JOHN BERGER

There is ne
solitude.

"The *hu* *ial*
man; for o is
own *human* *ral*
existence b ne
man for hi th
nature — t m
of man and the humanism of nature both brought to fulfillment." (Karl Marx: *Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts)*

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from JOHN BERGER, ABOUT LOOKING, New York: Vintage, 1980, pp. 199-205.

FIELD

"Life is not a walk across an open field" —
Russian proverb.

Shelf of a field, green, within easy reach, the grass on it not yet high, papered with blue sky through which yellow has grown to make pure green, the surface colour of what the basin of the world contains, attendant field, shelf between sky and sea, fronted with a curtain of printed trees, friable at its edges, the corners of it rounded, answering the sun with heat, shelf on a wall through which from time to time a cuckoo is audible, shelf on which she keeps the invisible and intangible jars of her pleasure, field that I have always known, I am lying raised up on one elbow wondering whether in any direction I can see beyond where you stop. The wire around you is the horizon.

Remember what it was like to be sung to sleep. If you are fortunate, the memory will be more recent than childhood. The repeated lines of words and music are like paths. These paths are circular and the rings they make are linked together like those of a chain. You walk along these paths and are led by them in circles which lead from one to the other, further and further away. The field upon which you walk and upon which the chain is laid is the song.

Into the silence, which was also at times a roar, of my thoughts and questions forever returning to myself to search there for an explanation of my life and its purpose, into this concentrated tiny hub of dense silent noise, came the cackle of a hen from a nearby back garden, and at that moment that cackle, its distinct sharp-edged existence beneath a blue sky with white clouds, induced in me an intense awareness of freedom. The noise of the hen, which I could not even see, was an event (like a dog running or an artichoke flowering) in a field which until then had been awaiting a first event in

order to become itself realisable. I knew that in that field I could listen to all sounds, all music.

From the city centre there are two ways back to the satellite city in which I live: the main road with a lot of traffic, and a side road which goes over a level crossing . The second is quicker unless you have to wait for a train at the crossing. During the spring and early summer I invariably take the side road, and I find myself hoping that the level crossing will be shut. In the angle between the railway lines and the road there is field, surrounded on its other two sides by trees. The grass is tall in the field and in the evening when the sun is low, the green of the grass divides into light and dark grains of colour — as might happen to a bunch of parsley if lit up by the beam of a powerful lamp at night. Blackbirds hide in the grass and rise up from it. Their coming and going remains quite unaffected by the trains.

This field affords me considerable pleasure. Why then do I not sometimes walk there — it is quite near my flat — instead of relying on being stopped there by the closed level crossing? It is a question of contingencies overlapping. The events which take place in the field — two birds chasing one another, a cloud crossing the sun and changing the colour of the green — acquire a special significance because they occur during the minute or two during which I am obliged to wait. It is as though these minutes fill a certain area of time which exactly fits the spatial area of the field. Time and space conjoin.

The experience which I am attempting to describe by one tentative approach after another is very precise and is immediately recognizable. But it exists at a level of perception and feeling which is probably preverbal — hence, very much, the difficulty of writing about it.

Undoubtedly this experience must have a psychological history, beginning in infancy, which might be explained in

psychoanalytical terms. But such explanations do not generalise the experience, they merely systematise it. The experience in one form or another is, I believe, a common one. It is seldom referred to only because it is nameless.

Let me now try to describe this experience diagrammatically in its ideal mode. What are the simplest things that can be said about it? The experience concerns a field. Not necessarily the same one. Any field, if perceived in a certain way, may offer it. But the *ideal* field, the field most likely to generate the experience, is:

1. A grass field. Why? It must be an area with boundaries which are visible — though not necessarily regular; it cannot be an unbounded segment of nature the limits to which are only set by the natural focus of your eyes. Yet within the area there should be a minimum of order, a minimum of planned events. Neither crops nor regularly planted lines of fruit trees are ideal.

2. A field on a hillside, seen either from above like a table top, or from below when the incline of the hill appears to tilt the field towards you — like music on a music stand. Again, why? Because then the effects of perspective are reduced to a minimum and the relation between what is distant and near is a more equal one.

3. Not a field in winter. Winter is a season of inaction when the range of what is likely to happen is reduced.

4. A field which is not hedged on all sides: ideally, therefore, a continental rather than an English field. A completely hedged field with only a couple of gates leading into it limits the number of possible exits or entrances (except for birds).

Two things might be suggested by the above prescriptions. The ideal field would apparently have certain qualities in common with (a) a painting — defined edges, an

accessible distance, and so on; and (b) a theatre-in-the-round stage — an attendant openness to events, with a maximum possibility for exits and entrances.

I believe, however, that suggestions like this are misleading, because they invoke a cultural context which, if it has anything whatsoever to do with the experience in question, can only refer *back* to it rather than precede it.

Given the ideal field now suggested, what are the further constitutive elements of the experience? It is here that the difficulties begin. You are before the field, although it seldom happens that your attention is drawn to the field

before you have noticed an event within it. Usually the event draws your attention to the field, and, almost instantaneously, your own awareness of the field then gives a special significance to the event.

The first event — since every event is part of a process — invariably leads to other, or, more precisely, invariably leads you to observe others in the field. The first event may be almost anything, provided that it is not in itself over-dramatic.

If you saw a man cry out and fall down, the implications of the event would immediately break the self-sufficiency of the field. You would run into it from the outside. You would try to take him out of it. Even if no physical action is demanded, any over-dramatic event will have the same disadvantage.

If you saw a tree being struck by lightning, the dramatic force of the event would inevitably lead you to interpret it in terms which at that moment would seem larger than the field before you. So, the first event should not be over-dramatic but otherwise it can be almost anything:

Two horses grazing.
A dog running in narrowing circles.
An old woman looking for mushrooms.
A hawk hovering above.
Finches chasing each other from bush to bush.
Chickens pottering.
Two men talking.
A flock of sheep moving exceedingly slowly from one corner to the centre.
A voice calling.
A child walking.

The first event leads you to notice further events which may be consequences of the first, or which may be entirely

unconnected with it except that they take place in the same field. Often the first event which fixes your attention is more obvious than the subsequent ones. Having noticed the dog, you notice a butterfly. Having noticed the horses, you hear a woodpecker and then see it fly across a corner of the field. You watch a child walking and when he has left the field deserted and eventless, you notice a cat jump down into it from the top of a wall.

By this time you are within the experience. Yet saying this implies narrative time and the essence of the experience is that it takes place outside such time. The experience does not enter into the narrative of your life — that narrative which, at one level or another of your consciousness, you are continually retelling and developing to yourself. On the contrary, this narrative is interrupted. The visible extension of the field in space displaces awareness of your own lived time. By what precise mechanism does it do this?

You relate the events which you have seen and are still seeing to the field. It is not only that the field frames them, it also *contains* them. The existence of the field is the pre-condition for their occurring in the way that they have done and for the way in which others are still occurring. All events exist as definable events by virtue of their relation to other events. You have defined the events you have seen primarily (but not necessarily exclusively) by relating them to the event of the field, which at the same time is literally and symbolically the *ground* of the events which are taking place within it.

You may complain that I have now suddenly changed my use of the word, "event". At first I referred to the field as a space awaiting events; now I refer to it as an event in itself. But this inconsistency parallels exactly the apparently illogical nature of the experience. Suddenly an experience of

disinterested observation opens in its centre and gives birth to a happiness which is instantly recognisable as your own.

The field that you are standing before appears to have the same proportions as your own life.

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