The Body of the Text: *To the Wedding, From A to X, and the Corporeality of John Berger’s Later Fiction*

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Although several commentators on Berger’s recent fiction are sceptical of his political messages, his prose style is often celebrated. This essay argues that it is first and foremost its sensuous quality that distinguishes Berger’s recent fiction. Indirectly addressing the reader’s senses by evoking images, sounds or physical experiences, Berger’s prose aims not only at the reader’s intellect but at his or her bodily experience, too, and speaks of Berger’s attempt to communicate on a pre-intellectual level. This essay provides a close study of strategies of sensuous writing employed in Berger’s novels *To the Wedding* and *From A to X*, and discusses the latter novel as a text that expressly reflects on the physical reality, or corporeality, of writing.¹

John Berger’s later fiction exerts a strange fascination. Many of his more recent texts are openly political in content: Berger writes about the fate of migrant workers in capitalist society (*A Seventh Man*), about the HIV-infected (*To the Wedding*), the homeless (*King*), and political prisoners (*From A to X*). Published in a period that has been shaped by postmodern theoretical discourse, the confident political messages of these texts appear at times irritatingly anachronistic—in an epoch that has disposed of all grand narratives, and political grand narratives in particular, Berger’s fictional worlds seem to adhere to an anachronistic moral righteousness. In his writing, Berger very clearly sides with what might be called the underprivileged, opening up dichotomies of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that sometimes run the danger of harking back to received clichés. In *King*, the moral line runs between the warmly human homeless people (and their dogs) in a French suburb and the wickedly heartless, and faceless, building companies that, for the sake of profit, treat those on the margins of society as if they did not exist; in *To the Wedding*, the reader encounters a man (clearly to be disapproved of) who ostracises, and physically abuses, the HIV-infected protagonist; *From A to X* repeats the us-versus-them opposition by creating a (positive) portrait of a political prisoner denied his humanity by a (negative) anonymous system of governmental repression embodied in the faceless multitudes of wardens, or ‘herders’ (e.g. p. 188) as they are called in this epistolary novel.²

¹ Parts of this paper are based on the analysis of Berger’s fiction in my study *Making Sense: Sense Perception in the British Novel of the 1980s and 1990s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 72–83.

Raised on the postmodern tenet that there are no longer any simple truths and single viewpoints, and that reality is far more complex than any dichotomies would want to make us believe, many readers might find the sense of political righteousness conveyed in Berger’s writing bewildering. More specifically with regard to his fiction, they might register with a sense of unease his attempts to employ novels in order to transmit openly political messages. Should Berger not restrict himself to expressing his political opinions in essays or interviews? Is he not hijacking the fictional form for political statements that, at least in the light of postmodern scepticism, must remain doubtful? When readers turn to novels at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, are they willing to be taught a lesson? Geoff Dyer’s statement, made in 1986, that Berger’s ‘belief in socialism animates every line of his work’ and that ‘like Sartre, he believes that at the heart of the aesthetic imperative there is a moral imperative’ still seems to hold true—but is such a stance not blatantly anachronistic today?3

And yet—and this is a ‘YET’ in capital letters—Berger’s prose fiction can exert a strangely irresistible attraction even on sceptical readers. Even readers who disagree with Berger’s uncompromising political stance might, quite in spite of themselves, find pleasure in reading these novels. For instance, Melissa Benn in her review of From A to X for the Independent seems to be rather sceptical about the moral imperatives implied, yet appreciates the ‘physical quality’ that permeates Berger’s recent work.4 Sam Jordison in his Guardian review of the same text criticises Berger’s ‘sledgehammer technique’ in which ‘the only human personalities described in the book are those on the left, while the forces of oppression are represented by Apache helicopters, missiles that appear from nowhere, and eyes behind riot shields’; yet he nonetheless admires the precision, and sensuousness, of Berger’s descriptions of everyday life.5 The review of the same novel in The Daily Telegraph best captures the ambiguous reactions triggered by Berger’s fiction, as it is divided in two diametrically opposed articles: while Sam Leith loses patience with Berger’s ‘saintly oppressed’ and decries a ‘gross sentimentality (all faceless oppressors and noble peasants)’ that goes so far as to ensure that ‘the wretched woman cannot let her gaze rest on a courgette

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