Part one

Attachments, reasons, and desires

. . . & is he honest who resists his genius or conscience only for the sake of present ease or gratification?

William Blake

"A memorable Fancy"

Plates 12–13 in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

1 Attachments: five stories

1.1. "The world has left the earth behind"

In his luminous fictional trilogy, *Into Their Labours*, John Berger describes in the first two volumes, *Pig Earth* and *Once in Europa*, the world of a small peasant village in the French Alps, a village that until very recently must have been fairly remote from big cities, as it begins to come apart with increasing contact with the wider economy and market mentality of the outside world, and, in the final volume, *Lilac and Flag*, the scattering of its children to the big cities.[1]

In the village and the country around it we see, as we move through the first two volumes, an older peasant mentality, the mentality of a culture of survival and intergenerational continuity with (as Berger says in his Introduction) a "profound suspicion of money," collide with a mentality that is still fairly novel to most of the villagers, a mentality that some would call capitalist, though it is wider than that and which, for now, we can call the market mentality as long as we remember that it is not confined to societies in which economic transactions are governed largely by competitive markets.

On three occasions in the trilogy someone refuses to sell something. Marcel, of *Pig Earth*, refuses to sell his old cider press. In *Once in Europa* Odile's father refuses to sell his farm to the owners of the factory complex that now completely surrounds the farm and is poisoning the land and mutilating its own workers. "The owners first doubled, then trebled, the price they were prepared to pay him. His

[1] John Berger, *Into Their Labours* (New York: Pantheon, 1992).

reply remained the same. My patrimony is not for sale" (p. 277). And finally, in *Lilac and Flag*, Sucus, the migrant worker searching for home and love and a little security in the alien city, refuses to sell his knife, though he is desperate for money, because the knife was his father's.

Let us go back to Marcel. Not everyone in the village is like Marcel. He is the only one left who still plants new apple trees – grown from seedlings that had sprouted from the *marc* (the residuum from pressed cider apples) that he buried each year in a corner of his garden. He doesn't expect his children to stay on the farm. But he continues to work with effort and care, though the farm will end with him, because it is, he thinks, "a way of preserving the knowledge my sons are losing," and he plants the trees "to give an example to my sons if they are interested, and, if not, to show my father and his father that the knowledge they handed down has not yet been abandoned. Without that knowledge, I am nothing" (p. 67).

One day, Marcel is pressing apples for cider, when one of those sons, Edouard, returns from work. Earlier that day, Marcel has observed Edouard at work trying to sell some sort of wonder-soap to women in the market, an activity that in Marcel's eyes is fraudulent. Edouard, whom we've already seen exasperated with his father for refusing to buy a tractor – for refusing the twentieth century – now casually tells Marcel that he could sell the ancient oak cider press, which has the date 1802 carved on it and has probably been in the family for generations, as an antique. There's a dealer he knows who would pay a lot of money for it; in turn the dealer, he says, could sell it to a bank or hotel, where, Edouard tells his astonished father, it would become . . . *décor*. To this proposal, Marcel's only response is: "The world has left the earth behind."

Berger has nothing more than this to say about Marcel's response. But it is clear that Marcel lacks interest in selling the cider press for half a million francs, though not because he thinks that he should be paid more for it. To him it is ridiculous, unseemly, almost incomprehensible that it should become décor in a bank's lobby (where the bank no doubt expects it to lend an aura of solidity, reliability, permanence, and integrity). It has never occurred to him to sell it, and it is to him an alien thought that the press is merely potential money.

With that money he could no doubt buy another, equally effective press, and have much money to spare. But the cider press – this particular cider press – has a significance or meaning for him that no other press could have. It is not just an old, familiar, and reliable friend; it *connects* him to his past life – to among other things the annually enacted routines of picking apples with his wife, and planting apple tree seedlings from the *marc* and making cider and *gnôle* and drinking them with family and friends; it is a link between past generations and his own living family and, he forlornly hopes, future generations; it represents and collects significance from the ancient culture, the knowledge and customs, that have sustained him and his ancestors.

All this is compromised when the press is thought of in terms of the money it would fetch, or when it is thought of as interchangeable with some other press, or as serving the extraneous purpose his son suggests for it. (We should note here parenthetically that if Marcel did voluntarily sell the press to, say, a bank, it would then, as our twentieth-century neoclassical economists like to say, be finding "a more valued use," perhaps its "most productive use," and that, say the economists, would be good. We'll return in Part Two to this mad way of thinking). To sell the press – and especially to outsiders beyond the peasant's world who will not even continue to use it as a cider press, to a hotel or bank moreover, which in peasant (and some other) minds represent the very forces that are gradually destroying the whole way of life that has given Marcel's own life meaning – is, in the mind of someone who thinks like Marcel, to *de-mean* his past life, to *disconnect* and alienate him from his culture (while contributing to a new one he cannot respect), to rupture the continuities that give meaning and some measure of dignity to his life.[2]

[2] *Into Their Labours* is in part about losing one's *home*, about being an emigrant, especially from the country to the city. But I should add that Berger, who writes elsewhere of the twentieth century as "the century of banishment," does not believe that it is possible "to return to that historical state in which every village was the center of the world. The only hope of recreating a center now is to make it the entire world. Only worldwide solidarity can transcend modern homelessness. . . . " *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 67.

1.2. "The meeting point of two worlds"

I do not know how close John Berger's fictional world is to the French mountain community in which he has lived for many years, but the collision of two worlds that is the subject of his trilogy is of course something that has taken place – in differing ways and at different times and speeds – all around the world. Let us look at this collision as it occurred in one small place – a hamlet called Alto in the Serra de Monchique in southern Portugal – as described in a fine book by Robin Jenkins.[3] Here, in Western Europe, less than an hour's drive now from the Algarve coast, with its swarming tourist hotels and night clubs, a way of life that had gone on largely unchanged for a thousand years did not begin seriously to give way until the 1950s and was still in the process of collapsing when Jenkins lived there in 1976.

The precipitant of this destruction was the building of a road, of only twelve kilometers, connecting Alto to the town of Monchique and thence by existing roads to the larger towns and cities of Portugal and the wide world beyond. Before this road was built in 1951, there was little movement of people or goods into or out of Alto and the surrounding country because the only link with the outside world was by rough donkey tracks – a thousand years old – to Monchique, a journey of three hours on a donkey or two hours on foot. Cork, medronho (the local firewater), and sweet chestnuts were the only things exported from Alto and, aside from a little iron for tools and donkey shoes from the mines of Aljustrel, seven days away to the north, and salt, rice, almonds, and cigarettes and a few other manufactured goods, all of which required donkey journeys of several days, the people of Alto were self-sufficient.

In a climate that is cool and wet in winter and hot and dry in summer, and on mountainsides whose natural vegetation would be only evergreen trees and scrub bushes, they had constructed and maintained over the centuries a series of terraces irrigated with water that they have tapped from springs by tunneling into the rocky hillsides

[3] Robin Jenkins, *The Road to Alto: An Account of Peasants, Capitalists and the Soil in the Mountains of Southern Portugal* (London: Pluto Press, 1979).

and stored in stone tanks. By these means they fashioned a "luxuriant environment," one that is no doubt biologically more diverse than the natural ecosystem, and were able to grow a great variety of food crops: potatoes, onions, carrots, cabbages, peas, and beans of several kinds; peppers, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, yams, tomatoes, maize, and peanuts; "oranges, lemons and tangerines, plums, cherries and nectarines, loquats, pomegranates and figs, and many varieties of apple and pear"; a few persimmon, mulberry, and grape vines. There were also olive groves, sweet chestnuts, willows along the streams – "carefully pollarded each spring for making baskets" – and on dry hillsides sometimes far from the village wheat and oats were grown, and there were stands of medronho trees whose berries are fermented and distilled into a spirit.

From the cork of cork oaks the people of Alto fashioned many things, including plates and cups and beehives. They made furniture and tools from local woods. They collected herbs for medicines and certain grasses for making string and sacks and for washing the dishes. They hunted a little.

Little entered the region, little left; nothing was wasted. Although the people of Alto utterly transformed their local natural environment, they were an *ecosystem people*: they lived for centuries within the constraints of their local ecosystem without degrading it, having indeed greatly increased its biological productivity. In their isolation before the coming of the road, their almost entirely self-contained economy, an economy governed by orally transmitted customs that encapsulated "the intelligence, trials and errors of generations because the local customs are a very precise reflection of what the local landscape, its soil and climate actually make possible," might very well have been indefinitely reproducible.

All this began to crumble with the coming of the road in 1951. By the time of Jenkins's sojourn there in 1976, the ancient subsistence economy had been penetrated and demoralized by the external capitalist order. Now, the biggest trucks could reach Alto and take out timber, and rich foreigners could easily scout the area for sites to build villas, and multinational corporations could come to prospect for uranium. Now it was easy for the literate to leave for work abroad and for the young to sample life in the cities. And before long the people of

Alto were no longer united by shared experience but divided between "those who remain illiterate peasants and those who are every bit a part of the modern world."

The road, of course, was not the force that turned Alto's world upside down; its role was to let that force in. Down the road came many things. The first effect was to make it possible and initially attractive for Alto's peasants to produce and export an agricultural surplus: chemical fertilizer was trucked in, potato yields were greatly increased, the surplus was sold and indeed had to be sold to pay for the fertilizer. Now more things that previously had been made or done in Alto were bought in Monchique – motorbikes, for example, replaced donkeys, whose manure had fertilized the terraces. Then the peasants discovered that increasingly large amounts of chemical fertilizer were needed to maintain the yields as their soils deteriorated with its use. And so they were drawn into a wider, capitalist economy and bound to it ever more tightly.

The road also brought the eucalyptus trees. Before the road was built, the only economic value of the arid mountain scrub all around Alto derived from the wild medronho trees, whose berries were used to make medronho, a spirituous liquor. But the fast-growing, nonnative eucalyptus grows well on this terrain, and those families in Alto that owned large tracts of mountain land were approached by large paper-manufacturing companies with offers of forty-year contracts. (Only large tracts of land are economically suitable for this purpose and the cost of clearing the mountainsides, bulldozing access roads, and planting the trees is beyond the means of even the local capitalists). From such a contract, with the company paying all the costs and doing all the work, the owner of 500 hectares of mountain land could sit back and earn an annual income (I calculate from Jenkins' 1976 figures) exceeding that of well-paid professionals in the capitals of Europe.

Four families in Alto had large enough tracts of land. Of these, three signed contracts. One family, that of Eloi and his wife Eulalia, both in their fifties, refused. It is this refusal that interests me. Before considering it, there is one more aspect of the eucalyptus plantations that must be noted. Eucalyptus trees drink enormous quantities of water and where they have been planted on the mountains around

Alto they are using the winter rainfall that would otherwise feed the mountain springs on which the peasants had always relied for irrigation. Below the eucalyptus plantations, the water is disappearing: some terraces can no longer be used for crops requiring irrigation and on others there is less and less water available even as more is required because of the use of chemical fertilizer in place of manure. The water supply of one of the contract signers is being dried up by the eucalyptus plantation on his own land; for the rest, their water is being taken by other people's trees. There is now aggressive competition for the dwindling water supply. Soon (wrote Jenkins) "the terraces will no longer be able to produce summer crops and the economic and ecological basis for centuries of stable agricultural production, already undermined by the excessive use of fertilizer, will be destroyed." This is a part of the background of Eloi's refusal to sign a contract for eucalyptus; it also illustrates a process – the effects on ecosystem people, on their intertwined local ecosystems, communities, and cultures, of integration into a much larger economic system – that I will come back to in Part Two.

But now let us look at Eloi's refusal. Eloi and Eulalia's lives were ones of almost unremitting manual labor and, with their refusal, would remain so. Their four children had turned their backs on this life on the land and had left Alto for good to live and work in the towns. When they returned to Alto each year they tried strenuously to persuade their parents to sign a contract with the paper company. The spreading eucalypt forest would in any case doom their parents' ancient way of life. They owned 600 acres of suitable mountain land whose only use to them was in the production of medronho. If they signed, they would be rich; they could look forward to a life of ease – in Alto, if they chose, or at a pleasant spot on the coast near some of their children – or they could continue to work on the land as long as that was possible. And if they did not sign away their mountain land their children would certainly do so as soon as they inherited it. Why did Eloi and Eulalia refuse?

Every year, in September, the couple make the trek over to their mountain land, several miles from Alto, to camp out for a month in a tiny cottage while they pick several tons of medronho berries, which are then carted off by donkey to be fermented in their vats.

They are joined, after some arm twisting, by their daughters and their husbands and their son and his wife, who all bring along *their* children. It is hard work. For Eulalia, though she doesn't drink and hates drunkenness, this is the best time of the year. "For a few brief weeks she can enjoy *her* family on *her* land, all working together in the traditional way. This is what her peasant life was all about – carrying on with the age-old traditions of work, keeping everything in good order, and above all, feeling that it was going to be left in good order for all the generations of family to come."

Of course, they make money from the sale of the medronho spirit, but it is a tiny fraction of what they would earn from the same land planted with eucalyptus. But they are not interested in becoming rich. They are not interested in the kind of life they could live with the secure income the plantation would provide. They prefer to continue to live the way they have lived their lives so far. But it is not just a matter of taste, or of preference – for a self-sufficient, unalienated life working the land they know so well. And it is not just a fear of the unknown, or a preference for the familiar or for a life filled by routine, by necessity even. Nor is it only the pleasure that Eulalia has of working with all her family every year at the medronho-picking season, or even of the couple's desire not to be among those who contribute to the destruction of the medronho tree and the ruin of Alto's centuries-old system of irrigation agriculture. It is also the satisfaction that they feel in continuing a set of ancient traditions, in being part of a process that has gone on for centuries and that they would like to see their children continue and pass on intact in their turn.

But Eloi and Eulalia's refusal is not, or not only, motivated by prospects of future preference satisfaction. (That is the only way the economists can see it, even if they admit more than a desire for profit or for things reducible to money or for the satisfaction of material wants.) The couple's refusal has also, I think, very much to do with the meaning, significance, and value of the way of life of which their lives and work have been a part and hence the meaning and significance and value of their own lives. To exchange their mountain land for money would be to devalue and demean the way they had spent their lives, to subvert the very meaning and significance of their lives and of the culture they had spent their lives helping to sustain and the centuries-old tradition in which their lives had been a link, rendering

obsolete all the accumulated knowledge of how to live in that particular place on earth. To abandon all this for money, for a life of ease, and in doing so, moreover, to contribute to the demise of that way of life, would in effect be to say that their lives and practices were worth no more, meant no more, than this other prospective life or the money with which it would be purchased. To sign the contract would be to allow an adventitious and (from their perspective) arbitrary intrusion of an almost incomprehensible world beyond Alto – to break the intergenerational continuity and community and to tear the ecological fabric that they had helped to sustain and that sustained their lives and in large part made them what they were. It would break the thread of their lives.

1.3. "The money means nothing"

In 1971, the premier of the Canadian province of Quebec, Robert Bourassa, announced "the project of the century": a colossal hydroelectric scheme in which all but one of the great wild rivers draining into James Bay and others draining directly into Hudson Bay would be dammed or diverted. Some two dozen power stations would be constructed, with the power going to cities and industrial facilities far to the south. To accomplish this, thousands of kilometers of road and dozens of towns and airports would also have to be built. Thousands of kilometers of transmission lines would be stretched across the province. Vast tracts of low-lying taiga would be inundated; hundreds of lakes would disappear.

The project would be built in three phases corresponding to three watershed complexes, spanning an area roughly equal to that of France. The first phase would be the La Grande Complex, in which ten hydroelectric dams would be thrown across the La Grande River and its tributaries the Eastmain and Opinaca Rivers.

The government of Quebec thought of this vast area as essentially empty of human habitation. In fact it was the home of the Eeyou Aski, or Cree, and, in the north of the affected area, of Inuit people. The Cree and the Inuit had lived there, in place, for several thousand years, utterly dependent until very recently and still substantially dependent, as hunters, fishers, and trappers, on the healthy functioning of the ecosystems of this fragile, harsh, and unforgiving