

I would like
to make
a portrait of
him from
memory

First in words. And perhaps one day I will do it as drawing. Strangely, time helps the eye to remember. Words forget because they fly too easily. (When I write that, I hear him laugh, and I wait for him to contradict. Yet contradict is not the right word. It is far too frontal and Cartesian. When he disagreed, he would make you change direction by taking your arm.)

The portrait is difficult because I see him changing all the while. And it is his changes which make him HIM. He was born under the sign of metamorphosis. Which is why his death, for those of us who mourn him, is both final and temporary. Make no mistake, he will change again. He is doing so as I write these lines. If I look at the pear tree through the window, with its autumn leaves just beginning to change colour, one of its branches looks like a signature. Not the one with which he signed cheques –insofar as he did sign cheques!– but the one which flowed through every drawing he made. Metamorphosis. I can hear him pronouncing the word as if it were the name of a place on the Aegean coast. Not a town. Not even a village. But a rock he remembered and beside it a bush and perhaps in the bush a fire.

Here, I begin a new page, and I mark it with the numeral “2”.

JOHN BERGER

The wisdom of a man

For him every numeral was part of infinity. 'Be realist' was the last piece of advice he gave me.

Portrait of a magician with the magician's secret. The secret of having never been seen producing magic. He comes into a café, sits down with you at a table, orders a drink and the magic, performed just before he entered is in the street outside. He is wearing a hat, everything he wears has style, or, rather, he wears it with style – he takes it off and hangs it on a hook. When it was on his head, the magic was inside his hat. Now if you look inside it, hanging on the hat-stand, there is the ribbon-lining and the manufacturer's label but the magic has disappeared. His magician's gift is that when you are with him, you believe that what the world considers impossible is achievable. Not through Herculean effort, but through flair.

A portrait of a Communist. Disinterested in power. Impervious to the Party line. But a man who never for an instant forgets what the oppressed, the poor, and the excluded suffer. Never forgets – not out of pity but out of deep respect. And a man who knows that men cannot live without hope – and in the modern world hope also demands politics. I see he is a Communist by the way he handles a loaf of bread and by what he looks at when he is walking in the street.

Portrait of a writer. When he writes his words trace roads or paths. Often there are crowds on them. He never writes on a road that he has not been on. He remeets people. All his writing is a way of saying *Au Revoir*, till the next time. Even to those who died in prison. To read him is to enter the present, a present which mocks history. He knows how language is everybody's companion on the road.

Portrait of a man. He loves women. He sees woman in everything. They are in all the colours of the world. They are not for display and they can never be fully seen. They are the first secret. What the mother shares with her child when she or he is still blind. For his senses woman is the only promise of wholeness. All this is there in his eyes when he looks. His expression carries a memory of femininity which is so intense that it includes the inconsolable sadness which is the source of tenderness. Portrait of a man, naked.

Portrait of a painter. His paintings have the air of coming into

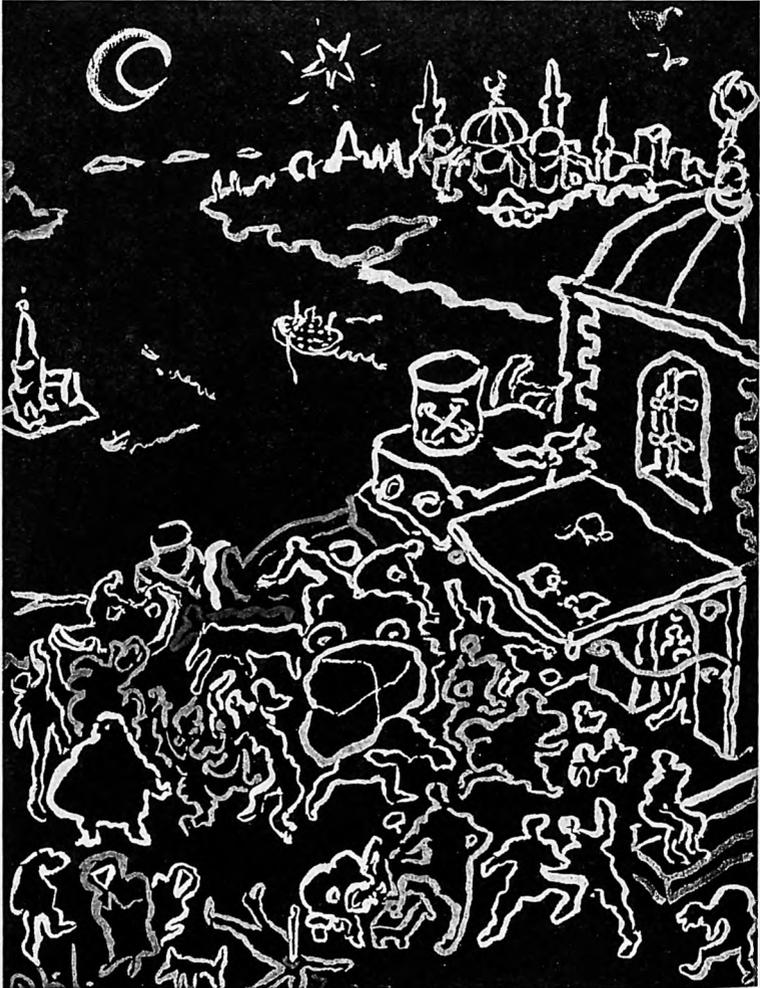
existence already finished. Like a bird which comes out of the sky and perches on his shoulder. It is hard for me to imagine him in the act of painting. He climbs up the ladder into his studio and then comes down carrying a finished canvas. Perhaps he spent an hour or even days up there. But the painting when I examine it looks immediate. As though the time up there was spent waiting for a rendez-vous. It seems strange that he has brushes to clean.

Portrait of a film-maker. Holding a camera he is a player, for he knows that to enter the world of frames a second, every act has to become performance. Film requires that you take half a step to the side of life so that you can wind it on to a reel. This has been his second nature for a long time – perhaps since childhood.

Portrait of a friend. In friendship he is the most courteous man I have known, drunk raki with, or listened to on the telephone. This courtesy is deeper than politeness. It comes from a complicity, a plot against the world's cruelty and indifference and the vulgarity of the powers that be. He can make a beggar feel like a gifted prince from the only unmapped island left on the planet. I think all his friends across the globe are visible to him all the while, for at night he sleeps on that island.

Here I have separated several portraits, giving a paragraph (or a sheet of paper) to each one. In reality they existed instantaneously on the same sheet. And the lines of them all were inscribed on his hands.

When he embraced you, the whole portrait was printed on your back from his hands. You felt it but could never see it. Perhaps one day I will climb up a ladder and the rendez-vous will be with him. And I will come down with a drawing.



A rollicking tune from Istanbul by Abidin Dino, 1985, 24x32 cm.