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Introduction

DISTRACTION AND THE DISCIPLINES OF ATTENTION

The piece that secures an axe's metal head to its wooden handle is called the wedge. The handle, passing through the head, splits open at the top, and when the wedge is driven down into the seam, like a *V* sinking into a *Y*, it pushes the sides of the handle out against the metal cylinder, the eye, to fix the bond. If the wedge rots or wears thin, the handle will narrow, and the head will rattle, coming loose. If you are not paying attention to your work, the head will fly completely off—and this is what happened, one day toward the end of March 1845, to the borrowed axe that Henry David Thoreau was using to cut white pines for timber as he built his house by Walden Pond.¹

Repairing the tool took skill and patience. Thoreau had to fashion a new wedge from fresh wood, then fit his pieces together again. Soaking the wedge in water would expand it, slowly tightening the bond between the handle and the axe-head. Thoreau was waiting, killing time, when something unexpected caught his eye. A little snake went slithering down Walden's bank. Thoreau watched it slip into the cold water and settle on the sandy bottom, where it stayed for a long time, perfectly still.

So early in spring, Thoreau thought, the snake must have been just waking up from hibernation. Here is how he described the

episode in *Walden* (1854): “One day, when my axe had come off and I had cut a green hickory for a wedge, driving it with a stone, and had placed the whole to soak in a pond hole in order to swell the wood, I saw a striped snake run into the water, and he lay on the bottom, apparently without inconvenience, as long as I staid there, or more than a quarter of an hour; perhaps because he had not yet fairly come out of the torpid state.”²

In the snake’s unresponsiveness, its lingering torpor in a thawing season, Thoreau looked for meaning. “It appeared to me,” he recalled, “that for a like reason men remain in their present low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life.”³ The people of the nineteenth century, like winter snakes, lay low, withdrawn into themselves. They did not feel the influence of the enlivening spring. Their minds were somewhere else.

What was wrong with them, exactly? A few of Thoreau’s ideas—the notions of the “torpid state” and the “primitive condition”—came from natural history. Other images—the serpent, the tree, the fallen waiting for their resurrection—he adapted from the Bible. Thoreau was putting pieces together, assembling usable components from his culture. He was combining scientific concepts and Christian symbols to diagnose a state of mind.⁴

In *Walden* and in several other works, Thoreau kept developing his thinking about this low condition. The trouble, as he came to understand it, had little to do with “primitive” ways. In Thoreau’s eyes, modern civilization itself did harm to nature, human and nonhuman. People were not really stuck in the past; they were lost in the present, suffering from the effects of new economic and social forces. And while Thoreau was enough of a middle-class Protestant to believe in the virtues of thrift and clean living, what he meant by “the torpid state” was not old-fashioned laziness. Bodies at rest were inoffensive. The sickening thing was the mindless, exhausting, machine-like activity of modern work and entertainment. It was making people numb instead of calm.

“The world is a place of business,” Thoreau observed sorrowfully in “Life without Principle” (1863), an essay about how much is lost when human life is reduced to an endless cycle of earning and spending dollars. He went on: “What an infinite bustle! I am awakened almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath.”⁵ Even the fish in Walden’s depths, Thoreau noticed, felt the “rumbling” of the passing cars.⁶ Leaving nothing untouched, the modern economy seemed to be invading every private sanctuary—even the cabin, even the mind. Thoreau thought that there was something obscene about all this industry and commerce, howling in the dark.

A word for the misery was *distraction*. “Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things,” Thoreau wrote in what has become one of *Walden’s* most commonly quoted lines.⁷ He was talking about how the “infinite bustle” of modern life damages our capacities for care and wonder. The economy observed no sabbath. In the workplace, it demanded constant labor under someone else’s supervising eyes. In the marketplace, it displayed an endless spectacle of trivial things. The more life accelerated, the more attention was debased.

Thoreau was speaking from experience. When he examined his personal habits, he found himself messed up, like everybody else. He knew he had been careless with a borrowed axe, and the snake he saw in the water represented, among other things, his own shame. It is unpleasant, as a reader, to feel yourself called out and scolded by Thoreau. But it is no less awkward to witness the ordeal of his self-reproach. “I believe that the mind can be permanently profaned by attending to trivial things,” he writes. The line is both a creed and a confession.

Thoreau devoted much of his life’s work to undoing the damage. For generations of readers, he has represented an American Romantic in rebellion against the soul-killing compulsions of market capitalism and, even more, a visionary in matters of attention. In *Writing Nature* (1985), the critic Sharon Cameron described

him “advocating constancy of attention.” A more recent academic study praises Thoreau’s work as “courageous in its willingness to attend to nature without a defined project, to pursue an investigation without yet knowing its end.” Another scholar argues that “cultivating habits of attention” is the first aim of Thoreau’s work, an ambition that might inspire social justice movements to this day. In a different sector, software engineers have launched a *Walden* video game whose users can move a virtual Thoreau around the woods, playing at living deliberately.⁸

Naturally, Thoreau’s legacy has its critics. Among skeptics, his name often serves as shorthand for a flawed ideological fantasy at the heart of American culture: a white man’s quest for personal freedom and moral purity in the unspoiled wilderness. Some scholars, notably the political theorist Hannah Arendt, argue that Thoreau’s obsession with clearing his own conscience made him unfit for the collective, compromising work that real political change demands. Some claim that Thoreau promoted an ideal of self-reliance while refusing to acknowledge his dependence on other people’s labor, or that he misrepresented the Walden Woods as pristine nature while ignoring the indigenous, enslaved, and marginalized people who inhabited the land before and after he did. Thoreau can be caricatured as a narcissist, obsessed with his own reflection in the pond. The axe that he used to represent the problem of his own distraction was also a weapon of imperial conquest and settlement.⁹

Many of these criticisms have less to do with the realities of Thoreau’s life and work than with his popular legend as a solitary voice in the forest. In fact, Thoreau did not ignore slavery or the violence of empire; he went to jail protesting his government’s participation in them. His idea in moving to Walden was not to extricate himself entirely from social ties; it was only to reorient his life so that the woods, rather than the town, centered his spiritual map. He never pretended to be entirely on his own. Around the ponds, Thoreau got to spend time with a motley community of outsiders and nonconformists, people living beyond the

confines of Concord's white, middle-class, Protestant mainstream. He also found himself communing with plants and beasts.

There are some good reasons to read *Walden* with a measure of ambivalence. Thoreau could not entirely break his culture's habit of recasting large-scale social and political problems as personal failings, best corrected by stringent moral rehabilitation. In ways I will explore throughout this book, Thoreau's program of self-correction mirrored the discipline that was forcibly imposed in the American prisons and reformatories of his time. Whether you think these paradoxes make Thoreau's work intriguing or just irritating, however, they are not peculiar to his thought alone, and they have never really been resolved. When Thoreau described the proliferating distractions of an industrializing market economy—and when he called for a bracing self-discipline to reawaken the powers of attention—he was joining the company of many others, then and now.

"Attention," the Massachusetts-based activist and novelist Lydia Maria Child announced in the first issue of a new children's magazine in 1826, "is the grand key to all knowledge, to all perfection, in whatsoever appertains to the mind." By learning better habits of attention, Child advised, impressionable minds could be improved, and wayward souls brought back into the fold. Two decades before Thoreau borrowed a friend's axe and went off to Walden, the concept of distraction was already gaining currency as a way to explain modernity's bad effects, and attention promised a psychological and moral solution to large-scale social problems.¹⁰

The modern cityscape was "busy and splendid," a New England minister preached on Thanksgiving Day, but its "unnatural wants" and "fictitious pleasures" could "completely engross the attention," with corrosive effects. It was better to settle in the country, where Christians could devote their full attention to God. In 1841, the young Connecticut poet Ann Plato studied these words and incorporated them into her own essay about the virtues of agrarian life. By doing so, she demonstrated her faithfulness not only to God but also to a Christian nation. After publishing her book of poems and

essays as a teenager, Plato became a teacher in a school for children of color, like the one where she received her own formal education, cultivating attention in the interest of racial progress.

“In our age of machines and money,” the creole mystic Adrien Rouquette wrote in French from his hermitage in the Louisiana woods in 1852, two years before the appearance of *Walden*, “people know nothing, anymore, of godly things.”¹² Rouquette adapted Roman Catholic devotional practices to an ascetic, missionary life among the Choctaw people near Lake Pontchartrain, outside New Orleans. Like Thoreau, whose book Rouquette came to admire, this self-styled primitive conducted an experiment on himself, trying to revive his depleted powers of attention. He saw himself as a voluntary exile, like one of the ancient desert fathers. The truth was that his diagnosis of modernity, along with his call for an attention revival, was becoming commonplace.

These writers and many others like them are the leading characters in *Thoreau's Axe*, and their writings about divided attention and moral discipline are my objects of study. The writers came from different regions and different social ranks, even different languages. Their politics ranged from reactionary to reformist and radical. Still, they shared some crucial things. They were all spiritual seekers, all interested in moral education and self-culture, all uneasy about the civilization that was taking shape around them. In the idea of distraction, they found a way to express the damage done by new economic systems and technologies. They responded by promoting disciplines of attention—regimens for cultivating perception, concentration, and presence of mind in a distracting world.

Today, in our age of new media and chronic attention deficit, these passages from the nineteenth century have a strange resonance. Are they just the artifacts of an old-fashioned, religious mentality, unable to adjust to modern times, or are they eerily familiar prophecies, anticipating our own worries about what screens and algorithms are doing to us now? What kind of problem is distraction, and how did we come to care so much about

attention, as if we could repair the harm that the world has done to us by changing our ways of taking the world into ourselves?

Distraction often appears in the guise of a novelty, but some of the psychic and social calamities that seem new have really been unfolding for a long, long time. Likewise, some remedies that might feel secular—or, in the common phrasing, “spiritual but not religious”—partake of Christian moral regimens devised two hundred years ago or more. We may think that our distraction is unprecedented; so did many poets, preachers, and activists in the days when trains and cheap newsprint first moved across the continent. They believed that they were living in a new era, the age of machines and money. Distraction was their name for how it hurt.

Disciplines of attention were their therapies and rehabilitation programs. In the nineteenth century’s attention revival, there were heavy-handed moralists who preached attention in the service of social control. They tried to reconcile the unruly, especially the powerless, to an existence of hard work and meager pleasure. There were plenty of middle-class escapists, too, who wished for little more than a spiritual vacation. They did what they could to soothe their frazzled nerves, then clocked back in to business as usual. And then there were a few wild mystics, pushing the limits, seeking spiritual freedom and ecstatic intimacies. Even the militants, however, did not dream of liberating themselves entirely from discipline, into a life with no direction or constraint. Instead, they tried to craft new disciplines, or counter-disciplines, for their movements and themselves.

This book is a genealogy of distraction and the disciplines of attention, going back to Thoreau’s era. In the documents of nineteenth-century American literature, religion, and social reform, I find the sources of a predicament that still bedevils us today: even after we understand that distraction’s real causes are in the large-scale economic systems and technologies that shape our world, we keep trying to solve the problem with personal, moral remedies. For instance, we adjust our consumption habits, or we make efforts to ensure that our leisure time is quality time,

spent mindfully. By doing so, we repeat a pattern that took shape under the nineteenth century's versions of accelerating, industrializing market capitalism and spiritual revival.

I study the archives to understand this long, conflicted cultural history. At the same time, *Thoreau's Axe* is something of a salvage operation. I find, in the nineteenth century's ways of valuing and practicing attention, some resources for living through the present. For me, as a critic writing about others' writings, this means approaching my sources both as relics of a troubled past and as crafted objects of sustaining beauty. I read with a cautious eye, watching for the ways that writers exercise and disavow their power, even as my mind becomes absorbed in their poetry, taking shelter. There is some wariness in my way of reading, along with some attachment and desire; that's what closeness feels like, anyway. Maybe attention can be a way of engaging with the world instead of trying to transcend it, and discipline can be for self-composure, not for purity.



To the distracted, attention makes alluring promises. It opens a way to fuller, more satisfying experience, or it brings people into deeper contact with the ones they love. In the midst of hustling and noise, disciplines of attention offer peace of mind. At the same time, though, they call for certain sacrifices. Some kinds of pleasure and freedom will have to be surrendered on the way to attention's more enduring ones. Distraction is a kind of suffering, but suffering has also been inflicted in attention's name. This give-and-take, the interplay of rehabilitation and submission, was already happening along the shores of ponds in nineteenth-century Massachusetts.

Out in the woods, Thoreau set up his little house and devoted his time to the work of self-recovery. In "Life without Principle," he explained his therapeutic regimen for people who had let their minds become distracted: "If we have thus desecrated ourselves—and

who has not?—the remedy will be by wariness and devotion to reconsecrate ourselves, and make once more a fane of the mind.” With the archaic word *fane*—from Latin by way of Late Middle English, meaning a sacred place, a temple—Thoreau reached back through the ages, trying to recover some ancient, less degraded state. He continued: “We should treat our minds, that is, ourselves, as innocent and ingenuous children, whose guardians we are, and be careful what objects and what subjects we thrust on their attention.” Treating his own mind like a child, Thoreau aspired to a second innocence. His program was a discipline of “wariness and devotion.”¹³

Thoreau took an interest in the tradition of spiritual exercises, developed over many centuries by mystics and philosophers. Spiritual exercises are practices designed to detach people’s minds from the passions and dramas of everyday social life so they can focus on higher, more enduring realities. Some of these practices, like solitary meditation, are perfectly tranquil. Others involve repressing the appetites and mortifying the flesh. In the opening pages of *Walden*, there are references to elaborate rituals of self-torment: ascetics “sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun” or “dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree.”¹⁴ Closer to home, for Thoreau, was New England’s deep history of Christian devotional practices. Even the Puritans, remembered for their frigidness, had recorded weird, ecstatic ravishments by their God.

Thoreau was not the kind of hairshirted monk who would reject the pleasures of the senses or cut up his natural body. He meant to situate himself in the physical world and intensify his own experience. He wished to feel more wakeful, more alive. But he did try to adapt old-fashioned spiritual exercises to his nineteenth-century circumstances. When Thoreau went walking in the woods, he practiced what he called “the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen.” When he studied the literary classics, he put himself through “a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this

object.” He worked on reconditioning his distracted mind with disciplines of attention.¹⁵

At Walden, Thoreau felt he had discovered just the right place to get himself together. It was a quiet situation:

The scenery of Walden is on a humble scale, and, though very beautiful, does not approach to grandeur, nor can it much concern one who has not long frequented it or lived by its shore; yet this pond is so remarkable for its depth and purity as to merit a particular description. It is a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, and contains about sixty-one and a half acres; a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods . . .¹⁶

Thoreau’s technical training as a land surveyor helped him here, but he also needed to unlearn his habitual ways of seeing. Being humble itself, Walden required humility from its observer. For Thoreau, writing a careful description was a way to show the fruit of his self-discipline. He had turned himself into the kind of person who could appreciate simple, rather than spectacular scenery.¹⁷

Sometimes, though, the history of attention’s disciplines is less free-spirited, less sweet. It is not only a history of people’s efforts to save themselves from mind-corroding economic circumstances by reawakening their own powers. It is also a history of captivity and psychic manipulation. Take a look, for instance, at this other description of a rural New England scene, composed (like much of *Walden*) in the 1840s:

The pond is of clear, pure water, about thirty feet in depth, and covering one hundred and seventy-eight acres of land. The ground rises, by a gentle acclivity, from the shore of the pond, to a height which overlooks this beautiful sheet of water, and an extent of country beyond, embracing, in part, the village of Westborough, and gives a very pleasing prospect. There are no manufacturing villages in the vicinity, and the farm-houses are

not more numerous than in most of the agricultural towns in the State, in proportion to the area. The situation, therefore, is sufficiently retired.

This passage celebrating pure water and gentle beauty, out in the country, far from modern noise, appears in an 1847 Massachusetts state legislature committee report, proposing the site for what would become America's first state-run juvenile reformatory.¹⁸

Drawing up the plans for its youth prison, the state chose a rustic, rural setting, distant from the temptations of urban consumption and the noise of factories. The planning committee noted, approvingly, that there was no industrial infrastructure in sight. The water was clear and clean, the views agreeable. It was almost as if the surveyors had stepped back in time. This, they determined, was the ideal setting for a new kind of incarceration.

Animating the committee's pastoral vision, there was a distinctly modern theory of delinquency and rehabilitation. The theory held that new manufacturing systems, along with the poisonous attractions of the marketplace, were corrupting vulnerable minds. Among the reformers who took an interest in such problems, the effect was called "hardening" (as in "hardened criminal"), or "blackening." Poorly supervised children, in particular, were said to suffer from bad influences, which coarsened their minds.¹⁹

Though juvenile delinquents were damaged, however, they were not incorrigible. Reformers saw their hardening as an effect of their experiences and circumstances, not some innate moral weakness or biological deficiency. What history had done to these victims of neglect could be undone by discipline. As the reformatory's founders put it, "It is proposed, by the discipline which awaits them here, to quicken the torpid action of conscience, by calling into play the moral sentiments which have been suffered to lie dormant."²⁰ Delinquents appeared, to their keepers, to be "torpid" animals, their moral sentiments in hibernation, like Thoreau's snake. To correct their ways, the state would begin by removing them to a purer atmosphere.

The property was secured; the facility was constructed near the pond. Just as Thoreau had exhorted his readers to treat our minds as “children, whose guardians we are,” state-administered juvenile rehabilitation promised to repair delinquents’ habits of attention. In custody, children would work all day and, in their free time, look out over the “beautiful sheet of water.” Under strict supervision, they would learn industry and self-control. Correction was being redefined as therapy, punishment as pastoral care.

Unlike Thoreau’s voluntary removal to Walden, however, serving time at the reformatory was compulsory, and it required submission to authorities. Although its propagandists talked about love and mercy, this was the kind of place that the sociologist Erving Goffman called a “total institution,” the style of enforcement that the philosopher Michel Foucault analyzed with devastating elegance in *Surveiller et Punir* (1975).²¹ Rather than a retreat for unhappy poets, the reformatory established a severe labor discipline and moral reeducation, under lock and key, mostly for the children of the poor. They were not “chained for life,” but they were forcibly confined. Their assigned work was supposed to prepare them for the rigors of industrial market capitalism. Their moral training assimilated them into the culture of white, Protestant respectability.

They tended the reformatory’s farm, or they made shoes and chairs in its workshops. Private contractors leased their labor from the state. If they failed to comply with the rules or to complete their work on time, guards and superintendents punished their insubordination. When their terms were over, the institution would unload them back into the same environment which, according to its own theory, first put them in harm’s way. Rehabilitated, they were supposed to “go forth with the habits of industry, of purity, and self-respect,” back to work.²² The reformatory was a supplement to the market economy, then, not a monastic world apart.

Thoreau’s self-culture and the reformatory’s punishment, his self-discipline and its compulsory rehabilitation, resemble each other in disquieting ways. Rather than resisting modern economic

forces, it appears, spiritual exercises can be used to reinforce them. Instead of striking against the true sources of distraction—the exploitations and manipulations of industrial capitalism—disciplines of attention were often used to keep the machinery running smoothly. This was the aim of the nineteenth century’s most elaborate experiments in top-down social engineering, from evangelical missionary campaigns to industrial prisons.

Among the reformers who built the nineteenth century’s correctional institutions, distraction was thought to cause two kinds of trouble: one at sites of production (the workplace), the other at scenes of consumption (the marketplace). First of all, there was inefficiency on the job. Distracted workers wasted time. The absent-minded sailor on the masthead in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), dissociating from his labor in “opium-like listlessness,” had many thousands of real-life counterparts on farms, in workshops, and on factory floors. Withholding a part of themselves, these mental drifters slowed production down.

In *Capital* (1867), Karl Marx defines attention specifically as a force that keeps workers focused on the work in front of them. Over the time it takes to do a job, Marx notices, the mind inevitably wanders. This happens in every kind of labor, including the least exploitative; it happens even when you freely set your own task for yourself. After a while, you lose your concentration. You might start wishing you were doing something else, or just to take a break. Marx introduces the term *attention* to identify the power that holds you fast. Subordinating your fickle will to the purpose of your work, he writes, “means close attention.”²³

In Marx’s theory of attention, it is not the laborer’s tools that fall to pieces, like Thoreau’s axe. It is the laborer himself. Inside the mind of every worker, there is a purpose, the will to complete a task, but then there also arise other desires and impulses, at odds with the original plan. Attention, like an axe-wedge, holds these two parts of the self together, in alignment. Although attention is often imagined as a person’s way of relating to a thing, like reading a poem or cutting down a tree, Marx suggests that it is really a

relation between two agents. Even when the worker is alone, there is something antagonistic about attention, maybe even something social.

The less the worker identifies his own freedom and pleasure with the purpose of the work, Marx writes, “the closer his attention is forced to be.” As work becomes more alienating and exploitative, the “exertion of the working organs” must be forcibly cajoled.²⁴ It is as if an outside, hostile will, at odds with the worker’s own, takes hold of him, using his attention to manipulate his body so that he can execute its plans. Attention means subordination.

Anyone who has done hard, unpleasant work can probably recognize the feeling of pushing themselves to get it over with. But in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, when Marx and Thoreau were writing about economies, the dynamics of productive labor under American capitalism were changing in profound ways, on a vast scale. Industrialization (of agriculture and manufacturing alike) and the market revolution wrought severe social and psychological dislocations. For many workers, the gap between the purpose of their labor and the freedom of their “physical and mental powers” was painfully intense.

The starkest example was chattel slavery. According to the American slave system’s legal fictions, there was no significant conflict between the master’s designs and the worker’s will, since the worker was not supposed to have any free will at all. “The tragedy of the black slave’s position was precisely this,” W.E.B. Du Bois writes, surveying antebellum Southern legal codes: “his absolute subjection to the individual will of an owner.”²⁵ On the ground, though, as Du Bois knew, the transaction was never so clean. This kind of owner-property relation was a human relation, fraught with conflict. “To coercion and punishment,” the historian Eric Williams observes, the enslaved “responded with indolence, sabotage, and revolt.” There was always resistance, ongoing drift.²⁶

The violence of plantation labor discipline became notorious, as did the monstrous figure who embodied attention as a subordinating force—the overseer. In Marx’s theory of productive

labor, two purposes within a single mind strained against one another, and attention mediated between the two. In the ideology of the American slave system, each of these three parts was played by a different actor. There was the master, with his will to raise a crop for market. There was the enslaved worker, whose body had productive capacity but also strong impulses toward pleasure, rest, and freedom. And then there was the overseer, who stood for attention itself.

The overseer's business was to keep the enslaved on task, enforcing submission to the master's purposes. His methods included both harsh violence and hypervigilance. Slavery's arsenal held many grotesque implements of torture, but it also included subtler styles of psychic and emotional control. "There was no deceiving him," Frederick Douglass writes of the infamous overseer Mr. Covey. "He had the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present with us."²⁷ Surveillance seemed to get under the skin, into the feelings, as unremitting wariness. In practice, overseers negotiated with the agency of those whose personhood the law denied. Even "the heart, the soul, and the mind," as Saidiya Hartman teaches us, can be "inroads of discipline."²⁸ Meanwhile, creating distractions became a prized tactical skill among subversives and fugitives.

As for the nineteenth century's wage laborers, they were "nominally free," in possession of themselves, contracting to sell their time and work consensually. All the same, though, there were tensions between entrepreneurs' purposes and laborers' wills. In one of Marx's source texts, *The Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835), the Scottish business theorist Andrew Ure complained about the wandering minds of men recruited into factories from other, pre-industrial sectors. "After struggling for a while to conquer their listless and restive habits, they either renounce the employment spontaneously, or are dismissed by the overlookers on account of inattention."²⁹ Distraction was gumming up production on the factory floor. The art critic and theorist Jonathan Crary sees subversion in this kind of mental truancy: "Though its history will never

be formally written, the daydream is nonetheless a domain of resistance internal to any system of routinization or coercion.”³⁰

Ure determined that grown-up laborers, “past the age of puberty,” were too far gone in their undisciplined habits. Industrialists found themselves searching for more innocent, malleable subjects (namely children) and more effective ways to motivate them. Ure fantasized about “willing menials” happily giving their “attention and dexterity” to the machine. If workers could be made to identify with the purpose of the labor, he imagined, they would acquiesce more readily. They would practically supervise themselves.³¹

Sophisticated labor discipline sought more than the menials’ rote obedience to the boss’s commands. It tried to change their hearts. The right kind of training, as nineteenth-century managers envisioned it, translated economic imperatives into the language of the worker’s private, moral conscience. And here, in the effort to educate minds and souls, industrial labor discipline found its common cause with a broader, Christian moral campaign to convert and civilize the nation’s population.

Securing social order in an era of rapid economic disruptions was not only about keeping workers at their ploughs and stations, turning out more goods. It was also about regulating how they spent their money and their free time, after work. The marketplace was a source of growing wealth for businessmen and merchants, but it was also a scene of social instability. Wayward, wandering types appeared to be assembling at the temples of indulgence—taverns, shops, and theaters—where their appetites got them into trouble. The authorities saw distraction as a source of delinquency and crime. Consumption, like production, needed supervision, and so the disciplines of attention were brought to bear in institutionalized moral training.

The theory of rehabilitation that shaped nineteenth-century disciplines of attention was drawn, in part, from enlightened philosophies of the human mind. The reformers who developed it were familiar with Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian proposals about surveillance as well as John Locke’s ideas about mental development.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke had explored how acts of attention involve both a passive receptivity to influences and an active selection of objects. Attention opened up the mind. It also exercised the will, focusing on certain things instead of others, filtering out the rest as background noise. Young people were available for rehabilitation because they remained malleable, receptive to new impressions from their superiors. The best way to shape their moral character, over time, was to enlist their own participation in the procedure.³²

Although some of the philosophers who developed this account of the mind were dissenters and freethinkers, not orthodox Christians, their ideas were easily taken up by religious authorities and missionaries. “The mind will unavoidably take its character from the objects most frequently presented to it,” one Unitarian minister preached in the early nineteenth century. “If these be low and trifling, so will be its pursuits and its desires.” Here, as in Thoreau’s remarks on self-discipline, attending to frivolous things was proscribed as a corrosive habit. To guard against the trifling that led to a vicious life, the minister recommended a regimen of prayer and devotional reading. He guided his young readers toward the “practice of piety,” a set of techniques that would “excite constant attention to virtuous and active pursuits.” By managing your objects of perception and desire, you could sanctify yourself.³³

“The degree of attention we pay,” another minister preached in 1850, “depends upon our own disposition to attend. This shows us that the matter, after all, is very largely one of *discipline*.”³⁴ During the years when Thoreau built his cabin and the state of Massachusetts opened its reformatory, each along a waterfront, the longstanding alliance between Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism, famously analyzed by the social theorist Max Weber, was entering a new phase. Christian morality made its peace with large-scale plantation and factory work, a free market for consumer goods, and a flood of cheap print. Schools and penal institutions imposed disciplines of attention, tempered by love, so that industry and civilization could proceed.³⁵

When the Massachusetts reformatory opened its doors and received its first delinquents, one reformer saw the future in these vivid terms: “Here . . . where the sound of the orgies of the dramshop never reach,—where no theatre opens its pit or gallery to entrap the unwary by its fascinations,—away from the oaths of ribaldry with which vice holds revel in the dens and stews of the crowded city,—washed clean of the filth with which vicious poverty defiles its children, the boy may learn the lesson of useful employment.” Reform reached into “dens and stews,” into a crowd of defiled, distracted children, and plucked out a single boy. Severed from the vicious social world that had shaped his character, he began to learn new lessons and to develop new habits of mind. When he was rehabilitated, he would be ready for employment.³⁶

The literary theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduces a beautiful phrase for the mental and moral lapses that nineteenth-century authorities meant to intervene against; she calls them “elopements of attention.”³⁷ The wandering mind was a queer and worrisome thing, running off with its bad objects. Disciplinary institutions were designed to lock it down. To investigate attention’s history, then, is not only to recover transcendentalist techniques of self-culture. It is also to encounter systems of exploitation, backed up by punitive mechanisms of social control. Along with free markets and free labor came the common school, the reformatory, and the prison. Thus, the industrial economy entered into an uneasy partnership with a civilizing mission, guided by white Christian nationalists who set the terms for social and political assimilation.

In revisiting the archives of nineteenth-century moral discipline, I come back to questions that have been at the heart of my own critical work for many years. I began the inquiry in my first book, *The Prison and the American Imagination*, and I have never really

been able to let it go. Some questions seem unresolved; they still preoccupy my mind. Let me try to give some reasons why.

When I read the works of nineteenth-century reformers, revivalists, and transcendental mystics in the pages of old books and magazines, I know that I am looking at artifacts from a distant time. And yet I seem to recognize their ways of talking about distraction and the disciplines of attention. I can almost hear the grandfather who taught me how to tie a fishing knot and cast a lure; the public-school teachers who tried to keep me on task; the preacher turning our congregation to prayer in the evangelical churches down in Arkansas, where I was raised.

Most of these pastoral figures in my early life, I felt, spoke for a conservative social order. I was sometimes fidgety under their scolding, restless in their pews. I wanted distraction, and like most kids I found my share. As it turned out, though, most of my favorite kinds of expression and dissent, growing up, incorporated their own disciplines of attention.

In the Ozark Mountains back then, there were still some remnants of a hippie counterculture, people who had sauntered like Thoreau out of middle-class conformity, into the woods, living off the grid and getting mystical. In the college town where I went to public schools, there was a small but vital hardcore punk-rock scene, militant against consumer culture and white Christian bigotry. The assembly of beautiful freaks and misfits who came together at the local all-ages music venue was the closest thing I had to a congregation. I was in a band with a fifteen-year-old genius who skipped school just to practice playing his alto saxophone all day, until his lips would bleed. Maybe the police thought he was a delinquent, but to some of us he seemed more like a holy saint. All of this was about attention, too, somehow.

My friends in high school went straight edge, or went vegan, or shaved their heads. Dressed in combat boots and simple, thrift-store clothes, we weren't just shaking off the scolding that we disliked at Bible camp or dodging the managers who supervised us

at our part-time jobs. We were also mimicking discipline, trying to adapt it to some other purpose. When we taught ourselves to play guitar, when we cooked for friends and strangers after rock shows in garages, when we pierced each other's faces with needles disinfected in the flame of butane cigarette lighters, late at night, it was sweet, but it was also regimented, in its way. We were doing work and practicing loyalty. The intimacies we nourished in private ended up sustaining us in public protest—against wars, against deportations, against police brutality, and against other kinds of state and vigilante cruelty.

I still hear all these voices now, I know, because I took them in, internalized them. They became part of the voice I use in silence when I am speaking only to myself. Trying to get my work done while the twenty-first-century attention economy chimes and flashes all around, I summon myself to concentration, to focus on my reading or my writing, in longhand, on a yellow legal pad. When I get distracted and blue, I tell myself that it is time to shut off my machines. I go out walking in the woods or by the sea, to recompose myself.

Even as I write critically about histories and fantasies of discipline, then, I cannot help practicing it. More and more, in middle age, I also find myself calling others to attention. In the classes I teach, some on a private university campus and some in state prisons, I try to cultivate my students' sustained concentration. I ask them to read closely, notice details, and think patiently about works of art. I use a similar voice when I instruct my son in drawing a picture of a hawk or setting up a hook with a jab in his tiny boxing gloves. "Watch this," he says all the time, calling my attention to himself.

Now and then, while I was writing this book, I drove out into the country to spend an afternoon at Miller's Pond, a spring-fed reservoir on a New England hilltop, where I like to swim and fish. Other days, I went to a particular bend in the Mill River, wading in the knee-deep water with my little boy. Once in a while we got lucky and caught sight of some wild bird of prey, an osprey or a

red-tail hawk, or came across a snake, tightly curled among the rocks. I found that being by the water, in the company of those undomesticated creatures, cleared my mind.

On the way, I passed through Wallingford, Connecticut, a small city that was developed in the middle decades of the nineteenth century by utopian socialists from the Oneida Community. Oneida became notorious for experimenting with free love, but its economic ideas were similarly radical. Beside the river, Oneida laborers built industrial workshops to support their collective enterprise. One of their products, Oneida silverware, became well-known around the country. The commune's organizers believed that manufacturing could serve their social and spiritual improvement, as long as the work was fairly managed and the profits equitably shared.³⁸

The community fell apart in the 1870s, but the company kept operating, and Wallingford grew and prospered as a manufacturing city for another century. It was only in my lifetime, after the 1970s, that most of the industry closed down or moved away. The infrastructure—old factories, warehouses, garages—stood empty for a while. Storms and vandals shattered the windows. The machines rusted out, and vines climbed over the walls, following the grooves between the bricks.

Nowadays, new enterprises occupy much of the commercial real estate. Where Wallingford laborers used to make things with machines, there are facilities for other disciplines. The industrial district houses a growing self-care industry for the multiracial working and middle classes. One former repair plant has been rebranded Forging Fitness, the gym where I work out. Upstairs, there is a martial arts studio. Nearby, you can find archery and axe throwing studios; you can get pierced and tattooed; you can practice yoga or Pilates. In these makeshift spaces, people come to find their regimens. The factories have been converted for new uses in a new economy.

Surveying this scarred and thinly touched-up landscape, it is tempting to take a disenchanting view, as the critic Christopher

Lasch did in his bitter indictment of postindustrial American society, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979): “Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to ‘relate.’”³⁹ In the burned-out mill towns of our own century, such a critic might say, ex-factory workers and their children—pushed into the lower rungs of the health care industry, or trying their luck in the gig economy—have nothing left but a commodified self-care. Where there used to be an assembly line, now there are rows of weight racks and elliptical machines you have to pay to use. Business, having abandoned these people when it found cheaper labor somewhere else, comes back to sell them the opportunity to discipline themselves inside the very buildings it left empty.⁴⁰

What are they seeking, really? What do we want? I like to think that the new disciplines of attention, like the ones that took shape two hundred years ago, register a widespread restlessness about economic conditions—a drive to realign our work with our own purposes. You can say that therapeutic self-care distracts people from the true, structural causes of human misery, but when you talk this way, you are doing your own moralizing about attention. The real question is whether disciplines of attention can be linked up with programs for economic and social—not just personal—transformation.⁴¹

The old utopian impulse might be revived, though the prospects for such a transformation remain uncertain. Since the nineteenth century, two prevailing forces have opposed it. One is market capitalism, which demands attention for its systems of production and consumption. The other is white Christian nationalism, which imposes moral discipline in the service of social repression. The first builds factories, shopping centers, and online marketplaces; the second drives evangelical missions, militarism, and a massive penal system.

The alliance between conservative religious discipline and the market economy has been a topic of critical study since the days of Marx and Weber. Still, seeing how they fit together can be tricky, not least because each of these formations sometimes makes itself look like a sanctuary from the other. An advertisement for a new brand of car or candy says that your consumer experience will feel like getting free from old-fashioned, repressive moral authority; meanwhile, right-wing evangelicalism represents itself as a campaign to save the nation's soul from base materialism. In reality, these two forged a strong bond in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century, when slavery and indentured servitude gave way to free labor, the "market revolution" expanded consumer culture, and new publishing technologies produced the mass media. Trying to manage the social changes and dislocations that they understood as pervasive distraction, Protestants engineered a Great Awakening, and states built monumental penitentiaries.

Now, in a new millennium, the dilemma reappears. Our economy creates a thousand distractions, while our conservative religious and social movements absorb people's longing for spirituality and community, and our state governments lock away the unruly in mass numbers. The era of the digital attention economy has also been a boom time for evangelical megachurches and mass incarceration. At the margins are the armed libertarians and the right-wing vigilantes, with their quasi-military disciplines.

From the beginning, though, my work on *Thoreau's Axe* followed the intuition that a critical, historical reckoning with attention's disciplines cannot afford to treat them merely as methods of coercion, to be shaken off. Even degraded, commodified styles of self-culture appeal to a real, living hunger. They promise to satisfy the craving that arises, under normalized distraction, for some kind of transformation. The literary works and other writings that I study here point the way to mystical perceptions and redeemed intimacies. In the tradition of dialectical criticism, such promises are called "utopian."⁴²

As a critical, historical study, this book is my effort to describe how so many American conflicts came to be imagined as problems of distraction or attention, as if they could be solved by retraining people's dormant capacities to see clearly and feel intensely. At the same time, though, I am interested in the possibilities that such an understanding opens up, not just its power to divert people from more authentic kinds of self-awareness or more effective kinds of action. Calling attention a mystification would not dispel its power, since mystification is another word for distraction.

Composing *Thoreau's Axe*, I wondered: What kind of thinking, what kind of critical writing, could grasp the histories of labor and power that shape the desire for a redeemed attentiveness while also recognizing—and pursuing—some version of this desire? Our methods of cultivating attention now are often escapist or therapeutic consolations, but other, fiercer ways have been imagined, and not all of them have been reactionary. Alone among the many disciplines of attention, reading can engage with attention's cultural history. Could I study the archive for both its coercive demands and its utopian cravings, both the violence that it disavows and the power whose pursuit it openly asserts? I decided to make an experiment.

I adapted an old religious genre, the book of devotion. Originally designed for Bible study, as an aid to prayer, devotional books incorporated brief excerpts from scripture or other religious works, supplementing the reprinted passages with the author's own meditations. Following the same model, I took some of my passages from religious works, but I also used the archives of literature and social reform.

I was looking for historical evidence that would help me reconstruct the cultural history of distraction and attention in the United States. I wanted to show the depth and the diversity of nineteenth-century writers' reckonings with these problems. More than artifacts, though, I wanted passages that would sustain slow, careful reading. I wanted to write with writers whose language had some music or some thunder and whose thinking harbored

intellectual surprises. I chose passages that resisted paraphrase and seemed to become stranger, more paradoxical, and more beautiful the more I paid attention to them.

I began each of my reflections with a quotation, usually a selection where problems of distraction and attention are treated in some especially interesting way. Reading the passage closely and thinking about the historical conditions that informed it, I composed my reflection. Curiously, I found that I responded to the most didactic, pious works with feelings of suspicion and resistance, rather than acquiescence. By contrast, some of the wilder, more incendiary passages, whether they came from poets or militants, made me want to understand the discipline that guided them. If distraction means a division within the mind, pursuing two different purposes, then you could say that I tried to read my passages distractedly: one part of my reading accepted the work's demands, staying with its aspirations and its artistry, and another part dissociated, wandering to a further distance, thinking about history and power.

Just as some Christian devotional books offered one reflection for each day in a four-week cycle, I composed four sets of seven exercises. The four parts can be approached as deconstructed chapters, where the primary sources are examined in detail, with an eye for their complexities, rather than being smoothly incorporated into my own narrative. I know that there are some intellectual risks involved in laying out the book this way. My interpretations often end up in ambivalence, rather than a strong judgment about the passage at hand. But this, in my experience, is how attention really works—restlessly, reflexively, usually away from commands, especially when they come cloaked in disavowal, and often toward the charisma of other people's self-possession. Readers of *Thoreau's Axe* may choose to make their way through the reflections in their numbered sequence, from one to twenty-eight, tracking my argument about the cultural history of distraction and attention, or they may decide to skip around, making their own connections. If you read enough of them, you will see the patterns.

Part One, “From the Devil to Distraction,” examines passages that deal with the changing meanings of distraction in modernizing times. The other three parts explore three ways the nineteenth century tried to regulate attention. “Reform” is about disciplinary institutions like experimental schools and penitentiaries; here I read passages about moral training, with reference to Foucault, Hartman, and other theorists of discipline. “Revival” goes to evangelical camp meetings and similar religious gatherings, studying passages about spiritual renewal while drawing from Marx, Weber, and other critics of Christianity under capitalism. “Devotion” examines nineteenth-century practices of self-culture, many of which were adapted from ancient spiritual exercises; here my readings focus especially on desire and disavowal, sometimes in a psychoanalytic mode.

The reformatory, the revival, and the scene of private devotion—as I make my way through this sequence of pastoral settings, I move from the one that is most obviously coercive to the one that seems most voluntary. Schools and correctional institutions impose compulsory disciplines, backed up by force. Evangelical churches use less formal kinds of paternalistic care and social pressure to ensure conformity. Devotional reading and prayer, when they are taken up by choice in private, might appear not to have any coercive force at all, though devotional literature usually models a kind of discipline for its readers, inviting them to try it for themselves, if they feel the calling.

Still, the story that unfolds across my four sections is not a neat progression from captivity to freedom. From the prison to the open-air sermon and the prayer closet, the politics of attention’s disciplines are volatile. In schools and penitentiaries, reformers attempt to remedy the psychic harms inflicted by market capitalism, endowing wayward minds with the self-control required for freedom, yet disciplinary institutions have always been sites of counter-discipline as well, and they sometimes end up fostering, in spite of themselves, a spiritual militancy that turns against their

own designs.⁴³ Revivals bring a Christian ethic of sober living to the working classes and the disenfranchised, but they can also become festivals of democratic intimacy, fiery and uncontained. Ascetic devotion mortifies improper desires, yet it occasionally prepares dissenters for resistance, even rebellion.

“I began to direct my attention to this great object,” the rebel prophet Nat Turner is reported to have said of his insurrection plot against Virginia slaveholders in 1831.⁴⁴ Every kind of pastoral supervision exposes itself to evasion and inversion. This is the predicament of a modern economic system that incorporates spiritual exercises as its therapeutic, regulatory supplements. By setting devotional practices apart from its own systems and operations, the economy allows people to use them as ways of cultivating communities and identities in opposition to itself.

Many of my readings in the archive show how the literature of attention stages ethical encounters between two wills while, at the same time, disavowing any coercive willfulness. This paradox is easiest to identify in punitive situations, where authorities control delinquents by training them in self-control. It may be more difficult to see how the same dynamic plays out in practices of self-culture, as well. Achieving a greater receptivity to the outside world entails a deliberate choice, an exercise of will over oneself, often expressed in the imperative mode. One commands oneself to submit. Attending is surrendering, but willfully.⁴⁵

My hope, in tracing these patterns of discipline and disavowal, is not just to expose some secret, unacknowledged complicity between power and attention. The worst effect of the developments I follow in this book is something other than hypocrisy or impurity. The diabolical thing is the breaking apart, the splintering of the world, so that each person or pairing seems isolated and condemned to its consoling therapy while the economy’s machinery grinds on, grinding people down. The way beyond is not within, in purifying disciplines; it has to go, by way of work and love, into the world.

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