

## The Dark Comic Genius of Thomas Berger

by  
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As is sometimes the case with contemporary writers, if their name is recognized by the general public, it might well be due more to the mass-market broadcast media than to the literary reviews. Indeed, some modern writers have received more attention when a work of theirs has been made into a film or adapted as a television drama than when it first appeared in print.

To a large degree, such has been the case with the American novelist Thomas Berger (born 1924), whose work offers a satiric, and often darkly comic view of modern life in America.

*Little Big Man*, Berger's 1964 satiric novel about 121-year-old Jack Crabb's reminiscence of his life on the western frontier, his adoption by Indians, and his survival of Custer's Last Stand—the 1876 massacre of General George A. Custer and his troopers by Indians—was made into a film in 1970, starring Dustin Hoffman and Faye Dunaway.

In 1981, the film "Neighbors" was released, starring John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd, and was based on Berger's 1980 novel about the bizarre twenty-four-hour relationship of two suburban couples.

However, there is a good deal more to Thomas Berger's career. Indeed, while the comic aspects of his writing have received the greater attention, there has always been a sombre tone running through his work. As Ronald R. Janssen pointed out, this dark aspect "is a major component of the early fiction and nonfiction,"<sup>1</sup> and is evident in the following passage from his first novel, *Crazy in Berlin* (1958):

the vast trenches of slack human skins, the bones inside all loose from their connections, and the oven-grates of human ash . . . that bouquet of burned men which for recognition it is unnecessary ever to have smelled before, and for sleep impossible to forget after.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, that novel, and Berger's subsequent output of seventeen more novels to date, move on to a criticism of the material values—which, in *Crazy in Berlin*, dominated Occupied Berlin—and in later works, were revealed as vapid values that "are promulgated by and through American commerce."<sup>3</sup>

At the center of four of these early novels, including the first one, is perhaps one of Berger's most notable achievements, the character of Carl Reinhart. This

lumbering, well-meaning but put-upon character is also at the center of *Reinhart in Love* (1962), *Vital Parts* (1970), and *Reinhart's Women* (1981).

Reinhart's quixotic effort to balance his idealism with the flawed reality he confronts in modern life is a recurrent theme in this series of novels. Still, all is not as bleak as it may sound, for Berger chronicles his hero's life with a combination of comedy and compassion.

While there are certain similarities between Reinhart and his creator, the comparison does not go much further than this: both are from Ohio, are of German-American stock, and served with the U.S. Army Medical Corps during the Berlin Occupation, events which constitute much of *Crazy in Berlin*. Rather than consider Reinhart as a surrogate for Berger, it is doubtless more reasonable to include his character in that pantheon comprised of such contemporary American protagonists as John Updike's Harry Angstrom and Philip Roth's Nathan Zuckerman.

Carl Reinhart's experiences in the corrupt, morally chaotic world of occupied Berlin serve to shake his naive optimism and ultimately lead to his mental breakdown.

Berger continues the saga in *Reinhart in Love* with Carl, finally recovered, re-entering civilian life. There he tries to find his niche in post-war America, working for the devious realtor, Claude Humbolt, and falling in love with Claude's secretary, Genevieve Raven.

Approaching middle-age, in *Vital Parts*, Reinhart has become the father of a surly son and a devoted daughter, views his marriage to Genevieve as "twenty-two years of boredom when it had not been agony,"<sup>4</sup> and is again embarking on another unsuccessful business venture: the cryogenic freezing of people until a cure can be found for their illnesses.

As a result, "Reinhart found himself nostalgic for routine realism, a rarity perhaps no longer available anywhere. Nowadays Midwestern Protestants orbited the moon."<sup>5</sup>

By the fourth volume of the series, *Reinhart's Women*, Carl is happily divorced and working as a chef on TV cooking program. Furthermore, he has even learned to cope, realizing "the best defense against any moral outrage is patience; wait a moment and something will change: the outrage, he who committed it, or, most often, oneself."<sup>6</sup>

Beyond his creation of Reinhart, Thomas Berger's other subjects have varied widely, and even include his version of the Arthurian legend, *Arthur Rex* (1978), parodies of the hard-boiled detective novel, *Who Is Teddy Villanova* (1977), and of the spy thriller, *Nowhere* (1985). Most recently, he has offered his updated version of the ancient Greek myth of Orestes in *Orrie's Story* (1990), and a grim examination of the nature of evil in the aptly titled *Meeting Evil* (1992).

Regardless of subject matter, though, there has remained one constant in Berger's career: his style. Berger's careful use of language, which in many ways is his true subject, sets him apart from most contemporary writers. Indeed, the wit of his observations, ranging from the wry aphorism ("A tart with a keen memory would probably go mad"<sup>7</sup>) to the outright comic, is the hallmark of his fiction.

In the late eighties (bracketing his 1988 novel, *The Houseguest*), Berger published two novels that meld contemporary satire with fantasy: *Being Invisible* (1987) and *Changing the Past* (1989). These works, coming as they do at this stage in Berger's long career, merit an extended discussion.

Berger's fourteenth novel, *Being Invisible*, takes the reader on yet another excursion into his strange world of put-upon characters who try to get on with their lives in the face of seemingly countless obstacles.

This novel has for its focus a few days in the life of Fred Wagner, a mail-order catalogue copywriter and would-be novelist. One day Wagner discovers that he can will himself invisible. This is not at all the start of a science fiction tale, however, despite Wagner's very real ability to disappear. Instead, Berger's purpose in using invisibility is for its metaphoric potential, and so it is more closely allied to the sort of invisibility described by Ralph Ellison than H. G. Wells. Indeed, through this insightful and comic novel, Berger calls attention to the dehumanizing effect modern society has on the individual.

Wagner has endured "the petty tyrants of quotidian life"<sup>8</sup> and repeatedly been a victim of false accusation. As Berger explains, Wagner's

habitual means of dealing with unpleasantness had been to postpone thinking about it until it either went away . . . or by becoming so routine it was seen as normal a part of life as bad weather. Only by viewing certain phenomena in such a light was it possible to endure life in the city.<sup>9</sup>

Yet at one point Wagner decides to put his newly acquired talent to criminal use by robbing a bank. His choice of location reveals much about Berger's view of urban life: "he was certain to be utterly unknown to all mortals found on the premises of a bank say four blocks north and two west. Which was the way of the city: that not in one's immediate neighborhood was Mars."<sup>10</sup>

Needless to say, the robbery scheme backfires with characteristic Bergeresque comic results. While invisible, Wagner sneaks behind a bank teller and tries to reach around her into her cash drawer. Losing his balance he "clutched out instinctively with his left, free hand . . . performing a grasp that partook of both jokey 'goose' and grim indecency." As a result, the woman "emitted a steam-whistle shriek . . . her features gargoyled with indignation,"<sup>11</sup> causing chaos to break out in the bank.

Of course Wagner soon regains his moral balance and plans never again to use his gift "for ignoble purposes."<sup>12</sup> It is this sentiment that eventually leads him and the novel to a happy resolution.

Along the way, Berger allows his protagonist a pivotal realization about contemporary life. Wagner finds that the people around him “looked to be much the same kind” as his co-workers. “Though culturally superior to them, he was in the same moral boat, like them at the mercy of a city that was heedless of the individual.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, that becomes a dominant theme in this novel.

Berger has also created a supporting cast that includes Wagner’s estranged wife Carla and her vulgar companion, a sculptor named Siv Zirko; the overbearing Roy Pascal “who had the mistaken conviction that because they worked in the same office they were friends,”<sup>14</sup> and Wagner’s salacious neighbor, Sandra Elg, among many others.

Throughout a novel where one finds such random sights as “an elderly woman . . . leashed to a small woolly white dog,”<sup>15</sup> Berger has created a witty and deftly written story that gently makes us consider our own role in contemporary society and the degree to which modern life renders us, in a sense, invisible.

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Which of us has never entertained the fantasy of turning back the clock in order to retrace our steps and so correct some fateful blunder or misstep in life? Thomas Berger has inventively pursued this idea in his entertaining sixteenth novel, *Changing the Past*.

In this novel, Walter Hunsicker, a middle-aged chief copy-editor at a book publishing firm meets by chance a shabby little man who asks, “Could I interest you in a deal?”<sup>16</sup> The incredulous Hunsicker is soon made to realize that this stranger can change his past into whatever Hunsicker chooses, for “the past is infinitely malleable.”<sup>17</sup> In response to Hunsicker’s skepticism, the little man explains:

Since when has “making sense” had any serious reference to what happens in reality? Things rarely make sense except in the banalities of art. Reason is usually beside the point in anything but a product of the imagination.<sup>18</sup>

Seeing no harm in this, and being assured of having nothing to lose, Hunsicker becomes, for a very short time, Jack Kellog, a vulgar real estate tycoon and owner of the building where Hunsicker has worked throughout his career. This incarnation soon sours and Hunsicker-Kellog blames the little man who, in turn, becomes indignant: “All I provided was your ability to change the past. I had nothing to do with *what* you changed it to . . . . If these are vulgar tastes, they are yours and freely chosen.”<sup>19</sup>

After grasping the simple truth that all choices are consequential, and seeking to obviate a very real tragedy in his family, Hunsicker plunges into three successive lives as Kellog, and these comprise most of the novel: Jackie, the abrasive night-club comic; John, the flash-in-the-pan novelist; and Jonathan, the radio talk-show psychologist who, though “sometimes inarticulate . . . [was] always *warm* (the word then in vogue, later to be replaced, when participles came into fashion, by ‘car-

ing.'<sup>20</sup>

As Berger carefully limns each life of Kellog, he holds each one's milieu up to close scrutiny and, while at times disarmingly humorous, each portrait becomes a modern social commentary. Furthermore, this novel, more closely than any of Berger's other novels, draws on the author's own intimate knowledge of the literary world. Indeed, much of the novel's vision is informed by Berger's insider's view and it is quite mordant in its satiric thrusts at the bogus and second rate that dominates so much of contemporary writing and popular culture, in general.

Consider, for example, Hunsicker's exasperated account of his experience as an editor:

In my job one doesn't always have the respect for writers that one probably should have, that one started with. But many of them are so awful! Of course, they all think they're Tolstoys . . . . The average writer is a self-pitying neurotic with some kind of addiction, most often alcohol though it can be anything else as well, drugs, sex, sometimes all of them at once, he's usually in debt, a monster of vanity, wracked with envy . . . .<sup>21</sup>

At one point, for example, Berger places Jonathan Kellog's radio program within an historical context:

These were the days before candor in sexual matters was routine on the airwaves, before people boasted, to the frenetic vulgarians who hosted mass-market TV shows, of merrily practicing an assortment of erotic bizarreries with their parents, children, and pets and being none the worse for it, which era was eventually succeeded by that of the next category of guests, whose lives had professedly been ruined by the deviates of the previous generation.<sup>22</sup>

Along the way, we are treated to such gems as the memorable vignette of Hunsicker's co-worker with the "quick, shrill laugh, hearing which was like being poked in the nape with a sharp pencil."<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, the novel returns to the issue of seeking to alter one's past, and poignantly affirms the necessity of facing reality, however unpleasant. Berger makes it clear that rather than possessing whatever seductive magic it takes to evade one's lot in life, it is far better to have the courage to accept it. It is to Thomas Berger's credit as a novelist that he can take such a sentiment, that in other hands would be rendered trite, and make us look at it again, as if it were new.

## NOTES

1. Ronald R. Janssen, "The Voice of Our Culture: Thomas Berger's *Reinhart in Love*," *Studies in American Humor*, 2 (Fall 1982), 111.
2. Thomas Berger, *Crazy in Berlin* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1982), p. 48.

3. Ibid., 112.
4. Berger, *Vital Parts* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1982), p. 258.
5. Ibid., p. 373.
6. Berger, *Reinhart's Woman* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1981), p. 26.
7. *Vital Parts*, p. 80.
8. Berger, *Being Invisible* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), p. 40.
9. Ibid., p. 79.
10. Ibid., p. 95.
11. Ibid., p. 107.
12. Ibid., p. 114.
13. Ibid., p. 109.
14. Ibid., p. 25.
15. Ibid., p. 116.
16. Berger, *Changing the Past* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989), p. 4.
17. Ibid., p. 9.
18. Ibid., p. 7–8.
19. Ibid., p. 35.
20. Ibid., p. 249.
21. Ibid., pp. 118–119.
22. Ibid., 247–248.
23. Ibid., p. 15.

#### **Novels by Thomas Berger**

Meeting Evil (1992)  
Orrie's Story (1990)  
Changing the Past (1989)  
The Houseguest (1988)  
Being Invisible (1987)  
Nowhere (1985)  
The Feud (1983)  
Reinhart's Women (1981)  
Neighbors (1980)  
Arthur Rex (1978)  
Who Is Teddy Villanova? (1977)  
Sneaky People (1975)  
Regiment of Woman (1973)  
Vital Parts (1970)  
Killing Time (1967)  
Little Big Man (1964)  
Reinhart in Love (1962)  
Crazy in Berlin (1958)