Bill Brown, *Other Things*

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Few scholars would dispute the importance of what Steve Connor termed, in 2007, the “thingly turn” in literary studies—the pronounced shift, since the late 1990s, in the focus of literary criticism from language and form to the “stuff” that language and form describes.¹ Borrowing from material culture studies—most notably, Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff’s edited collection, *The Social Life of Things* (1986), Daniel Miller’s edited collection, *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (1998), and Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery’s edited collection, *History from Things* (1993)—the first generation of literary materialist scholarship sought to demonstrate the socio-political charge of literary objects beyond that described by Marxist theory: which is to say, their capacity to illuminate not only systems of circulation and exchange but social dynamics and the pull of desire, aspiration, and memory, both within and outside the text. Now considered seminal, Douglas Mao’s *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (1998), David Trotter’s *Cooking With Mud: The Idea of Mess in 19th-century Art and Fiction* (2000), Elaine Freedgood’s *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (2006), and Bill Brown’s *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003) sought to render literary objects legible in order to render legible the texts in which they appeared. From the Colonial subtext of ivory in *Jane Eyre* (Freedgood) to the anxieties of Empire and rejection of Victorian values implicit in the scavenged materials in Virginia Woolf’s ‘Solid Objects’ (Mao), literary matter, they showed, is pullulating with tacit stories of its own—and can in turn provide a way into thinking about the object-status of literature itself.

Brown’s now famous essay, “Thing Theory,” first published in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* in 2001 while he was still working on his own contribution to the field (the afore-mentioned *A Sense of Things*), marked one of the first attempts to complicate this approach.² Borrowing from Heidegger’s distinction in *Being and Time* between objects “ready to hand,” whose only concern for us is their end-function, and the “present-to-
handedness” disclosed when an object falls apart or obstructs our work, Brown argued the importance of attending to what he later termed “object relations in an expanded field”—a field encompassing mis-use, misappropriation, and breakage. He further argued that New Historicist readings of literary objects (like historical materialist ones before them) effectively obscure their “thingness”. In one of the essay’s most frequently quoted passages, he thus argued:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation (4).

Part polemic, part manifesto, “Thing Theory” has left an indelible imprint on materialist literary criticism over the last decade and a half. It is indeed difficult to find a study of literary objects that does not quote the above passage, while the essay itself, according to Google, has been cited 1,115 times. Its influence is especially palpable in such studies as Mathias Nilges and Emilio Saurí’s Literary Materialisms (2013), Maurizia Boscagli’s Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism (2014), Babette Bärbel Tischleder’s The Literary Life of Things (2014), Will Viney’s Waste: A Philosophy of Things (2014), and Susan Morrison’s The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter (2015), all of which complicate the semiotic approach to the object matter of literature with an attentiveness to the ways in which such matter resists the schema into which it is placed. The latter two studies in turn evidence the utility of these ideas to the emergent field of discard studies, which is specifically concerned with objects and materials deemed beyond use.

The interest “Thing Theory” generated, as Brown repeatedly notes in his new book, Other Things (2015), is itself symptomatic of millennial and postmillennial anxieties regarding our increasing reliance on virtual objects, the proliferation of new technologies or “newly agential objects” destined to render human labour obsolete, and the threat of environmental catastrophe, which promises to render “our most familiar object, our planet […] uncanny” (13). These anxieties are evident in the art and literature of the last two decades (if not more), as well as in Object-Oriented-Ontology (OOO) and New Materialism, two (semi-)related disciplines whose emergence coincided with the publication of “Thing Theory,” and which for Brown are characterised by a pronounced focus on objects at the expense of the subject. OOO, according to Graham Harman, argues that “[r]eal objects withdraw from all human access and even from casual interaction with each other”, that they exist beyond their relationship to human beings or to each other, and that they “resist all forms of causal or cognitive mastery”. New Materialism holds that objects can also (in Jane Bennett’s words) “produce effects” and thus, to some extent, have agency, and can be said to possess their own “vitality” or “vibrancy.”

Brown’s new book however does not fully endorse the views of these new approaches, and explicitly resists much of OOO: instead, nearly a decade and a half after the publication of his seminal essay, and two decades after his first book (The Material Unconscious, 1996), Other Things seeks to re-assert the significance of the “subject” in the “particular subject-object relation” delineated by Thing Theory. As he explains in the book’s glossary entry for “New Materialism,” “my own new materialist practice explicitly takes place within the frame established by historical materialism”—even as, we might add, it seeks to challenge aspects of that framework.
The stated aim of *Other Things* is to provide an historical analysis of how the literary and visual arts of the long twentieth century (1890-2010) in the United States and Europe have approached the inscrutable, unquantifiable aspects of the object world: what Brown calls the “other thing”, which he defines as “the thingness that inheres as a potentiality within any object” (5). If objects are defined by their function within systems of production, consumption, and disposal, then “effecting thingness—depends [...] on a fetishistic overvaluation or misappropriation [...] that dislodges it from the circuits through which it is what it typically is. Thingness is precipitated as a kind of misuse value” (51). The book unspools as a series of broad-ranging readings of subject-object relations, from the scavenging practices of Woolf’s politician turned *bricoleur* in “Solid Objects,” which Brown reads as reflecting “senses fundamentally altered by the facts of wartime scarcity and postwar depression” and a “new subject-object dynamic [...] catalysed [...] by the Western world’s misuse of material for martial ends” (56-57), to the “commodity nationalism” of post-9/11 memorabilia and the anxieties implicit in the perception of objects in DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2006). Each of the essays focuses on specific materials—glass, plastic, ceramic, silicon—in relation to both their social significance and the text’s transformation of that significance into an “other thing”. Through attention to the depiction of object matter as uncanny, redemptive, resistant to commodification, or made radically other through reification (a transformation he identifies in the pottery in Philip K. Dick), Brown shows how Modernism, Surrealism, post-war Science Fiction, as well as Continental philosophy and late twentieth-century American film and animation have captured aspects of the material world that remain outside the constraints of an increasingly globalised economy, or that globalisation itself has made “strange”.

But *Other Things* has a second, and arguably more important aim, which is only alluded to in the Coda, but helps to in fact explain the reasons for publishing a collection largely comprised of essays already published elsewhere. Readers familiar with Brown’s work will notice that Chapters 2 and 6 through 10 are lightly revised versions of previously published material, while Chapter 1, which situates Heidegger and Lacan’s conceptualisations of objecthood historically, repeats many of the ideas expressed in “Thing Theory”. Their inclusion here, alongside new chapters on the Surrealist *objet trouvé* (Ch. 3), the “redemptive reification” of things in Philip K. Dick (Ch. 4), and the elision of the object in Hannah Arendt and the subject in Bruno Latour (Ch. 5), is explained by the book’s wider motive: to contextualise Thing Theory itself within the history of thing thinking, to bring it to bear on “vibrant” materialism and OOO, and to challenge the “retreat into the object” manifest in the latter’s posthumanist strains. The book’s value, in other words, resides not so much in the contribution of new ideas than in the collection of previously articulated ideas into a single volume that situates them within the current discourse around materiality, agency, and subjecthood. Combined here, the republished essays serve as case studies that testify to the enduring relevance of the human subject—particularly in literature, where, legible or not, objects necessarily exist in relation to humans even when they are eluding their control. Brown’s historicisation of Heidegger’s “Das Ding” as a “response to Marx’s account of commodity fetishism from which Lukács developed his theory of reification” (32), his reading of Lacan’s interest in Jacques Prévert’s matchboxes as an inadvertent foray into the object world that psychoanalysis usually elides (34-38), and his final chapter, which seeks to dissuade us from a “flat ontology—where subject and object, human and nonhuman,
animate and inanimate become indistinct” (292), each help situate the thingness of objects within human history. And that history encompasses our present: Brown is keen to emphasise, for instance, the specific relevance of Breton’s concept of the “total revolution of the object” to contemporary concerns regarding the “atrophy” or “soi-disant dematerialization” of the object world effected by digital technologies and “the hypertrophy of the object world in the form of proliferation (including objects and drones) and in the form of waste” (81). According to this reading, as much as the “commodity-object forms of surrealism” manifest in “Magritte coffee mugs” and “Dalí magnets” affirm Adorno’s fears about consumerism’s eventual co-option of the avant-garde (8)), the surrealist object as a concept retains a peculiar charge that channels both the anxieties of the period from which it emerged, and anxieties specific to our time. It functions, that is, as a conduit for the expression of shifting subject-object relations. The Brownian thing, then, “is a historical phenomenon; the thingness of an object cannot be abstracted from the field of culture” (155). Thing Theory—or the study of “other things”, as he calls it here—is not concerned with “describing the fate of the essential object abstracted from its interactions” or “a life behind or beneath the object” but rather with examining the “life that is [the object’s] fluctuating shape and substance and surface, a life that the subject can catalyse but cannot contain” (51).

To be sure, there are certain flaws in Brown’s criticism of OOO and New Materialism, and to the way it is structured. Most notably, the above-cited articulation of a “flat ontology” fails to recognise that the term as it is used by Manuel de Landa and Harman eliminates hierarchies rather than distinction(s) tout court. This is characteristic of Brown’s tendency to oversimplify the different ideas with which he professes to disagree (and it is likewise noteworthy that de Landa, who coined the term “flat ontology” in the first place, is not mentioned anywhere in the book). There are moments, too, when the discussion itself feels perfunctory—for example, when Brown mentions the “ethical and political quandaries” of what he describes as Latour’s “homogenizing ontology” in Pandora’s Hope, only to say he “does not mean to pursue” them (168). One wonders, in other words, whether the book’s defence of the subject would have been strengthened by a deeper engagement with, and recognition of, the polyvocalism of this emergent praxis—and from a more nuanced articulation of it.

The above criticisms notwithstanding, Other Things is an important compendium of previous work that functions as a second manifesto, enjoining literary scholars swayed by the thingly turn not to abandon humans entirely—and arguing how much literary criticism has yet to learn from our complicated history of dealing with things. Brown is at his best when he is reaffirming literature’s importance in such investigations: in a context in which it is increasingly difficult to see objects as anything other than commodities, literature “can serve as a mode of rehabilitative reification: a resignifying of the fixations and fixities of thing-ification that will grant us access to what remains obscure (or obscured) in the routines through which we (fail to) experience the inanimate object world” (222). And within this context, his remarkable essay on the “ontological confusion” between “person” and “thing” that ‘crystallised the moral horror of slavery’ (248) in literature and popular culture (first published in 2006), and his readings of uncanny automata and puppets in Shawn Wong’s Homebase (1979) and Frank Chin’s Donald Duk (1991) in relation to the history of US toy production, migrant exploitation, and Chinese outsourcing (first published in 1998), gain new urgency. These essays remind us
of the material conditions that precipitated the startling representations of objects with which literary materialism concerns itself.

14 Though his approach is original, Brown is not alone in voicing these ideas. At a recent round-table hosted by the London School of Economics Philosophy Forum titled “On Objects”, Daniel Miller, Esther Leslie and Carolyn Shapiro all spoke about the ethical and intellectual pitfalls of “pure” applications of OOO to literature or culture. “The objects I study”, Miller pointed out, “are cultural artefacts, made by people, owned by people”—while Shapiro noted that eliding the subject risks depoliticising objects entirely. One might extend this argument to contend that literature, while shedding light on resistant objects, ultimately contends with matter that has been identified as important by the human eye (and crafted, in language, by human thought). The subject is thus always there, even when it is being resisted.

15 In a similar vein, Other Things elegantly moves between close-readings of unwieldy, even “vibrant” objects, and readings of their complex relationship to the human beings who make, buy, look upon, or are made to suffer by them. Of these, the discussion of the “vitality” of Achilles’s shield in the Iliad, in the book’s preface, and the careful contextualisation of Man Ray’s “readymades” in Ch. 3, are particularly impressive. The individual essays themselves, which interlace discussions of literary and philosophical texts with analyses of film, sculpture, painting, and photography, can be seen to produce, themselves, an “other thing”: a hybrid of theory, literary and art criticism, and history of philosophy that “ontically” (in Brown’s words) investigates the “what and where and how and why” (24) of everyday things, and the amenability of these to representation. Brown’s writing style, which proceeds in a constellatory manner akin to Walter Benjamin’s, clustering ideas around select examples rather than through linear argumentation, is especially fruitful in this regard, effectively performing the textual equivalent of the expression, “And another thing…”

16 Other Things provides a useful contribution to scholarship on literary modernism and postmodernism. And while it is not entirely successful in its outright rebuttal of the latest ‘bends’ in the thingly turn, Other Things convincingly demonstrates their limited application in literary studies.

NOTES


3. Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, transl. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Blackwell, 3005 [1962]), 90-103. Heidegger distinguishes between “conspicuous” objects defined by their unusability through damage or breakage, “obtrusive” objects defined by the loss of a part needed to make them function, and “obstinate” objects, which prevent us from performing a task (102-104).