

— Heather Walton, »The Consolation of Everyday Things«

— A B S T R A C T —

This article begins by outlining some of the ways in which objects have been understood to have consolatory functions in Western culture. It then explores how a recent shift in thinking about things is emerging both within academic discourse and in popular works of creative non-fiction such as Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Edmund de Waala's *The Hare with the Amber Eyes*. This new materialist thinking offers the potential to challenge accepted understandings of the consolation to be found in human/thing relations. This potential is explored with particular reference to Etty Hillesum's war-time journals which place the consolation of things in a challenging and creative theological frame.

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■—Heather Walton—■

■—THE CONSOLATION OF EVERYDAY THINGS—■

■—PROLOGUE—■

In the late 1950's, when I was a little baby at the breast of my young mother, on the other side of the Atlantic significant experiments were taking place. Harry Harlow, of the University of Wisconsin, in research funded by the Ford Foundation was hand rearing tiny infant monkeys. He wrote,

— We had separated more than 60 of these animals from their mothers 6 to 12 hours after birth and suckled them on tiny bottles. Our bottle-fed babies were healthier and heavier than monkey-mother-reared infants. We know that we are better monkey mothers than are real monkey mothers thanks to synthetic diets, vitamins, iron extracts, penicillin, chloromycetin, 5% glucose, and constant, tender, loving care. ¹

The baby monkeys receiving this »tender loving care« in their wire mesh boxes clung to the soft material on the floor of their cages. It had placed there for hygiene not comfort but the researchers noticed the little creatures became distraught when it was removed for cleaning. Intrigued by the attachment this cotton towelling generated Harlow began the famous set of experiments in which fake mother-monkeys made *either* of bare wire frames *or* padded by soft cloth leered, with grotesque tennis ball faces, over their trembling charges. Even though the unyielding wire mothers dispensed food the baby monkeys sought the soft comfort of the cloth mothers. These mother substitutes quickly became key figures in debates about maternity, the role of women in the workplace and the nature of the child parent bond. More than this Harlow claimed while »it is possible that in the foreseeable future neonatal nursing will not be regarded as a necessity, but as a luxury ... it is comforting to know that we are now in contact with the nature of love.«²

A terrible tragedy split apart the life of my best friend, Chloe, when she was 13 years old. She had gone with her mother to visit her older sister who was married and living in Germany. Her father had remained at home and went about his normal routines. He mowed the lawn, pruned the roses, put the milk bottles on the doorstep, placed Chloe's pocket money in its accustomed place – a little jewelry box in her bedroom – and then he took his own life. In need of an income her mother returned to work, found that she liked it very much and was quickly promoted. As she worked longer and longer hours her

daughter was compensated by gifts, usually of wonderful new clothes, hot pants, miniskirts, midcoats, make up, white Mary Quant tights. Fashionable, grown-up items I could only dream of. My mother said, »That child needs love but instead she gets too much money spent on her. It's wicked and it's cruel.« I was not sure about this judgment at all.

Just before the Russian tanks rolled into Prague my friend Sybil fled the country with her parents – her father was a senior figure in the Dubcek government. Their departure was secret and swift so they were unable to take many possessions with them. One thing that Sybil did bring was her white muslin party dress. The dress was old-fashioned, multi-layered, had petticoats and a blue satin ribbon sash. I had never seen anything like it. Growing up in the »60's I was accustomed to crimplene, nylon and polyester myself. This unusual garment looked not only different but more dignified. It spoke to me of a strange, formal country very far away. Sybil allowed her new friends to try the dress on and we appeared transformed in it. »How you must miss home,« we said to her. We had become aware of the great distance she had travelled through wrapping ourselves in the folds of her garment. »Its funny«, she said, »I never really liked this dress when I wore it there but I love it here.«

— PEOPLE AND THINGS —

This paper will explore the consolation that can be gained from things; from ordinary and commonplace objects. I will argue that this consolatory function has been undervalued and underestimated because of the habitual denigration of the significance of material objects within our common cultural imaginary.

Interestingly, Collins English Dictionary defines consolation as a person, *or thing*, that is a comfort in a time of grief or suffering.³ I find it significant that »thing« is coupled with person so directly in this definition. Yet in popular wisdom the satisfaction that things can offer is usually seen as a poor substitute for other losses. The consolation offered is like that of the »consolation prize« at a children's party – a tawdry, deceptive substitute for the desired good. Things may offer comfort, to be sure, but we deeply recoil from ideas that they can do so »like a real mother«. We are sure that commodities, things made or bought or sold, cannot truly console the lost child and we do not believe that a dress can make the world a home again.

The dominant theoretical discourses of Western culture support these commonplace assumptions through making a significant distinction between the person and the thing when functioning as consolation. However, it is not possible to sustain this strict demarcation if we examine how things console us in the frequent processes of loss that constitute our daily lives.

Some of the most important work on this subject comes from psychoanalytic theory. Donald Winnicott's observations concerning the role transitional objects play in allowing children to substitute for the presence of the mother and thus make a successful transition to differentiated personhood remain particularly helpful.⁴ As Margaret Gibson writes in her moving essay, entitled »Melancholy Objects«⁵ the transitional processes of child development can also be mirrored in grief:

—According to Winnicott, transitional objects are invested with a magical quality – they have protective powers warding off danger and offering comfort. Teddy bears, dolls and other toys are animated egos ... [through] which a child exercises control of its environment and relationships. Transitional objects express the anguish and militate against the mother's absence as a primary figure and corporeal site of absence and loss ... In other words, there is an existential dimension to the transitional objects in that they mediate nothingness. If the child negotiates the outside world and the existential anxiety of absence partly through the transitional object, it is not surprising that the grieving might also negotiate their lost object with emotional props and buffers. In grieving, as in childhood, transitional objects are both a means of holding on and letting go.⁶

In her research amongst 30 recently bereaved subjects Gibson investigates the tremendous power of the transitional object in mourning and goes as far as to state that in the most simple and poignant ways people grieve »with and through objects« which comfort them. However, following the lead of Freud, her model for this grieving is fundamentally as a process of repudiation. People require the object to make a transition from love to acceptance of loss and then to letting go. As this happens the transitional object is necessarily abjected; it must lose its significance, must also, in a sense, die. Always a poor substitute for the person who has gone the thing gradually deanimates and becomes inert matter again to be appropriately disposed of or hidden away.

From Marxist theory we have also learned to acknowledge but simultaneously critique the consolation offered by things; objects that we deeply desire but which are in fact destructive of human life and social relationships. Interestingly, Marx makes a direct connection between the illusory comforts of commodities and the illusory comforts of religion. »A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.«⁷ Through a process of mystification, he warns us, the commodities we

produce console us for the losses we endure in the productive processes of capitalism. Their allure subtly disguises the alienation of our labour, the exploitation of our creativity and the enslavement, for profit, of those inventive, convivial and transformative qualities that make us human. This is a catalogue of serious accusations and, following on from them, it becomes clear that Marx deems it as necessary to escape from the dreamlike consolations of things as it is to escape the dangerous opiate of religion. An awakening to the true conditions of our lives is necessary – beyond the comforts of dreaming.

Marx's work on commodity fetishism is brilliant, powerful and persuasive. Today it has become deeply influential, in a way I do not think he would have entirely approved of, in the burgeoning mass of critical writing that routinely place things in opposition to nature and people. It has been compellingly re-inscribed in the political pessimism that marks those analyses of postmodernism that proclaim the triumph of the mysterious fetish (now as likely to be a sign as an object) over the embodied human. This is the key note sounded in the work of those cultural prophets who continually warn us that our fragile humanity is being overcome by the object-systems we have created. Jean Baudrillard⁸ and Zygmunt Bauman⁹ stand as representatives of this starkly apocalyptic discourse.

In contrast to social theory, anthropology has had, in some ways, a rather kinder view of the object world. The anthropologists of modern times have accorded very significant roles indeed to things as they function in rituals, exchanges, gift giving or in the routine commerce of everyday life. In fact, as the dominant anthropological approach¹⁰ has been to interpret objects as symbols bearing human meanings, they have thus become somewhat detached from the murky world of matter and understood to function like language. Things should be understood as signifiers and valued for the meaning they carry and the communication they make possible. In this frame no-one could deny the many forms of consolation that are made possible through objects but these should be properly understood as continuous with rather than differentiated from other person-centred cultural processes. Things are assimilated because they have become invisible in their »thingness« and have been baptised into the commonwealth of persons.

At this point I should make very clear that I owe a great deal to the work of Winnicott, would regard myself as Marxian in my sociological/political outlook and continue to think anthropologists like Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner still have a great deal to teach us about the meaning systems through which we shape our lives. I also care for the planet and want to save the world. However, like many others, I have become dissatisfied with an understanding of things that I have come to believe is shaped by a Western cultural inheritance that is

founded upon the denigration of materiality. It is important, not least because of the challenges we face politically and environmentally, to »disassimilate« objects from people and find a way to »both understand things and do full justice to their materiality?«¹¹ Unfortunately this is a difficult challenge because, as Webb Keane states:

— The effort seems still to be haunted and confounded by such ancient dichotomies as form and substance, essence and accident, matter and spirit. Old habits die hard, and a host of poststructuralist and postmodern redemptions have not entirely shaken themselves free of these conceptual genealogies. Perhaps, as some have argued, we can't shake these dichotomies because they are so deeply part of our metaphysics of presence ... because we have always been heirs of the Greeks, or conversely because we are now capitalist moderns.¹²

While the challenge may be daunting it is also interesting – and I would now like to briefly discuss a number of ways of »thinking about things« that generate more positive understandings of the consolations they offer. I should say I am being very selective here and am not attempting to describe the whole field of »thing theory«, which is a vigorous and rapidly growing area of academic debate. Also, as will be apparent, the various forms of new materialist thinking I shall consider do not neatly cohere into one overarching model – although they do contain related themes and insights.

— SMALL COSMOLOGIES —

I begin this brief exploration with the work of Daniel Miller who has been one of the key spokespersons for a revised approach to material culture and an active polemicist for the new thinking. Miller is an anthropologist and much of his research has been on the significance of objects in diverse cultural contexts from Trinidad to East London. He has particularly focussed on common objects, clothing, furniture, ubiquitous stuff. In this context it is interesting to note that Miller is Jewish and his work contains a number of references to the importance of things in the spiritual »economy«.

Miller's key insight is that »people-make-things-make-people«. In other words things have a formative role in the construction of culture and participate with other agents in what he views as a *dialectical*¹³ processes that bring our worlds into being. Things are not inconsequential, they are not inessential, their effects are not transitory; they are transformative and their influence can be viewed as »kindly« rather than destructive. Miller argues that it is impossible to imagine human culture without the nurturing guardianship performed

by things. He takes up and amplifies Pierre Bourdieu's narrative of how amongst the Kabyle a child is introduced to the order of the house and required to learn things must be placed high or low, on the left or right. This constructed order represents a domestic induction into a wider cosmology which maintains the pattern of existence despite the apparent diversity of experience:

— This seems to me to correspond very well to what I call the humility of things. Objects don't shout at you like teachers ... but they help you gently to learn how to act appropriately ... objects make people. Before we can make things we are ourselves grown up and matured in the light of things that come to us from previous generations. We walk around the rice terraces or road systems, the housing and gardens that are effectively ancestral. These unconsciously direct our footsteps and are the landscape of our imagination, as well as the cultural environment to which we adapt ... Things, not mind you individual things, but the whole system of things with their internal order, make us the people we are. And they are exemplary in their humility, never really drawing attention to what we owe them. They just get on with the job.¹⁴

So people form webs of meaning through complex interactions with networks of persons *and* things and yet so often in our binary culture we assume that healthy relationships with persons are primary and authentic and relations with things function as secondary substitutes, at best, and dangerous consolations at worst. This assumption is challenged by a simple but effective piece of research conducted by Miller in an ordinary London street and published, appropriately for the concerns expressed in this journal edition, as *The Comfort of Things*.¹⁵

When undertaking their investigations Miller and a colleague questioned inhabitants about the objects they lived with. They found that those who enjoyed a rich relationships with objects (commonplace things – a woman kept MacDonaldis »Happy Meals« toys whilst a couple made elaborate Christmas decorations) had a similarly rich relationship with people. Those whose lives were starkly bereft of beloved possessions were similarly starved of meaningful personal relationships.

But his research took Miller beyond reversing the terms of the familiar moral equation that there is an inverse relationship between love of people and love of things. He discovered people *not only* engage with objects as part of a holistic system of meaningful relationships but *they also* construct within domestic space microcosmological systems often far more meaningful and present to them than the larger social and

religious systems in which they may participate at one remove. Through the simple way treasured objects are arranged and assembled in the domestic sphere we can gain an understanding of the cosmological frame in which the person finds meaning and consolation in life. Miller found people more than willing to explain these small, ordered tableaux when questioned – and make strong links between favourite objects and the worldviews they sustained:

— The point is that Household material culture may express an order which in each case seems equivalent to what *one might term* a social cosmology, *if this* was the order of things, values and relationships of a society, A very little cosmology perhaps ... and one that in only a few cases ever develops into an abstract philosophy or system of belief ... Nevertheless such a cosmology is holistic rather than fragmented and ... [although] the focus is on the interior space these aesthetics are not isolated from the wider world.¹⁶

Indeed these micro-material cosmologies sustain identity and help generate the resilience necessary to pattern life creatively and interact meaningfully with others. Comforting things create people comfortable with themselves and others. They form us as persons who are able to look outward and explore the wider world. Beyond the simple consolation they offer a pathway is opened to deeper social participation and in this process things can even serve as vehicles to mediate our hopes and spiritual visions.

— ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER ... —

We can see within Miller's thinking the idea that things play a dynamic role in dialectical cultural relations however, the idea that things possess agency (are actants, can do things, make changes that produce results) is more fully developed in the forms of thing thinking frequently bundled together as ANT (Actor Network Theory). The generative influence of Alfred Gell's work on the »agency« of art works¹⁷ and Bruno Latour's¹⁸ work on networks of actants (human, none human, corporeal and none spatial) who co-operatively produce outcomes has become very influential in a number of fields such as studies on the porous boundaries between humans and machines, the ways in which cities function, weather mapping etc, etc.

In terms of our concerns here I would like to focus on the way in which the philosopher Jane Bennett has incorporated aspects of this thinking into her work on vibrant matter and enchanting objects. Concerned that a denigration of materiality was directly implicated in a disastrous approach to the natural

environment Bennett welcomed the challenge of new materialist thinking to view agency as confederacy – particularly in its resistance to all attempts to parse the world into vibrant life and dead matter. »What«, Bennett asks, »would the world look like and feel like were the life/matter binary to fall into disuse?«¹⁹ We then might be able to explore those important uneven spaces where none humans are actants, where agency

— is always an assemblage, where matter is not inert, where man is not lord but everything is made of the same quirky stuff...I can't predict what politics would emerge from this. My hunch is that the grass would be greener in a world of vital materialities.²⁰

Recognising that to accord agency to things can be seen as a form of animism or vitalism, Bennett argues that there are considerable strengths within these frequently disparaged modes of engaging the world – at least when we use them strategically, recognising their inherent anthropomorphism and holding them in tension with a robust materialism. This approach is increasingly gaining credibility as a challenging counterbalance to the mechanical instrumentality of Western rationalism and a recovery of animism in new forms is becoming a topic of debate far beyond the study of so-called primitive religious systems.²¹ Bennett holds that the sense of wonder we frequently experience in relation to objects confronts us as a compelling force. Her use of the »magical« discourse of enchantment does, of course, bring us directly back to Marx and his critique of the »mystical« commodity.

Bennett has developed her work as a respectful form of post-Marxist thinking. She argues that Marx rightly perceived the mysterious and attractive power of things. However, his accompanying analysis of the dangers of »commodity fetishism« through which »[h]umans become blind to the pain and suffering embedded in the commodity by virtue an unjust and exploitative system of production«²² made him, and his later interpreters, downplay the real possibility that we might find objects wondrous because they are wonderful. Do they not generate physical, emotional and aesthetic pleasure and actively impress themselves upon us in every aspect of life? Furthermore, Bennett challenges us to consider an idea that has been radically suppressed in critical political discourse namely that,

— part of the energy needed to challenge injustice comes from the reservoir of enchantment – including that derived from commodities. For without enchantment you might lack the impetus to act against the very injustices that you critically discern²³

I think it is very interesting that if we follow Miller and Bennett we can discern a route leading directly from the comfort of things to our involvement with people and onwards to the construction of political and social visions. It is an unfamiliar trajectory within a cultural system still haunted by the ancient dichotomies. These established binaries not only separate people from things they create a divide between what comforts and consoles us in the material present from what challenges us and provokes us to act in the cause of imagined futures. When I was a little girl I used to sing a hymn in which God was described as source of both hope and consolation. At a young age I thought there was a contradiction between the two. Either you got what you hoped for (the sacred) or you got consolation for your loss (the partial and profane). I perceive consolation now in more holistic terms as gently restoring active, spiritual engagement with the world as it is with all its challenges and ambiguities.

— POETIC MATERIALS —

At this point I want to introduce a form of »thinking about things« that differs somewhat from the dominant trajectory (represented by Miller, Gell, Latour, Bennett and others) and yet still offers interesting perspectives upon the theme of consolation that is provoking my explorations here. Tim Ingold, a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, has become celebrated for his radical and creative thinking on the relationships between art, things and the environment. Ingold is a very difficult thinker to pin down, not only because his work is often tangential to dominant theories, nor simply because he moves between many different fields of expertise. He has studied reindeer herding in Finland, the dynamics of walking, the connections between art, architecture, anthropology and archaeology and is always generating new research territories. Ingold also writes in a poetical, polemical and peculiar way. His most famous essay on materials and materiality, for instance, begins with this unusual demand:

— *Before you begin to read this chapter, please go outside and find a largish stone, though not so big that it cannot be easily lifted and carried indoors. Bring it in, and immerse it in a pail of water or under a running tap. Then place it before you on your desk – perhaps on a tray or plate so as not to spoil your desktop. Take a good look at it. If you like, you can look at it again from time to time as you read the chapter.*²⁴

As stated above, the contribution Ingold has made to debate calls into question some of the key assumptions about objects that many new materialists cherish. These include notions of

the dialectic relationship between people and objects advocated by Miller as well as some of the understandings of agency and assemblages adopted by Bennett and her mentors. He makes this challenge on the basis that the focus of such thinking (either implicitly or explicitly) is the human encounter with materiality, primarily figured through persons meeting objects. This reduces things to a common essence, namely materiality (when no such essence exists) and subtly maintains the dominant binary system – albeit in the new form of a confederacy of actants. For Ingold, this move occludes the fact really no distinctions can be made between *anything* that exists in the general flow of life. What happens when we literally and metaphorically lift the carpet on materialist thinking is that we observe,

— beneath its surface a tangled web of meandrine complexity, in which – among a myriad of other things – the secretions of gall wasps get caught up with old iron, acacia sap, goose feathers and calf-skins, and the residue from heated limestone mixes with emissions from pigs, cattle, hens and bees. For materials such as these do not present themselves as tokens of some common essence – materiality – that endows every worldly entity with its inherent »objectness«; rather, they partake in the very processes of the world's ongoing generation and regeneration²⁵

So »beneath the carpet« there are myriad materials in process and all things, including ourselves, form part of this. As Martin Holbraad argues, Ingold sees humans and things as submerged »on an equal ontological footing«²⁶ in a sea of diverse materials – that is materials not materiality. Learning to survive in this underwater environment is a humbling but exhilarating process.

— Once we acknowledge our immersion, what this ocean reveals to us is [...] a flux in which materials of the most diverse kinds – through processes of admixture and distillation, of coagulation and dispersal, and of evaporation and precipitation – undergo continual generation and transformation. The forms of things, far from having been imposed from without upon an inert substrate, arise and are borne along – as indeed we are too – within this current of materials.²⁷

I mention Ingold's rather different perspective here because it is challenging in the context of our previous thinking about things and the consolation they bring. I think it is helpful when reading Ingold to understand that his thinking on the properties of materials is related to the way an artist or craftsperson

understands them. Materials are not brute matter awaiting form and neither do they possess fixed, inherent qualities waiting to be discovered by the artist. »They are neither objectively determined nor subjectively imagined but practically experienced. In that sense, every property is a condensed story. To describe the properties of materials is to tell the stories of what happens to them as they flow, mix and mutate«. ²⁸ These are processes which we humans know so well as we are deeply implicated in them.

I think this is a very productive way of understanding things in relation to our topic of consolation. We engage with things as materials from which creative possibilities emerge – and which can always be taken. In the flux and flow of our life world we too are implicit in the poetic potentialities of things. This is both a modern and an ancient insight. De Certeau, the social theorist and mystical writer, drew both upon his particular form of embodied materialism and an Ignatian attentiveness to a world in the process of transformation to describe the human as a poetic creator and poetic creation. Our fragile voices sounding faintly in the systems through which we move »as dancers passing lightly through the field of the other« ²⁹. Have courage, de Certeau encourages us and Ingold enjoins us, to inhabit the poetic potentiality of an environment infinitely fluid and ambiguous and in which what is human is always a fragile creation. What appears at first to be unhomely is in fact your natural home. Abide and find comfort there.

— CONSOLING OBJECTS AND RADICAL VISIONS —

It is not possible to combine the work of Miller (a neo-Hegelian) with Bennett (a modern vitalist with debts to Spinoza and Marx) and Ingold (who draws upon Heidegger and Deleuze) into one comprehensive way of understanding the consolations of everyday things and how these renew understandings of spiritual agency in the world. I don't have a problem with this myself as my academic training is in literature and theology. In literature we are quite content to let theory be metaphor – something which generates startling new insights and provokes new thinking but is not necessarily »true« in the empirical sense of the word. And theologians, as everyone knows, make a living from speaking about what cannot be spoken about so let us do so boldly whilst recognizing the intractable nature of materiality and that we will never comprehend the »true« nature of things.

But my relaxed approach to the complexity and contradictions inherent in thing theory does not mean I regard it as an engaging but impractical form of esoteric knowledge. I teach and write about it because I find it helpful. We need new ways to explore why and how things matter to people and what roles they play in our lives if we are to live peaceably in this

heterogeneous and fragile, multi-faceted life flow – or whatever you want to call it. What all the approaches above have in common is that they challenge us to examine our prejudices and assumptions as they present a far higher view of the role of things in our lives than do many of the modern theories which still continue to predominate within the Academy. They also generate an understanding of consolation that encompasses comfort and change in one inclusive gesture. I think it is very interesting that this form of consolation can be seen as having political and poetic dimensions – as well, of course, as spiritual challenges to make.

Similar approaches to the dynamic consolation of everyday »things« presented here are also increasingly evident in contemporary novels and creative non-fiction. Some recent publications that take a thing-centred approach to experience have generated profound impact. Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*³⁰ quickly became a classic in »grief work« and explores the straightforwardly animistic qualities with which we imbue the objects that come to the fore in our lives when we experience deep trauma and loss. To my mind a more interesting book is the *The Hare with the Amber Eyes* by Edmund de Waal³¹. This bestselling work delicately displays, through recounting the »lives« of a set of small Japanese carved figures, threads connecting people and things that stretch over a long period of time -nearly two centuries. It also demonstrates how things and people are intimately bound up together in political and cultural processes. Impressionism, fascism, feminism, postcolonialism, sexual revolutions and personal loves all figure in the pages of this capacious book as we are shown how objects comfort and sustain people through periods of violent social change. Furthermore, because the text is also written by an artist, by a potter, we are never allowed to forget that things are not merely instrumental – they are wonderfully formed and works of grace.

Whilst these recent texts are valuable (and indeed there is a whole literary genre of »thing life writing« developing) there are many other works from previous eras, particularly I would argue texts written by women, that take a profound view of the consolation of material things. We have worked on some of these texts together in the Centre for Literature, Theology and the Arts at the University of Glasgow and have particularly focused on the »material mysticism« of female writers experiencing the turmoil of the middle years of the twentieth century.

In this edition my colleague, Elizabeth Anderson (now of Stirling University), interrogates the work of the celebrated modernist HD who developed a spiritual awareness focussed upon epiphanic encounters mediated through objects. These might be beloved things, often remembered from her childhood, or everyday objects that figure a divine sustaining presence in a

world made uninhabitable by violent conflict. Her most poignant writing on this topic was generated out of the experience of the London Blitz. We have also explored the novels of Jean Rhys who, in a rather contrasting vein, creates a stark, modernist symbolism depicting both good and evil out of the furniture of cheap Hotels and the fabric of fashionable clothing stores. Elizabeth Smart, whose work I have particularly researched,³² generated a domestic sublime in which the heights and depths of experience could be charted within the mundane confines of a living space populated by pots and pans, homemade curtains, washing lines and children's clothes.

— AESTHETICS OF CONSOLATION —

I would like to finish this article, and draw together its diverse threads, by briefly referring to one of the most powerful articulations of the consoling power manifested through things to have emerged in twentieth century writing. The war-time journals of Etty Hillesum record her personal and spiritual journeys in occupied Amsterdam from 1942 through to her transportation to the Dutch transit camp at Westerbork. Etty was taken from there by train to Auschwitz where she died in 1943.

I love Etty Hillesum, how could you not love someone who begins her spiritual journal with the comment that this writing is both vulnerable and ecstatic; like the last »liberating« cry in orgasm?³³ I love her also because of the delicate schema she bravely creates which opposes the awful experiences of her time with sex, beauty, poetry *and things*. She creates an aesthetics of consolation in which everyday objects play a key role. As the net around the Jewish community tightens she takes increasing delight in the power of objects to point to sustain an alternative reality to the one of violence and war. She delights in a red cyclamen placed on her writing desk beneath a small lamp, on the fact that glory can still be experienced in

— An old dress, a little bit of sun... I am coming over to your place right now. I have put on a beauty of a new pink wool blouse, and I have washed myself from head to toe in lilac soap.«³⁴

We see a process very similar to that described by Miller as the creation of small cosmologies at work displayed in her writing. Life becomes focused down, distilled, displayed in very little tableaux of resistance. She writes to her lover:

— I once quietly bemoaned the fact that there is so little space for our physical love in your two small rooms, and no chance of going anywhere else because of all those notices and prohibitions. But now it seems to me a virtual paradise of promise and freedom. Your little room, your

small table lamp. My lilac soap ... God knows how much that means ... [for] all that may lie in store³⁵

Etty found in the folded back sheets of a lover's bed, in the well-fingered sheets of a poetry book a power that consoles and confronts nihilism and death. More than this, towards the end she developed that sense, such an important part of much mystical and poetic writing, of intermingling with the things that surround her and a taking up the whole within the divine:

— I often see visions of poisonous green smoke, I am with the hungry, with the ill-treated and the dying, every day, but I am also with the jasmine and that piece of sky beyond my window³⁶

— From my bed I stared out through the large open window. And it was once more as if life with all its mysteries were close to me, as if I could touch it. I had a feeling that I was resting against the naked breast of life and I thought, how strange it is wartime. There are concentration camps.³⁷

I am aware this is a disturbing point on which to finish. The comfort of things in the face of terror. However, that is really where I started my talk. By trying to discern what strange and fragile forms of consolation they offer in the face of loss. —■

■ — E N D N O T E S —

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