

Adam Phillips. *Attention Seeking*.
London: Penguin, 2019.

I

It is awfully important to know what is and what is not your business.

Gertrude Stein, 'What is English Literature'

Everything depends on what, if anything, we find interesting – on what we are encouraged and educated to find interesting, and what we find ourselves being interested in despite ourselves. And when we are interested, we pay attention: sometimes, at considerable cost. There is our official curiosity and our unofficial curiosity: our official curiosity is a form of obedience, an indebtedness to the authorities. In our unofficial curiosity we don't know who we want to be judged by. It is the difference between knowing what we are doing, and following our eyes.

It is through both kinds of interest that we tend to recognise and characterise ourselves and other people. 'We get hooked,' the critic Aaron Schuster writes in *The Trouble with Pleasure*,

on certain things, impressions, patterns, rhythms, words that give a warped consistency to our world, the grain of madness that provides us with our style and character, our secret coherence – whether this saves us or drives us to our doom.

Our attention is attracted, and we attract attention, in very specific, idiosyncratic ways. We are not hooked by anything and everything; we don't desire everybody; only particular people, images, things, patterns, rhythms and words affect us. Indeed, what is striking, as Schuster suggests, is just how selective we are, and how much we assume our coherence, however secretly; as though everything about ourselves could be connected if only we had the wherewithal. Whether or not it is a grain of madness that provides us with our style and character, this assembling of our selves through what we notice, through what, as we say, attracts our attention – both consciously and unconsciously – and just how surely we limit the repertoire of what we do notice, smacks of addiction ('we get hooked'); and of a fundamental unknowingness about how we make ourselves up. As though what we call our identity, which is to do with what we notice, is a kind of fixation, an obsession with certain ideas about ourselves. What we might call our taste, or more simply our preferences, becomes a type of fate, or a preferred picture of ourselves (which 'saves us or drives us to our doom'). The

famous surrealist motto, 'Tell me what you are haunted by and I will tell you who you are,' all too easily translates into 'Tell me what you are interested in and I will tell you who you are.'

There is an assumption in psychoanalysis, as in the wider culture, that we are by nature interested creatures, driven to pay attention (at least once we have learned what it means to pay). That growing-up, ideally, means discovering one's interests; initially our apparently innate interest in our own survival, and our imaginative elaboration of this; and then, depending on our affluence and our inventiveness, our following of our curiosity as far as we are able. We may think of our attention as inspired by need, and formed by nurture (attention as another word for appetite). Babies and young children are, as we know, very intent on what they want, very intolerant of frustration, and very troubled by being bored, by losing interest in things. So we are prone, as adults, if we are lucky enough, to take our interests for granted, rather than be unduly bothered by them. Only when they become in some way disturbing do we become interested in our interest ('interest' then being a word for phobia, or obsession, or perversion, or addiction, or ideology, or hobby, or discipline). Our so-called symptoms narrow our minds by forcing our attention; and reveal, by the same token, just how much it is forced attention that we suffer from (so-called sexual perversions confine our interest in sex; anxiety and depression over-focus our attention; and

this may be part of their function). It is, though, one of our projects to circumscribe the range and intensity of our curiosity; as though our capacity for interest was itself threatening, by being so potentially promiscuous, or unbounded, or unpredictable. As though we always have too much or too little appetite, too much or too little danger. Our interest in anything or anyone threatens to become excessive, or not excessive enough.

Whatever or whoever it is that does interest us, like the appetites that prompt our interest, effectively organises our lives for us; we follow, and/or avoid following, our attention. Our interests are what we do, who we listen to, where we go. Psychoanalysis re-describes interest and attention as sexual desire, and takes this to be the informing force and purpose of our lives; and clearly sexuality can be used, if only by analogy, as a way of seeing how interest and attention might work (any presumed life force, or essence, is always an explanation of attention and interest). So when one of the early psychoanalysts, Ernest Jones, introduced the Greek term 'aphinisis' (disappearance) into psychoanalysis, he was addressing one of our fundamental terrors: the 'primal anxiety' of having no interest, 'losing the capacity or opportunity for obtaining erotic gratification', loss of desire as loss of life; a predicament, in other words, in which satisfaction is impossible: in which nothing is of interest, nothing engages us, and we are not drawn to anyone (it is perhaps akin to the nineteenth-century fear of the sun going out). Contrasting it with what he calls 'the

artificial aphinisis of inhibition', real aphinisis is the 'total extinction' of 'sexual capacity and enjoyment as a whole'. Desire might feel or have been made to feel so unbearably conflictual that it has to be abolished; a person is then left living in a world in which there are, to all intents and purposes, no objects of desire. What can we do with ourselves when, or if, nothing is of interest? And what would we have to have done, or what would have had to happen to us, for our interest in life to disappear?

We need to wonder, then, why we would ever want to accuse anyone of being attention-seeking. Attention-seeking is one of the best things we do, even when we have the worst ways of doing it. In its familiar sense, it is a way of wanting something without always knowing what that is. And it is, by the same token, a form of sociability, an appeal to others to help us with our wanting. Whether it is a cover story for the straightforwardness of desire, or a performance of the perplexity of demand, we seek attention without quite understanding what the attention is that we seek, and what it is in ourselves we need attending to. It is out of this complexity that people get together, to find out what is possible (sociability depends on attention-seeking). Part of the apparent relief of acquiring language is that it seems, occasionally, to clarify the obscure exchanges we make our lives out of.

We are attention-seeking, in both senses – throughout our lives, and not only as children – partly, as I say, because it is not always clear what we are seeking

attention for, and what we want to pay attention to: what in ourselves, and outside ourselves, needs attending to, and what we hope will be the consequences of securing the attention we seek. Because attention-seeking is not generally prized, it has to be disguised as something else – as art, say, or manners, or prayer, or success – so a lot of our so-called creativity involves us in finding acceptable ways of finding and attracting the attention we desire. This attention may misfire, may not get us the lives we want, but attention-seeking is where we start, and what we start with. What Lee Edelman calls, with deliberate tastelessness, ‘the fascist face of the baby’ is drawing our attention to our earliest gifts and talents for getting people to notice – or rather, to reveal – what we need; the attention we have to give to being paid attention, and the attention we have to give to what is worth paying attention to.

Need requires attention, and everything relies, initially, upon the kind of attention that meets our needs; and then on the kind of attention we can give to our needs and wants as we grow up (needs are constituted by the ways in which they are responded to). Everything follows on from how and where we pay our attention; both the attention that is demanded of us, and the attention we give without intending to, without noticing. The bringing-up and educating of children, whatever their culture or class, initiates them into regimes of attention; it tells them, in no uncertain terms,

what is worthy of their attention, and how it should be paid, as well as what kind of attention they should be wanting, and how they should go about getting it (neither distraction nor showing off is taught in schools). All religions, moralities, arts, sciences, politics and therapies organise and promote certain kinds of attention; in their different ways they tell us where to look and who to listen to; they tell us what about ourselves we should value and be valued for: what about ourselves we should take an interest in, and what we should take rather less interest in than we do.

And yet, of course, no one can actually predict the consequences of the attention they pay and are paid. As education and propaganda and advertising and sexuality continually reveal, people’s attention can be exploited and manipulated and directed, but it can’t be ultimately controlled. We never quite know what people will make of what they are given; or how their minds may drift while they are paying attention. These essays, then, are about this curious and revealing phrase, ‘paying attention’; not quite a cost-benefit analysis, but to do with investments and risks, and questions about currency and exchange rates. By attention, I mean simply how we find and involve ourselves with what interests us, what encourages and what inhibits us in following our curiosity, and what effect our being interested may have on ourselves and other people. As these essays want to suggest, it is worth noticing both what provokes our

attention and what, like shame, inhibits it. So they are also about what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze calls our 'capacity to be affected'.

We have to back our interests to find out what they are; and ideally our earliest environments should allow for and encourage certain of our interests – what John Stuart Mill called 'experiments in living' – rather than simply or solely determining what they should be (morality not born of experimentation can only be dogma). Attention and interest are always themselves experimental, even when – or perhaps particularly when – we are unaware of the risks being taken; curiosity never comes with a guarantee. Clearly, to prefer safety to curiosity, or to experience them as too much at odds with each other, is to limit the possibilities of experience, as is a consistent or too certain knowing of what one is interested in (it is always worth wondering what our interests are a way of not being interested in). Having been, at first and of necessity, consistently interested in and attentive to our parents, it is always an extraordinary moment in a child's life when she begins to realise that there are pleasures outside the family, that her parents' words are not the only words in the world (one of the ways we look after our parents is by believing what they say). One of the child's fundamental questions is: what is he allowed to be interested in outside the family? The history of our attention, in other words, is one of the stories of our lives.

II

Language only ever shows you how things would look if language was used.

Miles Hollingworth, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*

There is, of course, a great deal of concern currently about the effect of modern technologies on attention, and particularly the attention spans of the young (attention spans, to some people's relief, unlike qualities of attention, can be measured). In one of many clearly heartfelt contemporary jeremiads, the philosopher Talbot Brewer writes in a striking recent essay, appropriately entitled 'What Good are the Humanities?':

Our attentional environment has not equipped students with the traits required for appreciative engagement with literature or art or philosophy; the habits of devoted attention and of patience and generosity in interpretation; the openness to finding camaraderie and illumination from others in the more treacherous