

On being called to attention 'after the Gods have departed'

Jason Goroncy

There are those among us who embody, and invite others to similarly cultivate, the posture and habits of attention. Such gifts to humanity can be a form of care. When we truly attend to something – a leaf, a pear, a human body, a conversation, a thought – we offer it a quality of presence, a depth and complexity we might well otherwise miss. Such can also speak to us about something fundamental in how we experience life and discover, or make, meaning. The cultivation of such practices serves as a corrective to what might be termed the temporal displacement of consciousness – the tendency for awareness to become absorbed in retrospective rumination or prospective anxiety, thereby attenuating engagement with immediate realities, which is, for good and ill, where we live, exercise agency, make decisions, and encounter that which is other than ourselves.

Such sustained attention to the present moment allows us to perceive layers of experience that are typically obscured by our habitual ways of thinking and perceiving. Our cognitive processes normally operate through established patterns and assumptions that shape and bracket what we notice and how we interpret events. Deliberate attention enables a more rigorous *epoché* – a bracketing or suspension of presuppositions that allows phenomena to present themselves more fully to consciousness. This attentional practice also has significant implications for our understanding of time and existence. Given that past and future exist only as present mental constructs – as memory and anticipation, respectively – the cultivation of present-moment attention represents an acknowledgement of the ontological priority of immediate experience – of a more authentic being-in-the-world as it is, where our capacity for joy, creativity, love, and meaningful engagement or response expands. Instead of being swept along by the current of thoughts and reactions, we develop the ability to observe them, to choose our responses more deliberately. This is not about maintaining constant vigilance but about cultivating a more profound, more honest, relationship with our own experience.

Simone Weil was a French philosopher, activist, and God-seeker who felt deeply the evils of the world. She grew up in an affluent, agnostic Jewish family in Paris and, for most of her life, suffered poor health. She is known for her commitment to what Susan Sontag once described as 'uncompromising and troubling witnesses to the modern travail of the spirit'. This was embodied in Weil's solidarity with the suffering, starving, and poor. At age six, Weil

refused to eat sugar because French soldiers fighting on the front had none. At ten, she declared herself a Bolshevik. As an academic, she preferred the company of factory workers and the unemployed with whom she shared her salary. In 1938, Weil converted from Judaism to Christianity. Five years later, she died of tuberculosis and self-imposed starvation after refusing to eat more than what French people received as rations.

Weil placed extraordinary emphasis on attention (*l'attention*) as both a spiritual discipline and an ethical foundation. For Weil, attention was far more than mere focus – it was a profound form of receptivity that required emptying oneself of personal preoccupations to perceive reality more truly. She also distinguished between genuine attention and mere mental effort. Proper attention, she argued, involves a patient waiting and openness rather than forceful concentration. This state of 'detached attention' requires one to set aside one's political preconceptions, tribal allegiances, and convenient narratives to truly see what is happening. Conversely, forceful concentration, which involves making justifications and harbouring historical grievances, prevents one from receiving the truth that is immediate. True attention doesn't rush to contextualise or rationalise suffering, for example, whether one's own or that of another, but allows its full weight to be felt. For Weil, such attention was inherently transformative – it demanded a response. The 'detached' quality she advocated wasn't indifference but rather the clarity that comes from seeing without the distortions of self-interest or ideology. This kind of attention becomes an ethical imperative to witness, acknowledge, and act upon what is actually happening.

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This posture of 'detached attention' is not too dissimilar to how the Australian photographer Harry Nankin approaches his work. Based in Dja Dja Wurrung Country in west central Victoria, Nankin uniquely blends ecological advocacy with innovative photographic techniques. Undertaken with cameraless photographic processes, his work attends to the abject, ambient, and transient aspects of the natural world, those made largely invisible by our modes of being. Rather than using traditional cameras, Nankin employs processes that are partly land art, partly performance, and partly photography, endeavouring to turn the landscape itself into a camera.

With patient, prayer-like, and receptive waiting, and informed by his Jewish heritage, Nankin allows the world to reveal itself rather than forcing predetermined compositions or moments upon it. In this way, his work embodies and invites efforts at emptying oneself of agenda and urgency. This is about waiting without grasping, observing without immediately capturing, and receiving what is truly there – for example, shifting light, the subtle behaviours of wildlife, and the ways weather and violence transform landscapes. So undertaken, Nankin's modes of attention become, like Weil's, a form of ethical practice.

'I'm interested in "the problem of nature"', he wrote, 'that is, the problem of The Other. The non-human. Everything not of or made by people. Air and ants. Bandicoots and beaches. Grasshoppers and grassland. Moss and mountains. The planet we are on and the night sky above. And most especially where it all comes together in what we casually call "landscape"'. A landscape truly exists only when it consumes every trace of otherness, making all things part of its continuous becoming. Or, as he expressed it elsewhere: landscape is all that 'country becomes after "the gods" have departed', or become concealed. Whether it is due to sensitivities about cultural appropriation or something else, Nankin, appropriately so, does not take up in any sustained way a focus on Aboriginal understandings of Country wherein deities and wider ecologies are inseparable. Neither, for Nankin, is attention to the 'problem' of this Other driven principally by questions of epistemology – of outwitting the world through the camera, as it were – and still less by mere curiosity. In January 1970, he visited Lerderderg Gorge, some 60 kilometres west of Naarm/Melbourne, with Hashomer Hatzair, a socialist-Zionist Jewish youth group. That experience instilled in him a desire to attend to basic, primal questions of an ontological and ethical nature, framed in fidelity to his cultural roots, about the energy that remains unexhausted by matters such as geographical appearance and that animates all. Nankin names this search 'an ecological gaze'. When I met with him in June 2022, he described that gaze as 'thinking, feeling and seeing informed by the physical and temporal relationship between living things, including human beings, to the earth – and beyond'. 'Ecological thinking', he continued, 'begins with ideas about cosmological space, geological time, evolutionary descent and ecological interdependence; ecological feeling erupts in the radical re-evaluation of one's humanity that ecological thinking demands; ecological seeing is the more-than-visual gaze transformed by ecological cognition and emotion'. Nankin's ecological gaze and its employment of analogic shadowgram resolution also relate to a heightening of the sense of place as predicament, wherein the rooted presence and the vast weave of creaturely otherness are accentuated against the ecological imaginary.

Nankin’s work reveals some compelling parallels not only with Weil’s ethics of attention but also with Edward Said’s work. Born in Jerusalem, Said was a Palestinian literary theorist and cultural critic whose work, most famously *Orientalism*, exposed how Western academic and cultural representations of the Middle East and Asia served to justify and perpetuate colonial domination. Like Said’s analysis of how Western discourse constructs the Orient as an exotic Other to be catalogued and consumed, Nankin’s shadowgrams invite modes of seeing that risk abstracting the world into manageable visual patterns. His ecological imaginary functions similarly to Said’s concept of imaginative geography – a constructed framework that organises and domesticates the radical alterity of non-human worlds. However, where Nankin’s work diverges from Orientalist modes is in its cultivation of what Weil would recognise as genuine attention. Her notion of attention as a patient, self-effacing receptivity to what is actually present rather than what we expect or desire to see finds resonance in Nankin’s ‘heightening of the sense of place as predicament’. This predicament suggests an uncomfortable recognition that human dwelling is always already implicated in networks of creaturely otherness that exceed our comprehension. Said’s work complicates Weil’s vision of pure attention by revealing how power structures can colonise attention itself – that the coloniser’s attention is never neutral or receptive but is shaped by imperial interests and political expediency that serve domination rather than understanding. In nature photography, this tension becomes particularly relevant when considering whose landscapes get photographed, by whom, and to what ends. However, Said also believed in the possibility of more ethical forms of attention. He later suggested that genuine encounters across differences require acknowledging one’s position

and limitations – what might complement Weil’s ‘detached attention’ with critical self-awareness. For artists like Nankin, this may mean practising attention that includes consciousness of one’s cultural position, the politics of access, and the communities whose relationships to these landscapes preceded and exceed the photographic moment.

To make matters even more interesting, today such practices are carried out in contexts wherefrom, in Nankin’s words, “‘the gods’ have departed”. This recalls both Weil’s and Nankin’s deep interest in the Kabbalist notion of *tzimtzum*, a reference to a belief in the Divine’s self-delimitation or self-imposed contraction from the world, leaving us now to live as if without God, come what may. To so live is to take up Weil’s call to the ethics of kenotic love marked by ‘imitation of God’s renunciation in creation’. Said’s work reveals how human attempts at expansion often involve the opposite of this divine restraint: the projection of power that colonises and defines the other rather than creating space for authentic existence alongside one’s neighbours. We don’t have to fill every space just because we can. The kinds of encounters that humanise us are the encounters in which one’s projections and preconceptions are withdrawn and the other is allowed to exist on their own terms, beyond our comprehension or control.

One thing that emerges from such an account of things is that whatever true being is, it has its genesis and via in an experience of profound contradictoriness, of having our settled arrangements made unsettled, of being interrogated by that which stands at its centre. ‘The questioning involved here’, as Rowan Williams once pointed out, is not, however, ‘our interrogation of the data, but its interrogation of us’. **G**



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