CHAPTER 1

Understanding Thomas Berger

Career

Had the administrators of the Pulitzer Prize not overruled the recommendation of their judges’ committee and given the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for fiction to Thomas Berger’s *The Feud* rather than to William Kennedy’s *Ironweed*, would Berger’s place in American letters be significantly different? That is the kind of question suggested by Berger’s 1989 novel, *Changing the Past*, but not the kind of question that Berger himself would ever dwell upon. After a writing career that spans fifty years and twenty-three novels, Berger knows that his reputation is assured by one of the most distinguished bodies of work in postwar American fiction. Having persisted throughout his career in the writing of novels that are aggressively intelligent and consistently resistant to the twin sentimentalities of idealism and despair, Berger easily ranks among the most accomplished novelists since the end of World War II, and his writing seems sure to earn him a lasting place in American letters. His novels have established him as not only one of the most energetic American writers but also one of the most unpredictable, since no two of his books seem, at first glance, to have much in common. The fact that each of his books seems to follow a different genre convention is further complicated by the fact that no established genres prepare his readers for what his novels quickly become, no matter what genre traditions they seem to start from.
Having read *Little Big Man*, readers and critics alike find it quite difficult to understand how *Regiment of Women* could come from the same writer. And the task is almost as difficult with any two of Berger’s novels: little in *Arthur Rex* prepares readers for *Neighbors*, little in *Neighbors* prepares readers for *Reinhart’s Women*, and nothing in *Reinhart’s Women* prepares readers for *Adventures of the Artificial Woman*. Over a decade ago, Richard Schickel called Berger “one of the most radical sensibilities now writing novels in this country,” and any careful examination of Berger’s novels more than confirms Schickel’s claim.¹ Berger’s writing has always been just a bit too intelligent, a bit too unsentimental, a bit too hard to identify to garner him the number of readers and the popular acclaim easily granted to numerous contemporaries whose prose skills, narrative designs, and philosophical interrogations pale in comparison. For those readers long charmed and profoundly rewarded by Berger’s indisputable genius, this is hard to understand. It just doesn’t seem fair.²

Indeed, in his introduction to *Meeting Evil* (1992), Berger’s eighteenth novel, when it was republished in paperback by Simon and Schuster in 2003, Jonathan Lethem, an award-winning novelist as hip as any America can offer, has once again raised the fiercely loyal battle cry of Berger’s intensely loyal readers, many of nearly cultish devotion. “I’m grateful for the chance,” writes Lethem, “to shout that Thomas Berger is one of America’s three or four greatest living novelists.”³ It is important to remember that among Thomas Berger’s twenty-three novels are at least two stunning sweeping classics, *Little Big Man* (1964) and *Arthur Rex* (1978); the celebrated sequel to Jack Crabb’s fantastic adventures, *The Return of Little Big Man* (1999), *Neighbors* (1980), and *The Feud* (1983); and the four
novels in the unique Reinhart series, the most recent of which is *Reinhart’s Women* (1981).


That career has unfolded steadily since the appearance in 1958 of *Crazy in Berlin*. While most of Berger’s novels have received critical acclaim, none has been a best seller, and his career has been marked more by the noteworthy roster of appreciative reviewers and critics who have been fascinated by Berger’s unique fiction than by popular acclaim. However, Berger’s third novel, *Little Big Man* (1964), is generally regarded as his masterpiece, that codified his spot in the ranks of important American novelists. *Little Big Man* did not gain widespread recognition when first published, but the success of Arthur Penn’s film adaptation in 1970 redirected attention to the novel, as did numerous critical articles praising its unique voice and historical vision. Historians and critics of Western literature hailed *Little Big Man* as one of the great historical (and historically accurate) novels of postwar American fiction.

The most recent, and one of the most perceptive, celebrations of Berger’s writing, comes from Jonathan Lethem, in “Uncertainty Principle: Berger’s Ambivalent Usurpations,” Lethem’s introduction to the 2003 paperback edition of Berger’s *Meeting Evil*. Berger has never become a critical cottage industry, but his champions are so numerous and so passionate that it would be misleading to call him neglected. Nevertheless, it remains an article of faith among Berger readers that he deserves recognition as one of the most important American novelists of the twentieth century.

As might be expected of a writer in the mold of Vladimir Nabokov—and one who has widely ranged his novels across genres and historical eras—only the most oblique and ultimately insignificant connections can be drawn between the circumstances of Berger’s life and the particulars of his fiction. Nevertheless, a brief summary of Berger’s background may be of interest, particularly since his desire for privacy has given him something of a reputation as a recluse. In a 1990 *Washington Post* interview with David Streitfeld, Berger commented on his reputation of being reclusive: “The plain truth is that I would shameless suck up to anybody who might further my career (which indeed seems to be precisely what I’m doing here), but in the far-off days when I went public in quest of self-aggrandizement, I encountered only other opportunists, *mes semblables*
et freres, who expected to do to me what I had intended to do to them.”

As a man as well as a writer, Berger both invites and defies description. In his mideighties, he is a big man whose shaved head draws attention to penetrating eyes under eyebrows he once described as “arched in perpetual curiosity.” His jacket photo, by Jerry Bauer, freezes his age at fifty and presents him as a magnificent head, gazing from shadows. The overall effect manages to be at once faintly monkish and vaguely Charles Adamsish—a distinct but indecipherable suggestion of what the Czech film director Milos Forman affectionately called Berger’s “veerrdness.”

Berger was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1924 and grew up in the nearby suburban community of Lockland, where he attended the same public school from kindergarten through high school. His father was the school’s business manager. Berger notes of his childhood, “Very early in life, I discovered that for me reality was too often either dull or obnoxious, and while I did play all the popular games that employ a ball, lower hooks into the water, and, especially fire guns, I preferred the pleasure of the imagination to those of experience, and I read incessantly.” When asked by David Madden what provoked him to write fiction, Berger elaborated:

As a child I always loved to read and exercise my imagination. I have a vague memory of wanting to grow up to be a foreign correspondent, but that had to do almost entirely with wearing a trench coat, and I think that before I got too old I understood the difference between journalism and fiction and came to prefer the latter as being more likely to serve the truth: I mean of course, using Pascal’s
distinction, the truth of the heart and not of the reason, which is to say the serious truth as opposed to that of expediency and vulgarity. I regard myself as a teller of tales that are intended primarily to enchant or at least entertain myself. Only by living in the imagination can I successfully pretend I am a human being.8

When in high school, Berger worked part-time in a branch of the Cincinnati Public Library, and he also did library work when he was in college, experience that would later help him secure his first job in New York City.

The circumstances of Berger’s childhood do not seem to have had much of a direct influence on his fiction (certainly little, if anything, in his writing could be termed autobiographical in any strict sense), but the sounds of his childhood—the speech he grew up listening to—have exercised an influence little short of profound. Sneaky People, The Feud, and Reinhart in Love were generated as much from his fascination with the language of his childhood as from conventional concerns with plot, theme, or story. While writing The Feud, Berger reported, “I’m having a splendid time recreating the speech I heard when a child” (28 January 1982), and he has identified Sneaky People as “my tribute to the American language of 1939—to be philologically precise, that of the lower-middle class in the eastern Middle West, on which I am an authority as on nothing else.”9 More recently he explained: “I have all my life listened to the radio regularly, beginning in its golden age, the 1930’s. And I don’t have to remind you of my interest in sound, particularly that of human speech. In fact a good many of my sentences take their pretext from the sound of a certain word” (23 May 1979). Readers familiar with the trademark deadpan humor of the radio duo of
Bob and Ray may also find echoes of their style in Berger’s writing. He acknowledges that he has long been a fan of their brilliant humor, terming them “masters of American dialogue” and concluding, “I should say that it is very likely they have been an important influence on me” (24 September 1987). Perhaps even more important to Berger’s writing were the now classic movies of the 1930s and 1940s, references to which appear again and again in his novels, usually suggesting that the worlds of those movies largely influenced the behaviors or attitudes of the characters in Berger’s novels. Indeed, in some respects his fiction frequently aspires to the recognized artificiality of classic American cinema, his novels striving to create “alternative” worlds sharing many of the assumptions and codes valorized in the films of his youth. In more recent novels Berger also provides ample evidence that he is very well versed in the vagaries of American television.

Disenchanted after a short bout with higher education, first at Miami University in Ohio and then at the University of Cincinnati, Berger enlisted in the army and served from 1943 to 1946, his experiences giving him some of the background for his first novel, Crazy in Berlin. In 1948 he received his B.A. at the University of Cincinnati, and he was a graduate student in English at Columbia in the school year 1950–51. There he completed course work for an M.A., including a class with Lionel Trilling, and began a thesis on George Orwell, which he never completed. Berger not only abandoned that project, but left grad school altogether, although he acknowledges that “no doubt an Orwellian point of view can be seen in much of what I write.”

While it would be unwise to overestimate Trilling’s influence on Berger’s writing, it is important to note that many of Berger’s statements about his fiction and many aspects of the fiction itself
parallel Trilling’s beliefs, particularly as represented in his essay “The Meaning of a Literary Idea.” While Berger recalls that as a student in Trilling’s course in modern American literature he “worshiped Trilling . . . and was much taken with his sort of sociocultural criticism” (28 January 1979), he downplays suggestion of lasting impact: “Make of Trilling’s influence what you will. I don’t see much of it in my fiction, in which I think my influences are other literary artists, not critics, and yes, the movies and TV” (11 June 1987). From academic graduate study, Berger turned his attention to the writers’ workshop at the New School for Social Research. At the New School, Berger “studied classical Greek and philosophy for a while with refugee professors from the great universities of Germany, who had fled Hitler” (11 June 1987). Called “the University in Exile,” this special faculty seems likely to have helped shape Berger’s lifelong fascination with the parameters of freedom and victimization. In the New School writers’ workshop, Berger’s fellow students included William Styron, Jack Kerouac, and Mario Puzo. Since 1950 Berger has been married to Jeanne Redpath, an artist he met at the New School.

Under the aegis of the New School workshop director Charles Glicksberg, Berger, who explains he had always thought of himself as a writer, began to write short stories: “I produced one story a week for three months, most of them melancholy in tone, maudlin in spirit, and simple of mind, Hemingway then being my model. Graduating in time to the influence of Faulkner, I published a thing or two of little merit during the next five years in ‘little’ magazines, but I didn’t begin my first novel and develop my own style, such as it is—and little did I know that it would be different in each successive novel—until I was within a few months of my thirtieth birthday.”11
“Dependency of Day and Night,” published in the spring 1952 Western Review, confirms the accuracy of this self-assessment, but suggests that the Hemingway influence was even then heavily tempered by Berger’s sense of irony, as Berger’s soldier protagonist suffers not from battle wounds but from dermatitis.

Of his short fiction Berger is distinctly unenamored. As he has explained, “the marathon is my event, and not the hundred-yard dash”:

My gift is not seen at advantage in short works of fiction. (Nor do I usually read short stories with much pleasure.) Perhaps this is because I do not have much room in a story to create my alternative reality—and I am not unusually eloquent as a mere commentator on the reality I must, being human, share with everyone else. To put it another way, in the novel I have before me the possibility of being Alexander or Caesar—or Genghis Khan: there is a land of some magnitude to conquer. But a story seems a kind of Liechtenstein or San Marino: what does one have when he has assaulted and taken it? A trade in postage stamps. (23 August 1977)

Despite this preference, Berger’s short fiction has appeared in magazines ranging from the Saturday Evening Post to Playboy and the North American Review. He has written reviews and short satirical pieces for Esquire, where he also wrote a column on film from 1972 to 1973. Berger has written four plays, only two of which, The Burglars: A Comedy in Two Acts and Other People, have been published, the latter of which was also produced in 1970 at the Berkshire Theatre Festival in Massachusetts. A Berger radio play, At the Dentist’s, was produced by Vermont Public Radio in 1981.
From 1948 through 1951, Berger supported his writing by working as a librarian at the Rand School of Social Science. One cannot read the issues of the *Institute of Social Studies Bulletin*, in which some of Berger’s early book reviews appeared, without realizing that his work at the Rand School immersed him in an exciting, intellectually and ideologically charged environment, quite a break, no doubt, from earlier life with Protestant, “right-wing Ohio Republican” parents, when Berger had himself been completely uninterested in politics. Even in those early reviews, however, Berger’s interest clearly lay in ideas rather than in ideologies, a distinction rigorously maintained throughout his writing.

In 1951–52 he was a staff member of the *New York Times Index*, and in the following year he was a copy editor for *Popular Science Monthly*. During the early 1950s, Berger wrote a number of reviews, many of which were for *New Leader* and the *Institute of Social Studies Bulletin*. Of particular note are those of Orwell’s *Shooting an Elephant*, Koestler’s *Age of Longing*, and Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* in *Intro* and those of the anonymously authored *A Woman in Berlin* and Poliakov’s *Harvest of Hate* in the *Socialist Call*. In the former three, Berger discusses the limitations, opportunities, and responsibilities of the ideological novel, while in the latter two can be found part of the likely background for his first novel, *Crazy in Berlin*. These early reviews offer little promise of Berger’s subsequent prose style, nor do they more than hint at the complicated sensibility seen in his novels.

Having lived in New York City from 1948 to 1953, Berger moved frequently during the next twenty-six years, moving first to “a little village on the Hudson River,” then to London, then to the beach at Malibu, California, before moving back to
another village on the Hudson, then returning to London, and then back to New York City, where he remained for another seven and a half years. Next came a year in the Hamptons on Long Island, followed by three years on Mount Desert Island in Maine. In 1979 he moved to his present location, once more in a small village on the Hudson riverbank. “I have lead a quiet life for the past quarter century,” he notes, “writing novels, talking with my wife (now of 57 years) and whichever of her dachshunds is current, and going out only on the weekly trip to the supermarket” (10 June 2007).

Until 1964 and the publication of his third novel, *Little Big Man*, Berger did freelance editing to supplement the income from his writing. That writing won a Dial fellowship in 1962, the Western Heritage Award in 1965, and the Rosenthal Award that same year. In 1975–76 Berger was Distinguished Visiting Professor at Southampton College; a decade later he was awarded an honorary D.Litt. by its parent institution, Long Island University. For the first semesters of the 1981–82 and 1982–83 school years, Berger was visiting lecturer at Yale. In 1983 he declined an appointment to the American Institute of Arts and Letters, a quiet manifestation of his “fundamental lack of a feeling of community with most of my literary fellows: I am necessarily *with* them (chronologically), but I am not *of* them” (21 June 2007).

Little interested in teaching, lecturing, or participating in the literary community, Berger is first and last a novelist. “I never take a vacation,” he has written, “because what would it be from? I became a novelist many years ago so that I might live in a continuum of make-believe in which there are no weekends and, more importantly, no Monday mornings” (6 September 1977). In 1980, he concluded a written interview with Richard
Schickel by stating a succinct personal credo: “I should like the reader to be aware that a book of mine is written in the English language, which I love with all my heart and write to the best of my ability and with the most honorable of intentions—which is to say, I am peddling no quackery, masking no intent to tyrannize, and asking nobody’s pity. (I suspect that I am trying to save my own soul, but that’s nobody else’s business.)”

Overview

Thomas Berger’s devoted readers know how difficult a task it is to describe his writing—and any effort to do so with utility must alternate between general statements of Berger’s method and specific analysis that is just as likely to challenge as it is to confirm those statements. His novels wear twenty-three different masks, cutting across so many convenient critical categories and defying so many well-fed expectations that only the most general descriptions can introduce new readers to Berger’s writing, celebrating as it does the diversity of novel forms, the complexities of language, the paradoxes of the human condition, and the possibilities of prose style. Perhaps the one thing on which critics agree is that Berger’s talent is unique. The variety of Berger’s novels, a range with no equal in contemporary American literature, underlines the precision of his craft, while distracting readers from the steadiness and the seriousness of his purpose. And because Berger’s central concerns are deeper and older than those associated with any particular culture in which his novels are set, they are particularly challenging to describe.

The goal of this book is to explain at once why Berger’s novels are actually much more complicated than they at first seem and then to explain the radical implications of his writing. To understand the writing of Thomas Berger, a reader needs to
recognize his primary allegiance to language and prose style, his celebrations of the artifices of fiction over the “facts” of reality, his rejection at once of both sentimentality and irony as unchallenged worldviews, and his embrace of the human in all its banality, weakness, and inexplicable optimism. Understanding Thomas Berger requires the reader to realize that the interpretation of Berger’s novels is the study of his style and that the discussion of meaning really centers on the ways in which a reader experiences his writing. When Berger suggests that only the “selfish” reader will get the most out of his work, he explicitly spells out what his novels implicitly demand: far from encouraging readers to “lose” themselves in fiction, his novels challenge their readers to become conscious of themselves in the act of reading.14

Language and Style
The apparent diversity of genres, subjects, and themes in Thomas Berger’s twenty-three novels is unified by his thoroughgoing fascination with the many dimensions of prose style, appearing as they do in the languages of life as well as those of literature. This fascination with language gives rise to all the fundamental patterns of Berger’s fiction, informing the basic structure, themes, and character portrayals in his novels. As a result, his fiction challenges readers to recognize that they live more in a world of words than of things, a world where the mechanisms of language—the ways in which people think and talk about existence—determine the quality of experience more than do the “facts” of experience themselves. Indeed, as character after character encounters (but does not often learn) in Berger’s novels, the very idea of a “fact” is a linguistic rather than sensory phenomenon, and as such it can be manipulated
and distorted, usually to someone’s specific ends, to the detri-
ment of someone else. Readers can expect a series of recurring
situations in Berger’s novels in which language seems to war
with “reality.” Or, more properly, the situation reminds readers
that whatever the physical, experiential terrain of “reality,” they
know that sensory terrain primarily from the map of language—
a map continuously redrawn to suit the selfish interests of the
mapmakers in all humans.

One way of summarizing this overriding concern is simply
to say that for Berger, the novel’s most profound subject must
always be the power of language. The persistent goal of Berger’s
novels is to shift attention, from a purportedly real world of
experience, to the ways in which that world is conventionally
perceived as a construct of language. It is in this sense that
Berger cheerfully warns that we should not confuse fiction with
life, because “the latter is false,” and it is in this spirit that he
reminds the readers of *Killing Time* that his novel “is a construc-
tion of language and otherwise a lie.” The magnificent “lie” of
fiction, built upon the even more basic “lie” of language, where
words are not the things they name, fascinates Berger and sup-
plies one of the most prominent recurrent subjects in his novels.

Berger’s sentences, frequently elaborately serpentine, twist
syntax, display exotic diction, and sharpen his thoughts and
images toward ever more precise edges. His mastery of his prose
style, however, does not mean that his attitude toward language
is that of a craftsman toward his tools. Instead, the larger effect
of Berger’s novels is to suggest that the novelist’s manipulations
of the prose surface of his book are those of momentary and
isolated control rather than those of ultimate mastery, a state
roughly akin to that of a bronco buster who often stays on, but
never manages to break, a particular horse. Berger has said that
language is “a morality and a politics and a religion” to him, and his novels suggest that indeed in language reside the roots and the power of all such abstract systems. Accordingly his novels all address the workings of language, particularly the ways in which language determines the perception of reality.

A major assumption underlying Berger’s writing would seem to be that understanding of the referential world is largely determined by the ways it is talked about, the linguistic codes and formulas people have evolved for shaping their lives and their literature. This may at least in part account for persistent reminders throughout Berger’s fiction that “Nature” is the source of physical and physiological “facts” that defy the spin of language and sometimes awkwardly remind readers that some concepts of “normality” actually rise from the way things are, as opposed to the way one might wish them to be. Berger’s novels strongly suggest that many of the problems of human existence stem from the reification of verbal constructs and from the consequent confusion of language with the referential world. A corollary implication is that this confusion arises in significant part from the fact that these verbal constructs—linguistic codes for discussing racism, patriotism, or sexuality, for instance—are born of efforts to manipulate perceptions of reality for the interest of a particular worldview.

Consider that Jack Crabb, in Little Big Man, bounces back and forth not just between white and Plains Indian cultures but between competing codes of conduct designed to legitimize all manner of cruelty. Berger shows how Jack’s greatest problems are at bottom matters of definition, and the many different narrative codes Jack employs to tell his story reflect some of the major ways in which we have talked about the West, depending on the moment’s perceived needs. Consequently Berger’s novels
focus not so much on ideas or themes (although they swell with both) as on the relationship between language and thought. Language is Berger’s theme, and if his novels can be said to support a central thesis, it is roughly that the interaction of competing and conflicting language codes provides the most important constant of human existence.

Sneaky Celebrations of Genre

Because Berger’s fiction never advertises its anomalies, seeming to follow conventional narrative patterns, linear time schemes, and standard syntax, its experimental or innovative dimension is often overlooked. In this respect, Berger’s style somewhat resembles the broad pattern of deception best explained by Poe’s Inspector Dupin in “The Purloined Letter,” where he explains the advantages of hiding something in plain sight, where it escapes detection by being excessively obvious. Berger’s literary experiments are of this kind, sneaky in their obviousness.

To recognize that this so-obvious-as-to-be-overlooked experimental aspect is a major feature of Berger’s style, the reader must understand the nature of his celebrations of classic novel genres. The jacket note written by Berger for Who Is Teddy Villanova? reviews the general scheme of his career: “Each of Thomas Berger’s novels celebrates another classic genre of fiction: the western (Little Big Man), the childhood memoir (Sneaky People), the anatomical romance (Regiment of Women), the true-crime documentary (Killing Time), and the Reinhart books (Crazy in Berlin, Reinhart in Love, and Vital Parts) together form a sociological epic.”

Who Is Teddy Villanova? extends this pattern to the classic American hard-boiled detective story, and Arthur Rex to Arthurian romance; Neighbors traces its lineage to Kafka, Laclos,
and Sade; and Reinhart’s Women continues the sociological epic of the Reinhart series. Berger describes his twelfth novel, The Feud, as a “Dreiserian slice of life,” while Nowhere, his thirteenth, clearly invokes the utopian/dystopian tradition of Swift and Butler. Being Invisible, Berger’s fourteenth published novel, has ties to H. G. Wells’s and Ralph Ellison’s quite different invisible men, while The Houseguest presents a self-made hollow man in the tradition of The Great Gatsby (although Berger suggests that this novel may have had its origins in a John Belushi skit on “Saturday Night Live”).

While Changing the Past (1989) does not seem to start from any specific novel tradition, it clearly shares assumptions with “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” as well as with the “three wishes” tradition in folklore and fairy tales. Orrie’s Story (1990) resets the Oresteia in postwar America, and Robert Crews (1994) celebrates one of the very starting points of the novel itself, DeFoe’s Robinson Crusoe. Both Changing the Past and Meeting Evil (1992) can be read as parables with affinities to Kafka’s “Before the Law,” a reminder of the importance of Kafka to understanding Berger. Suspects (1996) reminds us of Berger’s interest in police procedurals. The Return of Little Big Man (1999) extends the vanishing of Plains Indians life so carefully chronicled in Little Big Man to the final vanishing of the American West as it disappears into the simulations of the World’s Columbian Exposition and the theatricalizations of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Best Friends (2004) offers another example of the doubling and confusion of “kicker and kickee,” long a feature of Berger’s fiction, and Adventures of the Artificial Woman (2004), while characterized by Berger as more “literary conceit” than novel, can only remind us of the complicated educational trajectory of the creature in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein.
The notion that these books parody their genre forms has dogged Berger’s career, appearing in most reviews of his work. However, the careful study of genre sources that has preceded the writing of these novels has been for Berger too much a labor of love to result only in parody. Unlike parody, Berger’s novels start from, rather than aim toward, the traditions of literary formulas, a testing and broadening of possibilities rather than a burlesquing of limitations. Berger has explained: “I never think about form. The structure of any book of mine comes from the sequence of the words. My conscious intention is always to write as conventional an example (of whichever genre) as I can manage to do. Thus I never begin with the intention to deride a genre; my purpose is always to celebrate it, to identify and applaud its glories” (11 February 1977). While he goes on to admit, “I am usually hoodwinked by my imagination before I get far,” that imagination looks far beyond the conventions of literary genres. In a 1980 interview with Richard Schickel, Berger expressed his impatience with those who mistake him “for a merry-andrew with an inflated pig’s bladder,” because such readers “can never understand that I adore whichever tradition I am striving to follow, and that what results is the best I can manage by way of joyful worship—not the worst in sneering derision.”

The novels of a protean writer as widely read as is Berger will inevitably contain echoes and invocations of the pantheon of great literature, and scrambling reviewers and critics have noted Berger’s debt to or affinity with Shakespeare, Dante, Smollett, Goethe, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Melville, Dickens, Proust, Kafka, Faulkner, and Nabokov (to name just a few). Include the Berger novels that obviously start from particular literary models, and this list must be expanded to include Aeschylus, Malory, Moore,
Defoe, Mary Shelley, H. G. Wells, Booth Tarkington, Dashiel Hammett, and Raymond Chandler (again to name just a few). To speak of Berger’s literary influences, then, is to say as little and as much as to note the influences on Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Suffice it to say that Berger’s fiction is inspired and informed by the great traditions and works of literary history.

What makes Berger’s experiments with literary traditions hard to detect is that he follows the rules of conventional literary arrangement, but he may do so through an unexpected and unsettling jumble of literary codes. This juxtaposing of incongruous—if not seemingly incompatible—aspects of prose and genre style results in an intensification of the “fictionality” of Berger’s novels. This effect has been most effectively analyzed by Jonathan Lethem, who explains:

I can think of no other American writer more invested in and trusting of the means and materials of fiction qua fiction: scenes and sentences, chapters and paragraphs, and, above all, characters—their voices and introspections, their predicaments in fictional worlds. He’s cultivated this investment to the exclusion of all forms of topicality or sociology, autobiographical appeals to readerly interest, superficial “innovations,” or controversialism. Berger’s too interested in the mysteries of narrative to bother with metafiction, yet his world does possess a certain rubbery pleasure in its own artifice. He doesn’t bother to disguise fiction’s proscenium arch—his “realism,” such as it is, resides in his assiduous scrutiny of daily existence, at levels both psychological and ontological. Berger adores novels too much to play at their destruction or to be embarrassed at his participation in a tradition.
Berger’s novels characteristically start from some recognizable literary tradition only to twist it in ways that call attention to the fact that it is indeed “a literary tradition,” whose protocols, whether scrupulously observed or self-consciously subverted, construct an artificial world that can only remind readers of the ways in which “reality” is itself equally a construct. If readers can be sure of only one thing in his writing, it is that expectations are meant to be disproved. To this end, Berger tries to make of each novel an “independent existence,” an alternative reality he hopes the reader will approach “without the luggage of received ideas, a priori assumptions, sociopolitical axes to grind, or feeble moralities in search of support” (8 November 1976). “If you want to know what I do,” he has more recently suggested, “go look at Neighbors,” explaining that in its writing he had no idea what was coming next: “I had no idea, but I usually don’t in my books. I don’t plot, I don’t make notes, I don’t structure, I don’t outline. That’s why I say the style, the language, is so important, because once I get the style, the style writes the book. I never think of it consciously. I sit down at the typewriter, and I get into that style, that voice, and I begin to hear it or begin to see it.”

This technique is not without its consequences, however, as Zulfikar Ghose, Berger’s friend and himself a novelist of unique sensibility speculates: “Novels whose subject matter is their greatest appeal are invariably vastly popular. . . . Novels which stand on their style alone win readers slowly, in little bands here and there, until the work becomes one of the layers which compose human consciousness.” Or, as Jonathan Lethem puts it, “Each time Berger writes he ventures out with only his style for courage.”
What Berger terms the “alternative reality” or “independent existence” of his novel is a verbal world that both owes its existence to a number of traditional and arbitrary conventions of representation and seeks to remind readers that the artificiality of these conventions is of interest and significance in itself—not just as a means to the representation of reality. Berger’s persistent reminders throughout his novels “that a work of fiction is a construction of language and otherwise a lie” emerge primarily from some kind of unexpected juxtapositioning of incongruous units of narrative—whether at the level of the sentence or of the novel and its traditions. He does this time after time, juxtaposing seemingly incongruous sentence styles, narrative codes, and other forms or concepts within the text of his novels.

The most obvious example of Berger’s use of this technique is probably *Who Is Teddy Villanova?*, in which he places side by side the landmarks of the American hard-boiled private-detective story and a protagonist who speaks (as another character pointedly observes!) “as though quoting Macaulay.” The unexpected juxtapositions in that novel exist in the disparate literary formulas it invokes, as well as at the level of its sentences, which wildly swing back and forth from street vernacular to an ornateness and intricacy so refined as to make an English professor blush.

Much more subtle and conceptual forms of this phenomenon can be found in Berger’s other novels and form one of the significant continuities of his style, serving to turn familiar literary patterns into unexpected means to self-reflexive ends, denying or inverting attendant expectations about what those literary patterns usually mean. Accordingly readers quickly recognize familiar formula landmarks—say of the historical novel in *Little Big Man* or of the hard-boiled detective story in *Who Is
Teddy Villanova?—in Berger’s novels, but that recognition comes with significant differences, like seeing an old friend suddenly gone cheerfully insane or an old insane friend cheerfully restored to reason. The effect of Berger’s “strange-making” is to pursue formula conventions past the point of their emblematic meaning to the point where they must assume a fresh, particular meaning within the context of his novel only. In creating these unexpected juxtapositions at every level of his writing, Berger redirects concern from the story told by his fiction to the story that is his fiction itself.

For example *Little Big Man* combined formula elements from the traditional western with those from Nabokovian tour de force, presenting the stereotype of the frontier hero but undercutting that stereotype with the sophisticated self-consciousness of his narration: just as much as or more than it is about the “Old West,” *Little Big Man* is about the ways in which the “Old West” has been constructed by the ways in which we talk and write about it. In the same manner, *Regiment of Women* so mixed sexual stereotyping with linguistic and literary codes that it managed to miff readers on both sides of the women’s rights issue, blinding many readers and reviewers alike to the fact that Berger’s real concern in that novel was with the vagaries of language rather than with those of sexuality. In each case, Berger constructed his novels in unexpected ways from unexpected combinations of literary, linguistic, and cultural codes, ever reminding his readers of the insidious determinism of expectations. One of the results of this technique is that Berger’s writing simply does not seem to fit existing critical categories—or, more perversely, it seems to fit several antithetical ones at once. His fiction swells with paradoxes, seeming to
embrace what it exposes as delusion, celebrating what it seems
to parody, absolutely refusing to subscribe to any codified phi-
losophy, whether romantic, existentialist, or absurdist, mod-
ernist, metafictional, postmodernist, or deconstructive.

Berger’s Characters

Any Berger character, no matter how minor or how despicable,
is capable of advancing propositions about reality that deserve
serious consideration, a condition complicated by the fact that
not only do the propositions of different characters clearly con-
tradict each other, but also by the equally clear case that the
propositions advanced by a single character almost always exist
in contradiction with each other. Indeed, that all Berger’s char-
acters have something to say worth thinking about and that
none of them speaks with uniform moral reason, much less
authority, makes reading his fiction both a challenge and a frus-
tration to the reader who expects fiction to have some fairly
consistent normative “message.” Even a cursory review of Ber-
ger’s novels reveals that his characters usually find themselves in
conflicts that largely result from the vagaries of language: the
lives of his characters are affected more by words than by
actions, and insofar as true freedom might be defined by Berger
as “the ability to be consistent with oneself,” his characters are
enslaved by language. They are victimized by definitions that
exclude or threaten them, by rhetoric that makes them lose sight
of physical facts, and by language designed more to preclude
than to encourage clear thinking. For this reason the plot of a
Berger novel typically chronicles the efforts of protagonists to
free themselves from someone else’s verbal version of reality. In
this sense Berger’s novels have all explored the processes of
victimization, with Berger approaching his subject much as a jeweler might examine all the facets of some bright and terrible diamond.

From Carlo Reinhart in *Crazy in Berlin* to Lydia Graves in *The Houseguest* to the animatronic Phyllis in *Adventures of the Artificial Woman*, Berger’s characters live blurring lives in which they oscillate between being victims and victimizers, between manipulating and being manipulated by the kinds of rhetoric or language codes that organize human life. Reinhart, for instance, knows that his true quest is for “freedom” but also realizes that he cannot “define the nature of his captivity, let alone identify the chief warden, though naturally he knew as well as anybody that we are our own jailors” (172). Berger’s protagonists struggle, whether consciously or unconsciously, to free themselves from the inexorable tendency to think of themselves as victims of outrages and impositions, both humorously small and tragically large. Almost never in control of the situation around them, these characters consistently find themselves outmaneuvered, outsmarted, insulted, and imposed upon. Their victimization is usually funny but always serious, often seemingly trivial but always with an underlying pattern that falls little short of an old-fashioned naturalistic determinism. While all his main characters seem on the verge of some momentous discovery that language is all that really matters, that to control their lives they must first learn to control the codes that define and evaluate their existence, only Joe Detweiler of *Killing Time*, Georgie Cornell of *Regiment of Women*, and John Felton of *Meeting Evil* seem finally able to break through the fictions of their verbally determined environments: Detweiler does so through insanity, Cornell does so through an inadvertent return to nature, and
Felton ultimately recognizes that truly meeting evil demands action rather than language.

Berger’s central, and particularly his peripheral, characters are a string of outrageously impossible but hauntingly plausible individuals who seem, in Berger’s words, to be “persistent liars” and “monsters of one persuasion or another.” Never brandable as good or evil (with the noteworthy exception of Richie, in Meeting Evil), his characters appear to the reader as appealing in their often-bizarre excesses as they are sadly humorous in their deficiencies. Most important, as Reinhart finally understands of a wife who leaves him and of a son who taunts and despises him, all Berger’s characters, whether for good or ill, do their best. They may trick, abuse, betray, and even murder one another, but in a world where understanding seems full of drawbacks and the irresponsible have, as Reinhart notes, “a permanent one up on those who feel obligations,” they are no more and no less than normal.

All observing Ishmaels, acted upon more than they act, Berger’s characters are generally content not so much to try to change or even judge the world around them as to survive and understand it. Even when granted what might seem to be fantastic power, as is Fred Wagner in Being Invisible or as is Walter Hunsicker in Changing the Past, Berger’s characters discover that—even when realized—fantasies of wish fulfillment can’t really change the nature of their lives. Nevertheless, almost all of them consistently engage in desperate fantasies when faced with disaster, only to find their dream-logic shattered by real-life humiliation. But even in the midst of their desperate fantasies, Berger’s characters display a penchant for serious concept spinning or for advancing philosophical propositions.
Whether educated or illiterate, young or old, privileged or imposed upon, male or female, his characters are uniformly contemplative, musing about general lessons and principles even when in desperate circumstances. For a Berger character, the attempt to understand experience involves the continuous formation of propositions. These propositions cover aspects of human life both small and large, banal and profound, and often seem a kind of collaboration between Berger’s narrators (quite different from book to book) and characters, the former precisely articulating the more vague intuitions, perceptions, and suppositions of the latter. For example, in *The Houseguest*, Bobby Graves’s point of view considers the proposition that “the concept of civilized behavior would seem to include a least a sense of balance, if not justice in the narrowest of legalistic senses” (195), while his wife, Lydia, who recognizes Bobby’s lack of moral strength, feels he may nevertheless make an effective lawyer because “it may well be that the ideal advocate for others is someone who cannot speak effectively for himself—he has no distractions” (8). Indeed a more or less steady stream of such propositions identifies its initiating point of view as that of a Berger character, but further discriminations are next to impossible: propositional thinking is what Berger characters have in common, and distinctions among characters rarely emerge from their specific reflections.

In the courtroom of his novels, Berger is neither judge nor advocate, feeling that his job is to maintain his characters in equilibrium, a concern of “art and not politics or sociology.” Accordingly his novels brim with characters of wildly opposing viewpoints, none of whom ever has the last word, since Berger never presents a character whose testimony can be totally believed or who can be totally discounted. Indeed, those of his
characters who most closely approach straw-man caricature, such as Splendor Mainwaring and Claude Humbold, prove so consistently outrageous that they are “so chicane as to achieve finally a kind of integrity.”23 Even an ostensible villain such as General Custer in *Little Big Man* is not denied the dignity of his conception of self, even though events reveal the obvious flaws in that conception.

All Berger’s characters reflect a fascination with people much like that ascribed to Reinhart. “Vile they might well be, but it happens that vileness is fascinating—to a degree of course. For example, he said to himself now, you will never find a transvestite bear” (338). In many ways, Reinhart remains the prototypical Berger character, even if Jack Crabb is the best known. For, while Jack addresses the audience of his expected with narrative gusto and vernacular eloquence, he does not engage most of the “actual” acquaintances mentioned in his tales with Reinhart’s love of argument and repartee. And Jack, while he must try to make sense of the cultural and consequently moral divide between white and Indian, is not the connoisseur of ever-finer moral distinctions we find in Reinhart—and indeed in most of Berger’s characters. Only Reinhart, the prototypical Berger moralist, would consider whether the greater moral opprobrium attaches to an American soldier who fails to repay a monetary debt to a survivor of Auschwitz or to an American soldier who has sex with a sixteen-year-old German girl in his employ (“Owing money to an alumnus of Auschwitz was a good deal rrottener than any sexual transgression” [CIB, 272]).

If Reinhart learns any singly most important lesson during his life, it would seem to be that he must jettison “the ballast of moral judgment,” as he finally realizes that “he had been burdened with it, made lead-footed, hunchbacked, his life long”
But, like almost all of Berger’s main characters, jettisoning the ballast of moral judgment is the act of which Reinhart is most singly incapable. While Reinhart’s theory only infrequently coincides with his practice, his controlling belief is a simple pragmatism that applies to the characters in all Berger’s novels: “make no mistake, people use us as we ask them to: this is life’s fundamental, and often the only, justice” (CIB, 310).

What critics have been largely unable to see is that Berger characteristically uses familiar figures in his novels—the chicane businessman, the crooked politician, the bumbling existential hero—without making them a part of the familiar assault on the culture of middle America. That his novels are often described as satires on society perplexes Berger as much as does the notion that they are parodies of classic literary forms: “The naive invariably believe that I strive, and fail, to write social criticism for the delectation of the illiterates who take the daily newspapers seriously and for the semiliterates who make up their staffs. They assume there is a consensus of men of good will and believe that I am trying to associate myself with it” (2 April 1977).

Put off by what he refers to as the “platitudes of social meliorism,” Berger concerns his fiction more with the perceptual and spiritual foundations of civilization than with its articulation into specific cultures and specific systems of belief. A perversely philosophical, blind, German Jewish, Nazi doctor in *Crazy in Berlin* may suggest Berger’s attitude when he warns Reinhart: “If you think I shall tell you what is right or wrong, my friend, you are mistaken. That is your own affair. I care only for practical matters” (341). Above all, in crafting his characters, Berger refuses to become another person who *knows better*. Berger has explained his own moral reticence, and by
extension that of his characters, simply: “The older I get the more reluctant I am to make judgments of that kind about other people’s lives or about all of life. I am happy to say that life continues to exceed my capacity to define it. And, as Reinhart might say, it isn’t as if one has an alternative.” Accordingly Berger’s characters neither represent nor call to mind worthy causes. Instead, they learn, or their lives suggest to the reader, that the very idea of a cause—even one as noble as the code of chivalry Arthur gave to his knights—ultimately works against the best interests of true individuality.

Comic Moralist, Moralistic Comic, Both and Neither

A constant in Berger’s otherwise genial and generous response to critics and reviewers with whom he disagrees or agrees alike has been his bridling at being termed a comic novelist. As he patiently explained to David W. Madden in an interview: “On the subject of whether my work is comic or not, I can only say that my intention is to tell a straightforward story for my own entertainment. Surely there are funny passages, but my purpose is not to inspire laughter except incidentally. What I dislike about being called a ‘comic novelist’ is that reviewers who don’t like my books find it too convenient to condemn them for not being funny enough.” Somewhat less patiently, Berger told Laurel Graeber on the occasion of the 1992 publication of *Meeting Evil*: “I think some people dismiss me as a clown who makes fun of serious things. . . . I’ve been trying in recent years to be grimmer and grimmer and grimmer. . . . I wanted to write a book no one could call comic.”

A year earlier, on the occasion of the publication of *Orrie’s Story*, Berger had expressed an even more exasperated view in an interview with B. A. Nilsson: “I made an intentional effort to
avoid anything that could be called comedy. . . . I have never intended to be funny and have always disliked the label of ‘comic Novelist,’ which has been applied to me by the humorless half-literate who read only to confirm received ideas. *Orrie’s Story* goes out of its way to be grim. Nevertheless, the anonymous buffoon who wrote the prepublication review for *Publishers Weekly* denounced it as an example of unsuccessful black comedy.”

While reasonable enough and certainly pragmatic, this long-standing protest against being identified as a comic writer may be precisely correct, but is also misleading insofar as Berger’s fiction consistently celebrates incongruities, which, if not comic, are undeniably funny. After all, as the book jacket illustration for *The Feud* reminds us, that novel featured, among many delightfully humorous moments, one when young Tony Beeler escapes a malicious small-town cop by hitting him in the face with a lemon meringue pie—a signature slapstick moment even when put to serious use.

Michael Malone distinguishes Berger as “a writer of comedy (as opposed to comic writer)” and suggests a number of ways in which responses to Berger’s writing confirms Malone’s observation that “terms for comedy have long been a hodgepodge of jumbled misuse, tossed about as loose synonyms for tone.” Perhaps it is Jonathan Lethem who, in his introduction to *Meeting Evil*, has most diplomatically and most authoritatively addressed Berger’s aversion to being associated with the comic:

As a favor to my friend I have avoided the word which has dogged his years on this planet: I have not called him comic. But I would fail here if I didn’t report that his books have made me laugh harder, over my years on the planet,
than any others on my shelves. I predict that you will laugh too, and that you will find, as I have, that this laughter sustains itself even after the contemplation, inevitable after absorbing more than one or two of Berger’s books, of the vast distress at the universal human plight (though it is an even-keeled, contemplative distress, as in the way of the Buddha) which necessitated their writing. Berger isn’t comic. He, like life, is merely, and hugely, fucking funny.29

Somewhat paradoxically, while Berger has balked at accepting the label of being a comic writer because of the misleading connotations of that term, he has readily accepted the label of being a moralist, even while insisting that he lacks what is generally understood to be the moralist’s reforming agenda. When asked by David W. Madden to respond to the characterization of Being Invisible, The Houseguest, and Changing the Past as modern morality tales, Berger denied that he preaches morality, but noted that he is “interested almost exclusively in moral situations.”30 When, later in that interview, Berger is asked to comment on the claim that he is a writer of “stringent moral parables,” he acknowledges that he could “reasonably” be called a writer of parables and continues: “I am happy to be called a moralist, which by the way does not conflict at all with my stated intention of writing only to amuse myself. What amuses me are tales of moral significance: my own are always personal inventions, even when I use history or established legend, but hardly ever self-regarding.”31

All Berger’s novels again and again identify and investigate the complexity of moral issues, whether of the capital “M” Morality of matters of life and death or of the little “m” morality of politeness and everyday responsibility. What his fiction
generally does not offer is answers to the questions it raises about morality. Explaining why his “tales of moral significance” do not propose solutions to moral problems, Berger recalls in a letter to Zulfikar Ghose a conversation with Arthur Koestler in which Koestler admitted to Berger he could not help trying to save the world:

He said this wryly, of course, and then asked me whether I felt the same urge. I said no, that I wouldn’t walk across the street to save the world, because I did not see it as a problem to which there was a solution. . . . Existence seems to me to be simply there. It is certainly basically painful, but the true pain, beneath the inconveniences that can be dealt with, is not the kind of thing that can be eradicated by scientists or economists or politicians or mass religious movements; although to individuals involved in these, life may be more gratifying than it would be without a cause.32

Citing his belief in a “fundamental reciprocity, which maintains the principle of constant damage in the universe,” Berger concluded simply that he did “not see life as responsive to any ‘cure.’” Which is to say that Berger does not usually moralize in his fiction or does so only superficially and incidentally on what may at first seem to be trivial issues, but that he takes morality deadly seriously.

The insistent message of Berger’s fiction is that every decision has a moral implication and every human interchange involves some moral dimension or calculus, whether large or incredibly small. Indeed, permutations of the word “moral” appear again and again in Berger’s novels, frequently attached to situations that seem more phatic than occasion for moral reflection—as
when Robert Crews considers it “morally degrading” to stay out in the rain rather than entering a cave that might be occupied by an unknown human or when Roy, in Best Friends, contemplates a possible humiliation which he accords “the moral equivalent of vomiting or diarrhea.” In Berger’s worlds, moral issues involve ever-finer distinctions and can be measured only by complicated calculations, as Roy also illustrates when he attempts to evaluate his moral culpability for blurting out to his best friend’s wife that he loved her: “He had neither lied nor exaggerated when he admitted that he was in love with her, but he should never have done so. Hypocrisy requires more moral courage than candor, for truth is a destructive element, more dangerous to retain than release, whereas confession is a rude display of bad taste. He might not have distinguished himself by achievement, but he had always before been at pains to avoid gracelessness” (127). While Berger involves his characters in too many moral equations to number or describe, the above passage suggests some of the complex of words, terms, and concepts that structure his moral situations: “lied,” “hypocrisy,” “truth,” “rude,” “gracelessness.” Similarly Berger’s relentless moral calculus addresses situations that factor in words such as “responsibility,” “propriety,” “obligation,” “ethical,” “decency,” “fault,” “blame,” “guilt,” “betrayal,” “loyalty,” “humiliation.”

One of the clear implications of his approach is to suggest that, at some level of understanding, all moral decisions are of great importance, whether their consequences involve matters of life and death or only pride or embarrassment.

This seeming absence of a sense of proportion or hierarchy in moral issues is one source of what has repeatedly been identified as the Kafkaesque in Berger’s fiction, and it is worth noting that Berger’s view of Kafka centers on the importance of
maintaining a moral stance even in the face of impossible situations. As Berger explained to David W. Madden: “What has always struck me most forcefully in Kafka is the hero’s being not only totally without power but also having not even a vague idea of what’s happening to him, yet trying with all his strength to maintain his standards nevertheless: just because the effort is hopeless, utterly doomed, is not an acceptable reason for quitting, even if he knew to quit, which he doesn’t, but that doesn’t matter, because he wouldn’t!”33

This seems to particularly be the case in Berger’s more recent novels. For example, although a castaway from human society, Robert Crews retains an equally acute moral sensibility. Even in the wild, completely separated from other humans, Crews worries “about behaving improperly in a milieu of plants and animals.” He considers a range of moral issues raised by his being thrown entirely into the world of nature, seeing the irony in a morality “founded on inches and ounces” that attaches moral value to the relative size of creatures he kills, but he also comes to understand the moral imperative of survival. Berger’s most recent novel, Adventures of the Artificial Woman, is also one of his most interesting in terms of its interrogation of morality, as its animatronic woman, Phyllis, is moral by design, as she is programmed to be logical, to tell the truth, to obey all laws of which she is aware, and to have making sense as her only cause. And yet, as her creator realizes, being programmed to be moral can only make Phyllis morally neutral, although it does establish her as an interesting judge of human morality. Phyllis quickly concludes that humans are better at technology than at morality, and her moral status as a machine, particularly as one involved in the sex industry and politics, focuses her creator,
Ellery Pierce, on the moral choices facing him and his creator, Thomas Berger, on the larger nature of morality itself.

While one reviewer accurately observed that Berger’s *Changing the Past* “reads like a cross between a medieval morality play and an episode from *The Twilight Zone,*” and while that novel does contain what may be Berger’s ultimate moral comment when a character realizes that “life is taking your medicine,” it is *The Houseguest* that seems to contain Berger’s most sustained consideration of moral issues as they relate to individual choices in matters usually seen as mundane. Here, as is true elsewhere in Berger’s novels, moral issues present themselves in a range of situations involving personal responsibility, honor, motive, justice, the law, virtue, vice, and various structures of power. One of the clear suggestions of *The Houseguest* is that “morality” is a phenomenon manifesting itself along a continuum from manners to the law and that questions and outcomes at every stage of that continuum should be taken seriously. Indeed, the plot of this novel might be characterized as a tutorial in the ways in which moral distinctions undergird relations of power, a constant concern in Berger’s fiction.

The Inspiration of Nietzsche

If Berger, despite his disavowals, can be said to present a moral philosophy in his fiction, it is because his novels have much in common with the general view advanced by Nietzsche, particularly in his *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals.* To note this similarity, however, is far from accounting for the complicated relationship between Nietzsche’s view of the world and the world of Berger’s fiction. What makes the relationship between Berger and Nietzsche so complicated is that
Berger’s novels tend to be set in worlds that support Nietzsche’s theories of human interchange but do not necessarily lend themselves to Nietzschean solutions. What Nietzsche describes in a tone always approaching exasperation, Berger portrays with a resigned and often gentle equanimity: the general tenor of his novels is of acceptance rather than of criticism. As the young Reinhart somewhat fatuously announces to a cynical Berliner: “I accept life. Some things in it are by nature hateful” (CIB, 378).

Berger approvingly cites Nietzsche’s claim in Beyond Good and Evil that “there are higher problems than the problems of pleasure and pain and sympathy; and all systems of philosophy which deal only with these are naivetes,” a reference that helps to explain Berger’s dissatisfaction with the platitudes of social meliorism, although nowhere in Berger’s fiction can be found the championing of suffering with which Nietzsche concludes this discussion.35 In a letter to Zulfikar Ghose, Berger has glossed Nietzsche’s easily misunderstood philosophy: “His vision is utterly original and one cannot understand him unless one puts aside such assumptions as that the poor are necessarily morally superior to the rich or that victims are necessarily heroes. He plunges through such surfaces, rejects such false disjunction.”36

Nietzsche’s belief that the will to power is the most basic of human motivations and that this will to power has necessarily created morality for selfish reasons and pursued it by immoral ends would seem to be the starting assumption for the world of any Berger novel. “Life,” Nietzsche claims, “is essentially appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation,” and a better description of life in the world of Berger’s fiction would be hard to find.37
And yet, for all the correspondences between Berger’s fiction and Nietzsche’s philosophy and for all the respect Berger holds for Nietzsche, significant differences appear in the ways in which they proceed from shared assumptions. Perhaps most significant is the disparity between Nietzsche’s implication that knowledge can only advance the will to power and Berger’s depiction of knowledge as a kind of insidious torment. For Nietzsche knowledge serves to abolish the concept of guilt, but for Berger it is the leading cause of guilt and the necessary precondition for most kinds of suffering—most masochistically, from nothing more than banality. The energy that informs so much of Nietzsche’s writing can only be seen as ultimately optimistic, while Berger’s energy is almost always ironic. One of Reinhart’s many epiphanies is that “you can’t afford irony if you are seriously interested in acquiring power,” and in Berger’s novels what Nietzsche would identify as the will to power is always frustrated by a kind of “will to irony,” which both enlightens and paralyzes his protagonists.

Berger’s sensibility may often coincide with Nietzsche’s, but it is not necessarily derived from it. Rather, it seems to be the case that Berger’s thinking bears a natural affinity to the antimoralistic, antipietistic stance represented by a number of writers and thinkers—including Nietzsche, Laclos, and Sade—who insist that the official accounts of existence are at best myopic and at worst cynically hypocritical. While continuing to insist that he has no conscious philosophical intent in his novels, Berger did offer David W. Madden this complicated specification: “My own philosophy is an amalgam of Nietzsche and Simone Weil, who may superficially be seen as impossibly divergent but come together in a stern amor fati: one must ‘not
merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it . . . but love it’ (Nietzsche). ‘I saw it (the love of fate) as a duty we cannot fail in without dishonoring ourselves’ (Weil). But my conscious purpose in writing novels is not to promote my beliefs or even to suggest or reflect upon them: it is rather, as I have continued to insist, only to amuse myself.”

And what must be remembered is that the art of Berger’s novels mediates any ideas it may concern itself with. For instance, a Berger character may implicitly or explicitly accept the validity of Nietzsche’s account of human interchange without being able to act upon that knowledge. As Reinhart laments, “the mere formulation of a principle has absolutely no effect on existence in re; which, for example, is why you’ll look forever to find a good Christian” (RIL, 87–88). In one ironic sense, the character who understands but cannot profit from Nietzschean thought may be the ultimate victim, the true antithesis to the Übermensch, and it is precisely in irony of this sort that Berger most revels. “I never think consciously in a Nietzschean fashion when writing fiction. If I did, I should not be at all Nietzschean. For me any hint of tendentiousness breaks the fictional trance and one is left with only hateful reality” (26 July 1983).

Like Nietzsche, Berger implicates his reader in the text; like Nietzsche, he views life in dialectical terms (although resistant to synthesis); like Nietzsche, he suspects the self-serving pieties of conventional morality; and like Nietzsche, he sees the dangers inherent in the reifying, hypostatizing nature of language. But in Berger’s hands these concerns undergo celebration and transformation just as surely as does literary form. In the world of Thomas Berger’s fiction, not even Nietzsche has the last word.