

JOHN BERGER

*Madrid*

**I am waiting for my friend Juan who**, I think, will be late. His statues are never late; they are always already there, enigmatically waiting at the rendezvous. Juan works like a mechanic in a small garage, lying on his back underneath a car; he only looks at his watch when he crawls out and gets to his feet. We have agreed to meet in the lounge of the Ritz Hotel, Madrid.

There are tall palms and, leading off this lounge, a bar named after Velasquez. (I doubt whether he drank much.) The walls, the columns, the conservatory ceiling are painted a whitish yellow, not what the paint manufacturers call ivory, but the true colour of elephant's tusks - much closer to the colour of old teeth. The ceiling of the lounge is as high as three elephants standing on each other's backs.

As soon as one comes off the street and the double glass doors swing shut, one is aware here of the deafness of money, which, like the depth of an ocean, is perceived, not as an empty silence, but as a seclusion.

The wide, carpeted staircase and, upstairs, the suites and bedrooms with their shaving mirrors which enlarge many times and yet nevertheless flatter - an optical laboratory must have worked for months to meet that challenge - are palpably quiet. In the lounge, although a number of people are talking, their voices are muted, just as the hands of the two waiters, carrying tinkling trays of glasses full of champagne, are gloved. They wear white gloves.

The first guests for an evening Reception are arriving. The Reception is being held to launch the new Venezuelan economy, which, supposedly, now depends on Spanish investors.

The seclusion prompts me to remember the clamour of shanty towns and the everlasting racket in prisons.

The Reception guests, mostly in their thirties, have surf-riding smiles, controlled eyes and a way of tilting themselves forward like the figureheads once carved on ships. In the muted quiet, cameramen and journalists, with their microphones at the ready, are waiting for the stars who have been announced.

Not far from where I'm sitting, three hotel guests, who apparently have nothing to do with the Reception, have installed themselves on two sofas and a deep armchair, as if they were at home. Perhaps they never leave their home and, like snails, carry it with them: snails who have lived a long while and have ancient names.

Both waiters and radio technicians are respecting their claimed territory. On the floor between the two sofas is a large Chinese carpet, and the man of the trio, who is also the youngest, paces slowly round this Chinese carpet, smoking a Cuban cigar.

Those invited to launch the new economy, are all, women and men, agents of promotion, and perhaps it is the imaginative effort of promotion which obliges them to lean forward in the way they do.

It may happen, at the end of a long day, that one of them catches a glimpse of themselves reflected in a glass, and that then this leaning forward provokes a kind of paralysing panic – a fear of falling forwards, flat on to one's face! (A similar panic is sometimes visible on the faces of those suffering from Parkinson's.) This evening, however, they are confident as they lean forward to take the glasses of champagne from the tray offered them by the waiters with white gloves.

For the man with the Cuban cigar, smoking is a way of slowing down the process – or at least his awareness of the process – of things getting steadily worse.

A young woman, seated on an upright chair opposite me, is reading a book. Like me, she is waiting for somebody who is late, though she looks towards the door more frequently than I do. I suspect she is waiting for somebody she's in love with, and whom she doubts will turn up this evening. The crescendo of her disappointment is expressed by the ever briefer glances she accords to the book. Suddenly she slaps it shut, gets to her feet, and walks out between the camera-lights, set up for the stars.

I see him coming down the wide staircase, a room key dangling from his lightly-clenched fist. The way he holds the key, it could be a bird he has in his hand. He is wearing a checkered cap, tweed jacket, plus fours with heavy woollen socks and brogue shoes. His name is Tyler. His first name escapes me – probably because I remember that it signified a lot. His first name – whatever it was – evoked the mystery which surrounded him, above all, the mystery of the defeat he had suffered. I always addressed him as Sir.

Tyler is now at the bottom of the staircase and has taken off his cap and is coming into the lounge. As I follow him with my eyes, he looks away. He had a great gift for looking away and avoiding questions. He chooses the chair vacated by the woman who decided she would wait no longer for her lover. There he picks up a menu for drinks and sandwiches and studies it through his thick glasses, bringing it close up to his forehead. Often when he dropped some small object – the stub of a pencil, or a rubber, it was I who would look for it on the floor, because he could not see without bending

down. Once the frame of his glasses broke – it was a very cold winter – and it was I who mended them for him with some sticking plaster which we bought at a chemist shop. This was in 1932 or 1933. I was seven years old. Now, he turns the chair he has chosen so that he is not facing me, and gives his order to a waiter.

On one of the Trio's sofa, with skeletal legs crossed, and a shoe dangling from an arched foot, reclines a woman of over eighty with platinum hair. She might be the cigar-smoker's mother. She too is smoking – her cigarette in a long holder – to slow down the process of things getting steadily worse. Being, however, older than he – and possibly his mother – she is more confident that she herself won't live to see the worst.

The skin of her face and neck, after numerous operations, is like *crêpe de Chine* paper. Her head – chin up as she exhales the cigarette smoke – reposes on a cushion. Her left arm is draped along the long back of the sofa and the flesh of her arm is draped from its three bones. She is wearing half a dozen golden bracelets and a pearl necklace.

Hard to know whether the pearls are real, as hard as it is to guess whether she comes from a circus or a *château*. Both would allow her her special effrontery, which is full of disdain and pride in all the appetites she has not lost and is determined to satisfy.

Maybe Circe on her island of *Aeaea* was more like her than the way she is usually depicted, centuries later, in Renaissance paintings. .

The third member of the Trio is the confidante, at least for this evening and, who knows?, perhaps for life, of Circe. Maybe she is her sister, *Pasiphae*, the one who had an affair with the Bull of Crete and gave birth to the *Minotaur*. It is impossible to guess the age of this person, tumbled into the massive arm chair beside the sofa, because of her size. Her immensity seems like that of time itself. She wears rings on seven fingers. Her neck is as wide as a slender woman's waist. From time to time she glances protectively at Circe. In her expression there is less disdain than in her sister's since other people impinge on her less. She notices only those who approach close to her, and, like this, she is spared the gaping curiosity which must be her lot as soon as she appears anywhere in public.

She has learnt to answer the question that used to haunt her: where am I? She now knows the answer by heart: I'm here, I am here in the centre of myself. And this is her effrontery.

The waiter brings Tyler a bottle of white wine in an ice-bucket and a silver stand of sandwiches decorated with parsley.

An actress, accompanied by three men, and wearing a backless dress, makes her entrance into the lounge. She is resplendently pregnant. In answer to a journalist's question, she gently pokes a finger to make a dimple in her belly, and says: For the middle of June! The public applaud.

A waiter asks me whether I would like to order something. I do so. After a moment I hear Tyler's voice: I notice that regrettably you haven't improved your pronunciation. You are as lost in Spanish as you once were in English, he says.

I do my best, Sir.

You don't listen to how other people talk. You never say to yourself: He speaks well, so I'll listen to him and learn how to speak.

I listen all the time, Sir.

You don't listen with enough patience.

I can listen for hours.

Then why do you pronounce so badly?

I don't listen to their words, Sir.

Exactly.

During this conversation Tyler sips his wine and doesn't glance in my direction for a second. Circe is eying him with some interest. She is probably telling herself that he is only half her age, and that he is so evidently a gentleman he will ignore the difference.

If you want to catch a ball, Tyler explained to us in the Green Hut, you don't snatch at it in the air, you watch it coming and then place your hands accordingly. The Hut was roofed with corrugated iron which was painted green. It had a door which fitted badly and three small windows. There was no heating and no water. Tyler and I brought the water each day in his car. What did we do about shitting? I don't remember. Maybe there was an earth closet outside. A vague memory of vomiting there once. This hut on the edge of a field was our school. Nobody, however, referred to it as such, because Tyler insisted that he was not a schoolmaster but a tutor. A tutor in a green hut.

A young government minister has arrived. He is surveying the lounge to see who else is there. In a minute he will decide whether to make his entrance straightaway, or whether to wait a moment in the Velasquez bar. His bodyguards too are surveying everyone in the lounge and in the entrance hall and at the hotel reception desk. For them to recognise a face, or place somebody, is already a distraction, for the shot, the blow, may come from anybody or anywhere in the world.

It was in the Green Hut before the eyes of Tyler, now eating his sandwiches decorated with parsley in the lounge of the Ritz Hotel,

that I first learnt to write. Earlier, at a nursery school, I had learnt to form the letters, all of them, from A to Z, belonging like moles or birth marks or beauty spots, to the pert, pretty, rounded body of my teacher, Lilles, whom I desired. Forming the letters, however, was not writing, as Tyler pointed out on my first day in the Green Hut. Writing involves spelling, straight lines, spacing, words leaning the right way, margins, size, legibility, keeping the nib clean, never making blots, and demonstrating on each page of the exercise book the value of good manners.

We were six, all from different families. Wood. Henry. Blagdon. Bowes-Lyon. And one I've forgotten. For every lesson we sat at the same small table. Tyler, when he wasn't looking over our shoulders, stood behind the workbench on which, twice a week, we learnt carpentry.

Most educational establishments are mysterious, perhaps because teaching and folly share an interface. And the Green Hut was no exception. I still don't know how the place began, how long it had existed before I was sent there, where Tyler came from. He coached boys to get into what were considered good schools. I don't think my parents – unlike the others – paid any fees. I think he ate free in my mother's café – in exchange for his improving my English and making it possible to pass me off as a gentleman boy. We both recognised the hopelessness of the project – I was with him for two and a half years – and this was our secret, which made us, in a strange way, accomplices.

You're going to make a mess of your life.

Why, Sir?

Because you can't saw straight.

It's difficult to hold, Sir.

Only because you're scared of its teeth. Are you frightened of sawing your thumb off?

No, Sir.

Then saw straight.

Apart from carpentry, we learnt arithmetic, geometry, Latin, drawing, the history of the Royal Family, geography, physics and gardening.

How do you spell hyacinth?

With a 'y', Sir.

Of course. But where is the 'y'? You're in too much of a hurry. Let the question sink in. Take the measure of it.

During the winter in the Green Hut the six of us suffered from the cold. There was only a portable paraffin stove, nothing

more. And on certain days the can of paraffin was empty. Tyler would pretend he had forgotten – because he preferred us to think that he was absent-minded rather than broke. We had red noses, chilblains on our fingers and toes, and sopping handkerchiefs stuffed into the pockets of our shorts. In the months of January and February Tyler often wore a long loosely-knitted woollen scarf, whose colours astounded us: white and lilac with little flecks of pink – like you see mixed with snot on your handkerchief after your nose has stopped bleeding.

After the last lesson of the afternoon in the Hut, driving in his car to his home, from where later I caught the bus to mine, he would offer me, as I sat beside him, half of his scarf.

Where did it come from, Sir?

You ask too many questions. You do it to draw attention to yourself.

I'm interested, Sir.

You never stop being interested, that's where the trouble begins. Wrap this end around you, keep quiet, and put your gloves on.

Circe sits up, and, with a flick of her head, tosses her hair back.

Señor, she asks Tyler, do you find the sandwiches here good? The bread is a little too thinly cut, but otherwise, yes,

Señora.

She gazes at him shamelessly; the elegance and sadness of his reply allow it.

Tyler's car was an Austin 7. The roof was a kind of tarpaulin, with brackets which folded. On winter mornings he had to start it by turning the crank handle. I sat in the driver's seat, on the very edge, so that my right foot could touch the accelerator if the engine caught. Sometimes it took us ten minutes. I would shiver, and his moustache got frosted.

Tyler lived in two rented rooms on the ground floor of a large house with a rose garden, which he did not have the right to sit in. The house belonged to a widow whom I occasionally glimpsed wearing a fur coat or a floral summer dress. She, like Tyler, was a Catholic, which is why she agreed to rent him the two small rooms. He was allowed to leave his car in the drive, but only in one place, at the back of the house by the kitchen door where the dustbins were.

We'll be leaving tomorrow, Circe says, touching the shoulder of Tyler's tweed jacket, leaving for Huesca. I feel, Señor, that you would love Aragon. You might accompany us?

The cigar-smoker – Telegones if he's really the blonde's son – is now helping to get Pasiphae out of her chair and on to her feet. It is a hard struggle, and they need both of her crutches, which fit under her elbows, to prop her upright. Once on her feet, she turns towards Tyler.

I think you would enjoy seeing our horses, she says.

Once more I wonder whether they come from a circus or a château.

Tyler's two rented rooms smelt, like the Green Hut, of his cigarettes. He smoked a brand called De Resque Minor. On the window sills of the two rooms he grew flowers in wooden boxes. And on the mantelpiece, above the gas fire, he kept the seed packets. They were arranged, either side of the clock, like letters in their envelopes: Evening Primrose. Red Champion. Meadow Cranesbill. Cobia Scandens. Tanagra. Sweet Sultan. Flax. Phlox. Larkspur.

It would have given him pleasure if I had been able to remember the Latin name of just one of them, but there, in his living quarters, lessons were out of the question. So Larkspur remained Larkspur. In the Green Hut Tyler demanded work and obedience; the smallest sign of what he called slackness would be punished by a rap over the knuckles with a knotted yew branch which hung on a hook beside the cupboard where he kept the rulers and exercise books. In his two living rooms slackness was ignored and he demanded only quiet and company.

He spread honey – given him by a beekeeping friend – on to a slice of toast, toasted in front of the gas fire, and he offered it to me on a hand painted plate.

The plate was decorated by a friend of mine, he said. You recognise the plant?

Not yet, Sir.

The flower of the so-called Strawberry Tree.

Strawberries on a tree, Sir?

He didn't bother to reply.

Tyler made drawings himself. Always with an H.B. pencil. Sketches of Tudor cottages, churches, driveways, willow trees, sheep, delphiniums. Some of his drawings he had printed on postcards.

Do you sell them, Sir?

I print them for my friends, like this I can offer them a little present.

Nobody can help him, I told myself, as I sat in the wicker chair before his gas fire, rubbing my chilblains and eating my toast and honey. He's too old and he has too many hairs growing out of his body.

Pasiphae on her two sticks is crossing the Reception. People make way for her, and, when she stops to regain her breath, they move around her as if she were a natural landmark. It is her effrontery which puts them at ease.

Did she die?

Who are you talking about? Tyler asked.

I nodded towards a photograph by his bed.

Never, never, talk, he said, about what you see on somebody's bedside table. Study it if you want to – he picked up the framed photograph and put it in my hands – remember it if you like – and say nothing, for there's nothing to be said. Nothing.

At last the TV star arrives. People have been standing in the street outside the hotel for almost an hour in the hope of catching a glimpse of her. She is tiny, even smaller than they thought, perfect, with tumbling black hair, wearing silver. Cameras flash on all sides. We all of us hope to find – in this impromptu unscreened moment – something beyond the fame, something which equalises. For example: the fact that she too farts like us. Meanwhile, we are also waiting for the opposite to happen: she has so much perfection, much more than any single person needs, so she could throw us some!

Tyler takes a pad out of his pocket and begins to draw one of the palm trees in the hotel lounge.

It is at this moment, as he begins to draw, that I remember the immensity of his solitude. Perhaps with me, given my age, he felt no need to mask or hide it. Anyway, his glasses magnified the solitude expressed in his eyes. The man who taught me to write was the first person to make me aware of irreparable loss.

Pasiphae is returning on her crutches from the Velasquez bar. Did she have a drink there? When she reaches her chair, she has the problem of lowering herself. Telegones is at the ready, but it is safer to have a man on each side, so she glances at Tyler, who, straightaway, comes and places one of his huge hands under her colossal elbow.

Are you an artist, Señor?

No, it's a pastime, Señora.

The TV star, accompanied by a guitarist, has started to sing. The tune is both very young and very old. She sings simply, her eyes almost shut, her silver hips almost still, her lips almost touching the microphone.

*On a tree trunk  
a young girl jubilant  
carved her name....*

*you are she who cut into my bark....*

Tyler died in his fifties soon after the Second World War.

His death involved a story about a gas fire, or a house burning down, or an accident with a car left running in a garage with the doors shut. I have forgotten the details because they suggested that the methodical, tidy, gruffly shy man, who believed that quality mattered more than anything else in the world, died – or even put an end to his days – through indifference or carelessness. The details are better forgotten.

We'll be leaving shortly, Circe whispers, standing at his elbow, it's a big car and there's plenty of room for your luggage.

I have very little, Señora.

Like this, will you draw our horses? Pasiphae asks him.

When you shade a drawing, you do not scribble. Is that clear, Berger? You shade carefully, putting one line beside the next and the next and the next. Then you crosshatch and like this your lines weave the sketch together. The verb: to weave. Past participle?

Woven, Sir.

Juan comes up behind me, puts his hands over my eyes and demands: Who is it?

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**JOHN BERGER** is among the most eminent living British writers. He recently donated his archive to the British Library in London.