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Modes of Attention

If attention is the most profound link we have to the world, the chemistry that glues us to the processes that occur regardless of our presence within them, humans have developed various modes of attention to address the many circumstances of their lives. There are qualitative differences to the kinds of attention we pay to things, but even if we put aside the question of full or partial attention, there are modes of attention that are all equally full and yet quite different in the nature of their texture. Each kind of attention carries with it a distinct sense of our relationship to the world and thus has a unique character. Likewise, every culture organizes and thinks about these different forms in unique ways, and some of the modes of attention may be almost entirely culture dependent. Even more, within a given culture one can imagine various ways of construing the modes of attention. Thus, the primary modes of our own culture might well be thought of as the subjective, the objective and the aesthetic. But the kinds of attention can also just as easily be defined in terms of the apparatus to which they are attached,

even if we concede that our capabilities are not completely separable.

One mode of attention is required when we are prompted to consider something we perceive through our senses, another is called for when we are trying to reason through something, whereas still another is pertinent when we address the thick texture of human relationships, the irrational feelings that make up such an important part of our lives, or the contemplation of our prospects in the future. Each of these modes can be broken into others, for the kind of attention that hearing requires, for example, is different than that which vision calls on, or smell, or taste, or touch. The modes are related, yet they have different textures to them.

In contrast to the prevailing wisdom, I would argue that our first and most fundamental mode of attention is aesthetic in nature. If we think of attention as the confluence of our own stream of activity with the processes around us, we have done nothing more than assert that attention is initially aesthetic in nature. Our culture tends to emphasize the subjective and objective modes, the one minimizing or placing into the background the effects of the subject on the object, the other the object on the subject, but we are first and foremost part of a composite event, one that is not a bridge between the outer and inner worlds as we perceive them but rather the generator of our sense of outer and inner that comes from our attention to the way an event calls forth an action on our part. Even this language is not quite precise, for it is more accurate to say that an action we undertake is part of the ongoing events in the midst of which it takes place. It is both a response to the flows around us and a positive act within them that forever alters the pattern of the flows.

Aesthetic attention in its most immediate sense is not a way of perceiving the world beautifully or of beautifully perceiving; rather, it is a mode whose vectors play equally in both directions, generating our sense of outside and inside and yet demonstrating the artificiality of those concepts at the same time. If the world seems beautiful to us from within the aesthetic mode, that is because the dense links between us and the events around us are powerfully evident, suffi-

ciently so to remove from consideration our usual concern with self-interest. As we saw with Whitman's loafing and Ammons' walking, the aesthetic form of attention prompts us to be aware of an entirely different series of phenomena than our regular modes of attention, and what is perhaps most curious about the human species is that it is not more interested in this mode, at least in the West.

The aesthetic calls forth something from our position within it, insists on a response to the patterns it makes available to us, and we tend to experience this in a positive way. Whitman's loafing and Ammons' walking are "relaxing," providing positive effects through the manifestation of patterns that we cannot perceive when we construe ourselves as distinct entities in opposition to the world around us. This is why the aesthetic mode of attention is not so much a loosening of the ties of attention as it is a different form of them, why the aesthetic and inattention are not the same modes but rather the opposites that define our possibilities. Our attention is fully engaged when we are aesthetically aware of the world, but it is not engaged in a way that focuses on ourselves; hence, it brings with it some of the characteristics to be found in inattention, chiefly the feeling of relief that comes from not having to think about the self and its anxieties. Even if aesthetic attention seems unfocused or "looser" than our usual self-interested form of being, though, in fact it only focuses our attention in different ways, and the intensity of aesthetic modes, the way they fully occupy us, is more than testament to the fact that they are not just a release from the tensions of everyday life. If they provide relief, that is an adjunct to the form of attention they are rather than the central feature of the experience they offer us.

Aesthetic attention is a full absorption into whatever we are in the midst of, but not necessarily so full an occupation of our mind that we forget that we exist, though that too is possible. Aesthetic modes of awareness have their own range of intensity, and only the sublime moments remove our self-awareness completely. Unlike inattention, the aesthetic puts us at our ease by providing a form of perception that makes us aware of the rhythmical nature of the activities we take

part in and demonstrates how those rhythms are part of the larger patterns around us. It is relatively devoid of self-attention precisely to the extent that it shows us that our "self" is not an autonomous site fraught with the perils of any solitary location but rather a densely connected set of locations within flows, each of which attaches us to the world in a different way, each of which demonstrates that attachment in a different way. Of course, this mode of attention is available to us only when our surroundings do not threaten us, for we feel more vulnerable when we discern the many ways in which our activities are part of larger processes. Most humans, however, have found ways of regularly absorbing themselves into this mode of attention, and this mode makes life most worth living because it makes us feel most fully alive.

Aesthetic attention is an intense gathering of energies that manifests the ways in which the forces of the world are bound to sites within flows, and it calls forth great intensity from us as well. As a result, it is a demanding form of attention, albeit one that also provides us with positive feelings. Its intensity requires of us the kinds of things so seldom found in the modern world: alertness, a clear mind, a perspective on events that doesn't force them into rigid time frames or nag one with the need to accomplish this or that before one moves on to something else. And the intensity of the experience means that we need energy of our own that we are willing to "spend" on such a "fruitless" event. After all, aesthetic attention can only be immediately transformed into socioeconomic benefit by hucksters. It demands our full compliance, our full commitment of energy, and that is one of the reasons why it is harder and harder to find a place for it in everyday life.

To work through some of the lesser forms of aesthetic attention, we might think for a moment about the reasons why our society has tended to move from a participator's world to a spectator's world. We know that athletic activities are aesthetic forms of attention, and we recognize that at the therapeutic level they provide us with the kinds of things hardworking people need: relaxation, "escape" from one's concerns, toning of the body, and a nonharassed period in which we can deal within an artificial framework with something

we know to be unimportant in the overall scheme of things. Given these psychological and physiological benefits, one might think that we would all run to sporting activities and make them an integral part of our lives, as many people do. The contrast between the benefits of sporting and spectator activities is obvious, for even if a spectator isn't necessarily cultivating a form of inattention (though he may well be), he certainly is not achieving all the benefits to be found within the sport.

Why, then, would one choose to be a spectator rather than a participant? For some there is no choice. Physiology or some other personal factor precludes active participation. But for most of us sporting activity is available, yet it is always *easier* to be a spectator. If we don't receive the benefits from the event that the actual participants do, at least we are provided with a form of attention that removes our self from the center of focus, which is one of the primary goals of all humans. Inasmuch as it takes less energy to be a spectator than a participant, we are often willing to settle for the lesser benefits given the lighter demands on our resources. This is more than understandable, particularly in a world where people feel as harassed as they often do today. Even more, when one considers the obsessiveness with which some people pursue the aesthetic mode of attention available in sporting activities, one can see how far we often go to eliminate the aesthetic from sports. For such activities can end up being nothing more than an intense way of physiologically focusing on the self, and to the extent that they are construed in this way, they lose their aesthetic qualities and at least some of the benefits to be derived from giving oneself over to the artificial rules of the game.

The very fact that one speaks of the *benefits* of the aesthetic mode of activity found in sporting events demonstrates a potential problem of its own, for if the aesthetic provides "benefits," its presence in our lives in that way also demonstrates our relative inability to make the best use of them. That we must find utility in modes of attention whose characteristics include the gratuitous nature of their activities suggests our general inability to attend to the world in aes-

thetic ways. We run with music in our ears or lift weights with constant thoughts of how the development of those muscles will enhance our image of ourselves and hence our self-esteem; or we play tennis just to keep the cardiovascular system in working order, much as we would devote time to a car tune-up so that it would perform well. The emphasis on utility removes attention from the event itself, focusing on the self and not its network of relations within the event that an aesthetic mode of attention is. Even in these relatively common and available forms of aesthetic attention, we have found ways to take away from the aesthetic nature of the event and move it more toward a self-interested and self-aggrandizing activity.



When we think of attention, and when we consider the aesthetic mode in particular, one of its most mysterious aspects is the way we are aware of some things rather than others. Why do we pay attention to this and not that? How is it that we are inclined to see one thing in a scene whereas another individual focuses on something else? Of course, a good deal of our attention is occupied by things that force themselves on us, and there is no mystery in the way they prompt us. When someone screams at us, the relative difference in the quality of the noise forces us to pay attention. Any relatively extreme gesture within a context calls attention to itself and thus prompts us to deal with it. And when one includes the kinds of things to which we must attend as a full partner in the social world, it may seem that not much is left over for the mystery of attention. A student knows that he or she is supposed to attend to this subject matter at 9, say, and that discipline at 11, and then there are six other things to focus on in the afternoon. A worker knows that his or her job requires attention to the meeting at the beginning of the day, the workers whom he or she supervises the rest of the day, and the traffic both coming and going from the job. Again, these activities are prearranged and thus don't prompt us in any ingenious ways to be aware of them. Within these

events it is always the exceptional, that which stands out, that prompts our particular manifestations of attention during the day. The assembly line that has stopped, the computer that has gone haywire, the boss who won't let up in his criticism, these are the things that we spend a great deal of our attention on.

But what calls attention to itself when we are capable of allowing things to come to us rather than be forced upon us? Inasmuch as something always takes up our attention in one way or another, we tend not to reflect on the things that occupy it unless we don't want to contemplate them. An obsessive person with a bad mental pattern that keeps forcing him to think suicidal thoughts may well ask why these things keep coming back, may well do everything possible to run away from that which has called attention to itself. And someone with serious fantasies might deliberately conjure up things within his attention to please himself. But most of us still spend most of our time attending to what our principles of selection have brought to the foreground of our consciousness.

In some respects, attention is filled with what comes from the straightforward workings of the nervous system. On awakening this morning, I found the birds full of song, one cardinal in particular, and it was not the distinctive nature of my nervous system that made me focus on the music of the birds but rather the relative excessiveness of their noise on a quiet morning. To be sure, a good many people might not have heard those birds when they woke up, either because they were immediately drawn into their own obsessions or because they had trouble overcoming their drowsiness. And inasmuch as we all learn to ignore a great many things in life, it would certainly be possible for one to fail to note the birds. Nevertheless, aside from the fact that the sounds of the birds in the morning provide one of my favorite moments in the day, many other people would have also heard their voices because they stood out from the quiet. There is nothing mysterious about this kind of attention, particularly when we know that it is in any specie's interest to be aware of the exceptional in the environment: what stands out might well

also be that which does one in if one fails to note its presence. Our highly versatile selective apparatuses always do much of our job for us, prompting us to pay attention to those things in the environment that are new or different in order to increase the likelihood that we shall continue to be able to note things.

That our nervous systems are capable of performing such miracles without any thought on our part is an astonishing feat, particularly when one considers the number of things at any given moment one could attend to. And it is even more astonishing when one realizes that these nervous systems also have histories and are repositories of memory as well. If over time we determine that the sounds of squirrels in the trees are not signs of danger, our nervous system notes that fact and stops heeding those sounds with the same degree of alarm. If we have figured out after five months with our new baby that *this* particular cry means nothing more than the baby is hungry, whereas that one signifies a need for attention, whereas still another is a genuine cry of distress, our nervous system calibrates its responses accordingly, prompting us to various levels of attention in accord with what sound is coming from the baby. A person unfamiliar with the history of our child would not be able to discern the differences in these cries, and once the period of regular crying has abated in our baby's life, we too will quickly lose the nuances of the various cries, with perhaps only the cry of distress lingering in our memories.

That our nervous systems are feedback mechanisms, that they have histories out of which they work and to which they regularly respond, makes our attention incredibly adaptive, just as it allows us to prompt them to attend to things they might otherwise ignore. We can make a mental note of the relative importance of a particular sound, for example, and a focused instruction to ourselves will give that sound higher priority in the overall scheme of things, thus altering the history of our nervous system's response to sounds in the environment. These feedback loops are most important in the development of our modes of attention, for they allow us a larger and larger grasp of the terrain to which we should

attend even as they give us a degree of control over the involuntary aspects of our nervous systems, which in some respects clearly have lives of their own and would go on noting things without any prompting from us.

The history of our attention and our nervous system also accounts for habit, for the fact that over time the world becomes so familiar to us that we stop being aware of a great many things that were once of major interest to us. A child is first highly fascinated by the moon and may keep its interest in such a phenomenon for quite a while, just as it may spur renewed interest in the moon on the part of its parents. But life is full of events and sensory impressions, and over time the moon recedes into the distance once again, to be noted in the future only when it provides a particularly striking display for one reason or another. The film that gathers over our lenses after we have seen things dozens or hundreds of times is also a necessary part of our attention, but not always a good one. We know that it is far too easy to lose interest in some of the most compelling features of the world because we have experienced them too often. The moon truly is something worth seeing, but it is most difficult to see it freshly every night it is visible. So a part of the history of our nervous system should be that we note our tendency to lose attentiveness to some of the most beautiful and compelling features of the world. Our feedback loops need to have built into them our awareness of our *natural* tendency to lose interest over time in anything that doesn't stand out for one reason or another. Only such a manifestation of attentiveness can keep the world looking as beautiful as it is.

When habit has dulled the importance of a great many things that were once particularly striking to us, and when experience has suggested how many other things are not the potential threats we might have thought, we are left with those things that still stand out because of their newness and those things with which we have developed a historical relationship that will prompt an interest in us over a long period of time. Those motifs of attention provide us with long-term patterns of activity and represent the particular responses of our individual location to the possibilities of the

world: they are the activities that engender the modes of attention that are most appropriate for who we are. And the modes of attention that are most distinctively our own—even if others share the same interests to varying degrees—are almost invariably aesthetic in nature. They are the modes that tease us out of thought, and yet precisely because they do, they allow us to discern the patterns of thought that link us to the flows around us. Human beings are constituted to prefer aesthetic modes of attention, and they seek them out throughout life. Those aesthetic modes of attention that appeal to an individual depend on his or her specific chemistry and the functions that are available for those modes within a given culture, but regardless of the specifics, humans seek out aesthetic modes to the extent that they are available and to the degree that they can they develop historical relationships with these modes of attention that provide the most important continuities within their forms of attention throughout life.

In discussing the ways in which humans have a propensity for the aesthetic mode of attention, we need to distinguish this mode from other types. It would be possible to argue, for example, that those who exist in a drug culture such as ours tend to seek out the aesthetic mode of attention with one drug or another. Many drugs share with an aesthetic mode of attention the relative absence of self-awareness, and they are capable of providing experiences that are as intensely aesthetic as any sublime moment on Mt. Snowdon might be. So it is not that drugs are incapable of attachment to aesthetic modes of attention; they clearly are. It is just that most often they are not used for those purposes. That most cultures are drug cultures in one way or another may or may not be true. The only question is whether the drug use within the culture is geared predominantly toward forms of oblivion or forms of attention. The danger of drugs is that they might well encourage intense modes of attention in the beginning but tend over time to lead to oblivion and inattention instead.

At present we lack sufficient knowledge about the nature of mind-altering drugs to determine whether they are a stan-

andard aesthetic form of attention in some cultures—they surely are not in our own—but they do occupy the space within a human life that aesthetic attention ordinarily would. In the absence of any viable forms of the beautiful, the site of aesthetic awareness is overtaken by its opposite, the oblivion that eliminates self-awareness through inattention rather than full absorption into an experience. If there is nothing available aesthetically to attend to, an individual becomes overly occupied by the repetitions of the self or the banality of the everyday world and thus seeks out something that would be different. At this point, the nature of the difference is less important than that it is indeed a difference. In this respect drug cultures would be social systems that were incapable of providing for their constituents a sufficient variety of events to graft onto aesthetic modes of attention to keep them from falling back regularly on the repetitions of the self. And in the absence of such activities, drugs are one of the few resorts that possess at least some of the constituent features of aesthetic attention.

The variety of human types and the many possibilities to be found in every one of us suggests the need for a good many forms of aesthetic activity, and most cultures provide such sites. In our own, aesthetic attention is directed to the various arts of music and painting and language and dance; to various sporting activities, from sailing to basketball to at least some manifestations of the fitness movement; and to various other activities that are designed to encourage our aesthetic attention, from drives in the mountains to dialogue with others. Within each of these forms there are possibilities that appeal to various constituencies, something most apparent these days in music, which ranges from classical to rock to jazz to country. Likewise, with sporting activities one can rely on the old standards like baseball and track-and-field or move into newly prominent ones like soccer. In our own society, there would seem to be a more than sufficient supply of contexts for aesthetic attention to take place, yet we still have a drug culture.

For some reason, the large variety of sites of aesthetic attention is not sufficient to occupy the minds of the citizens

of the country. One could argue that this is a result of changes of interest, suggesting that the older forms of aesthetic attention no longer appeal to sufficient numbers of humans in a world that has become ever more complex and frenetic. Or one could argue that the frenetic nature of the current world has prompted individuals to separate the desire for an absence of self-awareness from aesthetic attention and to concentrate on that alone. Or one could come up with some other proposition about the difficulties of achieving aesthetic attention in the modern world. But when one looks at the various possibilities available to most of us, one cannot help but think that the problem resides elsewhere. It is *not* that we don't provide sites for aesthetic attention in the world. There are many, and most of them are available without great cost or even major effort. If in spite of all these possibilities we have a drug culture that is committed to inattention, the only conceivable reasons for this would be that the species itself has a propensity to value inattention over *any* mode of attention or that a culture must provide more for its members than sites for aesthetic attention: it must also provide an ethos that demonstrates the value of these events in and of themselves. Apparently our society fails to do that in any meaningful way.

We can, for example, return to Longinus's remarks about the half-heartedness that dominates so many individuals' lives and their desire for praise and pleasure rather than what Longinus calls "those solid benefits which are a worthy object of our own efforts and the respect of others." We shall assume for the purposes of argument that Longinus didn't go into greater detail about the solid benefits that are the worthy object of our attention because he believed they were obvious, but if they were, how come they remain so sparsely in evidence in his time and in ours? To take a less grand example, we could refer to the endless commencement speeches that are given every spring across the land, most of which seem to be devoted to the proposition that the graduates should not be overly preoccupied by material concerns in the future but should rather devote themselves to the greater good of society. What that greater good might be is contingent on the speaker

and the year of the speech, but every year thousands of graduates hear that they should not be consumed by money and pleasure but should instead strive for the solid benefits of the good life.

It may well be that this is precisely the kind of message one should urge upon graduates, but it also suggests that, as in Longinus's time, society encourages the pursuit of material goods and personal pleasures rather than solid benefits. Why, then, do people continue to insist on those solid benefits that are often so vaguely articulated to begin with? Why maintain that the better life is one that does things for others as well as for oneself? Or, for that matter, why assert that a human life is better to the extent that it is regularly engaged in significant aesthetic activities? Why endlessly denounce the drug culture we have when drugs seem to be more a part of our society than those solid benefits that might take one away from drugs? Commencement speakers are not required to answer these questions, and even Longinus didn't feel compelled to provide an explanation for the lack of committed attention in his own day. But if one provides the sites for aesthetic attention and for the rich and worthy life, and if those possibilities remain unrealized in far too many lives, then one has to look elsewhere for explanations for people's behavior.



If we continue to assume for the moment that humans have a propensity and a need for aesthetic attention and yet tend to live in societies that urge on them greater and greater *inattention*—in spite of the great variety of aesthetic forms available—we must reconsider the relationship between the aesthetic forms and the ways of life we have created. In this reconsideration we must remember that aesthetic modes of attention are not simply the locus of pleasurable responses to the harmonious nature of things or cognitive states in which we perceive certain rhythms or patterns otherwise unavailable to us; they are the origin of the ethical in the human world as well. It is not that the pleasures of the aesthetic are as gratuitous as we might think, for if they are useless in some

respects, they are also the site for our developing sense of what is right and proper in the world. We might recall that Longinus's treatise on the sublime asserts that the "transport" of the sublime is based not only on "skill in invention" and the decorous ordering of words into rhetorical flourishes but more fundamentally on "the power of forming great conceptions" and "vehement and inspired passion."¹ For Longinus these were the two elements of the sublime that could not be learned but rather were innate. One could practice the craft of writing and improve one's skills in that domain, but either one had the power of forming great conceptions and possessed vehement and inspired passion or one did not.

The power of forming great conceptions and inspired and vehement passion are naturally related, but what they might have to do with the development of the ethical frameworks of our lives is another question, one that Longinus presupposes rather than demonstrates, prompting us to consider in greater depth what he means by the power of forming great conceptions and by relating that gift to vehement and inspired passion as well. Great conceptions for Longinus are those ideas that form the basis of our ethical vision of things: they are great because they engender the good in our lives, just as the good requires conceptualizing in order to be fully formed. One must have a sufficiently capacious mind to be able to frame the nature of what is in its proper light, but if one can do that, great conceptions are the result, and a vision of the good inevitably derives from such a viewpoint. The sublime is not an artificial perception of the world but rather the fullest conception of it of which we are possible, the most intense and comprehensive measure of our relationship to the flows of life, and it is dependent both on our ability to conceive the words that will frame a sublime experience and on the conceptual pattern that will undergird the most powerful of human perceptions. Subjective experience embraces part of the world, objective experience reflects another part, but sublime experience bridges the difference between these two modes of attention and embraces them as well.

Great conceptions are tied to "vehement and inspired passion" for several pertinent reasons. First, it is possible to

construe great conceptions as a reflection of the objective aspects of the sublime experience, or at least those aspects of sublime attention that are construed objectively from other modes of attention. In this way the vehement and inspired passion manifests that which we call the subjective, those elements of the sublime mode that bring our affective capabilities most pertinently into relation with the concepts through which their surges and intensities are modulated. Second, only the most intense of human contexts is capable of sufficiently expanding our awareness of the patterns and flows of life to allow us a broad enough vision to create great conceptions in the first place. The pliability of our minds and the degree to which they are capable of attending to what is are contingent on a host of psychophysiological factors, and we are not always sufficiently engaged to be able to perceive the world in the broadest, most aesthetic of ways. In our own day we might suggest that Longinus's vehement and inspired passion is partially a function of the heightened nervous system activity on which all sublime experiences are based.

The inspired affects that are an integral part of aesthetic attention, though, are not simply the result of increased nervous system activity. They are indeed inspired, which is to say among other things that the passion is a *response* to the context of the individual as much as it is a productive act within it, though it is both at the same time. Whatever inspires these affects remains beyond the individual's control. The person must be capable of great conceptions and inspired passion, but the inspiration is not a product of the individual's mind in isolation but is rather a function of the event itself, of which the person is always only a part. So at the center of Longinus's view of aesthetic attention we find the most comprehensive of human events, the one in which we attend completely to what is and our place within it; the one that brings to bear the fullest expression of our conceptualizing abilities and the most intense of human affects; the one, in short, that provides us with the mode of attention that allows us to create forms that are viable responses to the world about us and as a result provides us with patterns through which to enhance our principles of selection.

Another useful way of getting at the link between individual and event, conception and affect, is to look briefly at Raymond Prier's commentary on the moments of wonder in Homer's *Odyssey*. In concentrating on these moments, Prier makes us think of the sublime mode of attention in an interesting way by trying to recreate the early-Greek sense of rapt attention for us: "The common point of focus of the wonder of gods and men is clearly, then, an 'amazing deed.' It is the *ergon* toward which their 'lines' of sight-wonder are directed and the purveyor or point of meaning in that place between the two, that is, in the phenomenological intermediation between 'this' and the 'other.'"² If the aesthetic mode of perception is to be distinguished significantly from our other modes, Prier describes the reason why. Properly construed, aesthetic attention is the focal point of an event that directs our "'lines' of sight-wonder" to a place "between" the "this" and the "other." In other words, an aesthetic event is one in which our attention measures the relations between the this and the other through the lines of sight that gauge the mutual interaction of the two. This is why aesthetic attention is always both responsive and productive, why it produces the real into which we move even as it is a response to the real that calls our attention to it. It could not be just one or the other, for if it were we would be either passive victims of our fates or else godlike creatures who could determine the kind of world we wanted to live in. Certain subjective modes of attention can lead us to posit a kind of omnipotence to our conceptions and affects, and some modes of objective attention can lead us to think of the world in entirely deterministic terms, but the aesthetic mode is capable of manifesting the responsive-productive form of attending to the world that is a result of that which prompts us to measure the relations of the fields of which we are a part.

Prier gets at the productive-responsive effects of aesthetic attention through his discussion of the phenomenological intermediation between this and other, and the importance of his terms is to be located both in *intermediation* and in the use of the word *this* for the site of the individual. The realm of intermediation does indeed mediate between two things, but

in so doing it also produces both of those things in the process. The measure that gauges the relations between this and other constitutes both of them as well. More significantly, it does *not* constitute a *self* but a *this*, a site whose existence has value to the extent that it marks a relation to an other, not an autonomous location that constitutes an individual as a discrete entity. We take the *this* of an intermediating experience and transform it into a self, or a part of a self, and we tend in turn to lose sight of the *this*'s constituting moment as part of a relation to the other, but at the point of origin we are not selves but simply *this*'s that are also a measure of the other.

In Prier's discussion, the *this* and the other are brought together through the lines of sight-wonder because of an amazing event. Homer, in this sense, uses the gods to mark out those moments of great conception and vehement passion that frame the individual's life in the future. When Telemachus is confronted by the wonder of Athena, he has what we would call in our own debased coinage a *formative experience*. The wonder that this event calls forth truly does engender a different "this," one whose lines of sight are focused in new ways, one whose vision is enlarged to take in a greater good and to engender plans that will effect particular changes in the relationship of that *this* to the others around it. Our own tendency would be to say that Telemachus finally decides that he is going to make something of himself, and Homer uses the device of the gods to manifest that change in viewpoint to us. Telemachus gets to grips with his fate and chooses to make his path in the world, or so we would think. But the wonder of the event and its aesthetic formulation suggest otherwise: Telemachus has made no self-aware choices here but has rather been called to a different vision of himself by a context that has undermined his current vision of the "this" he is. The suitors and his own maturation have created a situation in which the *this* he thought he was no longer sufficiently expresses his relationship to the others in his midst, and so the event itself brings forth the vehement and inspired passion that prompts him to form the great conceptions that will lead to his increased resolve to seek out the fate of Odysseus.

Aesthetic attention, then, has as its chief marker the fact that it is neither here nor there, neither this nor that. The this that we are in an aesthetic mode of attention is not something that is worth calling attention to, nor is the other to which it is linked. If in the other modes of attention the this and the other are the only things we attend to, in aesthetic attention we are prompted to think of the world in terms of events that link and gauge the relations between various sites, one of which is always the this that we are, the other of which is always construed in terms of the site that we are. For it is important to remember what both Longinus and Prier keep in mind: aesthetic attention is not a mode in which the this disappears; we are not dissolved so thoroughly into the event that we no longer are. Aesthetic attention depends on our awareness of our thisness, an awareness that differs considerably from our normal self-conscious modes, but one that still marks both us and our awareness of ourselves in important ways.

It stands to reason that we are not wholly absorbed into an aesthetic event, for the aesthetic is a mode of *attention*, and as a mode of attention it would require an awareness that included ourselves in some way. What differs in aesthetic attention is not the presence or absence of our awareness of self so much as the nature of that awareness. As a "this" rather than a "self," we recognize the degree to which the event depends on the site from which it is measured, and from our own perspective aesthetic attention can always be gauged only from the site that we are. But again, the site that we are within an aesthetic event is significant to the degree that it is a measure of the other and the parameters of the field itself. We take on no value outside of that measure and cannot create a context in which the this of any particular aesthetic moment transcends the situation out of which it came in the first place. Prier's "this" forces us to recognize how thoroughly all aesthetic relations are a function of their context, just as its neutral expression of what we are in such a situation strips us of the self-aggrandizing significance that we would like to attach to our function in the context.

The "this" takes its value from the other that is mea-

sured out in the moment of aesthetic attention as well, and our selves are the composite vision of our locations that we get from the many interchanges we have with the various fields of which we are a part. And our particular this in every context does indeed have a specific value in relation to the rest of the activity in the field: we change the character of the relations in a field as a result of our presence within it and thus affect the values that play out from it. If the "other" of an aesthetic event is a human or a group of humans, we can readily see how we affect the value of what is produced because we know that collective human events are a function of all the humans involved, not just the ones who speak the loudest or are most demonstrative in other ways. Even silence from a this in a collective event affects the disposition of the collectivity in one way or another and thus contributes to the overall character of what comes from the event. And in larger contexts we are aware of how the this that we are affects the non-human world as well, most obviously when it comes to our negative effects like air pollution. Of course, these are collective manifestations of the effects of our this and not singular expressions, but our this does indeed have an effect on all the events of which it is a part, and it thus alters the character of everything with which it comes in contact over the course of its lifetime.

Most fundamentally put, we could say that the very fact that our this has existed has forever altered the nature of the universe. Even if we have gone through our lives completely oblivious of any effects we might have had on anything, our existence has changed the character of the world. It will forever after be different than it would have been if our particular site had not appeared. The other way of phrasing the matter is best expressed by Whitman, who was quite willing to assert that he was "an acme of things accomplished, and . . . an encloser of things to be."³ Our this at any given moment represents the furthest extension of the universe from the particular site that we are, and thus we are indeed always at every moment an acme of things accomplished, just as the this that we are becomes an encloser of things to be, for our this becomes completely woven into the fabric of the universe,

regardless of our desire for it to be so or our knowledge of its furthest extensions into the future. Our importance in the world, then, is not a function of a self at all, except within the narrow compass of the human community. Outside of it, and even in many ways within it, our this's significance derives from the site we are through which things are measured and affected, nothing more or less.

Nevertheless, we need to remember the implications of Longinus's remarks about the creators of sublime human events. Longinus explains that these individuals require the power to form great conceptions and vehement and inspired passion, and he asserts that these are innate features of the human that cannot be acquired through learning. All of us are sites within contexts that affect the values of the fields of which we are a part, but not all sites affect things in the same way or to the same degree. Regardless of whether the powers of aesthetic attention are innate or learned, the fact remains that in any given moment in any given context, some sites are more instrumental in the development of the values of the field. Longinus accounts for this difference by suggesting that some people are capable of sublime expression and others are not, and he perhaps understands too little the contextual nature of all sublime moments, but he does recognize that even if the values of a field are distributed throughout, still the various sites within the field play differing roles when it comes to effecting changes in the direction of the flows.

The power to form great conceptions and vehement and inspired passion provide a larger context through which to construe things, one that manifests the relationship between the this and the other, and thus one who is capable of discerning the lines of sight-wonder that establish the relation between this and other is the one who gives more shape to the events in the field. Of course, not all fields are greatly susceptible to human actions, so in many cases the value-determining apparatus has less to do with humans than with other forces in the world. Likewise, even within fields that humans have some control over there are limited functions they occupy and limited changes they can therefore effect. But whatever the relative degree of effectiveness is, those humans