# ATTENTION
## Lorraine Daston

In Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 1562 painting *The Triumph of Death*, all hell is breaking loose—literally. The dead have arrived to claim the living. Armed with scythe and sword, hell's legions lay waste to the land: fires smolder; infernal engines crank away; dogs scavenge among the corpses. No one is spared, whether king or cardinal, peasant or soldier, man or woman. All are ripped from life suddenly, mercilessly. Death rides a pale horse and chaos reigns.

Yet in one corner of Bruegel's vision of the apocalypse a couple is oblivious to the horrors that surround them. Amidst the ghastly battalions and the carnage, a man and a woman are still singing away, he strumming the lute and she holding a songbook. Death looks over their shoulder and mockingly strums a guitar—but nothing can break their concentration. One imagines their conversation over the din of the killing and the shrieking: "Once more, then, from the coda, this time *più allegro.*" Even the end of the world cannot distract them. They are under the spell of rapt attention.

Attention sorts out the world. To attend is to distinguish the urgent from the humdrum, signal from noise, foreground from background. Without attention, our senses would be useless: we would look without seeing, hear without listening, touch without feeling. All experience would be as bland as pablum, without accents or interest. Attention is the prototype of all the ways of pinpointing a center and pushing back a periphery. It defines the tiny focus of what matters and the vast blurry remainder of what doesn't. All other forms of centering—egocentrism, ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism—are metaphors for the monomania of attention. Attention creates the most lopsided asymmetries, the most pigheaded partiality. But unlike its rigid metaphors, attention has the saving grace of mobility. It darts from object to object, restlessly shifting its center from moment to moment. To stare too long or too hard, no matter how wondrous the object, is to freeze into astonishment, that surfeit of attention that is the equivalent of inattention.

Inattention takes several forms: openmouthed astonishment, languid boredom, flitting distraction—and divine omniscience. To know everything, all at once, with equal intensity would be, for beings with our sensorium, to know nothing at all—just as to be blinded by light comes down to the same thing as to be blinded by darkness. "Not a sparrow falls, but God attends." This is a burden of blanket attention no human can imagine without a shudder. This is one reason why critics within the psychoanalytic ranks mocked Freud's "free-floating attention" as both an arrogant sham and an insult: the mental suffering of the analysand deserved a more intense focus on the part of the analyst. Even saints who contemplate God do so selectively, never in God's own panoramic fashion: Saint Jerome lost in the Bible is the paradigmatic example.

In ancient Greek mythology, the gods punish by numbing attention, that most mortal faculty. The Theban princess Semele foolishly asks her lover Zeus to appear to her in all his blazing glory as a god; she dies of bedazzlement. Hermes, the trickster god, bores the watchman Argus to death with endless,

above: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Triumph of Death*, 1562 (detail).
below: Vincenzo Catena, *St. Jerome in his Study*, ca. 1510.

droning stories, closing the hundred vigilant eyes one by one. In Hades, Sisyphus rolls his rock endlessly up the mountain; Tantalus ceaselessly reaches for food and drink. They are doomed for all eternity to repeat the same gestures of futility, numbed for all time by monotony. There is nothing new to see or do, nothing to freshen attention. It is the nature of knowledge to be selective—not because of the infirmities of the human intellect but because of its strengths.

Someone deprived of the ability to pay attention would be overwhelmed by sensations, bored by thinking, and stupefied by company. It would be a life worse than that inflicted on the inhabitants of a Hobbesian state of nature: nasty, boring, and short. *Ataraxia*, the cultivated indifference of the Stoic philosophers, would be animated by comparison. Short of death, utter inattention is literally inconceivable. Indifference, disinterest, and distraction are not really such states. Rather, they are the obverse of selective attention: disinterest in most things is usually the consequence of intense interest in one particular thing. To be disinterested is merely to trade the usual interests—money, fame, sating the common appetites—for unusual ones: Sumerian coins, butterflies, the spectra of distant stars. The pedant, the hobbyist, and the mad scientist are all notoriously disinterested in what matters most to the vast majority of people—and obsessively interested in some topic that strikes almost everyone else as trivial, revolting, or obscure. Small communities of attention accrete around these eccentric objects: covens of numismatists, lepidopterists, and astrophysicists. Although these fellow-obsessives may never meet face-to-face, their contacts with one another, as pen pals or as writers and readers, may consume more of their lives in time, resources, and passion than their nearest and dearest. The bonds of kith and kin slacken in comparison to those of shared attention.

Attention lavished on the same select objects over a lifetime and in the company of at least a virtual community of likeminded specialists creates connoisseurship and virtuosity. Ever more exquisite nuances, ever more delicate distinctions gradually reveal themselves to the initiate. To become a master of an art or science is to undergo a rigorous training in a particular regimen of attention, whether it is the carpenter learning the specific grains of wood, or the botanist discerning the textures and structures of thousands of plant species. Language is endlessly enriched by the terms of art that name the shades of sensation picked out by sustained attention: anthemion, neap tide, soffit, chondule, nimbostratus.

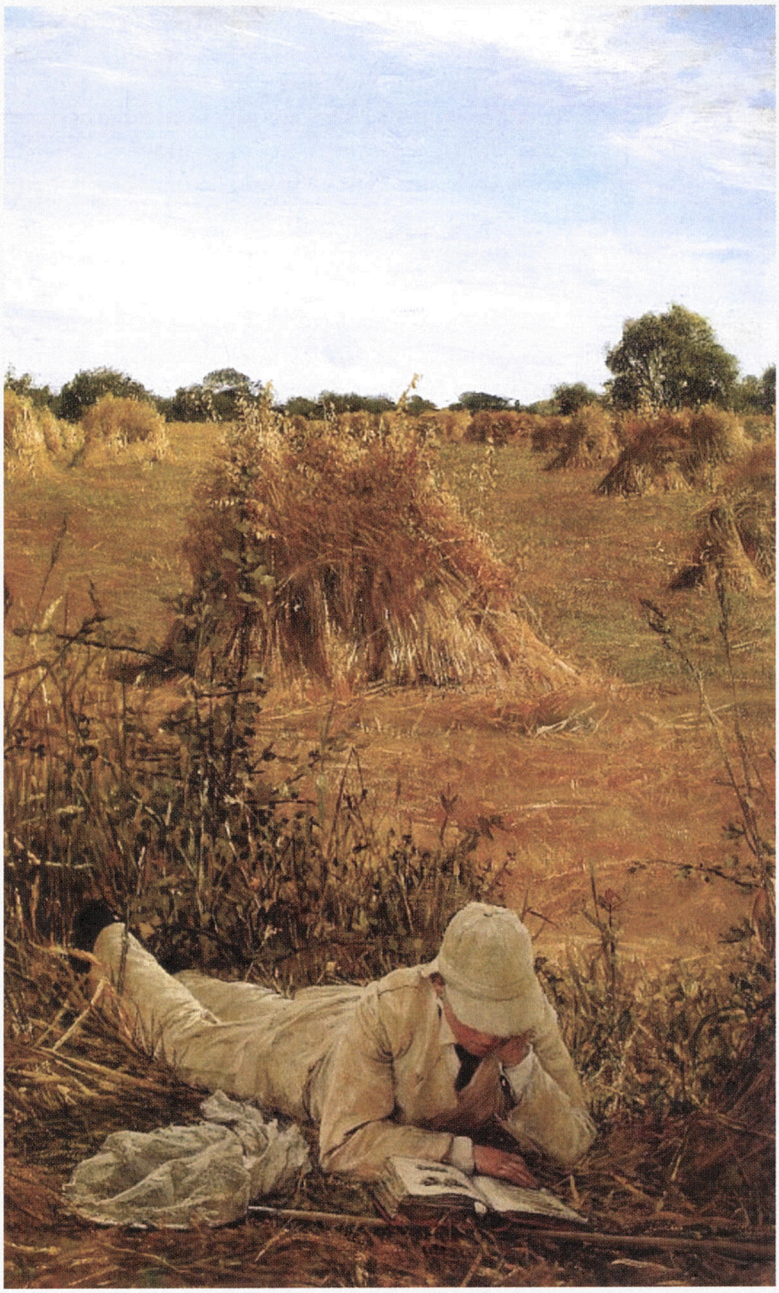
Virtuosity is rarely solitary, and attention is no exception. To be taught and above all to be heightened by emulation and applause requires first an apprenticeship and then an audience of fellow connoisseurs to take each other's measure. Regimens of attention—to the timbre of a Stradivarius or to the smell of urine that yields a diagnosis—are passed down from generation to generation. Guilds, clubs, and professional societies form around collective nodes of refined attention. Whether members meet and compete or vie with another only through lore and tradition, they hone their discerning senses against one another. In these select circles closed around still more select objects, adepts enjoy the luxury of taking the worth of their cherished stamps or fossils or Sanskrit epics for granted. Among other adepts, there is no need to justify this center of attention over alternatives. But even without the spur and support of likeminded sociability, the very act of cultivating attention infuses its objects with value. To attend is always to compliment, to incline one's being in the direction of another—and because attention, like romantic love, is exclusive, simultaneously to withdraw it from something or someone else.

This is why attention and its many regimens—religious meditation, craft skills, scientific observation—are never morally neutral. The allotment of attention is a zero-sum game: my win is your loss, as every child squabbling to rivet its parent's distracted eye knows. Whether the rival is a sibling, the mortgage, or work, an ethical choice has been made when attention is fixed elsewhere. Every culture therefore has its characteristic ethics of attention that specifies which objects are worthy and which not, and in which measure. New and absorbing objects of attention always ignite fierce controversy. When, for example, in seventeenth-century Europe naturalists first began to devote the better part of their days (and nights) to squinting at insects, spotting comets, and dissecting animals, they were roundly criticized for neglecting their civic, familial, and religious duties. Their vice lay not in an interest in the study of nature per se, a perfectly respectable avocation, but rather in their disproportionate interest: they channeled too much attention in the wrong direction, at the expense of the right ones. Scientists may nowadays be more admired than disdained for their exclusive dedication to their objects of inquiry, but the moral ambiguity of their deviant distribution of attention lingers in the figure of the mad scientist, whose attention is dangerously skewed away from ordinary objects and obligations.

In a society of advertisement, attention becomes a scarce commodity with economic value. Fortunes are made and spent for a split second of mass attention, on the margins of a web page or a billboard glimpsed at high speed on the highway. Celebrity has been distilled to its purest form, to be famous for being famous—or rather, to have become a media magnet for attention. But these are simply the crudest forms of the economics of attention. Far more subtle and far more effective is the carefully adjusted tempo at which images succeed one another on television and movie screens in order to refresh attention just as it is waning, or the shifting balance between the novelty that arrests attention and the monstrosity that repels it, as familiar to fashion designers as to the makers of horror films. It is not surprising that in societies so expert at manipulating attention, previously unknown disorders of attention, both deficits and surfeits, should break out like an epidemic. But every age has suffered its characteristic malaises of attention: Renaissance melancholy, Enlightenment *idées fixes*, Victorian failures of the will.

There is no form of value, aesthetic, moral, or economic, that does not depend crucially on attention. It insinuates itself into our natures as individuals, as cultures, and as a species. A distinctive pattern of attention, alive to some objects and dead to others, is a signature more individual and more informative than a DNA fingerprint. Attention is the raw material out of which all culture is molded, the marker of what and who should matter, and how much. It is proverbial among travelers and anthropologists since Herodotus that the stranger's eye is sharpest for the telling details of a culture that natives hardly notice. It is just these contrasts of attention between native and stranger that define being at home or abroad. The peculiar nature of human attention, at once so narrow and so flexible, defines many of the species' most distinctive features. Our consciousness mimics the spotlight/penumbra contrast of attention, as our affections imitate its exclusivity—and mobility.

In the age of the Internet and text messaging, we imagine ourselves to be at the mercy of distraction: only a long airplane flight now offers refuge from email and cell phones, but the airlines have found other ways to constantly interrupt concentration. Yet just as every age has worried about the pathologies of attention, so has every age worried about the pathologies of distraction. Here, for example, is Augustine confessing his distractions to God: "When



Laurence Alma-Tadema, *Ninety-Four Degrees in the Shade*, 1876.

I am sitting at home, a lizard catching flies or a spider entrapping them as they rush into the web often fascinates me. ... When my heart becomes the receptacle of distractions of this nature and the container for a mass of empty thoughts, then too my prayers are often interrupted and distracted; and in your sight, while I am directing the voice of my heart to your ears, frivolous thoughts somehow rush in and cut short an aspiration of the deepest importance." Seventeenth-century natural philosopher Francis Bacon complained that distraction was the greatest enemy of the true philosophy: like the swift runner Atalanta in the Greek myth who lost her race to Hippomenes because she paused to gather the golden apples he had strewn in her path, natural philosophers strayed from experiments of light in order to pursue experiments of fruit—i.e., they greedily sought technological applications before figuring out how nature worked.

Augustine was spared email; even the visionary Francis Bacon could not imagine channel surfing. To each age its own distractions. The moral to be drawn is that attention has always been scarce and therefore always precious, always in need of cultivation and intensification—whether by the disciplines of ascetic meditation or sensual enjoyment. The polar opposites of sensory deprivation and sensory indulgence meet in the moment of undeviating focus. Briefly but sweetly, we become undistractable.