

Taking Pity on Things

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We continue to tell ourselves that we are different from, and more than things, and that to be taken up in things, to allow ourselves to be caught up in the snares of mere stuff, is to give away our freedom, our powers of self-determination, our humanity. 'The world is too much with us; early and late,/Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers' begins Wordsworth's sonnet. But we may forget that, almost straight away in that sonnet, the necessity of 'the world' is reaffirmed, in the form of the things of nature that we are made ill-equipped to see by what we call our materialism. 'Little we see in nature that is ours/We have given our hearts away'. For Wordsworth, the affective powers that we 'lay waste' through excessive getting and spending are not in any sense merely 'subjective', in the sense of being simply set against the object world. In fact, they are instanced and embodied in them: 'The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;/The winds that will be howling at all hours,/And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers'. Our power is in no sense the power of pure and unadulterated self-assertion; it is rather the active-passive power to be, to be able to be moved by natural objects. It is what Giorgio Agamben has called an 'impotential'. Any power we might have in respect of the world of things is a power of being affected by them, of not being invulnerable or ague-proof in respect of them.

Our feelings about objects have been muddled by an over-simplification, which encourages us to feel that what is most essentially us or ours, over here on the subject side of things, can have nothing to do with what we call the 'object world', a phrase which seems to imply not just the world of objects, but the world conceived as object. What is an object? An object is something, some thing, that is over there, the principal force of the *ob-* prefix being to imply that which stands against us, or brings us up short: the object is an obstacle, it obstructs, opposes, occludes. A thing is something that has nothing to do with us, and no part in the kind of life that is ours. And yet this very idea of the thingness of the thing, or the objectness of the object – the Ding-an-sich, or thing-in-itself, as Kant defined it – is itself an idea rather than a thing, and, moreover, an idea that could only ever have been come up with, come up against, by creatures like us, who feel themselves to be intrinsically more or other than things. This idea of the object is what the philosopher and historian of science Michel Serres has called the 'transcendental objective'. For Serres, who devotes some remarkable pages to the relation of the subject and the object in his book *Statues*, the

transcendence of the object; first of all, the life of the object is mysteriously apart from, or beyond our experience, and, secondly, the very idea of the object seems to come upon us with the force of a kind of revelation, from elsewhere, or beyond us:

Human being appears in front of the object that has been abstracted or separated from these relations, that is free, come from elsewhere like a stone fallen from the sky. We invent it, we receive it, what matter, we were only there to decide upon it, we were born, in the beginning, from its epiphany. Man comes from things, he knows it yet. (Serres 1987, 208)

What, in this case, can be meant by the word subject? The subject is held to be free, unfixed, capable of choice and variation, softly undetermined. But to be subject is to be, as Serres explains, to be cast down, or thrown under. To be a subject is precisely to be able to undergo, that is, to be able to come up against the objectness, the objection of things to our dreams of infinite self-enlargement. May we then perhaps define an object as that which cannot undergo the subjection by another object that a subject can? For Serres, a subject is

[t]hat which lies under that which lies before it, holds itself back: attentive, concentrated, humble, silent. Subject. This word retains the trace of an act of humility. The subject subjects itself to the dominion of that which forms and loses it. Yes, kills it. Only the object exists and I am nothing: it lies before me and I disappear beneath it. (Serres 1987, 211)

Objects are sometimes distinguished from subjects by philosophers on the grounds that objects are *for* things – spoons are for eating soup, spades for digging, pens are for writing – while subjects are, or should be, for themselves. But we may also say that objects and subjects are bound together by the fact that they are for each other. Objects, which cannot be there until there are subjects, are there in order for there to be subjects. Subjects, which cannot be there in the absence of objects, that is, in the absence of the self-absenting provocation or possibility which an object is for a subject, must be there in order for there to be objects. And what we mean by ‘there’ is perhaps wherever subjects and objects come in this way to be for each other. Subjects and objects are each other’s dative case, and so are bound together by the principle of their dativity, their respective and reciprocal being-for each other. Subject and object have their rise in this dativity, finding in it their nativity.

Subjects and objects do not exist independently of each other, in such a way that their relation might just happen contingently to come about, amid a host of other possible relations. Their relation of dativity means that each is, intrinsically and exclusively for the other. So subjects are for objects, that is, there must be a subject in order for there to be objects, since only subjects can bring objects to birth. But objects

are also for subjects, in that only the capacity to project and thereby bring about objects can form a subject. Serres sees this as a kind of whirling vortex, like the cartoon punch-ups in which two characters roll over and over each other inconclusively, accelerated into a whirl of dust:

I imagine, at the origin, a rapid vortex in which the transcendental constitution of the object by the subject grows just like, in the other direction, the symmetrical constitution of the subject by the object, in dizzying semi-cycles endlessly renewed, leading all the way back to the beginning. (Serres 1987, 209)

These are more than philosophical riddles of definition. They involve feelings, more, they are feeling itself. In fact, I wish to propose that all feeling involves and demands the intercession of things; in order to be able to *feel* things, we have to be able to feel *things*. To feel oneself alone is not to be a self at all. This relation between minds and things has been subjected to close analysis in the work of Samuel Beckett, who expresses the numb agony of a life without relation to a world of objects in the words of Henry in his radio play *Embers*:, who picks up two stones from the shingle and yells ‘Thuds! I want thuds! Like this!... (*Starts dashing them together.*) Stone! (*Clash.*) Stone!... That’s life. Not this ... (*pause.*) ... sucking’.

The psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott pointed to the importance in the emotional and intellectual life of the young child of what he called ‘transitional objects’ – the objects such as dolls, dummies, blankets, or even verbal rituals and routines, which, by occupying the gap between inside and outside, or between the realms of ‘me’ and ‘it’, allow me to move between them, in the process securing and enriching the realm of the me – and, for Michel Serres, there is no me at all until I am capable of taking leave of myself, or moving out towards the ‘it’. Though transitional objects belong to early life, in fact transitional objects grow and ramify rather than diminishing in importance. None of us has anything other than a borrowed identity, borrowed, that is, from the objects that most deeply concern us, and by doing so define us. Our projects require objects, indeed, when we use the word object in the sense of an aim, we acknowledge that objects are in fact projects, throwings out towards the world, and into time.

To be concerned with things, to be, as we say, wrapped up in them, is to be in some sense subdued to them. We are not unique in our ability to fetch and carry the things of the world, but we seem unique in our need to perform this action, our inability to exist without the embrace of encumbrance. We are not just surrounded by things, we bear their weight; *homo ferens* should be our species name, I suggested at the beginning of a little book about our involvement with objects, with what we call our

paraphernalia, a word that signifies that which is carried across. We carry objects, we subject ourselves to them as a pleasurable burden; they are important to us, because our lives are lives of portage, importing, exporting, transporting, reporting, disporting, in all which activities, we and our things provide support to each other. The illustrious beings who guard the gates of Oxford and Cambridge colleges are known as porters, one of them assured me magnificently (but still correctly) in the Elm Tree pub the other day, not because they carry things in and out, but because they have charge of the gate, the *porta*. But a human being who regards himself as above such drudgery in fact demeans and even despeciates himself. The etymological scuffle in which the porter and I subsequently engaged was over the question of whether things are said to be transported because they pass through gates, or gates are called ports because of the portable things that are carried across and between them. But in fact carriage and passage are the same thing. We carry things when we transport ourselves because we wish to have them by us; but subjecting ourselves to the extra weight and responsibility they represent is in itself a self-transporting, a way of being carried away, as we say; they are passports, away from our pinched and parched self-sufficiency.

Though all feelings are ultimately feelings for things, the primary and typical condition of our relation to the world of what we call objects seems to be aggressive. The relation of subjects and objects must always have some element of adversity: there is a being-against that is strongly required by the being-for. For we are not just for objects, we are up against them. At the beginning, and too long after that, we engage with objects in order to demonstrate, to ourselves and others, our powers over them – indeed, we depend on them for the proof of our dominion over them.

When children play with toys, as Baudelaire observes in his essay ‘The Philosophy of Toys’, their play is an elaborate testing to destruction or putting to death. The overwhelming desire of the playing child, Baudelaire suggests

is to make visible the soul, some at the end of a period of play, others straight away. It is the more or less rapid incursion of this desire which decides whether the lifetime of the toy will be long or short. I cannot bring myself to blame this infantile mania: it is a first stirring of metaphysics. As soon as this desire has lodged itself in the cerebral matter of the child, it fills his fingers and fingernails with an extraordinary force and agility. He turns the toy back and forth, scratches it, shakes it, bangs it against the wall, throws it on the ground. Now and again, he forces it to continue its mechanical motions, sometimes in the opposite direction. Its marvellous life comes to a halt. The child, like the populace besieging the Tuileries, makes a supreme effort; at last

he breaks into it, he is the stronger. But where is the soul? Here begins daze and melancholy.

There are other children who straight away break any toy almost as soon as it is placed in their hands, scarcely without inspecting it. I must admit that I do not know what mysterious feeling prompts them to this. Are they seized by a superstitious rage with these tiny objects which imitate humanity, or are they perhaps making them undergo some Masonic initiation before introducing them into nursery life? (Baudelaire 1975, 587)

Objects must be subdued or defeated, because they resist us, by refusing to be assimilated to us. Objects can be killed with impunity, and repeatedly. But this is because they cannot in fact ever be killed, for they are not subjects. Objects are available to be killed in fantasy, because they are entirely unavailable to be killed in fact. And perhaps objects may inspire the lethal rage they can or do because they of their immortality, their equanimity.

And this implicit recognition allows the relation of aggression slowly to be replaced by a relation of concern for the object. We have pity for objects, which take pity on us, or allow us to take pity on ourselves through them. There is another important remark that Winnicott makes, almost in passing, about transitional objects, of which I might have taken note before passing on from him. Transitional objects are there not just to receive our love, he writes, but also to survive it. 'The subject is creating the object in the sense of finding externality itself, and it has to be added that this experience depends on the object's capacity to survive' (Winnicott 2005, 91). There is something assimilative and imperialistic about every love, and, in order to be loved or lovable, and, in the process, to render us capable of loving without destroying, the object must show itself incapable of being destroyed by assimilation. The job of the transitional object is nothing less than to indemnify the world as such, as something ultimately invulnerable to my assaults. Transitional objects protect me against myself, against the ego's monarchical rage for destruction and assimilation, the desire to be the world.

We must learn repeatedly the lesson of melancholy learned by Baudelaire's child, and taught again in many stories and films – in *Toy Story*, for example. Rather than being enraged by objects, and seeking to take revenge on them for not yielding up to our inspection and subjugation the soul we demand they must have, we must learn that their soul is neither buried inside them, nor merely projected into them, but comes into being between us and them, in the conversation that the subject has with its objects. The soul of objects is a transacted thing, like the life that we attribute to puppets or animated drawings; but the soul of subjects is the result of just the same

kind of transaction. The soul is, as Michel Serres has suggested, not on the inside but out on the edge, at the fingers' ends, between I and it.

If Melanie Klein is right, this primary aggression may be an indispensable part of the relation we may have to things. In her essay 'The Psycho-Analytic Play Technique', she as it were keeps the tape running after the destructive scene with which Baudelaire ends his essay, to observe its aftermath. Often, she writes, the child will put aside a toy he has damaged for a time, indicating, she says, 'dislike of the damaged object, due to the persecutory fear that the attacked person (represented by the toy) has become retaliatory and dangerous' (Klein 1986, 42). However, after some time, the child may search in a drawer for his damaged toy. At the same time, she suggests, the child may soften in their hostility towards the sibling that (she suggests) the toy symbolises. This softening 'confirms our impression that the persecutory anxiety has diminished and that, together with the sense of guilt and the wish to make reparation, feelings of love which had been impaired by excessive anxiety have come to the fore' (Klein 1986, 42). The principle of reparation is the most distinctive and powerful part of Kleinian theory. It provides a far-reaching explanation of the functions of law, art and love, indeed of all the operations that Freud gathered together under the heading of *eros* as opposed to *thanatos*, in so far as *eros* brings things together rather than seeking to disperse them. The instinct to reparation is an instinct to put right the primary destruction in which we have engaged in our relations to the world. For Klein, of course, the relations with the object world are really only symbolic of relations with other subjects - in the case of the little boy, with his sibling. But this reduction of objects to symbols is itself a kind of aggression, a refusal of the essential quality of the object, and that which gives it all its power, some moiety of which may perhaps come back to me - namely, that it has nothing to do with me, does not depend on me for what it is. We make reparation to subjects through objects, to be sure, but there is a deeper, and more primary reparation to be made to objects themselves, for the assimilative rage which has torn them from their self-sufficiency and forced them into the shadow-play of our fantastical needs and desires.

My father was not much of a handyman, any more than I am. But he did love to mend things, much to the annoyance of my mother. I have wanted for many years to write about an episode of my youth whose pathos I have never quite been able to articulate and understand before, and may still not be able to now. I used to wear sandals made of a strange, savage, odorous substance somewhere between rubber and plastic. The weakest part of their construction was the strap where it met the buckle which was secured at the side of the sandal. This strap would often give way, making it impossible to do the sandal up. (What heart-mysteries there are in simple

phrases like that 'do up'. Why is it that, when things have been secured or bound together with themselves they are 'done up' rather than done together, down, or in? What is mysterious is not that we don't know what it means, but that we somehow do). On the occasion I am about to recall, my father announced that there was no need to make the trip to the shoe-shop (and there is no more traumatic yet emblematic scene of the relations of subjects and objects than the children's shoe-shop) to replace the sandals, because he intended to mend it. I was intrigued, for children inhabit a world of shifts and ruses for making things carry on working after they have stopped, and I could conceive no way in which the disjointed strap could be restored to its function. Would he perhaps sellotape the pieces together (children having an almost religious faith in the powers of sellotape and glue to heal broken things)? Or draw them together by a lace drawn through two holes bored in the separate portions of the strap? My father's daring, heart-stopping idea was to employ a soldering iron (why did he have such a thing, I now wonder? he was no home radio enthusiast, given to the intricate conjugation of valves and transistors). He was going to melt the pieces of the strap and fuse them together. I remember that the operation was performed, as all such paternal operations are, in the face of my mother's nose-sighs (a nose-sigh consists of a jet of air expelled forcibly through the nose, with lips compressed and nostrils flared wide, employed for the expression of an extreme of exasperated contempt), on the kitchen table, with the marmalade jar and teapot as mute, sceptical witnesses; had they had arms, they would, of course, Disneywise, have been grimly folded.

To begin with, things seemed to go to plan: the edge of the ablated strap indeed seemed to melt at the touch of the soldering iron. The problem was that, by the time the opposing edge had also been melted, and was ready to be presented to it, it had cooled and hardened again. What is more, the edge of the strap seemed to have been annealed by the process in some way, such that it would no longer submit to re-melting, but simply glowed sullenly, then subsided into black. My father who, like the child unwillingly cast as the sheep in the nativity play, was stuck with being a man, therefore had no choice but to come up with some reckless escalation or other of the project to which he had committed himself, did what it was enjoined any father must do in the circumstance and which I would almost certainly now find myself doing. Reasoning, like a World War 1 general, that more force would undoubtedly prevail where subtle and restrained persuasion had failed, he took the two charred stumps of melted and reformed plastic and held them together over one of the rings of the gas stove. The effect was immediate and undeniably impressive. After a few seconds, the pieces of plastic sent up thin trails of acrid black smoke, which immediately caught in the throats of everybody crowded into our tiny kitchen; at the same time, the plastic started to bubble, and even to drip like wax on

to the stove. Enjoying the spectacle of our wide eyes and choking, my father, with a mixture of calmness and stubborn decision, pushed the two bubbling edges together, though there were scarcely any edges at all visible any more, and held them together for their alchemical union. It worked. I mean, it worked and it didn't work. It worked in the sense that the two pieces of plastic had indeed fused, and tightly enough that the firmest of tugs could not drag them apart. It didn't work in the sense that they had writhed together in the flame into the most appallingly amorphous lump, wizened, black and blistered, that was now far too large to be drawn through the buckle. When I first saw the victims of napalm in Vietnam, some short time afterwards, and whenever now I see the victims of serious burns, I think of the bleached, puckered ruin of that sandal, the horror and the pity of what had been done to it. I realise with a shock that I have always heard the word 'sandal' whispering and tittering inside the word 'scandal'. Yet I cannot entirely blame my father, for that would be to accuse myself, and my own lifetime of bodes, fixes, failed rescues and sorcerer's apprentice catastrophes, performed in front of similarly appalled infant witnesses, pleading for me to desist and just buy a new one, dad.

I have wanted to tell this story for a long time, and have tried to do it with more delicacy than my father, but I fear I have made a loyally filial mess of it. For what I wanted to do was to repair my father's act of reparation, to rescue and honour the instinct of pity, for that is how I think of it, that wanted to put things right, even at the risk of despoliation and calamity. At the time, I burned with pity for the object that had been ruined, but now what has me twisting and turning is the flame of pity for my father and his shambolic efforts to make things right. I think the most mysterious song in the whole Beatles' catalogue is 'Fixing A Hole', and I suppose it is because it seems to be about this strangely stubborn strain in our relation to things that suggests there is always something to be put right: 'I'm fixing a hole where the rain gets in/And stops my mind from wondering/Where it will go./I'm filling the cracks that ran through the door/And kept my mind from wondering/Where it will go'.

The word 'pity' has soured. To pity someone is to assert a kind of contemptuous superiority over them. This is why the disabled and the disadvantaged compulsorily declare that they do not want pity, that they despise the despising that is supposed by pity, and why we tell ourselves that we should avoid self-pity (in which one is said to 'wallow'). But there is, I believe, a deep pity in things. And pity is not the same as compassion or sympathy, which is perhaps why people sometimes object to being pitied. Yes, we objectify to some degree when we pity, but this helps disclose the strong like between pity and objects. We take pity on objects perhaps because we see that they have essentially been subjected to their objecthood, subjected to it by,

and as the cost of, our subjecthood, their muteness made into a kind of mutilation. Taking pity on things is perhaps a kind of pardon given to things for the wrong they never did us.

There is an ethical force in pity that neither compassion nor sympathy necessarily have. One says 'that's a pity', after all, as an alternative to the phrase 'that's a shame'; pity and shame imply not just suffering, but also wrong. Pity exerts a force of requirement on us, exacts from us some active response of putting right, as shame does too, but sympathy need not. Pity is in fact a shortening of the word 'piety', as is made clear in the Italian word *Pietà*, used to describe sculptures of the Madonna grieving for her dead son. It derives from Latin *pius*, meaning dutiful to one's gods and parents, and therefore related to the word *expiate*, meaning to purify, or make good, or put right (Partridge 1978, 498-9). Kleinian critics see the instinct of reparation powerfully at work in all art, but I would like to be able to see this not just as symbolic reparation made through the shaping and forming of matter, but also as a kind of reparation to matter. Perhaps we might see in plastic art, as well as in many forms of handicraft, matter pitied, or made piteous, matter which has taught us to hold back our rage for it.

We have lost something very valuable, perhaps even indispensable, in having done with the possibility of making do and mending. Actually, precisely because it is indispensable, I do not think it has been lost, for many of our reparative instincts have passed across into the immaterial objects of our digital technology, as indicated by the words like 'hacking' and 'patching' that we may apply to the dodges we may apply to things. To borrow a formula that appears repeatedly in the recent work of Michel Serres, we depend on things that depend on us – they demand our care, they give us the gift of our caring about and therefore caring for them. We depend on them, in fact, because they depend on us, we depend on their dependency.

It would be easy to take what I have been saying as a species of animism – a refusal of the separation between people and things, and an affirmation of the harmony between all the elements of creation, animate and inanimate. I am emphatically not saying any such thing. The gap between persons and things, between subject and objects is absolute and irreducible. But it is so because it is also necessary for the inescapable relation between subjects and objects. Subjects and objects are necessary to each other precisely because they can never merely meet. The pity that people have for things and the pity that things are for people could not come about if it were not for that melancholy caesura between us and the world that characterises our mode of being-in-the-world. 'They told me I was everything: it was a lie. I am not ague-proof' howls King Lear in his philosophical agony; and the pity of things is precisely that they make, or help, us feel the tender ache of not being everything.

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