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“Things and Theory”
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Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2003). ISBN 0-226-07628-8

When Emerson complained that things were in the saddle and rode mankind, he was under the impression that there was a significant difference between things and mankind. There are, he wrote in the 1846 “Ode” inscribed to W. H. Channing, two “laws discrete,” one for man and one for things, and man ought to follow the former. From the vantage point of today, this argument seems decidedly dated. A culture of imitative consumption has habituated us to things and their law, which we scarcely distinguish from our own. Encouraged, perhaps, by check-out line magazines like *Self*, we find it natural to regard “man” as a thing that, like other things, can be improved upon, repaired, disciplined, pampered, made over.

But if Emerson’s concern to keep the two laws discrete seems quaint in one respect, it is remarkably prescient in another. Anxiety about things has dominated philosophy since Marx, whose account of the “fetish” of the commodity focused on the uncanny spectacle of a table that, upon entering the system of exchange, somehow transcends its material condition, becoming virtually sentient, “evol[ving] out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas.” Walter Benjamin held commodities, as displayed in world exhibitions and especially in the mercantile arcades of Paris, to be the key to the “primal history” of the 19th century and the dream from which the 20th century had to awaken. Benjamin quoted with approval a line from the poet Léon Deubel: “I believe . . . in my soul: the Thing.” After WWII, Heidegger raised anew the question of *das Ding*, as did Gadamer in his turn. Perhaps the most succinct post-Emersonian

formulation of the problem of the thing is Adorno's argument in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), in which he urged thinkers to concentrate on the distinction between thought and "the object." "What we call the thing itself," he wrote, "is not positively and immediately at hand. He who wants to know it must think more, not less." To think about the thing is to attend to the "somatic moment" in cognition, the part of cognition that is "not purely cognitive." By insisting on distinguishing the subject from the object, Adorno argues, "traditional philosophy has bewitched what is heterogeneous to it" (194). As a corrective, we must undertake a "passage to materialism."

This emphasis on a passage calls attention to the narrative quality in our understanding of things. To call something a thing is not to describe it, but to position it in a sequence of emergent understanding. What we call things have emerged into the conceptual field as a problem, a challenge to our vocabulary: their identity has not been determined, but ignoring them is no longer an option. We are half-aware of them as features of the general surround, and they awaken the possibility that material objects, which appear to us primarily as anonymous, random, mute, inert, or functional, can possess a kind of individuality, identity, even an ambiguous vivacity. To live amidst things is to inhabit an atmosphere of vague solicitation, like walking down the corridors of a museum in a state of preoccupation that precludes a direct or conscious engagement with the paintings themselves, but permits an awareness of the immediate availability of potentially meaningful forms.

If the thing is heterogeneous to philosophy, we should not be surprised if penetrating accounts of thingness come from nonphilosophers. One of these, Eric Maschwitz, wrote the musicals *The Gay Hussar*, *Happy Holiday*, and *Zip Goes a Million*, and, in a reflective moment in 1936, "These Foolish Things," which philosophizes about the passage to materialism in the mode of popular lyric. The things mentioned in the song are drawn from the random flux of life by the magnetic force of desire, which seizes on anything with a connection to the lost lover (who may have been Maschwitz's wife Hermione Gingold). Some of these are material—the cigarette that bears a lipstick's traces, the Ile de France with all the gulls around it, a fairground's painted swings—but others are more conceptual: the beauty that is Spring's, the song that Crosby sings (the song as distinct from the singer). And some are in between, taking the form of a sound—

the sigh of midnight trains in empty stations—or a smell—the scent of smold’ring leaves. None is altogether conceptual, and each retains, despite the intensity of the longing that animates it, a certain resistant materiality that is never wholly assimilated to the meaning that claims it. Each is brought into being as a thing by a longing and restless mind disposed to find in it some connection with the lost lover. “How strange,” s/he exclaims in astonished delight, “how sweet, to find you still!” The things in the lover’s mental inventory are pregnant with unformed significance, and they are “foolish” because they seem so paltry and insufficient to the desire that has appropriated them. Loss and longing will effect an epiphanic transformation of almost anything: “Oh, how the ghost of you clings”—even to a cigarette butt.

The phenomenon of things suggests that the mind can discover in the world tokens of its own subjectivity, points of purchase for its energy, a principle of receptivity or responsiveness in the domain of the nonsubjective and nonsentient. The thing is an externalized version of identity, absorbing vague longings, momentary reflections, and fugitive impulses and giving them back in enriched and articulated forms, giving body to fleeting cognitive or affective events that might never reach consciousness otherwise. Surrounded by things, we learn to recognize ourselves in them, to realize and transform ourselves through them, and to draw from them a measure of consolation as we filter through time, degrading as we go, passing through and eventually out of the world, while our objects—our shoes, our neckties, our coffee cups, our cigarettes, and perhaps the beauty that is spring’s—remain to remind people of us.

Much depends, of course, on the thing. And the very best things are products of human agency and intention, especially the kind of freestanding and exchangeable goods that one could buy in an arcade and have in one’s home, where they could acquire significance from a familiar regard. For the most part, the things philosophers and nonphilosophers alike think about when they think about things are domestic objects: tables, bowls, chairs, bric-à-brac, beds, vases, flower-pots, stools, lamps, typewriters, cabinets, figurines, breadboxes, saddles. These things seem eminently knowable. When, in the interests of scientific certitude, W. V. O. Quine made the linguistic turn, he urged philosophers to abandon thoughts of intentions, sensations, and thoughts, and to focus instead on “a domain where both parties are better agreed on the objects (*viz.*, words) and

on the main terms concerning them.” Words were excellent things to talk about, he said, because they were things, “tangible objects of the size so popular in the marketplace.” It is useful to think of words, especially written words, as exemplary things, because by doing so we are forcibly reminded of the role played by subjective energy in the constitution of things in general. Until words are apprehended by a properly equipped mind, they are just marks, but when they are read, they enter the domain of meaning; without ceasing to be marks, they become things, and remain so as long as they are being read, as long as the somatic moment is extended.

So far, I have been talking about the ahistorical nature of things. But in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, Bill Brown describes the culture of things. Brown begins his study in the years after the Civil War, which, he says, witnessed a flood of things onto the market as the industrial capacity of the north, liberated from wartime restrictions, turned to domestic manufacture. New forms, and a new scale, of production were followed by ingenious new methods of promotion and marketing—department stores, catalogues, display windows, arcades—and with this invasion of the cultural imaginary by manufactured goods, something like a new metaphysics of things began to take root. As “the invention, production, distribution, and consumption of things rather suddenly came to define a national culture,” Brown says, American culture became preoccupied with the subject and even the subjectivity of things, and, eventually, with the thingness of subjectivity. In turn-of-the-century literature and culture, Brown sees an unsystematic but thoroughgoing confusion of the laws of man and thing. If he does not provide what the book jacket promises, a “new way of thinking about objects,” he does provide a rich historical account of some of the ways that people at a given time and place negotiated and understood their personal and cultural identities by thinking about their things.

According to Brown, what began as the stoking of consumer desire rapidly spread to other areas. A dawning awareness, in the minds of anthropologists, museum directors, merchandisers, and philosophers, of things as objects of cultural concern signaled a newly specific sensitivity to the material conditions of life in industrial America. Already struck by a loss of traditional bearings in the wake of the war, a wide range of thoughtful people both indicted the culture of things and turned to things themselves as consolation.

They saw, that is, that things could signify and exacerbate people's alienation from the organic, metaphysical, traditional, and spiritual; but they also recognized that things could absorb and even relieve some of the anxiety created by this alienation by giving substance to life, anchoring the subject in the durable world. The primary medium of this unfocused but broad-based cultural concern, this thinking-through of what might be called, from today's vantage point, the conditions of subjectivity in the modern era, was the exploratory and tentative modality of literature.

Literature from this period—Twain, Norris, Jewett, and James are the primary examples, with others such as Cather, Melville, and even Balzac figuring in—traces, according to Brown, a kind of arc of increasing refinement leading from the massive materiality of Twain's famous house to Henry James's re-enchantment of modernity's disenchanted object world. If Twain's house represents in an all-too-literal way Twain's social and material aspirations, James's representational practice fully realizes the aesthetic potentiality of thingness, the way in which, as Brown puts it, we take "a nonproprietary possession of objects that simultaneously requires being possessed by them." Together, the work of all these authors registers the full spectrum of the ways in which material things can absorb and express human identity, interests, and relations; together, they provide a rich context for the summative pronouncement, in 1926, by William Carlos Williams, that there are "no ideas but in things." (For some reason, Brown does not mention Imagism, which, as Pound decreed in 1913, strove for "direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.")

The most imposing chapter concerns the least imposing figure Brown takes up. In "Regional Artifacts," the primary subject is Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, a series of unprepossessing and underplotted sketches describing the people, places, and things encountered by the author during a summer in Maine. In its modest and unself-conscious way, Brown says, this collection of vignettes discloses a new sense of the legibility of the object world, which becomes more prominent in the field of representation as character and action recede. Artifactual things become, in Jewett, objects of fascination; but, more interestingly, they are treated as tokens of a particular regional culture, an "object culture." What makes this new literary discovery of the capacity of things to express the essence of a specific regional culture especially

significant is the fact that other kinds of thinkers were simultaneously coming to a comparable understanding of the expressive capacities of objects. Franz Boas, working for the Smithsonian, strove to transform the museum from a “cabinet of curiosities” (its original name) to a place where people could learn about other cultures. Under this new concept, pots, for example, were no longer exhibited in rows of similar items—fifty pots on a shelf, demonstrating the development of the pot—but in what Boas called “occupational groups” that exhibited the character of the human community in a given environment. Thus objects were enlisted to tell the truth of a culture, on the premise that everything about the culture could be inferred from the objects had been produced by it. As anthropology was weaning itself away from natural history and drawing closer to narrative literature, Jewett, for one, was attempting to realize a well-nigh anthropological understanding of the possibilities of literature. Contemplating the connection between curatorial anthropology’s understanding of things as “object lessons” and the culmination of American literary modernism a generation later in Williams’s “no ideas but in things,” Brown argues that the commonplace understanding of modernist “primitivism” should be tracked not just to Africa and the masks that so excited Picasso and others, but also to the American Indian, Boas’s specialty.

Also crowding in this very long chapter are more abbreviated discussions of still-life and *trompe l’oeil* painting, Edward Eggleston’s several-volume history of the U. S., end-of-the-century expositions, L. Frank Baum’s 1900 treatise on window-dressing (published in the same year as *The Wizard of Oz*), other practices of “museal anthropology,” Marsden Hartley’s essay on “Red Man Ceremonials: An American Plea for American Esthetics,” other works by Jewett, and by Melville, Dreiser, Cather, Chesnutt, and Mary Murfree. By the end, Brown has accumulated such a remarkable mass of material that it does seem as if the entire period culture—artists, writers, anthropologists, museum curators, philosophers, window dressers, and psychologists—had more or less simultaneously been seized by the same fixation. Reading this chapter in particular, one feels that an entire culture became suddenly preoccupied by the fate of the subject in a world largely of its own making, and found itself excited, bewildered, threatened, intrigued, confused, apprehensive—the entire range, but all focused on the single subject of things.

Perhaps the primary contribution of his book is its dazzling and inventive compilation of uses of his magical word, a word that, he argues, lights our way down a particular tunnel into the past, and gives us a slant-angle perspective on our ancestors, and on ourselves. *A Sense of Things* is a remarkable word-hoard, a work of scholarship in the age of Google, but undertaken in something of the spirit of another thing-oriented artifact, this one entirely characteristic of the last part of the 19th century, *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Philology: Oh, how the ghost of it clings!

The Sense of Things is an exemplary book in several respects, not least in that it provides countless examples of what things are. One of the more interesting features of literary study is the way in which scholarly arguments, conducted in a spirit of fidelity and accurate representation, sometimes conform in odd ways to their subjects. (The general phenomenon is given pop-cultural expression in John Carpenter's 1982 movie *The Thing*, about an alien that mimics the cell structure of its victims; it was marketed with the tagline, "Man is the warmest place to hide.") Brown's book is an especially striking example. It is, of course, a thing, a meaningful object. But beyond this, it has a decidedly thinglike discursive character, signified by tics or rhetorical mechanisms that answer to Brown's own account of the way that characters in Norris's *McTeague* become thinglike by giving themselves over to their little habits or ways. *A Sense of Things* is full of such habits, as, for example, his way of beginning sentences with the phrase, "Which is to say," a mannerism that, because of its oddity, lingers in the mind until the next occurrence. Which is usually not far behind, as when Brown notes that

. . . reproduction and representation, however much they may reduce objects and events to abstractions, are also the means . . . by which they can fully confront us as things.

Which is to say that, confronted by the very reproduction of an object, we may recognize its thingness—may recognize some "thing" about the object.

But such moments, marking the metamorphosis of one formulation into another that is not identical but that can, with some doing, be shown to be related to it, actually signals a deeper mechanism that informs the book as a whole and structures many of its local arguments. That mechanism is announced early on, in a reference to Marx's analysis of

the conversion “of things into persons and persons into things.” This back-and-forth conversion is thenceforth recalled compulsively, as in the claim that “repetition is the mode of becoming historical; alternatively, we know people through their repetitions.” Or: “thinking about things . . . meant fetishizing place, just as thinking about place meant fetishizing things.” Or: “Whereas *Washington Square* is a novel about the impressions that people leave on objects, *The Spoils of Poynton* is about the impressions that things leave on people—which is really to say the impressions that constitute character.” Or: “Not only are people perpetually metaphorized as natural objects, but artifactual objects are thoroughly personified.” Or: “*The Country of the Pointed Firs* [depicts] a world where . . . things behave like humans and humans like things.” Or: “in *The Golden Bowl*, he transformed thoughts into things *The American Scene*, in turn, transforms substance into thought.” On frequent occasion, the readings of individual texts devolve into labored and inconclusive variations on the general proposition that things are human-like and humans are thing-like, as if drifting in search of a properly critical argument.

This thinglike repetitiveness of the argument is both negated and oddly confirmed by the equally insistent appearance of its other, an excessive familiarity that seems to signify improvisation and intimacy. “Should you begin to think about things in late nineteenth-century America,” the book begins, “it won’t be long before you stumble over Mark Twain’s House in Hartford, Connecticut. It’s a toe-stubber if there ever was one.” An earlier version that appeared in journal form added, after “America,” the phrase “(as I do),” contributing a moment of self-presentation that was refined out for the book. Others survived. “I’m as undisciplined as anyone in my engagement with other fields,” he confesses, presuming an audience of dilettantes. Recounting a moment of inspiration years ago, he recalls that, “Then—honestly—I started to write a poem, a Christmas poem: a joke, composed as a child’s letter to Santa Claus that asked for things with ideas in them.” Brown is very concerned that you follow his thinking as he plans the argument he will make to you. “To establish the stakes of *The Prince and the Pauper*,” he says early on, “I want to address that fetishism and that culture. I also want to juxtapose a reading of Marx on the commodity with a reading of Twain’s romance But I am especially interested in how Mark Twain shares with Karl Marx a logical, structural understanding” of the tyranny of the thing. But enough about me. “To gather some sense of these

things,” Brown (“I”) continues, “you could begin with George Santayana’s *The Sense of Beauty*.” “I” and “you” are constant presences in the text, enacting little encounters, with “I” confessing, recommending, concluding, suggesting, anticipating the needs and interests of “you,” who are urged, nudged, considered, solicited. Which is to say that these familiar gestures constitute their own kind of mechanism, just as the mechanism constitutes its own kind of familiarity.

Brown refers, more often than not glancingly, to such thinkers as de Tocqueville, Marx, Santayana, Royce, William James, Veblen, Dewey, and Simmel, who provided anticipatory or contemporary theoretical reflections on thingness. He also notes later insights into thingness by a number of thinkers, including Lacan and Zizek. And from time to time, Brown himself sometimes seems tempted to abandon the domain of cultural history and join the ranks of theorists. In 2001, he guest-edited an issue of *Critical Inquiry* called “Things,” introducing the volume with an essay called “Thing Theory,” in which he notes that the word *things* “holds within it a more audacious ambiguity.” “Somewhere beyond or beneath the phenomena we see and touch,” he posits, “there lurks some other life and law of things, the swarm of electrons.” Circling tightly around the subjectivity of things and the thingness of subjectivity, the essay itself swarms with references to Baudrillard, Lacan, Benjamin, Butler, Adorno, Bataille, and Castoriadis. The whole enterprise seeks to create the buzz of theory around the humble topic of things (bowls, lamps, rakes) by identifying the thing as the paradigmatic instance of that magnet for theory, “otherness.” If—Brown nearly says—we could devise a proper theory of the ways in which we make and re-make ourselves by infusing objects with subjective energy, then we would be in a better position to understand the whole field of human responsibility and cognitive agency.

This is the sort of argument Brown—the author of a book on “American amusement” and the editor of an anthology of dime westerns—resists making in *A Sense of Things*, where theory remains a kind of temptation that is resisted, one feels, with good reason: if the enormous tooth outside the dentist’s office in *McTeague* is a thing, and *McTeague* itself is also a thing, and Mark Twain’s house is a thing, and the germinal idea of a narrative is (according to Henry James) a thing, and toasters and telephones and

zithers and doilies and robots are things—then . . . what *is* a thing, and how does one theorize about it?

But on the other hand, how can one theorize about anything else? Theory goes wrong when it foregoes the somatic moment and declines to test itself against the material specificity of the world. Responsible theory requires things, and things theory. As Alfred North Whitehead said, we must trust that “the ultimate natures of things lie together in a harmony which excludes mere arbitrariness”—a harmony that theory, with its tendency to systematicity, is uniquely capable of providing. Things may represent, in fact, the most productive point for theory, when, uneasy with its own abstractness, theory turns to the world in an attempt to get a grip. When Lacan, for example, required a more intuitively comprehensible term for “the abyssal Otherness which addresses us with the unconditional injunction,” the force that compels us over and against any desire we might have and therefore the best name for the site of ethical obligation, he turned to the Thing.

It is in fact in ethical theory, that most pragmatic of philosophical discourses, that the concept of the thing acquires its rightful place. In all its forms, ethical theory posits a . . . a thing that exerts powerful, indeed overriding claims on the subject. This thing is variously specified—justice, human nature, communal norms, virtue, reason—but it is always in some sense external or extrinsic to us, even when it is depicted as being lodged deep within us (the warmest place for an ethical obligation to hide). If the thing were not external, the effort to meet the obligation imposed by it would not be considered an accomplishment; on the other hand, if the demands imposed by the ethical thing did not accord with human values, and were not in some sense validated and affirmed by human existence generally, these demands would have no ethical value. The ethical thing is therefore both inside and outside the human subject. As a bit of worldly substance that, having been mixed with human labor, enlists our attention and concern, the thing in Brown’s sense has much in common with the ethical law, and Brown and others might well wish to pursue this possibility further.

The moment is now. Already, forces are conspiring against the thing. The contemporary discourse on electronic technology stresses the changeover from an old paradigm of knowledge in which a person tries to obtain accurate information by studying a fixed set of objects to a new paradigm in which a protean but uncommitted

subject in search of stimulation explores ever new and changing fields created by his own choices. In *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle argues that the internet encourages us “to think of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicitous, and ever in process”; it has thus become “a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life.” The era of things, of stable selves and objects, may be ending, or over.

Before it takes an ecstatic leap into the virtual, Brown proposes that literary study return to the manmade material object as a way of grounding a “grittier, materialist phenomenology of everyday life.” While he considers this a progressive project, it is informed by a certain nostalgia; on occasion, he comes close to invoking a sublime realm of pure matter, immersion in which would constitute a kind of re-baptism for scholarship. The way forward, for Brown, is the way back, and we can, he suggests, do no better at this point than to recover and appropriate for our own purposes the fertile metaphoric idiom of a century ago.