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AND OUR FACES, MY HEART, BRIEF AS PHOTOS

Author: John Berger

Published by Writers and Readers, 1984 101 pp.

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Reviewed by Lindy Stiebel

On first reading, *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos* emerges as a rather bewildering collage of ideas expressed in snatches of poetry, prose, polemical tract and autobiographical glimpses. Though a number of issues are raised by Berger in this book, his treatment of them is suggestive rather than exhaustive, and despite his characteristic direct and uncompromising use of language the book's flavour is a combination of realism and dream-like imprecision which calls for a second, more rewarding, reading. Parts of the book are reminiscent of "that state between waking and sleeping. From there you can wander towards either of the two. You can go away in a dream or you can open your eyes, be aware of your body, the room, the crows cawing in the snow outside the window" (p14).

Despite its diversity of style *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos* is unified through Berger's sustained exploration of the interaction between private and public domains, an exploration which he divides into two section — as stated in a Prefatory remark:

Part One is about Time.

Part Two is about Space.

In Part One then Berger reflects on the nature of time: the length of the "lived", deeply experienced moment as opposed to the seeming brevity of other moments; the perception of time as a force which people either take to be annihilating or capable of being, if not controlled, at least opposed.

When I open my wallet
to show my papers
pay money
or check the time of a train
I look at your face.

The flower's pollen
is older than the mountains
Aravis is young
as mountains go.

The flower's ovules
will be seeding still
When Aravis then aged
is no more than a hill.

The flower in the heart's
wallet, the force
of what lives us
outliving the mountain.

And our faces, my heart, brief as photos (p5).

Berger writes of the dead living on into present thought: those recalled range from individuals personally known to Berger to an anonymous group of Turkish workers, members of DISK, the left confederation of trade unions declared illegal in 1980, whose image he sees frozen in a photograph lying before him. The choice of philosophers whose names and thoughts he chooses to mention in this section are evidence of a similarly eclectic choice: Pascal, Proust, Hegel, Marx. In most instances, Berger does not enlarge on the statements or ideas he chooses to quote but mingles them in a shifting kaleidoscope — the effect gained is therefore correspondingly attractive but insubstantial.

Berger as art critic is rarely absent. In Section One his preoccupation is with the paradoxical timelessness of pictorial art because its language is static, and yet its specificity because its subject matter is the particular and ephemeral. In Section two he describes Van Gogh's compulsion to bring the canvas and the reality depicted closer and closer, to close the space between these two acts of production. There is also a lengthy (for this book) analysis of Caravaggio's work conveying Berger's deep admiration for this painter of life as experienced by the lumpenproletariat and by Caravaggio himself, which for Berger is the important point as his focus is on lived experience.

Part Two is entitled *Here* and the theme of space is introduced early on in this section:

This visible brings the world to us. But at the same time it reminds us ceaselessly that it is a world in which we risk to be lost. The visible with its space also takes the world away from us. Nothing is more two-faced (p50).

A sense of distance, of space to be crossed is a frequent accompaniment to Berger's reference to a lover writing to him from afar, mentally prompting him in present and past absence. He imagines the absent lover in spatial terms as a country, a place physically constituted possessing familiar landmarks. The sense of spatial alienation from this person is interwoven with the theme of leaving home, of being an immigrant in a foreign land, of moving from well known village to metropolis — related no doubt to Berger's projected three part work entitled *Into Their Labours* which is to trace in fiction a similar voyage by the peasant. Despite the feelings of displacement and alienation of the newly arrived immigrant, Berger manages to sound a note of cautious optimism which, in a way, sums up the tenor of this book as a whole:

Eventually perhaps the promise of which Marx was the great prophet, will be fulfilled, and then the substitute for the shelter of a home will not just be our personal names but our collective conscious presence in history, and we will live again at the heart of the real. Despite everything, I can imagine it (p67).

