

“**E**veryone knows what attention is,” is a good first line. It arrests your attention, then lets it loose. It sates through deprivation. It was written by William James and published in 1890 in *The Principles of Psychology*. But it is not the first line of that book, nor even the first line of its lecture/essay on “Attention.”

To write a book in which every sentence is a first sentence. To write a book in which every sentence is as good as the first sentence. “To live as if every day were your first,” “to live as if every day were your last”—conditionally. To begin with sex. To begin with loss. To begin with death. To begin with the end.

Everyone knows what attention is, James asserts, but he doesn’t let that stop him:

It is the taking possession of the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others and is a

condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state which in French is called *distraktion*, and *Zerstreutheit* in German.

The most distinctive aspect of this passage is James' insistence that the word "distraktion"—I'll resist the italics—is French.

James' linguistic scrupulousness was shared by his brother, Henry:

There was a new infusion in his consciousness—an element in his life which altered the relations of things. He was not easy till he had found the right name for it—a name the more satisfactory that it was simple, comprehensive and plausible. A new 'distraktion,' in the French sense, was what he flattered himself he had discovered; he could recognize that as freely as possible without being obliged to classify the agreeable resource as a new entanglement. He was neither too much nor too little diverted; he had all his usual attention to give to his work: he had only an employment for his odd hours, which, without being imperative, had over various others the advantage of a certain continuity.

That passage is from a fiction called *The Tragic Muse*, also published in 1890. It is neither its beginning, nor end, rather a passage from the middle of a middle chapter. *The Tragic Muse* is obsessed with the theater, as was James. We're often the most obsessed with disciplines for which we possess the least talent.

All that you should be able to recall—now, tomorrow, next week, or month—is that a certain type

of British theatrical character written by a celibate homosexual expatriate American might still have considered *distraktion* French, in or around 1890.

The poems I like best have no middles, their first words are their last. All novels are all middle, which is why the better ones try to begin and end like poems. Loudness compels attention. You learn this before you learn that crying is not music. Size and contrasting colors do the same. You're taught this before you're taught that smearing the house with a diaper's soil is no way to sculpt or paint.

For some reason, you're here. Maybe it was William James, or Henry James, or a coworker's recommendation that did the trick, or else maybe you read a synopsis or an excerpt you accidentally clicked—in some way, regardless of the way, if you've gotten this far, your attention has been *apprehended*. You've paid money for this book in order to *pay attention*. You are skeptical, which is to say, unforgiving. You have enough money to afford this book or you have family or friends who do and who don't mind your borrowing, or you have the type of family or friends who gift books like this on auspicious, and even for no, occasions, in which case perhaps you're only being attentive because you're interested in just what type of person this gifter thinks you are—whether they think you're too attentive, to them, to yourself, or too inattentive, to either or to both.

But let's agree for a moment—the present—that you're interested in what attention is (despite your already knowing what it is); you think that attention is important, though maybe not important in and of itself as much as it's important to everything else that is important, like carbon or chlorophyll is, though you're not 100% sure what those are; you believe that we live in a time of *perpetual mediation*, but you hate that phrase; you believe that we must practice some degree of *aesthetic ecology*, but that phrasing too is odious; you're not sure how you've come to regard attention as both a *spiritual principle* AND a *commodity*; you believe our sensoria to have become an *unregulated marketplace*—in which advertisers compete to distract us the consumers from essential appetites, and the culture industry vies to muddle distinctions between art and product that have served us faithfully since the Enlightenment—through a redefinition of experience as *interactivity*; you believe that this *commodification*—or *commoditization*—has led to a state of existence that “increasingly”—or “exponentially”—resembles a *battle for consciousness*, a *resource war*, the most important war of our time, perhaps, though also the most unimportant given that genuine wars still rage and campaign for our contemplation alongside what we still have to call *culture*; which is a word that must be used in italics ever since that innovation was introduced by the Renaissance—slanting text in cursive, as if the

language were fleeing its sense; you are bewildered by the new drugs that are regularly synthesized “to engage” “attention,” but to or for what you aren't sure; you aren't even sure of what exactly is being “engaged”; you're bothered by new films and television shows premiering with fresh promises of an encapsulation of “a contemporary condition,” by new websites launched to provide constant commentary on our inability, or unwillingness, to “disconnect,” to seek “a primary text,” and by new books published, texts secondary (academic), tertiary (popular), and quaternary (academic commentaries on the popular), always claiming to tell us precisely “what matters now,” or “the meaning of the present,” and yet in doing so are willing to pervert even the matter and meaning of the quotationmark, which has been used to denote true speech, that of God, or Christ, or a government, since Medievalism, but has, in our time, been used to denote speech that can never be “true”; you don't know which to believe, whether your experience—which tells you that attention is something abstract, a state or condition—or your schooling or internet—which tells you that attention is something concrete, a measurable neurological response to stimulus—or both; you want to know what happens when we “attend,” and whether it's something of which only humans are capable.

You consider all this and find yourself spiraling into that comfortable yet disconsolate postmodern

or postpostmodern or amodern, perhaps, contemplation of contemplation, a recursive consciousness wherein you find yourself in both every place and no place at once, wondering about the differences, if any, between a helix and spiral; between reminiscence and memory; wondering about the relationship, if any, between/among reminiscence and/or memory and attention; about the relationship, if any, between attention and the type of dreaming you do when you're asleep and the type of dreaming you do when you're awake; whether you're only rehearsing your attention while you're dreaming and, if so, if everything you find yourself attending to, whether consciously or unconsciously, is merely a result of a routine or script; you suspect there's a difference between conscious attention and unconscious attention but you're not sure whether the subconscious exists or plays a role in either or in both; you suspect that considering the perception of time might be a waste of time; that it might in fact be easier to be an animal who, whether they can attend or not, is far better than a human at attracting/seducing attention, especially for sex, by emitting extreme colors and sounds and smells without embarrassment, or perhaps with an embarrassment that eludes human perception; you suspect that you should be having more sex; you've already noted that William James' focus on the visual aspect of attention—"clear and vivid"—is ironic, given that his essay was originally

written and presented as a lecture (sonic/aural); you wonder whether he himself noted this irony; you note too that Henry James' observation that his character—whose name and circumstances you perhaps are familiar with, or perhaps aren't—"could recognize [his distraction] as freely as possible without being obliged to classify the agreeable resource as a new entanglement" is both entirely paradoxical and crazy but also entirely logical and sane; you wonder whether James himself was aware of this or intended that his character be regarded as being aware of it; you muse as to whether reading makes you more attentive, while partaking in other media makes you less attentive; you consider experimenting with psychostimulants; you consider that all the new amphetamines being peddled everywhere might help you attend better and longer but, because they reduce bloodflow too, will certainly hamper your hopes for better sex; you wonder how is it that these drugs exist and are routinely prescribed when the disorder they're intended to treat—Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, ADHD—remains a mere description of symptoms, which is to say no, or little, or little to no neurological evidence exists that all these diagnostic acronyms that have invaded our language are in fact anything more than further psychological aberrancies, delusions, or pharmaceutical scams, and that those scams themselves, whose brandnames I'd prefer to be paid to mention in a

book, are in fact just legal iterations or achiral reproductions of substances that have been classified as illegal perhaps because the deficiencies or circumstances these illegal substances treat cannot be so rigidly perceived as being physical or mental or even psychological so much as political or economic; you are enraged that everything becomes corrupted, but you are also inspired by that corruption; you know that change is bad but good and also a fact; you are aware that attention comes from the Latin *attentio*, which itself is a calque, through *ad tenso*, of the Greek *pro soché/prosoché*, which itself means “to grip,” “to grasp,” “to take with the hands or hold/mold with the fingers”; you are aware that the word “buttonhole,” i.e. to detain someone in conversation, is merely a corruption of “buttonhold,” the loop of thread that cinches a button into place, which reminds you that men’s shirts have buttons on the right but women’s on the left because women, or certain women, used to be dressed by attendants for whom those leftside buttons were on the rightside and most people are righthanded; which reminds you that we shake hands with the righthand only to show that we’re not carrying weapons and that Britain and so most of its former colonies drive on the leftside of the road because knights would ride their horses with their lances tucked under their right arms and if you met a stranger on the road you passed him on the left to keep your lance between

yourself and him; which reminds you that the rest of the world not British followed the practice of the distracted French, led by Napoleon who was lefthanded and so ordered his armies to march on the right so he could keep his sword between him and any oncoming traffic (lefthanded infantry, because of scabbard placement, had to mount their horses from the right, while horses themselves are subject to laterality: horses that take longer strides with the right foreleg, which means they tend toward the left, are more successful at racing, as most tracks are run counterclockwise); which reminds you that the earliest French trains were built in the original century of distraction by the British and so kept to the left and that what further distinguishes French railroads are the postings at their crossings that read: *un train peut en cacher un autre*, which means “one train may hide another,” though it’s always been a mystery to you as to whether that implies that one train might closely follow another or, the more impractical and depressing interpretation, that even as one train passes east, another passes west, and never again will they meet (even further distraction: it just so happens that the father of British rail transport was named William James, while another Henry James was a pioneer of map production, and the father of the contemporary cartographic scale, 1:2500, in which 1 cm. on a page is equal to 25 m. of earth); which reminds you that all boats and airplanes are supposed to pass on

the right; which reminds you that when you cross by car between China and Hong Kong you have to switch from rightsided driving to leftsided; which reminds you that I have still not explained anything directly or tied together, left shoelace over right, all my Jameses, or whether we humans possess the same laterality that we have in our hands in our feet and so you go to the computer to search it up, searching “human foot laterality” or “rightfooted leftfooted humans,” or you check your email instead and by the time you’re finished checking you’ve forgotten what your original purpose in going to the computer had been; or you don’t even go to your computer but stay seated or lying and reading, let’s hope, though you’re tired; which reminds you, ultimately, that a long sentence in the second person—rather my addressing you as you, rather my addressing all my readers as you and you as all my readers, but also as me (my truest readership), at relentless length—is just another weary technique to compel/exhaust your continued . . . mindfulness.

– Directionality, Sumer, Babel and
the Flood, Eden –

*(if you’re averse to religion/myth, skip directly to
chapter 4)*

The world’s oldest languages were chiseled into stone. As most people are righthanded,¹ the righthand held the mallet, the lefthand the chisel. This is why Semitic languages are written right to left, as the dominant R hand does the powerful work, as the submissive L hand returns across the body, reaching, at the end of each line, its rest. Arabian dialects in use a full millennium before Christ advantaged this return and were written in *boustrophedon*, or “cow-path-writing,” in which lines alternate their directions, R to L and L to R. A tablet

1. Most people (approx. 70 to 95%) are R handed; the remainder is L, save a smattering of the crossdominant (ambidextrous). But the determining factors of handedness remain elusive. Geneticists cling to genetics, of course, though while some studies have shown dominance to be hereditary, others have demonstrated only a limited relationship (a 2006 study of twins set L heritability at approx. 24%). Sociologists point out that handedness can be influenced by culture, obviously, by