Wanting to have

I came across two Latin tags which set me thinking about cupidity, a human trait which I have always found particularly difficult to deal with. The first was in St Conan's kirk, Loch Awe: *vix ea nostra voco*, I scarcely call these things our own. This is said to be one of the Campbell family's mottoes, and while it might not reflect the Campbells' general reputation over the course of history, it was appropriate for Walter Campbell who devoted his wealth and energies to building this remarkable church.[1] The second was in the *Scotichronicon*, which we were reading in preparation for our visit to Inchcolm, a mangled misquotation of St Augustine's saying: *non enim est in carendo difficultas nisi cum est in habendo cupiditas*: for there is no difficulty in doing without except when there is desire in having.[2] Augustine's remark comes in the course of a much wider argument about the teachings and precepts of the scriptures. The rightness of an action, he says, is affected by the mental state that attends it. 'The custom which men shun can have a good use and the custom which they embrace can be damnable, if in the former case there is *caritas* on the part of those using the custom, and the latter case there is *cupiditas*.' So, those who in the past were permitted more than one wife but who used sexual intercourse only for the sake of procreation were closer to God than those who have just one wife but use her lustfully. 'Therefore,' he says, 'if the coming of the Lord found them in that life when it was still the time for gathering stones together rather than casting them away, they would immediately castrate themselves, for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.[3] For there is no difficulty in doing without except when there is desire in having.' Bower applies the saying to the sacrilegious looting of churches by English soldiers maddened by desire to possess.

Posession and the desire for possession are complicated and troubling matters. If we think of Bower's looting soldiers we might pose the question in this way: should all striving to possess the goods of the world be assimilated to his picture of insensate pillage? These scraps of Latin refer to two traditional ways of developing the point.

First there is the ideal proposed by the Campbell motto of possession as stewardship. The good things that we enjoy, the riches that pass through our hands, do not belong to us but are lent to us, put into our care. This idea of holding things in trust appears in various different guises, such as when the inheritor of a great estate sees himself as looking after it for the benefit of his successors, or when we are told that we are responsible for the survival of the planet for the sake of generations to come. The words are carefully chosen: *I* scarcely call these things *our* own. If it's true that my possessions are not mine, who then do they belong to? How wide is the range of *our*? Does it apply to the family, the generation, or the whole human race? The motto might be applied narrowly to the steward looking after the property of his employer – the goods are not mine, and not my family's, but my lord's – or more widely: the goods don't belong to the human race at all, but to God, or the planet.

According to Augustine's saying it is not the lust or desire *for* possession that moves men, but the lust that accompanies possession, *cupiditas in habendo*, what we might nowadays call the thrill, or the buzz or the high, that is experienced in the having. Possession is an addiction, a craving, a difficulty in doing without. This model of behaviour seems particularly apt for Augustine's examples, sexual possession and gluttony. Perhaps encouraged by Augustine's

[1] It is also the motto of the Greville family (Earls of Warwick) – noted caustically in the *DNB* article on the seventh and eighth earls, who systematically converted the family treasures to cash.

[2] Augustine,*De Doctrina Christiana* Book III cc 17-18; Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon* Book 8, chapter 36.

[3] 'A time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.' (Ecclesiastes 3.5) ' 'For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men : and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuch's for the kingdom of heaven's sake.' (Matthew 19.12)

association of sexual indulgence with the 'time to gather up stones', Bower takes his saying and applies it in the case of the English looters to their lust for material possessions. Looting, acquisitiveness, grabbing what you can, are such commonplace parts of life that it is at first sight surprising that Bower feels he has to go back to Augustine to find an explanation, but he is clearly struck by the mad audacity of the English looters, and their disregard for religion and their salvation. Why do they do it? It's insanity. The emotion, he seems to be saying, the joy they feel in possession, is of such orgasmic intensity that they cannot bear to forego their looting.

Most of us are not sacrilegious looters, but many would recognise that there is in possessing material objects something of what Augustine would call *cupiditas*. We value many of our possessions for more than their functional contribution to a good and healthy life. Just as many of us reject Augustine's warnings against the dangers of finding pleasure in sex or in eating and drinking, so we might be quite comfortable with taking pleasure in possessing things. We might even feel that there is a sort of moral timidity in taking literally the Campbell motto, and that those who renounce all sense of possession are performing a sort of self-castration. But still, as Augustine says, the pleasure of possession does make it so difficult to do without.

*

I can remember wanting things very badly as a child. When we visited Granny and Grandpa in Willingdon Grandpa would often give me something, such as the writing cabinet which Jessy now has, or the crossed bayonets with coat hooks on them which I don't remember seeing since we left Shooters Hill Road. But sometimes he would show me something and not give it to me. I don't remember any examples but I do remember the agony of hoping, the temptation to drop hints, and the fear that my wanting would be detected. This mixture of hope and guilt was one of the mental states which I came to recognise like a recurrent pain. I never spoke to anyone about it, of course, and it remained for some years one of the things that cropped up now and then in my inner life like a tedious and insulting guest.

When Michael Callaghan and I played with our toy soldiers I always felt that my men and their equipment were inferior to Michael's. It was true, partly because he had more pocket money than I had, but mainly because he was better at deciding what he wanted. For some reason I had a lot of guardsmen in their red coats and busbies, some of them playing band instruments. I'm not sure why I had them, whether I had been attracted by the bright coats, or whether they had been given to me by someone who knew of my liking for toy soldiers but failed to grasp what was needed. When it came to battles with the Germans, these figures were obviously unsuitable. How I longed for real soldiers like Michael's. He had a patrol of American soldiers, with their dome-like helmets, which I particularly admired. I don't think Michael ever parted with his Americans, but he had other things that he was prepared to swap. With every exchange my force of men and vehicles dwindled in size, until suddenly there would be a crisis and I would have to reverse an earlier exchange, to retrieve something I found I couldn't do without, on ever less favourable terms. It was always me who initiated the swaps, because there was something that Michael had which I wanted so badly. His tank-transporter was a particular magnet. I longed for it, and eventually persuaded him to part with it, but at such an enormous cost that in the end I had to beg him to swap back. I didn't feel resentful at this, and I never thought that Michael was swindling me. I still don't think he was swindling me; he was always trying to be kind, and I think he was simply baffled; he didn't know what to do with someone so spectacularly inept as me. Unfortunately I can't remember the details clearly enough to reconstruct the terms of our dealings. All I remember is the dull repetition of a sense of things slipping away from me.

I'm trying to remember what happened to my collection of guardsmen. I think in the end I did manage to swap them for something of Michael's. I don't know why he changed his mind and decided to accept them. Perhaps he had been with his Mum and Dad to see the Trooping of the Colour which might have given him an interest in ceremonial uniforms, or perhaps it was just the kindness of his heart that made him yield to my importunities. I have only the dimmest recollection, but I think he set the guardsmen up as though on a grand parade ground. He managed to make something credible out of them, so that they were not an embarrassment to him as they had been to me.

What I should have learned from all of this was that in order to get what you really want you have to know what you really want, and you have to take planned steps towards getting it. Not grasping this lesson, I failed to see that what I lacked were some basic planning skills. Instead I thought it was just my fate to be bad at getting things, and as with other activities I was bad at I gave it all up as a bad job. It didn't immediately stop me wanting things, but since it stopped me doing anything about my wants, the discouragement was enough to make me want less and less. I am not saying that I became other-worldly and selfless, far from it. What I renounced were things, possessions, and this renunciation made me perhaps all the more keen on getting my own way in other respects. I wanted to be in charge, to have things done as I liked them, to avoid having to eat things I didn't like, to avoid situations in which I would appear in an unfavourable light, and on the whole I was quite good at achieving these things – these were exercises in manipulation which I had mastered.

There were two motives that particularly moved me to want things. The first was an ecstasy of imagined self-identification. That was why I wanted Michael's American soldiers. There was one in particular which I longed to possess, longed to be. He was advancing, slightly crouched, intensely concentrating, gun at the ready. The artist who had created the model from which the mould had been made for this particular soldier had, probably by chance, but perhaps by genius, captured the casual American way of moving, graceful, easy and powerful. The identification I felt in anticipation was, of course, bound to lead to disappointment – owning that soldier would never turn a tubby eight-year-old boy into a lithe American giant. It may be that I remember this ecstasy precisely because I never possessed that particular soldier, and so never was disappointed in it.

Disappointment was equally inevitable with the other motive for wanting things, what might be called the dream of infinite supply, with its converse, the nightmare of limited supply. This applied to anything which was subject to being used up. People talk about regarding a glass as half-full or half-empty. For me as a child the glass was empty from the moment the first mouthful was taken. As soon as the supply of some commodity had begun to run down all I could see was total destitution. A half-crown coin was a wonderful reassuring thing to own, but when it was broken into, replaced by lesser coins, such as a florin and five fat pennies, it was gone, and with it went the comfort and reassurance. It was the same with chocolate. Once the bar was started I felt at once the pain of total loss, and would eat up the remainder almost without pleasure. When I observed Tiggy husbanding and nibbling her chocolate with glacier-like gradualness I felt a sort of incredulous admiration.

Early on in my soldier-collecting phase I had a huge tin full of lead soldiers, chipped and bent and dented. I'm not sure where I got them, but they dated from the first war. For a while they satisfied my desire for an endless supply, but before long I felt too keenly their inferiority to the modern plastic soldier, and I got rid of them – or were they taken off me as being too dangerous? I recall being warned not to put them in my mouth.

But more than money, more than chocolate, more than soldiers, this longing for an infinite supply applied to paper. All my childhood I was on the lookout for paper and notebooks. I

remember the pleasure I found in a sheaf of old blue-prints that my uncle gave me to draw on. This must have been when I was two-years old. When Mr Pfanda at about that time made me a bookshelf out of orange boxes, painted a lovely green, there was one section which was open at the top rather than in front; this was for storing paper. I think from an early age I saw myself as about to start a great literary work or a complex investigation, but the moment for beginning had to wait until I had enough paper to accommodate all I was going to write. When we used to visit Heather and Derrick in Orssett, Derrick would take us into his school store-room and give us paper and notebooks, at the expense of Essex County Council. I don't know whether he realised the intense joy that I found in these gifts. Once he gave me several exercise books ruled in a curious way, probably intended as guidance to those learning to write. It may be that the school was happy to get rid of these because handwriting was no longer taught in the same way. For years afterwards I was writing things in these notebooks, ignoring the lines. On our family visits to Orssett it was as it was with my grandfather, I found myself guiltily willing Derrick to produce something from his miraculous store-room. The longing for an infinite supply of paper was doomed to disappointment in two ways: first because however generous Derrick or anyone else might be, the supply never was infinite, and once a few pages had been used and spoiled the end was always in sight; and secondly because the great literary work or investigation never materialised.

My pre-occupation with paper continued in different forms. After my visit to Switzerland I developed a taste for good note-paper and envelopes. Possessing these gave me enormous pleasure although when actually used they produced an often unbearable tension. It was impossible to write anything without blemish – an inkblot or a spelling mistake or a verbal infelicity crossed out – and the better the paper the more intolerable was the fault. When a blot made it necessary to start a letter all over again it meant that the precious stock of paper was used up at twice the rate. Simply by having paper of different kinds and qualities I was forced to make impossible decisions about which paper to use for different purposes, for different correspondents. I remember feeling that it had been a mistake to use my good quality Swiss notepaper for one of my letters to the Home Secretary on behalf of a condemned murderer. Would my appeal have been more effective if written on more business-like paper? In the end these tensions brought about a revulsion and I adopted the cheapest possible paper and plain brown envelopes. My father surprised me by criticising me for using brown envelopes to send personal letters, but I persisted, and even found an aesthetic justification. In those days postage for letters was 4d, and I would use two 2d stamps, claiming that their chestnut brown went well with the brown of the envelope.

Books had a great advantage over paper: they were not consumed by use. Once read, they were put back on the shelf. You could look forward to a steadily increasing collection. There was a ledge going along the length of my narrow bedroom in the Shooters Hill Road house. I had a bookshelf where I kept books that were not really mine, family books of one sort and another. My own books I kept on the ledge, and I watched with pleasure and vanity as the line grew. It was a narrow ledge, so large volumes were out. This may be the origin of my life-long preference for paper-backs.

My mother encouraged me to collect books, so apart from the pleasure of holding and having and reading them, they were also the one licensed object of extravagance in our lives. She was an enthusiast and loved old books, and good books. Her father (who died when she was a young woman) had been a keen reader and book-buyer. I still have old Everyman Library volumes with his name in them—S. Eden-Green—and we also have his glass-fronted book-case which his wife, my Nana, always disliked because, to house his collection, he persuaded the carpenter to add an extra shelf which made the whole thing top-heavy.

My mother liked things. She was also someone who felt disappointments keenly, which we all often found irritating. She was rendered wretched when we got our first fridge because she couldn't work out how to make ice-cubes, and she had made up her mind to have some ice-cubes ready when my father got home. She thought it was because the fridge was not working properly, but in fact there was just some secret that she hadn't grasped. I suppose she got over it quite easily, since she must have had many other things to worry about, but her disappointment communicated itself to me and made me feel intensely depressed, even though I was aware that I didn't care tuppence about ice-cubes. I was more sympathetic towards another great disappointment of my mother's – perhaps because it was closer to my own feelings about paper. It was at a time when our friends, and in particular the Eden-Greens, were beginning to use printed note-paper, and my mother wanted to do the same. Philip Barnes arranged to have a huge pile of note-paper printed with our address by the printers who produced the ACE publicity material. Unfortunately, as with many things associated with Philip, there was a small mistake in the address (I think the postal district was wrong, perhaps given as SW 3), and the entire stock was wasted. I guess it was used up, with the error corrected by hand, but it was a lasting grievance with my mother. She blamed it, I have no doubt, on Philip's penny-pinching ways.

So far I have mainly spoken of things that I longed to acquire, but Augustine's *pleasure in having* is apparent in other ways. I remember certain childhood gifts which came out of the blue and gave intense pleasure. One Christmas, for example, I was given a lighthouse. I think it was intended as a nightlight, although it may have been a sort of fancy torch. It must have been made of bakelite and run on batteries. I don't seem to remember very much about it, except that I was delighted with it. It was unlike anything I'd ever had before, and was unlike anything anyone else had. At some point during that Christmas day a bit broke off the bakelite. This accident didn't stop it working, and I don't remember being particularly upset. Uncle Alan drove us home in his car, and I turned my light on as he was driving. He asked me to turn it off as the light in the car distracted him. I did as I was told, but looking out at all the streetlights I wondered how my one little beam could make any impression. It was the first time I noticed the different colours of the streetlights – greenish on the main roads, pale yellow on the smaller roads. The smaller roads may well have been gas-lit, in fact. It was one of the occasions when I was aware that I was observing something new about the world around me. It made me happy, and streetlights still make me happy, so that it's only when I make the effort to think about light pollution that I recognise that we have too many of them.

Another object which I can recall as giving me pleasure was my first biro. This was after we had moved to Shooters Hill Road, so I was probably five or six years old. I remember that it encouraged me to write the story *Farming at Eastbourne*. I started this on the last of the bundle of blueprint paper that Alan gave me. It bothered me slightly that the supply ran out and I had to use a different sort of paper to finish it off. It's hard to say at this distance why this biro made me so happy. Sometimes, as happens still with ball-points, the flow of ink was impeded and it was necessary to scribble vigorously to get it to run again. Had this happened frequently it would have spoiled my pleasure, so I guess on the whole it must have worked well. An obvious explanation of why I liked it so much would be that it enabled me to identify with the adult world. While this may have been true in some sense and at some level, it's not part of what I remember of that intense pleasure that I felt in handling my biro. Interestingly, I don't recall what it looked like. I remember being able to write in blue or in red, so either I had two biros or it was one which had both colours – I think in fact it may have had red at one end and blue at the other, like the double-headed coloured pencils we sometimes had. It's not so much the look or the feel of the thing that has stuck in my mind as the joy of producing marks on the paper, marks which meant something, marks which moved towards a goal or pattern, which made some sort of progress. I was aware, of course, that my writing was not always quite right,

that my letters were clumsily formed and my lines sloped downwards, but this was not enough to dampen my pleasure. I wanted to write in red as well as blue, but I would only allow this when there was some reason to justify the change. I'm not sure what reasons might have counted for me then, but I remember being quite strict with myself over limiting the red. When my story was typed up, reducing the many pages full of biro-marks to a few dense paragraphs, mockingly called chapters, it may have been something of a disappointment, but I think my father, and perhaps Jeffy too, took care to help me over it, and it stuck in my mind as simply an interesting fact of life.

It turns out that both the lighthouse and the biro seem to be associated in my memory with a sense of making some sort of intellectual progress. I wonder whether this is just the way I would like to see myself as a child, or whether it is the way I really was. Am I embroidering, or even making up these responses altogether? I don't think I am, I'm pretty sure that those were the feelings I had as I treasured my lighthouse and my biro, but it's always a doubt one has to entertain concerning childhood recollections.

Whatever the explanation, I can still feel the long-delayed ripples of pleasure that I experienced with my light-house and my biro, in particular the shiver of delight associated with writing in red. I think now that the red biro was separate from the blue, and it may be that there was more than one red biro that contributed to the effect from different times. There are similar faint after-shocks of delight from another childhood possession. I remember nothing about it except that it had different coloured lights. I don't know what it looked like, what I did with it or where I got it, but I can still feel the soothing pleasure of the green light. These pleasures were probably not dependent particularly on feelings ownership of the articles, but they were such intense and private pleasures that other people would have interfered with them, annulled them.

*

Another thing to bear in mind is that I was brought up in comfort and security. How far can we turn around Augustine's dictum and say that *cupiditas in habendo* is itself due to the hardship of doing without? Was it their lifetime of wretched poverty that spurred on the English soldiers to their lustful pillaging? It doesn't require too much self-knowledge to be aware that I had a comfortable and secure upbringing, and that even my longing for Michael's American soldiers and tank-transporter was insignificant compared with the need for possessions felt by many who have had a truly deprived childhood. Furthermore, the longing to possess things was insignificant compared with other urges that my childhood left me with, in particular the compulsion to be thought well of by others and to think well of myself. I have always assumed that this can be traced back to low self-esteem in childhood, which in turn goes back to the way we were all brought up. I never wanted any material possession with the sort of intensity that fuelled my longing for approval and praise. It may be that for some people these two urges go together – either the possession of certain objects is the way to gain approval, or they need the objects as an endorsement, to prove to themselves that they have gained approval. This is perhaps analogous to the religious man's desire for worldly success: in theory he despises it in comparison with the eternal bliss of the saved, but in practice he longs for it, as something like an advance payment on account, a confirmation that he is indeed saved. For me there was never this link between possessions and approval, and approval was more important than possessions.

If I have, as a result of my upbringing, managed to avoid an irrational desire to possess objects, have I perhaps gone further and acquired or affected an irrational indifference to possessions? It certainly seems that there are some things which other people do by instinct or second nature, but which I have to tell myself to do, or be told by others to do. Perhaps it is the intimate

identification of themselves with their possessions which makes people take care of their belongings as part of their instinct of self-preservation. There are many reasons for carelessness over things, for mislaying them, dropping them or damaging them in all sorts of ways, and most people are liable to slip up from time to time. I suspect however that I may take this to an extreme, and that it must sometimes look as though I am displaying a wilful, even ostentatious, disregard for things – for acquiring things and for protecting them.

It's very hard to say whether this is so. Here are two examples, which have stuck in my mind, of what I can now see to have been irrational behaviour with regard to possessions.

When my parents came back from America they brought me a very nice transistor radio. You didn't see many transistor radios in those days, and they were not cheap. There was a delay in getting it, because an American friend offered to bring it into Britain without paying the import duty that British citizens would be subject to. As often happens when someone offers to do a favour, this arrangement ended rather acrimoniously, as I recall, but eventually my radio arrived. I was very fond of it. It had a leather case and a handle, and I remember hanging it on a hook in the bathroom so that I could hear the ten o'clock news in the bath. I remember listening in the bath to the Third Programme's weekly readings from *The Inferno*. It was this radio that I used when we were staying in Sutherland to hear the test commentary – climbing up to the top of a hill to get a signal. It was a test commentary which, the following summer, was my undoing. I took the radio with me when I went to do my Saturday afternoon at the Oxfam shop in the Old Dover Road. I could have put it behind the counter, but for some reason I left it on one of the shelves – perhaps the reception was better there. During the tea interval I turned the radio off, and it was then that a man came in and took it. I remember talking to him, thinking that he seemed a really decent sort, with a rugged, nice-looking face. I remember him picking up the radio and admiring it. But obviously I didn't notice him going out with it, and only found that it was missing when I went to turn it on after the interval. My mother was angry, angry with the man who took it, angry with me for not taking better care, angrier still because I didn't seem to mind enough. I don't know why I made a point of not caring. It may have been simply as an embarrassed reaction to my mother's extreme indignation, or it may have been cussedness, a refusal to admit that I had been extremely stupid. I think I was partly intent on making a political point, that in a world where property was theft the man, the decent-seeming man, had as much right to the radio as I had.

My attitude, made up of so many different elements, angered my mother more than any other aspect of the theft. I don't think I understood my own feelings at the time, and I'm sure I regarded her reaction reductively as bourgeois hysteria about possessions. It was to be many years before I came to appreciate the selfless nature of my mother's selfishness. She would have felt that since she had given the radio to me she had a right to enjoy my enjoyment of it – an aspect of possession that I have only thought of as I have been thinking through these events.

I am so habitually careless that it's surprising that I have not been robbed more often. I've learned, over the years, to be more sensible, but I think some people have more of an instinct for taking care than I have. I still find myself wanting to leave doors unlocked, to carry my wallet prominently in my outside pocket and to avoid putting things safely out of sight. Perhaps my habit of leaving little piles of money lying about the house is a safe way of indulging these wishes. I'm quite aware that it is a nuisance to lose one's wallet and foolish to take risks with one's things, and so I force myself to take precautions, and, lacking the instinct, I tend to go to extremes, burying my wallet deep in my inside pocket and fingering it nervously to make sure it is there; not taking my laptop with me on journeys for fear of leaving it unprotected while visiting the lavatory on the train; hiding money under the bed if ever we have large sums in the house overnight – as happened when I used to organize street collections. Because these

precautions are adopted not instinctively but consciously, and often with some effort, they are liable to lapse suddenly, a moment of carelessness leaving me completely unprotected. One doesn't know exactly how it is with other people, but I think if I had more of an instinct to preserve my things I would take a more balanced view.

A second example of my unwillingness or inability to assert ownership arose whenever I took the children to the park in Heaton to play football. Because of the family dynamics any games at that time were liable to end quite quickly in tears, and in order to keep them going as long as possible a certain amount of control had to be asserted. Also, none of us knew the rules of football, neither of the game proper nor of the cut-down version that boys would play in the park. Still, when someone, possibly my mother, gave us a football we developed a way of playing with it that seemed to work for us. But whenever we went to the park to play we would inevitably find that other boys would appear, demanding a share in the game. It clearly annoyed our children, but I found myself unable to tell the interlopers to go away. It was partly that feeling ourselves to be interlopers in Newcastle we wanted to conciliate those we lived amongst; partly a desire to set an example of sharing; partly just plain weak will. Because they were more skilled than we were, any two boys could effectively take over the game, passing the ball back and forth, tackling each other, doing whatever they wanted, reducing us to irritated spectators. Our footballing days did not last long, and I was greatly relieved when the football was lost, or punctured, or stolen, or whatever happened to it.

*

It's difficult to write about these things because of the moral weight that they carry. In all the pairs of opposites it seems clear which is the good guy: selfish, acquisitive, grasping, mercenary, worldly; generous, sharing, unworldly, other-worldly. Even when we concede that virtue lies in a moderate care for worldly goods, tempered by a rational willingness to share, we tend to think that it is better to err on the side of the spendthrift than the side of the miser. Despite the corrective provided by the character of Harold Skimpole, we often suppose that the fault of the spendthrift is the more generous fault. I've tried to write about my lack of acquisitiveness without seeming to claim any moral superiority. For one thing, it seems to me that unworldliness taken to the extremes that I have sometimes taken it ceases altogether to be a virtue and becomes instead a weakness or vice. Secondly, acquisitiveness is only one way of being selfish, and I have followed many of the other ways. But the main reason for detaching this discussion from morality is that, good or bad, all these characteristics are the product of the systematic influences of family and upbringing, and of the shocks and chances of childhood contacts. Nonetheless, it remains true that morality and politics played their part in forming my views.

I had a romantic and sentimental belief that a more equal society would be happier and more cohesive. Whether this is true, I'm not now so sure, nor whether strict economic equality is the most important kind of equality. Still, I find it hard to accept inequality. People justify it at the social level by saying that it promotes enterprise and dynamism, and on the individual level unequal reward is said to be justified by unequal effort. These arguments are no doubt valid enough, even if it sometimes seems that inequalities are compatible with a static society stratified along fixed lines, and even if the individuals receiving the greatest rewards are seldom those of the greatest merit. If I find inequality morally and politically objectionable it is less because I think I know how to generate a better society than because I find it painful to think of one person being less well off, less well rewarded, than another. This pain takes the form of guilt whenever it's a matter of someone being less well off than me. This means that the sentimental views that I used to have about society have become simply sentimental views about individuals, an unwillingness to judge, to condemn, to penalise.

This view is expressed in the parable of the workers in the vineyard, in which those who start late in the day are paid the same as those who have laboured since morning. The point of the parable is, I suppose, something to do with the gentiles as well as the Jews having the benefits of salvation, but I have always favoured a more literal message about everyone receiving the same reward. My father never liked to hear us complaining like the early-comers in the vineyard that things were 'not fair'. They might have complained if their pay were inadequate, but if they had enough and had what they had bargained for it was no business of theirs that others received the same for less work. The story is not so much about equality (because from one point of view the rewards are unequal, the late-comers being privileged) as about not allowing yourself to compare your lot with that of others. Absolute suffering is something to complain about, something to struggle against, but the relative suffering we hear so much about is insignificant. Understood like this I still find the parable compelling, but I can see why one might be uneasy about it. The reward for working in the vineyard is arbitrarily set by the owner of the vineyard, which is fine if it stands in the parable for the freely given grace of God, but in the world of work and payment some more rational method of calculating the *quid pro quo* would be preferable. Such method and such calculations are arguably the most effective way of checking the lust for possessions.

Another way in which morality comes into the discussion of cupidity is in the matter of giving to charity. This has always been a contentious issue. There was a time when left-wing people strongly disapproved of charities, since they encouraged the state to withdraw from areas of life which it should manage and control. The life-boats were a common example. Lifeboatmen themselves seemed to want to continue as a charity, and were unwilling to become state employees, but it was absurd, people on the left would say, for such an important service to be in the hands of volunteers supported by private donations. This sort of view was strong in the seventies and eighties. Charities and volunteers, it was said, both undermined the power of the state and took work away from paid professionals. There were some circles in which I had to be apologetic about giving to Oxfam. I used to say that I would not give to Oxfam if the state would do the things that Oxfam did, and Oxfam itself would emphasise its political activities – albeit carefully, so as not to fall foul of the Charity Commission and not to alienate those of its supporters who wanted to be sure that all their money was going directly to feed the hungry. You hardly ever hear this sort of argument nowadays. In many areas it is charities themselves who give employment to the skilled professionals, and the existence of powerful institutions such as Oxfam and Shelter is seen as a mark and guarantee of pluralism in society. Less positively, charity has become a magic word; *doing it for charity* is taken as a justification for almost any activity, provided it can be turned into fund-raising. It sometimes seems that the charitable label is all-powerful and that it is unnecessary to examine the actual effectiveness of the enterprise. Although you seldom hear the same outright rejection of charities that was common in the seventies, you do sometimes hear of people objecting to the tax relief on charitable donations: not all charitable activities are equally valuable, so it seems wrong that public resources should be applied so indiscriminately. The laws governing charities rule out the downright fraudulent examples and require some element of public benefit, but it remains possible for people to constitute themselves a charity, and so claim public funds through reclaimed tax, for the prosecution of aims which may be at variance with the policies and priorities of the elected government. The argument in favour of tax relief for charitable donations is that, even if the function of this or that charity might not justify public funding, it is beneficial for the community as a whole to encourage charitable institutions and re-inforce the habit of charitable giving. A slightly different kind of contention arises over whether it is better to give to charitable institutions with strictly stated aims or to individuals who might spend our money on drink or drugs. Anti-begging propaganda plays heavily on the futility of giving indiscriminatingly to individuals and urges us, if we wish to help, to do so through a

‘recognised’ charity. Reason says that this advice is good, but there are those who cannot resist the human appeal of the outstretched hand.

My grandfather conscientiously gave a tenth of his income to charity. He would place an envelope rather than a naked coin in the collection plate at church – I never knew why, but it was something that was clearly associated with being an elderly and important man. He supported the London Missionary Society, and used to go on the coach from Willingdon for meetings in Town. I don’t know what other causes he supported – perhaps boys’ clubs in the East End and probably something to do with horses. According to my father he would calculate his tithe at the end of each financial year. I must have been in my early teens when he told me this, and when he added that this was when most people were engaged in fiddling their tax returns, his vehemence and the evident admiration that he felt for his father made a lasting impression on my mind.

When I left school, opened an account at the Westminster Bank and started earning, I took a certain pleasure in watching my money accumulate. Of course, it accumulated very slowly, but eventually, after perhaps six months it reached three figures. The understanding when I left school was that I should save money for travelling to Greece. This had a sufficiently romantic ring to reconcile my mother to my folly in leaving school. It may be that at first I genuinely intended to go to Greece; if so, I’m not sure when I changed my mind, but by the time I had accumulated £100 towards my travel fund I no longer had any great desire to visit Greece. This was before the Colonels took over, so there was no political motive for not going there. My friend Tony was planning an extended tramp round the Mediterranean, and it was an accepted thing that before going up to University one should take in a bit of the continent. It may have been just because it was an accepted thing that I rejected it, but anyway, for whatever reason, by the spring of 1965 I knew that my accumulating bank balance would not be used for travelling to Greece. I sent £100 to Oxfam, but it nagged at my conscience that I had not given it all away, so that a few months later I sent another £100. In doing this I thought I was doing as my grandfather did, but of course the essential ingredient of Grandpa’s giving was absent: whatever one might say about my donation it was not a careful, conscientious, considered action.

Over the summer of 1965 my parents themselves went to Greece. They were there during some of the street demonstrations which were, some time later, to lead to the Colonels’ coup. While they were away they had to consider the proposed move from Blackheath to Farnham, and they were evidently worried about money. Although I had been earning for almost a year I was not contributing towards my keep, and they knew I was putting money in the bank. They also knew that as yet I had no plans to travel, and so felt that they might reasonably ask me to advance them something. I’ve forgotten what they wanted it for exactly, but in those days a few hundred pounds would go some way. Almost as soon as they were home my mother explained the plan, and I blurted out that I had given away almost all my money. My father said nothing; my mother, although she was not sure how to go about blaming me for giving money to Oxfam, was angry about it. The immediate consequence was that I was required to pay something towards my keep, which upset me, not because I grudged the money, but because I felt I was being placed in the wrong. If I had still had the money I probably would have made a grand gesture of paying my mother all the back-instalments since I started work the year before. I wanted to make it clear that I would have been willing to pay all along – although I’m not sure how far that was true. It had simply not occurred to me to do so. As it turned out, the point was fairly academic, because within weeks the house in Shooters Hill Road was shut up, my parents and Rowwy moved to Farnham, and I went to stay with Mrs Denny in Charlton, where I naturally contributed a few pounds a week for bed and board.

I wish I could say that I told no-one about these donations. It wasn't something I talked much about, but I did tell some of my friends. I always regretted it. The response was always disappointing. The reason I mentioned it to people was in order to provoke a discussion about the nature of property, but nobody ever got beyond a vague expression of moral approval, which would leave me feeling that I should have kept quiet about it all. Looking back now I'm inclined to be critical: the donations were too large to be sensible, and too small to count as giving all to the poor, and I suspect that the whole thing was some sort of attention-grabbing gesture. As a gesture it went off at half-cock, because there was no graceful way of making it known. This view may be over-harsh on my seventeen-year-old self. It was a gesture, but perhaps a more complex gesture than seems obvious in retrospect. I may have had in mind something like Catherine's leap into the Seine in *Jules et Jim*. I was also very impressed at the time by Camus's novel *La Chute* in which the protagonist, at a key moment, fails to act and is damned for it; I felt that every moment was a crucial moment, demanding action. This provided one strand of motivation. Another strand came from my grandfather, and the belief that charitable giving was a vital duty. These were the ostensible, full-dress, theoretical motives, which could be put forward in a philosophical argument. There was another level, more banal, in some ways more childish, and probably more authentic, on which my hesitation was not due to any unwillingness to forego the benefits I could get from the money, but to a suspicion that to give so much money was a sort of showing off, even if only to myself. Such doubts were resolved by the practical consideration that whatever my motives and whatever the philosophical justification of my action, the money would still do some good to somebody.

Although these donations did not amount to giving everything to the poor, they were still quite substantial, something more than £3000 in today's value, and my action was perhaps a fairly extreme refusal to call these things my own. I wanted to make a statement against private property, and that is how I would characterise my action, if I had to single out just one motive. I remember saying, after the first donation, that I hoped it was enough, hoped that I might be forgiven for hanging on to the rest of the money in my bank account. This hope was answered in the negative, it seems, and I felt obliged to add a second hundred. There was no obvious indication where I should stop, and my donations were limited, in the end, only by my reluctance to give up everything, by the difficulty of doing without.

*

I've mentioned what may seem an irrational reluctance on my part to possess things. This has given rise to contention between Anna and me in the matter of the distribution of my parents' belongings. Indeed, inheritance is a topic which illustrates both the Latin tags with which I began. The acceptance of our own mortality and the arrangements we make for handing things on are a reminder that these things are not our own but belong to both the previous and the succeeding generations. On the other hand, arguments about inheritance, in both history and literature, provide many of the most hair-raising examples of *cupiditas in habendo*. I'll end with two incidents connected with the handing on of our family belongings.

While we were in Newcastle my grandmother gave up her house, and her belongings were to be distributed or disposed of. We were allotted the Burton silverware and the long sideboard that had stood in the dining room in the Wannock Lane house. The silverware was considered a desirable prize, but I don't think anyone envied us the sideboard, although I was pleased to have it. Several of our friends in Newcastle said that of course we would have the varnish stripped off and the bare wood polished with beeswax. I was opposed this and felt unusually strongly on the subject. My first reason was a straightforward dislike of fashionable trends. The passion for stripped wood had, I thought, become a cliché. Secondly, I felt that although we had inherited the sideboard, and although nobody else had shown any interest in it, the family retained some rights in it, so that we ought not to transform it without taking counsel

with my parents and sisters. The third and strongest reason was that I felt very attached to the sideboard as it was (and as it still is, some twenty-five years later).

It reminds me of times when I stayed with Granny and Grandpa in Wannock Lane. Everything had to be just right in Granny's house, but since the rules all made for a comfortable, civilised life the régime held no terrors. When we were there as a family things were sometimes a little tense, because of my mother's anxiety and the never quite eradicated animosity between her and her mother-in-law, but when I was there on my own everything seemed easy. I suppose those few brief holidays were the closest I have ever come to living the life of a retired colonel in a country cottage.

There were rituals and routines, such as laying and clearing the table. Grandpa would remind me that the eating irons should be placed so that one worked inwards, course by course – in other words the soup spoons went on the outside. He would usually tell me about the man who said he had just the one knife which he wiped on his bread between courses. The salt, pepper and mustard (not to be called the cruet) were kept in the sideboard, and I liked to take them out and return them after the meal. The dark wood of the sideboard, the little wooden catch that keeps the door closed, the woody, spicy smell, the shining silverware and glasses – it all seemed solid and gentlemanly and safe. I can't have stayed more than half a dozen times between the ages of ten and fourteen, and the little household was about to be turned upside down by the illness and death of grandpa and his sisters next door, but at the time it seemed timeless and changeless. After putting the things back in the sideboard I would go out to help with the drying up. Granny would tell me how my father when he was a boy would help with the drying up but would run away when the smellies were reached. I was never sure whether all saucepans counted as smellies or only the fish saucepan.

These associations operated on my mind back in Newcastle when the sideboard first arrived and made me feel strongly attached to the sideboard, and to keeping it as it was. I rather think these feelings are now less strong with me than they were then, if only because of the dilution of feeling that so often comes with passing time and increasing age. When the sideboard first came to us it still seemed to belong to my grandparents, but now that it has been in our kitchen in St Andrews for so long I feel more inclined to call it ours rather than theirs. With the distribution of our parents' belongings we have acquired other things with more long-standing and more intimate associations. As I have thought more about the past, I've found that my memories and feelings can be detached from the objects associated with them. For all these reasons I think I would now be less appalled than I was back in Newcastle by a suggestion that the sideboard should have its varnish stripped – but I doubt if we will have it done after all these years. Still, it is worth recalling the incident, worth remembering how strong, how absolute, such feelings about objects can become. It's also worth recalling that at the time I only partially understood the source of my feelings, and so could not express them clearly nor in a balanced way.

This inability to express feelings about objects was very apparent later on when my sisters and I were engaged in distributing and disposing of our parents' belongings. This was done in three main stages – when they moved from Mount Pleasant in 1989, when they moved from their little house in Arundell Place three or four years later, and finally when my mother died in the year 2000. I think on the whole we managed to get through this process without too much animosity and difficulty, despite a host of feelings which we hardly understood and certainly could not articulate.

On reflection I think we made a significant and probably quite common assumption about the nature of the associations that made the objects valuable to us. This was that the value of the objects lay in the memories and associations that they carried, and that it was only childhood

memories that counted. It never really occurred to me that anyone might want, or have a right to own the objects for what they were, independent of childhood memories. Inevitably this meant that we treated the whole business as a matter for the four of us, without our partners. So far as my sisters were concerned this was reasonable enough, since Martin, John and Terence had no interest in our parents' things, but we should not have discounted Anna's involvement. Our exclusive attention to childhood associations may have been understandable, but was illogical – if only because so many of the objects under consideration had only been acquired by our parents after we had left home. My view of these later acquisitions, such as my mother's collection of cups, was that only the grandchildren could have any claim based on memory and associations. This was a slippery idea, because the grandchildren were too young to know whether the objects carried any important associations for them. Childhood memories are, I guess, based on material acquired during our childhood, but it is as adults that we work them up, articulate them, and value them.

This assumption was one of the things at play one evening in the early nineties when Jeffy, Rowwy and I had to divide up the contents of our mother's china cupboard. There was a bleakness about the house, inevitable at such times, and made worse by the damage done by the wretched tenants. We knew that we ought to have removed the contents of the cupboard before allowing the tenants in, that it had been pure weakness on our part not to have done so – we allowed the tenants to bully us into giving them entry sooner than we wanted to, and this had provided an excuse to postpone the task of distributing the things in the china cupboard. We had been glad to evade the issue, and had persuaded ourselves that by locking the cupboard we would make things safe. We knew that some things had been broken, but were not entirely sure what, and this, together with the general feeling that the tenants had left their unpleasant mark upon the house, made us sad and uneasy.

All three of us started out by declaring that we didn't really want anything, which sounds like hypocrisy, like an attempt to dissemble our acquisitiveness. Children of our generation were taught that selfishness was a great vice, and this tends to make us prefer indirect ways of gaining our ends. We regard the naked attempt to take things for oneself as shameful or ridiculous. Perhaps we were afraid of seeing ourselves as characters in a play permitting cupidity to destroy family tenderness. But it was not simply a matter of hypocrisy. It was also an expression of our distress at what we were having to do. There were practical reasons for passing the bulk of the things to Jennifer, whose house was large enough to take them; and I thought that Rowwy, who had been closer to Mummy and Daddy over the years than any of us, and whose continuing identification with her own childhood was more intense, had some sort of prior claim. We were also keen for Tiggy not to be left out, because we wanted to prove to ourselves and perhaps to her that she belonged to the family. All these considerations weighed with me, and I think also with the other two.

The fact is that there were some very nice pieces. I can't now think what they were, except for the Wedgewood Oranges and Lemons jug and the Wedgewood bull, but there were others that were quite desirable irrespective of any childhood associations. None of us was prepared to say, however, 'I want that, you can't have it.' The trouble with this sort of inhibition is that it prevents you from seeing things straight. We found it impossible to work out rationally what would be fair shares. Nonetheless there was in the background a notion of fair sharing, and as a result, since it had been decided separately that Jessy was to receive the bulk of the cup collection, I felt at something of a disadvantage. Things went, in the end, to whoever was least emphatic in saying they didn't want them. Jeffy and Rowwy, more honest than me, were on the whole less emphatic than I was in saying this, except in the case of the Portmeirion, which neither of them liked, and which I therefore secured for Jessy. I wish I could remember the

detail of some of the exchanges, because they were gems of evasiveness and indirection. It left us all feeling unhappy.

My impression is that I came away from this process with less than the others, but I may well be wrong. I don't remember enough of the details to say for certain, and in any case these things are impossible to quantify – or is that just a continuation of the same old evasiveness? Apart from the jug and the bull I can't think of anything I didn't get, nor can I remember what I did get. I don't remember even what happened in the end about the Portmeirion. Having failed to look squarely at what was going on at the time, I should not be surprised if my memories are fuzzy and indistinct. I came away with a burden of bad faith, and I knew I had somehow failed, but I am sure the main cause of the depression that we all felt was simply the fact that our parents were leaving their home for good and that their decline and death could not be long postponed.

My conclusion from these recollections is that Augustine is right to identify the heavy emotional charge attaching to possessions. The fact is that the things we have and the the things we don't have, what we get and what we fail to get, all have the power to disturb our peace of mind. There is difficulty in having as well as in doing without; there is often a perverse pleasure in doing without, as well as an insane greed in possession. What a relief it would be if only we could look on all the things that make up our little world and say with conviction that they are not ours.

*

Since writing this piece I have read *The Hare with Amber Eyes* by Edmund de Waal, and it has led me to think again about collecting, or rather to think about it seriously for the first time. Having had very little personal contact with serious collectors, I have taken the P G Wodehouse view, that they are harmless, or not so harmless, eccentrics. As a child I never got beyond the stage of amassing—building up large supplies of paper or soldiers, or later on, paperback books. I have described how I sometimes longed for particular specimens, an experience which was so distressing, and so futile, that I quickly decided to have nothing more to do with it. As an adult I have never felt the collecting urge. The closest I come to it now is in the pleasure I derive from my small row of dark blue Penguins, and if I see one going cheap I will still probably buy it. But here, as in book-buying in general, one encounters the absurd effect of collecting, summed up in the word *collectible*. Dark blue Penguins are collectible, which has pushed up the price.[4] At one time I might have become a collector of old china, and I enjoyed seeing our pile of miscellaneous plates growing steadily. While it was worth laying out the odd shilling, or later the odd pound, once the collectibility of cheap Victorian china and blue Penguins became established the pleasure was no longer worth the swollen price.

Comments made by Edmund de Waal have challenged my negative view of collecting. His great-grandfather's cousin Charles Ephrussi was a great collector of Japanese lacquer-work and *netsuke,* his lavish but discriminating outlay of the Ephrussi wealth being as much a part of the family's expansion from Odessa grain-merchants to international magnates as his elder brothers' business activities. De Waal describes Charles's development from youthful enthusiast of European art to pedantic scholar to connoisseur and collector:

> Charles learns to spend time with a picture [de Waal says of Charles's art criticism]. … You feel his growing confidence and his passion, and then at last the beginning of a steeliness in his writings, a dislike of set opinions. Charles holds his feelings in balance with his judgements, but writes so that you are aware of both. This is rare in writing on art … (p 37)

[4] Green Penguins, absurdly, are more collectible than the orange ones, and routinely cost more in second-hand bookshops.

In de Waal's account, two general points about connoisseurship stand out. The first is an informal definition of what it is to be a collector: 'to turn looking into having, and having into knowing.' (p 33). The second is a quotation from Edmond de Goncourt which crucially adds the sense of touch to the process: 'The man who handles an object with indifferent fingers, with *clumsy* fingers, with fingers that do not envelop lovingly, is a man who is not passionate about art.' (quoted on p 50)

The collector's jump from looking to having, and the passionate connoisseur's loving fingering of an object, are clearly examples of *cupiditas in habendo*, and some might detect special pleading in de Waal's and de Goncourt's association of them with positive traits like knowledge and a passion for art. Isn't the collector just a rich man building up treasure on earth? Is the precious talk about a passion for art anything more than a mask for vanity and vulgar acquisitiveness? Yes, perhaps, but *cupiditas in habendo* might encompass not just vile cupidity, but also the joy of possession. There are those who remain unaffected by the beauty that they imprison in their galleries and display cabinets, for whom the collecting mania amounts to nothing more spiritual than the love of the chase, but we should not assume that all collectors are like this. De Waal insists on the erotic dimension to collecting, and probably there is the same variety of taste in collecting as there is in the erotic: vulgar, crude, violent and tyrannical at one end of the range, and progressing through the stodgy, dull and pedantic, to the refined, precise, spiritual and ethereal at the other. Somewhere along the line we'll find the ordinary, discriminating, down-to-earth, life-affirming, thoughtful thing-lover.

De Waal's book is a study of the part played by possessions in our lives. The collecting impulse is just one aspect. The collector himself, because of fashion and because of his own developing ideas, moved on to acquire other things. Once collected, the set of of *netsuke* acquires layers of meaning as it is passed from one member of the family to another, and as the family itself changes from generation to generation, from place to place, from one historical period to the next. For the three children in Vienna the *netsuke* in the vitrine were intricately associated with their difficult relationship with their beautiful, bad-tempered and adulterous mother. For Iggie in Japan they symbolised and in some way facilitated his difficult assimilation to post-war life. For the author himself and his children their significance remains strong, though attenuated through distance in time and place from the peculiar pressures and dangers of the Ephrussi's lives in Paris and Vienna.

As a reader, I was divided in my mind between disgust at the wealth and power of the great banking family in their *palais*, and horror at the manner in which they were brought down by national socialism. Looting, whether by the anti-semitic bureaucracy or by the invading mob who throw priceless pieces out of the window, is appalling. It's a political conundrum that I don't think we'll solve until we have acquired a deep and universal egalitarian spirit. Failing that, the human solution was demonstrated not in words but in action by the servant, Anna, who at great risk to herself, preserved the *netsuke* for the family.