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Berger's ghosts: Storytelling and death in John Berger's «The red tenda of Bologna»

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Abstracts

This article discusses John Berger's experimental work entitled *The red tenda of Bologna* first published in 2007. Like several other Berger's late works, it mixes fiction, criticism and documentary forms to address aspects of the lived reality of our historical time; in particular, it focuses attention on the themes of death, temporality and memorialisation. Beginning at the end with the death of Berger's uncle and working its way to the meaning of the life that has passed, *The red tenda* is exemplary of Berger's late narrative's attempts to rescue the past from oblivion, to find ways of bringing personal and historical memory into an enduring relationship, and to perpetuate cultural and collective memory through storytelling. This article proposes a critical trajectory that connects *The red tenda* with Berger's late works and with Walter Benjamin's essay *The Storyteller. Reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov*.

Questo articolo propone una riflessione su *The red tenda of Bologna* di John Berger, un'opera dal carattere sperimentale pubblicata nel 2007. Come altre opere tarde di Berger, essa intreccia diverse forme letterarie – finzione, discorso critico e documentario – per proporre una riflessione su aspetti cruciali dei nostri tempi. In particolare, incentra l'attenzione sui temi di temporalità, memorializzazione e morte. Prendendo le mosse dalla scomparsa dello zio dell'autore e snodandosi attraverso la rappresentazione del significato di vite presenti e passate, *The red tenda* è una esemplificazione del tentativo di Berger di recuperare il passato dall'oblio e forgiare connessioni tra ricordi personali e memoria storica, proponendo riflessioni di più largo respiro su come preservare il passato attraverso l'atto del raccontare storie. Questo articolo propone un percorso critico che mette in relazione *The red tenda* con le opere tarde di Berger e il saggio di Walter Benjamin *Il narratore. Considerazioni sull'opera di Nikolaj Leskov*.

Keywords: John Berger; memorialisation; «The red tenda of Bologna»; «The storyteller»; Walter Benjamin.

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Throughout his lifetime, Berger's writing encompassed an extraordinarily diverse range of subjects and genres, from essays on art and photography to sociological and political reflections on migration, exile and displacement, as well as screenplays for films, short stories, poetry, plays and novels. However, his later works combined aspects of what had largely remained separate pursuits into new experimental forms of writing that freely intermixed poetry, fiction, criticism and documentary.[1] In these late works Berger contravened the customary distinction between works of criticism, fiction and reality, instead regarding each as a kind of witnessing and testimony of experience that spoke to fundamental aspects of the lived reality of our historical moment.

Much recent Berger scholarship has preoccupied itself with tracing the developmental shifts between his earlier and later writings and the ambiguities and complexities of his later political positions, specifically the extent to which he remained within the broad orbit of the Marxism that had characterised his early works.[2] His reflections on the question of human rights and statelessness, most notably in relation to Palestine, in which he advanced the prescient concerns raised by Hannah Arendt about the plight of refugees in the aftermath of the Second World War era, have been pivotal in the assessment of his work.[3] Berger's thoughts on the human casualties of capitalism's expansion further and further into all aspects our lives (both labour and leisure), the emergence of a precariat class and the fate of traditional working class communities have made him an eloquent commentator on the condition of what Jameson has called late capitalism.[4]

This focus has, however, led to much of Berger's literary output becoming somewhat marginalised and to an overemphasis of the discontinuities in his oeuvre at the expense of thematic threads that bind his work together. To some extent Berger encouraged this. In several interviews he stated that, as a writer, he had only one theme: the experience of migration, displacement and exile.[5] These questions prevail across his writing in progressively complex and varied forms and in ways that are not always immediately obvious or appreciated. They cannot be disentangled from the broader issues of subjectivity, history and temporality present in his writings from the earliest to the last. Re-examining Berger's oeuvre involves an understanding of how those strands of thought are ultimately interwoven and how they come to bear both on Berger's understanding of the role of literature – or more precisely storytelling – and the

[1] Though poetry is not the focus of this study, this genre has had an important role in Berger's experimentation. Exemplary in this respect is Berger's *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, London, Writers and Readers, 1984. This work has been described as poetry smuggled as essays. See The Poetry Society webpage.

[2] On this see J. Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time: The Life and Work of John Berger*, London – New York, Verso, 2018, pp. 1-19 and 185-214.

[3] H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1973, pp. 276-280 [1st ed. 1951]. See also T. Mancheno, *Hannah Arendt on the "stateless"-condition*, «HannahArendt.Net», VIII, 2016, 1, doi 10.57773/hanet.v8i1.347.

[4] F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, «New Left Review», 146, 1984, pp. 53-92.

[5] See for example John Berger interviewed by Jeremy Isaacs during the Bbc late show on October 2 1995.

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forms of political liberty and resistance that preoccupied him throughout his life. These latter themes took on a particular poignancy toward the end of his life, where questions of life and death and the destructiveness of time came into sharp focus.[6] His later stories show an increasing preoccupation with temporality, memorialisation and mortality, both his own and that of others. The preservation of cultural and collective memory through the storyteller in his later oeuvre is associated with Berger's ongoing reflections on the dehumanising and impoverishing effects of late capitalist modernity. For Berger, writing constituted a shared intersubjectivity between writer and reader – or speaker and listener – and his stories continually reflected on what it means to tell a story, the existential questions of what deeper impulses lead us to want to write, read and listen to stories, what we derive from them and how the meaning of storytelling relates to questions of place, time and, eventually, to the spectre of death. As such, the differences between actual lived experience and fictional stories become less meaningful than the shared experience, commonality and community that originate from these 'conversations' between the author and reader.

The red tenda of Bologna encapsulates many of the qualities of this later phase of his writing, with its increasingly intricate interface between fiction, documentary and politics.[7] Written in a plain, descriptive prose that sometimes devolves into lists, it is a work that defies simple classification. It might be described as a short story, memoir, novella, collection of fragments, travelogue or biography. It is simultaneously all these, yet none of them. Though slight and deceptively simple, it has the gravity of a larger, more fulsome text. In one respect it belongs to the tradition of the story of the travellers who bring back images and reflections of the otherness they have encountered on their voyages. But unlike travellers' tales that traditionally report the marvellous and the strange, often embellishing reality with the fantastical, Berger's story focuses on the common realm in order to reveal the unseen and unanticipated lurking within the everyday.

In its simplest description, this is a memoir of his father's elder brother, Edgar, who came to live with his family in his mid-fifties, when Berger was ten years old. The life of Edgar, who ran a small employment agency in South Croydon (Surrey), was in many respects banal. Edgar's existence was modest and by worldly standards unsuccessful: he was unmarried, unprepossessing and unambitious. However, his travels to foreign lands were unusual in a period before tourism and travel had become a common feature of British middle-class life, constituting a minor act of liberty and resistance to the stultifying petit bourgeois normality of the period. Travelling was his uncle's great passion; a broadening of the range of experience of an otherwise secluded life lived through reading, letter writing and listening to the radio. These travels and those that he and his nephew embarked on together were intellectual explorations, phenomenological investigations of other cultures and histories. They were an escape from the dull and limited suburban milieu Edgar inhabited into other worlds of actual and imagined relations, places of secret, alternative knowledge that led to lasting personal connections. These

[6] On Berger and time, see J. Berger, S. Demirel, *What time is it*?, with an introduction of M. Nadotti, London, Notting Hill, 2019 and A. Merrifield, *John Berger*, London, Reaktion, 2012, pp. 146-164.

[7] J. Berger, *The red tenda of Bologna*, with illustrations by P. Davis, London, Drawbridge, 2007. This book was republished without illustrations by Penguin and Random House [trad. it. di M. Nadotti, *La tenda rossa di Bologna*, con disegni di G. Volpi, Bologna, Modo Infoshop, 2015]. The word *tenda* (pl. *tende*) means awnings and refers specifically to the outdoor structures attached to windows, characteristic of several buildings in the city centre of Bologna.

adventures account for much of the fascination the young Berger developed for his uncle; his reminiscences on his uncle's death blossom into an evocative series of impressions and reminiscences, as he re-enacts the visit Edgar made to Bologna toward the end of his life.

Bologna was not the first Italian city Edgar visited, and the reasons why it becomes the city that Berger most associated with his uncle's travels only slowly emerges. Berger's interest in visiting the city was triggered by a casual remark to his uncle that Bologna was the city of the artist and printmaker, Giorgio Morandi, the most famous modern Bolognese artist, known for his austere and economical paintings of everyday objects, including vases, bottles and bowls.[8] It gradually becomes clear that this association is tied both to Berger's characterisation of his uncle's life, and also to the aura of death that hangs over his experience of Bologna. Edgar visits Bologna in 1965, the year after Morandi's death, when he himself was already in his eighties. Berger draws attention to several affinities and similarities between the secluded, uneventful and bourgeois lives the two men lived, one finding artistic expression in the meticulously planned and rendered objects of his natura morta, and the other in his similarly meticulously planned journeys. The quiet simplicity of the artist's still lifes resonates with the life of his uncle and acquires within the story a kind of parallelism. The deeper meanings of this parallelism gradually become bound up with Berger's reflections on the political history of Bologna and the current conditions of capitalism in the west. In addition to communicating his approval of Morandi, the uncle's report of his visit to Bologna singles out a singular, enduring impression. After being asked by his nephew whether he liked the city, Edgar replies: «It's red, I've never seen a red like Bologna's. Ah! If we knew the secret of that red ... It's a city to return to, *la prossima volta*».[9]

We never discover whether the uncle, nearing the end of his life, made another trip to Bologna, or if he learned the secrets of that red, «not a clay red, [...] not terracotta, [...] a dyed red».[10] Indeed, these are the last words that we hear from him. With the «*prossima volta*», the following visit begins immediately after, though this time it is undertaken many years later by his nephew. It is Berger, following in his uncle's footsteps, whose impressions of the city we witness as he re-traces and re-imagines his uncle's prior journey. The unravelling of Bologna's secret is left to his nephew, and by extension the reader, to reflect on. The red of Bologna that he referred to is, in its simplest, literal sense, the traditional red dyed linen awnings that adorn the windows of the city's grand and less grand apartments. However, at a deeper symbolic level, the secret of that red remains an open-ended question, an enduring impression that refuses to relinquish its mystery, resisting any simple, stable explanation, but continuing to resonate and accumulate meanings within the text. Berger defers full and immediate apprehension, immersing the reader instead in the sensual flow of thought and experience.[11] In some respects, the

[8] Berger wrote a short essay on Morandi entitled *Morandi, the metaphysician of Bologna*. This essay was reproduced in the November, 6 2015 issue of Artnews. Further revised reflections on Morandi were published in a later volume containing essays on art and politics; see J. Berger, *The shape of a pocket*, London, Bloomsbury, 2001, pp. 139-146.

[9] J. Berger, *The red tenda...*, cit., p. 22.

[10] *Ibid*., p. 35.

[11] Often the effect is of an intentional temporary disorientation, as in passages where a figure's identity seems momentarily fused with that of another, or when a girl's footsteps along the shop windows of the Pavaglione are described as being as feline as the weightless tiger floating above her. It is only by inference that one understands that this tiger is an image on the balloon she is holding. See *ibid.*, pp. 26-31.

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presiding mystery of its significance reflects the resistance in Berger's writing to closing down meaning. It is as much in the silences of his work, as to what it communicates, that we find meaning. This comes to be one of the defining features of Berger's storytelling and the way it addresses the reader, a point that will be mentioned further, as it directly bears on Berger's conception of storytelling as well as the deformation and ideological coding of language within capitalist production.

Most of *The red tenda* comprises evocative observations of the everyday life of the city: the citizens, tourists and visitors traversing the square and going about their daily lives and the manner in which the cityscape filters their perceptions and shapes their habitual movements. The city's imprinting of patterns and habits of ways of seeing of its inhabitants, and their personal stories are a source of deep fascination for Berger. But even more crucial is the dulling of habitual familiarity, the not seeing of the everyday; the way in which the presence of the historical traces of the city's past go unnoticed and un-reflected upon.

This relationship between the seen and unseen, the visible and the invisible, lies behind why Berger accords such significance to the red tende that adorn the windows of Bologna's buildings. The red tende become a powerful metaphor for history itself and our perspective of history; they are mute witnesses of the procession of history. The tenda is a blind whose function is a double one, it both lets in and conceals the light; in Berger's narrative, via a quotation from Pasolini, light becomes associated not only with perception, but also with the illuminated future:[12] «... the light of the future doesn't cease for even an instant to wound us: it is here to brand us in all our daily deeds with anxiety even in the confidence that gives us life...».[13] The tenda both reveals and makes oblique, makes visible and invisible what lies beyond itself.

Berger's description of the quotidian world of Bologna thus gradually turns into a larger historical meditation about the past, present and the future. This is first alluded to in the continual speculation of the pedestrians about the weather and, later, in the repetition of the sentence, «Time will tell»[14], which resonates as a leitmotif. What we can and cannot know of what is to come – the immanent but unseen – pervades the present. But this immanence is Janus faced, for *The red tenda of Bologna* is as much a story of the historical forces of past and present that we fail to see before us, as it is of the uncertainty of the future. This question of the unanticipated and unseen, but also of the historically unforeseeable, is inseparable from the story Berger tells of the city.

Faced with the ultimate indeterminacy of what the future holds, the everyday of the present becomes the focus of Berger's politics, a politics of continuity with past communal traditions, of the giving pre-eminent value to the intimate texture and materiality of the quotidian and the capacity for discovering the extraordinary within the banal. Moreover, the tende are what expose but also what protect, they shield us from the failures, horrors and catastrophes of past

[12] A key reference for the story and the understanding of Berger's later reflections on political disillusionment and resistance in late capitalism is Pasolini's article, *Il vuoto del potere in Italia*, «Il Corriere della Sera», 1° febbraio 1975, translated in English by C. Mott with the title *Disappearance of the fireflies*, «Diagonal thoughts», 23 June 2014. See also J. Berger, *The chorus in our heads or Pier Paolo Pasolini*, in *Hold Everything Dear. Dispatches on survival and resistance*, London, Verso, 2007, pp. 77-83 and J. Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time...*, cit., pp. 237-239.

[13] J. Berger, *The red tenda...*, cit., p. 40.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

historical projects.[15] The sacrifice of martyrdom and the small acts of resistance one may find within the quotidian are brought into a relation with each other in their shared quality of endurance; they are the macro and micro poles of the resistance to political power and authority on communities. They are the actions, both large and small, that refuse the reduction of human values to the impersonal logic of commodity exchange.[16]

Beyond these meanings others rapidly accumulate. On one level these tende define the boundary between the public and the private; they are the coverings that divide and conceal the inside from the outside and vice versa. As such they demarcate two increasingly differentiated spaces of the modern city integral to its contemporary life: the sheltered space of the private apartment and the public exposure of the collective space of the street outside. On another level Bologna's red tende are a metaphor for the political history and regional identity of the city, red Bologna, the quintessential city of the Left. Their red is the blood of the city running through the arteries of its ancient streets, where they are omnipresent, if somewhat worn and faded by the city's pollution and the passing of time; they are the symbol of the city's exalted past flowing into its contemporary present.

The faded red tende, thus, represent not only the wearing away of time, a time of perpetual struggles against historical oppression, but they also signify the fading of the memory and ideals of a generation whose blood was spilled in the fight against Fascism and a contemporary disillusionment with the belief that the future and the sacrifices made for it would inevitably bring about a better world. This disillusionment is pitted against a certain strength, resilience and imperturbability that Berger attributes both to his uncle's character and to Bologna itself.

Berger's itinerary mirrors his uncle's meticulously, though his impressions offer a far broader history of the city, commenting in passing on Bologna's culture, political traditions and its history then and now; from its disastrous annexation to Rome in the Sixteenth Century to its revival in the late Nineteenth Century and resistance to Fascism during the Second World War. In addition to references to Morandi, there are reflections on Giambologna's mighty *Nettuno* and Niccolò dell'Arca's moving *Compianto* in Santa Maria della Vita; «a hurricane of grief».[17] His route around the city begins at the east façade of the *Basilica di San Petronio*, in *Piazza Maggiore* and the two Twelfth Century towers a short walk away. Berger discusses the history of medieval structures that transformed Bologna and still shape its experience, the lines of porticoes where, «You can keep [a rendezvous] without ever being exposed to the sky» and where, referencing the Italian tradition of *la passeggiata*, «Pleasure and Desolation take their evening stroll [...] and walk hand in hand».[18]

[15] It is interesting to compare the parallels in the treatment of themes and motifs in Berger's *The red tenda* with Derrida's notion of the hauntological in his book on Marx. On this see, J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international*, New York, Routledge, 1994 [ed. or. Paris, Galilée, 1993]. See also J. Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time* ..., cit., pp. 191-213 and 235-243.

[16] This concept of resistance is articulated across a series of Berger's later essays. See for instance, J. Berger, *The shape of a pocket*, cit. See also J. Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time* ..., cit., pp. 185-240 and A. Merrifield, *John Berger*, cit., pp. 124-145 and 165-184. Berger's emphasis on collective values and his focus on economic and political issues over the question of the individual connects Berger's work with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's definition of minor literature. See *What Is a Minor Literature?*, «Mississippi Review», XI, 1983, 3, pp. 13-33 [ed. or. *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*, Paris, Minuit, 1975]. The author is indebted to one the anonymous reviewers for pointing out this connection.

[17] J. Berger, *The red tenda...*, cit., p. 69.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

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We follow Berger as he walks across east from the piazza to the university quarter – Europe's first secular University – and through various neighbouring streets, commenting on the sights he randomly encounters, the street life, the cuisine and recent changes and events in the city. Eventually, he arrives, full circle, back in the centre at *Pasquini*, in Via Uccelli, a fabric shop established over a century ago, where, as a souvenir of his uncle's prior visit and his own, he buys some of the red linen fabric of the story's title.[19]

At *Pasquini*, whose light reminds him redolently of the light in Morandi's paintings, Berger 'sees' or imagines his uncle's presence in the face of the shop's owner. Later Berger meets and converses with this man amid the pilasters of the *Pavaglione*, where their discussion ranges across martyrs and ordinary people, hope and sacrifice, history and justice, humility and resignation, life and death. It is in this conversation that the various threads of the story obliquely knit together. The present pervaded by the ghosts of the past is the theme that subsequently resonates within the story. In this conversation the quotidian and mundane descriptions of the city give way suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, to something more mystical, melancholic and mysterious. The image of the city as a place pervaded by the traces of its past folds into one in which the dead still walk visibly through its streets. Gradually, it becomes clear that Berger's visit to Bologna is not simply to retrace his uncle's footsteps, or to recount the story of his past, but a re-evocation spurred on by the desire that in doing so he might recapture, if only for an instant, a presence that has been materially lost. The recognition in the face of another brings his uncle's presence vividly back to him in an astonishing passage reminiscent of the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, or of the resurrection scene in Dreyer's *Ordet*,[20] a passage that instantaneously transforms the narrative from unswerving realism into dream-like uncertainty.

Berger's recounting of his journey to Bologna is thus a tale of traveling in the interstices of two spaces and two times; in his memories of his uncle and those that belong to the city he visited. Most of the places cited in Berger's itinerary have endured a history that extends back from the present deep into the past. Like Walter Benjamin's famously incomplete thesis on the Parisian arcades, it is the city's complex relationships between its past and present, the continuity and discontinuities of the city's spaces that are the focus of attention.[21] The time of the city is not merely that of its present, but a time haunted by the ghostly vestiges of what it has once been, what it is and what it will become – the palimpsests, afterimages and remainders of the past – all that the city has been and may have become remain as traces that haunt its present.

Therefore, however much this itinerary re-enforces the impression of the reconstruction of a prior visit, as though Berger is walking in his uncle's footsteps, the journey undertaken is a

[19] Pasquini's shop was to disappear from this location shortly after Berger published his story in 2007, only to return briefly to the centre, around the corner at Via IV Novembre, before moving out to Castenaso, a town in the province of Bologna.

[20] *Ordet* is a drama film written and directed in 1955 by C.T. Dreyer. On G.G. Marquez's magical realism, see C. Warnes, *Magical realism and the postcolonial novel: Between faith and irreverence*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

[21] Berger's work has remained deeply informed by the example and ideas of Walter Benjamin. His account of Bologna is no exception. Benjamin's characterisation of Haussmann's Paris as a modernised city haunted by its past parallels Berger's account of Bologna. See W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*, London, Verso, 2023 and W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, edited by R. Tiedemann, Cambridge (Mass.) – London, Belknap, 1999. See also J. Sperling, *A Writer of Our Time* ..., cit., pp. 87-90; 201; 219-221 and 238.

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distinctive and singular one. Berger's path leads us through the historical traces of the pathos and suffering of a city long associated with the Left and resistance to authoritarian power, whether in the form of its struggles against the Papacy or its later resistance to Fascism. Images of the past and of futures not realised haunt the narrative, so that death and decay are never far away.

It is no accident that the first mention of Bologna in the story invokes the temporal and the way the past weighs heavily, if silently, on the present. While sitting on the steps of the east side of *San Petronio* in *Piazza Maggiore*, Berger writes: «For centuries people have sat on these steps to watch what's happening in the square and to notice the minute differences between yesterday and today. I'm sitting on these steps».[22] This invocation of the flow of past and present and the entropic character of history pervade Berger's descriptions of the city. In contemplating the two most prominent remaining medieval towers built in the Twelfth Century, he writes: «During the Renaissance there were many such towers in the city – each one built by a rivalling mercantile family to demonstrate its wealth and power. One by one they collapsed and within a century you could count on one hand those that remained».[23]

If the trajectory of Berger's walk is one of a circle of return, it is also circumscribed by an arc between two points in space and time: the line that leads us physically and psychologically from dell'Arca's *Compianto,* through the steps of *San Petronio*, to the wall of several thousand photographs of Bologna's partisans, anti-Fascist martyrs, that spurs the following passage: «Amongst martyrs, and in the pursuit of little refined pleasures, there is something of the same defiance, and of the same modesty. At a different level naturally. But the coincidence remains. Both defy the cruelties of life».[24]

The reference to «little refined pleasures» echoes the achievement of fifty years of administration of the Left that made Bologna «the best-conserved city in Italy, famous for its small luxuries, refinements and calm»[25], but it also takes us back to Morandi's painting with its focus on the materiality of the objects that surround us, its rejection of the grand tradition of narrative history painting (megalography) and its embrace instead of the more modest and unassuming world of still life painting (rhopography).[26] The lesson of his uncle and Morandi is to unravel the perception that what is within the everyday realm is only the commonplace. For Berger, resistance begins in the meaningfulness found within the everyday and an act of seeing that is truly seeing. For this is to open one's eyes to the immanent presence of our history and its shaping forces, everywhere and at all times within what passes for the quotidian, to make visible what is significant in the overlooked, to begin the struggle to say the unsaid, to recover the long forgotten, to understand the misunderstood and to break free of the already known. It is, moreover, to give true value to material life in and for itself in a world of utilitarian instrumentalism, where everything is reduced to commodity exchange and where curiosity about the life around us is replaced by a dulled unreceptivity and the constant, distracted stimulation of a world of commodification. This curiosity that Berger articulates might be considered a

[22] J. Berger, *The red tenda...*, cit., p. 23.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

[26] On the concepts of rhopography and megalography in still life and history painting, see N. Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, London, Reaktion, 1990, pp. 17-94.

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poetic, and even radical, act pointing to a sustainable way of living and finding meaning in one's environment that is not determined by the reductive habituation to acquisitiveness and the logic of late capitalism. To put this another way, the central proposition of the narrative is that the struggle against the totalising logic of late capitalism and its infinite production of sensation begins in the everyday and its micropolitics.

To understand the role of the storyteller in this process of the historicity of the quotidian and the uses of rhopography as a literary form of resistance to the ideology of late capitalism, one needs to connect Berger's later fiction to Benjamin's conception of the different modes of pre and post capitalist narrative. In many ways we may see Benjamin's storyteller as the ghost in Berger's later literature, haunting his texts and his continuing relationship to the form of Marxism that informed his thought. Berger's own views about literature and politics closely shadow many of Benjamin's statements and formulations in his essay, *The Storyteller*, an account of the origins and basis of storytelling, its transformation and its demise.[27]

In this essay Benjamin makes two key differentiations. The first is a bipartite distinction: storytelling has traditionally taken two forms: on the one hand, the story of the traveller, who brings back tales from what he or she has witnessed abroad, and, on the other, the story of those who are rooted in a particular place and whose stories thus become an inhabitation and channel of the past, preserving some experience and knowledge local to that particular place and its histories. Though ostensibly belonging to the former category, the *red tenda* may in certain respects be a hybrid that encapsulates elements of both these categories.

The second distinction is a qualitative one between those forms that have remained in contact with the oral origins of storytelling – the focus of Benjamin's essay – and those that have departed from this tradition. The former, Benjamin characterised as possessing an orientation toward practicality and reality in a form whose compactness provides an ideal resource for the commitment of events and experience to memory. Storytelling draws from and preserves the life around it and imparts – whether obviously or more discreetly – something useful: some proverb, moral, advice, proposal or maxim. As such it conveys a kind of counsel to its listener or reader. For Benjamin, no matter how much the oral storyteller may draw on the miraculous and fantastical, her story is grounded in the reality of lived experience and is never simply an expression of novelty and pure invention.

Responding to specific historical context, Benjamin begins from the premise that the traditional art of storytelling is dying as a result of the erosion of the kind of exchange of knowledge and experience communities once shared. The end of storytelling, he states, is: «a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing».[28] What for Benjamin has caused this passing and what has it revealed? His answer is that this has been a long, drawn-out historical process: «The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out».[29] In the course of history, both the conditions of the production of truth and the intelligibility and

[27] W. Benjamin, *The storyteller. Reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov*, in *Illuminations*, ed. and with an introduction by H. Arendt, London, The Bodley Head, 2015, pp. 83-107.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

[29] *Ibid.*

communicability of experience have profoundly altered. The most obvious symptom of this process, for Benjamin, is the rise of the novel at the inception of modernity, a form entirely dependent on the book and the expansion of the mass printing. This may appear at first glance paradoxical, but Benjamin argues that the novel is not a continuation of the origin of storytelling as he has defined it, despite its roots springing from the same source, for what can be handed on orally in a story and what can be conveyed in the form of a novel present two distinct possibilities. The storyteller is not an author in any traditional sense, rather the preserver and communicator of the culture of a community; she is the conduit for the transmission of that culture. The story she tells is rooted in the life of the people shared across generations who have relayed the story, augmenting, embellishing and refining it in the process. The novelist by contrast is isolated, in Benjamin's terms, «uncounselled, and [who] cannot counsel others. [...] The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual»[30] separated from the broader society by capitalism's conditions of production and consumption. The novel is thus an ideal form to express the perplexity and alienation of modern life. Though understated in Benjamin's essay, his argument turns on the way the commodified conditions of production under which novels are written imply an entirely different relation between the conveyance of narrative and its audience. For, if the experience of modern capitalism is not in itself the sole origin and cause of this transformation in storytelling, capitalism's profound perplexity, its economic and political mystifications, displacements of people, concomitant atomisation and estrangement exacerbated and accelerated this process.

Early in his essay, Benjamin relates this alienation specifically to the trauma of industrialised warfare in the First World War and its aftermath, the hollowing out of language in the face of unprecedented destruction:

> never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.[31]

A lacuna, Benjamin argues, had opened up between language and what it recounted, or failed to be able to recount. A crisis of representation had occurred in which silence and the impossibility of truly conveying the experience of this trauma had overwhelmed communicable experience. For Benjamin the modernity of the post First World War era that he experienced was characterised by an ever-amplifying sense of shock and sensation, the reverberations of which changed both the nature of experience and the capacity of relaying that experience; in short, according to Benjamin, in this era the possibility of giving intelligible form to the experience of alienation and of overcoming the hollowing out of language quickly receded. Benjamin associates this with the vast and overwhelming increase of information and the emergence of modes of immediate analysis, simultaneous interpretation and explanation of that information. This profoundly changed the dynamics of knowledge production toward modes of instantaneous consumption, reportage and ephemerality that, while increasing what is

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 87.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

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described and known, also encouraged the kind of cultural aphasia that storytelling was intended to resist and has, indeed, managed to resist through later recounting of those who lived this experience.[32] Historical analysis and mass media reporting of historical events moved toward immediate clarity at the expense of complexity, explaining away the ambiguity and uncertainty of events through definitive elucidation and the dissection of their causality, in contrast to the way, for instance, the chronicler (the historicist equivalent of the storyteller) is content to present events «as models of the course of the world»[33] that leave the listener or reader space for reflection. What Benjamin is describing is the narrowing and receding of particular qualities of communication even as the modes of communication have expanded. The relationship between storyteller and listener or reader is for Benjamin a companionship and interrelation of subjectivity distinct from the indifference of contemporary life, a continuous transference between past, present and future.

One should add to this necessarily compressed description of Benjamin's argument, a differentiation he is making about time; between the momentary temporality of the inexorable flow of the dissemination of modern information and the enduring time and compactness of the story passed down from generation to generation by the storyteller, or, to put it in other words, between the oblivion of the flux and essentialism of modern communication systems and the mnemonics of the storyteller. «Memory», Benjamin writes, «is the epic faculty *par excellence*».[34] The «chaste compactness»[35] of the oral story, the layers that occur naturally in its various retellings and patient craftsmanship of storytelling make it a powerful channel of memory. Its claim to a place in the listener's memory also rests in part on its not reducing its recounting to an essence or moving toward closure, but through leaving an openness of cultural legacy for interpretation that makes the storyteller the channel of a continual process of recovery and reinvention.

Benjamin's argument is not intended to be Manichean or necessarily nostalgic. In the course of developing it a more complex historical and dialectical relationship between the oral storytelling tradition and the novel emerges; both spring from the immanent possibilities that existed within and evolved from their origins in the epic. Moreover, the Benjaminian conception of the storyteller has still, against all odds, found expression in the medium of the novel. Leskov's tales of peasant life are an example of this, preserving as they do the speech and experience of the Russian peasantry. Though Benjamin's example is limited to this one novelist, one might say the same for Marquez's novels and stories, and likewise for Berger's short stories, novellas and novels too. For many of the abiding themes of Benjamin's essay, such as inhabitation and rootedness, the storyteller as the preserver of personal and communal histories over time, and in particular, estrangement, death, time and memory are also abiding themes in Berger's storytelling. The spectre of death, the death of storytelling, the deaths which stories often take as their starting or end point, the death that is warded off through a refusal of closure and

[32] Oral testimonies and first-hand accounts of the First World War have been collected by national institutions such as the National Archives in the United Kingdom and are available to the wide public on digital platforms like Bbc Sounds and YouTube.

[33] W. Benjamin, *The storyteller...*, cit., p. 95.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 90.

the transference of the story from storyteller to listener/ reader, loom as large in Berger's narratives as they do in Benjamin's essay.

The epic, in its expression through storytelling, for Benjamin, is ultimately a meditation on the relation of life and death: Scheherazade, for instance, keeps death at bay through continually weaving and reweaving her stories. Death is the sanction and authority of everything the storyteller tells. In what appears a digression, Benjamin discusses the receding public presence and omniscience of death in the sanitised remaking of bourgeois society. The context of the storyteller is, by contrast, one in which death is vividly present, immanent in life. The experience of death that hovers within and around storytelling, confers meaning both on the life it expresses, but also on the continued memory of that life. It is death that gives authority to the story, it is the deaths of protagonists and the revelation of the meaning of these deaths that makes meaning visible and situates it in time.[36]

Drawing on Benjamin's dialectic, Berger has described his storytelling as a traversing of distances, a journeying between two qualities and two positions in time and space: between objectivity and subjectivity, the familiar and the unknown, the present and the past, and finally between life and death. Following Benjamin, Berger conceptualises storytelling as necessarily involved with questions pertaining to time and historicity. «Narrative» he writes «is another way of making the moment indelible, for stories, when heard, stop the unilinear flow of time».[37] This is true, for Berger, of both a text that is organised sequentially or chronologically, and of more ostensibly fragmentary narrative conventions of experimental or avant-garde writing that Berger himself favoured for their ability to bring past, present and future into a simultaneous flow.

The task of the writer, as conceived by Berger's adoption of Benjamin's notion of the storyteller, might be regarded as a paradoxical endeavour. It is no less than the attempt to breathe life into a form that the conditions of capitalism are inevitably obliterating at an ever-accelerating rate. Berger is attempting to recover the intersubjective, transactional and communal character of storytelling that Benjamin sees as inevitably compromised by the conditions of capitalist production and the commodified culture industry that has since arisen. In his later stories, Berger reasserts this mode of storytelling as a mechanism of resisting the deleterious effects of these conditions, which include the inimical impact of late capitalism on such a tradition of storytelling. There is, one might note, almost a fateful, romantic aspect to the character of this enterprise, which seeks to conserve ideas, modes of feeling and understanding that are fast vanishing. Thus, the intimate tone in which the author addresses the reader in Berger's work and his appropriation of Benjamin's notion of counsel are set against the hollowing out of language and the atomisation and estrangement of contemporary life. Storytelling becomes the means of carrying forward and even renewing qualities that might otherwise disappear. It is an act of resisting the loss of certain qualities, thoughts and bonds that for Berger define our understanding of what it means to be human in a dehumanising era of alienation.

The text in this way becomes a kind of monument and Bologna too, in Berger's vision, becomes a living monument paralleling the novella's function as a testimonial to the dead –of his

[36] The story as a means to both illuminate and ward off death, the connections with the land, place and past are, for Benjamin, associated with oral storytelling. See *ibid.*, pp. 83-107.

[37] J. Berger, *What time is it?*, cit., p. 16.

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uncle but also of the city's historical martyrs. It is in the context of this meditation on Bologna's history that the theme of death and ghosts of the past emerges most forcefully and resolutely for the reader. In *The red tenda*, it is not simply the presence of death that permeates the narrative and description of the city, but the haunting that comes with it, the ghostly traces of the past that remain, the ghosts that inhabit memories and the 'spectres' that appear before us. At one point, the author states: «It's an improbable city, Bologna, like one you might walk through after you have died».[38] In the re-enactment of the uncle's movements across the city, there is a performative sense in which the dead do indeed seem to walk again. Berger's imaginary retracing of the footsteps of his uncle's prior visit to the city is presented as a momentary resurrection. It is through this retracing that the dead come back to life.

Melancholic associations of Bologna with intimations of decay and death recur in several other Berger stories. *To the Wedding*, again set in the city, is a tender and lyrical evocation of the wedding of a young couple, whose love is overshadowed by the fact the twenty-three-year-old bride is dying of Aids. The dialectic between life and death comes to the fore in several metaphorically laden passages. In one instance, the bride takes off her shoes and dances with her bridegroom in an act that is a wedding dance but also a dance of death. However, this fateful dance is also a joyous affirmation of love and life in the time that we are given before death sweeps away our existence. The theme is already announced earlier in a passage where the narrator reflects on dancing to a *rembetiko*. When you dance to a *rembetiko* song, you step into the circle of the music, and the rhythm is like a round cage with bars; there you dance before the man or woman who once lived the song. Your dance is a tribute to their sorrow, which the music is throwing out.

> Drive Death out of the yard
> So I don't have to meet him.
> And the clock on the wall
> Leads the funeral dirge.[39]

In another passage Berger's narrator reflects on her own impending mortality, remarking: «I wanted to ask them in the hospital in Bologna to tell me the truth – as if there was another truth! I stopped myself for I knew there was only one truth – which is my death».[40]

The inevitability of death in defining the limits of our singular existence and the way in which we come to understand and attribute meaning to it is one of the central preoccupations of Berger's later fiction, whether in terms of actual deaths and the responses to these, or in terms of the ever-present anticipation and intimation of its occurrence. However, in *The red tenda*, as in other later stories, the presence of the spectral, as a mediating figure between life and death, is accentuated.

Berger's interest in transcendental figures that mediate the realms of life and death stretches back to his earlier trilogy *Into their Labours*.[41] One of the stories in *Pig Earth* entitled *The Three*

[38] J. Berger, *The red tenda...*, cit., p. 31.

[39] J. Berger, *To the Wedding*, London, Bloomsbury, 1995, p. 10.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

[41] *Into their Labours* published in 1991 is a trilogy that includes *Pig Earth* (1979), *Once in Europa* (1987) and *Lilac and Flag* (1990).

Lives of Lucie Cabrol[42] is the tale of a ghost whose life story is told by a narrator who is himself a ghost. Themes of the 'presence' of the dead among the living traverse the series of stories and poems in *Pig Earth* that spare nothing of the harshness of peasant life and its fatal attempts of resistance to industrial capitalism, raising in this way questions of how to preserve its memory. Here, peasants continually express their anxiety over the disappearance of their way of life and with it themselves and the memory of everything they have experienced and lived for.

This preoccupation with ghosts of the past becomes ever more intimate in Berger's late work as it begins to touch on more immediate personal loss and a progressive awareness of his own mortality. This takes on various forms of resurrection in his later fiction. In most of these instances, the 'reappearance' of the dead is unanticipated and purely a matter of a chance encounter. The spectre of his mother or uncle appears through an involuntary memory, or else triggered by something familiar in the appearance of another. In *The time we live*, it is the name of a department store that conjures the memory of Berger's mother in an almost Proustian reverie. Here, Berger recalls the Croydon riots of August 2008 that led to the burning down of Reeves retail outlet that had traded continuously for 144 years. The name of this department store, where Berger and his mother used to go shopping when he was a child, acts like an incantation to evoke the presence of his deceased mother beside him:

> On August 8th the kids were rioting because they had no future, no words and nowhere to go. One of them, arrested for looting, was eleven years old. Watching the pictures of the Croydon riots I wanted to share my reactions with my mother, long since dead, but she wasn't available, and I knew this was because I couldn't remember the name of the Department store where we regularly went before hurrying to the cinema. I searched persistently for the name and couldn't find it. Suddenly it came to me: Kennards. Kennards! Straightaway my mother was there, looking with me at the footage of the Croydon riots. Looting is consumerism stood on its head with empty pockets.[43]

In these stories and sketches, the evocation of the dead often comes in the form of the apprehension of another; the sight of the other becomes the trigger or cipher of that resurrection. As in *The red tenda*, in *Here is where we meet*, the encounter with the deceased mother is unanticipated, but in the latter case it is inexplicable, all the more so in that it occurs in Lisbon, a city his mother had never visited and had no association with:

> An old woman with an umbrella was sitting very still on one of the park benches. She had a kind of stillness that draws attention to itself. Sitting there on the park bench, she was determined to be noticed. A man with a suitcase walked through the square with the air of going to a rendezvous he kept every day. Afterwards a woman carrying a little dog in her arms – both of them looking sad – passed, heading down towards the Avenida da Liberdade. The old woman on the bench persisted in her demonstrative stillness. To whom was it addressed? | Abruptly, as I was asking myself this question, she got to her feet, turned and, using her umbrella like a walking stick, came towards me. | I recognised her walk, long before I could see her face. The walk of somebody already looking forward to arriving and sitting down. It was my mother.[44]

[42] J. Berger, *Pig Earth*, London, Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1979, pp. 104-195.
[43] J. Berger, *The time we live*, Open democracy, 23 August 2011.
[44] J. Berger, *Here is where we meet*, London, Bloomsbury, 2005, p. 2.

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When asked why she had arbitrarily appeared to him in Lisbon, her reply is that she had simply chosen it as a place to inhabit, implying that the dead are not restricted to the places associated with their past. Their conversation, nevertheless, re-evokes the Croydon of his childhood. While the stories contained in this book are mostly titled according to a specific place, such as Lisbon, Geneva, Kraków, Islington, Le Pont d'Arc and Madrid, the association of these cities and places with the dead are far more oblique than in *The red tenda*. The relation of the departed to these spaces is neither simple and straightforward, nor fixed and static. Despite the historical materiality of the settings in which these spectres appear, their presence evokes a space that, by contrast, is fluid and undefined, the nebulous space in which a conversation between the living and the dead may take place, the space of memory, imagination, dreams and melancholic reflection. Here the living and dead commune unfettered by the constraints not only of place but of time. The dead move from place to place conveyed by the memory of those who remember them. Hence in *Here is where we meet*, Berger's mother remarks chidingly, «There is something, John, you shouldn't forget – you forget too much. The thing you should know is this: the dead don't stay where they are buried».[45] The dead roam freely in memory, migrating from place to place, refusing to be bound by the rational laws of gravity, the borders of nations and the categorisations and rules of national identity and citizenship. Their liberty is a kind of imagined resistance to the increasing coercion of contemporary bureaucracy. It is the very opposite of the condition of the migrant who, stripped of identity and history, becomes stateless and homeless, an itinerant precariat, a nomad in the global economy.

The ghosts of the past appear and speak as though time had stood still. The pathos of their return might be said to be reparative, a reparation of the broken web of time; the mother appears and speaks as if she had remained alive. Such evocations of ghosts and spectres in Berger's writing express a fundamental human desire, even need, for some kind of communion with the dead; a desire for life to run continuously rather than the fracture of time that someone's death represents. The fear expressed in his mother's reproach is one of forgetting, the forgetting that stalks memory and consigns the dead to a second more far reaching death; that of oblivion. Storytelling becomes the medium through which such forgetting is transcended.

The storyteller is thus, in one of Berger's most memorable formulations, «Death's secretary», who rescues the singularity of the dead and their past from oblivion, indifference and forgetfulness; the storyteller is the one who resists the amnesia that would carry away its subject with everything that it had once done, felt, thought and known. *The red tenda of Bologna,* beginning at the end with the subject's death and working its way back from the body of the dead to the meaning of the life that has passed is exemplary of this rescuing of the past from oblivion. The time of the story reverses the time of a life, turning against the linear movement from life to death, and thereby turning back time on itself. Indeed, it is in this resistance to forgetting that we begin to see how Berger's later writing, which broadened from its Marxist roots into a more general resistance to the deleterious effects of global capitalism and industrialisation, sought to find ways of bringing personal and historical memory into an enduring relationship.

This sense of life marked by death – by the deaths of those who have passed and the deaths to come – is taken up most explicitly in Berger's film *About Time*, made for Channel 4 in 1984,

[45] J. Berger, *Here is where we meet*, cit., p. 3.

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which delves into folk tales, most notably Italo Calvino's *Fiabe italiane*,[46] to recount and explore the meanings of our relation to death. As Andy Merrifield remarks:

> In 'About Time', Berger tells stories about those that want to [...] offset death. Their desire-our desire- is nothing less than a desire for *immortality*, even if they (we) know immortality is a folly, is a silly fairy tale, a 'once upon a time...'. Yet in knowing it is only a fairytale, living out this fairy tale, dreaming and telling fairy tales, remembering the past and re-imagining the future, we have already begun to discover our own immortality; we have already begun to *deconstruct* linear time, to take it apart from the seams. It is the soul which pierces time, says Berger; people go on loving each other long after one partner has died, long after their body has ceased to be in time. In remembering, in dreaming, in entering a story, tellers and listeners find joint communion in an eternal present.[47]

The red tenda of Bologna, like other later Berger stories, is transactional in its enactment of this conception of time, immortality and the redemptive nature of memory carried through and beyond time. The transaction is between author and teller, between teller and listener, or writer and reader. No text in this conception is exclusively the product of one individual, for all writers draw on, borrow from and continue themes of others before them, and, in turn, will be drawn on themselves. No text is the conception of one individual because the listener/reader interprets and re-interprets each reiteration of the story, and, in retelling the story, renews it and continues its temporal life. Storytelling is the infinite well of intersubjectivity from which each writer, reader, storyteller and listener draws. Its labour, writing, memorizing, reading, listening is therefore collective and unending. In *Here is where we meet*, on a page set aside to itself, Berger writes: «The number of lives that enter our own is incalculable». [48] It is in the life of the collective, in handing down stories from one generation to another that, for Berger, the discontinuity of death is resisted, and where the qualities that the progressive onslaught of capitalist commodification are obliterating find a space of reprieve.

In reading or listening to a story, we are seeing through a lens fashioned in and through time, a time that is continuous rather than the abstract time of the regular rhythm of the watch. As Berger remarks:

> Those who read or listen to our stories see everything through a lens. This lens is the secret of narration, and it is ground anew in every story, ground between the temporal and the timeless. If we storytellers are Death's secretaries, we are so because, in our brief mortal lives, we are grinders of these lenses.[49]

In reading Berger's story of his uncle's visit to Bologna, we are back in the tales of *Pig Earth*, of an endless labour to preserve the memory of the dead, of ghosts telling us the story of other ghosts.

[46] I. Calvino, *Fiabe italiane*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1976 [1st ed. 1956].
[47] A. Merrifield, *John Berger*, cit., pp. 147-148.
[48] J. Berger, *Here is where we meet*, cit., p. 161.
[49] J. Berger, *What time is it?*, cit., p. 16.

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