In the spring of 2008, while sketching at the National Gallery in London, John Berger rested his satchel on an empty chair. A security guard approached Berger and asked him to remove it. Berger placed the bag between his feet, but the guard was not satisfied, and insisted that the bag be carried. Berger became obstinate and was thrown out of the museum.

There are three kinds of thought evident in BENTO’S SKETCHBOOK (Pantheon), Berger’s slim new volume. The first is his own text, consisting of the mixture of anecdote, essay, politics, reverie and poetry that he has been exploring for more than half a century. Second, there are his drawings, most of them in ink, with a few splashes of color, some in charcoal or graphite. Third, there are fragments from the work of the freethinking philosopher Baruch Spinoza, nicknamed Bento, who died in the Netherlands in 1677.

“Bento’s Sketchbook” is so named in homage to the sketchbook Spinoza was reputed to have carried around with him, but which was not found among his possessions after his death. The relationship between Berger’s drawings and text in “Bento’s Sketchbook” is intricate. In one instance, Berger presents a sketch of a dancer seated on the ground, and follows it with the story of his struggle to draw the dancer in question, his friend Maria Muñoz. “The image in my head was often clearer than the one on the paper,” he writes, but eventually he arrives at what he is after. “The effort of my corrections and the endurance of the paper have begun to resemble the resilience of Maria’s own body.” On the next page, in continuation of the argument begun by the drawing and the story, is a typically knotty quotation from Spinoza’s “Ethics,” which reads, in part: “Although we do not remember that we existed before the body, we sense nevertheless that our mind in so far as it involves the essence of the body under a species of eternity is eternal and its existence cannot be defined by time or explained by duration.”
This is the technique Berger employs for much of the book. With an unsteady but insistent line, he portrays the faces of friends and artists, a handful of quetsch plums, an old bicycle, a dead badger and a host of other subjects; and with his clear, sinuous prose, he gives an account of how the contours of reality “harass” the act of drawing. “If the lines of a drawing don’t convey this harassment the drawing remains a mere sign.”

In some cases, the drawing the text discusses is not reproduced in the book. For his friend Marie-Claude he draws seven irises, an offering to be placed in her coffin the following day. Other drawings, like one of an angel by Luca della Robbia, or another of a dried fig split open, are depicted but not discussed. And certain aspects of the text, like Berger’s digression into the management’s fears of shoplifting at his local supermarket, or his musings about the cruelties of agribusiness, bear no obvious connection to drawing.

Nevertheless, the book coheres because Berger’s is a humane and uniquely confiding voice, and this voice is coextensive with his skill as a draftsman. The two attributes act in concert with Spinoza’s enigmatic philosophical propositions. All three constitute a singular act of witness. One of the best drawings in “Bento’s Sketchbook” is of the Crucifixion by Antonello da Messina. This drawing, we realize, was the modest but ineffable outcome of Berger’s harassed afternoon at the National Gallery.

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