

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC**

**375**

Volume 375

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short-Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers

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## Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 3,000 authors from 91 countries now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Before the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially necessary to today’s reader.

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*CLC* is designed to serve as an introduction to authors of the twenty-first century. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 covered authors who died after December 31, 1959. Since January 2000, the series has covered authors who are living or who died after December 31, 1999; those who died between 1959 and 2000 are now included in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. There is minimal duplication of content between series.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

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*CLC* is part of the survey of criticism and world literature that is contained in Gale’s *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*.

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of titles published in other languages and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, plays, nonfiction books, and poetry, short-story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks. All titles reviewed in *CLC* and in the other Literary Criticism Series can be found online in the *Gale Literary Index*.

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# John Berger

## 1926-

(Full name John Peter Berger) English critic, novelist, essayist, poet, playwright, short-story writer, and screen-writer.

The following entry provides criticism of Berger's life and works. For additional information about Berger, see *CLC*, Volumes 2 and 19.

### INTRODUCTION

John Berger is a novelist and art critic known for his novels about the marginalized members of society and for the classic work of criticism *Ways of Seeing* (1972), considered a landmark text in twentieth-century aesthetics and cultural criticism. A prolific author, Berger's career so far spans over fifty years and multiple genres. He has been both celebrated and reviled as a radical and original thinker, and his works of fiction and nonfiction reveal his commitment to art that is politically engaged. Among his most distinguished literary works are the experimental novel *G.* (1972) and *Pig Earth* (1979), his novel of peasant life. Well into the twenty-first century, however, new works by Berger, such as his novel *From A to X* (2008), continue to explore new territory both in narrative form and in ideas.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Berger was born on 5 November 1926 in London. His father, S. J. D. Berger, was a British army officer who served in World War I and later became the head of a financial advisory institute. His mother, Miriam Branson Berger, was a suffragette from the working class who ran a coffee shop while Berger was a child to help pay for his schooling. His parents sent him to boarding school, which he found to be authoritarian and abusive. While there, he developed an interest in art, but he left at the age of sixteen against his parent's wishes. In 1942, he enrolled at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London. He studied there for two years before being drafted to serve in World War II. Given his background, he might have taken a commission as an officer, but he refused and instead joined the infantry. He served in Ireland for two years and then returned to London, attending the Chelsea School of Arts from 1946 to 1949.

Following school, he taught painting and drawing while exhibiting his own work in London. After a brief marriage to Patricia Marriott, he married Anya Bostock, a Russian

translator and feminist critic, and they had two children. He also became connected with the Communist Party and began writing for left-wing periodicals, including the *Tribune* and the *New Statesman and Nation*. For the *New Statesman and Nation*, Berger wrote art criticism from a Marxist perspective, quickly making himself a controversial figure. His first novel, *A Painter of Our Time* (1958), increased his notoriety as a vocal critic of mainstream British culture and politics and was withdrawn by its publisher after a month under pressure from the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an anticommunist group secretly funded by the CIA. His first work of criticism, *Permanent Red* (1960), which was also controversial, collected extended essays from the *New Statesman and Nation*. Eventually he decided to leave painting to focus entirely on writing, considering it a more direct way of having an impact on society. By 1962, Berger had decided to leave England, living in Paris and Geneva, and during the next seven years, he wrote two more novels, three books of art criticism, a screenplay, and a photo-essay collection with Swiss photographer Jean Mohr.

Berger moved to Quincy, a small village in the French Alps, in the early 1970s with writer Beverly Bancroft, his third wife, whom Berger met while working on the BBC show *Ways of Seeing*, the 1972 series that preceded his seminal book of the same name, and with whom he had one child. That same year, Berger's *G.* won the Booker Prize for the best novel published in Britain. Again he created controversy when he donated half of the prize to the Black Panthers, a revolutionary socialist group that promoted black nationalism. Berger's move to a rural setting strongly influenced his work. He published another photo documentary with Mohr, *A Seventh Man* (1975), and two novels about the lives of peasants in the face of industrialization, *Pig Earth* and *Once in Europa* (1987). These were later published together with a companion novel about migrant workers, *Lilac and Flag* (1990), under the title *Into Their Labours* (1991).

Berger's reputation has allowed him to lend his voice to political causes internationally. Later collections, such as *Here Is Where We Meet* (2005) and the volume of essays *Hold Everything Dear* (2007), reflect on topics ranging from personal memoir to 9/11 to wars in the Middle East. In novels such as *To the Wedding* (1995) and *King* (1999), Berger also addressed social concerns such as AIDS and homelessness. Among his most successful later works are the novel *From A to X*, which was long-listed for a second Booker Prize, and *Bento's Sketchbook* (2011), a well-received collection of meditations on Baruch Spinoza, art,

the body, and other topics that also includes Berger's own drawings. In 2009, he received the Golden PEN Award for a lifetime of service to literature and donated his papers to the British Library. As of 2014, Berger is still living in Quincy; his wife, Beverly, died from cancer in 2013.

## MAJOR WORKS

Berger has published in a variety of genres over a long career, and his writings on aesthetic theory have been influential for art historians and cultural critics. In *Ways of Seeing*, which expands upon "The Work of Art in the Epoch of Mechanical Reproduction," the title essay of Walter Benjamin's 1963 collection, Berger notes that art is now reproducible in ways unforeseen by its creators. This perspective leads to a work of art having effects and being used by various entities in ways that are completely different than in the premodern era. Berger explores the use of art as a commodity and indicator of wealth, as property in a society obsessed with display, and as a tool of publicity. He also explains how the interpretation of works of art can be shaped by information about the work, using as an example Vincent van Gogh's last painting before his suicide. The power of an image is also enhanced by modern technology, which can communicate it broadly. For Berger, there is both danger and opportunity in the ways that images and art have moved to the center of the public forum.

For literary scholars, Berger's most significant creative output has been his early novels, up to and including the books in the *Into Their Labours* trilogy. Berger's first three novels, *A Painter of Our Time*, *The Foot of Clive* (1962), and *Corker's Freedom* (1964), emphasize relationships between individuals, especially marginalized people, and the impersonal forces of history. *A Painter of Our Time*, for example, focuses on Janos Lavin, a Hungarian painter exiled in London after World War II. As an exile who finds it impossible to form a meaningful relationship to society, Lavin lives alienated from it, both artistically and politically. When Lavin returns to Hungary to participate in the burgeoning revolution, his diary reveals that he has accepted "historical necessity" and reengaged.

Berger's breakthrough novel *G.* similarly depicts a protagonist who lives on the periphery of society, isolated and seemingly abandoned by history, yet also willfully apolitical. *G.*'s life revolves around the pursuit of sex. As a sign of his extreme marginalization, he has no name for nearly half of the novel. *G.* is more experimental than Berger's earlier fiction; *G.* himself is more of a cubist collection of images and perspectives than a coherent character, and occasionally the narrator abandons the story completely for a philosophical discursion on class, sex, or the nature of time. The text also contains poetry, music, and drawings by Berger, some of them sexually explicit. Where Berger's first novels

were political in theme, *G.* represents the social novel as not merely representation or discussion but as the enactment of his developing Marxist ideals.

*Pig Earth*, *Once in Europa*, and *Lilac and Flag* also use a collage-like means of narration, combining fiction with poems and essays. Berger later remarked, however, that his shift in focus to his peasant novels required him to relearn his method of storytelling, suggesting that the culture of the rural working class required, for him, a new way of seeing and writing to contain and represent their experience. Berger's peasant stories are strongly physical and sometimes brutal, at times dwelling in detail on grotesque but mundane events, such as the slaughter of a cow, distinguishing them from romantic accounts of peasant life. Instead, Berger portrays peasants and migrant workers as survivors in the face of modernizing "progress."

In his later fiction, Berger continued to delve deeper into his political concerns and to experiment with modes of narrative. In *King*, Berger tells the story of twenty-four hours in the lives of homeless people in France through the eyes of King, a dog owned by the elderly homeless couple Vico and Vica. *King* reflects Berger's ongoing interest in the relationships between animals and humans and how they reflect on human alienation, as in *Pig Earth* and in Berger's essay "Why Look at Animals?" *From A to X* is a novel told in epistolary fashion, via letters between A'ida and her lover, Xavier, who is in prison after being accused of founding a terrorist network. The work is presented as the discovery of a fictional Berger, so that letters are sometimes out of order, key pieces are missing, "illegible" words are redacted, and code obscures their meaning. Over the course of the letters, the lovers document political uprisings, individual suffering, and resistance against the dehumanizing effects of globalization.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Given Berger's roots in art and art criticism, many scholars have considered his representation of the role of art and the artist in society. While *A Painter of Our Time* is one of Berger's few works of fiction to focus specifically on the character of an artist, several of his works have discussed broader issues of seeing, representation, and perspective that reflect his belief in the social and moral functions of art in society. Summarizing his views, A. R. Brás (1984; see Further Reading) said that, for Berger, art is revolutionary not because it leads to major social events but because it gives people a new way to see themselves and their world. As Brás and others have pointed out, those who try to remain apolitical in Berger's works typically fail. Yet, according to Brás, Berger has a broad notion of what "political" means: an artist is political not by representing explicitly political themes but by sustaining the very concept of perspective.

Scholars have emphasized this idea particularly in novels that are included in the *Into Their Labours* trilogy. Writing about *Pig Earth*, Eric P. Levy (2004; see Further Reading) argued that the most significant struggle humankind faces is striving to see things as they really are. The narrator, Jean, lives his life unseeing, which is a tragedy, as Levy observed. Yet at the end of his life, he glimpses his failure to see, which leads to another kind of tragic suffering. For Levy, the pain caused by the vision of truth, however, contains the seeds of redemption. Christian Schmitt-Kilb (2012) maintained that the novels of the *Into Their Labours* trilogy mourn the loss of a peasant perspective, particularly its emphasis on survival rather than progress. Both Schmitt-Kilb and Richard Kerridge (2012) suggested that Berger's representation of peasants' relationship to animals reflects an alternative to the alienation of capitalist or industrialized culture.

Another central theme in scholarship on Berger's fiction is the importance of historical consciousness. Harvey J. Kaye (1983) quoted Berger's *A Fortunate Man* (1967) on the relationship between historical consciousness and class: "The culturally deprived have far fewer ways of recognizing themselves. A great deal of their experience . . . has to remain unnamed for them." According to Kaye, Berger contends that the ruling classes of a capitalist society benefited from this lack of historical perspective, which allowed them to justify their superior social positions. Kaye observed that while Berger's earlier protagonists struggled with a lack of historical consciousness, in *Pig Earth*, Berger turns to peasant culture and the importance of storytelling to illustrate possible practices for maintaining links to the past. However, as John C. Hawley in his 2006 study of Berger's *Une autre façon de raconter* (1981; published as *Another Way of Telling*) clarified, "history" in this sense is not a master narrative that describes a linear and progressive movement from past to present but rather the preservation of truths that demystify the gaps in official history.

Some critics have questioned the political efficacy of Berger's work. Gordon Johnston (2001) cited an early review of *A Painter of Our Time* as an extreme example of fears over the consequences of Berger's political views at the height of Cold War paranoia. More recent critics, however, have been less concerned about Berger's socialist commitment. Joseph H. McMahon (1982) and Randall Craig (1983-84) characterized Berger's work as an exploration of the difference between contemporary society and what might be possible under different conditions.

Shaun Strohmmer

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*A Painter of Our Time*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1958. (Novel)

*Permanent Red: Essays in Seeing*. London: Methuen, 1960. Pub. as *Toward Reality: Essays in Seeing*. New York: Knopf, 1962. (Criticism)

*The Foot of Clive*. London: Methuen, 1962. (Novel)

*Corker's Freedom*. London: Methuen, 1964. (Novel)

*The Success and Failure of Picasso*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965. (Criticism)

*Une ville à Chandigarh* [may be translated as *A City at Chandigarh*]. With Alain Tanner. Artaria Film, 1966. (Screenplay)

\**A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor*. London: Lane, 1967. (Essays)

*Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of the Artist in the U.S.S.R.* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969. (Criticism)

*The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969. (Criticism)

*La salamandre* [may be translated as *The Salamander*]. With Tanner. Forum Films, 1971. (Screenplay)

*Selected Essays and Articles: The Look of Things*. Ed. Nikos Stangos. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971. (Criticism)

*G*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972. (Novel)

*Ways of Seeing*. BBC. 1972. (Teleplays)

*Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972. (Criticism)

*Le milieu du monde* [may be translated as *The Middle of the World*]. With Tanner. Jupiter Communications, 1974. (Screenplay)

\**A Seventh Man: A Book of Images and Words about the Experience of Migrant Workers in Europe*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975. Pub. as *A Seventh Man: Migrant Workers in Europe*. New York: Viking, 1975. (Essays)

†*Pig Earth*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, 1979. (Novel)

‡*About Looking*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1980. (Essays)

\**Une autre façon de raconter* [published as *Another Way of Telling*]. With Nicolas Philibert. Paris: Maspero, 1981. (Essays)

*Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000* [published as *Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000*]. With Tanner. Jupiter Communications, 1983. (Screenplay)

*Question de géographie* [published as *A Question of Geography*]. With Nella Bielski. La Criée, Marseille. 22 Nov. 1984. Marseille: Laffitte, 1984. (Play)

*And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1984. (Poetry and prose)

*The White Bird: Writings*. Ed. Lloyd Spencer. London: Chatto and Windus, 1985. Pub. as *The Sense of Sight: Writings*. New York: Pantheon, 1986. (Essays)

†*Once in Europa*. New York: Pantheon, 1987. (Novel)

*Le dernier portrait de Francisco Goya: Le peintre joué aujourd'hui* [published as *Goya's Last Portrait: The Painter Played Today*]. With Bielski. Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1989. (Play)

*Play Me Something*. With Timothy Neat. British Film Inst., 1989. (Screenplay)

†*Lilac and Flag: An Old Wives' Tale of a City*. New York: Pantheon, 1990. (Novel)

§*Into Their Labours*. New York: Pantheon, 1991. (Novels)

*Keeping a Rendezvous*. New York: Pantheon, 1991. (Essays, poetry, and short stories)

*To the Wedding*. London: Bloomsbury, 1995. (Novel)

*Photocopies*. New York: Pantheon, 1996. (Essays)

*Titian: Nymph and Shepherd*. With Katya Berger Andreadakis. Munich: Prestel, 1996. (Letters)

*Isabelle: A Story in Shots*. With Bielski. London: Arcadia, 1998. (Screenplay)

\**At the Edge of the World*. London: Reaktion, 1999. (Essays)

*King: A Street Story*. London: Bloomsbury, 1999. (Novel)

*Arturo Di Stefano*. With Michael Hofmann and Christopher Lloyd. London: Merrell, 2001. (Criticism)

*Géo Chavez: Dder erste Flug ueber die Alpen = Géo Chavez: The First Flight across the Alps*. Visp: Rotten, 2001. (Biography)

*Selected Essays*. Ed. Geoff Dyer. London: Bloomsbury, 2001. (Essays)

*The Shape of a Pocket*. London: Bloomsbury, 2001. (Essays)

||*Forest*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2005. (Essay)

*Here Is Where We Meet*. London: Bloomsbury, 2005. (Prose)

*Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance*. London: Verso, 2007. (Essays)

*From A to X: A Story in Letters*. London: Verso, 2008. (Novel)

#*Face au silence* [published as *In the Face of Silence*]. Arles: Actes Sud, 2010. (Essay)

*Bento's Sketchbook*. London: Verso, 2011. (Drawings and essays)

*Understanding a Photograph*. Ed. Dyer. New York: Aperture, 2013. (Essays)

### Principal English Translations

*Another Way of Telling*. Trans. John Berger. New York: Pantheon, 1982. Print. Trans. of *Une autre façon de raconter*.

*Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000*. Trans. Michael Palmer. Berkeley: North Atlantic, 1983. Print. Trans. of *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000*.

*A Question of Geography*. Trans. Berger. London: Faber and Faber, 1987. Print. Trans. of *Question de géographie*.

*Goya's Last Portrait: The Painter Played Today*. Trans. Berger. London: Faber and Faber, 1989. Print. Trans. of *Le dernier portrait de Francisco Goya*.

*In the Face of Silence*. Trans. Berger. Stockport: Lewis, 2010. Print. Trans. of *Face au silence*.

\*Includes photographs by Jean Mohr.

†These novels comprise the *Into Their Labours* trilogy.

‡Includes the essay "Why Look at Animals?"

§Includes the novels *Pig Earth*, *Once in Europa*, and *Lilac and Flag*.

||Includes photographs by Jitka Hanzlová.

#Includes photographs by Christophe Agou.

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## CRITICISM

### Joseph H. McMahon (essay date 1982)

SOURCE: McMahon, Joseph H. "Marxist Fictions: The Novels of John Berger." *Contemporary Literature* 23.2 (1982): 202-24. Print.

[In the following essay, McMahon surveys major themes in *A Painter of Our Time*, *The Foot of Clive*, *Corker's Freedom*, and *G*. In his discussion of the first three books, McMahon emphasizes the tension between the characters' marginal status and the historical forces acting on them. He calls *G* a more ambitious work that struggles to reconcile the life of the individual with the progress of civilization.]

What is true? asked the survivor. He answered his own question. Only what you make true.

*The Foot of Clive*

Some of the works of John Berger, principally the films on which he has collaborated with Alain Tanner, the Swiss film-maker, are better known to an American public than John Berger himself or the works that are his creation entirely. Since the early 1950s, when he began to report on the art scene in London for the *New Statesman*, he has been an increasingly visible presence in Great Britain, mainly because of his work with independent television and later because of the programs he did for the BBC, some of which, as videotapes, have become standard fare for secondary students in schools throughout the United Kingdom. His standing as a novelist was enhanced by the controversies which eddied around his novel, *G.*, when it was first published in 1972 and won the Booker Award, believed by some to be Britain's most prestigious prize for fiction.

Throughout his career as a teacher, art critic, television commentator, novelist, and scenario-writer, Berger has been a dedicated and open Marxist who has used his writings to bring into high relief the tensions, dramas, and disappointments of life in the modern world. Berger has tried to keep his investigations as free as possible of ideological clutter while adhering to a particular ideology which he sustains out of a belief that, if human existence does not make sense on a global scale, or if it cannot be *made* to make sense on such a scale, then men will live in chaos with themselves and with others.

There is nothing especially novel about such an observation. What is noteworthy about Berger is the intensity of his personal effort to study the chasm between the ideal perceived and reality attained and to propose possible ways of bridging it. Because of that, his writings revive a tradition not much honored in recent generations by Western writers—that of the artist who advocates certain social relations and strategies, who is not content simply to condemn the society that surrounds him but prefers to have that society cured of the several maladies afflicting it and all its members to different degrees.

Berger is conscious that the bourgeois system has formed him so that he has become a critic of that system who wishes not to reform it, but to replace it; its single-mindedness of purpose cannot be taken as its sole characteristic; something else—which I will call, precisely because the term is vague, the human—has also and always been present, if not always at work, within that system; Berger recognizes that strain, his own presence within it, his affinity to some aspects of it, and his role as a continuator of a nay-saying activity that emerged in the literature of the West with Gilgamesh. The existence of this lineage and the appeal of its materials, which bring their briefs so invitingly to our attention, tells us, as it tells Berger, that there is something both before and beyond the brightest moment of a particular ideology: the domain of that brute, often unmalleable matter where the human stubbornly reveals the fact that it has interests which do not always coincide with

the central preoccupations announced by particular ideologies. The non-coincidence of the two reveals two things in one flash, sometimes in one flesh: there are separated areas of values and those values, more often than not, are in conflict; indeed, they are given to us as such; almost from the start, we perceive the world as a field of conflicts; and we may come to believe that the resolution of those conflicts necessitates our involvement with their components. "We must purify reality," Berger has one of his fictional characters say; "we cannot create our own substitute for it" (*Painter [A Painter of Our Time]*, p. 173).<sup>1</sup> Earlier on in the text, that same character writes the following entry in his journal: "I gain strength from my knowledge that in any given circumstances most men are the same; it is only the circumstances that are so various. There are other men who want to paint as I do, and in front of our pages or easels, our experiences are common to each of us. There are many brotherhoods without name" (*Painter*, p. 130).

All of John Berger's novels are centered about individuals whose lives are passed on the margins of history; they are attuned in different degrees to the sounds of great events but are not usually among the makers of those sounds. They are surrounded by the occasions of history, and their lives are influenced by the consequences of those occasions; but such moments, as events, are not an integral part of their consciousness because those moments do not reveal themselves as components of their personal intimacy. In those instances where a coincidence takes place between one individual's existence and a public happening, the coincidence is an epiphany precisely because of the unexpectedness of the encounter.

Most of Berger's characters do not, however, look upon themselves as ahistorical or devoid of an awareness of history as a sweeping complex of forces which engage them and sometimes carry them away from where they had expected to stay. As they experience it, history is not so much a continuum of sometimes concatenated events drawn from their lives and the sweep of portentous public events as it is a patch of time and space that periodically yields to intruders and produces surprises they must deal with. When plunged into such situations they find—or the reader discovers—that their experience has become a microcosm of what happens when political events encounter each other and clash in order to form part of the background of international history.

Though their foreground is not that of statesmen and politicians, of the men of affairs and the military commanders, that background world clearly comes to surround theirs and in so doing shows its capacity to preempt it. They can, for example, be called to serve a cause they do not fully understand and about whose articulation they have not been consulted. Public history then comes to encircle their personal history as the earth's atmosphere surrounds it and, frequently, with the same results. Suddenly, they may be reduced to a mute and terrifying passivity. They discover themselves as

victims. As they become more fully conscious of their unanticipated situation, they develop an awareness of their personal condition. This allows a reader to perceive that their lives, and quite possibly his own, are being worked upon by the same forces of clear intention and unwanted confusion that shape, sometimes chaotically, the lives of states, alliances, and the uneasy confederations effected among those who, for a time, share a desire to defend certain issues and who, as a result, can give at least a momentary name to their present brotherhood.

In the same year (1959) in which he published his first novel, *A Painter of Our Time*, Berger brought out a translation of a poem by Bertolt Brecht, "An Address to Danish Worker Actors on the Art of Observation," which included the following counsels:

All this watch closely. Then in your mind's eye  
From all the struggles waged  
Make pictures  
Unfolding and growing like movements in history.  
For later that is how you must show them on the stage.  
The struggle for work,  
Bitter and sweet dialogues between men and women,  
Talk about books,  
Resignation and rebellion,  
Trials and failures,  
All these you must later show  
Like historical processes.  
(Even of us here and now  
You might make such a picture:  
The playwright, having fled his country  
Instructs you in the art of observation).

These verses help to identify both the goals proposed by Berger's fiction and the way in which he will seek to present them, conscious that an author's knowledge, though it may surpass the knowledge or experience of his characters, can serve to situate that experience against a wider, more illuminating background. Because of the intention he brings to his endeavor, the writer can serve as an intermediary; by the way in which he carries out his intention, he becomes the explicator and in some cases the intercessor; the presentation becomes a plea for a particular program; yet the plea can emerge only if the writer assumes and maintains that modicum of modesty that is the best possible control on distortions that may result from his own subjectivity. Though his enterprise envisages a particular end, he cannot assume that the end is attainable, and so he cannot manipulate the movement of his fictions in order to reach the hoped-for goal through scrivener's tricks. What he can do is arrange the display of the movement so that it renders more urgent the need for attaining the end.

Berger designed his first fictions to help the reader share the experience of others, which in its specificity might be radically unlike or greatly distant from the reader's own. Clearly there is nothing especially innovative about such a design. Even as he did this, Berger sensed that the tech-

niques of earlier novelists who shared this same purpose could no longer be used with confidence.

His modesty as a narrator appears to stem from two interconnected observations. The way in which a reader may be led to conceptualize a world because of his familiarity with system-building and systems already built is not the way in which the world is experienced by most of its inhabitants. The visibility of this gap rattled Berger's confidence in older narrative techniques. He writes:

We hear a lot about the crisis of the modern novel. What this involves, fundamentally, is a change in the mode of narration. It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. And this is because we are too aware of what is continually traversing the storyline laterally. That is to say, instead of being aware of a point as an infinitely small part of a straight line, we are aware of it as an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the center of a star of lines. Such awareness is the result of our constantly having to take into account the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities. . . . To prophesy today it is only necessary to know men as they are throughout the whole world in all their inequality. Any contemporary narrative which ignores the urgency of this dimension is incomplete and acquires the oversimplified character of a fable.

(*Essays [Selected Essays and Articles]*, p. 40)

The "we" refers to writers and other interpreters of the human. What they must possess, as the title of one of his later critical books will indicate, are particular ways of seeing, and what they must pursue are narrative methods that will adequately convey what has been perceived in order then to direct those perceptions towards the purpose announced in the theory and incarnated in the practice. The text attempts to build the perceptions into the purpose and to ensure that the reader, persuaded, will accept that purpose, making it his own. Commenting on a passage by Karl Marx, Berger writes: "The words do not accumulate to confirm one another; each articulation supersedes the preceding one. One might argue that this is the nature of writing itself; in life one begins at the beginning: in literature one begins at the end. . . . 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" (*Essays*, p. 85).

The end at which one begins has a three-fold sense at least, for the end can reveal either what has been achieved, what was intended as the content of that achievement, or the space between the two—a space which Berger, in the same commentary, associates with the principle of discontinuity, here stated as a narrative problem that must first be reflected in the narration before it can be resolved by the narrative. All the narrative can initially hope to reflect by way of a solution is the promise offered by supersedure; the narrative can be a humble model of how one might conceive and then organize the world. That has the ring of