

# Transforming the Object, Rebuilding the World: The Transcendent Power of Everyday Care

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In his treatise on the phenomenology of the home, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard expresses an important but all too often overlooked truth: “A dreamer can reconstruct the world from an object that he transforms magically through his care of it.”<sup>1</sup>

Each of us has some functional object in our lives that we return to over and over through life so that it begins to become more to us than its use: a pair of shoes, a favorite pen or pocket knife, a chair, a car, a cabin. These are objects we invest ourselves in; we care for them, dust them, sharpen them, resole them, take great care not to bend their nibs. Often these are the things we want to outlive us, to go on to our friends and loved ones after our lives cease. Is this mere sentimentality? An anchoring to the close-at-hand & concrete in a metaphysically uncertain world? There is more to it than that: over time our maintenance transforms these objects of use into objects of beauty, perhaps even vessels of a kind of truth.

This is often apparent to us in our experience but it is hard to place exactly how this meta-morphosis happens. What are its mechanisms? And why should it emerge from a process – maintenance – that means, at its root, to attempt the preservation of the status quo?

The things with which we share our lives begin as “found objects” – everyday and devoid of meaning beyond their function. Many are the products of modern mass-manufacturing that bear no mark distinguishing them from the objects that sat to their left and right through the assembly lines and warehouses that birth them. *And then* – coming to *use* they begin to come to *life*. Use degrades them. Repair maintains them. But also, in certain cases, transforms them. What is this transformation Bachelard speaks of when he says, “a human being can devote himself to things and make them his own by perfecting their beauty. A little more beautiful and we have something quite different”?<sup>2</sup>

Operating as Bachelard and his peers did by making observations about particulars – by inquiry into anecdote and affect – I want to probe this process and its implications. This is unlikely to bring us to any systematic truth of the matter but, I think, it may do better than systematics at uncovering some real truths among these illusive impressions and recurring questions.

Let’s turn our attention to objects and questions and see what emerges.

## I. Care-taking: The Transformative power of Attention

I have a pair of work boots that I virtually live in three seasons of the year. They are of enormous use to me: their chemical-resistant, water-impenetrable rubber soles; their durable, rigid, double-thick toes; their comfortable, pliable, high ankles. They are a manufactured good, the product of serial reproduction, and they are a product with a brand and a model name: Red Wing™ Iron Ranger ©.

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Beacon Press, Boston, 1994), p. 70.

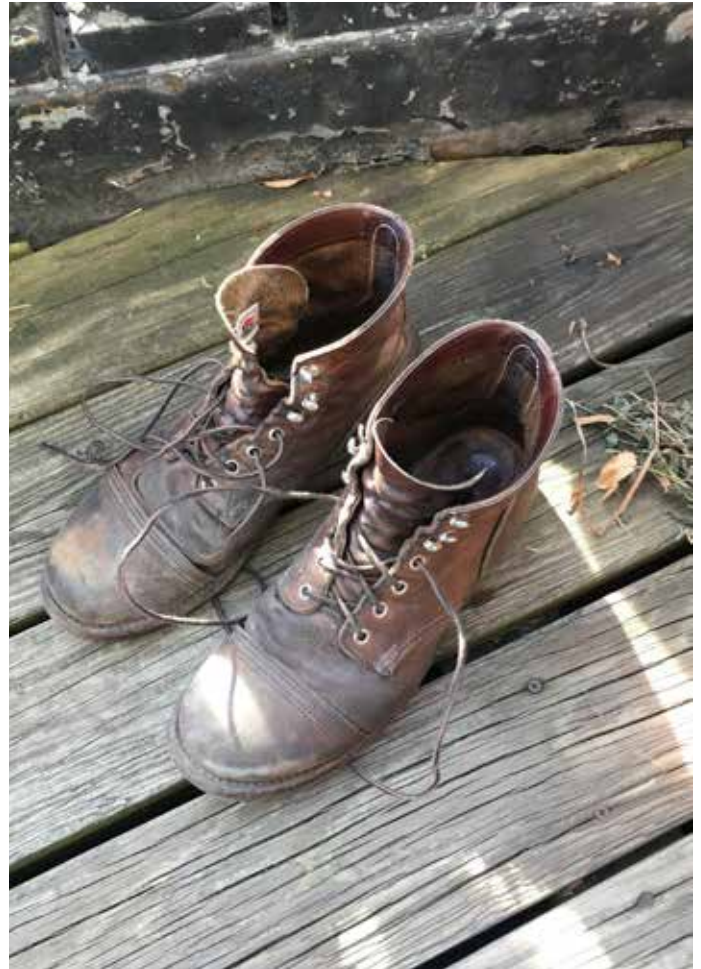
<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69.

I see boots just like them on other's feet, in other's lockers, beneath other's mudroom benches. But, when I pay attention, it becomes clear that these other boots are not "just like" my boots. Many of the wear patterns on mine are common to the boots of others – after all, feet all flex in much the same way: stretching and wrinkling the leather across the base of the toes; wearing first, by the arc of the leg, the toe and heel of the sole.

But my boots have more wear than those of friends. My boots have lived longer.

I hear a friend say they bought new boots and I am compelled to ask what happened to the old ones. The answers are inevitable – the leather became parched and tore, or otherwise ceased to resist moisture, or perhaps the soles wore too thin, or the thread holding two parts together snapped and unraveled.

My boots have lived longer. I take some pride in this, it's true. But my care, not my pride sustains them. We commonly say that I have "given them my attention". With any object of use, we must give *some* attention to the thing in order to accomplish the ends towards which it is useful. The first time I put my boots on, I had to "pay attention" to them insofar as was necessary to bring them into use. I made sure of which fit on my left foot and which my right. I was careful of how I laced and tied them to distribute pressure evenly and keep them tied tight and out of the grasp of anything that might catch or cut them.



Only as time passed, as my boots sustained use, did I come to give them a *different* kind of attention – as objects in and of themselves. This is the attention that defines care. Often this begins as a concern with maintaining the usefulness of them as tools – if they do not resist water any longer, they do not protect my feet; if they are unsightly, they do not assist in helping me look the way I would like to. But very quickly, as I take my boots in hand and begin to pay attention to the specific surface cracks and dry spots, I begin to be concerned with sustaining them in their own regard. I rub them with some wax until they are saturated and then wipe away the excess. This begins to change their color and it leaves some of my own hand in their compositions – not the accidental marks incurred during use but the conscious and highly personal marks of repair. Later in their life I have had to resew parts of them with whatever thread I have on hand – burnt orange in place of the original white. Or I have chosen at the cobbler to have a different type of sole attached than the factory had initially included – something thicker; more useful but also more proportional in my eye. My attention changes the object, transforming it in a conscious way from quotidian to unique.

At a certain point, when I have been through five tubs of wax and resoled my boots three times, I have to realize that I could have purchased a brand new pair of highly functional Red Wing™ Iron Ranger © work boots for the expense I have put into my old ones. But I don't, and I won't until I absolutely have to, because my boots now have meaning for me beyond their functionality. My investment in them is more than their function or their monetary value. My boots are a part of my life. They *live* in my life. They have, through my care

come *alive*. And this process started the moment I began to give them attention beyond what was needed to sustain their function.

In his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin indicates the power of this encounter between object and attention to overcome what he sees as the general lifelessness of things in the manufacturing age, saying that, “permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation... reactivates the object.”<sup>3</sup>

The marks of care left indelibly in my boots are, for other attention-paying people, gateways into my own world, too. Of course one might read in them that I spend more time on construction sites than farm fields, but one can also see *that* and *how* I care for them; one can see where my attentions devote themselves; one can see what is meaningful to me. Bachelard loves to highlight this aspect of care: its capacity to bring objects into the fold of the human community.

*When a poet rubs a piece of furniture - even vicariously - when he puts a little fragrant wax on his table with the woolen cloth that lends warmth to everything that it touches, he creates a new object; he increases the object's human dignity; he registers the object officially as a member of the human household.*<sup>4</sup>

There is also a sense in which truth comes forward in this double attention – the meaning cultivating and meaning recognizing kinds. “Attention” may be close to the disposition that Martin Heidegger believes we must all adopt in order to perceive the emergence of a transcendent, poetic truth from the quotidian, scientific one. In fact, he calls this deportment towards objects “care-taking”.<sup>5</sup> Indeed it may be for him that this attentiveness to things in and of themselves, this care-taking, insofar as it prepares the ground for the emergence of poetic truth, of beauty, is itself a philosophical act.<sup>6</sup>

So, by my attention, by my maintenance, I do not keep my boots the same; I do not maintain them, merely, but I transform them. The marks of these transformations are the registrations of my attentions and indicate the framework of meaning that I build around them even as I reconstruct their physical stuff. This initiates them as living members of my household and it lays the groundwork for them to present themselves as more than everyday; as more beautiful, as more authentic, perhaps even as more “true”. Through my attentions, which manifest themselves in acts of repair and maintenance, I come to perceive my boots in a new way and to perceive *in* them more than their physicality and function.

## II. Dulling & Sharpening: The Object of Attention in Time

I have a pocket knife that I carry with me most days. It was my great grandfather's knife; his initials are etched into its sterling handle, only visible some days as my hands work over it, tarnishing and polishing. I found it in the mess on top of my dad's dresser sometime in high school and he told me I could have it. He never really carried it, but his father always had, and his grandfather.

What stood out to me about the knife there on the dresser, even before I knew its history was the conspicuousness of the use and of the care that this object had seen. Most striking to me were the blades, two of them, one at each

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, *Illuminations*, (Schocken Books, New York, 1969), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth”, *Pathmarks*, p. 143.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 152.

end of the handle. They were incredibly narrow in the dimension that most blades are wide. They were much narrower than they had once been, judging by the width of the handle and of the material where the blade met the handle. They had been worn down.

As a lifetime outdoorsman, the son and grandson and great-grandson of outdoorsmen, I have seen and used and owned and swapped and broken and repaired countless folding knives. The folding knife, whether it has thirty tools or one simple blade, is the classic object of casual utility. It is the quintessence of the unthought-about tool: always present, rarely considered in its own regard. As we have highlighted, it is only at the moment where care and maintenance are required that things fully come to our attention, and this is no different for a knife.

What is maintenance for a knife? Sharpening, most significantly. But there is a tension in saying that sharpening is maintenance: in order for a knife to be made sharp, we must wear away some material. In caring for the thing, in allowing it to continue its role in our lives, we degrade it. As we use it, then care for it, we move it closer and closer to uselessness. The maintenance performed on my knife by my great grandfather, by my grandfather, by me, gives this utilitarian object life but also participates in its progress towards what we might, with some poetic license, see as the object's death. Three out of four generations of Pierces have worn it away in the name of retaining its utility and now its once-broad blades are needle-like. Even as maintenance purports to resist or arrest the progressive deterioration of an object in time, it so often participates in it.



Time simultaneously tears down the objects of our lives and builds up their meaning to us. Care; repair stands between these two vectors, simultaneously acknowledging the destructive and constructive powers of time, often by channeling the former into the later.

Would it be of value to do what my Dad did and not use the knife? Just as he no longer uses his grandfather's watch, but has, rather, allowed it to stop and placed it in a case on the wall? When we arrest the progress of a thing in time, do we thereby pay tribute to the care once given by others? To me, my great-grandfather's watch there on the wall presents as a dead object, like so many artifacts in museums. But the same man's knife is *alive* in my pocket. While it is true that, if I am to keep living with it, to keep sharpening it, I am participating in the deterioration of this knife, I am also keeping it alive because I am investing it with care and attention and meaning. It has a life only so long as it has a place in *my* life, and it can speak to me and bring forward its beauty to me only so long as I have a caring relationship to it. Were I to "archive" it like the watch, it would become entirely instrumentalized once again – it would serve only to transmit the memory or the scientific facts of the man who used it, like an artifact, or a tomb.

I am reminded of the striking passage in Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Crusoe in England" in which Robinson Crusoe, long since rescued and returned to his birthplace, reflects upon the "archived" objects that once populated his cast-away life. His attention dwells lovingly on *his* knife:

*The knife there on the shelf—  
it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.  
It lived. How many years did I  
beg it, implore it, not to break?  
I knew each nick and scratch by heart,  
the bluish blade, the broken tip,  
the lines of wood-grain on the handle ...  
Now it won't look at me at all.  
The living soul has dribbled away.<sup>7</sup>*

What was once endowed with a living soul by the care it received is now lifeless. It lived, and yet it now reeks of meaning "like a crucifix" – not significant in itself but only as a reference to something *other* that was before; a symbol, not a life. Bishop's Crusoe goes on to say: "The local museum's asked me to / leave everything to them", and he is stunned: "How can anyone want such things?"<sup>8</sup> What beauty, what emergent truth stems from the lifeless objects that no longer call out for maintenance?

When we care for a thing, when we give it attention in and of itself, independent of any reference it bears to people places or things outside of it, we give it life. When we continue to make use of it and to make it a part of our lives, we acknowledge its life in time. Just like other living things, decay and death are inherent in its life. When I sharpen my knife, I give it care but I also sharpen it so that I can continue to *use* it; I participate in bringing it to life and sustaining its life, even in the face of its physical erasure. Just as use without attention relegates an object to lifeless utility, to commit attention without use, to attempt to arrest decay and remove the cared-for from the flow of time can only serve to render it lifeless and relegate it to the past.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, "Crusoe in England," *Poems*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



### III. Caring Together: Opening up an Extended Community of Care

There is a long, simple table by the window at the Poet's House in Lower Manhattan where I like to work. I love it in some part because of the afternoon light and views of the Hudson it affords, but other tables, couches, desks spread along the curving western facade of the reading room offer the same. I can't really say that its location within the reading room, somewhat closer to Hart Crane than Wallace Stevens, is of great meaning to me either. It is the table itself that stands out.

It is a fairly typical wooden table of vaguely Scandinavian origin. Its materials are solid enough, and fair consideration has been made for expansion and contraction of the wood over time. The joints, on the other hand — those between the legs and the apron, between the short and long stretchers, between the individual boards that make up the top — are ill conceived and seem to have failed, each in turn. Perhaps I should say *were* ill conceived, since, just as each has failed, each has been carefully addressed, given attention, repaired. And herein lies the root of my love for this table.

Someone, or more likely many someones have, over the years, invested themselves in the longevity of this table far beyond its base value as a derivative-of a derivative-of seventy-year-old Danish carpentry. Of course the Poet's House, as a not-for-profit cannot be replacing tables all the time, but the serial surgeries performed on this table represent a commitment far beyond the organization's needs.

Moreover, the interventions have not been made with what we might call a designer's eye — there is no sense that the effort was to reconfigure the overall composition to make up for what it originally lacked in proportion or detail. The care-takers have exceeded any reasonable sense of keeping up the economic value of the table by staving off the need for a replacement and their "maintenance" has so altered the original that it is unrecognizable as the original. So, what is it that they are maintaining, and why?

I would charge that these care-takers are together maintaining the particular "life" of the table in a sense that transcends the table as a physically identifiable thing, a functionally determined tool, or an economically valued asset. The care itself transcends physical operations to encompass a kind of psychic engagement in the well being of the object by a community of care that is larger than the table's "actual" repairers.

Clearly a *cast* of care-takers engage; the marks of their engagement with the table are abundant in the breadth of will that has sustained the object of use long past its time. I come to this table among many because it presents itself to me as alive and I engage *my* life with it, as, I am sure, do many others. *Through* the table, I engage *with* them. The table becomes, in a silent reading room, a site of exchange and play.

Bachelard confirms that old things "insist in us in order to live again, as though we give them a supplement of living".<sup>9</sup> This insistence seems to be projected even onto me, a member of some non-literal care-taking class. Bachelard might suggest that I care through my sustained, investiture of meaning: I care in daydreams. The table in which I am invested has a deep personality, an individual character initiated by the physical acts of care that serves as a genesis for our individual non-physical acts of care and an anchor drawing to its center all who care for it. Each of us saw the small flame of the ones who



<sup>9</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 56.

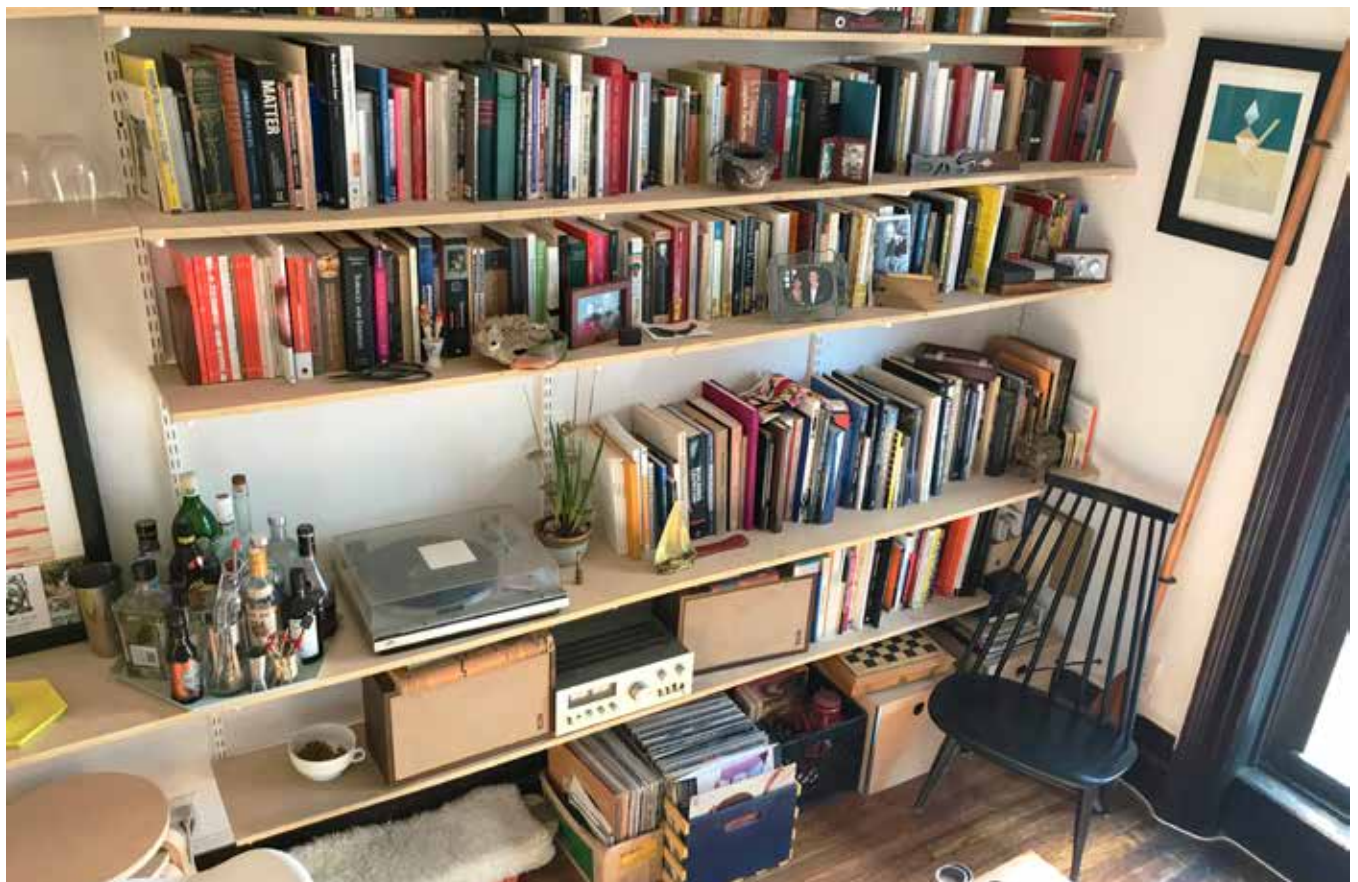
cared before us and, ignited by it, added our own, becoming bonded to the object and to one another.

Although I do not participate in the physical care of the table I do care about the table and through it I care about the world of the physical care-takers and that of all others who love and use the table. Though I don't know their names, ages, professions, identities, the table opens some corner of their worlds to me, it constructs our shared world before me in some limited but significant sense. The table as a thing-marked-by-care stands at the center of a new world, part manufactured and part dreamed; a new network of meaning shared by all who care for it in daydream or in reality.

#### IV. Tidying: Order, Meaning & World Building

I live in a small apartment in Upper Manhattan with my wife, our cat and dog and a small mountain's worth of books and sketches and forks and door stops. Most of the stuff we have is "functional" in some regard – a book of poems offers solace, a dinner plate keeps the table clean and organized, a chew toy facilitates interspecies play. Nearly all have meaning and are objects of care for us, objects of maintenance.

The apartment, itself, is an object of maintenance, and that we maintain it allows me to say to you that we have "a small mountain's *worth*" of things, rather than "a small *mountain* of things". We maintain it by tidying, by bringing its myriad parts and pieces into order. Echoing the Greek myth of world creation, we bring order out of what is too often chaos.



I have been using this word, “world”, a lot – Boots open my world by revealing the investment of attention in care. The knife participates in my world as a living thing by its continued use in time. The cared-for table forms a world around itself accessible for all who care for it in fact or in dream. My apartment, brought to order, manifests or maps my world. What do I mean by this idiosyncratic use of “world”? I intend something like “a network of meaningful things”. When I maintain things I register them as meaningful to me and I imbue them with meaning that is manifest and accessible to others. When I begin to put cared-for things into relation with one another, much as I would define one word by attaching other significant words to it, this only stands to deepen the meaning of each and to make more clearly manifest the meaning that underlies it.

When I am tidying up, I am doing maintenance on my *world*. I clarify the relationships between objects in physical space (“this goes here”) and in this network of meaning (these go together in such-and-such a way). When I dust or when I remove the meaningless detritus that collects while my attention is elsewhere, I allow the actual objects of meaning to shine through more clearly. When I put things in order, other levels of order become apparent to me in ways that would have been impossible before. As Bachelard says of “objects that are cherished”, “they produce a new reality of being, and they take their place not only in an order but in a community of order.”<sup>10</sup> When I tidy the disorderly, I give place; I bring each object-of-care into a unique place of dwelling among others, and I dwell within the architecture thus constituted.

Care adapts the detached objects of production to the multiform world of human life. We “construct” worlds through our care of things, and through our care of families of things. There is a recurrent notion in Heidegger of the open space prepared by attentiveness into which truths can emerge.<sup>11</sup> When we, as individuals or communities adopt an attitude of care and maintenance towards our physical world and thereby create a world of meaning around ourselves, the truths present in things and in ourselves have a clear space in which to come forward. In a cared-for space, surrounded by cared-for things we come to perceive in a new way, a way that is impossible in environments of indifference.

I have always been struck by the central journey of the poem “The Idea of Order at Key West”. The narrator is enlightened by a singer’s rendering of order from the meaninglessness of sound. He recognizes her to thereby become “the single artificer of the world in which she sang”. He, himself goes on to tread the path now familiar to us from quotidian to transcendent – rendering higher order from the rolling lights of boats at night, “arranging, deepening, enchanting”.<sup>12</sup> Like him, we move from the commonplace of repairing the broken and tidying the disarrayed, to something other, something broader, something both transcendent and true.

Perhaps better put by Bachelard, as we began – “A dreamer can reconstruct the world from an object that he transforms through care.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1976), p. 673.

<sup>12</sup> Wallace Stevens “The Idea of Order at Key West”, *Collected Poems*, (Alfred Knopf, New York, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 70



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