

Bento's Sketchbook

John Berger



PANTHEON BOOKS, NEW YORK

Copyright © 2011 by John Berger

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto. Originally published in Great Britain by Verso, an imprint of New Left Books.

Pantheon Books and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Berger, John.

Bento's sketchbook / John Berger.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-307-90692-2

1. Berger, John—Themes, motives. 2. Drawing—Philosophy.
 3. Spinoza, Benedictus de, 1632–1677—Miscellanea. I. Title.
- NC242.B47A4 2011 741.942—dc22 2011010841

www.pantheonbooks.com

Jacket design by Peter Mendelsund

Printed in the United States of America

v3.1



The philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) – generally known as Benedict (or Bento) de Spinoza – earned his living as a lens-grinder and spent the most intense years of his short life writing *On the Improvement of the Understanding* and the *Ethics*, both of which were only published posthumously. We know from other peoples' souvenirs and memories of the philosopher that he also drew. He enjoyed drawing. He carried a sketchbook around with him. After his sudden death – perhaps from silicosis, a consequence of his grinding lenses – his friends rescued letters, manuscripts, notes, but apparently didn't find a sketchbook. Or, if they did, it later got lost.

For years now, I have imagined a sketchbook with his drawings in it being found. I didn't know what I hoped to find in it. Drawings of what? Drawn in what kind of manner? De Hooch, Vermeer, Jan Steen, Gerard Dou were his contemporaries. For a while in Amsterdam he lived a few hundred metres away from Rembrandt, who was twenty-six years his elder. Biographers suggest the two of them probably met. As a draughtsman Spinoza would have been an amateur. I wasn't expecting great drawings in the sketchbook, were it to be found. I simply wanted to reread some of his words, some of his startling propositions as a philosopher, whilst at the same time being able to look at things he had observed with his own eyes.

Then last year a Polish printer, who is a friend of mine living in Bavaria, gave me a virgin sketchbook, covered with suede leather, the colour of skin. And I heard myself saying: This is Bento's!

I began to make drawings prompted by something asking to be drawn.

As time goes by, however, the two of us – Bento and I – become less distinct. Within the act of looking, the act of questioning with our eyes, we become somewhat interchangeable. And this happens, I guess, because of a shared awareness about where and to what the practice of drawing can lead.

I was in London on Good Friday, 2008. And I decided, early in the morning, to go to the National Gallery and look at the Crucifixion by Antonello da Messina. It's the most solitary painting of the scene that I know. The least allegorical.

In Antonello's work – and there are less than forty paintings which are indisputably his – there's a special Sicilian sense of *thereness* which is without measure, which refuses moderation or self-protection. You can hear the same thing in these words spoken by a fisherman from the coast near Palermo, and recorded by Danilo Dolci a few decades ago.

'There's times I see the stars at night, especially when we're out for eels, and I get thinking in my brain, "The world, is it really real?" Me, I can't believe that. If I get calm, I can believe in Jesus. Bad-mouth Jesus Christ and I'll kill you. But there's times I won't believe, not even in God. "If God really exists, why doesn't He give me a break and a job?" '

In a Pietà painted by Antonello – it's now in the Prado – the dead Christ is held by one helpless angel who rests his head against Christ's head. The most piteous angel in painting.

Sicily, island which admits passion and refuses illusions.

I took the bus to Trafalgar Square. I don't know how many hundred times I've climbed the steps from the square that lead up to the Gallery and to a view, before you enter, of the fountains seen from above. The Square, unlike many notorious city assembly points – such as the Bastille in Paris – is, despite its name, oddly indifferent to history. Neither memories nor hopes leave a trace there.

In 1942 I climbed the steps to go to piano recitals given in the Gallery by Myra Hess. Most of the paintings had been evacuated because of the air-raids. She played Bach. The concerts were at midday. Listening, we were as silent as the few paintings on the walls. The piano notes and chords seemed to us like a bouquet of flowers held together by a wire of death. We took in the vivid bouquet and ignored the wire.

It was the same year, 1942, that Londoners first heard on the radio – in the summer, I think – Shostakovich's 7th Symphony, dedicated to besieged Leningrad. He had begun composing it in the city during the siege in 1941. For some of us the symphony was a prophecy. Hearing it, we told ourselves that the resistance of Leningrad, now being followed by that of Stalingrad, would finally lead to the Wehrmacht's defeat by the Red Army. And this is what happened.

Strange how in wartime music is one of the very few things which seem indestructible.

I find the Antonello Crucifixion easily, hung at eye-level, left of the entry to the room. What is so striking about the heads and bodies he painted is not simply their solidity, but the way the surrounding painted space exerts a pressure on them and the way they then resist this pressure. It is this resistance which makes them so undeniably and physically present. After looking for a long while, I decide to try to draw only the figure of Christ.

A little to the right of the painting, near the entry, there is a chair. Every exhibition room has one and they are for the official gallery attendants, who keep an eye on the visitors, warn them if they go too close to a painting, and answer questions.

As an impecunious student I used to wonder how the attendants were recruited. Could I apply? No. They were elderly. Some women but more men. Was it a job offered to certain city employees before retirement? Did they volunteer? Anyway, they come to know some paintings like their own back gardens. I overheard conversations like this:

Can you tell us please where the works by Velázquez are?

Yes, yes. Spanish School. In Room XXXII. Straight on, turn right at the end then take the second on your left.

We're looking for his portrait of a stag.

A stag? That's to say a male deer?

Yes, only his head.

We have two portraits of Philip the Fourth – and in one of them his magnificent moustache curls upwards, like antlers do. But no stag, I'm afraid.

How odd!

Perhaps your stag is in Madrid. What you shouldn't miss here is Christ in the house of Martha. Martha's preparing a sauce for some fish, pounding garlic with a pestle and mortar.

We were in the Prado but there was no stag there. What a pity!

And don't miss our Rokeby Venus. The back of her left knee is something.

The attendants always have two or three rooms to survey and so they wander from one room to another. The chair beside the Crucifixion is for the moment empty. After taking out my sketchbook, a pen and a handkerchief, I carefully place my small shoulder bag on the chair.

I start drawing. Correcting error after error. Some trivial. Some not. The crucial question is the scale of the cross on the page. If this is not right, the surrounding space will exert no pressure, and there'll be no resistance. I'm drawing with ink and wetting my index finger with spit. Bad beginning. I turn the page and restart.

I won't make the same mistake again. I'll make others, of course. I draw, correct, draw.

Antonello painted, in all, four Crucifixions. The scene he returned to most, however, was that of Ecce Homo, where Christ, released by Pontius Pilate, is put on display, mocked, and hears the Jewish high priests calling for his Crucifixion.

He painted six versions. All of them close-up portraits of Christ's head, solid in suffering. Both the face and painting of the face are unflinching. The same lucid Sicilian tradition of taking the measure of things – without either sentimentality or flattery.

Does the bag on the chair belong to you?

I glance sideways. An armed security guard is scowling and pointing at the chair.

Yes, it's mine.

It's not your chair!

I know. I put my bag there because nobody was sitting on it. I'll remove it straightaway.

I pick up the bag, take one step left to the painting, place the bag between my feet on the floor, and re-look at my drawing.

That bag of yours cannot stay on the floor.

You can search it – here's my wallet and here are things to draw with, nothing else.

I hold the bag open. He turns his back.

I put the bag down and start drawing again. The body on the cross for all its solidity is so thin. Thinner than one can imagine before drawing it.

I'm warning you. That bag cannot stay on the floor.

I've come to draw this painting because it's Good Friday.

It's forbidden.

I continue drawing.

If you persist, the security guard says, I'll call the Super.

I hold the drawing up so he can see it.

He's in his forties. Stocky. With small eyes. Or eyes that he makes small with his head thrust forward.

Ten minutes, I say, and I'll have finished it.

I'm calling the Super now, he says.

Listen, I reply, if we have to call, let's call somebody from the Gallery staff and with a bit of luck they'll explain that it's OK.

Gallery staff have nothing to do with us, he grunts, we're independent and our job is security.

Security my arse! But I don't say it.

He starts to pace slowly up and down like a sentry. I draw. I'm drawing the feet now.

I count to six, he says, then I call.

He's holding his cell phone to his mouth.

One!

I'm licking my finger to make grey.

Two!

I smudge the ink on the paper with my finger to mark the dark hollow of one hand.

Three!

The other hand.

Four! He strides towards me.

Five! Put your bag on your shoulder.

I explain to him that, given the size of the sketch pad, if I do this, I can't draw.

Bag on your shoulder!

He picks it up and holds it in front of my face.

I close the pen, take the bag and I say Fuck out loud.

Fuck!

His eyes open and he shakes his head, smiling.

Obscene language in a public place, he announces, nothing less. The Super's coming.

Relaxed now, he circles the room slowly.

I drop the bag on the floor, take out my pen and take another look at the drawing. The ground has to be there to limit the sky. With a few touches I indicate the earth.



Animals in Motion: Hundreds of birds, for example, National Gallery

When the Super arrives, he stands, arms akimbo, more or less behind me, to announce: You will leave the Gallery under escort. You have insulted one of my men who was doing his job, and you have shouted obscene words in a public institution. You will now walk in front of us to the main exit. I take it you know the way.

They escort me down the steps into the square. There they leave me, and energetically jog up the steps, mission accomplished.

Now many errors consist of this alone, that we do not apply names rightly to things. For when any one says that lines which are drawn from the centre of a circle to the circumference are unequal, he means, at least at the time, something different by circle than mathematicians. Thus when men make mistakes in calculation they have different numbers in their minds than those on the paper. Wherefore if you could see their minds they do not err; they seem to err, however, because we think they have the same numbers in their minds as on the paper. If this were not so we should not believe that they made mistakes any more than I thought a man in error whom I heard the other day shouting that his yard had flown into his neighbour's chickens, for his mind seemed sufficiently clear to me on the subject.

(Ethics, Part II, Proposition XLVII)