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Beyond the Barbershop: Berger, Turner and the Inner World

In 1972, Berger wrote his well-loved essay on Turner. First printed in the Parisian magazine *Réalités*, it appeared in a number of Berger's collections, the last of which, *Portraits* (2015), includes an angry preface from its author. 'I have always hated being called an art critic', it begins, linking the job to the art market, and ends with an attack on colour reproductions of paintings, which belong 'in a luxury brochure for millionaires' (*Portraits* was published by Verso, with the reference images reproduced in black and white).[1] For Berger, to write on art was to be an 'outlaw'.[2] In each 'portrait', a polemic was made for what counted as art and what did not. Early attacks on Henry Moore and Francis Bacon, accused respectively of formalism and mannerism, were as violent as Berger's praise for so-called Kitchen-Sink painters like John Bratby was fulsome. Art was not only an aesthetic matter but a moral and political one; a perennial concern was the artist's relationship to history – what Berger called elsewhere 'the unprecedented events of the period.'[3] Or at least that is how the portraits are usually remembered.

The essay opens with the claim that it was Turner who best represented the character of the British nineteenth century; hence his popular appeal during his lifetime, which exceeded that of Constable and Landseer. 'Turner was expressing something of the bedrock of their own varied experience',[4] Berger writes, referring to members of the art-going public. This experience was ineffable, inexpressible in words – Berger uses the word 'dumb'.[5] Then he provides a short biography, where emphasis is placed on Turner's early history in London: a father who owned a barbershop in Covent Garden (where, by the way, the pictures Turner painted as a child often occupied pride of place); an uncle who was a butcher; and an early exposure to the Thames, from which he developed his passion for water: coastlines, seascapes, rivers. '(The painter's mother died insane),'[6] Berger adds, as if this were literally parenthetical – Turner's mother is mentioned only once in the essay, and nothing is made of what it might have felt like to grow up in her shadow.

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Although he admits that it was not possible to know what early visual experiences affected Turner's imagination, Berger develops an analogy between his painting and the experience of the barbershop run by his father, which acts as one of the fulcrums upon which the essay turns. Addressing the reader directly, he imagines – or confabulates – what the barbershop might have felt and looked like to the boy Turner and how it survived in the work: 'Consider some of his later paintings and imagine, in the backstreet shop, water, froth, steam, gleaming metal, clouded mirrors, white bowls or basins in which soapy liquid is agitated by the barber's brush and detritus deposited.'[7] Then, two further images, more violent now: 'Consider the equivalence between his father's razor and the palette knife which, despite criticisms and current usage, Turner insisted upon using so extensively. More profoundly – at the level of childish phantasmagoria – picture the always possible combination, suggested by the barbershop, of blood and water, water and blood.'[8]

The correspondences work well. In a late painting such as *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844), the paint is laid down on the canvas with quick strokes of the palette knife, where it is given solid form and cut into; the dirty sea resembles used soapsuds and whitewash, as does the barely distinguishable sky above it. Turner in fact employed similar metaphors in his own writings – he once criticised Poussin's *Winter (The Deluge)* (1660–4) for its lack of 'ebullition'[9] – and, although Berger may not have known this, so did his contemporaries: the novelist William Beckford, who owned one of his early paintings, said that Turner's late style suggested that it was 'as if his brains and imagination were mixed up on his palette with soapsuds and lather'.[10]

'Confabulation' is a word Berger used much later in life to describe the activity of writing as a 'true'[11] form of translation. For him, the process of translation was not a binary one, a simple matter of turning one language into another, but a 'triangulation'[12] of two languages with the 'pre-verbal', a register of experience he connects both to the complexities of the body and to the infantile – or what in the essay on Turner he called 'childish phantasmagoria'. 'Language is a body, a living creature … and this creature's home is the inarticulate as well as the articulate.'[13] Far from being an empty vessel for meaning, language implied subtle shifts among and between voices and bodies, while the pre-verbal underpinned all authentic, three-dimensional forms of communication and aesthetic experience. In establishing a relationship between self and other, painter and viewer, writer and reader, what counted most was 'what lay behind the words of the original text before it was written'.[14] This, for Berger, is what lent the products of creative

process a transcendent impulse and allowed them to communicate across history.

The essay on Turner is triangulated in this way, at least in part. When Berger cites the painter on *The Angel Standing in the Sun* (1847) – 'light *devouring* the whole visible world'[15] – he implicitly links luminosity, not to speech, but to orality or to the oral drive, as Freud called it. What he describes is painting's capacity to incorporate the world, to incorporate nature itself. 'I believe that the violence he found in nature only acted as a confirmation of something intrinsic to his own imaginative vision. I have already suggested how this vision may have been partly born from childhood experience. Later it would have been confirmed, not only by nature, but by human enterprise.'[16] In Turner's paintings an intense and violent crossing is staged between the visual and the oral, to the point where the viewer might begin to feel almost as devoured by a painting as the landscape was by Turner and, later, industrialisation. 'The scene begins to extend beyond its formal edges. It begins to work its way round the spectator in an effort to outflank and surround him. [...] There is no longer a near and a far.'[17] Aggression, absorption, the collapse of representational distance: these are the affects that triangulate aesthetic experience with the pre-verbal and make Turner a great and disturbing painter.

Implicit here is the idea that Turner's painting – and indeed all pictorial art worth its salt – is not, in the last instance, a product of political economy, as critics associated with Marxism and the New Left often held (and still do), but rather a product of the internal world that only later found confirmation in the external one: in Turner's case, the world of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. Berger differentiates himself here from the strictly materialist understanding of culture that elsewhere he claimed to hold. Hence perhaps the need for qualification: '[early visual experiences] should be noticed in passing without being used as a comprehensive explanation.'[18] Or, again: 'Turner lived through the first apocalyptic phase of the British Industrial Revolution. Steam meant more than what filled a barber's shop.'[19] Yet the essay's originality does not stem from the romantic view of Turner as a 'genius,'[20] 'a man alone, surrounded by implacable and indifferent forces,'[21] or from the connection it makes between industrialisation and his painting. This last point was well made long before by Ruskin, who also wrote about Turner's boyhood in *Modern Painters* (1843–60), comparing it to Giorgione's. In Ruskin's account, Turner's early life was caught up in 'the meanness, aimlessness, unsightliness of the city,'[22] which would find expression in the relationship between painted light and death: 'death, not once inflicted on the flesh, but daily

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fastening on the spirit.'[23] What makes Berger's essay original is its character as a confabulation, the way it triangulates the experience of painting with the infantile, a language of feeling and affect unconsciously inscribed in the sensorium, 'the wordless language which we have been reading since childhood',[24] as he describes it in *Confabulations* (2016).

Berger was of course aware of psychoanalysis; it had long formed part of the cultural zeitgeist, with many left-leaning intellectuals turning to Freud in the post-war period. As it happens, in the 1940s, when still in his twenties, Berger rented a maid's room above Donald Winnicott's consulting room on Pilgrim's Lane in Hampstead, London, where they frequently passed each other on the stairs. Winnicott, he remembered, would 'often be on his hands and knees in the drawing room on the ground floor playing with and observing a baby, and I would be on the top floor … Four days out of five it seemed hopeless – life was too big, and we would both console one another at the foot of the stairs. The sharpness of the colours. The depth of the panic. Next morning the same infant and the same canvas would prompt us to try to advance further.'[25] Although he says little more on the matter, painting for Berger seems to have unfolded on a path parallel to the psychoanalytic process. This was not only because analyst and painter worked five days a week, but because both painting and psychoanalysis were concerned with the triangulation of subject and object with the unconscious and were frequently confronted with impasses – as psychoanalysts well know, life is often just too big to change in 50 minutes! (There may also be a symbolic equivalence between a painting and a baby.)

Yet psychoanalysis feels most conspicuous in Berger's work by its absence. Indeed, according to Joshua Sperling, Freud was the 'great repressed figure in his 1972 novel *G*.'[26] – the first two words of which are 'The father …' – and may be 'the great repressed figure throughout Berger's entire middle period'[27] – the period to which the essay on Turner belongs. 'Marx was brandished while Freud was covered up.'[28] Sperling links this to Berger's own childhood struggles against his father, Stanley Berger, who once confiscated his copy of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920) and resisted his wish to go to art school, and suggests that these found themselves repeated in battles with establishment figures such as Kenneth Clark (who wrote about Turner on a number of occasions). He also argues that the problem psychoanalysis posed for Berger was political: if, with the God of Communism having failed, priority was given to the individual, the family and the internal world, if, as Winnicott once said, 'home is where we start from', it became more complicated, but by no means impossible, to instigate and sustain a socially revolutionary praxis. A problem appears much easier to resolve when it

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is externalised as a political one; much harder if it is believed to be innate or 'intrinsic'[29], part of someone's 'nature'[30] – both words used by Berger to describe the 'violence'[31] of Turner's vision.

Seen through a psychoanalytic lens, many of the claims made in the essay become clearer. When Berger writes that Turner's paintings often resemble 'the aftermath of a crime'[32], he seems to be suggesting that he was forever working through a violent primal scene that he could only ever know in retrospect. (This is what makes the psychoanalytic story close to traditional crime fiction, where the scene of the crime is always arrived at after the fact and is only reconstructed once it is too late; the story of the crime, the first story, generates the second story, but, like the primal scene, you only ever witness it in its effects and subsequent reconstruction.)[33] Later, when Berger observes that in Turner's painting 'parts could no longer be treated as wholes',[34] it is likely that he was referring to the irrevocable fragmentation of social life in the nineteenth century; but, less predictably, he may also have been referring to an infant's relationship to what Melanie Klein called 'part-objects': the mother's breasts, as well as other organs and 'erogenous zones' (the title of an essay by Berger published in 1992). According to Klein, part-objects are damaged by infants both in phantasy and reality and are only repaired once there is a recognition of the mother as a 'whole object', which leads to the experience of guilt and, afterwards, the wish to make good. In Turner's paintings, it is as if the damage wrought was irreparable, 'like an image of a wound being cauterised'[35] but never truly healed, as Berger describes a painting called *Peace: Burial at Sea* (1842). To spend time looking at the painting is to understand why, for Berger, 'the impossibility of redemption'[36] in Turner's work was connected, not to death, as Ruskin held, but to 'indifference' and, specifically, to the absence of guilt.

In the implicit connections it makes between painting and the unconscious, Berger's essay brings to mind the writings of Adrian Stokes. A critic, painter, lover of ballet and patient of Klein's, Stokes wrote about Turner a decade earlier in his book *Painting and the Inner World* (1962), which Berger is likely to have read and almost certainly to have known about. (There are many overlaps between the two writers: Stokes also wrote about Henry Moore, for instance, albeit sympathetically). Confronted by Turner's painting, Stokes writes of 'a whirlpool envelopment into which we are drawn' and describes how, 'in the act of painting, even his vast distances were pressed up against his visionary eye like the breast upon the mouth'.[37] The painter becomes 'like the breast that feeds [the painting]'.[38] The materiality of oil paint is also commented

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upon – 'Sky and water were equated with the paint itself'[39] – and a connection made between the use of yellow paint and urine. The experience of Turner's painting, according to Stokes, is one of confusion and fluidity. In aesthetic experience, as in unconscious phantasy, eyes and mouths, nipples and hands, urine and paint, penises and brushes, babies and paintings, enter into zones of indistinction. 'There is a long history of indistinctness in Turner's art', writes Stokes, 'connected with what I have called an embracing or enveloping quality, not least of the spectator with the picture.'[40]

Stokes helps raise to the surface the psychoanalytic ideas latent in Berger's text. He also prompts us to consider why Berger should have privileged the paternal over the maternal, placing Turner's mother's mental illness and death between parentheses. We know, for example, that Turner fell out with his uncle and was cut out of his will after having his mother committed to Bethlem, who broke down after the death of her daughter, his beloved sister. At the level of 'childish phantasmagoria', to recall Berger's expression, there is surely as much, if not more, fear, anxiety, guilt and sadness in the experience of an insane, grief-stricken mother as there is in a father's razor and its presumed threat of castration. At a pre-verbal level the mix of blood and water could also describe the amniotic fluid. When Turner had sailors tie him to a ship's mast, like a latter-day Ulysses, so that he could observe a storm at sea – a story Berger recounts – what, unconsciously, did the stormy sea symbolise? What was the nature of the siren song Turner felt so dangerously drawn to, which was also such a rich source of creativity? A recent biographer posed the question well: 'Who is to say that the shipwrecks, drownings, plagues, infernos, avalanches and other catastrophes he would one day depict did not ultimately have their origins in the death of a beloved sister that simultaneously toppled his mother over the edge of insanity?'[41]

The point is not to criticise Berger for what he didn't write, but to say that the omissions are worth thinking about. It does not take a psychoanalyst to recognise that a mother locked to a wall in Bethlem is likely to have a profound impact on a child. So why would a writer as sensitive as Berger not stop and pause? Why would he fix on the biographical data and not the personal sensibility processing it?

Perhaps the answer to these questions is itself biographical. For the first half of his life, Berger seems to have been preoccupied with fathers. A repeated childish phantasmagoria of his own was of a father who, although kindly and ostensibly respectable, working in managerial accounting and living in the middle-class suburb of Stoke Newington,

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protected 'gangsters' (i.e. financiers). Berger's father was 'a front man for every conceivable kind of shark and crook,'[42] he said; criminals he believed ran the world. Such a father cast a threatening and ambivalent shadow, making appearances deceptive, and may have been one of the sources of Berger's revolutionary zeal, which, after all, often involves the dethroning of fathers. (Turner's own father, Berger tells us, ended up becoming his assistant.)

In later life this attitude changed and softened into what could be called an aesthetics of care, where the maternal figures more prominently. In *Confabulations*, for instance, published two years before Berger's death in 2017, he attended to ideas such as the mother tongue, suggesting that the pre-verbal was housed within the mother tongue, words that evoked in my mind the image of an infant in the womb: an unknowable and mystical place, but also claustrophobic and anxiety provoking. Yet it was in 'Mother', an autobiographical essay published in *Keeping a Rendezvous* in 1986, where his concerns for the maternal were most poignantly expressed. Here Berger connects the autobiographical genre to the experience of aloneness, calling it an 'orphan form.'[43] We learn that of all artists, Miriam Berger, his mother, once a suffragette, only ever admired Turner, 'perhaps because of her childhood on the banks of the Thames.'[44] We also learn of her hopes that her son would become a writer, a wish she held since the night he was born. For Berger, this wish was not due to a love of books; growing up, there weren't many around, and his mother never read the ones he published, which must have been painful, although he does not say so. Rather, it was due to her sense that writers were keepers of secrets: inarticulate, unspoken, or indeed unsayable, secrets connected to 'death, poverty, pain (in others), sexuality …'.[45] That his mother never spoke of such matters was, for Berger, due to her gentility, but also to 'a respect, a secret loyalty to the enigmatic'.[46] This, I believe, is what Berger could not yet see or articulate in his essay on Turner, a dimension of life he would spend much of his later years uncovering.

Notes

1 John Berger, *Portraits* (London: Verso, 2017), xi. I would like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for its support through an Early Career Research Fellowship I hold at the University of East Anglia. Thank you also to Leo Robson for his help in editing this article.

2 Berger, *Portraits*, xii.

3 Berger, cited in: Joshua Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time: The Life and Work of John Berger* (London and New York: Verso, 2020), 94.

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4 Berger, *Portraits*, 203.
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9 Turner, cited in: Adrian Stokes, *Painting and the Inner World* in: (ed.) Meg Harris Williams, *Art and Analysis: An Adrian Stokes Reader* (London: Karnac, 2014), 121.
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11 John Berger, *Confabulations* (London: Penguin, 2014), 4.
12 Berger, *Confabulations*, 5.
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14 Berger, *Confabulations*, 26.
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25 Berger, cited in: Tom Overton, 'I Tried to Push Him Down the Stairs: John Berger and Henry Moore in Parallel' (https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/tom-overton-i-tried-to-push-him-down-the-stairs-john-berger-and-henry-moore-in-parallel-r1151306.) Accessed 28/10/22.
26 Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time*, 64.
27 Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time*, 64.
28 Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time*, 64.
29 Berger, *Portraits*, 206.
30 Berger, *Portraits*, 206.
31 Berger, *Portraits*, 206.
32 Berger, *Portraits*, 205.
33 See Tzvetan Todorov's great essay, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction' (1966).
34 Berger, *Portraits*, 206.
35 Berger, *Portraits*, 206.
36 Berger, *Portraits*, 208.
37 Stokes, *Painting and the Inner World*, 120.
38 Stokes, *Painting and the Inner World*, 119.
39 Stokes, *Painting and the Inner World*, 110.

40 Stokes, *Painting and the Inner World*, 112.

41 Moyle, *The Extraordinary Life*, 23.

42 Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time*, 5.

43 Berger, 'Mother', in: ed. Geoff Dyer, *John Berger: Selected Essays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 494.

44 Berger, 'Mother', 494.

45 Berger, 'Mother', 495.

46 Berger, 'Mother', 495.

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