On Attention

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I

In a world defined by unparalleled degrees of specialization, "expert-knowledge," and an ever- expanding inventory of technical terms, we risk losing sight of ordinary language as a source of ethical insight. To be sure, words such as action, judgment, goodness, or attention routinely surface in everyday speech, even as we seem largely unaware of their conceptual richness. It is only when we find others, or indeed ourselves, failing to live up to the meaning of these words that we begin to glimpse their submerged complexity. Remaining for the most part outside our purview, the importance of a word such as *attention* will typically divulge itself only in moments of crisis or (less frequently, perhaps) wonder. Being for the most part employed in adventitious fashion, the concept of "attention" appears wholly entwined with the particular situation that calls for it and, to our dismay, has not received it. On the face of it, then, there is very little about the idea of *attention* that can be stated in general terms. It concerns some particular object, issue, phenomenon, or person and appears exclusively defined by the specificity and richness of what we attend to. As the philosopher Simone Weil put it, attention "consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object ... [or] in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is." A first and provisional conclusion, then, might

be that attention – a state seemingly unpremeditated and impersonal – appears to be an antonym of subjective control.

It is easy to understand why the concept of *attention*, thus understood, should no longer engage modern and, especially, contemporary philosophy. Ever since René Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1637) established the fateful rift between mind and nature, modern rationalism has been wary of phenomena that do not readily conform to its methodological protocols. As Michel Merleau-Ponty sums up rationalism's discomfort with a concept such as attention: "how could an object, distinguished by its presence, call forth an act of attention, since consciousness includes all objects?"[1] Furthermore, what "evidence" would there be to support the phenomenon of attention other than someone's verbal assurance? Yet the modern skeptic will be quick to point out the difference between a verbal *claim* ("I *am* paying attention") and the putative *fact* of attention itself. To inhabit a certain state (say, to *be* in love, feel anger, or pay attention) is not the same as to *report* on it as a factual occurrence. For the modern skeptic, the first order of business thus becomes disentangling something as specious as a specific inner state from the propositional language employed by individuals *claiming* to inhabit some such state.

Naturally, once inner states are deemed to lack objective, measurable criteria for their verification, it is but a small step to deny them *any* reality and legitimacy as topics for philosophical enquiry. Hence, if the phenomenon of attention has commanded any respect whatsoever from modern thought, it has tended to be as a type of *behavior* manifested in verbal and physical form. To the philosopher committed to objective, quantifiable verification, attention thus merges with outwardly *behaving like* someone who is paying attention. Conversely, neuro-scientific reductionism dissolves inner states or *qualia*, such as attention, into a distinct and measurable data-stream such that any explicit, putatively "conscious" assurances offered about one's inhabiting a particular state ("I am in love" or "I am paying attention") will then be treated as a *separate* neural event. Both the behaviorist and the neuro-scientist thus premise that attention, if it is anything at all, amounts to a distinctive *state* of mind, an outwardly observable or digitally measurable spike in computational acuity on the part of a subject merely *re*acting to external stimuli or data.

The picture changes considerably, however, if we replace the prevailing notion of attention as a "*state* of mind" and instead think of it as an *act* in the strong sense already established by Aristotle and Aquinas. Positing that the reality of any being is inseparable from the way in which it realizes itself *in actu*, Aquinas in particular conceives of human as a complete fusion of intellect and will ordered toward a good not constructed *by* a self, though constantly inviting the latter to participate *in* it. For only where we engage the world teleologically, that is, for the sake of a good (however tentatively apprehended), can we invoke the category of action. Simply put, as soon as we recognize intelligibility as a necessary descriptor of action, we realize that the latter cannot be lumped together with "behavior." Nor can the concept of action be classified as merely the kind of outwardly observable "doing" pursued *in order to* obtain something or get somewhere. Whereas behavior or mere "transaction" leaves the human agent uninvolved – little more than an efficient cause of some external change – an "act" tends to be transformative of the doer. To close in on why this shift in perspective – from attention as a *state* to attention as *act* – matters, it helps to consider situations in which the idea of attention comes alive for us. Let us begin with the intersubjective scenario, so familiar to any parent enjoining a child to "pay attention." To ask our child to "pay attention" typically means more than, indeed *prima facie* something different from, a call for intensified concentration. It asks the person – say a teenager whose glance keeps drifting away from an obscure biology-textbook page about cell-division to the bright screen of her cell phone – to focus on what truly matters at *this* moment, to be fully present in *this* situation, and to recognize why doing so is indeed the right thing to do.

Put differently, to pay attention is not simply a matter of increasing, seemingly at will, one's computational prowess but, first and foremost, to recognize and assent to what deserves our attention and why. It typically involves a change of mind (*metanoia*), that is, some fundamental shift in focus. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "attention is neither an association of images, nor the return to itself of thought already in control of its objects, but the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon. ... Consciousness must be faced with its own

unreflective life in things."[2] Attention thus involves a judgment whereby we recognize ourselves to be standing in an ethical obligation vis-à-vis some particular phenomenon or person. Where the domains of fact and value appear substantially entwined, what is *just and right* – viz., to give our attention – is never merely a function of our will. In her "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies," Simone Weil specifically rejects the widespread confusion of attention "with a kind of muscular effort. If one says to one's pupils: 'Now you must pay attention,' one sees them contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles. If after two minutes they are asked what they have been paying attention to, they cannot reply. They have been concentrating on nothing. They have not been paying attention. They have been contracting their muscles."

Yet if it is a mistake to think of attention as issuing from a self exercising its will, it would also be wrong to think of it as entirely adventitious or accidental. More plausibly, attention belongs to a deep-structural pattern of action that Aquinas captures under the heading of *habitus* and regards as indispensable for an education into the virtues. According to this model, to attend properly means to assent to an as yet unconsummated good that will be realized only if we unconditionally and habitually bestow our attention on what presents itself to us, and that will be terminally lost if we don't. At once a creative and an ethical act, attention is consumed by the reality of what we attend *to*. Yet even as attention involves a self-emptying or *kenosis*, it is not to be confused with a passive, hedonistic stance such as would have the individual abide in mindless desire for the sheer novelty of some object "out there." Rather, attention constitutes the act and achievement of focused and undesigning participation in what gives itself to us. To give attention is to find oneself in the presence of a gift, something not claimed and used but received and honored. Not coincidentally, Simone Weil likens attention to prayer. Similarly, for the poet and thinker Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "attention has for its object the order and connection of Thoughts and Images." It amounts to an "awakening the mind ... from the lethargy of custom, and ... directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us." What rationality one may ascribe to the work of attention, then, surely belongs to the domain of practical, not theoretical, reason.

Yet as Kant had pointed out long ago, concepts of practical reason cannot be syllogistically demonstrated. Hence, a different approach is

needed to illuminate attention's distinctive character. One way to proceed is by engaging in what Coleridge calls "desynonymization," namely, by parsing how the meaning of attention differs from closely related concepts. Rather than juxtaposing attention to its putative antonym, "distraction," we might proceed by disentangling attention from "interest," a concept whose quasi-forensic and enduring intentionality would seem to place it in close proximity to attention. And yet, the resemblance deceives. When we are interested, we proceed on the basis of a priori notions and goals that have us prejudge the world and seize on particular aspects of it. Interest, as Kant puts it, is by its very nature "determinative."

Ordinary language offers some guidance here. We are said to "take" an interest in something or other, whereas attention is something we can only "give." What prompts us to take an interest in something is, ordinarily, the prospect of an expected or at least highly probable "return." Our interest in X pivots on its supposed usefulness in relation to something else to the attainment of which we are already committed. Interests can only be "realized" as a desire "fulfilled," an opportunity "seized," or an object "acquired." For precisely that reason, however, our interested take on the world can never fundamentally alter or transform who we are. Rather, we take an *interest* in things only insofar as doing so lets us consolidate knowledge of and control over an already familiar world. Where we are interested, we engage things solely on *our* pre-established terms.

By contrast, attention is solicited by our sense of a potentiality as yet undefined, unrealized, unfulfilled – some meaning or value that will only disclose itself in proportion to the attention we are prepared to bestow on the phenomenon or person in question. Here the underlying ethos is one of generosity rather than some claim staked in conceptual or quantifiable form; and it is here, too, that we begin to see why our interaction with works of art offers quite possibly the best examples for understanding attention. Before pursuing that connection, one final caveat is in order. If attention appears incommensurable with the acquisitive and controlling attitude of "interest," it would be nonetheless a mistake to link it to a notion of "disinterestedness" that Immanuel Kant had famously identified as a defining feature of aesthetic judgment. One reason for this caveat is that *dis*interest is nothing more than the absence of interest and hence lacks all phenomenal specificity. What's more, to associate attention

with Kantian, disinterested pleasure would mean losing sight of the fact that attention amounts to an *act*, not a *state*, of mind. In attending to a person, an image (natural or man-made), a work of literature or music, we assent to the sheer presence and particularity of something that incontrovertibly gives itself to us. As novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch notes, where "I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at." The act of attention differs from other acts in that it can neither be reduced to a function of the will nor be construed as the very antonym of volition. Involving our whole person, rather than just one of our faculties, attention is never something resolved a priori and subsequently "implemented" (or not). Rather, the reality to which attention, and it alone, opens access cannot be known predicted, controlled, or even desired. Operating beyond the realm of personal choice, preference, or calculation, attention finds us entering a realm of significant meaning and absorbing presence. What we find here cannot possibly be viewed with indifference.

II

Here, then, we have reached the point where we can see why attention is so profoundly realized in our encounter with works of art, perhaps surpassed only by our encounter with another person or what Emmanuel Levinas calls the infinity that is "the face of the other." Two of my examples will actually combine the visual arts and the human face as catalysts of attention by examining two portraits. First, though, let us consider a literary work that dramatizes the instant of attention as both transformative and as consummated in *action*. Part III of *Anna Karenina* (1876) opens with Konstantin Levin contemplating a scene of abundance at the "turning point of summer, when the harvest of the current year is assured, . . . [when] the mowing is at hand, when the rye has all come into ear and its grey-green, unswollen, still light ears sway in the wind, when green oats, with clumps of yellow grass scattered among them, thrust themselves unevenly amidst the late-sown crops, when the early buckwheat is already bushing out, covering the ground, when the fallow fields are half ploughed . . . [and] awaiting the scythe, the intact

meadows stand in an unbroken sea, with blackening piles of weeded sorrel stalks here and there."[3] It is a scene suffused with visual detail and tactile sensations that cumulatively trigger memories of our having been in such a place.[4] The precise timing of the passage further reinforces the Platonic motif of *anamnesis*. For unlike a routine description rooted in many discrete details — which is often taken to be the bread and butter of Tolstoyan "realism" — the narrative's visible particulars here coalesce into a complex image only because they happen to be encountered at "that time of year" and precisely at the "turning point of summer" when no practical tasks interfere with Levin's attention.[5] Ever so obliquely, the scene's symbolic powers fade into view; vision merges with recognition, that is, with a heightened awareness of the meaning and significance of what is phenomenally given. An intuitive nexus is established between the presence of a form and the mandate for transformative action encoded in it.

Yet the dynamics of recollection are not confined to matters external to Levin; rather, the distinctive familiarity of the scene that beckons his active engagement also intimates his own potential completion and flourishing as a person. Caught at the precise moment when cyclical, agrarian time lets the image stand forth and disclose itself in all its luminous fullness, Levin's vision is not descriptive but transformative. He does not encounter "nature" but specific *things* — richly textured, profoundly familiar, and effortlessly merged into a single *Gestalt*, such as "the tall grass softly twined around the wheels and the horse's legs, leaving its seeds on the wet spokes and hubs." Suffused with such sensuous qualities, the visible scene here is taken in not as the correlate of some detached perception but as an enveloping, acheiropoietic presence. Levin is literally *in the midst of it*, visually absorbing it rather than looking at it.

For Levin, who does "not like talking or hearing about the beauty of nature . . . [because] words took away the beauty of what he saw," what makes this visible scene real is not its verifiable, empirical character but the epiphanic intensity with which it draws him in. The prevailing affect is not one of subjective pleasure (*hedonē*), disinterested or otherwise, such as a tradition of aesthetic thought extending from Shaftesbury to Kant had posited as the foundation of modern sociability (*sensus communis*).[6] Rather, the scene is one of active, if notably quiet contemplation whose

precise timing ("when a short break comes in the farm work") allows Levin's "attention [to be] absorbed by the sight of a fallow field on a hillock, in some places yellow with grass, in others trodden down and cut criss-cross or dotted with heaps." The precision with which the narrative here traces Levin's gaze, the astonishing depth-of-field (no pun intended) of his vision, so responsive to minute yet significant details, sharply contrasts with his verbal ineptitude during that "vexing" conversation with his brother, Sergej, the day before Levin resolves to join in the mowing of the fields. It is his "physical movement" during those two days of vigorous, productive, and unalienated work that shows the image of fields, as yet not harvested, to embody the patristic conception of *figura*. Levin's immersion in the image as work constitutes spiritual fulfillment.[7] Drawing on Hannah Arendt's careful distinction between labor and work, we thus should think of Levin's mowing of the fields as "work." As his contentious exchange with his brother makes clear, Levin is not concerned with labor as the source (or mechanical cause) of surplus or profit but with work as the completion of a natural and just order visibly realized in his familiar, agrarian world. Whereas labor merely ensures bare life, work is an integral factor in a person's spiritual flourishing.[8]

To be sure, there is no ecclesiastic or theological framework mediating Levin's experience of the initial natural image, let alone compelling his conclusion to join in the mowing.[9] Tolstoy's misgivings about the Russian Orthodox Church—already running deep in 1876 and culminating in his harsh indictment of the Church in his last novel, *Resurrection* (1899), followed by his excommunication two years later—ensure that Levin's epiphanies are couched in ostensibly non-religious language.[10] Instead, the focus is placed on the symmetries of a landscape visibly transformed by the steady, recurrent motions of forty-two men moving across "the curved semicircle of the mowed space, grass and flower-heads bending down slowly and wavely about the blade of [the] scythe." Far from a product of the myriad rules and regulations arduously debated and adopted at the zemtsvo meetings that Levin so abhors, community here is realized as the fulfillment of the initial image. Tolstoy's prose unfolds for us a liturgical process whose "strenuous rhythm" dramatizes "the passion of work." Thus Levin's empirical perceptions effortlessly coalesce into an image wherein what is visibly given and the fulfillment of its transcendent

import appear at once distinct and entwined.

What Erich Auerbach remarks about Dante also applies consummately to Tolstoy: "The moral order is contained in the physical."[11] Thus the liturgical structure of embodied work in the fields allows Levin to grasp and inhabit the connection between physical labor and moral attention that had eluded him during his frustrating exchange with Sergej, on the evening prior, concerning the benefits of agrarian modernization and Western political economy. As Levin moves across the field, side by side with the peasants, chronometric time appears to have been suspended ("Levin lost all awareness of time"), and the boundaries between self and other have all but faded away:

> A change now began to take place in his work that gave him enormous pleasure. In the midst of his work moments came to him when he forgot what he was doing and began to feel light, and in those moments his swaths came out as even and good as Titus's ... The longer Levin mowed, the more often he felt those moments of oblivion during which it was no longer his arms that swung the scythe, but the scythe itself that lent motion to his whole body, full of life and conscious of itself, and, as if by magic, without a thought of it, the work got rightly and neatly done on its own.

There is nothing sentimental here as Tolstoy takes care to show Levin rejecting the false choice between aestheticizing the world of peasant life (as does his detached, sight-seeing brother, Sergej) or naively identifying himself with the peasantry. Instead, action and contemplation here have merged in a kind of non-propositional knowledge, what the Byzantine theologian Maximus had called "knowledge embodied in practice."[12] Konstantin's labor in the fields intimates a kenotic dimension in "passion" all but occluded in Western modernity; very much alert to its presence in active contemplation, Maximus had spoken of such "passion" as "an ecstatic power, elevating the passive recipient to the state of an active agent."[13] Well aware that he belongs to a different social class than the "muzhiks," Levin nonetheless understands himself to be very much part of the same community and the same life-world, one in which differences of education, wealth, and political authority need not harden into political antagonisms. In the event, the harvest scene winds up with a

rapturous account of Levin atop a hay-cart enveloped in "a thundercloud of merriment" that is the sound of "some fifty different coarse, high, healthy voices" of women singing: "the whole meadow with the distant fields . . . started moving and heaving to the rhythm of this wild, rollicking song."[14]

My second example of attention as a form of spiritual action involves the work of Cézanne. The choice may seem almost too obvious, considering how his paintings, particularly the later ones, have long been recognized as a threshold moment, not only in the history of painting where they set the tone for Braque's and Picasso's cubism, but in their overall departure from a conception of art as faithful mimesis, simulation, or illusionism. But let me consider, without apology, one of Cézanne's later works, his 1899 Portrait of Ambroise Vollard, the first art dealer, as it happens, to have taken an interest in the painter's work.

The departure from the covenant of verisimilitude that had long governed classical portraiture could hardly be more striking. Tonally, Cézanne restricts himself almost entirely to a spectrum of brown and gray. Likewise, any attempt at symbolic meaning – such as through revealing objects or emblems placed in the painting's periphery – has been abandoned. Instead, Cézanne's sole concern is "to give the image of what we see, forgetting everything that has appeared before us."[15] If it seems that the painter's focus had narrowed onto only those things that truly elicit and hold his attention, another friend confirms as much. Recalling Cézanne's work habits while engaged in his portrait of Vollard, his friend Joachim Gasquet recalls how "during many sessions, Cézanne seemed to make only a few brushstrokes but never ceased to devour the subject with his eyes." In his 1914 biography of Cézanne, Vollard himself also remarks on the painter's manic obsession with capturing and memorizing the configuration of shades and colors, which made the process of sitting for him excruciating and slowed down the actual painting to just a few brushstrokes in several hours: "After a hundred and fifteen sessions, Cézanne abandoned my portrait to return to Aix. 'I'm not discontent with the front of the shirt,' were his last words."[16]

For Cézanne, the work of visual attention requires above all the absolute stillness of his objects, for which reason he found apples (less prone to change during the weeks that it took him to complete a canvas) rather more congenial subjects than flowers or human beings. The latter

were a source of notorious frustration for the irascible Provençal ("Wretch! You're changing the pose. I say to you, ... remain still as an apple. Does an apple fidget?"). Such anecdotes show that what Cézanne aims at is to capture, not the object or person but, rather, the particular aspect *as he sees it*. Consequently, his subjects' pose often appears awkward, their bodies a composite of shapes slightly askew and uncomfortably frozen in time. His portrait of Vollard confirms as much with its subject appearing somber and inscrutable, looking downward in striking departure from conventional portraiture. As our gaze lingers, further oddities emerge, such as the strange greenish and gray specks on the forehead, the left arm's awkward angularity, and a raised right leg not just obscuring but positively eclipsing the left hand. The overall impression is of an unfinished presentation, a dense mass of tangled and cross-cutting lines and shades intimating a brooding, self-contained presence that simultaneously elicits our interest and defeats it with an aura of terminal inaccessibility. Crucially, Vollard's eyes are not just invisible but positively missing within their clearly delineated sockets. Meanwhile, the infinite gradation of brown- and gray tones, as well as the minimalist, seemingly unfinished background, further estrange us from any realist covenant. One is disoriented by countless irregular planes of brown and gray, which effectively create the network of lines from which springs the impression, less of an individual than of a person-like shape. Already in 1927, the art critic Roger Fry remarks on Cézanne's "Byzantine austerity of design" and on "his instinctive, though as yet unconscious, bias towards severe architectural dispositions and an almost hieratic austerity of line."[17]

Eleven years later, Picasso was to capitalize on these proto-cubist tendencies, though the effect now seems clever rather than profound, even mannered, and less psychologically intriguing than Cézanne's version. The overall effect of Cézanne's Vollard portrait, then, is of a presence that defeats our visual expectations and denies us the comforts of recognition; and it is this very estrangement that raises our visual attention to an entirely new plateau. As Alex Danchev puts it, "a Cézanne portrait is more a thereness than a likeness."[18] As early as 1907, summing up his impressions of the first Cézanne retrospective at the Salon d'Automne, Rilke observes how "Cézanne did not paint 'look at me' but 'here it is.' Truth meant *saying* rather than *judging*."[19] For Cézanne, the giving of attention is what he

means by *réaliser* and *réalisation*, terms he habitually employs and, to his student Émile Bernard, describes as follows: "In order to make progress in realization, there is only nature, and an eye educated by contact with it. It becomes concentric by dint of looking and working. I mean that in an orange, apple, a ball, a head, there is a culminating point, and this point is always the closest to our eye, the edges of objects recede towards a centre placed at eye level." With respect to the quote's perplexing equivalence of orange, apple, and head, Giacometti in 1957 noted that "Cézanne blew sky high [traditional portraiture] by painting the head as an object. He said as much: 'I paint a head like a door, like anything else.' As he painted the left ear, he established a greater rapport between the ear and the background than between the left ear and the right ear, a greater rapport between the colour of the hair and the colour of the sweater than between the ear and the structure of the skull."[20] To a neighbor in Aix, Cézanne remarked on "how a man or woman resembled a cylinder," echoing his widely-quoted remark that one should "treat nature in terms of the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone, everything put in perspective, so that each side of an object, of a plane leads to a central point."[21]

Visual attention for Cézanne pivots on completely expunging, or suspending, our preoccupation with subjective sentiment and historical or symbolic reference, a shift toward an impersonal aesthetic that also informs the work of Rilke and, soon thereafter, of T. S. Eliot. Sheer being supplants the drama of subjective meaning. The dense and unfathomable objectivity of Vollard confronts us not with a specific, known individual but with the bewildering and humbling fact that *there* is someone, or something, real confronting us. Fascinated by an earlier portrait, "Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair" (1877), Rilke remarks on the subject's "animal alertness" and "untiring, objective wakefulness in the unblinking eyes." The gaze, he muses, is fully equivalent to that of Cézanne the painter, whose "unimpeachably accurate" habit of watching neither "presumes superiority" nor means to interpret his subject. We have left the domain of interest, interpretation, and symbolic closure. Instead, the ethical space opened up by Cézanne's unflinchingly engaged, impersonal gaze is one of sheer equivalence with his subject, and thus of wonder at the latter being indeed so indisputably and unfathomably present. As Rilke puts it, Cézanne captured what he saw "with so much humble objectivity, with

the unquestioning, matter-of-fact interest of a dog who sees himself in a mirror and thinks: hmm, there's another dog."[22] Again, Cézanne's human subjects exist on the same plane as his apples, on whose "thing-like and ... stubborn thereness" Rilke also remarks ("they cease to be edible altogether").[23] Having "so incorruptibly contracted a reality to its color content," the painter's "infinitely responsive conscience" delineates a new form of attention that is exclusively and utterly involved in the reality of the being across from it, and hence appears immune to any sentiment, desire, or context-dependent meaning. It is "this limitless objectivity, refusing any kind of meddling in an alien unity, that strikes people as so offensive and comical in Cézanne's portraits. ... They start missing the interpretation, the judgment, the superiority."[24]

Turning to my final example, an image by the Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado, it helps to bear in mind remarks found in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's justly famous essay on Cézanne. As Merelau-Ponty notes, Cézanne wants to represent the object, "to find it again behind the atmosphere. ... He did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear" and, in so doing, strives "to make *visible* how the world *touches* us.... It was the objects and faces themselves as he saw them that demanded to be painted, and Cézanne simply expressed what they *wanted* to say."[25] What the act of attention draws out, then, is precisely this "wanting-to-say" by attending to the way in which objects and faces appear as such, rather than engaging in speculation about their intentions or symbolic meanings.

For a number of reasons, the art of photography encapsulates many of the distinctive features that characterize attention, indeed, where pursued with care may itself be understood as a specific type of attention. Far less dependent on expensive tools than a hundred years ago, photography in its contemporary, mainly digital practice has to rank among the most affordable and democratic of arts. To be sure, that fact also allows for the proliferation of mindlessly acquisitive, gratuitous "snapshots" that neither reflect nor bring about a viewer's considerate and attentive engagement with her subject. Like morality, which Iris Murdoch so sensibly characterizes as the capacity for "accurate vision," the art of photography hinges on the cultivation of the eye. Even so, or rather because of the tacit efficacy of visual habituation, some of the most powerful and iconic photographs

seem to have been above all the fruit of an unpremeditated responsiveness to what gives itself to be seen.

Like attention itself, of which it is a *prima facie* instance, documentary photography in particular constitutes less the product of a determined will than the vicarious yield of habituated and undesigning attention. That the image *finds* the photographer, rather than the other way round, becomes especially apparent in documentary photography – such as in the work of Robert Capa, W. Eugene Smith, Dorothea Lange, or Salgado. At once ephemeral and poignant, the flicker of life captured in such photography impresses on us what, as Murdoch notes, "we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognize, the minute and absolute random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form." In Salgado's close-up of a worker at a Kuwaiti oil well, the act of attention and its photographic result convey above all the subject's immobility and distance. Slumping forward, his facial expression a mix of exhaustion, resignation, and pensiveness, his body utterly caked over and glistening with the dark sheen of crude, the well worker's overall pose verges toward the art of sculpture. He also appears bereft of all perspective. As in the Vollard portrait, there is no "scene" here, and hardly any "background" to offer us any orientation, an impression compounded by the absence of any distinct source of light. All we see is a blend of gray tones, of flesh and skin vanquished by the ubiquitous and alien texture of oil. In beholding this nameless man, caught off-center against what is barely distinguishable as the massive, grimy wheel of a lorry, our viewpoint is just as confined as that of the subject in the picture. Indeed, it is just this fusion of the subject's and the beholder's perspective that prompts us to attend to what we see, to *see this* man, nameless yet real, rather than enjoying perspectival dominion over, and thus merely *looking at*, some generic worker in a generic desert landscape. And because as beholders of this image we find ourselves in such close proximity to the subject, our gaze gradually comes to rest on the man's face, itself oblivious to our attention. For it is here, if anywhere, that subject and beholder might yet achieve their humanity in an act of recognition. It is that incipient acknowledgment of the subject's reality and presence that constitutes the ethical vanishing point of the photograph. The moment of recognition has not occurred, to be sure, but it is what the photograph asks us to anticipate

or imagine as its fulfillment. Something of this dynamic appears to inform Murdoch's more general characterization of art as never "a diversion or a side-issue [but] the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*."

Among the many ills afflicting contemporary thinking about education – from pre-K through college – one of the least remarked-upon, and yet most deleterious in the long term, concerns our society's scandalous and deliberate neglect of the arts. Where public funding for primary and secondary schools is tight, instruction in the arts is inevitably among the first subjects to be cut. It does not help that our national imaginary, forever consumed with security, profitability, and influence is just as pointedly *un*-curious about goodness and beauty. Resembling less the complex Athenian polis of the fifth century than militarized Sparta – a society that notably bequeathed posterity nothing at all – the United States today presents itself as a society whose fixation on its presumptive national interests and their global enforcement stands in inverse proportion to its indifference to the cultivation of artistic gifts and curiosity among its youth. Judged to have no measurable impact on a student's "utility" for the nation's economy, art and by extension the type of attention that creative expression uniquely helps cultivate are baldly anathemized by the well-connected and influential proponents of modern, instrumental rationality. By default and in profoundly misguided ways, any engagement with art is consigned to the realm of surfeit, luxury, and indolence. President Barack Obama's recent, passing reference to the study of art history as lacking in lifetime-earnings potential reflects an entrenched, narrowly calculative view dismissive of any ideas and values that cannot be assimilated to the prevailing rhetoric of efficiency, interest, and influence.[26] The art of attention, and the ethical formation of the whole to which it is uniquely conducive, has become *terra incognita* to neo-utilitarian, professional administrators and "planners" defining curricular agendas for public schools and shaping strategic plans for universities in much the same way as they have long set the agenda in corporate boardrooms.

On this model of rationality, mental activity is deemed real and legitimate only if its results can readily be tabulated and quantified by outside observers. And yet, once leisure has been misconstrued and stigmatized as sheer idleness and lack of "productivity," the oblique but eminently real work of attention – and the conditions for its patient and

sustained cultivation as an artistic and ethical habit – end up being acutely imperiled. As the German Thomist Josef Pieper observed not too long ago, a world where rationality has been pared down to metrics and accountability "expects nothing from 'intellectual contemplation' *because* it costs nothing." Yet such a world also ends up being a dangerously stunted and often lethal environment where visual, empathetic, and unselfishly attentive participation in the reality of things has been supplanted by detached and calculative technologies of vision, be it CCTV street cameras, the powerful zoom lenses on drones, or the monochrome glare of a sniper's night-vision goggles. At the heart of attention, understood as both an act and a good, is the proposition that intelligence and empathy not only are not mutually exclusive but are, on the contrary, profoundly interdependent. Instilling generous and engaged habits of visual attention in today's children and young adults would seem an urgently needed and in the long run beneficial counterweight to our impersonal and utilitarian technologies of seeing and imaging.

Notes

1. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London & New York: Routledge, 1962), 32.

2. Ibid., 35.f.

3. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000).

4. That the precision of Tolstoy's passage is not merely the fruit of his literary exertion becomes clear in his letters; see his letter to A. A. Fet (16 May 1865), which appraises the abundant and luscious fruits of agrarian work against the backdrop of famine elsewhere in the region: "We have pink radishes on our table, yellow butter, and soft, well-baked bread on a clean table cloth; . . . but elsewhere the evil devil famine is already at work, covering the fields with goose-foot, causing cracks to appear in the dried-up earth, chafing the calloused heels of the peasants and their women, cracking the hooves of the cattle." *Tolstoy's Letters*, 2 vols., trans. and ed. R. F. Christian (New York: Scribners, 1978), vol. 1, 195.

5. "Occasionally over the months some hours of leisure and silence occur, when little by little your own atmosphere is created around you, undisturbed, and in this atmosphere all the phenomena of life begin to occupy the place they should have and do have for you, and you are conscious of yourself and your powers, . . . And at such moments you really want to work for yourself (not for others) . . ." (to N. N. Strakhov, 13 September 1871, *Tolstoy's Letters*, vol. 1, 239).

6. See Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis" (taken up in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, §§ 18-22), and the discussion of Shaftesbury in Pfau, *Minding the Modern*, 217-48. Like Hopkins, Tolstoy is deeply suspicious of aesthetics and art (including literature) as a specialized human endeavor; in *A Confession*, he notes how, having "enjoyed watching life through the mirror of art," he soon "began to feel the necessity of living," at which point "I found this mirror either unnecessary, superfluous and ridiculous, or tormenting" (33); *A Confession and other religious writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (London: Penguin, 1987). Elsewhere, he remarks that "our literary language is spineless" (to N. N. Strakhov, 22/25 March 1872, *Tolstoy's Letters*, vol. 1, 244).

7. Tolstoy's acute fusion of image-consciousness and action here is echoed by Seamus Heaney; recalling his childhood on the family farm at Mossbawn in Northern Ireland, Heaney recalls frequently "following the mowing machine, lifting and tying the sheaves, stoking and hutting. I did those jobs routinely, with siblings and with neighbours. I actually enjoyed work in the hay. There was a terrific rightness and likeness about the forks and rakes, a wonderful sense of the hand and the tool being made for each other. I loved to dress a ruck, comb it down, give it a nice firm set." In Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 56.

8. See Arendt, *Human Condition*, esp. 87-109 (on labor) and 144-59 (on work). See also Blondel, *Action*, esp. 109-44; and Pfau, *Minding the Modern*, 87-97 and 360-67.

9. I take the phrase from David Patterson, who sees Tolstoy trying to map a third way between orthodox Trinitarianism and modern Socinianism by "understand[ing] the union of Father and Son posited in the Gospel as a union of the inner divine essence of man with God, so that the phrase 'Son of God' is an expression of every human being's relation to God." "The Human Image Divine: Tolstoy's Anthropic Theology," *Christianity and Literature* 40, no. 1 (1990): 23-36, at 28. A fuller discussion of Tolstoy's extraordinarily rich and complex theological views would have to scrutinize Tolstoy's *A Confession* (esp. Chapters 9-12) and later statements on the subject, most of which are gathered in Tolstoy, *What is Religion and Other Writings* (Guildford, UK: White Crow Books, 2010).

10. On Tolstoy and religion, see A. N. Wilson, *Tolstoy: A Life* (New York: Norton: 1988), 295-339; Patterson, "Human Image Divine," and the landmark study by Richard F. Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

11. Auerbach, "The Three Traits of Dante's Poetry," in *Time, History, and Literature*, 192; what animates Auerbach's brilliant reading of Dante can also be predicated of Tolstoy's literary oeuvre: "The human world in all its breadth and depth is gathered into the structure of the hereafter and there it stands: complete, unfalsified, yet encompassed in an eternal order; the confusion of earthly affairs is not concealed or attenuated or immaterialized, but preserved in full evidence and grounded in a plan which embraces it and raises it above all contingency." *Auerbach, Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: NYRB, 2001), 133.

12. *Ambigua* I: 3 ("Preface").

13. Ibid., I: 115 (no. 7, to John).

14. Yet it is here, too, that the limits of the scene emerge into view; Levin understands that he can never be part of the world of the muzhiks. Instead, the harvest image and its quasi-liturgical fulfillment in strenuous work makes palpable for Levin his own, impending "transition from the old life to the new" (276)—one not wrought magically from above but, rather, practically and from within. On the visible as theophany, see Andrew Louth, "Beauty Will Save the World: The Formation of Byzantine Spirituality" *Theology Today* 61 (2004): 67-77, esp. his discussion of Maximus the Confessor, 69-73.

15. To Émile Bernard, 23 October 1905; *The Letters of Paul Cézanne*, trans. and ed. Alex Danchev (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2013), 355.

16. *Cézanne*, ed. Françoise Cachin et al. (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1996), 422f.

17. *Cézanne: a Study of His Development* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 20; 26. As Alex Danchev notes, Braque and Picasso were among the first to notice how, in an apparent departure from Renaissance, linear perspective, Cézanne collapses horizontal into vertical

lines, with "color ... called upon to do the work of linear perspective" (*Cézanne*, 305).

18. Danchev, *Cézanne: a Life* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), 293.

19. Danchev, *Cézanne: a Life*, 317.

20. *The Letters of Paul Cézanne*, 343.

21. Ibid. 334f. -- In the same vein, David Sylvester sees the overriding objective of Cézanne's mature style to consist in "concentrate[ing] all his attention on achieving the most precise and complete sensation of a human presence." Yet this he paradoxically "achieves ... because he was also undistracted by an interest in virtuoso illusionism." In Danchev, *Cézanne*, 293.

22. Rilke, *Letters on Cézanne*, trans. Joel Agee (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 74f.

23. Ibid., 30.

24. Ibid., 58f.

25. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993), 62-3; 70-71.

26. "[A] lot of young people no longer see the trades and skilled manufacturing as a viable career. But I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree" (as quoted in *Inside Higher Ed*, 31 January 2014).

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