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Bearers of Communion: Reality Remembered in the Home

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1. The Home as Embodied Intimacy

The vase on the dining table keeps a bouquet of irises and peonies cut from the garden in full bloom, for a brief time to touch the room with congenial fragrance and pigment. While still at their most vivid, these flowers can embellish, and in embellishing *really symbolize*, the life of the household. For the bouquet's reality carries remembrance of the patient nurturing of the plants whence it comes, of the care to adorn the home pleasantly that moved the gardener to prefer these stems, of the love for spouse and children expressed in hands that arranged the ensemble. It ties the family anew to the land on which its house stands, and to the passing season that marks this moment, together with all the promise of Mays to come. Perhaps one among its flowers commemorates an anniversary—of a wedding, say, or the death of a beloved relative—associated with its first unfurling. Being wholly itself, the rose is ever-more than itself:

And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses

Had the look of flowers that are looked at.

In these lines from the beginning of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, the speaker addresses a beloved with whom he shared a saturated experience in the garden of a ruined house, where these two discerned the glittering presence of the dead who dwelled there once.[1] The first line alludes to a poem by Donne in which a lover reminisces on a rendezvous with his darling:

Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread

Our eyes, upon one double string.[2]

Eliot transforms Donne's image so that the intimate exchange-of-looks between two lovers is carried-over (*meta-phorein*) through the look of a thing. Lovers gaze at one another even and especially when they together gaze away towards a different third—the roses, for instance, or the invisible community of departed souls who have looked upon these roses, or a hint of childlike laughter in the leaves (“Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children/Hidden excitedly, containing laughter”[3]), or a wish for children that this laughter evokes, or a homesickness for the lost lord-and-ladyship of the Garden and a foretaste of its restoration. The common attention of lovers to the third is a mode of contact with one another, and such mediated attention is the pattern for all interpersonal relationships.

[C]aring for the goods of the home both turns us to and flows from *owning* (confessing and embracing) God as beyond all possession. Poverty underlies ownership insofar as things are dwelled with first and foremost as gifts worthy of delight.

This brings us to the heart of this reflection: while it may seem that we uphold the “thushood” of things by isolating them from man’s esteem from them, I submit that we best appreciate the thing’s substantial volume (its proper “inscape”) when we situate it relative to our life in common. Since the human soul is present in and shares its being with the body that it formatively animates, the living flesh mediates the person’s spiritual presence to other bodies it perceives, so the bond with the flesh one has and is both exemplifies and serves as instrument of one’s ownership of things.[4] This stands behind man’s common experience that his own life becomes intertwined with and is returned to him by the integrity of his most cherished goods. And like his very flesh, things return to man his relationship not only to himself, but also to those other things and persons to which his affections, knowledge, and love address and attach him. We see this especially in that human society that St. Augustine calls most natural, the family, where each member’s ownership is inflected by those with whom he shares or from whom he receives this responsibility.[5] The things of the home, and the thing the house itself is, symbolically concretize and are thus a second embodiment of the family’s intimacy.[6] The house bears and conveys the family’s own memory and mission (even to its visitors), and this is what converts its mere shelter into a hospitable dwelling. It materially represents the convergence of, and the excessive setting for, the self-expropriation of all who rest within it. We turn to the home, then, as the privileged possession that discloses par excellence how things are given their due when regarded from within human membership.

There is a similarity between the hydrangeas growing in the garden and the wood that has seasoned beside the house so it can bloom in the woodstove or fireplace. The warmth of the hearth colors and centers the family’s repose and is thereby a source of leisure. Watching its bounded and cultivated game, the family naturally drifts into conversation and reverie. The house protects the fire’s thriving, but the fire in turn reflects and invigorates the fellowship of gatherings before it. Through and behind this flame, the family makes contact with immemorial practices—comradery over mortal perils, convivial levity, ceremonial offering. Here common life is ruminated upon and cultural patrimony is digested. Hearing the legends and sagas recited, the boy reads on the fire’s agile play his own heroic future, stirs to his yearning to leave a legacy and peradventure a lineage on earth, and beyond this, to find final glory in the divine Father’s countenance.[7]

Wallace Stevens, a master poet of “things,” writes of one meditating upon the reality of a

candleflame, which presents its singular wholeness to this figure all the more lucidly for being situated in the peace of his home:

It was here. This was the setting and the time

Of year. Here in his house and in his room,

In his chair, the most tranquil thought grew peaked

And the oldest and the warmest heart was cut

By gallant notions on the part of night—

Both late and alone, above the crickets' chords,

Babbling, each one, the uniqueness of its sound.

There was no fury in transcendent forms.

But his actual candle blazed with artifice.[8]

2. *Memoria Rerum*

Socrates appeals to a lyre calling to a lover's mind the image of the real boy who plays it to illustrate the relation between our perception of finite wholes and our insight into the intelligible forms of which they are the material epiphany.[9] Like the boy's lyre for his lover, all things of the world charm our soul's affectionate longing for and belonging to the divine realities they betoken. And just as the familiarity of the absent boy, coupled with the prospect of reunion with him, endears the lyre itself to its beholder, so the goodness proper to things is more a boon for us the more we love the universal Good they signify. I mention this not so much to establish how things mediate our anamnesis of God as to remind of the more terrestrial point that they relay the presence of and serve our communion with the rest of the world. The portrait or photograph manifestly participates in and so transmits the one it depicts to its observer, but the many things of the home do the same, each in its own right.

The inherited violin hanging on the wall makes us think of forebears who played it first. In the wear and sheen of its wood, and in the strains the bow-strokes draw from it, the instrument holds its player's yearslong diligence in conforming herself to and so executing its real possibilities. Even at rest it resounds with the gatherings in this room where player, singers, and audience have joined in hilarious celebration. Its presence invites other like experiences, and even a time when such corporate happenings will *only* be remembered. Because the violin bears all this materially, we can trace our own lifetime against it, as we do with books on the shelf or clothes in the closet.

To be sure, the thing's mediating precedes and exceeds our own story. While it is crucial that there be a threshold between the home's inner society and society without, a threshold is not an impermeable boundary only beyond which one discovers other lives. As we glimpsed with the hearth-fire, the culture beyond already forms the home from within, as its things incarnate local customs, national folkways, worldviews, and achievements of universal significance. The

violin holds the history of stylistic developments that led to its being crafted in this fashion, as well as sources and intermediaries that have left this music to be played on it now. Through things precious to us we become reacquainted with the narrative unity of our own lives—where our freedom is realized bodily in commerce with others—, doing so while rediscovering how our lifetime is situated within the network of stories that are themselves enfolded in the largest tradition of which we all are beneficiaries and co-heirs.

We are the sorts of *things* that, by virtue of our intelligent and feeling bodies that let us live beyond ourselves in the real world, can rightly adhere to, be present in, nondestructively interiorize, and so meet ourselves and one another anew in and through our belongings. And we love things most deeply because, like the lyre to which Socrates refers, they connect us to what we love; so binding us, they co-define our very lives. But they are able to tie us to our beloveds first because (and in the measure that) they are themselves lovable. The things that occupy our homes foster and form us because they are already commodious *with* meaning, and only thus *for* meaning. Each creature has “the look of being looked at” because the relation God bears toward it is at bottom inscrutable to us, which means that the being of each rose is meaningful past finite utterance.[10]

Since they have this ontological depth, things can be more themselves for holding within their own depth more than themselves, especially the coexistence of persons. This is true both of natural and of artificial things, the latter of which are born from and marked by their artist’s spirit through his bodily craft, so that the well-made thing has a person-like capacity and is positively available to be a locus of our “inter-presencing.” Each is so to the degree that it means to us more than the use we make of it, even as its proper use points the way to the meaning it can have for us. So the violin best mediates persons for persons when its prior worthiness is appreciated in being played well. Our common enjoyment holds us together in holding us before the goods that move us. And the mediating third’s nobility shines forth all the more as it lends its character to friends whose presence to one another rests upon it and passes through it.

The beautiful thing thus has a twofold pedagogical significance in the seedbed of the home: it initiates us at once into receiving beauty on its own terms and into joining in beautiful fellowship around this beauty. This is the reason why Socrates remarks that skilled artisans have a vital part in the task of cultivating justice in the consummate city:

Mustn’t we, rather, look for those craftsmen whose good natural endowments make them able to track down the nature of what is fine and graceful, so that the young, dwelling as it were in a healthy place, will be benefitted by everything; and from that place something of the fine works will strike their vision or their hearing, like a breeze bringing health from good places; and beginning in childhood, it will, without their awareness, with the fair speech lead them to likeness and friendship as well as accord?[11]

3. Personal Effects

Integral goods are traversed by our exchanges with others, and as our affections for others abide and are augmented through our memory’s thingly embodiment, these are also, if it be permitted to say, genuinely social media. The communication whole things convey is indirect, unlike that of the cybernetic device, and such goods are suited for this mediation not because of a discreet function they can indifferently host or because we have conventionally assigned them a meaning they have not of themselves. They bind us to others because, having dwelled

with them, we have been conformed to their real givenness and, by love's extroversion, have so "incorporated" them into our personal relationships that their appearing integrity is inseparable for us from the events and people that matter to us and that we therefore re-encounter by way of these goods. Not devices but wholes present a true "interface," for we also direct ourselves to one another in countenancing for itself the profound superficiality of the real thing between us.[12]

The less a thing is exhausted by our control of it the more it can mean something to us. Devices ask only to be controlled and so to program our lives thereby. Technology's presumption is to surpass material thinghood and to disappear into a communication that, by a seeming freedom from bodily mediation, mimics angelic illumination. The cybernetic order trains us thereby into seeing real things as flat or merely decorative because they seem to be insufficiently useful, as less than purely intellectual, even though they are in fact more *instrumental* for personal becoming and belonging than any device. Virtual mediation pretends to give presence, but replaces it with mere presentation that, even as it can yield communication, nevertheless cannot make good on its offer. Good things (inanimate or animate) accept real absence and by virtue of this acceptance let distance bring a secondary presence that could not otherwise be enjoyed, as we find for instance in the letter. Indeed, devices only serve real exchanges to the extent that the unreality of their mediation is acknowledged and endured.[13]

In response to the dehumanization suffered under totalitarian and technocratic regimes, many have sought to clarify the sharp demarcation between persons and things, the Thou and the It. This is a necessary distinction, but if we only define things as *impersonal* we inevitably reinforce what Martin Heidegger called technology's "enframing" of our experience of being, since things here present themselves to us as manipulable and expendable at will. This is a position that Kant's defense of the person's distinctiveness as (anti- rather than meta-phenomenal) "end in itself" already encouraged. Man's received dominion in the material order is better honored if we maintain that the person is, as the most perfect among created natures, also the metaphysical pattern for all other natures.[14] It is real depth, not vacuity, that renders things fit for personalization, and even for personification. Virgil speaks of the *lacrimae rerum* (both the tears things shed and the tears we shed for things) and Dante of *un riso de l'universo* (a smile of the universe).[15] Personifying lets a truth come to the fore, whether the grieflike loss things undergo by dint of human suffering and evil, or the joylike exuberance of all things before God and before man, who for his part rejoices in God with and for the sake of all that he beholds. So it is that the stars in their watches can declare in their Maker's presence (from within man's God-inspired song, hence both *for* man and *through* man): "Here we are!" (Bar 3:34).

It is thanks to the home that we first glimpse how the morphology of anything prefigures, is naturally related to, and is oriented to being elevated by persons.[16] The curtains, lamp, and furniture of the children's bedroom softens the night's dangerous majesty into a gracious and solicitous hospitality, thus allowing night to be most herself. Because they are together sheltered, not only by the house but by the ministering presence of their parents to which even the closed door of their room testifies, each sibling can be ushered into the dreams where he touches those amorphous depths of his own emerging personality and of the collective memory of mankind that is secretly carried in his flesh, and thereby return to that perennial inward beginning when God even now affirms the goodness of his creation in granting it to be:

Nights follow each other and are linked together and for the child, nights

are continuous and form the very basis of his being.

He falls back on them. They are the very basis of his life.

They are his being itself. Night is the place, night is the being where the child bathes,

wherein he is nourished, wherein he is created, wherein he is made.

Wherein he makes his being.

...

Wherein he comes home. And leaves again refreshed. Night is my most beautiful creation.

...

Night is what is continuous. Night is the fabric

Of time, the reservoir of being.[17]

The home concretely shelters the symbolic ontology that the whole universe really realizes all the time. In the interplay between his dream and waking, the child finds and follows his life-story within an abyssal tradition: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. / Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge" (Ps 19:1-2). As the natural center of repose from which creation is first encountered and reflected upon, the home's figural embodiment delicately intimates universal concord, and the divine blessing that holds us all intact.

4. Awaiting the Father's Many Mansions

"The soul descends once more in bitter love/To accept the waking body." [18] Walking through town on a crisp morning, each house the ambler passes appears inwardly richer for the woodsmoke emerging from its chimney against the chill. At the same moment, the neighborhood shows itself more intimately one for the greater intimacy each house has within itself. Indeed, it is by virtue of each family's owning and abiding within their own respective dwelling that all these homes together are turned toward one another in a common neighborhood. What is proper to each family is significant for every other *as neighbor*, and so as a familiar feature of the other's own life. The home also places its participant so that he can belong with the public things of the town in which he lives, and so orient himself in being beholden to these realities, themselves intermediaries of every more englobing community. All this attests that things best return man to himself in opening him beyond himself to the world and to God.

In his reflections on *das Ding*, Heidegger draws on an older meaning of the German word for thing, an assembly where men would meet to discuss matters that bore on their households, their people, their place on earth. He finds that a trace of this meaning remains in the modern word, in that things convene the world for man. His example is an earthenware jug, whose

thingness, he observes, consists in pouring out drink for man's fellowship with man and libation for man's fellowship with and praise of the divine. The jug thus enables a meeting; it "things." The pouring jug holds together the *sky* from which rains fall to swell the grape, the *land* from which the fruit is collected and the vessel itself is molded, the *mortals* who harvest and share in drink and worship, and the *gods* who are glorified by human festivity. When the jug is permitted to act as the thing it is, it serves the exchange of these domains while preserving the distance between them. For man in his enjoyment acknowledges his dependence on the divine who provides the rain and earth joined in the grape from which man brings forth his offering.[19] Among things, the *domus* has a primary place in expressing and schooling into the order of the world before God.[20] In facilitating the meeting and co-belonging of persons, household things help to integrate the world for man, for it is in human fellowship that the fellowship of all creation is centered, and it is here that cosmic interpresencing is rightly interpreted as praiseful.

Above all, caring for the goods of the home both turns us to and flows from *owning* (confessing and embracing) God as beyond all possession. Poverty underlies ownership insofar as things are dwelled with first and foremost as gifts worthy of delight. For these are best stewarded in thankful reverence toward God, who provides all that we have and also communicates himself by grace through the home's crucifixes, Bibles, icons, holy water, and other liturgical instruments and sacramentals. "Let him regard all the vessels of the monastery and all its substance, as if they were sacred vessels of the altar." [21] What St. Benedict said of the monastery holds true for the domestic church, who is charged, from within the universal Church, with "carrying the fire" that "was sent to burn at the heart of the world" in the hope of the homeland to come.[22]

[1] T.S. Eliot "Burnt Norton," lines 28–29, in *Four Quartets* (San Diego: HarperCollins, 1971).

[2] John Donne, "The Ectasy," lines 7–8, in *John Donne: The Complete English Poems* (London: Penguin, 1971).

[3] "Burnt Norton," lines 40–41.

[4] For the natural oneness of being between the human soul and body, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.76. D.C. Schindler has explored the way our relationship to our flesh patterns and mediates our ownership of things in several places. He discusses affection as freedom's ecstasy into things in *Love and the Postmodern Condition*, 118–26, and ownership as the binding of freedom to the reality of things through the body in the chapter "Property as Body" in *The Politics of the Real: The Church Between Liberalism and Integralism* (Steubenville, OH: New Polity Press, 2021), 139–69. The present essay represents a modest tribute to and minor engagement with his work on this essential theme.

[5] Augustine of Hippo, *De bono coniugali*, 1.

[6] Gaston Bachelard speaks of intimacy as the feature that is most characteristic of the home in his entrancing *The Poetic of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

[7] Pinckaers notes in passing how the boy awakens to the moral life through playing at courage in his daydreams. Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press 1995), 356–57.

[8] Wallace Stevens, "A Quiet Normal Life" in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New

York: Vintage, 1954), 523.

[9] Plato, *Phaedo* 73d.

[10] “This relation on which the truth of things is fundamentally based—the relation between natural reality and the archetypal creative thought of God—cannot, I insist, be known formally by us.” Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas: Three Essays*, trans. John Murray, S.J. and Daniel O’Connor (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999), 59.

[11] Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom, 401d.

[12] Such things are in fact more *connective* than digital platforms because they have a deeper receptivity to human memory. Nor is there any advancement that could make them exponentially more meta-phorical, or more able to bear presence across their surfaces.

[13] Micheala van Versendaal and I discuss the difference between incarnate and virtual mediation in “The Discovery of Freedom: Incarnate Education and the Work of the Child.”

[14] Though Martin Buber, for one, sometimes opposes the I-Thou and I-It relation, he also famously ponders the Thou-like depth that belongs to a tree, even as he acknowledges the relative rightfulness of attending to its It-character. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 57ff. Erazim Kohák argues that all substances are “personal” in their own order, though he does not perhaps say enough about the goodness of thingliness. Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), esp. 110–23.

[15] Virgil, *Aeneid* I.462 and Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* XXVII.4–5.

[16] The objection that here we valorize man’s forceful propensity to overlay fictive values on the wonder of givenness lends too little credence to what it means to be *capax entis*. Our evaluating and prizing, in the measure that it is true, rests upon and affirmatively recapitulates the gratuitous worthiness with which any good is really endowed. Our co-affection for something can yield a warmer sensitivity to this worth. Owning together in the home, we more readily cherish the blessing that each thing is from the beginning and remains in its acquisition and incorporation. This is not to deny that attention is also a task that is frequently under threat from diversion or acedia, but to recall that one’s life-form in community naturally carries one into habitual presence to those goods that accompany and support that common life.

[17] Charles Péguy, *Portal of the Mystery of Hope* trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 128–30.

[18] Richard Wilbur, “Love Calls Us to the Things of the World.”

[19] Martin Heidegger, “The Thing” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 161-184.

[20] Heidegger elsewhere attends to this significance of our habitations for holding together the relation of land, sky, mortals, and divinities (what he refers to as the “fourfold”). In his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking,” he writes: “Dwelling, as preserving, keeps the fourfold in that with which mortals stay: in things. ... But things themselves secure the fourfold *only when* they themselves *as* things are let be in their presencing.” In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 149.

[21] St. Benedict, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Rev. Boniface Verheyen, OSB, Ch. XXXI.

[22] J.R.R. Tolkien writes of *Eä*, “the Secret Fire ... at the heart of the World” in his second mythopoetic tale of creation (“Valaquenta”) in *The Silmarillion*. I take this fire to suggest the presence of God in the Person of the Holy Spirit radiating through the goodness of his material creation. The phrase “carry the fire” comes from Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and concerns a father’s imperiled labor of handing-on civilization (and the essential goodness of reality it preserves when at its best) to his son. Both of these speak to the mission of the family, whose remembrance of things is remembrance (and trans-mission) of the good.

