Introduction

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Thomas Berger has been publishing novels since 1958, when he made an auspicious debut with *Crazy in Berlin*, and since that time he has written a quartet about Carlo Reinhart, a warmhearted loser fitfully making his way through contemporary America, two novels about graduate student/playwright cum detective Russel Wren, a modern masterpiece about the American West in *Little Big Man*, and numerous reinterpretations of established fictional genres—*Who Is Teddy Villanova?* (hard-boiled detective novel), *Regiment of Women* (science and futuristic fiction), *Killing Time* (crime fiction), *Arthur Rex* (Arthurian legends), *Orrie's Story* (Oresteian trilogy), *Nowhere* (utopian novel), and the recent *Robert Crews* (modernization of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*). Berger is a remarkably inventive and prolific writer totally dedicated to the art of fiction.

Scholars and critics have continually seen in Berger's writings the reflection of their own predilections. To read them is to view a novelist who has done and been it all, and at almost every turn Berger has demurred or rejected their estimations. Early in his career he was solemnly declared a black humorist, a label that persisted throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s, but the author has disavowed his relationship with those writers, preferring instead the company of Vladimir Nabokov.[1] He has been described as a satirist, a label he also vigorously disavows: "I don't think I'm a satirist because I have absolutely no desire to correct anybody or get anybody to do differently. In fact I enjoy enormously all these horrors of which I write."[2] Frequently critics have seen his reinventions of fictional forms as parodic, to which he has responded, "Persons who naïvely mistake me for a merry-andrew with an inflated pig's bladder can never understand that I adore whichever tradition I am striving to follow, and that what results is the best I can manage by way of joyful worship—not the worst in sneering derision."[3]

Berger most often has been proclaimed a comic novelist, for which there is ample evidence in many of his novels, yet he has consistently resisted

such a description: "I do not think of myself as a comic writer, and it is rarely my intent to be funny. But this statement itself, which has been made by me repeatedly, is usually taken as being facetious, and if I make it in public, is received with laughter."[4] He has been described as a searing social critic: "My interest is in creation, not in commentary. Those who believe my *intent* is to criticize society, to satirize, to write spoofs and send-ups, to be that most humorless of scribblers, the so-called comic novelist, are utterly misguided."[5] Because of a number similarities between Reinhart and Berger and because *Sneaky People* and *The Feud* are set in the Midwest and during the Depression, he has gained the mantle of autobiographical writer, which he also eschews: "Fiction must never be confused with thar existence through which I make my daily slog . . . what I required by way of a hero was almost anybody but myself."[6] To those who have described him as a realist, he cites the influence of Kafka, and to others who have regarded him as a postmodernist, he has insisted on an abiding affection for classic writers such as Smollett, Goethe, Tolstoy, Melville, and Dickens.

Berger's opinions of his works are certainly instructive, but they are not the only means of approaching his canon. By the same token, attempts to pin him down to a single overriding passion or approach are equally misleading. In point of fact the problem is not that Berger's works fall in none of these categories, but that different novels partake of different traditions. Thus to a certain extent each of the critical approaches mentioned above is applicable but not wholly appropriate to his divergent canon. As some critics have pointed out, Berger finally defies easy categorization, gleefully exploiting or celebrating various traditions while never being completely contained by any of them, and as a consequence the critical response to his work has often been divided.

Berger was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, 20 July 1924, and grew up in nearby Lockland, until he attended Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in 1941. He transferred the next year to the University of Cincinnati but interrupted his studies in 1943 when he enlisted in the army and was stationed in Berlin in a medical unit with the first American occupation forces. In 1948 he graduated with honors from the University of Cincinnati, moved to New York where he worked as a librarian at the Rand School of Social Science, and married in 1950. He did graduate work at Columbia University and began, but never completed, a thesis on George Orwell. After doing various editing jobs and publishing reviews and a handful of short stories in the 1950s, his first novel appeared. Except for sporadically publishing short stories, serving briefly as cinema critic for *Esquire* in the early 1970s, and writing some plays in the early 1970s and late 1980s, Berger has devoted himself to writing novels, the importance of which he has described: "As Henry James said of himself, I am an 'inveterate proser,' and therefore it is fiction that has been the means by which I can see myself as a wizard, ebulliently making things from the void."[7]

The critical reception, although limited, to his first novel, *Crazy in Berlin*, marked a response that would continue throughout most of Berger's career—mixed and sometimes quizzical reactions. One reviewer, for instance, noted his sense of irony and saw the novel as autobiographical and only loosely controlled,[8] and Orville Prescott denounced it as "pretentious, portentous and prolix," but declared Berger "a talented new writer."[9] More kindly disposed reviewers were also uncomfortable with the density of the prose, but commended the book for being an exceptional first novel.[10] However, the most perceptive and important review came from Harvey Swados, who offered Berger as an example of America's answer to Europe's intellectual men of letters. In dealing with the horrors of the war and the Holocaust, Berger eschews traditional liberalism "to commence where liberalism ends, in the world of ideas." He praised Berger's mixed style and pronounced, "Thomas Berger is a name to remember, an important addition to the small group of important American writers, and a novelist with a great career before him."[11]

Although still limited in number, the reviews of *Reinhart in Love* were much more favorable. Critics praised the hero, Carlo Reinhart, as "a kind of Everyman, an ever-hopeful Twentieth century Candide,"[12] commented on Berger's sense of the absurd, and even compared him favorably to Samuel Beckett.[13] The novelist Zulfikar Ghose, writing anonymously, complimented the novel's comic, absurdist, and allegorical aspects, and concluded that Berger's "writing, full of images which a poet would not have observed with greater accuracy or economy, is superbly fresh throughout."[14]

Little Big Man, the novel that firmly established Berger in the minds of critics and general readers, received more attention but was not initially a great success. The critical reaction once again revealed ambivalence. Most reviewers praised Berger's faithful rendering of Native American culture and his generally unsentimental view of the westward movement. They noted the tall tale tradition, sometimes comparing Berger to Mark Twain, but they also questioned the point of the prologue.[15] Guy Davenport offered the most perceptive and enthusiastic evaluation, praising Berger as a "superb satirist" and his style and sensibility "as robust as a tornado . . . and his novels as generously unplotted as life itself."[16]

His next novel, *Killing Time*, by far provoked the most denunciatory reactions of any of his early works. Reviewers saw it as a polemical, self-indulgent exercise, although he was compared to writers as diverse as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Terry Southern, and Joseph Heller.[17] Enthusiasts saw it as another example of black humor and absurdist fiction.[18] Guy Davenport singled out the main character as "one of the most complex characters in modern fiction. . . . The eeriest thing about him is that he is wholly believable, which is to say, of course, that Thomas Berger is a magnificent writer."[19]

The response to *Vital Parts* was again divided and often contradictory.

For instance, a writer for the *Times Literary Supplement* declared the book a failure and proclaimed that the protagonist, Carlo Reinhart, was "*designed* to be taken as a type, a touchstone for our civilization,"[20] while Guy Davenport saw in Reinhart "a kind of heroism . . . he is a fool, but all his greatness is in his foolishness."[21] While the *New Leader* declared that "the problem with *Vital Parts* is that its hero is no Candide in this worst of all possible worlds, but merely a Charlie Brown,"[22] John Leonard praised the book for being unique in that its "central character . . . is a Candide with private opinions, better than most of us."[23] Paul Theroux criticized the novel's style, "Nothing succeeds like excess . . . [the novel is] written in undisguised anger and disgust for the present—a tone which would be fair enough if it had a measure of art";[24] however, John Hollander asserted that "it reads like some kind of masterpiece."[25] In one of the two most penetrating assessments of the book, Richard Schickel identified a central theme in not only this but all of Berger's novels: "What [Reinhart] seeks, really, is freedom from his own concept of freedom, freedom from the old American myth of omnipotent individuality so that he can join the revel of corporate corruption with the rest of us." He sadly asserted that "Thomas Berger will never achieve the recognition he deserves."[26] Brom Weber was the most unequivocal in his contention that the novel "confirms Berger's rank as a major American novelist, one whose stylistic fecundity, psychological insight, and social knowledge are seemingly inexhaustible."[27]

Where the reaction to *Vital Parts* was confusing, the response to *Regiment of Women* was simply incomprehensible, and one wonders if reviewers were reading the same novel. These responses suggest that the novel confused a good many readers, especially Berger's attitude toward sexual politics. Reviewers saw it as a spoof on radical feminists, a critique of male chauvinists, and a send-up of both feminists and chauvinists.[28] The most perceptive evaluation, however, can be found in *Ms.* magazine, whose reviewer felt it was his best novel and argued that the "book is no more antifeminist than it is antimale; Berger is not arguing one political line. His anarchic imagination exaggerates all sexual stereotypes into ludicrous postures, perhaps to show how they rob us of our freedom."[29]

Another mixed reaction greeted *Sneaky People*, with a number of reviewers complaining about its being an exercise in nostalgia and the characters unsavory.[30] Detractors could not see any point to the novel, while those favoring the book complimented its comic gusto. Favorable reviewers saw the book as either a harbinger of the state of 1970's culture or a depiction of "anarchic American individuals *in* a particular time but *for* all time."[31] D. Keith Mano managed to discern two of Berger's fundamental concerns—the moral dimensions of his fiction and the constant motif of a search for the grail.[32]

Aside from a few equivocal reactions, *Who Is Teddy Villanova?* can easily be called a critical success. Reviewers praised its parodic dimensions and

were quick to note the primary sources of inspiration as the works of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Ross MacDonald.[33] These reviewers lauded the novel's baroque extravagance, and Leonard Michaels, in a witty and inspired piece, carefully probed the novel's style, and identified the central theme as being "the staggering insufficiency of an educated intelligence to such modern circumstances [as a widespread decline in amenities and manners]."[34] For the most part *Arthur Rex* was another critical success. Where detractors criticized the modernization of some characters and Berger's attempts at medieval language, others praised what one called his "embellishing rather than altering Malory's work," adding that "he bestows new, often bawdy life into these timeless tales."[35]

Neighbors received an even larger number of enthusiastic reviews, although once again critics were confused about the novel's methods and implications.[36] One reviewer claimed it had no point, another found it a parody of all the rituals of neighborliness, and another contended that it dealt with the reader's apprehension of fiction.[37] Berger's champions were generous in their praise, Thomas R. Edwards calling him "one of our most intelligent, witty and independent-minded writers"[38] and Michael Malone dubbing him "the real thing: a major, Major Writer" and comparing him with the likes of Mailer, Heller, and Pynchon.[39]

Reinhart's Women, like the two novels that preceded it, was also well received. Most reviewers commented on its buoyant, comic tone and compared Berger to Updike and Roth, each of whom had created characters who have appeared in four novels.[40] Comments about Berger's sense of the absurd continued,[41] and the novel's style also drew applause.[42] *The Feud* reinforced the pattern of mixed responses, with critics objecting to the novel's manic events and skeptical spirit[43] and complaining about the range of ironic targets[44] and about its language.[45]

The laudatory reviews seemed written almost to refute the claims of the detractors. For instance, Jack Beatty addressed the issue of language and subject by tersely commenting, "Thomas Berger is an exquisitely subtle artist who can conjure character and emotion from the slightest verbal means."[46] Anne Tyler offered an incisive explanation of Berger's vision: "There is a certain sharp edge to his vision that identifies all he writes. He appears to see his subjects in a uniquely clear, hard light. . . . When Thomas Berger pokes fun at his characters here, he does it fondly, with inspired perception. When he describes an event, it seems the event is taking place of its own volition; it fairly tumbles out. As a result *The Feud* is both endearing and surprising—a comic masterpiece."[47]

Nowhere was unquestionably Berger's critical failure, with most reviewers criticizing what they regarded as his social and cultural didacticism. They were quick to note the novel's utopian antecedents but found "some vital tension . . . missing."[48] They were, however, slightly more generous with *Being Invisible*. The negative views criticized the work's structure and

style and what was regarded as its unsatisfactory conclusion.[49] On the other hand, many praised the shrewdness of the author's observations and Berger's ability to reveal the evil in the banal.[50]

Reactions to *The Houseguest* were overwhelmingly enthusiastic, yet also enigmatic in some cases. For example, Paul Gray announced that "in truth *The Houseguest* harbors no hidden messages that can stand up to a reasoned analysis. The novel instead is a rare example of buoyantly irresponsible comedy, a piling up of non sequiturs for the pure pleasure of creating progressive confusion."[51] However, John Clute argued that here, as in earlier books, "appearances can only be maintained by a kind of social compact—or conspiracy—not to challenge the rituals which enable humans to make sense in the social world."[52]

As with *Nowhere*, critics again had difficulty accepting Berger at his most fabulous in *Changing the Past*,[53] and *Orrie's Story* also provoked mixed reactions, many centering around Berger's modernization of the Oresteian trilogy,[54] but Thomas Disch praised its treatment of the mores and folkways of the Midwest and its measured tone, and asserted that it "must rank among his best novels."[55] Bill Marx took the occasion to reassess Berger's career, which he explained is characterized by "restless experimentation . . . a progression of intelligent, skeptical, and voracious comedies that should be recognized as substantial achievements in contemporary American literature."[56] *Meeting Evil* elicited a host of laudatory reactions, many of which touched on the complex moral dilemma the protagonist faces, while the issue of style drew contradictory reactions.[57]

Where reviewers have expressed ambivalence, confusion, or simply distaste, scholars have been far more favorable of Berger's canon and far more probing in their examination of his art. The first of these evaluations came from Ihab Hassan, whose essay "Conscience and Incongruity: The Fiction of Thomas Berger" raises a number of issues that successive scholars have returned to and developed more fully. Hassan limited his discussion to *Crazy in Berlin* and *Reinhart in Love* and attempted to define Berger's unique point of view as a "comic-absurd vision which we feel articulates our existential situation." He isolated a crucial Berger theme—the disjunction of appearance and reality—and the tension between this and Berger's "gnarled syntax [which] constantly searches for meaning." Although he felt the two Reinhart books have weaknesses, he saw these novels as making a significant contribution to contemporary fiction, "a more subtle sense of how Fraud and Force work to undermine our identity, of how Aggression is part of the human fundament, more damaging to commit than to endure."[58]

The next scholarly treatment was a brief discussion of *Little Big Man* by Robert Edson Lee, who dismissed it as "a product of what Berger has read, not of what he has seen and experienced. No one pretends it is literature."[59] In the same year, however, an entirely different view was offered by L. L. Lee, who insisted that this is "a most American novel [for its treatment of] all

the divisive and unifying themes of the American experience, or, more precisely, of the American 'myth.' "[60] Lee viewed the novel as picaresque with a comic vision and found in the protagonist, Jack Crabb, the elaboration of the work's central theme—the truly worthy person is an individual first and the best society is an anarchistic community. America's commitment to change, he insisted, produces both vitality and destruction, and the depiction of Custer clearly reveals this paradox.

In the same year another discussion of *Little Big Man* was offered by William T. Pilkington, who credited the book as being "the most significant Western comic novel," which parodies the "staples of Western literature." Berger was compared with Faulkner for his absurd, grotesque humor, and the work was described as the "first piece of comic fiction about the West that can plausibly claim status as a major novel by anyone's standards."[61]

In the next year *Crazy in Berlin* and *Little Big Man* were cited as two among many of a growing number of contemporary American fictions that exhibited an exaggerated, grotesque form of neorealism.[62] However, in 1968 Leslie Fiedler criticized *Little Big Man* in *The Return of the Vanishing American* as an example of a new Western that demonstrates that "for all its pathos and danger, the West was and remains essentially *funny* [rather than mythic]."[63] In the same year Gerald Green wrote an impassioned defense of realist fiction and cited Berger's first three novels as offering "the stuff of history, of actual events, to create memorable works."[64]

Four new essays on Berger were published in 1969, two of which concentrated on *Little Big Man*. The first of these, by Brian W. Dippie, presented an overview of narratives of putative sole survivors of the Little Big Horn and declared that "in *Little Big Man*, Berger is faithful to both the West of history and the West as myth." The author refuted Fiedler's view by contending that "it is only by blending the two kinds of truth [historical and mythic] that one arrives at the West of the American mind."[65] In another essay decrying the paucity of aesthetically satisfying Westerns, Jay Gurian praised Berger for treating "Western materials as part of the greater literary tradition from which they are usually separated."[66] He found the characterizations complex, the language richly diverse, and the depiction of Native Americans fresh and imaginative.

Frederick W. Turner III, presented a subtle comparison between *Little Big Man* and Melville's *Israel Potter* as "extended cultural parable[s]," with Melville examining the contrast between the agrarian West and the urban East and Berger continuing at the historical moment where Melville concluded his novel, with Jack Crabb as "Israel reborn." Turner favorably compared Berger with Henry Miller, John Dos Passos, and Faulkner for producing one of "America's finest works." He saw the novel as a microcosm of the story of the West, whereby "America is neither near-savage and vital nor civilized but rather an unhealthy amalgam of both states, an amalgam in which the virtues of each have excelled." He credited Berger with compre-

hending Melville's idea of the erosion of cultural vitality and contended that Berger offers "an examination of American culture and character [that] presents to us a picture both pathetic and tragic."[67]

Reinhart in Love was discussed along with James Purdy's *Cabot Wright Begin*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and John Barth's *The Floating Opera* as an example of contemporary satire that was radical in technique and not "barren, superficial, and destructive." Marjorie Ryan saw the novel as "a mock-epic of post-World War II American society" with Reinhart appearing "almost as a latter-day and younger Babbitt."[68]

In 1971 another refutation of Robert Edson Lee's assessment of *Little Big Man* appeared, with Delbert E. Wylder arguing that the character of Old Lodge Skins, for instance, begins in absurdity and ends in solemnity, elevating him to the condition of "a Cheyenne Oedipus." This was the first article to consider in any depth the technique of using two narrators—the effete dilettante, Ralph Fielding Snell, and the earthy Jack Crabb—which emphasizes Crabb's believability and increases the ambiguity of his sardonic vision. Wylder furthermore rejected the notion that the novel was a sentimental defense of Native American culture, but instead a "commentary on the foibles of mankind itself."[69]

Joyce Hancock continued the investigation into *Little Big Man* with an essay that illustrated the separate values of the Native American and white cultures, and noted as central the symbols of the circle and the square. Where time, experience, and sex are natural, spontaneous, and connected for the Native Americans, for whites all is artificial, linear, and fragmentary. She viewed Berger's language as the means of unifying the "conflicting world views within the hero. . . . By giving the imprisoned Jack Crabb the language of liberation, and . . . by placing him and his language within the context of a rather foppish intellectual and civilized man, Berger has attempted to demonstrate that although Crabb is indeed confined at last, he still embodies those rebellious, boyhood-savage values that are represented by the Indian in the tale proper."[70]

Little Big Man drew more attention with Max F. Schulz's discussion of the novel as a parody and product of the 1960s zeitgeist. Schulz identified the objects of parody as the tall tale, the idea of Native Americans as children of nature and rapacious savages, the American dream of a virgin wilderness, and the Hollywood interpretation of how the west was won. With Crabb as the book's focus, Berger creates a "new mythic synthesis of major occurrences on the Plains . . . and a reinterpretation of [major Western figures] so convincing that no one reading the novel will be able to assent easily to the previous legends."[71] Schulz rejected Wylder's idea that the novel comments on the "foibles of mankind" to present instead a decidedly 1960s version of reality, with Native Americans as projections of youth culture and whites as representing the established order.

Historian Leo E. Oliva approached the novel as a document of exactingly

accurate historical fiction. "The creative artist who knows of which he writes, as in this case Berger most certainly does, adds insight and understanding to the historical record." Oliva praised Berger's sense of chronology and events but singled out his treatment of Native American culture: "His picture of Cheyenne life is so authentic that one may gain as much understanding of these people from his novel as from any other single work."[72]

Arguing against a remark of Edmund Wilson's, Brom Weber wrote an essay demonstrating how ingrained black humor has been in American literature. Weber charted the origins of the term from the French surrealists and selected Berger and Walker Percy as the two most significant black humorists working in the tradition of Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner. Percy and Berger "have avoided the temptation inherent in black humor to imitate disorder, to parody the incoherence of reality by slipping unself-consciously into literary incoherence. . . . These writers reassure us that black humor will not disappear from American literature."[73]

The first extensive treatment of the then Reinhart trilogy came from Douglas A. Hughes who saw Berger as closest to Dickens and Twain for his satirical vision. Hughes contended that the trilogy focused on how one maintains integrity and humanity, the quest for personal freedom, and the separation between appearance and reality. Like many reviewers, Hughes saw Reinhart as a Candide-like figure and as an American Leopold Bloom, belonging in the tradition of the "schlemiel hero, a wise fool [whose shortcomings] are mitigated by his essential goodness. . . . [He is] an embodiment of those humanist values the author wishes to celebrate." Hughes charted the character's development through the three novels from a man who initially resists the temptations of cynicism and nihilism, to one who fails at various undertakings while succeeding morally, to a voluntary outsider, disillusioned and resentful. Ultimately "Carlo Reinhart and the imperfect humanism he has metaphorically come to represent are really indestructible."[74]

In another essay on *Little Big Man* Fred M. Fetrow reviewed scholarship of the novel and concluded that little attention had been given to its specific fictional techniques. Fetrow concentrated on the use of the frame device and the role of the narrator, Snell, whom he felt "establishes a neat balance between veracity and sheer farce. . . . Berger uses Snell to establish the prerequisite mood and to set the ambivalent tone which initiates and supports the satire which follows." Snell is a paradoxical combination of naïf and expert, fool and scholar, and he signals many objects of social satire in the novel—doctors, the aged, racial arrogance. Finally, "the frame technique and the external narrator serve the purpose of moving the reader toward where Thomas Berger wants the reader during the reading and after the digestion of the novel—in between the uncertain, amused by the tall tale, but seriously pondering the moral implications."[75]

The first extended discussion of *Regiment of Women* was a confusing, poorly developed essay that dismisses the novel.[76] The success of the film of

Little Big Man occasioned a comparison between the novel and the movie. Where director Arthur Penn sought to satirize and demythologize the Western genre, Berger set out to remythologize the image of the West. Where Penn romanticized the Native Americans, Berger displayed no tendency to idealize. Where Penn's version of Jack Crabb was that of a loser overwhelmed by experience, Berger's hero assumed legendary roles and remained "self-possessed and recalcitrant . . . a character with substance and a will of his own."[77]

In the same issue of *The Nation* in 1977, two articles about Berger appeared, one offering a reassessment of *Little Big Man* and the second an overview of his career. Frederick Turner argued that *Little Big Man* had remained underappreciated because of an ingrained American disgust for Native American culture, yet "for the first time really in American letters, *both* cultures are seen from the inside out." Berger was praised for treating each culture even-handedly, and the novel stands as a "seminal event in what must now seem the most significant cultural and literary trend of the last decade."[78]

In the first of his many articles on Berger, Brooks Landon saw him as an original defying easy classification. In examining the novelist's first eight works, Landon described their protagonists as "observing Ishmaels," seeking survival more than change. He regarded the Reinhart trilogy as possibly Berger's greatest creation, and he underscores Richard Schickel's view that Berger has " 'one of the most genuinely radical sensibilities now writing novels in this country.' "[79]

A second comparison of the film and the novel of *Little Big Man* again ranked the book as the superior treatment by using a structuralist approach of binary oppositions to reveal the film's weaknesses. Although the film can dramatize the two cultures' activities, it cannot reveal adequately what those cultures believe. The film consistently sentimentalizes the Native Americans and "fails, then, despite all Penn's admirable intentions and considerable craftsmanship, because he has not achieved a structure that will sustain the weight of his materials. . . . What vitiates Penn's achievement in the film is his failure to avoid romanticizing the past."[80]

A second essay dealing with *Little Big Man* as picaresque appeared in 1978, and dealt more profoundly than any before it with Berger's manipulation of the form's conventions. Crabb, as picaro, was seen as an heir to Huck Finn, with "a sound heart in a deformed conscience." Crabb was also compared with Melville's Ishmael for his sense of invulnerability and was seen as trickster, "[who] refuses to be recruited to specific moral views. Confronted with absurd situations, he remains a western Sisyphus in permanent exile." The result of Berger's method is that "historical reality looks like a hoax because the American past appears as a sustained tall tale. Ultimately *Little Big Man*'s picaresque adventures teach that reality is at best seen as someone's make-believe."[81]

Berger has often been compared with John Barth, but Stanley Trachtenberg offered the most trenchant comparison of the two in an essay devoted to a form of comedy in which their heroes merge with the figure of the dupe. Trachtenberg argued that current literature refuses to compete with reality, and he labeled this "hunger art:" "it is an art of displacement which hesitates to reconstruct reality or even to frame it." Linear plot gives way to random situations and emphasis is placed on literary self-reflexivity. The reassurance of comedy comes not from a vision of wholeness but from fragments that do not connect.

Trachtenberg insisted that the subject of *Little Big Man* is not the West but its myth: "Despite its vernacular diction, Crabb's account is no more real than the myths it parodies. Along with Snell's pedantic frame, the totality of the novel makes a comic statement of the impossibility of taking seriously any one version of history, even its own." Trachtenberg also discussed the role of the double in this fiction: "Sometimes real, sometimes imaginary, the double engages the self with the dilemma of ambivalence or of suppressed desires."[82] Reinhart encounters numerous doubles in *Vital Parts*, with the result that identity is fragmented and personal relationships rendered difficult to sustain.

There were at least two feminist reactions to *Little Big Man*, the first of which, by Madelon Heatherington, was the more probing and original. She began by criticizing the Western form as perpetuating a "puerile fantasy" in which the dynamics of romance are aborted. The Western, she demonstrated, is a modernization of the medieval romance in which a hero's principal duty is the deliverance of endangered, vulnerable women, and female characters are uniformly depicted as "shallow demi-types of no complexity whatever."[83] *Little Big Man* was seen as one of the best Western novels, despite its treatment of women in only narrow, stereotypical roles.

The second feminist reading, by Caren J. Deming, is little more than a facile, superficial treatment. Deming denounced the ancillary role of women in *Little Big Man*, which depicts them as either a bountiful garden to be exploited (as in the case of the Native American women) or a preserver of culture, tainted by any contact with Native Americans (as with Olga, Crabb's first wife). Deming denounces the scene where Crabb is encouraged by his wife to have sex with her sisters, and on this issue readers should compare Deming's reading with that of Joyce Hancock mentioned earlier. Finally, "the complex of assumptions behind the double standard of miscegenation denigrates all women and, ultimately, plays white women and women of color off against one another."[84]

The first scholarly treatment of *Who Is Teddy Villanova?*, by David W. Madden, argued that the novel is a parody of the hard-boiled detective form and drew extensive comparisons with Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*. "By imitating, and at the same time inverting, many of the hard-boiled detective story's conventions, Berger manages to sustain his unique

comic-absurd vision and illustrate the artistic and cultural disparity between the values of the writer of detective fiction and those of the novelist in post–World War II America." The essay concluded that "the self-reflexive and self-conscious aspects of its hero, and finally his use of the parodic mode, place Berger in that tradition of American literature established by Hawthorne: the romance tradition."[85]

Michael Cleary examined the satiric and parodic dimensions of *Little Big Man*, asserting that "on one level [the novel] is a condemnation of the weaknesses of human nature; on another level, it is a serious indictment of American institutions, culture, values, and even history itself." Cleary praised Berger's balanced treatment of both cultures, each of which is satirized for its limitations, and the result is a commentary on humanity in general. In spite of Berger's fairness, though, the novel does reveal white culture as lacking the moral foundation that underpins Native American societies. Cleary concluded that instead of being a cynical or nihilistic exercise, it offers "a serious consideration of what it means to live well."[86]

Still another consideration of *Little Big Man*'s picaresque dimensions was offered by Richard A. Betts, who emphasized the novel's episodic plot and the antihero status of Jack Crabb. The hero's pragmatism, lack of principles, resiliency, and solitude are noted as primary attributes of a traditional picaro, and Crabb is "supremely adept at the trickery that is necessary to survival and that sometimes even results in momentary triumphs." The unresolved plot, the panoramic sense of space, and the subjective narrator are other picaresque conventions employed by Berger, and as a result, "his novel undoubtedly belongs to the mainstream of the picaresque tradition."[87]

The high water-mark in Berger scholarship was 1983, when sixteen articles appeared, and *Studies in American Humor* published two issues devoted exclusively to his work. A penetrating biographical glimpse into the author was provided by excerpts from his correspondence with longtime friend Zulfikar Ghose, letters that extend over a thirteen-year period. The topics are numerous: his newfound fascination with writing plays, difficulties in completing a new novel, love of music, disgust over an age of cultural decline, and enthusiastic appreciation of Friedrich Nietzsche. He also comments liberally on a host of writers—Petronius, Henry James, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas De Quincey, Tobias Smollett, Henry de Montherlant, Charles Baudelaire, Jane Austen, and Leo Tolstoy.

Michael Malone wrote an excellent essay in which he argued against the idea that Berger is a parodist or social critic and insisted that "it is language, not self-expression, that absorbs him; voices, not Voice." He found in Berger's fiction an "emotional yearning for human love, harmony and nobility that is persistently drawing Berger towards those romance elements of his tradition that help make his novels true comedies, always a much more serious (and moral) business than burlesque." Malone argued against other interpretations of Berger's work—sentimental, nostalgically

adrift, or "romantic primitivist"—and contended that his depiction of women illustrates men's view of them as baffling and alarming. Ultimately, "the achievement of the best fiction-makers, like Thomas Berger, is to triumph over Time, not by the mocking murders of their predecessors, but by continual recreation."[88]

Myron Simon provided the first assessment of Berger's German-American background and Reinhart's confused sense of ethnicity. Much of Reinhart's craziness in the first novel results from his realizing that German history has not been entirely heroic, and his experience of being hated for his ethnicity provides him with a greater sensitivity toward others so despised (especially Jews and blacks). Reinhart eschews ideology and politics in human affairs, preferring fundamental values such as respect and decency; thus Berger "proposes a vocabulary of moral actions as profound as they are simple and communicable by gentle ways." Reinhart achieves an almost Olympian view of humans as flawed but not contemptible creatures, and *Crazy in Berlin* emerges as "one of the few truly indispensable ethnic novels in American literature."[89]

In another excellent essay, John Carlos Rowe examined Berger's existential humanism, insisting that in the novels, acts of creation are a defense against existential contingency. Rowe focused most of his discussion on *Neighbors*, and noted that while the characters of Harry and Ramona represent a popularizing of existential concepts of the antihero, they are not exemplars of authenticity. The protagonist, Earl Keese, gets the worst of what he expects from these new acquaintances, and the novel is constructed around a series of choices which are really judgments of the reader's values. Melville was invoked once more, in this case *The Confidence Man*, and Rowe concluded that in *Neighbors* Berger "uses Earl and Harry to parody the idea of art as a defense against a threatening world and to relate that aesthetic to a glib existentialist jargon. . . . [which amounts to a] transformation of Berger's aesthetic values."[90]

Brooks Landon, in the first in a series of essays devoted to Berger's stylistic experiments, examined Berger's unswervingly ironic method in *Sneaky People* and *Neighbors*. The first of these deals with the ways male-female relationships are skewed by verbal misunderstandings, while *Neighbors* is a novel "whose action consists primarily of function. . . . [It is] a book in which language becomes the only operating reality." The tenuous nature of human behavior and ethics is connected with the arbitrary nature of language among the characters. Landon showed the dialectic in the novel between freedom and victimization and was the first to acknowledge Nietzsche's profound influence on Berger. "Berger's narrative continually foregrounds the ironic ways in which the worlds of his characters' language are exposed as being at odds with the worlds of their experience."[91]

Another discussion of Berger's parodic practices can be found in an essay by Jean P. Moore. Under consideration were *Little Big Man*, *Regiment*

of Women, and *Who Is Teddy Villanova?*. The discussion emphasized Berger's foregrounding of language and form, to the point that fact and fiction blend. "Because Berger does not perceive art to be a conveyer of truth, a corrective or the means through which right or wrong may be revealed, story-telling is not seen as a means to an end other than itself."[92]

Sherrill E. Grace provided an excellent comparison of *Little Big Man* and Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* that revealed the differences between the American Western and the Canadian Northern as responses to the frontier. Grace regarded *Little Big Man* as a combination captivity narrative and tall tale and noted that the two novels are structured around journey quests. "*Little Big Man* is a bawdy, secular text, truly representative of the Western paradigm . . . [it] adds to and continues the Western mythology."[93]

In another examination of the author's style, Max F. Schulz argued that in Berger's novels words are the medium of reality, and style is the underpinning of that verbal world. Berger's language performs a paradoxical function; it can be "a mimetic mirroring of existence, and an expressive distortion of its appearances." In *Neighbors* words are duplicitous and "gambits of social power," whereas in the Reinhart novels language is used and abused by a host of manipulators; in *Killing Time* words become unhinged from the reality they describe, and in *Regiment of Women* "doppelgänger diction" mixes and confuses gender referents. "Berger's many styles represent a continuing celebration of the self-regenerative powers of language. He is the closest we have today to that rare literary fauna, the writer's writer, the literate dweller among the fictional forms and styles of his tools of trade."[94]

In another discussion of the Reinhart trilogy, Sanford Pinsker placed Berger in the company of other postwar writers of serial fictions like Roth and Updike, and claimed that these three writers' works rank among the period's finest achievements. Once again Reinhart was discussed as a schlemiel hero whose life is built on comic defeats.[95] Ronald R. Janssen limited his discussion to *Reinhart in Love* to reveal the ways in which the novel fits within a tradition of fictions critical of American culture over the last one hundred years. The character of Claude Humbold was cited as the embodiment of a commercial culture that demands conformity and represses individuality.[96] In a second essay devoted to *Who Is Teddy Villanova?*, Philip Kuberski rather ponderously examined the various meanings and implications of the German word *Kraft* (power) to reveal the ways in which the novel "pursues its satisfactions (regardless of whoever would try to civilize or police or arrest them) through the constant demonstration and subversion of craft."[97]

David W. Madden examined the pervasive role of crime and the criminal in Berger's fiction, concentrating on five novels in particular. Berger's criminals are not necessarily professional miscreants, but almost anyone, and their crimes emerge most often from accident. In most of Berger's novels the line between the police and the criminal is blurred, with some police being their

society's greatest malefactors. Berger's use of the ubiquitous third-person narrator promotes the sense of pervasive crime, and the often ambiguous quality of his books underscores the ambiguity of values in his fictional worlds.[98]

Little Big Man was once again compared with another Western, in this case Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, in an essay by Patrick W. Shaw in which Western heroes were described as "a tawdry assortment of crazies, each individually pathetic."[99] Berger was credited with achieving a greater detachment from his characters than Kesey and with viewing reason as the means of individual freedom.

With his essay "Reinhart as Hero and Clown," Gerald Weales provided one of the best overviews of the complete Reinhart saga. Although noting the differences between the books, Weales defined important areas of similarity: the uncertainty about human relationships, the problem of identity, the elusiveness of truth, the inefficacy of language, the "authoritarianism of self-righteous idealism," and mortality itself. In recognizing the comic extravagances of the books, he suggests that "either his grotesques are real or his themes are too serious to be treated except in fantasy."[100] There is a typical pattern to these plots as Reinhart passes through confusion and despair to minor triumphs that leave him by the fourth novel in a condition of relative contentment.

The best essay on *Regiment of Women* was Brooks Landon's "Language and Subversion of Good Order in Thomas Berger's *Regiment of Women*," which examined the theme of individuality and freedom and the ways in which language can promote or frustrate that freedom. He developed the idea of victimization introduced in his earlier essays to show that in all of Berger's fictions victimization is primarily a linguistic phenomenon. The task of the novel's protagonist, Georgie Cornell, is to free himself of the verbal versions of reality foisted on him by others. Berger's primary concern, he explained, "is not with sex, but with power . . . [which] is almost always a function of language."[101] Landon wrote a second, much shorter, consideration of the novel by comparing it with Joanna Russ's *We Who Are About To* and Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains*; he argues that by "using essentially patriarchal literary formulas, each questions patriarchal assumptions, a reversal that gives rise to fantastic elements in these three novels."[102]

A third reading of *Who Is Teddy Villanova?* came in an essay by Larry E. Grimes in which he compared the novel with Jules Feiffer's *Ackroyd* and Richard Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon*. All three are "re-visions" of the classic detective model, with Berger's being the best for its "full-adherence to the formula." As he explained, "True mystery and not the moral self, ontology and not ethics, most concern Berger and Wren."[103] Berger's revisions include an absurdist view of the city as a typical setting, a plot with infinitely incomplete actions, detectives who become writers and dreamers instead of moral arbiters, and style as a substitute for morality.

With "Acts of Definition, or Who Is Thomas Berger?" Alan Wilde offered the most challenging, far-reaching, and presumptuous piece of Berger scholarship. As the title suggests, Wilde sought to locate the author in the fiction and placed Berger in the camp of the "mid-fictionists" who "attempt to demystify the imperial ego—the self as preexistent 'psychic entity' coercing a yielding world into a transparent text." Wilde bases his ideas on the phenomenological notion of the author found *in* the text as a figure who "creates himself in and through language—or, more accurately, creates that phenomenological ego to which we as readers respond and which *does not exist* anywhere—not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life."

Wilde cautioned that while Berger says his aim is to make language a theme, "his practice, the primary evidence of his *intentionality*, suggests nothing so much as an edgy discomfort with a world too effortlessly dismissed from consideration . . . [Berger acknowledges] that art can do no more than supply *a* view of what we choose to call reality." Wilde argued that Berger consistently creates "coercers of reality," monomaniacs who resist their worlds and seek to impose their wills on the world. In Wilde's view the portrait of the artist that emerges in his fiction "is in general one of uneasiness, discomfort, tension. The novels manifest, along with a determined effort to accept the contingency of reality, a more fundamentally intentional sense of the world as hostile, threatening, disequilibrating, alien, *other*."[104] The encounter with the Other—time, women, language, mortality, anarchy, evil—is at the center of his books. The determining of the self Wilde regarded as Berger's dominant theme. Wilde extended his thinking to later novels in a long footnote at the end of a reprint of this article in *Middle Grounds*.[105]

Berger's parodic practices in *Little Big Man* and *Arthur Rex* are considered in an essay by Joan F. Dean. She argued that Berger seeks to renew these myths' vitality by "demystif[ying] his material while preserving its mythic power to inspire belief and action."[106] Berger achieves these ends by emphasizing the human as well as the heroic aspects of his characters, thus emphasizing their complexity and contradictions. Berger presents a view of the world where people struggle amid good and evil, and consequently his books amount to a secular version of hagiography.

Three essays devoted exclusively to *Arthur Rex* appeared next, the first of which, by Raymond H. Thompson, was the weakest, lacking a clear thesis or approach. Nevertheless, Thompson contended that of the three typical responses to the Arthurian legend—heroic fantasy, ironic fantasy, and mythopoeic fantasy—*Arthur Rex* is an example of the second because of Berger's eye for the ridiculous.[107] Jay Ruud, on the other hand, saw the novel as pondering universal questions—what is truth, what is love, what is goodness?—and these meet in the figure of Galahad. Truth, he argued, is often only a matter of appearance, and what matters to Berger is what

people *think* they are doing. Love relationships in the novel are exercises in power, and selfishness is the root of that power. Goodness is revealed to be ambiguous but "equated with truth, which is beyond the shaping power of human perceptions. It exists in the natural order of things. To see truth, to achieve true goodness, one must overcome the self. Berger has shown one path to total selflessness: true love.[108] Ruud concluded that Berger endorses a truth beyond the mundane that affirms goodness and love through self-denial, an experience Galahad undergoes.

Klaus P. Jankofsky organized much of his discussion around the figure of Gawaine and his adventures at Liberty Castle. Jankofsky argued that the novel can be read as Berger's answer to the condition of modern depravity he reveals in so many of his novels. For Jankofsky, Gawaine is the touchstone for revealing the moral issue Berger investigates. The "central issue for the modern reader [is] how to be human and live to tell; how to be a Christian knight and reconcile one's nature with the self, the world, and God."[109] From his encounter with the Green Knight at Liberty Castle, Gawaine emerges as the most likely successor to Arthur as king and an exemplum of the values Berger is promoting in the novel.

In "Language as Self-Defense in *Who Is Teddy Villanova?*," Jon Wallace analyzed Berger's style to demonstrate that the true mystery in the novel lies not with who has committed a crime but with the uses and abuses of language. Where language loses its traditional frames of reference, the novel questions "how [we are] to survive as individuals in a violent and apparently meaningless world in which language has become less an expressive and ordering medium than a dis-ordering force that helps the powerful maintain control of the powerless." Against such "nomenclatural vandalism," the hero, Russel Wren, finds first refuge and then conquest in his linguistic precision.[110]

A number of scholars have remarked that in *Little Big Man* the soliloquy Custer delivers before his death is taken directly from a portion of his autobiography. In a brief essay Jon Wallace took a semiotic approach to this passage to argue that there are two kinds of language in the novel—exploratory and defensive. Custer, he argued, is "at bottom a defender of a restricted sense of self . . . [who] for all moral purposes [is] blind and deaf to the existence of others." In his last words he denies the world, distancing himself verbally from what will soon kill him. This scene reveals in miniature a fundamental view of language elaborated in the novel as a whole: the "nature of human discourse, what it can and cannot do, how it shapes our world and vision, and ultimately limits us."[111]

In another essay on *Little Big Man*, Wallace turned his attention to the implied author, what he believed is the actual protagonist of the novel. Because Snell is presenting Crabb's words, one can never know how much of that presentation is a result of Snell's imposition on the text. "The central theme of *Little Big Man* is the restrictive power of language—the ways in

which it limits our perception and understanding. . . . Crabb seeks to expose and transcend the language codes through which we have come to see the Old West—and to do so by means of an undeniably idiosyncratic style." Berger, in foregrounding language, shows how Crabb "plays the game of self-creation. . . . [By] forcing us to read [Crabb and Snell] as his own creations, Berger's implied author deepens and extends the theme of the search for selfhood by dramatizing it in linguistic as well as mimetic terms."[112]

In a second article concerning *Arthur Rex*, Klaus Jankofsky saw Berger's treatments of food and sex as elements that tellingly reveal his seriocomic approach to legendary material. In spite of humor that some critics found deflating, Jankofsky argues that Berger preserves "the essential idealism, depth, and pathos of the Arthurian story" and thus illustrates "again the perennial appeal of the Arthurian material."[113]

Brooks Landon also examined *Little Big Man*, which he called "Berger's greatest novel—not necessarily his best," and chose to look at the work in terms of its vision and style rather than its relationship to other narrative subgenres. Analyzing Crabb's amalgamation of verbal styles, Landon argued, "Just as surely as Jack's account of his life explores the nature and importance of western myths—both white and Indian—it also explores the linguistic and literary mechanics of myth-making, whether in history, anthropology, journalism, or the novel itself."[114] Landon endorsed the idea of the novel as a captivity narrative, but captivity imposed by language and standards impossible to achieve for the protagonist.

The best discussion of *Killing Time* was offered by Jon Wallace, who explored the ways that language is used to dismiss protagonist Joe Detweiler's experience and person. Wallace compared Detweiler with the actual killer upon whom he is based, Robert Irwin, and two accounts of his trial and prison statements. In *Killing Time* "Berger is specifically interested in how language serves to protect an established metaphysical frame of reference against a character whom it cannot explain." Wallace demonstrated the ways in which most of the novel's principal characters grapple with language and lead the reader to the essence of the author's method: "Berger not only reveals the limitations of labels, he also calls our attention to the limitations of language itself as a means of knowing, or revealing, the world—and persons. . . . As human beings, [Berger] seems to suggest, we will always remain in some shadowy, non-verbal other place—beyond the reach of language and the value assumptions that inform it."[115]

The one book devoted to Berger was written by Brooks Landon, in which he reprinted each of his four previous essays with revisions. The study was a general introduction that discussed all the novels up to *The Houseguest* and took for its thesis the idea that Berger's vision and method are paratactic, emphasizing a thoroughgoing dialectic. "A vital corollary to Berger's view of the way reality operates is his apparent conviction that only through a

better understanding of the conflicts structuring the operation of reality—a search for truths—can personal freedom be found."[116]

Landon devoted most of his attention to the Reinhart quartet, *Little Big Man*, and *Arthur Rex*, emphasizing Berger's manipulations of language and persistent themes such as time, appearance and reality, victimization, power, identity, and freedom. The study was particularly useful for its treatment of such overlooked novels as *Nowhere*, *Being Invisible*, and *The Houseguest*, as well as the three plays from the early 1970s, which have also not yet received scholarly consideration. The book was furthermore noteworthy for the many excerpts Landon offered from his correspondence with Berger, which provide an often privileged glimpse into the writer's practice and thinking. The conclusion presented a helpful consideration of Berger's manipulations of traditional narrative forms, the role of language in the characters' lives and personae, and the inspiration of Nietzsche.

In another examination of *Arthur Rex*, Suzanne H. MacRae acknowledged the novel's contradictory reception and argued that sections of the book represent different and evolving narrative methods. Thus it progresses from ironic satire, to pathos, then tragedy, and finally realism. MacRae argued that Berger is not a misanthrope but a writer aware of the possibility for heroism despite radical human limitations. *Arthur Rex* is a "supple, sad, wise, and witty book which reincarnates the essential thing—the old story."[117]

There are also thirteen interviews, of varying lengths, that have been conducted with Berger over the years. By far the most important and revealing were with Douglas Hughes, Charles Rydell, and Richard Schickel.[118] The topics are of course diverse, with Berger explaining his writing habits, origins for characters and novels, relationship with the literary establishment, and intellectual and artistic inspirations. Most of the discussions have involved *Little Big Man* and the Reinhart saga, although one interview was devoted exclusively to *Arthur Rex* and another to Berger's theories of language and the dominant role it plays in his novels.[119] Another pair of interviews touched upon his relationship with his Ohio origins and his knowledge of New York City, among other topics.[120]

Even the most cursory review of Berger scholarship reveals that *Little Big Man* and the Reinhart novels have garnered the most attention (there are forty articles or treatments in books of the former and fifteen considerations of the quarter). While most of the novels from the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s have been considered by scholars, Berger's later novels (*Nowhere*, *Being Invisible*, *The Houseguest*, *Changing the Past*, *Orrie's Story*, and *Meeting Evil*) have been ignored and deserve much more attention. While there has been a good deal of attention given to his experiments with style and language and his manipulation of narrative conventions and forms, scant recognition has been given to the moral (as opposed to didactic) emphasis in his canon.

Berger has always been concerned with issues of justice and ethics, beginning with Reinhart's moral education in *Crazy in Berlin*, and he has not received the attention he deserves as one of contemporary American fiction's truly morally serious and penetrating writers.

The biographical information on Berger remains thin. He is an extremely private man, and the few details about his life must be gleaned from interviews, the introduction to Landon's book, and the usual references sources such as *Who's Who*, *Contemporary Authors*, and the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.[121] Certainly more work remains to be done in this area, as well as some assessment of his letters and papers, which are housed in the Boston University Library. Landon's book also provides a brief annotated bibliography of primary and secondary materials, and James Bense has published a more comprehensive bibliography of materials.[122]

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