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A meditation, in words and images, on the practice of drawing, by the author of *Ways of Seeing*

The seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza—also known as Benedict or Bento de Spinoza—spent the most intense years of his short life writing. He also carried with him a sketchbook. After his sudden death, his friends rescued letters, manuscripts, notes—but no drawings.

For years, without knowing what its pages might hold, John Berger has imagined finding Bento's sketchbook, wanting to see the drawings alongside his surviving words. When one day a friend gave him a beautiful virgin sketchbook, Berger said, "This is Bento's!" and he began to draw, taking his inspiration from the philosopher's vision.

In this illustrated color book John Berger uses the imaginative space he creates to explore the process of drawing, politics, storytelling and Spinoza's life and times.

Bento's Sketchbook Details

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Zanna says

From book to book my progress is haphazard. Occasionally I look for a link, more often a contrast: fiction after feminist theory, poetry after history. Yet links unanticipated are made. After reading *The Lesbian Postmodern* I moved on to this, and Elizabeth's Grosz's lovely essay on refiguring desire as creative via Spinoza, gave me a silver thread, an eager intent, to follow into Berger's quotations of the philosopher here, a book which takes off from the point of Spinoza's lost sketchbook and floats freely hither and thither from there.

Berger's drawings are so eloquent of the tension felt in drawing, the tension of space, object, substances interlocking, dynamic, relational. I like the fruits best: the hanging smoke-blue plums, the split fig. Another link: like Diego Rivera, quoted in Frida, Berger describes the act of drawing or impulse to draw as 'something like a visceral function... independent of the conscious will'. Drawing comes *before* language, certainly before writing.

Sometimes I am uncomfortable about the power of Berger's gaze. He describes the gaze steering a motorcycle and I am uncomfortably aware not of the rider's vulnerability but that of the bodies Berger sees, describes, draws, exposes.

Some of the heterogenous reveries though have not only poetic grace notes, but the insistent melody of political conviction. My favourite is the one in the discount supermarket, which Berger describes as dedicated to theft, as opposed to a street market, which revolves around the promise of a bargain, an agreement between two people face to face for about what would meet the needs or desires of both (see! desire is productive! desire makes connections!) The forms of theft, the loci of theft in this place are multi and manifold: cameras watch, hours are stolen from workers. This place is dedicated to desire-as-lack, to the stuffing of emptiness. Without Grosz, I would not read this in Berger-Spinoza, and without Berger I would not carry this out of Grosz. Between them, they have changed my way of seeing.

Syl says

spanish language alert

El libro "Cuaderno de Bento" del famoso filósofo John Berger es un libro que he disfrutado enormemente por su espléndida y admirable originalidad, no tanto por la temática que esclarece, sino por la manera en la que ilustra y relata.

Es un libro corto, ameno de leer. Que hace referencia a un dibujo más misterioso, más enigmático. Un dibujo que siempre tendrá una historia detrás. Un dibujo espontáneo, fluido, fruto del momento y el instante.

"Quienes dibujamos no sólo dibujamos a fin de hacer visible para los demás algo que hemos observado, sino también para acompañar a algo invisible hacia su destino insondable." (p.22)

Adoro esta frase, es tan cierta. Tan real, tan poética. Te muestra una realidad del dibujo tan interesante. Aquel dibujo sentimental, tan importante. Que trata de mostrar la realidad pura. Aquel que responde a las preguntas que recurren. Aquel que con su secreto desvela aquello jamás expresado.

“La idea que constituye el ser formal del alma humana es la idea del cuerpo, el cual se compone de muchísimos individuos muy compuestos. Ahora bien: hay necesariamente una idea en Dios de cada individuo componente de un cuerpo. Luego la idea del cuerpo humano está compuesta de esas numerosísimas ideas de sus partes componentes.”

Ética, parte segunda.

Hay tantas lecturas de esta cita... es especialmente curioso pensar en ello. Pensar que el ser humano está compuesto de muchos otros. Tantos reflejos y tantos pasados en nuestra propia piel. Que esto lo hace irrevocablemente interesante. Y creo fervientemente, que en cuanto al dibujo, la forma de observar, la forma de coger el lápiz o el carboncillo refleja toda esta teoría. Creo que el dibujo es una forma de sacar nuestras tantas personas en el interior. Por eso jamás un dibujo es similar a otro, incluso hecho por la misma persona. La versatilidad del momento, la sensación emocional del instante, la intensidad de nuestro ánimo. Todo influye en cuanto a cómo acabamos dibujando.

La Silvia triste es probable que no dibuje de la misma manera que la Silvia emocionada.

“Mas no por ello dejamos de sentir y experimentar que somos eternos, Pues tan percepción del alma es la de las cosas que concibe por el entendimiento como la de las cosas que tiene en la memoria. Efectivamente, los ojos del alma, con los que ve y observa las cosas, son las demostraciones mismas. Y así, aunque no nos acordemos de haber existido antes del cuerpo, percibimos, sin embargo, que nuestra alma, en cuanto que implica la esencia del cuerpo desde la perspectiva de la eternidad, es eterna y que esta existencia suya no puede definirse por el tiempo, o sea, no puede explicarse por la duración.”

Spinoza, ética, parte quinta.

Respecto al dibujo, creo en el concepto de lo eterno. De hecho, es esto lo que hace al dibujo interesante. Creo en la concepción del dibujo como algo mágico; algo que al igual que la fotografía o la escritura, dota de aquello que representamos de una vida eterna, goza de inmortalidad.

Aquello que físicamente está frente nosotros, naturalmente es temporal. Pero la visión intelectual traspasa esta barrera y lo dota de la particularidad de que quizá viva por siempre.

Obviamente Spinoza ha sabido expresar esto que digo de forma mucho más ingeniosa e inteligente que yo, y es por eso que la considero una de las citas más interesantes del libro.

De todas las escenas, para mi, el pasaje de la bailarina me pareció el más curioso de todos. Habla del dibujo como una forma de búsqueda, de viaje que constante, donde de manera reflexiva el artista expresa su realidad actual. Con la bailarina que descansa, el artista dibuja y dibuja, borra, y sigue dibujando hasta que topa con el reflejo verdadero de dicha silueta. La esencia, la inherencia de la bailarina. Su carácter en los músculos, la personalidad en su movimiento.

Y como, J. Berger relata “no pararé hasta que su alma aparezca”.

Me resultó una forma muy sensible de considerar el dibujo.

Marcus Hobson says

This is a magical collection of stories by the late John Berger.

It combines his passions of art and storytelling, and he was a master of both. It also, very unusually for Berger, allow him to put forward some of his own drawings and paintings.

The basic premise of the book is that Bento, or Bento de Spinoza who lived from 1632-1637 and was a lens grinder by trade, actually wrote two books of philosophy which were published after he died. He also carried a sketchbook which was either lost or destroyed over subsequent years. Using the quotes from Bento's written work, Berger recreates stories and sketches which might have filled the book.

It is not quite as simple as that. The stories that Berger tells are taken from his own life and experiences and are in several cases exquisite vignettes. He tells the story of an aged guide in a small Paris museum. He plucks out some of her more racy commentary and then, when he sees her leaving for the day with a plastic bag, goes on to enumerate the items inside the bag in a wistful list of treasures. Pure imagination and pure joy.

In another story he tells the beautifully composed life story of Luca, illustrated by a picture of his bicycle. It is a sad but satisfying tale. Later still he tells the story of a Japanese paintbrush that he gave to a Cambodian woman he saw regularly at a swimming pool in Paris and who gave him a painting in return. Little life stories in ten pages or less which are wonderfully observed by someone with an eye for art as well as life.

Stories that will linger in the mind for a long time to come.

Aloha says

Beautiful musings based on minuscule observations that can only happen by slowing down and interacting directly with the object. The musings in this book were predicated on the fact that the philosopher and lens grinder Benedict de Spinoza (Bento) was said to have kept sketchbooks that were lost. John Berger wondered what Bento's sketchbook would have been like.

...I wasn't expecting great drawings in the sketchbook,...I simply wanted to reread some of his words,..., whilst at the same time being able to look at things he had observed with his own eyes....Then...a Polish printer...friend...gave me a virgin sketchbook...This is Bento's!...I began to make drawings...

That virgin sketchbook began Berger's journey of being and observation. This gem of a book is interspersed with Spinoza's writing, and the author's experience of drawing and verbally detailing what he sees. It will bring you back in touch with why you want to draw and write from impressions.

Fernando says

Lo más bello de los libros de John Berger es que le piden al lector un compromiso enorme sin anunciárselo. No es solo cuestión de la lectura en sí, que puede ser demasiado complicada o cargada de alusiones, como en este caso (con algunas secciones casi incomprensibles de lo gaseosas y distantes que son), sino que exigen siempre, en el fondo, un compromiso moral. Es un compromiso moral al que se llega por medio de la apreciación o el diálogo con el arte y con sus creadores, y principalmente con la materialidad del arte, con los objetos y los ingredientes de las piezas artísticas.

El libro consiste en una exploración de los cuadernos de Spinoza (a los que nunca tendremos acceso) por medio de diálogos de Berger con el arte, dibujos suyos y muchas citas. Más que complemento o discusión de la visión spinoziana, lo siento como un poema largo provocado por su visión y sus escritos. Ilumina y acerca al poder de la observación, pues en el fondo es un libro sobre "cómo empieza un dibujo a ser dibujado";

seguirlo capítulo por capítulo es trazar con la mano del dibujante-escritor, contemplar su modelo, participar de la relación entre el mundo, sus objetos y quienes lo habitamos, compartimos, destruimos y dibujamos.

Tanya Kaplun says

«...»
P. S.

Mike Tracy says

The subtitle of this book is “How Does the Impulse to Draw Something Begin?” The book doesn’t answer the question- it doesn’t even pose it, again, explicitly. But, this is a collection of thoughts, stories, impressions, organized around excerpts from Spinoza’s “Ethics” and “Treatise On the Correction Of the Intellect,” and interspersed with Berger’s own drawings. Most of the Spinoza excerpts are obscure and without context. Reading and rereading them several times I often found myself at a loss to completely understand the meaning of the propositions, but, no matter, the value of the book, as far as I am concerned, is in the poetic meanings that arise, like images of his drawings, from ink line and spit, from the way the words fall on the blankness of the page, gently at first, than gathering in density until the eye collides with the substance of those words. I am first grateful that this is not a tedious read, and second that it is a gorgeous little book, and I’m sorry it finished.

Berger shuttles between history, philosophy and his personal experience of life told in stories that stretch from the old Cambodian couple he meets at the local swimming pool to drawing at the breakfast table with his granddaughter. Every few pages a new gem arises:

“What is distinct about today’s global tyranny is that it is faceless. There’s no Fuhrer, no Stalin, no Cortes. Its workings vary according to each continent and its modes modified by local history, but its overall pattern is the same, a circular pattern.

The division between the poor and the relatively rich becomes an abyss. Traditional restraints and recommendations are shattered. Consumerism consumes all questioning. The past becomes obsolete. Consequently, people lose their selfhood, their sense of identity, and they then locate and find an enemy in order to define themselves (I immediately thought of Fox News when I read this part). The enemy-whatever their ethnic or religious nomination- is always found amongst the poor. This is where the circular pattern is vicious.

The system economically produces, alongside wealth, more and more poverty, more and more homeless families, whilst simultaneously it politically promotes ideologies which articulate and justify the exclusion and eventual elimination of the hordes of new poor.

It is this new politico-economic circle which today encourages the constant human capacity for cruelties that obliterate the human imagination.”

In the face of grim thoughts like these, predictions, really, Berger gives us treats us to his drawings. Usually quick, sketchy, messy and imperfect (in its own way a kind of economic perfection, I think) we are treated to vision as a covenant, and act of hope, a vote of confidence for humanity. He draws from works of art in museums, (hilarious anecdote about drawing in the National Museum and running afoul of the attendant- remind me to be careful next time I do that when I visit,) and he draws from observation of the world around him. It's like he's making valentines to the past and the present, and sending them off into the future.

Amir says

It is believed that the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, besides writing philosophy, has kept a sketchbook of drawings that he made. After his death at the age of 44, no such sketchbook was found.

In this book, John Berger imagines what those sketches could be, accompanied by benign anecdotes, diaphanous meditations on varied topics, and thus it becomes an enterprise that opens up nooks and crannies that allow us glimpses into a mind that is occupied by the creative art of drawing, what lies behind the this impulse to draw, its counterpart in reality, politics and tyrants, writing and freedom, all against the strain of time.

Drawing for Berger is a "form of probing," it is an impulse that is derived "from the human need to search, to plot points, to place things and to place oneself." It is an act of liberation, ascendance, and ultimately one in which one could sprout wings and soar above and beyond the confines of life whatever they may be.

Taking a look at the drawings of Berger, you notice that there is innate quality about them, drawings that are as light as a feather, and which in part, are a reflection on the essence of life, storytelling and freedom. And in a similar manner to that drawing of Käthe Kollwitz, they offer hope and illumination in times of darkness.

Working Woman (with Earring) - 1910

David Schaafsma says

I seem to be reading these books about creativity, and artistic creativity in particular: *Ok for Now* by Gary Schmidt about a kid's redemptive art, which echoes *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, and this was recommended by a friend because it talks about the power of storytelling as well. Complicated, more ruminative than an organized argument, sort of explores a cluster of issues around the idea of why we create, where the impulse comes from... and this book look at Spinoza's *Ethics*, is itself a sketchbook, and shares art from others, and meditates on storytelling as a function of the creative process. Very thought-provoking. I have used his books in my courses over the years, like his *Ways of Seeing*, *Into their Labours*, *Photocopies*... and this writing is similar. I liked it, and need to read it again, and suspect that will get me closer to the heart of it...

David M says

For the past 5+ years I've worked as an artist's model in San Francisco & environs. Some of these years this has been my main source of income. I've been drawn probably hundreds of different times, but I myself can't draw. The last time I even tried was in middle school, forced by some dreaded homework assignment. I lack that basic gestural fluency. (For that matter I can't dribble a basketball, or sing.)

John Berger has done many things in his life; probably at one point or another he's modeled for a portrait or figure drawing, but if so the experience didn't interest him enough to write about it. In his writing he always approaches experience as an inquisitive, capable, grasping mind, a subject but never an object; reading him I confess to a certain amount of jealousy. He makes drawing sound so casual, as natural a mode of expression as speech. Though he trained as an artist in his youth, as an old man he's kept up the hobby as a passionate amateur. As a strong humanist, he'd probably say that everyone can learn to draw, in the same way virtually all humanity is capable of becoming literate. By now it's hard to say if I lack ability or will, or some combination thereof.

Pauline Esson says

This is my third time reading Bento's sketchbook and I'm sure I'll read it again from time to time.

It's a beautiful set of observations with drawings along the way.

Takes me back to noticing things, the small things that ARE the important things.

A gorgeous reminder to notice through John Berger's noticings with Bento Spinoza's philosophy leading the way.

Jeanne says

John Berger (Ways of Seeing) gives artists more to think about with his latest work, Bento's Sketchbook: How does the impulse to draw something begin? Truly there is much to ponder here even for readers who have never picked up a brush. The essays move between the life and philosophies of Benedict de Spinoza and Berger's own stories during his travels and stays in and around the art world and suburbs of contemporary Paris. Part sketchbook, the book has wonderful drawings by Berger as he imagines Spinoza might have sketched. Spinoza was known to have sketched but none of his drawings remain.

In Berger's words he and Bento "shared an awareness about where and to what the practice of drawing can lead." Berger's stories and criticisms inspire the drawings he includes; of a sixty-year old bicycle belonging to a friend whose wife became stricken with Alzheimer's, of dancers whose bodies reflect their exertion and endurance, of a special brush he gives to a Cambodian woman with whom he swims laps in a pool. He writes of politics and protest, tyranny and democracy and draws the faces of those whom Berger refers to as the new "profiteers." When he refers to Spinoza, he quotes one of his propositions and seamlessly weaves it into the tale. The drawings illustrate and the words defend the philosophies in a readable, visual way. At 162 pages, this is a brief but fully satisfying read and one that the reader will enjoy again after digesting it the first time. It was like a meal that you know you will talk about long after the guests have gone.

Igor says

I love everything this man writes, and this latest book, just out November 8, 2011, brings together all the many threads of his life, his art, his political philosophy, and his great great heart. Bento's Sketchbook (subtitled How Does the Impulse to Draw Something Begin?) contains ink-and-spit drawings, quotations from Spinoza (the Bento of the title), and stories of real people: everywhere John Berger's eye touches the Earth. I have bought copies for everyone I love: it's the kind of book you can open anywhere, read one story, put it down in order to assimilate the deeper and deeper layers of awareness Berger brings into focus, and know you will want to re-read many times. Each page contains perceptions that make me stop and breathe in the world around me with more empathy, more appreciation, more sorrow and more hope of redemption. If you don't know John Berger's work, this is a wonderful place to begin. If you do, you will not want to miss this gift from a man in his 80s who has lived his life with such passion and integrity.

Felix Hayman says

John Berger is an enigma.No one else writes likes him or, I suppose, even thinks like him.From being one of the most controversial authors on aesthetics these days his musings on philosophy, gardens , architecture are quite unique and here is one such gem.Imagining the sketches of Spinoza, Berger recreates a meditation on the art of drawing in the world.No book recently has given one such a pause for thought because he is unique.

Larnacouer de SH says

"Hiç dü?ünmeksizin eskiz defterinin her zaman sol de?il de, sa? sayfas?na çizmek gelir içimden. Çocukluktan kalma bir an?, umuda dair bir ?ey olabilir mi?"

Çok sevdim. Ama böyle bir kitaba puan vermeyi uygun bulmuyorum. Yani, san?r?m.
