James Soderholm is Professor of English at The King’s School, Canterbury. He has published three books, including Beauty and the Critic: Aesthetics in an Age of Cultural Studies (1997), and most recently Byron and Romanticism (2002). He is currently completing a book of dialogues entitled “Platonic Occasions: Dialogues on Art, Literature and Culture” (with Richard Begam, Univ. of Wisconsin) and working on an experimental book on Hamlet.

This lecture sketches connections between our capacity for at once noticing the streaks of the tulip and the shrieks of the tortured. A moral imagination makes it possible to both notice what is beautiful in the world and respond with sensitivity to the pain and suffering of others. Drawing on music, painting, philosophy and literature, I will offer twenty-seven brief meditations on ‘the attentive’ and ‘the heartless’ as a way of suggesting that our moral perceptions may be sharpened by works of art in which seeing is represented as understanding. I shall show that epiphany is the crystallization of [self] attentiveness and yet also, at times, the heart of an impenetrable darkness.