

Commentary

'The half I keep': John Berger's Booker Prize speech 50 years later

MARTYN HUDSON

Abstract: Fifty years after John Berger's controversial acceptance speech for the Booker Prize in 1972, in which he highlighted Booker McConnell's involvement in the colonial exploitation of the Caribbean and announced that he would donate half of the prize money to the British Black Panthers and the other half use to research the situation of European migrant workers, the author reflects on the implications of the speech for anti-racist struggle in the 1970s and today, as well as the direction of Berger's work after this pivotal intervention.

Key words: *A Seventh Man*, Booker McConnell, Booker Prize, *G*, John Berger, migrant labour

Introduction

On 23 November 1972 John Berger delivered his acceptance speech for the Booker Prize at the Café Royal in London. It was awarded for his experimental novel *G*, published in June earlier that year.¹ The speech allowed him to testify about the experimental novel as imagining another reality and to vilify not just the act of competition but the entire history of slavery and racism that had led to that moment. Berger announced he would share half of the prize money with the Black Panther Movement in London. The half he kept was to be used for a study of migrant labourers in Europe, alongside photographer Jean Mohr, which would ultimately become *A Seventh Man*.² This speech is a moment that Sukhdev Sandhu has referred to as a performance, an act of rebellion.³ Revisiting the speech fifty years later allows us to think about three entangled formulations in what Berger had to say: the implications for anti-racist struggle of that period; the insights that it might hold for communities of resistance in our present; and the barely-conceived futures.

In the speech, Berger refers to the 'inner voice' of the novelist. His act of sharing the prize money was focused on his future work as a writer and the project that he was discerning ahead on migrant labour in Europe: 'What is their view of the world? Of themselves? Of us? Of their own exploitation?'⁴ Making a direct link between Booker McConnell's involvement in the colonial exploitation of the Caribbean and the modern poverty in the region, he reflected on how his future project on migrant workers would be financed from the profits made on their ancestors. And in sharing the prize 'the half I give away will change the half I keep'.⁵ He sees this as an act of sharing against exploitation and colonialism, but also as a kind of reparation for a set of moments that had happened centuries before this speech:

Martyn Hudson is an Assistant Professor in Art and Design History at Northumbria University, Newcastle, UK

Before the slave trade began, before the European de-humanised himself, before he clenched himself on his own violence, there must have been a moment when black and white approached each other with the amazement of potential equals. The moment passed. And henceforth the world was divided between potential slaves and potential slavemasters. And the European carried this mentality back into his own society. It became part of his way of seeing everything.⁶

Berger's act of reparation is situated in an emerging territory of hope – that the two lineages of 'descendants' could meet each other again with the 'amazed hope of potential equals'.⁷

Reception of the speech

The speech caused uproar amongst its spectators. For Joshua Sperling, who documents the hostile reaction amongst the audience to the speech, the moment becomes entwined with the intention of the novel *G* itself:

Like a moon circling around a planet, the speech has a curious relation to the novel that occasioned it. The two share a connection, but it is not a straightforward one. The speech was almost a lived-out coda to the book, the uproar it produced like a scene contained within it.⁸

The novel itself is situated in a Europe of mobility and migration. It is deeply entangled with a sense of political hope, but perhaps more importantly, it acts as an interior reflection on the protagonist and the writer himself. As Sperling writes:

The egalitarian image at the heart of the Booker speech was not only a political dream. It was also an allegory and refracted self-portrait. On the stage at the Café Royal, the artist and the revolutionary saluted each other in the mirror.⁹

This novel was another iteration of Berger's lifelong self-portrait, but it also marks an end to a certain type of novel. Berger had already begun to document the experiences of migrant labour, and this would culminate in his late, great novels on the peasant experience in Europe.¹⁰

Struggles in the early 1970s

Of course, there were insights for Berger and for the anti-racist struggles of the early '70s, including against the policing of black communities and the pulverisation of working-class power in the following decade. The symbolic power of the Grunwick strike¹¹ signalled a measure of hope but, to a great extent, working-class self-identity began to be severed from political practice. The idea of an equal 'contact' – a 'moment when black and white approached each other with the amazement of potential equals' – that had somehow been lost had implications for the future: that the violent caesura of racialisation and subjugation in early capitalism could somehow be restituted and reparations made.

There was hope for the future, but it had to be found, and Berger would find it in what he saw as the dying class of the European peasantry and their migration to the cities of Europe. This was a world of gravitas and dignity that was slowly dying, and the restoral of the lost stories of rural labour and their severance with land, animals and crops, became Berger's obsession. He lived amongst them and witnessed their labours, their ancestries, and their exile. He also found sources of liberation and hope elsewhere, with the mining communities of Britain, the social struggles in Chiapas, and amongst the marginalised and the imprisoned. He became obsessed in both his fiction and non-fiction with the emerging geographies of communities, new forms of enclosure and struggles over land.

The world of migrant workers

All of this, in 1972, was part of his rethinking of his own communist civilisation. He had, become increasingly critical of Stalinism through the '60s. With the new emerging horizons of migrant labour, he had begun to untie himself, in both his fiction and his writings on art, from any kind of 'official' communism. To live in rural France, amongst the labouring poor, was not an abdication of struggle but an 'unveiling' of the end of a certain way of living – of a world, of a migration and an exile emerging out of the wreckage of pre-capitalist civilisation. In some ways it offered another form of contact, where the descendants of that first contact would meet again and be amazed. This radical act of empathy with peasant labour was an archival gesture from the exterior, as Berger clearly recognised that he was not one of them. The world of migrant workers, the *Xeno-Monde*, was already documenting itself from within and indeed, had always been doing so, away from the gaze of power. Of course, power had its own data sources: migration routes, numbers of migrants, deportation figures but the *Xeno-Monde* was also self-defining and self-determining through its own writing, photographs and media. Berger himself had written in *G*: 'To understand him closely we must consider him from afar'.¹² Ultimately, he would go closer again and again to document individual labour, but his lens was also planetary.

In the end, Berger finds that art, rather than retribution, is what matters:

I can't tell you what art does and how it does it, but I know that often art has judged the judges, pleaded revenge to the innocent and shown to the future what the past suffered, so that it has never been forgotten. I know too that the powerful fear art, whatever its form, when it does this, and that amongst the people such art runs like a rumour and a legend ...¹³

Art and writing become the 'meeting-place', a form of retribution, but also a repair of that lost contact between human beings as equals – it 'becomes a meeting-place of the invisible...'.¹⁴ This restoration of hope allows the statues of power to be downed and new archival histories to emerge.

The 'Café Royal' is a moment in a writer's life, but also it marks a historical moment full of hopes unfulfilled and those yet to be satisfied. These hopes were vague because the future could not be clearly discerned, but Berger tried to live each day as an act of resistance, in solidarity with movements of hope and as the embodiment of counter-capital. He was not interested in the accumulation of anything. The half he gave away changed the half he kept.

References

- ¹ John Berger 'Speech on accepting the Booker Prize for fiction at the Café Royal in London on 23 November 1972' in Geoff Dyer (ed.) *John Berger: selected essays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), pp. 253–255.
- ² John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man: the story of a migrant worker in Europe* (London: Granta, 1989).
- ³ Sukhdev Sandhu, 'Other Kinds of Dreams: why John Berger's writing matters', in Gareth Evans, *Here Is Where We Meet: John Berger; a season in London 2005* (London: Artevents, 2005), p. 12.
- ⁴ Gareth Evans, *Here Is Where We Meet*, pp. 253–254.
- ⁵ Gareth Evans, *Here Is Where We Meet*, p. 254.
- ⁶ Gareth Evans, *Here Is Where We Meet*, pp. 254–255.
- ⁷ Gareth Evans, *Here Is Where We Meet*, p. 254.
- ⁸ Joshua Sperling, *A Writer of Our time: the life and work of John Berger* (London: Verso, 2020), p. 141.
- ⁹ Sperling, *A Writer of Our time*, p. 160.
- ¹⁰ See Berger's trilogy *Into Their Labours* (London: Granta, 1991) consisting of the novels *Pig Earth*, *Once in Europa* and *Lilac and Flag*.
- ¹¹ In 1976, South Asian workers at the Grunwick film processing plant in north-west London went on a strike lasting two years in protest of their treatment. The strike was widely supported by trade unionists, anti-racists, feminists, postal workers and miners. See A. Sivanandan's article on the Grunwick strike in *A Different Hunger* (London: Pluto Press, 1982).
- ¹² John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man*.
- ¹³ John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man*.
- ¹⁴ John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man*, p. 9.