Art Matters

John Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*, London, Bloomsbury, 2001, 264 pp.

In his latest collection of essays *The Shape of a Pocket* J. Berger elaborates a thesis about the political and moral significance of art. It is an ambitious attempt to say why art is important today. This is a wonderful but difficult territory. The temptation to think in logical terms about such matters often seems irresistible. To say, as Wilde did, that morality has nothing to do with art is frivolous – Wilde surely meant only that art has no obligation to uphold conventional morality.

J. Berger sees art as an arena in which one may come to a greater awareness of what is important to oneself. It is potentially a special part of morality. The process of artistic creation is a model for – and a prime instance of – the kind of careful, loving attention one ought to give to oneself, to others and to the world. This way of thinking is brought into focus in a short but enlightening meditation on Van Gogh. J. Berger comments on what he sees as Van Gogh's "nakedness", by which he means a refusal to idealise, elevate or denigrate what he encountered in the world.

"And from this nakedness of his, which his contemporaries saw as naivety or madness, came his capacity to love, suddenly and at any moment, what he saw in front of him. Picking up a pen or a brush, he strove to realise, to achieve that love".

In other words, the act of painting or drawing, as pursued by Van Gogh, is the fulfilment of an aspect of his character – it is the result of his way of experiencing himself and the world. And, J. Berger hopes, if one learns to love his work then one learns to be like him. Any account of the value of art has to look at life in general. It has to paint in a background picture of the human condition against which evaluations come to make sense.

J. Berger starts with a contrast between the endless profusion of images in the world and modern unhappy solitude. He suggests one is surrounded by images of sociable, fulfilled, enviable people, while one feels isolated, insecure and unsatisfied. These are, he argues, "false images". Such images are radically different from those "true images" J. Berger admires. Some of the most memorable phrases in the book come when J. Berger is trying to express his sense of what a "true image" is. The true image offers "hospitality" to the thing or person portrayed. The true image finds "the face" of whatever in being painted. The painter "is looking for its returning gaze, looking for its expression – a slight sign of inner life. And this is true whether he's painting a cherry, a bicycle, a blue rectangle, a carcass, a river, a bush, a hill, or his own reflection in a mirror". The true image breaks the cycle of desire. When one recognises such an image, one becomes a partner with the painter and with the things painted – one is not driven to consume or to feel envy. The artist is the person who produces "true images". And true images are the most important things in the world. For J. Berger this is a political issue. He regards the production of "false images" as a requirement of capitalism. To make a true image – the kind of image which he thinks is central to the idea of art – is to create a "pocket of resistance" to the dominant mode of experience. Hence the book's rather opaque title.

J. Berger's thesis of personal and political redemption through love and his insistence that artistic creativity is a crucial act of love of individuals and of the visible world are not new. They would have been familiar to St. Augustine, for instance. However, J. Berger works with this in a way which would have been quite foreign to their tastes. It is a question of where he sees the redemptive task being played out. Where is one to find these true images? The closest he comes to a systematic answer is in an essay on Géricault, the most politically radical of the French romantic painters.

"Behind everything that Géricault imagined and painted – from his wild horses to the beggars he recorded in London – one senses the same vow: Let me face the affliction; let me discover respect and, if possible, find a beauty!".

J. Berger, therefore, aligns himself with the margins of society – it is there, facing affliction, that one comes to see things clearly, he thinks. J. Berger's ideal artist identifies with, or emerges from, the mad, the dispossessed, the rejected. And he seeks to reclaim canonical figures such as Michelangelo and Rembrandt for the margins. It is their distress, their confusion rather than their mastery or power which excites him.

But to dwell exclusively on the margins in this way is to miss much. Great works of art are often connected to what Hume called "natural pride" – the human equivalent of the lion's glorying in its own power. A baroque

ceiling painting may be moving and impressive for its grandeur, its boldness, its aspiration. One cannot deny that these attitudes – assertion, confidence, expansion, dignity and mastery, the longing for perfection – have much to offer. It would be a pity if a preoccupation with what is difficult should close one's eyes to what is magnificent. Elegance and ease surely have a legitimate place in one's life.

Berger sometimes makes it sound as if the whole point of art is just that it can be a pocket of resistance to global capital. Art is not powerful in that way. It does not win economic battles. Whatever transformations occur in the economy they will not be brought about by the pocket of resistance offered by art. It is not to be lamented – it has never achieved such things. By making the cure so radical J. Berger makes it unavailable. If the only way of making a better world is along the lines he suggests, then one can be sure of failure.

J. Berger is a man of extreme sentiments making demands which few will wish to follow. But there is a haunting note of self-awareness. Of the solitary Italian painter Morandi he writes: "It may be (...) that each moment of art needs somewhere a furiously obstinate recluse, inaudibly muttering against over-simplification. In art the temptation to please too easily is ever present (...). The obstinacy of the recluses, familiar with failure, is art's saving grace".

Perhaps one can see this as a kind of self-portrait. A recognition of the over-demanding nature of his claims. And yet, at the same time, a way of holding to the sense that these claims are worth making. The aim of serious cultural discourse is not some final permanent truth. Rather, it is to keep alive a rich and complex discussion. J. Berger is highly sensitive to some of the things art can offer. It would be unfair to chide him from the partial nature of his vision.

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