

# Pages from a Painter's Diary

*John Berger*

The following includes extracts from the diary of an elderly mid-European painter living in London during the 1950s. They are taken from **A Painter of Our Time**, by John Berger, which is to be published by Seeker and Warburg this autumn. These selections appear by kind permission of the publishers.

*August 30*

**W**ENT to the National Gallery and looked at the Bellini *Agony and the Titian Ariadne*. They were not gods. It is only the scholars who think them that. Even the worst and humblest painter need feel no awe in front of his great predecessors. We can only learn from the success of our equals. It is the eternal, damned comparative measuring of talent or genius that vitiates art by breeding doubt and by separating ability from its usage. Titian would have acknowledged me, or, if he hadn't, it would have been because he didn't like my face, or because I cheated him out of a commission. In front of a Titian, if it is a good one, I become prouder. I am reminded of what it is to be a painter. And if I am also reminded of the relative failure of my own paintings, this is unimportant; the sense of fraternity is stronger. Only other painters can understand this. Those who think that art is transportable, timeless, universal, understand it least of all. They put a Hindu sculpture next to a Michelangelo and marvel at the fact that in both cases the woman has two breasts! But it is the differences which are essential to our sense of fraternity. Each of us works for different ends, under different pressures, a few of them personal, most of them social and historical. Without these differences we could never accept the difference in achievements. The only thing we share is the magnitude of the

difficulty we face: the technical difficulty. The historians would even deny that of course. They would contrast a craftsman in the Byzantine tradition which barely changed for centuries, with the revolutionaries of the Renaissance. But I do not accept this as the whole truth. We all face the same problem of co-ordinating our eyes and our hands with our minds. We are all athletes whose limbs are images. And the athletes of every age have something in common. A Byzantine mosaicist pauses to reflect on the last ordained tessera he has inserted; a Renaissance painter pauses to reflect on whether his proportions, his counterpoint, can be made more unified; a Baroque artist pauses to examine whether he can tense even further; Delacroix pauses to reflect on the romantic alchemy of his colour; Cezanne pauses to reflect again on whether he is still being faithful to his little elusive sensation; we today pause to reflect on whether our severity might be made more severe; and in every one of these pauses the artist faces the same difficulty—it is the difficulty that unites us—the difficulty of making the intangible, of creating a cold form to contain our fervent content. All of us know that difficulty so profoundly that we would all recognize its nature despite the totally different considerations that fill our pauses. Down the road there is an old man who sits in a chair under the porch of his front door to enjoy the sun. He is very old. In fact he is dying. And because I

know this, every time I pass him, I pass the time of day with him. I tell him he is getting brown in the sun. Or he asks me about the price of the vegetables in my shopping bag—once he lived in the country, and I answer him at length and with great warmth. Why do I do this? It is a natural reaction. Soon he will die, he will be dead as Laszlo, and I want him between now and then and perhaps even at the moment of dying, to have good thoughts, not of me personally, but of the living, of the world he leaves. I want to give him reason for thinking the best possible thoughts. And so it has been for every artist. The old man, sunning through his last days, is not strictly speaking a necessary reminder for us artists. We know it without having to pass him on the way back from the greengrocers. We have all wanted others to take away the best possible thoughts that we can struggle to make manifest. And in that is our fraternity. To all those who have not faced the difficulty of it, our common aim will sound so vague that it becomes unreal. But was it so unreal, Laci? Or were you? Let me think again of the Titian and Bellini.

For the Renaissance artist draperies were what paint and drawing themselves have become for us. Their folds have become our brushmarks, or, for those of us who are suspicious of gesture, our manner of analysing planes. Renaissance drapery was as arbitrary as the facets of the Cubists. The robe that Christ wears in the Bellini is simultaneously a manner of analysing the structure of his body, of unifying him with the merciless landscape where the same fissures are made of rock instead of cloth, and of expressing the moment of reckoning when time looks like the slowest glacier, yet moves more terribly than the fastest shooting star. After you were sentenced, Laci, you waited for such time to kill you.

Let me think again of the Titian. It is the same. Drapery has nothing to do with dress in that painting either. It entwines, flows over, trails beyond and glorifies the bodies just as three hundred years later Renoir made the light do. Or even as fifty years later Titian himself did in that Shepherd and Nymph in Vienna. Ah! The milk of the light in that canvas I haven't seen for twenty-five years! And the hand of the otherwise invisible unknown lover plucking the woman's arm! How the old man dreamt! After the sleeping draught and the last visit of the brisk, cheerful night nurse in the old people's ward how many octogenarians mutter beside that shepherd and, putting their old hand into the glove of that young one, play whilst the shepherd pipes the tunes of their heyday and the broken tree behind bears witness to their age and the temperature chart above their bed? We have all been simple. What is complex beyond measure is our technique. Titian said a great painter needed only three colours. But I count vision as technique too. Titian as a randy old man is no different from my friend down the road watching the girls walk through his last summer. Genius is never a case apart. It is utterly opposed to mania. The genius bears the full weight of what is common, of what exists hundreds and thousands of times over. But he watches himself. That is the largest part of his technique and it is what separates him from others. We all forget continually. The genius, because he watches himself, remembers. He naively remembers his dreams, he ruthlessly remembers his real experiences, and gradually, very gradually he learns to remember the exact nature of his mistakes and successes as a man applying paint to a flat surface. And so he recognizes what others have felt but never known. Technique and genius are nothing more nor less than recognition.

I have tried to sleep but I cannot. When I close my eyes I see the Titian canvas in Vienna. But behind the figures in the scrubbed, unfinished milky dawn light of the sky, I see too much of Vienna. I hear the buckets of a nearby *con-*

*cierge* early in the morning after we had killed Paul who had betrayed us.

Let me think again of the woman in the foreground. Two buttocks like pearls. There are two kinds of remembering. There is the Giorgione Venus in Dresden. And there is the Titian. Giorgione remembers the figure of a woman who is already departed, already absent, already subject to the idealization of memory that begins as soon as one commences to remember one's memories. I love that Giorgione. But she hangs there like a crescent moon remembered on a cloudy night. She is a reconstruction. And so she fits into an ordained shape. She is anticipation and memory but she is not fact. Her awkward limbs slide into a total form of perfect symmetry. She is reconstructed, all be it perfectly—but there's the point: *not* imperfectly—from the imprint she left on the grass. But not so the Titian with two buttocks like two pearls. There are elusions there too, but they are tribute only to the unreasonable adoration one feels in face of the fact; they are a tribute to the unknown quality that jostles the known facts—not to the kind of memory that does not jostle at all. The Giorgione is a virgin dream, poignant in its ignorance. The Titian is the memory of a woman that was briefly once all that the picture pretends. The point is too fine perhaps for any except an emigre who both dreams of and remembers the women of his own country. Katinka. My age.

#### May 12

The faces must be open like vases. This was Michelangelo's secret as much as it is Leger's. It is the energy of their bodies that fills their faces with meaning. It is the opposite of Rembrandt. In Rembrandt it is the expression that gives the body meaning. Moreover, by expression in that sense we always mean tragic expression. Happiness is curiously impersonal. That is why we can identify ourselves so easily with a happy pair of lovers, and even share their happiness. At a bus stop today I saw an old man and an old woman. There was a short queue and the old woman was at the head of it. The old man comes up and stands behind her. Nobody else in the queue objects. But the old woman turns round and, swearing, tells him to take his proper place in the queue—at the back. He says that it is none of her business. She replies that everyone taking their turn is her business and everybody's business. And so they wrangle and swear at each other. She turns her back on him. And he stares with loathing at the grey bun on the back of her neck. Then she turns round and looks him up and down, noticing the buttons that are missing from his shabby suit, the frayed cuffs, the undone shoelace. You're a filthy man, she says, and her mouth turns down over the words. The bus arrives. And they get on together and sit next to one another. They are husband and wife. Their faces, harsh and individual in their suffering, have been recorded many times in the history of painting. You will find them in Cosimo Tura, and in Michelangelo himself—when he tried to destroy the Sistine ceiling by painting the Last Judgment, in Breughel, in Rembrandt, in El Greco, in Goya, in Daumier, in Grunewalde, in Picasso. Their suffering challenges your individuality, puts you on your guard, and cautiously, because you're playing with fire, you take in as much of the truth about your life as you dare. God knows I should be able to paint like that myself; I have seen enough. But another vision persists. Calm. Permanence. The stability of the anonymous. The pride of the artist searching, not directly for his soul, but for ever-increased skill. Piero, Raphael, Veronese, Poussin, David, Cezanne, Leger, Brancusi and, in his distracted Calvinist way, Mondrian too. The art historians

make the differentiation between Romantic and Classic, but that has little sense before the nineteenth century. And anyway Delacroix, arch-romantic, immensely admired Raphael. No, the difference is between those who believe that life is essentially tragic and those who do not. I do not. The individual is tragic. But the individual can also question this tragedy and so become heroic: heroism consists of understanding that the achievement can be greater than the individual achiever.

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August 11

I have glimpsed how pictures can be cherished. One of the students at the school is a Cypriot. Very earnest, very proud, trying to make two moments out of every one of his education, and very likeable. All last term he was trying to persuade me to go and see the works of a friend of his, another Cypriot painter. I went today. This friend lives with his aunt, who keeps a cafe, in two rooms in Camden Town. After I'd seen the boy's paintings, the aunt insisted upon my having tea. Tea being Cypriot wine, olives, salami, and God knows what else. Our southern hospitality among the northern railways of Camden Town. She is a short woman, bag-shaped, and always, I imagine, dressed in her traditional peasant black. Her eyes are withdrawn, only they are made sharp by a squint. While I ate, she stood at one side of the table and whenever I looked at her, she smiled and propelled herself towards me behind her huge bosom to offer me another plate of something to eat. After the meal was over, she said: "Now, mister, would you like to see my pictures?" I was surprised because I found it hard to believe that she painted as well. Then it turned out that I had misunderstood her. What she wanted to show me were her photographs and snapshots of Cyprus. Yet in fact I had not

entirely misunderstood her because for her there was absolutely no distinction between her photographs and her nephew's paintings—many of which were also of Cypriot scenes. How could there be? Both transported her home and when she was there, she was not going to bother about exactly what kind of vessel it was she had sailed in. She held each picture up in front of her as if it were a mirror before giving it to me. Here was her son, proudly sporting an American tie. Now, she said, he only had one arm. How did that happen? He was shot. She said it with ancient weariness—as if it were a time-honoured blasphemy that had retained its meaning but could no longer shock. Behind her large bosom, behind her smile, behind her counter in the cafe downstairs, she had lived now for a long time with the image of an arm severed off from her son and thrown into a bin. But I don't think it occurred to her that the shot might have been fired by the son of one of her British customers. Here was the house he had been born in—with a protruding roof to give shade to the ground on one side of it. Here was an old photographer's photograph of her husband. In ceremonial sepia. He was drowned. Here were her friends. Here was the bay you could see from the house. Here were her nieces bathing. Here was the bought postcard of the church. That is where she was married. Here was her brother in the door of his shop. At the end, she kept her stubby thumb pressed hard down on the last photograph. I leant over to look at it for I knew surely that it was of her. Here was a young girl and as I studied it she straightened her back with pride, and smiled. She was proud in the same way as if it had been her daughter. And by the same token I smiled at her as if I were going to be her future son-in-law. When she gathered the photographs up, she placed them in a leather wallet under some brightly embroidered, treasured garment.

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Now entering its second year, in the summer number Claude Bourdet, G. D. H. Cole, D. G. Arnot and Ralph Miliband discuss foreign policy and provide more facts for the N.D. Campaign, Doris Lessing has a new short story, Christopher Logue *The Song of Autobiography*, and Peter Worsley discusses recent sociological research in *Britain—Unknown Country*. There is an illustrated feature on *Daumier and de Gaulle*, Ronald Meek writes on *Marxism in Japan*, there are excerpts from the Yugoslav Draft Programme and Edward Thompson writes again on "socialist humanism." In the autumn number (out in September) there will be a special feature—"Searchlight on Labour"—and a feature on the visual arts in which John Berger, Derek Greaves, Edward Middleditch and Dr. Burnett Stross, M.P., take part. And did you read the spring number, with its special symposium—*NATO or Neutrality?*—its story by Tibor Dery, John Rex on *Central Africa* and Christopher Hill on *Antonio Gramsci*? Better sign on for the year . . .

I have never seen drawings handled as those photographs were handled. And no museum in the world contains for its curator such treasures as that tallboy's drawer for my hostess.

June 26

It is the most profound activity of all, this one of drawing. And the most demanding. It is when I draw that I regret the weeks, the years perhaps, that I have wasted. If, as in the fairy stories, I could grant a gift to a child who was to become a painter, it would be a long life, so that he might master this activity of drawing. What so few people realize is that the painter, unlike the writer or the architect or the designer, is both creator and executant of his art. He needs two lives. And above all to master drawing. Nearly every artist can draw when he has made a discovery. But to draw in order to discover—that is the god-like process, that is to find effect and cause. The power of colour is nothing compared to the power of the line; the line that does not exist in nature but which can expose and demonstrate the tangible more sharply than can sight itself when confronted with the actual object. To draw is to know by hand—to have the proof that Thomas demanded. Out of the artist's mind through the point of a pencil or pen comes proof that the world is solid, material. But the proof is never familiar. Every great drawing—even if it is of a hand or the back of a torso: forms perceived thousands of times before—is like the map of a newly discovered island. Only it is far easier to read a drawing than a map; in front of a drawing it is the five senses that make a surveyor.

All great drawing is drawing by memory. That is why it takes so long to learn. If drawing was transcription, a kind of script writing, it could be taught in a few years. Even before a model, you draw from memory. The model is a reminder. Not of a stereotype that you know by heart. Not even of anything you can consciously remember. The model is a reminder of experiences you can only formulate and therefore only remember by drawing. And those experiences add up to the sum total of your awareness of the tangible, three-dimensional, structural world. A blank page of a sketch book is a blank, white page. Make one mark on it and the edges of the pages are no longer simply where the paper was cut, they have become the borders of a microcosm. Make two marks on it of uneven pressure and the whiteness ceases to be whiteness and becomes opaque three-dimensional space that must be made less opaque and more and more lucid by every succeeding mark. That microcosm is filled with the potentiality of every proportion you have ever perceived or sensed. That space is filled with the potentiality of every form, sliding plane, hollow, point of contact, passage of separation, you have ever set eye or hand on. And it does not stop even there. For, after a few more marks, there is air, there is pressure and therefore there is bulk and weight. And this scale is then filled with the potentiality of every degree of hardness, yieldingness, force of movement, activeness and passiveness that you have ever buried your head in, or knocked it against. And from all this you must select in a few minutes, as nature did through millenia, in order to create a human ankle, a human arm-pit with the pectoral muscle burying itself like an underground stream, or the bough of a tree. From all this you must select the one lock and one key. I would grant three lives not two.

October 25

It is a strange solitude that we choose. Yet we do choose it so there is no point whatsoever in regretting it. It is like the solitude of a man who, for some reason, is able to see all the stars in the sky in the daylight. The other people in the street stare at him as he looks up at the sky and then they look up themselves because they believe he can see an aeroplane. Which quite possibly he can. But it wasn't why he was looking.

Every time I come back here I look at the Games. I did something there. I brought it out. Diana looks at it and sees committees and not the flowers which are in it, but the flowers which will be put in front of it when it's in ceremonial position. The man who collects the shillings from the gas meter looks at it and sees a lot of figures made of triangles and bunting. He may or may not like it. He should be given time. The one thing painting needs—TIME. And Peace is time. But anyway he has few preconceived ideas and obviously it is a big job of work. He hasn't that sneaking suspicious feeling, which the bourgeois can never lose, that I may be laughing at him. He can laugh as well as I can.

Nevertheless, what I see is like the stars in daylight. In every shape on that canvas I could now go to sleep happy. None of it is just paint now, just coloured shit. It is clean. Every colour has ceased to be something that can be rubbed off. Has become space and form. No one else will ever quite understand the satisfaction of that. The painted athletes will take the credit. Which is right. The content of the picture must always get the credit of the painter's technical struggle. The great acrobat, the great juggler, the great comedian, always appears to be giving his performance for the first time, because when you look at his performance it is inconceivable that there should have been any struggle. The performance must take all, leaving us only our names. Painter and critics always mean something different by the word style. Critics mean panache, elegance. But when I say The Games has style, I simply mean I see the best of myself in it. And this best is almost impersonal because it is quite separate from myself as I am—good and bad together.

October 11

If we think of ourselves as special creators, we are wrong. Everyone creates in the same way as we do. They invent, imagine, hope, dream, frighten themselves, remember, observe—and from all this they make for themselves certain ideas and images, some expressible, some inexpressible. Where we're different from most people is the way we try to destroy these ideas and images. We hit at them, strike them, do our utmost to kill them. We often succeed—the image falls away, lifeless, at last recognizable as a lie or a cliché. Just occasionally there is one that withstands our beating. It won't die. The more we beat it the stronger and harder it becomes. It becomes indestructible. We have made a work of art—we, creators, whose job is to destroy the tentative, the half-conscious, the merely evocative. 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.