

## READING THE QUEST FOR “THE HUMAN” IN JOHN BERGER: SCATTERED NOTES FROM THE BACK OF THE MAGIC BUS

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*On their side of the barricades it is already the future*

John Berger wrote his novel *G* in 1972. This book traveled with me to South Africa during the summer of 2014, having actually become part of my library in the winter of 2012 after the recommendation of a good friend who had obtained a master’s degree in English Literature. For no other reason I chose it as my bus reading.

For Amazon.com reviewers, Berger wrote a simple story, albeit elegant and insightful. The text narrates the life of a British-Italian “Don Juan” who learned the powers of the Simmelian stranger – as it were – and harnessed them to seduce a number of women. It is situated in Europe, at turn of the XIX century. Along with Giovanni, the character that provides the novel with a title, and Berger, as he intermittently makes himself present throughout the text, the reader travels through the 1898 workers revolt in Italy; through an attack by Boer commandos of a British encampment in the mountains north of the Great Karoo, Cape Colony, in 1901; through the first flight across the Alps; through the battlefields in the western front of the Great War...

This summary is accurate. But it does an injustice to Berger and *G*. In describing, it distorts.

Berger’s topic is survival.

And so was ours.

At the WiSER seminar room in Johannesburg, Achille Mbembe’s talk on “Non-racial Futures in Contemporary Black Thought” clarified to me the poignant interest of exercising a long lost faculty of our intellect: the capacity to aspire. This year the JWTC was concerned with flexing the atrophied muscle of the imagination. It was about dreaming. But not in the distant, monotonous, almost disembodied tone of our mind abandoned to itself, as when it contemplates the views of the African bush passing through the bus window. It carefully avoided fruitless reverie. Our work in the JWTC consisted in drafting a futurology. Deeply engaged with the present, it was about envisioning the politics of the possible within the horizon of our times: our rage, tears, laughter, love, mutual trust, witnessing, listening, and certainly sacrifice, foreshadowed an ethics, a political ethics urgently needed if humans wish to survive in the age of the anthropocene.

To the violence of circumstance, we chose to oppose the violence of imaginative preoccupation.

Berger walked me to this conclusion. According to my journal, the scribbles on my notebook, and the small plastic blue post-its glued here and there on my copy of *G*, the passages that I subsequently quote *in extenso* were critical to my overall thinking about the workshop. In citing Berger I wish not to sound pedantic. Rather, my intention is to exercise my own imagination, not only through an admittedly generous – and perhaps somewhat idiosyncratic – reading, but also by virtue of deploying a mode of attentiveness, a certain sensibility, that I honed during this journey.

### HISTORY

*Arrival to Johannesburg. The Africa Museum. Exhibition on photography during Apartheid. Why*

*gather us in South Africa? In Mexico, we are all me-sizos. Race is over. Is it not? Talk to Fede, chat with the Argentinean Prof. [...].*

Berger quoting Collingwood (p. 53):

“All history is contemporary history: not in the ordinary sense of the word, where contemporary history means the history of the comparatively recent past, but in the strict sense: the consciousness of one’s own activity as one actually performs it. History is thus the self-knowledge of the mind. For even when the events which the historian studies are events that happened in the distant past, the condition of their being historically known is that they should vibrate in the historian’s mind.”

### THE PROBLEM

Border crossing into Swaziland. Many ways are there to be ‘race’ (racialized?), only one to be white. Elliot’s research on taxis, movement, and the queer subject supplements De Certeau nicely in this regard. Roommate![...]

In a luxurious Milan restaurant, Berger (p. 61) makes Umberto (Giovanni’s father, a rich seller of canned fruit from Livorno) say to Laura (Giovanni’s mother and Umberto’s mistress, a Fabian socialist):

“The problem of poverty! Umberto interrupts, repeating the words very loudly and laughing. In our country, he says, poverty isn’t a problem. It’s a life. There is only one way of being rich but there are a thousand ways of being poor.”

## LOVE

*House on Fire, Swaziland. Long day. From bananas to intimacy and sex. Love emerges as intellectual framework. [...] Language itself inflicts on us the wound of race. If the non-racial is to be anything, it will be without words. Yet, racism is also affective: Dhammamega dixit. [...] Dinner. Goat canapés. Tjiaja: how is one to make love political? Can we design public policy based on love rather than rights? Entitlement? The duty of mutuality: Kropotkin.*

Reflecting on how Giovanni, as a child, fell in love with his governess, Berger (p. 36) writes:

“Being in love is an elaborate state of anticipation for the continual exchanging of certain kinds of gifts. The gifts can range from a glance to the offering of the entire self. But the gifts must be gifts: they cannot be claimed. One has no rights as a lover – except the right to anticipate what the other wishes to give. Most children are surrounded by their rights (their right to indulgence, to consolation, etc.): and so they do not and cannot fall in love. But if a child – as result of circumstances – comes to realize that such rights as he does enjoy are not fundamental, if he has recognized, however inarticulately, that happiness is not something that can be assured and promised but is something that each has to try to find for himself, if he is aware of being essentially alone, then he may find himself anticipating pure, gratuitous and continual gifts offered by another and the state of that anticipation is the state of being in love.”

“If the non-racial is to be anything, it will be without words.”

## WORDLESSNESS

*House on Fire. Swaziland. Roberta cannot help feeling enraged by the architect of Apartheid. Is rage another component of the list of intellectual frameworks that we are drafting? We are listing frames to think possibility. And all these frames must be wordless: besides love, we explored the potentiality of trust (Siva). Wopko Jensma is proof of the power of wordlessness, even if his medium is poetry. Helen: we must learn to predicate on “we” without words. Achille Mbembe calls this “the politics of form”. The cage of language should not deceive us: the universal is affective.*

Berger (pp. 66 – 67) narrates how the young Giovanni, the morning after his parents met in Milan, left his hotel alone to stroll around the city and how he found himself in the midst of a workers strike turn violent. It was May 5, 1898. In the turmoil, a group of boys his age, who spoke only Italian (while Giovanni spoke only English, having grown up under his aunt’s care in Great Britain), aggressively grabbed him and interrogated him about his presence. Was he a spy? Giovanni, Berger tells us, shook his head and shrug his shoulders:

“[...] So you are not Italian. They try to talk but the boy understands nothing. The young man puts his arm around the boy’s shoulders [Giovanni’s]. Within a few seconds his whole attitude is reversed. If the boy cannot understand their language, he is immune to the hypocrisy of deception of words and thus can be the pure witness of their actions. The boy’s wordlessness now appears to him, in an unclear paradoxical way, to be comparable with the universality of the Revolution

in which he believes. He calls to his sister in a nearby group of mill-girls: Come and meet our *pulcino*, he says, *Ecco il nostro pulcino.*”

## WITNESS

*Movement. En route to Durban. After Swaziland’s oral history session, I am afraid that suspicion was the substance of everyday life under Apartheid. Our dreaming needs to be grounded on this eroded land. We need fertilizers for this dry historical soil. Françoise evokes the importance of witnessing. Is this a way? Justice demands judgment [...].*

On May 5, 1898, the Italian strikers advanced until the cavalry charged; before that happened, Berger presents to us the atmosphere (p. 68):

“The crowd see the city around them with different eyes. They have stopped the factories producing, forced the shops to shut, halted the traffic, occupied the streets. It is they who have built the city and they who maintain it. They are discovering their own creativity. [...] Of the reality of politics most of the crowd are ignorant. Politics are the means by which they are kept suppressed and impoverished. Politics are the means by which they are deceived and disarmed. Politics is the State which oppresses them. In the heart of each there is a desire to challenge the entire political armoury of their oppressors with the single and simple weapon of justice: the justice of their own cause, crying out to the sky above Milan and to the future. Yet justice implies a judge. And there is no judge and no judgment.”

## BARRICADES

*Ginsberg. Steve Biko Center. We have to demonstrate that racism is incompatible with the modern world, with the world of the anthropocene. We need to insolently demonstrate this incompatibility. We need to fracture the present and transform the racial into past. Race must be pushed to the other side of the barricade.*

In Milan, on May 5, 1898, Berger (p. 71):

“At the barricades the pain is over. The transformation is complete. It is completed by a shout from the rooftops that the soldiers are advancing. Suddenly there is nothing to regret. The barricades are between their defenders and the violence done to them throughout their lives. There is nothing to regret because it is the quintessence of their past which is now advancing against them. On their side of the barricades it is already the future. Every ruling minority needs to numb and, if possible, to kill the time-sense of those whom it exploits by proposing a continuous present. This is the authoritarian secret of all methods of imprisonment. The barricades break that present.”

## RACISM

*Johannesburg. David Goldberg warns that anti-racism bears with it the reproduction of racial thinking. It shares the premises. [...] Ginsberg. Ghassan: How does one recover the minor realities that are lost with racial thinking? Cape Town. [...] I am being hosted by Elliot's friends, two anthropologists. One of these girls has promised to put me in contact with a retired transsexual sex worker who will take me to Gugulethu*

*“This mountain in the middle of Cape Town is a wall. I have seen this architecture before.”*

*township. I will go tomorrow. [...] This mountain in the middle of Cape Town is a wall. I have seen this architecture before. I have seen it on 67<sup>th</sup> street in south Chicago where I was stopped by city police, forcibly escorted back to the University of Chicago and invited to “stick in the future to my area, north of 59<sup>th</sup> street”.*

Remembering the husband of Giovanni's aunt, an empire builder who died in battle in South Africa, Berger reflects (p.101):

“African civilization in South Africa was destroyed by the Boers. The Boers colonized South Africa for the later benefit of the British. The British intermittently aided them in this colonization but the essential relation between the colonizers and the colonized was created by the Boers. Yet the Boers were themselves fugitives – in both a geographical and a historical sense. They defeated in the name of defeat. When, in the eighteenth century, they began to penetrate into the High Veld, they did so to escape the controls of the Dutch East India Company in Cape Town, and as soon as they did so, they regressed historically. They abandoned fixed farms; they became nomadic herdsmen and hunters.

“The Great Trek of 1835 which led the Boers into Natal, the Transvaal and Orange Free State was a retreat from the demands and disciplines in all spheres of social activity – productive, political, moral – of nineteenth-century Europe. Unlike other colonizers it could not occur to the Boers that they were taking ‘civilization’ into ‘the dark continent’: they themselves were withdrawing from that ‘civilization’.

“Their productive means were no more advanced than those of the Bantu whose land they seized, whose crops they burnt and whose herds they stole. Their fire-arms, fast horses and wagons gave them the necessary tactical advantages. But they were incapable of exploiting the labour force of impoverished squatters which they created. With all their rights of mastery and property, which they held to be sacred and God-given, they could do nothing. They were impotent; and they were alone among those whom they had uselessly defeated.

“In the rest of the world which Europe colonized, enslaved and exploited, native populations were massacred and destroyed (in Australia, in North America): deported elsewhere (from West Africa as slaves): or else they were accommodated within a moral, religious, social system which rationalized and justified the colonizations (catholicism in Latin America, the princely kingdoms and the caste system integrated into the imperial rule of India). In South Africa the Boers were unable to establish such a self-justifying ‘moral’ hegemony. They could accommodate neither victory nor victims. They could draw up no treaty with those whom they had dispossessed. There was no settlement possible, because they were unable to use what they had taken. There was consequently less hypocrisy or complacency or corruption among the Boers than among other colonizers. But it seemed to them that the existence of every African was an incitement to that great black avenging which they continually feared. And since no settlement was possible, the justification, the explanation of their position had to be continually reaffirmed through individual emotion. Day and night every Boer had to insure that his feeling of mastery was stronger than his fear. All that could relieve the fear was hatred.”