A Painter of Our Time

John Berger

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desire for something better
not to be extinguished in men
MAXIM GORKI

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John Berger was born in London in 1926. He went to an art school and began his working life as a painter and teacher of drawing. He first began writing art criticism for *Tribune* and was then the regular art critic of the *New Statesman* for ten years. He has also written for the *Observer*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Daily Worker*, *Labour Monthly*, *Marxism Today* and many newspapers and magazines on the continent and in America. He has worked a great deal in television, notably on *Monitor* and in two programme series of his own for Granada TV. His published works include a book of essays called *Permanent Red* (1960) and three novels: *A Painter of Our Time*, *The Foot of Clive* (1962) and *Corker's Freedom* (1964), which he considers the best thing he has done. He is now writing an 'imaginative documentary' about a doctor, called *A Country Practice*, and is planning another novel.

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To Liz, my wife

In no society is any product the exclusive result of one man's effort. Many contribute. I would like to acknowledge in particular the contributions of the following to this book – contributions by way of example, criticism, encouragement and quite straightforward, practical services of help: Victor Anant, the late Frederick Antal, Anya Bostock, John Eskell, Peter de Francia, Renato Guttuso, Peter Peri, Wilson Plant, Friso and Vica Ten Holt, Garith Windsor, and my own parents.

The Beginning

On the door was a strip of metal foil with 'Janos Lavin' printed on it. It had come from one of those machines on railway-stations into which you put a penny – or is it now sixpence? – to print so many letters. Bureaucrats should always use them when writing their speeches. I had the key, and so I let myself in.

The place – it was a large studio – felt uninhabited. Everything was there in its usual position, but one could tell that nothing had been moved or used for at least a week.

I had come with no very definite purpose in mind. I told myself that I would just check up, see that the skylight wasn't leaking on to anything, and maybe look at some of the paintings again. I was too mystified and shocked to start making plans.

Having let myself in, I did not know what to do. All the old life had gone. I strode up and down, looking at everything as though I were some kind of inspector. That was useless. I must take it easier. I would make myself a cup of coffee. The grinder was fixed to the wall at the kitchen end of the studio. The coffee-tin was in the kitchen. The water had not been cut off – or perhaps one couldn't cut the water off without cutting it off from the other studios as well. On the draining-board there was a tea-pot with tea leaves in it and an unwashed cup: a sign of shock and hurried departure. There was also on the window-sill a jam-jar of water with half a dozen brushes soaking in it: a sign, to any painter who values his brushes – and anyway they are expensive enough – of neglect.

The whole place was very quiet, as if I were hearing an accumulated absence of sound. While the kettle was boiling, I went and sat in one of the wicker chairs in the studio. It went on creaking after I had settled in it and was sitting quite still. Skin had formed over all the mounds of paint on the painting table. There was no smell of either oil or turps. I tried to imagine

Janos suddenly appearing. I could not. One of his berets was hanging on the back of the door. The wheel of the etching press over in the alcove looked as permanently stationary as a mill-wheel whose stream has long dried up.

Everything was the same, yet to my eyes everything looked different; everything except what the studio was full of – the painted canvases. Such of these as faced outwards appeared exactly as they had done before. It was a typical London autumn afternoon, but even in that muted light their colours remained strong and resonant. The huge figures in *The Games* canvas, that leant along the whole length of one wall, looked certain and unalterable. Never before had I realized so vividly and personally what all our talk about unity of 'form' and 'style' meant. By virtue of these qualities, this canvas now had an independent life. Around it were the personal effects the meaning of which had been transformed by recent events. Not so the painting. It was already beginning to outlast the circumstances that had given rise to its being painted. On to everything else in the studio except the paintings I was able to project my own feeling of confusion and loss. In their own way the paintings were as independent as the sky on a day of national tragedy.

The kettle whistled. Against the frosted window, over the sink in the kitchen, was a piece of mirror. Waiting for the coffee to filter through, I gazed idly into it. Here Janos shaved, and Diana, if she was in too much of a hurry to go up to the bedroom, did her hair and touched up her lips. I thought of their faces. His, for all its sensitivity, rather like a potato that has just been dug out of the earth, brown and dirty looking in a wholesome way; hers, like a fine china cup – with a cherry pattern on it to represent her lips. Beside the mirror was a razor. If he was alive, did he now have a beard? He hated Bohemianism. But he was nearly sixty, and a beard would have become his years and his appearance of always having something on his mind. He never looked passive. Even if he was sitting back in one of the wicker chairs smoking a cigarette, he always gave the impression he was working something out – probably he wasn't, but he looked like it. When did he work out what he had now done?

I took my cup of coffee back into the studio, and sat in the corner behind the painting table. From here he usually worked,

with the easel at an angle placed towards the centre of the room. On a shelf was another piece of mirror which probably originally belonged to the same one as the shaving piece. This one was for squinting at the canvas in. Except for the actual painting implements – the palette knives, the easel and the bundles of brushes – every other object in this corner was an improvised scrap. The painting table was an old desk with the drawers missing. There were a dozen cups without handles – for oil or turps or size or varnish. There were broken plates used as temporary, small palettes. Beneath the brown paper bags of colours, all stained with their own bright dusts, was a cornerless marble slab from an old washstand on which the dusts were worked into paint. There were old shirts and sheets stuffed under the table, yellowed newspapers stacked on the floor. There was a broken bucket half filled with matches and cigarette stubs.

Such is the working 'furniture' of nine studios out of ten. What distinguishes one from another are the objects, the photographs, the personal tokens with which the particular painter chooses to surround himself. These are talismans for good painting. Bits of tree trunk, fragments of coloured glass, an old poster, a few of his own drawings, a photograph of Miss Universe next to a Leonardo drawing of a plant, a seashell – the variety and combinations are endless. I have seldom seen a studio which has not had its collection.

I looked at the wall beside my chair. It now seemed rather like going through a man's wallet in order to identify him. Not that there was anything there which I hadn't seen dozens of times before. I was almost as familiar with this studio as with my own living-room. I had imagined that I knew Janos well – far better than any of his few other English friends. We were intimates. But now the unexpected had forced me to realize how little I had known of him, and I looked at the scraps of paper pinned to the edges of the shelves and to the wall, in the vague hope that they would give me a clue to what I had not known, to what I had missed.

There were several photographs of athletes in action – hurdlers, skiers, divers. There was a picture postcard of the Eiffel Tower. There was a photograph of himself with some

other students at Budapest University in 1918. He had originally intended to be a lawyer. He did not seriously begin painting until his early twenties, when he was in Prague – having been forced to leave Hungary after the overthrow of the Soviet revolutionary government of 1919. There was another photograph of about a dozen people at a studio party in his own Berlin studio in the late twenties. In the background one could see some of his own paintings, which were then abstract. There was a torn piece of paper with MAY I OFFER YOU MY HEARTFELT CONGRATULATIONS written in block capitals upon it. He had pinned this up about a year ago, and I had never asked him to explain it. He was a forbidding man to question about himself, and he seldom referred to what is called 'his emotional life'. One had the impression that he considered that in this respect too many people wasted too much time over details. Probably this was a wrong impression.

There was a reproduction of Poussin's *The Court of Flora*, another of Léger's *Les Constructeurs* and another of Van Gogh's *Potato-Eaters*. He quite often changed these, pinning up something new when he came across it. There was always, however, a Poussin. High up on the wall there was one of his own drawings – a portrait head of Diana, which he must have done soon after they were married, for in it she looks like a young ballet dancer. Under the drawing was written *Rosie*, which was Janos's pet-name for her. Hers for him was *Jimmy*. Thus they hid some of their differences.

Written on the wall with a paint brush was a quotation from Éluard – '*Je ne regrette rien, j'avance.*' Beneath was a telephone number, which I recognized as Susan's.

There were also several newspaper photographs – but nothing in this opened-out wallet was yielding any new information. I was only being reminded of what I already knew.

When the telephone rang, I jumped so much that I spilt some of my coffee. I went down to the other end of the studio under the balcony to answer it. It was the Malvern Gallery wanting to speak to Janos about the price of one of his paintings. Obviously no one had told them, and so I stalled and said Janos was away for a few days. It probably meant they were selling another painting. That made a total of ten in a fortnight, and all of them

large and expensive. I looked round at the hundreds of canvases stacked along the walls, even taking up space in this, the domestic end of the 50-foot studio, and the irony of it made me furious. Not the grand life and death irony of it, but the irony of it measured out in thousands of daily irritations no grander than chilblains, and no less painful.

I clambered up the stairs to the balcony in order to look into the two bedrooms leading off it. This was Diana's part of their living space – it is impossible to call one of these studios a home: those who live in them have rejected the concept. Although here nothing was pinned to the walls, the furniture and furnishings were themselves autobiographical: the eighteenth-century dressing-table in the bedroom, the silver-framed photographs, the bow chest-of-drawers, the decanter on the balcony table, and a dozen other objects, had all clearly come from a house in the country where they had been polished by a succession of housemaids for several generations. They had reflected – literally – a way of life. Here in this cramped space they looked like a few possessions that had hastily been packed into a wagon by their owner fleeing from her home. On the floor in the spare bedroom was a dark, mouldy-looking dispatch-case. Once this had been Diana's token of emancipation in the new life she had chosen. Everything was in order. And I clambered back down the ladderlike stairs.

It was cold without the stove burning, and even if it hadn't been, there was no point in staying. I decided to go. I washed up, and then, passing the bookshelf, I remembered that Janos had had my copy of Diderot translations, which I should need. I looked along the shelf for it. Underneath the shelf on the floor were wedged dozens of red-covered sketch-books. On an impulse I took out the only one which was not jammed in. Janos was always rather cagey about his working drawings. I flicked the pages. To my surprise there was no drawing in it; it was full of writing. I looked more closely. A few sentences were in English and French, but most were in another language – presumably Hungarian. I then noticed that many of the paragraphs were dated. Three years ago. Last year. I rushed to the last page of writing. It had been written twelve days before. Janos had kept a journal.

I sat on the floor and started searching for an entry which I could read in order to get some idea of how it was written. I could not find one. I could only recognize names here and there.

I was both excited and appalled. Excited because I had come to the studio in the vague, half-conscious hope of being able to understand more, to discover something, and this was a more positive discovery than I would have thought possible. Appalled because a mystery was ending.

I would now learn exactly how this man whom I had loved as a friend had eluded me, and therefore how I had failed him.

I forgot about my Diderot. I wanted to go straightaway. I gave a last look round the studio. The paintings did look different now, but only because it was getting dark. Given this light, they would always look like this. The athletes in *The Games* would always be heroes. Tucking the book under my arm, I hurried out. I wanted to be amongst people again, but, as so often in London, all but the main streets were deserted.

Looking back on it today, it surprises me a little that I didn't hesitate then, that I didn't wonder whether I was justified in taking the book away with me. But I didn't.

What I did hesitate about for a whole year was whether or not to publish Janos's journal. A Hungarian friend first read the book out loud to me. It was a humiliating experience. But as I recovered from my own personal shocks, I began to realize what a remarkable document I had in my hands. My friend, who prefers to remain anonymous, made a written translation into rough English. When I read this, I saw even more clearly how much the book revealed; it amounted to a *Portrait of the Artist as an Emigré*, and today in one sense or another most artists are *émigrés*.

I will not bother the reader with all the arguments I had with myself about the rights and wrongs of making what follows public. Finally, I decided it was right to do so, but that, in order to complete the picture of these four years of a painter's life, it was necessary to have also a commentary of background facts. This I have tried to write. I have also, with the help of my friend, tried to polish the translation. Naturally, I have changed most of the names.

The Book