

John Berger: Epistolarity and a Life in Letters

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The thick files of correspondence in the John Berger archive at the British Library reveal Berger's serious commitment to letters. This paper argues that this commitment is important in understanding Berger's literary work, particularly his recent epistolary novel *From A to X* (2008). The paper makes an initial attempt to bring together Berger's manuscript and correspondence with a close reading of the novel, in order to explore the relationship between Berger's real and literary letters. The use of epistolary conventions and techniques in *From A to X* speaks to a wider preoccupation in Berger's late work of launching an 'appeal' to the reader. Berger uses the letter's present tense, first-person narrative and stress on encounter to challenge incarceration, evade censorship and pursue dialogue. These conditions require the letter-writer to encode as well as communicate. I argue that the overall composition of *From A to X* is governed by the principle of encryption, and suggest that this is connected to Berger's long pursuit of dialogue under conditions in which this is barely possible.

You are not of course defeated. They're simply trying to build a wall between you and what you have always believed in. And they won't be able to.

——Letter from John Berger to Iona Heath, 26 April 2004¹

Those who impose this on us are frightened by our irregularity. So they build walls to keep us out. Yet their walls will never be long enough and there'll always be ways round, over and under them.

——John Berger, *From A to X*²

¹ Handwritten draft of a letter from John Berger to Iona Heath (General Correspondence 2004 (j), British Library). All future references to John Berger as real-life correspondent will be abbreviated to JB. All of the letters cited in this essay are contained in the John Berger archive in the British Library unless otherwise stated. At the time of my research (May 2012), the archive was not yet foliated. All references therefore cite the British Library file name (which corresponds to the boxes in which the documents were kept in Berger's stables in Quincy, France). 'General Correspondence' is hereafter abbreviated to 'GC'. The manuscript of the novel is referred to as 'MS'. I owe a debt of gratitude to John Berger for donating these papers, and for his generosity in allowing me to cite his letters and use images from the novel. I am also grateful to Tom Overton at the British Library for his generosity and patience in helping me find my way in the archive.

² John Berger, *From A to X: A Story in Letters* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 191. All other references to this text will be given parenthetically.

The first of these quotations is taken from a letter written by John Berger to his regular correspondent Dr Iona Heath, writer and President of the Royal General College of Practitioners. The second is from Berger's epistolary novel, *From A to X* (2008): a collection of highly coded letters from A'ida, a pharmacist living in an oppressive state, to a political prisoner named Xavier. Whilst it would be facile to suggest a causal link between the letters, it is worth noting their marked similarities: the tone of defiance, the lexicon, the cadence, and the thematic concern with 'walls' at a time when Berger was writing to his correspondents about the literal walls of the West Bank, Guantanamo Bay, and Abu Ghraib prisons, and the metaphorical, although no less real, walls of oppressive regimes including those in Burma and Chile.³ Indeed, many of A'ida's letters echo the style and syntax of Berger's real-life correspondence, even down to his unique style of punctuation, characterised by the frequent use of exclamation marks. The angel, prison, and medical imagery that permeates the novel is scattered throughout Berger's correspondence, and phrases and salutations recur between his letters and the novel. One of the notes that 'Xavier' scribbles on the 'back' of A'ida's letters, for instance, meditates on mass unemployment and declares that words like '*Democracy, Freedom, Progress, when returned to their cells, are incoherent*' (53). The tone and content echoes that of the short piece that Berger wrote for the thirtieth anniversary of *Race and Class* in 2004, which states that 'development and modernisation' mean 'nothing at all.'⁴ Other letters in the novel echo Berger's real-life political commitments which he often pursues through his correspondence, from open letters to personal letters of support to individuals across the world. These similarities became apparent as I read the thick files of John Berger's personal correspondence and the manuscripts of the novel in the British Library. At the time of my research, these documents, gifted by Berger in June 2009, were not yet foliated and had not been considered in relation to his literary work. This essay therefore marks an initial attempt to bring together the material

³ JB corresponds with individuals across the world about their experiences of prison and state oppression. JB also discusses these issues with his regular correspondents, for example discussing the West Bank separation barrier with Lisa Schlesinger (GC 2004 i); writing to Ariel Dorfman about his afterword to the prison poems of Guantanamo (GC 2007 i); and exchanging emails with Naomi Klein about the similarity between prisoner interrogation techniques and those used by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (GC 2007 ii).

⁴ This draft, typed, physically cut, and taped, is included in a letter from JB to *Race and Class* (GC 2004 i).