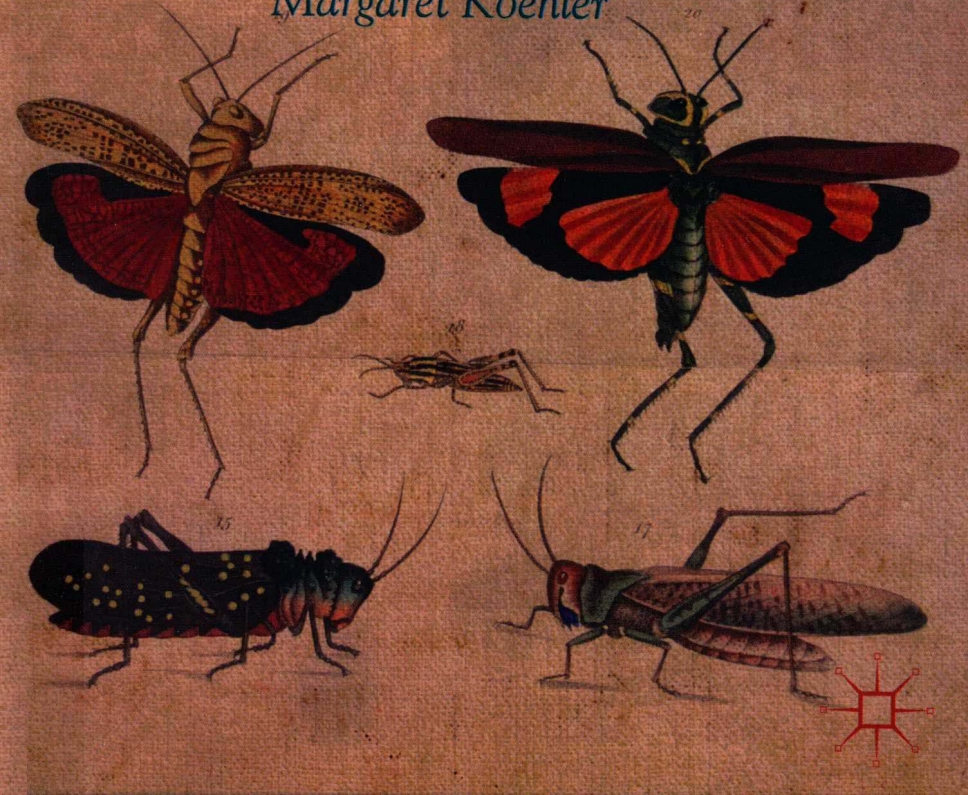
Poetry of Attention in the Eighteenth Century

Margaret Koehler



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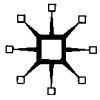

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For John, Gilbert, and Arthur Wright

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Introduction

"Let Me Be All, but My Attention, Dead"

References to attention abound in eighteenth-century English poetry. Often they are made admiringly, as when Christopher Smart praises his Cat Jeoffry's acoustic precision: "For his ears are so acute that they sting again. / For from this proceeds the passing quickness of his attention";[1] or when William Cowper wittily commemorates the sparrows who associate a Trinity College warning bell with the chance to beg a few crumbs from passersby:

> Sagacious list'ners to the sound
> They flock from all the fields around,
> To reach the hospitable Hall,
> None more attentive to the call. (17–20)[2]

Poetic references sometimes depict attention as pleasurable, as when Mary Leapor authorizes one of the first stops on her tour of Crumble-Hall with this enticement: "The sav'ry Kitchen much Attention calls"[3] (56); or when James Thomson advises fly-fishermen to monitor their lines: "With Eye attentive mark the springing Game" (*Spring*, 410).[4] Conversely, poets like Stephen Duck point out that not all attention is leisurely, as when the farmer summons his threshers to their task: "Around we stand, / With deep Attention waiting his Command" ("The Thresher's Labour," 19–20).[5] These and the many other perceivers who populate eighteenth-century poems—the "Careful Observers" of Swift's City Shower, Anne Finch's nocturnal "Wand'rer," the chronicler of the natural world in Thomson's *Seasons*—practically embody alertness. Poems capture them poised in moments of vigilance, concentration, and wonder. Poems explore how alert receptivity can reveal a world that is fresher, stranger, and more vivid.

The reference most emblematic for my project is a line from William Congreve's 1692 ode "On Mrs. Arabella Hunt, Singing" that reads, "Let me be all, but my Attention, dead."[6] Congreve's plea embodies what, I will argue, is a wider aspiration in the period's poetry to explore overt themes of attention and to demonstrate techniques of readerly attention. The attention Congreve cultivates in this example produces aesthetic pleasure; he wants to be fully absorbed in the vocal performance. This scenario is characteristic of eighteenth-century poetry, which frequently represents a perceiver's rapt attention to a scene. The vigilance Congreve demonstrates also typifies a commitment in much of the period's poetry to teach readers how to attend closely. As Congreve summons full concentration on the song, he instructs the reader to do so with the poem. His poem provides a sort of script: identification with an attentive speaker is training for the attentive reader.

This preoccupation is related to a more widely recognized impulse in eighteenth-century poetry to describe details and to proliferate objects.[7] Eighteenth-century poetry tends to focus on the minute, the miscellaneous, the detailed, the domestic—to catalog and categorize *things*. Less has been said about this poetry's renderings of corollary states of awareness. The fascination with ordinary, literal surroundings requires a particular state of mind: methodical, experimental attentiveness. How does the world look from a cat's vantage? What response does the ringing of a bell evoke from hungry sparrows? What is newly discerned by situating a familiar kitchen within Crumble-Hall's larger whole? In these poems the ordinary is defamiliarized; it is particularized according to the perception of one attentive viewer. This viewer is active, eccentric, and selective. The interest of the scene lies in what is emphasized, how perception shifts from component parts to larger whole, how external events take on uncalculated significance to an attentive perceiver. Certainly all poetry asks readers to pay a more intense or demanding kind of attention than they might to ordinary language and events. Eighteenth-century poetry invites an especially agile reader on a highly exploratory trek.

The title of my project plays on a current cultural anxiety about attention deficits, but it also offers a sincere description of the demanding but rewarding experience of reading eighteenth-century poems. This poetry requires rigorous concentration from readers, who confront its meticulous description and close observation, as well as its wide sympathies and deep absorptions. As a state of mind, attentiveness is profoundly interesting to eighteenth-century poets, who not only experiment with its various degrees but encourage readers

to trace their own corollary states of attention. These poets promise readers substantial dividends for committing to a strenuous reading experience and learning to enjoy both the expanse and the precision of eighteenth-century poems.

Part of the impetus for my project arose from a dilemma in my teaching. A comment from a student in an eighteenth-century literature class illustrates the predicament: "I don't like reading poems where I have to keep stopping to think about every word. I like it when poems just flow." Of course this complaint is not uncommon for a candid student to make about poetry of almost any period. But eighteenth-century poems seem to intensify the difficulty for several reasons. Verse form is one obstacle: metrical patterning and rhyme can strike a contemporary reader as contrived or distracting. Asking students to read the verse aloud often reveals how disruptive the line breaks, strictly interpreted, can be to their processing of the poem as a whole. Topical references and frequent allusions then make already disconnected lines seem even more bewildering. The diversity of subject matter can also disorient contemporary readers. To sample some thematic categories listed by a recent anthology of eighteenth-century verse, one is reminded how unsuitable for poetry some of these themes might sound to a twenty-first-century reader: "Literary Patronage/The Economics of Authorship," "Houses and Gardens," "Liberty," "Autobiography," and "Politics, Power and the State."[8] Contemporary readers must make a series of adjustments to the verse of the eighteenth century. While the poetic forms are exactingly regular and precise, the subject matter is disconcertingly expansive and eclectic. These features make a heady combination—and a unique opportunity for teachers of poetry.

To frame these readerly impediments another way: contemporary readers sometimes find the close attention required by eighteenth-century poems to be alien and difficult. Such readers can also reap substantial benefits from persevering. Given that we read and live in the "flow" of an increasingly perpetual media and electronic buzz, my project argues that eighteenth-century poems, with their energy for closer observation and quirky combinations, ask readers to stop and tally more frequently—to exercise neglected attention skills. As a different student wrote in a reflection on her own analysis of a poem, "The reader or viewer may need to look more closely than they are willing to." My hope is that the paradigm of *attention* might make a reluctant new reader of eighteenth-century poetry more willing to look closely. My own students respond productively when asked to notice the workings of their own attention as they read. Among other

things, then, this book sketches one approach to teaching eighteenth-century poetry.

Another aim is to identify a certain psychological vigor in eighteenth-century poetry, which has sometimes been accused of the opposite: satiric brutality or anxious self-doubt. But to concentrate fully on a poem by Alexander Pope, for example, and adjust to its intricate geometry of metrical, syntactic, and conceptual patterning is to reap ample rewards. Eighteenth-century poems are remarkably spacious. Miscellaneous contents sit comfortably within the same poem, and movement among them is agile and elastic. The poems have a distilled quality, a sense that they are the product of much cogitation, and yet they zero in on particulars with vivid immediacy. They move easily between gravity and humor. They are adventurous, analytical, effusive, and wholehearted.

I hope that my study will help to reposition eighteenth-century poems as a collective model for assiduous reading and supple, wide-ranging attention. Other critics have noted both the obstacles and the curative effects of eighteenth-century poetry for modern readers. Margaret Doody frames the readerly adjustment to eighteenth-century poetry as working up a heartier appetite:

> Our appetites have, in short, to match the poetic appetites of the poets and their appreciative original readers. Once we educate ourselves into this frame of mind (rather like going off a diet) we can proceed. It is harder for us, who have been bred in the sparer tradition of modern lyric poetry, to regain such a mood, to take the gargantuan courses of poetry. But once we realized that it is our appetite that it being commanded first, and not our fasting, that richness instead of austere control is the order of the day, then the extraordinary nature of what we are offered can make its appeal.[9]

John Sitter names eighteenth-century poetry's outsized *temporal* scale as both strange and instructive for modern readers: "Precisely because we seem to have lost the future as a dimension of meaning in so much of our discourse and perhaps in poetry especially, the temporal expansiveness of eighteenth-century poetry can be alien and salutary. Salutary not because it is always optimistic about the future—many of its most powerful glimpses of futurity are darkened—but because it assumes a larger theater of human action and significance."[10]

David Fairer frames the adjustment—which he associates with the mock-heroic but which arguably characterizes eighteenth-century poetry more broadly—as a burgeoning freedom of imagination: "In the Lockean mind, great and small, heroic and trivial, could

co-exist . . . Descriptive and creative elements, in other words, might coincide. With its sportive juxtapositions of image, mock-heroic was brought to the centre of this field of poetic possibility. It achieved its effects by encouraging contrasting ideas to converge, and used its witty combinations to challenge traditional categories and linguistic decorums. In this way it was able to go beyond satirising the trivial, by raising questions about the notion of value itself. It allowed great and small to engage more unpredictably."[11] Fairer associates the georgic—his description again more widely applicable—explicitly with the amplification of attention: "Welcoming variety of scene, details of place and time, and an appropriately specific, even technical language, georgic flourished by seeking *new subjects for attention.*"[12]

The art historian Barbara Stafford has recently contrasted eighteenth- and twenty-first-century theories of mind. She diagnoses a widespread contemporary fascination with "autopoietic" systems—self-assembling systems that operate spontaneously and automatically.[13] The current model of the human brain, 90 percent of which is estimated to function automatically, is one such autopoietic system. Stafford points out that the current understanding of brain/mind as a largely automatic system reverses eighteenth-century epistemology, which likened cognition to seeing. Her critique casts the discrepancy explicitly in terms of attention: "What's left of selective attention?"[14] She expresses reservations about the view that attention is mostly unconscious: "[W]hat are the macroconsequences of putting attention almost wholly in the service of microcircuits, cerebral localization, processing-perceptual systems, and other inbuilt constancies?"[15] Stafford does not refute neuroscience's claim that the brain operates mostly automatically, but she emphasizes the voluntary functions and contends that the imbalance exerts "special pressure on what I have been calling the remaining empirical 10 percent."[16] In her remedy for the autopoietic daze and her formula for maximizing the remaining 10 percent, she extols the dividends of deliberate attention: "Creativity may well lie in escaping, not giving in to, our autopoietic machinery and focusing carefully on the world. This proactive proposition defies a hyper-Romantic theory of consciousness . . . that we can never perceive the real world but only our mental representations."[17] One way to escape a hyper-Romantic theory of consciousness is to look back to earlier models. Stafford's call for a new aesthetic commitment to "outward-directed attentiveness" finds a vital precedent in eighteenth-century poems.[18]

WHAT IS ATTENTION?

To claim that eighteenth-century poems cultivate attention and thus administer a kind of literary tonic raises a crucial question: what exactly is attention? William James claimed that "[e]very one knows what attention is."[19] In a sense this is true, and we rely on phrases like "pay attention," "got my attention," and "needs attention." But the ubiquity of references to attention obscures its conceptual complexity. Popular usages of the word are stale and imprecise. Several early definitions provide a useful starting point for pinning down this notoriously slippery concept. John Locke formulated one definition in 1690: "When the Ideas that offer themselves are taken notice of, and, as it were, registered in the Memory, it is Attention."[20] This description outlines a rather passive process. The "Ideas" perform the action, "offering themselves" to a submissive attention. Amid Locke's circuitous syntax, attention first *notices* the compelling Ideas and then "registers" them in the memory. Memory thus defines attention: whatever exists in the memory got there because one paid attention to it, and whatever one pays attention to gets committed to memory. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Johnson's *Dictionary* offers a modified definition of attention: "The act of attending or heeding; the act of bending the mind upon any thing" (attend is defined as "to regard; to fix the mind upon").[21] Johnson envisions a more forceful role for the perceiver, who "bends" or "fixes" the mind upon things, rather than passively taking note of forceful ideas. Johnson's version implies that attention selects a particular focus ("any thing") and that the operation of mind is a deliberate, even strenuous act.

The first definition of attention listed in today's *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) echoes Johnson's: "The action, fact, or state of attending or giving heed; earnest direction of the mind, consideration, or regard . . . The mental power or faculty of attending."[22] A few additions and modifications are worth noting here. Johnson's "bending the mind" acquires the descriptor "earnest," which emphasizes effort and intent. "Direction" replaces "bending," reinforcing a view of attention as purposive and goal-oriented. Johnson describes an "act" of attending, while the *OED* broadens the designation to include "action, fact, or state." Both a "fact" and "state" of attention indicate longer duration than a momentary act. "Fact" suggests that the opposition between attention and distraction has solidified; one is either paying attention or not. Attention has become "a mental power or faculty," an expansion that reveals its rising reputation as an aspect of human psychology.

Contemporary cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists are stricter and more scrupulous in defining attention. One prominent contemporary attention researcher reverses James's formula and asserts that *no one* actually knows what attention is—and that there might not be an "it" to know.[23] Fortunately, other researchers have been more willing to concede attention's existence. Raja Parasuraman acknowledges that attention "is not any one thing" but also insists that it is not a "chimera."[24] He proposes a "potential antidote" to the retirement of attention as an ill-conceived concept. Attention is not a unified operation of mind, he points out, but a collection of interacting skills and brain processes.[25] While researchers debate the components of the larger category of attention, Parasuraman notes, they agree on a basic three: selection (processing some stimuli while filtering out others), vigilance (sustained readiness to respond to infrequent events), and control (overriding impulses).[26] Because the modern study of attention has tended to focus on performance,[27] psychologists conceive of attention as a set of resources that a perceiver must allocate in order to achieve goals. David LaBerge names "accurate perceptual judgments and actions," "speeded perceptual judgments and actions," and "sustained processing of a mental activity" as three major, goal-supporting benefits of attention.[28]

David LaBerge offers a less technical distinction of attention from other mental processes: "The term *mind* points to a variety of functions of the brain—thinking, feeling, intending, perceiving, judging, and so on—whereas the term *mindfulness* or *attention* points to the characteristic way in which any of these functions can move to center stage (or can move other functions off stage) at any given moment."[29] He provides a convenient shorthand for this description: attention as "mental emphasis."[30] This brief definition is worth underscoring at the outset of a study of attention: "mental emphasis" indicates that attention confers prominence on some things over others, and that it is more a matter of degree than all-or-nothing.

A Cognitive Approach to Eighteenth-Century Poems

The question then arises how literary studies can contribute to the study of a phenomenon that today is typically analyzed in a laboratory or with an fMRI machine. While some attention researchers discount the legitimacy of "subjective" analyses of attention, others insist that one can only understand attention fully by studying it at multiple levels. The eminent psychologist of attention, Michael Posner, issues

such an invitation: "The cumulative nature of work on attention is not widely appreciated, in part because of a failure to recognize that the methods used in current studies arose in empirical findings of the past and also because attention is a concept that can be studied at many levels. There is evidence that findings at the level of performance, subjective experience, and neural systems can be linked, even though they are not yet reducible to a single theory."[31]

Posner criticizes the disconnection between recent attention research and its history as an idea. He urges that attention be studied "at many levels," including "subjective experience." His appeal makes room for evidence from literary texts, which ask unique questions and use unique methods to analyze attention. David LaBerge agrees, noting that his own recent study of attention combines cognitive, computational, and neuroscientific research methods as well as insights from other disciplines including "the more experiential analyses of some philosophical approaches," which he claims "help maintain a synoptic view of attention in the face of highly detailed psychological and neurobiological data."[32]

This study attempts to join the conversation into which Posner and LaBerge invite multiple disciplinary perspectives. A "cumulative" account of attention should not ignore literary and historical contributions. My aspiration to bring insights from the psychology of attention to bear on eighteenth-century poems—and vice versa—aligns with a rationale for interdisciplinary reading articulated clearly by John Goodridge in his recent study of eighteenth-century poetry: "Part of what I want to do, indeed, is to assess the degree to which an interdisciplinary and detailed reading can enable us to rediscover the poetry of the eighteenth century, without on the one hand condescending to or apologising for it, or on the other losing sight of our own concerns and interests, our reasons for reading."[33] My own study likewise aspires to be interdisciplinary, to combine the methods of literary studies and cognitive psychology in order to see both the history of attention and the poetry of the eighteenth century newly.

To probe Congreve's poetic mandate ("Let me be all, but my Attention, dead"), my project brings eighteenth-century poems into the animated conversation between cognitive studies and literature.[34] Numerous critics have argued for the viability of cognitive approaches to literature and noted that literary study and cognitive science share an interest in language and mental operations, in patterns of thought and language; Mark Turner has pointed out that literary critics offer a trained eye and ear for "the intricacies of mental and linguistic phenomena."[35] The phenomenon of attention—intuitively