G.—pursue freedom through painting, lecturing, and sexuality respectively, against the controlling forces of political, economic, and cultural privilege. Viewing history through the perspective of the alienated individual enables Berger to adopt the method of Marx as interpreted by Sartre:

it is the concrete man whom he [Marx] puts at the center of his research, that man who is defined simultaneously by his needs, by the material conditions of his existence, and by the nature of his work—that is by his struggle against things and against man.⁵

The act of writing is for Berger an instance of the struggle that it depicts. Not only does the abstract become concrete in the fictional characters, but the writer himself explores, as Berger has said of the planned trilogy that begins with *Pig Earth*, "the issue . . . between me and the culture which has formed me."⁶

As their titles suggest, the novels are concerned with a central figure, yet each rejects a continuous narrative account in favor of increasing degrees of formal experimentation. *A Painter of Our Time* (1958)

consists primarily of a journal sporadically kept by an exiled Hungarian painter. The discontinuity of the entries is somewhat mitigated by the explanatory notes of Janos's friend who publishes the journal, assigning it a formal unity and generic identity by describing it as a *Portrait of the Artist as an Emigre* (P 14). But the painter's notebooks remain a pastiche of self-examination, descriptions of events and friends, discourses on painting and aesthetic theory, and analyses of capitalism's effect on society and art. Style varies from the oblique and poetic to the direct and discursive; tone from lyricism to didacticism. These tensions are more radically dramatized in *Corker's Freedom* (1964). Not only are blocks of narrative and sections of internal monologue juxtaposed, but distinct elements of the protagonist's psyche assume separate narrative voices. In the course of Corker's lecture, for example, Berger presents readers both with what Corker "actually says" to his audience and with a counterpoint of unheard voices including what he "would like to say," "thinks," "knows," and "decides." By the time of *G.* (1972), the narrator has added his own voice and experiences to those of the characters. In addition, seemingly discrete events, such as Chavez's flight over the Alps and G.'s seduction of a chambermaid, are interwoven with meta-commentary, poetry, drawings, and encyclopedic information about social, political, and military history. While G. himself remains the focal point, the result of this technique is less a sense of a fixed character or linear plot than of a multi-dimensional field.

The narrator explains the sensibility that gradually emerges in the novels and culminates in *G.*:

I have little sense of unfolding time. The relation which I perceive between things—and these often include casual and historical relations—tend to form in my mind a complex and synchronic pattern. I see fields where others see chapters. And so I am forced to use another method to try to place and define events. A method which searches for coordinates extensively in space, rather than consequentially in time. I write in the spirit of a geometrician. (*G* 137)

The writer's struggle against the limits of "the language of literature" (*G* 135) and its conventions is another form of his protagonists' efforts to overcome various forms of institutionalized control. Like them, he must accept the uncertainty and isolation that accompany the rejection of convenient but confining categories or systems. The narrator of *G.*, for example, refuses to "bring the account to a conclusion. The writer's desire to finish is fatal to the truth. The End unifies. Unity must be established in another way" (*G* 77). The "complex synchronic pattern" is one such way. Each novel, then, applies the geometrical method to the problem of individual freedom, and each is itself an experiment in artistic freedom.

Artistic freedom is in fact the subject of Berger's first novel, *A Painter of Our Time*, which begins with the journal of the Janos Lavin in 1952. When forced to leave Hungary in 1919 because of his political activism, Janos wanders to Prague and Berlin before arriving in England in 1938. In "this secluded and fortunate country" (P 17), he pursues the career of artist, free of the distractions and dangers of revolutionary politics. Yet this isolation and relative comfort have blurred his sense of identity and belied the reasons for coming to England:

The most critical decision of my life, though at the time it was casual enough, was when I decided to come west instead of going to Moscow. And the reason behind my decisions now seems not only naive but ironic. I wanted to go where I would still have to fight for Socialism. I did not want to enjoy the victory that others had fought for. (P 41)

He therefore begins a journal in order "to see myself again" (P 17). After more than four years of self-examination and at the height of his success among British art patrons, he concludes that he has "nothing to write Words lie" (P 165) and returns to an uncertain future amidst the political turmoil of the Hungary of 1956.

The journal is dated less by the passage of months and years than by the completion of series of major canvases—*The Waves and Gulls*, *The Swimmer*, *Lido*, *The Games*, and *The Welder*. The sequence of paintings from seascape to athletes to laborer foreshadows Janos's return to the Socialist struggle. He writes that "If I had painted still-lives and clouds, I might have continued indefinitely" (P 166), but in the figures of athletes Janos finds both an analogy to the discipline of painting and an exemplar of collective action:

the final creative aim of self-consciousness must be to consciously lose itself, to return to a reliance upon intuition *within certain consciously created limits*. To live as the athlete runs or jumps or swims Capitalism has finally destroyed the traditions of art it once inherited or created, because art also needs the same kind of controlled liberation of intuition—in both artist and spectator

But the athlete demonstrates the point best. In pure athletes it is the individual's intuition that is liberated. In sport the liberation is collective. (P 122)

In *The Welder*, a subject more overtly linked to proletarian revolution, the aesthetic principle of control (Janos's classicism) is given a specific political referent. The flame of the welder's torch reminds Janos of a flame-eater seen at a fair in his youth:

The difference between that terrible superstitious flame turning a man's mouth into the entrance to a medieval hell, between that and the flame of a welder, used in the most precise way that heat has been used by man

—that is the difference, the advance I struggle toward with my classicism. Maybe it is also the difference between Hungary yesterday and today. Another reason why I should be there. (*P* 161)

Almost a year later in his final journal entry, Janos returns to this motif: "The strongest metal is tempered by successive heating and cooling. All can heat—as a result of the great, marvellous warmth of men. Our privilege, if that is what it can be called, is that we can also cool—with the terrible coldness of our discipline" (*P* 186). Although he ultimately rejects the problem of the artist—to create "a cold form to contain our fervent content" (*P* 64)—for the analogous problem of the activist, much of his journal is dedicated to a defense of the artist as revolutionary that would seem to make the return to Hungary unnecessary.

Throughout the journal Janos invokes the example of Poussin (*P* 54, 119, 124, 129, 171), and in an essay entitled "Poussin's Order," Berger establishes the connection between the historical painter and Janos:

Poussin was simultaneously both a very reactionary and a very revolutionary artist. He was reactionary . . . because probably his sense of order derived from, and was sustained by, the absolutism of the France of Louis XIII [as Janos has been sustained by the security of England]....

He was a revolutionary artist, not only because his work was supremely rational—and consequently was to inspire the revolutionary classicism of David—but even more profoundly, because his determination to demonstrate the possibility of man controlling his fate and environment made his art the solitary link, in this respect, between the two periods when such control could generally be believed in: the Renaissance and our own century. (*PR* 171)

This concept of the revolutionary, that is, the belief in humankind's power to control its fate, constitutes the link between art and politics. Janos believes that the shared objective of improving the world will mean that the methods of the artist and the politician, while directed toward the same objective, can remain discrete:

Of course a desire to improve the world is not in itself worth much. Of course one must add, How? And improvement for whom? And as soon as I try to answer those questions I realize that organization and discipline are necessary, as well as an understanding of history. Marxism and the Party provide this organization, discipline, and understanding. *But for the artist so can his art.* Finally, there should be no contradictions between the discipline of Communism and the discipline of art. (*P* 147-8)

To the weaponry of the rebel and the stridency of the propagandist, Janos opposes the "prophetic vision" of the artist. While "the ways of the gun and the emergency editorial committee are usually short-lived"

(*P* 142-3), the modern painter “fights to contribute to human happiness, truth or justice. He works to improve the world” (*P* 144). That change is more durable than political change because it affects consciousness itself. The artist’s goal of improvement is not purely subjective, he argues, “because a true work of art communicates and so extends consciousness of what is possible” (*P* 145). “All good art is for—Man—and therefore for us” (*P* 146). He concludes:

when I work with my forms that have come from a man and will become a man again, but will make this new, unique, painted man, free, dignified, strong, happy, I am working from my conviction that living men can similarly transform themselves by transforming their own society into a classless one. If I paint a capable hand, a noble head, a group of figures moving together, they have come from the proletariat even though they are without recognizable emblems. (*P* 154)⁷

While Janos’s defense is coherent, it does not placate his pangs of conscience. When he learns of the execution of his friend and fellow artist and revolutionary at the order of the Communist Central Committee, he is forced to reconsider his voluntary exile. Guilt over abandoning the Socialist struggle in Eastern Europe becomes a persistent, finally a pervasive theme in the journal. Reaching a verdict of his own *Desertion, Disloyalty, and Dependence* (*P* 165), Janos returns to Hungary and to the strong possibility of sharing Laszlo’s fate.

That return is not a rejection of the concept of the revolutionary artist; Janos does not condemn his own artistic output. Nor does he return to Hungary to answer the call for the kind of art “that arouses the consciousness of the working class to an awareness of their heroic role in the historical transformation of their society” (*P* 53). His decision cannot be separated from his feelings about Laszlo, with whom he shared childhood experiences (*P* 87, 90), sexual initiation (*P* 93-4), and early political activism (*P* 41-2). When Laszlo, a Party member recently forced to be “more an administrator than an artist” (*P* 73), is executed, Janos questions how it is that his “friend as a brother” (*P* 154) could be a traitor. The refrains, “How guilty, Laci?” (*P* 73, 74) and “Laci, were you?” (*P* 61, 64, 85) echo through his mind. He concludes that Laszlo did turn against the Party but that he is “innocent; the dictatorship of the proletariat has become a police state; the revolution has been betrayed” (*P* 76). In understanding that “LASZLO WAS INNOCENT” (*P* 165), Janos indicts both the Communists’ actions in Hungary and his own inaction in England. By virtue of “protestant conscience” (*P* 81) and “revolutionary discipline” (*P* 80), Laszlo has acted; Janos must do the same: “In the face of the unknown, one can only rely on conscience. The mind needs knowledge.

The heart needs interest. I begin to find my conscience. I must test it" (P 168).

The test, of course, is Hungary. Janos feels that

It is I who have been left behind. Laszlo is gone and his comrades, guilty and innocent, have advanced. . . . It cannot happen again. It is I who have been left behind—I who never declared his innocence even to myself. . . . Because he would not have understood my work? For that? (P 166)

When his first major exhibition is about to open, Janos wants to think of it as a "protestation of innocence" (P 168), but it can be only a partial protest because it says nothing of Laszlo's real innocence. The answer to a question about Laszlo's guilt—"if mistakes are punished by death, who learns?" (P 73)—is that the living learn, and Janos learns that he must return "*to tell my mistake to those who are like I was*" (P 190).

In *Corker's Freedom* William Tracey Corker at age sixty-three takes up where Janos ("nearly sixty" [CF 10]) leaves off.⁸ A bachelor who has lived with his sister and run a London employment agency for the last twelve years, Corker finds momentary freedom in travel and in giving lectures about the cities that he has visited. Vienna has come to represent for him the fulfillment that his own life lacks. He tells his clerk, Alec:

"I've often thought to myself how Vienna—Wien as it's really called—isn't just a beautiful city, it's a way of life. In Wien some things are important and some aren't. They have a phrase you know—the Wiener Art, which means the Viennese way of doing things. Now to my mind if it's an art, you ought to be able to practice it anywhere." (CF 50-1)

Thus he decides, as the novel opens, to move out of the suffocating environment of his sister's house and to begin to live, as he has not lived heretofore.

The decision is a symbolic, as well as a literal, expression of freedom because Corker thinks of the identity that confines him as a house—first erected by his father and cutting him off from "the silken sky of my infancy. . . . When the sky was rent the name William became me. . . . I lived in the name William as though it were a small house" (CF 34). As his name changes to Corker, Mr. Corker, and to some Corky, he realizes that the house is not a matter merely of paternal authority:

Perhaps it was not so much a question of being grateful to who-ever-it-was that had supplied the house, but rather to all those who were helping to maintain it: the Prime Minister, George V our King, our Judges, my employer who assured me that I had a golden future. . . . the writers of editorials, men who behaved like gentlemen. . . . Many opportunities slipped through my fingers. I no longer felt grateful to the

representatives of the supplier—and furthermore I was no longer so certain who these representatives were—but consoled myself by believing that if things became really bad, I could always seek out a representative somewhere and appeal to him to pass a message back: the message would have read: Things Cannot Go On Like This. William Corker Is Not Counting. (CF 37)

Corker finally decides “that there was no supplier” (CF 38) and that he must fend for himself. He translates Sartre’s belief that existence precedes essence into appropriately domiciliary terms: “My house William will be ashes when I die. I shall be myself no more. The house and I must end together. But we did not begin together. I came before the house” (CF 35).

Thus one of the major events in the novel (which, except for a brief coda, takes place on a single day) is his making an apartment of the rooms above his offices. The area had previously been used for storing old family possessions—“the furniture I was brought up with Corker says” (CF 91). Sorting through the furnishings recalls to him a childhood game of the Knights of the Round Table in which he played Lancelot. The gap between childhood fantasy and current actuality causes Corker to cry:

Sir Lancelot! whose heart was full of the best intentions, he wanted everything to be good, his dearest wish was to be a true knight, but he was human, that is to say he was a victim of circumstances. He never intended the pain he caused. Mr. Corker blinks through his glasses. (CF 92)

But the fragmented form of Corker’s thoughts indicates that he will not be able to integrate intentions and actions in order to overcome his adult circumstances. As he rests after moving furniture, four distinct voices dominate his thoughts:

Corker thinks: I can hear them saying it—He’s gone to pieces, aged you know, ever since he left his sister . . .

Corker makes believe: Which saying grieved Sir Lancelot sorely, and especially when he brought to mind the high hopes and noble endeavour with which he had set apace that morn.

Corker knows: I am as old as I lie here. This is the worst moment of the day yet. Perhaps now I shall fail to carry out my plan. There is so much yet to be done and it is possible that I haven’t the strength necessary. . . . There are stupidities and inevitable mistakes which must be accepted as unquestioningly as the law of gravity. . . . When I begin to fall nothing can stop me except the bottom. This is why life is so dangerous. We are surrounded by stupidities we must accept as though they make sense and by mistakes we must count on being made.

Corker makes believe: Sir Lancelot lay him down in the wood wherein many had died of their wounds and reckoned his solitude: a state he knew full well.

Corker thinks: I'll be alone here tonight.
A voice screams: I want to disappear. (CF 106-8)

The voices convey the surexcited confusion of Corker's hopes and fears, as well as his attempts to calm himself. Struggling to hold together the refractory components of self-consciousness, Corker unwittingly expresses the volatility of his new psychic home when he repeatedly and ominously says that he is getting on "like a house on fire" (CF 113, 119, 121).

This dissociated sensibility continues that evening as Corker talks to the St. Thomas's Church Social Club about Vienna. For example, while showing a slide of the Imperial Gardens, Corker would like to convey his thoughts as he sat in the park: "Why do we suffer? And I replied to myself: It's senseless" (CF 144). But he actually says: "Why go to the cinema . . . when you can be in the fresh air and there's a free show in front of you all the time? It's senseless" (CF 144). Corker's unarticulated thoughts reflect the dissatisfactions that prompted him to leave his sister, and they become increasingly urgent, almost evangelistic, as he continues: "For there is never time to lose. Live where you like. If you hate your wife leave her! Enjoy your pleasures whatever people call them! Use your talents! Never be ashamed of what you can do! Don't be a door-mat" (CF 157).

This urgency, as it did for Janos, culminates in a revolutionary act. Inspired by his own words—and by the several glasses of Kummel—Corker finally "finds himself saying what he would like to say" (CF 189) and thinking "I'm free now"; "All is possible" (CF 191, 193). For the first time he is able to align his private and public voices, his thoughts and feelings. He tells his uneasy audience: "To the best of our ability we must choose happiness. That is my choice. I may be interrupted, prevented or defeated by circumstances but at least now I know what I want and what I am doing. I am making myself happy" (CF 197).

Corker's illustrated lecture concludes with slides of Schoenbrunn, the Hapsburg palace that represents, at least momentarily, his new home. He talks of its decorations—its mirrors, for example—as he had of his own apartment (CF 122, 190). Significantly, it was at the palace that Corker first decided to try to make a Vienna of London:

Leopold and Maria Theresa knew what they were doing when they built Schoenbrunn, they must have done. They were building an ideal setting. And if you go there today, you can still understand what that means. The last time I was there, I planned some changes in my own life, changes very much for the better! (CF 189)

The palace is worthy of Lancelot. Inspired by Schoenbrunn and by Vienna where the houses are "large, richly, bedecked and well-built" (CF 136), Corker attempts to unify the romantic ideal of childhood with cultural ideal of adulthood. His hope is that a second-floor Clapham apartment will become a Viennese palace. His closing remarks indicate that he intends to teach his audience by example as well as by precept:

Do not forget Wien—it is a city well worth a visit. But as I have tried to show you, it is more than that, it is an example. We must have the courage of our convictions—We must pursue what we want and live as we like, most people don't think for themselves and so they just quietly take what they're given. This is not necessary. Friends, this is what I hope I've shown you. Wien is there as an example. It *can* be done, civilization *is* practical. We can make a happy life for ourselves. (CF 211-2)

Yet that very practicality—the stupidity and circumstance—splinters Corker's new foundation. While walking home, he thinks that "a practical man . . . budgets and bargains with himself . . . making applications to himself for shares in his newly found freedom . . . fully aware that his freedom can never be larger than his income" (CF 221). Ego and alter ego, and in a variety of guises, begin to bid on that freedom; the householder and the traveller, the businessman and the bankrupt, the single-minded and the self-effacing Corkers, the libidinous and the self-denying Corkers—all emerge to claim rooms in the new house (CF 220-6), while the "managing director" struggles to arbitrate among the competing demands. The single image of Corker's face reflected in the mirrors of the Clapham apartment and the Hapsburg palace mask a refracted consciousness: "All the Corkers appear as faces reflected in mirrors arranged like the facets of a crystal. They all have the same face" (CF 223). That unchanging visage portends Corker's failure. Reaching home, he readies himself to "inhabit these premises . . . as the young Corker inhabited the name *William*" (CF 225), but the new house/identity will be as confining as that he seeks to escape.

Dishinherited by his sister and falsely implicated in a burglary of his own business, which took place while he was lecturing, Corker is forced to leave Clapham. In a short coda set two years after the robbery, Corker is still lecturing. His freedom now, however, consists of a weekly Hyde Park soap box lecture, still inspired by Kummel but given to small crowds of hecklers. Whereas he had once speculated about opening international employment offices to be called "Corker's of the Continent" (CF 50), he now speaks for a "United States of Europe." Whereas the "house" of his identity had once been a Haps-

burg palace, he now defines himself in terms of a small box in which pamphlets on pan-Europeanism are kept and from the top of which he issues a plea for Unity, Liberty, and Charity (*CF* 229).⁹

Pasted inside of his soap box is the photograph of a film star. This image is all that remains of Corker's hopes for erotic fulfillment, which in part prompted his move from his sister's house. His hope resided in the housekeeper who was to have been hired for the new apartment—perhaps the chestnut-haired Mrs. McBryde with whom he dreams of bathing. That his erotic fantasies entail taking baths rather than having sex is perhaps the result of his childhood sexual initiation, which took the form of seeing the maid naked in the bathroom (*CF* 96). Corker's erotic feelings have not advanced beyond his childhood Guinevere, the Viennese maid Liesel (*CF* 96, 97, 198). The maternal Austrian nurse is embodied in the English Mrs McBryde, about whom Corker thinks, "Whether we do the fucking depends on how strict she is: in itself I doubt if this is essential. I want a McBryde to be with. Somebody who is kind, somebody who listens, somebody who rewards me, somebody who looks after my comfort, somebody who teases me, who runs my bath . . . (*CF* 77). During his lecture, Corker brings himself at least to voice his longing, saying "my dear, your red hair is lovely, lovely" (*CF* 195). The phrase is repeated during the walk home after the lecture by one of Corker's voices—that of "a naked Corker in his bath," who says, "My week-ends will be my own . . . and I shall lie in bed in the mornings and eventually reach the stage of saying: My dear, your red hair is lovely, lovely" (*CF* 223-4). Two years later all that remains of this hope is "a colour picture from an illustrated magazine showing a Dutch film star in a décolleté black dress. She has long red hair, the colour of a red vixen" (*CF* 235).¹⁰

Although circumstances have reduced Corker's existence to the dimensions of a soap box, his political and sexual fantasies are uncircumscribed. The result is a split between his sermonizing on the family of man (*CF* 231) and his actions. When he can, Corker takes those interested in pan-Europeanism to a cafe where he orders tea and Viennese pastries, leaving his guest to pay the bill. In the utopianist and the con-man, the fissures in Corker's consciousness have become radical. His "weekly Talk is now the climax and justification of Mr. Corker's week" (229), but there is no connection between the lectures and his own life. His weekly and momentary freedom has exacted a very high price; as with Sir Lancelot, circumstances seem to have won out.

Alec, Corker's assistant, suffers a similar if less drastic fragmentation. He categorizes all his experience under one of three headings: *Office Day*, the familiar aspects of his unfulfilling job as a clerk;

Funny, new experiences that nevertheless can be accommodated by the rules of the first category, and *Unknown*, essentially new and not understood experience (CF 11). On the night before the novel begins, Alec has his first sexual experience, which introduces a new and unifying category, *Having Jackie* (CF 11). "Before *Having Jackie* you wasted your time" (CF 15), he tells himself, and "From today he would like everything to be different. He is sick of all the arguments . . . which explain why things must stay the same. He would like everything to be different and everything to be explained by the new truth of *Having Jackie*, even Corker" (39). Although Alec resents his menial position with Corker's of Clapham, he is also able to empathize with his employer because "Everything for him belongs to *Having Jackie*, even Corker's future. And so, although he is quite aware of the differences between himself and his employer, the warmth and sense of freedom assured by *Having Jackie* colour his view of the new Corker" (CF 71-2). Alec is perhaps the only member of the audience who accepts the wisdom of Corker's talk. And he formulates his own utopian vision, feeling "an onrush of certainty and confidence" (CF 209). He takes a new job, marries Jackie, and with wife and child moves into a new home. Although his Schoenbrunn is only a one-room apartment and although his circumstances are only slightly better than Corker's (CF 228), Alec's sexual understanding, signified by the interpretive category *Having Jackie*, as well as "the different histories of his penis and Corker's" (CF 127) suggests that he experiences the kind of freedom more fully explored in Berger's next novel.

In *G.*, Berger establishes an analogy between the sexual domination of women, the political and economic oppression of the working classes and of foreign lands, and the linguistic and conventional constraints placed upon the novelist. An example of the relationship of these forms of power occurs when G.'s cousin Beatrice marries a British soldier during the Boer War. Her discovery that her husband's sexual demands include bondage and declarations of her allegiance (*G* 97-8) corresponds to her sense of the enslavement of South Africa, experienced, for example, as she rides in a rickshaw pulled by a Zulu boy or as she listens to British social banter at the Royal Hotel. As a result of her alienation, she experiences her world as being tilted: "Even when the delusion had passed, the idea of the sub-continent being tilted did not strike her as implausible; on the contrary it seemed to correspond with the rest of her daily experience and to make that experience more credible" (*G* 98).¹¹ Beatrice perceives the British values as skewed "precisely because she lacked the protection of ready-made generalizations and judgements, . . . because she lacked what all administrators and troops oppressing another nation must always maintain—a sense of duty without end" (*G* 103). Without the interven-

ing protection of language and "civilization," Beatrice senses the absurdity of her world as a kind of nausea.¹²

The abuse of language by the ruling classes, suggests a more fundamental philosophical problem for the novelist. How can any language, to say nothing of the wilful linguistic distortions of imperialism, be accurate? All description distorts (*G* 80), and the narrator states that "the uniqueness of each event" causes his "difficulty as a writer—perhaps the magnificent impossibility of my being a writer" (*G* 136). A second more particular challenge to the writer results from Beatrice's reaction to the tilting subcontinent. She turns to the freedom offered by sexuality, seducing G. "on the level ground in the free space" (*G* 93) of her own bedroom. The writer, however, remains confined within the oblique world of words. The immediacy and originality of sexuality are inaccessible to the mediating and conventional structures of language:

The third person and the narrative form are clauses in a contract agreed between writer and reader, on the basis that the two of them can understand the third person more fully than he can understand himself; and this destroys the very terms of the equation. Applied to the central moment of sex, all written nouns denote their objects in such a way that they reject the meaning of the experience to which they are meant to apply. (*G* 112, see too 49, 52, and 77)

A similar problem faces Janos who refers to "the life-long struggle towards a language of form . . . those spaces and forms and all the neatness of their coincidences—neat as sex" (*P* 154). He seeks in painting "an entirely voluntary contract" inaccessible to words that "cannot define the satisfaction we seek" (*P* 154). Analogously, Berger's formal innovation in *G*. is an attempt to minimize the distortion of language, to redefine the existing contract between writer and reader. The novel juxtaposes different genres (history, narrative, and essay), points of view (personal and objective), literary modes (realistic and self-reflexive)—as well as different plot lines and styles—in an attempt to communicate in a new way. Berger even includes sexual illustrations to make readers aware of the "cultural load" of language (*G* 113). Although he frequently admits the contractual and conventional limitations of language and is ultimately reduced to silence (*G* 315), the narrator establishes a parallel between this struggle for aesthetic freedom and G.'s pursuit of sexual liberation. Thus, in G.'s career is to be found the hope for, as well as a measure of, the writer's success.

G. is a modern version of the protagonist of the opera heard by Corker in Vienna, an "opera called *Don Giovanni*—which is all about the famous Spanish lady-killer" (*CF* 141). All of G.'s sexual experiences—from his childhood masturbatory discoveries, to his infatuation with

the governess Miss Helen, to his seduction by Beatrice and seductions of Leonie and Camille, to the unconsummated pursuits of Marika and Nusa—are acts of liberation and means of self definition. G. is the Don Juan of Albert Camus,

who discovers a new way of being which liberates him at least as much as it liberates those who approach him There is no noble love but that which recognizes itself to be short-lived and exceptional. All those deaths and all those rebirths gathered together as in a sheaf make up for Don Juan the flowering of his life. It is his way of giving and vivifying.¹³

For women, that gift consists of the possibility of at least momentarily healing the division of consciousness that has been forced upon them. Under the watchful eye of their husbands, women are split into the “surveyed,” the object defined by and presented to men, and the “surveyor,” the subject “always accompanied—except when quite alone—by her own image of herself” (*G* 149). “A man’s presence,” Berger writes, “suggested what he was capable of doing to you. By contrast, a woman’s presence expressed her own attitude to herself, and defined what could and could not be done to her” (*G* 149). The sexual presence of women is reflected in the difference between nakedness and nudity, a distinction made in Berger’s collection of pictorial and prose essays, *Ways of Seeing*:

To be naked is to be oneself.

To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. (*WS* 54)

For G., sexual desire and the sexual act are the antitheses of the objectification and ownership signified by being surveyed or being nude. Sexuality is a kind of liberating vision that perceives the naked self. Thus the novelist calls out to one of the women G. seduces: “Leonie, look up. He sees you. Look at him seeing you. You are being seen as you are He stands naked seeing you You have never seen yourself like this” (*G* 135-6). Janos too talks about sexual sight. He “would like to die painting a nude. There is so much to disclose with pleasure. Our eyes are like hands. . . . Maybe it is for this reason that we see as differently from other people, as the blind feel” (*P* 150).¹⁴ The metaphoric association of sight and touch is further evidenced by G.’s seduction of Camille. He knows

before touching her . . . what touching her will reveal to him. When he touches her he will fully appreciate how alone she has become. Undressing was the act of shedding the interests of those who make up the interests of her life. . . . Her unclothed body is the proof of her

solitariness. And it is her solitariness—her solitariness alone—that he recognizes and desires. (*G* 203)

Camus also emphasizes that for Don Juan “it is a matter of seeing clearly.”¹⁵ Intercourse is a way of discovering the “exceptional self” (*G* 131), therefore of rejecting socially imposed definitions of self.

Berger further suggests that not only the imposed dichotomies of self but also the division between self and other are overcome by sexual union. He relies upon the simplicity—the nakedness—of equation to express this idea. *Ways of Seeing* defines “the possibility of the shared subjectivity of sex” in this way: “The sequence is subjective—objective—subjective to power of two” (*WS* 59). In *G*, he postulates: “Because the other who is palpable and unique between one’s arms is—at least for a few instants—exclusively desired, she or he represents, without qualification or discrimination, life itself. The experience = I + life” (*G* 112).¹⁶ The narrator refers to Leonie and G. in this instance, but he expresses his own love for Camille in similar terms:

My eyes touch her almost but not quite in the same way as my hands might I desire her singlemindedly And so she will acquire the value of the world: she will contain, so far as she and I are concerned, all that is outside her, myself included. She will enclose me. Yet I will be free, for I will have chosen to be there, as I never chose to be here in the world and the life which I am ready to abandon for her. (*G* 162)

Sexuality, therefore, offers choice, the existential freedom that Corker defends during his lecture. What a house symbolizes to him becomes a world to the lovers.

Making love also eliminates the division between actions and words that exists for Corker. Sexuality is its own language; lovers communicate directly by look. For instance, in seducing G., Beatrice has

total confidence that at that moment to express something—without thought, without words, but simply through one’s own uncontrollable eyes—is to be instantaneously understood. To be, at that moment, is to be known. Hence all distinctions between the personal and the impersonal disappear

To follow her look, we enter her state of being. There, desire is its satisfaction, or, perhaps, neither desire nor satisfaction can be said to exist since there is no antinomy between them: every experience becomes the experience of freedom there: freedom there precludes all that is not itself. (*G* 114, 115)

The sexual union constitutes a new and free world, a world that threatens the socio-sexual order of the husbands of those G. seduces.

The connection between the sexual and social orders is evident in G.’s seduction of Camille Hennequin, the wife of a Peugeot engineer, whose friends include an Italian industrialist and a Belgian banker.

The capitalists' (or in Cocker's terms, the suppliers') principles are "Organization and persuasion" (*G* 167). Cousins of Sir Gerald Banks in *A Painter of Our Time*, they make no distinction between their capitalistic and their marital enterprises. Both relations are typified by an "interest in owning. Not a remote merely financial interest, but a passionate one which stirs you physically, which becomes a sense as acute as the sense of touch To fuck is to possess either by paying rent or by buying outright" (*G* 177). Maurice Hennequin views G. as a threat to his property, but his threat upon G.'s life does not prevent the seduction; in fact, the heightened sense of risk encourages G. In another instance, when an Austrian diplomat tries to "maintain . . . administrative control of his wife's appetites" (*G* 257) by arranging Marika's affair, G. plans revenge on those believing that "passion can be regulated and that a lover can be something different from a second husband" (*G* 216-7).

The prospect of a controlled sexual liaison induces in G. a kind of nausea similar to the tilting experienced by Beatrice. Berger repeats the passages recounting the disgust that G. first felt as a child (*G* 48-9) much later in the novel to explain his revulsion from the von Hartmanns' sexual contract (*G* 272-3). The smell of paraffin, associated with the lamps of the strangers in G.'s childhood and with the candles in the von Hartmann residence in this scene, as it soon will be with the burning of the Italian newspaper office, is the physical stimulus of a metaphysical nausea. The revulsion is not at the perception of unmediated reality as in Sartre's *Nausea* but at the attempt to control and manipulate others.

G. chooses death rather than the inauthentic existence offered him by the European businessmen and by the Europe of 1915. While sexual experience is "the only thing you can oppose to death" (*G* 160), the legislation of love enacted by the industrialists forces G. to consider the possibility of dying. He silently addresses them (suggesting a division of consciousness similar to Corker's): "You cannot threaten me. Your existence reconciles me to the idea of my own death. I do not want to live indefinitely in a world in which you dominate; life in such a world should be short. Life would choose death rather than your company" (*G* 180-1). G. initially chooses life, at age eleven, when he finds himself wandering the streets of Milan during the riots of May, 1893. He is taken in hand by a Roman mill girl, who pretends that they are engaged. In a pre-sexual experience, "he sees her expression; never before has a second person's expression appeared to express what he is feeling" (*G* 75). He discovers that "what matters is what her expression in the yard confirmed but what until this moment, was wordless. What matters is not being dead" (*G* 79). But in the parallel situation some

twenty years later, he reaches the opposite conclusion. Running through the streets of Trieste in May, 1915 with Nusa,¹⁷ the Slovenian peasant girl with whom he has insulted the Austrian and Italian patricians, G.

remembered Nusa's face as it was just before she was led away. And again he found it impossible to make a distinct separation between her face and the face of the Roman girl in the courtyard in Milan. . . . Their features were entirely different. It was in their expression that the mysterious continuity resided . . . what mattered then was not being dead. Now, the second time, what mattered was what her expression confirmed and what until now had been wordless: why not be dead? (*G* 297)

G. therefore allows himself to be caught up in the riots and is killed as a traitor by one of the national factions.

But he is more directly the victim of his own sexual identity than of the political or social situation. Two of the factors that typify sexuality are surprise and strangeness. That explains, the narrator suggests, why Zeus disguised himself to approach women; the lover "must be a stranger, for the better you, as you actually are, know him, and likewise the better he knows you, the less he can reveal to you of your unknown but possible self" (*G* 133). Mysteriousness has marked G.'s approach to women—Leonie, Camille (or the narrator), and Marika all ask, "Who are you?" (*G* 144, 201, 264). Yet each seduction more definitely established the identity imposed upon G. and erodes his strangeness. Berger asks us to

Imagine a character in a legend becoming conscious as he was when alive. The legend is made and cannot be altered. Its unchangeability proffers a kind of immortality. But he, alive and conscious within the legend which is being told, which has already been repeated many times, will feel buried alive. What he will lack is not air but time. (*G* 306)

G. is identified with two legendary figures. He is called Garibaldi, not because of his political commitment but because of his "being more than half foreign" (*G* 240; 81, 90, 260). What the historical Garibaldi accomplished on a national scale—he "inspired the nation to become itself: to anticipate its identity . . . Garibaldi was a threat to order" (*G* 21, 23)—G. attempts on a personal scale. Hence, he is associated with a second legendary figure, Don Juan (*G* 216, 264-5, 271, 280). As Camus suggests, Don Juan is an erotic, as Garibaldi was a patriotic, liberator:

It is not through lack of love that Don Juan goes from woman to woman. It is ridiculous to represent him as a mystic in quest of total love. But it is indeed because he loves them with the same passion and each time with his whole self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest.¹⁸

This love, Camus continues, is very different from the idealized love of Werther or the possessive love of a mother or a passionate wife. That love is a "single emotion, a single creature, a single face, but all is devoured. Quite a different love disturbs Don Juan, and this one is liberating."¹⁹ Although the legendary heroes themselves represent freedom, the imposition of their identity upon G. becomes confining.

G. is trapped more by this legendary identity than by the Hennequins and the von Hartmanns. When he tells Nusa, "We have no time" (*G* 305), he is not referring to the immediate situation: "none of these contingencies," Berger tells us, "were insuperable and in the past he would have ingeniously found a hundred ways to get round them. The statement meant something more" (*G* 305). G. is caught in a temporal paradox. While sexuality provides a moment of timelessness (142, see too 115, 117, 306), each instance of intercourse reifies G.'s mythic identity, therein compromising the essential elements of sexuality, such as surprise, extraordinariness, and firstness, and reducing the possibility of meaningful sexual experience.

Camus contends that

Time keeps up with him. The absurd man is he who is not apart from time. Don Juan does not think of "collecting" women. He exhausts their number and with them his chances of life. "Collecting" amounts to being capable of living off one's past. But he rejects regret, that other form of hope.²⁰

Time, however, has stopped for G.; it has become meaningless (*G* 301-2).²¹ Whereas sexual experience exists in the present, G. feels "condemned to live even the present in the past tense" (*G* 305). Finding "his chance of life" narrowed, G. chooses death rather than atavistic life. For him, now that sex can no longer be opposed to death, death itself becomes a kind of consummation: "Perhaps death when it arrives is always a mounting surprise which surprises itself to the point at which all reference—and therefore all self-distinction—disappears" (*G* 315).

Each of Berger's protagonists achieves a limited victory. Although the novel ends at the moment of Janos's choice, we are told that he is never heard from again (*P* 190). Corker chooses happiness but becomes a speaker without an audience, or gaining an audience, without a message (Pan-Europeanism being readily sacrificed for "several rum babas and two *indianerkrapfen*" [*CF* 237]). G. finally is able to go "further" (*G* 302, 307, 310, 314) only in death. The freedom reached by each pales in comparison to their utopian dreams. Janos writes:

I live, work for a state . . . where every worker has a sense of responsibility, not because he is appealed to but because he has responsibility; . . . where the word freedom has become unnecessary because every ability is wanted; where prejudice has become so overcome that every man is able to judge another by his eyes; where every artist is primarily a craftsman. (*P* 117)

Corker similarly asks his audience to

Imagine a happy world! A world confident enough to enjoy itself! A world where if anybody complained they would be treated if they were ill . . . A world where we could all be ourselves. Free. A world in which we could all feel at home. (*CF* 191)

And G.'s utopia is less a matter of sexual experience exclusively than of the transformation of consciousness effected through sexual union. He refers to another way of achieving transformation, offering the example of people riding a roundabout:

As soon as it begins to turn and they begin to gain height as they swing out, their faces and expressions are changed. They leave the earth behind them, they throw back their heads [also a sexual gesture (*G* 140)] and their feet go up towards the sky . . . I have watched this many times and nobody escapes the transformation. The shy become bold. The awkward become graceful . . . so free and abandoned in the air. (*G* 166)²²

While the idealistic visions are frustrated by a variety of forces—political, economic, social, and personal—each character consciously chooses and to that extent becomes free.

The novels, like the tales of the peasants in *Pig Earth*, are not “narrated either to idealize or condemn; rather they testify to the always slightly surprising range of the possible” (*PE* 8). Berger's fiction is, as Sartre says, “shot through and through with a freedom which has taken human freedom as its end, and if it is not really the city of ends that it ought to be, it must at least be a stage along the way.” For both, “there is no ‘gloomy literature,’ since, however dark may be the colors in which one paints the world, he paints it only so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it.”²³

NOTES

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 5.
2. The following editions of Berger's works will be used, and all references to them will appear in the text: *A Painter of Our Time* (London: Writers and Readers, 1972); *Corker's Freedom* (London: Writers and Readers, 1964); *G.* (New York: Pantheon, 1980); *Permanent Red*.

- (London: Writers and Readers, 1981); *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon, 1980); *Ways of Seeing* (New York: 1979); and *Pig Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 1979).
3. *Times* (London), 22 November 1972, p. 16.
 4. Karl Marx, *Capital*, cited by Sartre, pp. 33-4.
 5. Sartre, p. 14.
 6. *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 November 1972, p. 2.
 7. Berger relies on a similar argument in an essay on Jack Yeats: "How is it then, the reader may ask, that I, a Marxist, can find so much truth and splendour in the art of an arch-romantic such as Yeats? Professor George Thomson has already answered this question by quoting the painter's brother: 'Sing on: somewhere at some new moon. / We'll learn that sleeping is not death. / Hearing the whole earth change its tune.' What, in other words, we have in common with the genuine romantic is a sense of the future, an awareness of the possibility of a world other than the one we know" (*PR* 148). This point is also made in the essay, "The difficulty of being an artist," in which Berger writes, "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 and depth of human hopes" (*PR* 32).
 8. As the novel opens he is described as sixty-three (*CF* 9). But he says later that same day that he is sixty-four (*CF* 154). In the Coda, after two years have passed, he is again said to be sixty-four (*CF* 229).
 9. Some of Corker's speeches are direct quotations from Count R.N. Coudenhove-Kalergi. See *Europe Must Unite* (Glarus, Switzerland: Paneuropa Editions, 1939).
 10. Earlier in the day Corker has discovered his mother's fox stole (*CF* 100), making the color of the woman's hair another indication of his mother-centered eroticism.
 11. Berger interrupts this section on Beatrice with an account of "The Great Amaxosa Delusion," further suggesting the comparison between British oppression and sexual control.
 12. This scene is discussed by George Szanto in "Oppositional Way-Signs: Some Passages Within John Berger's History-Making. History-Unravelling Experiment," *College English*, 40, no. 4 (1978), 364-78.
 13. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 55.
 14. Berger does not exclude the possibility of painting a "naked nude," offering Rubens' "Helen Fourment in a Fur Coat" as an example (*WS* 60-1). Janos comments on the revolutionary aspect of painting a nude: "Although nobody may know it, the nude is a revolutionary subject. The body suggests, on a sensuous level, all that man is capable of becoming on every level when he has at last created that society which will be worthy of himself" (*P* 85).
 15. Camus, p. 54.
 16. This scene is anticipated by the description of Alec's and Jackie's love making in *Corker's Freedom*: "He remembers how each sought their opposite and left it and took it and left it—each time more largely—and took it and took it until at a moment their sight and arms could encompass the whole universe, the opposites became identical, their names forgotten, their seeking over, their sex unknowable" (*CF* 47).
 17. Berger dates the occurrence both 20 May (*G* 270) and 20 April (*G* 286).
 18. Camus, p. 51.
 19. Camus, p. 54.
 20. Camus, p. 54.
 21. Janos experiences a similar sense of temporal disorientation during his last months in England. He can no longer write (*P* 165); the entries become few and far between; he has stopped painting (*P* 167); and he has lost a sense of time. One of the entries is dated, "GOD KNOWS THE DATE" (*P* 165).
 22. The "giddiness" associated with centrifugal motion and producing a kind of freedom explains, I think, why G. as a child rolls down a hill after leaving the two men (*G* 49-50), as well as the significance of Miss Helen's revolving on the piano stool (*G* 37) and the spinning glass swan (*G* 165-66).
 23. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1978), pp. 56-7.