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The Literary Life of Things

Case Studies in American Fiction

campus

Contents

Introduction: Lively Objects—Scenes of Animation and the American Literary Imagination

Objects are no longer dead. In current critical thought, the material world is gaining much attention, and inanimate matter is seen to possess agency and vitality—to be alive with potential, ontological defiance, and vibrant force. While this renewed focus on questions of materiality in the humanities and the social sciences is a rather recent phenomenon, variously designated as the *material turn* or the *new materialisms*, the object world has long played a vital role in the American literary imagination. Because narrative fiction depicts human subjects in the concrete circumstances of everyday life, it is a medium that grants us particular access to a material world that can become fully animate. The worlds conjured up in and by narrative are usually configured as a tangible universe. Be it the built environment of a city, a natural habitat, or the microcosm of the home, material life is depicted as the coexistence of human subjects and inanimate objects. My book shares the "current interest in questions of material culture, objecthood, and thingness" that W.J.T. Mitchell observes in a number of academic fields—from sociology and political science to literary and cultural studies.[1] Like other new materialist studies, *The Literary Life of Things* seeks to go beyond the more traditional materialisms inspired by Marx (which remain largely focused on political economy and class relations). It does so in two ways: first, by engaging with

1 W.J.T. Mitchell, "Romanticism and the Life of Things: Fossils, Totems, and Images," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001), 167. Over the past decade, this interest has articulated itself in numerous books, special issues, and conferences in Europe, North America, and beyond. New materialisms have yielded innovative critical ways of thinking about culture, history, art, technology, media, ontology, or agency from the perspective of materiality and objects. Notable in this regard are, for instance, Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, eds., *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

the concrete material situations and physical forces that impact and mold human lives, and, second, by spotlighting the cultural, ecological, psychological, affective, perceptive, and aesthetic dimensions of how people relate to inanimate objects and envision these relations.

Setting out from these premises, as well as from the observation that objects have a much-neglected life in fiction, my book focuses on making visible scenes of animation in different literary-material settings. It asks how people's lives are propelled by a dynamics of objects—how human aspirations, fantasies, practices, memories, and self-concepts engage the object world in essential ways. Rereading both canonical and lesser-known texts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American fiction, I explore what I call the *material imaginary*—the various ways in which literary texts invite us to imagine physical objects in active roles that enable and shape people's actions, social relations, self-fashioning, emotional states, and moral or cultural orientations, as well as the texts' own narrative and aesthetic expressions.

It seems a bold claim to say that inanimate things have lives when it is generally understood that they constitute the realm of the inanimate, the inert, the passive backdrop of human action. This book sets out to challenge the common idea of the object world's inertia and lifelessness, and explores how, in American fiction and cultural history, objects are animated in numerous ways. Literary texts encourage us to see our practical, emotional, and imaginary engagement with the nonhuman environment in modes that resist any clear-cut distinction of subjects and objects, the physical and the metaphysical, the animate and the inanimate. The notion of the life of things, then,—whether social, cultural, psychological, or plainly physical—is premised on the recognition that human lives are enmeshed in matter and that we have to account for the agency and vibrancy of physical stuff, whether trees, clouds, toys, or elevators. Taking things seriously means to recognize the liveliness that resides in matter itself, that which Jane Bennett calls "vital materiality"—"the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."[2] The awareness that matter is active and potent and has a vitality of its own also informs the material imaginary of the fictional works I consider. This vitality has compelled me to take issue with the familiar distinc-

2 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

tions between the organic and the inorganic, the mortal and the immortal, living beings and inanimate stuff.

The question of how things are imagined to assume different forms of life in a literary context (and beyond) informs the methodology of this book. Of course, *life* itself is a complex term that does not only denote the biological quality or condition of animate existence, which distinguishes a living organism from dead matter and would allow us to neatly divide animals, plants, and people, on the one hand, and pebbles, computers, and plastic bags, on the other. Even the first definition the *OED* gives for *life* includes capacities—"reproduction, adaptation to the environment, and response to stimulation"—which are not restricted to organic life, but describe mechanical and industrial production, technical artifacts, and digital technologies as well: chromolithography (mechanical reproduction), shock absorbers (adaptation to the road), thermometers or cell phones (chemical and electronic sensitivity to stimulation) are obvious examples.[3]

More important, though, life in a comprehensive sense defies the very distinction between animate and inanimate forms of existence. Understood as a "vivifying or animating principle," *life* clearly encompasses the sustaining functions of the object world: both natural things and artificial ones constitute the physical environment—the very world we live in—that keeps us clothed, sheltered, nourished, oriented, and connected with one another. In their introduction to *New Materialisms*, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost set out from a similar proposition: "As human beings we inhabit an ineluctably material world. We live our everyday lives surrounded by, immersed in, matter. We are ourselves composed of matter."[4] From a phenomenological perspective, it would make little sense to distinguish the living from the dead elements that together constitute our *Lebenswelt*, especially since *life-world* means precisely the *entirety* of an individual's immediate (cognitive, affective, sensuous) experiences, interactions, and relations. It is the world we know and take for granted, the one upon which we unthinkingly rely to still be there when we wake up in the morning. How crucially our life is a fact of material embeddedness is best understood if we try to picture a world without things, as Lorraine Daston does:

3 The *OED* lists 14 different main entries (and even more subentries) for the term *life*; the full records of these entries comprise together 33 printed pages; with compounds it adds up to 64. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "life."

4 Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in: *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Coole and Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

> Imagine a world without things. It would be not so much an empty world as a blurry, frictionless one: no sharp outlines would separate one part of the uniform plenum from another; there would be no resistance against which to stub a toe or test a theory or struggle stalwartly. Nor would there be anything to describe, or to explain, remark on, interpret or complain about—just a kind of porridgy oneness.[5]

On a mundane level, then, physical objects give our lives substance and orientation. They shape our perceptions, give us food for thought and experimentation, and help us understand ourselves—in everyday life, in science, and in the literary imagination. The recalcitrance of matter, the mishaps and unexpected encounters we have with stubborn things help to secure our sense of being in the world and remind us of our own physicality.

In addition to these spatial characteristics, the dimension of time is also crucial for understanding inanimate life. It is with reference to duration that the *OED* defines another usage of the term *life* that explicitly includes objects: "The term of duration of an inanimate thing; the time that a manufactured object lasts or is usable" (10.a.). We are used to thinking about commodities in terms of life cycles, and the time between an object's fabrication and obsolescence or disposal is seen to correspond to an individual person's lifespan: the "period from birth to death" (8.a.). While the life expectancy of digital devices or fashion items often doesn't exceed a few years, other, more durable things have much longer lives, either as a person's valued possessions (heirlooms, jewelry), or because they circulate through many different hands.[6] In any case, the lifespan of objects depends on the uses to which they are put and the changing values attributed to them. This social context, rather than inherent properties, largely determines what Igor Kopytoff has called the *biography* of a thing, and which is discussed as "the social life of things" in the field anthropology.[7] I will show that both the notion of duration and the biographical perspective are very useful for understanding the life of things in literature; the latter takes shape when objects are exchanged, passed on, and endowed with meaning and sentimental value by their possessors over the course of time.

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5 Daston, *Things That Talk*, 9.

6 I do not mean to suggest that technical obsolescence should be considered a "natural" cause of death for an object; an object's lifespan depends on many factors—technical performance is just one of them. Functionality or suitability always involves technological compatibility, changing designs, social uses, and consumer tastes—all of which are influenced by the economic interest in high turnover rates.

7 I will discuss these concepts by Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff in greater detail below.

There is yet another way in which individual objects (rather than matter in general) come to be perceived as animate or alive: they can convey "a sense of vitality or energy. . . . in action, thought, or expression" (*OED*, 6.a.); they can even become models of liveliness. A popular example can illustrate this point: the Energizer Bunny, the pink toy rabbit wearing sunglasses and flip-flops, which kept moving and beating its drum through countless television commercials in the 1980s and 90s, is not merely a commercial icon promising and indeed *embodying* the long life of batteries, but it is also alive in the popular imagination and has entered common parlance as an expression for tireless activity.[8] It even entered the *OED*, which defines it as "a persistent or indefatigable person or phenomenon." The mechanical, motor-driven movement of the toy bunny never tried to imitate the natural grace of a living rabbit. Yet the toy has come to signify a human trait of life: the capacity to "keep going" that characterizes people with extraordinary energy and endurance. This example demonstrates that our sense of vitality or liveliness is not restricted to activities performed by humans or animals, but that it extends to inanimate objects that are "alive" with motion, energy, or vivid expression. Moreover, if physical or chemical energy is conceived of as a life-defining property, batteries are indeed a vitalizing force: they "give life" to appliances and gadgets that shape our daily routines—from simple alarm clocks to tablet computers.

The aspects of inanimate life addressed thus far—the physical environment that constitutes our *Lebenswelt* and conditions our grasp of that world, the lifespan of things that converge with human biographies, and the capacity of devices to perform work and radiate with energy—represent only the most mundane ways in which ordinary objects are seen as being alive. What has been left out of the picture so far are the psychological and symbolic dimensions of the relations humans have with objects. Literary texts in particular reflect the intimate entanglement between people and things. They show how essentially people's psychic life and self-understanding rely on the object world in general, and on individual things in particular. Ma-

8 The Energizer Bunny was devised by DDB Chicago Advertising and has served as a mascot for Energizer batteries for over twenty years. Starting out its televised life in 1989, it has now become an icon of American popular culture: you can find over 800 "Energizer Bunny" videos (the original commercials and a great number of parodies) on YouTube.com. A recent advertising-related study has shown that "95% of respondents [in the US] were aware of the bunny." "Still Going and Going: Energizer Bunny Enters His 20th Year." *USA Today online*, Nov. 29, 2008, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/advertising/2008–11–29-energizer-bunny_N.htm?csp=34

terial artifacts become the nodal points of human stories and serve as both objects and expressions of people's desires, anxieties, anger, and longings. As toys, tools, cherished possessions, souvenirs, gifts, commodities, relics, or junk—just to name a few modes of thingly life—they take on very different roles: they foster personal development, individual and collective memory, religious faith, social distinction, cultural tastes and belonging, emotional and symbolic investments. Moreover, artifacts are the products of human design, creativity, and labor. As such they are alive with our ideas and visions, calculations and efforts. Both physically and metaphysically, then, objects are an integral part of human life, of everyday practices and structures of feeling. What is more, they become the trash that is left behind when we no longer care—the remnants of life that tell their own story about our cultural values and civilization.

Object studies and *thing theory* usually approach the complex interactions between people and things from specific disciplinary perspectives:[9] Anthropological studies consider how the traffic in things—their ritual exchange as gifts or their circulation as commodities—constitutes a politics of value and maintains social ties. Sociology investigates how objects figure in people's everyday practices, how they are integrated in their habitus. Psychology is interested in the function of transitional objects for the development of children, the affective significance of personal possessions, and the psychic functions of collecting. Philosophy is concerned with the subject/object dialectic, the distinction between objects and things, and the epistemological question of how material phenomena come to be represented in thought. Material culture studies explore artifacts as expressions of a particular regional culture, historical period, or national character. Archeologists try to reconstruct vanished forms of human life from its material remnants. Social studies of technology consider the agency of nonhuman objects in relation to human actors. While all of these approaches offer valuable concepts for the study of literature, none of the disciplinary approaches alone can account for the complex ways in which literary texts envision relations between human characters and the material world. The aesthetic experience of fictional texts allows readers to imagine the mutual lives of people and things through an engagement with the idiosyncratic perspectives, affective bonds, and con-

9 Bill Brown introduced "thing theory" as a form of critical thinking that is concerned with the complex social, philosophical, and aesthetic relations we maintain with objects and that tries to come to terms with their thingness. "Thing Theory," in "Things," ed. Bill Brown, special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.

crete practices that constitute the characters' world and their interactions with one another. Before I address the specific texts that I analyze in this book, I want to give an account of the most relevant theories that have informed my critical practices.

That objects have a social life is one of the salient concepts introduced in Arjun Appadurai's book *The Social Life of Things* and Igor Kopytoff's essay "The Cultural Biography of Things" in the same volume.[10] The idea that an object's meaning or value is defined by a particular social situation rather than by its inherent qualities goes back to anthropological theories of the gift. Gifts are understood with regard to their social functions as constituting systems of perpetual exchange and reciprocity between persons. While the market economy is the dominant principle by which objects are seen to circulate in Western societies, anthropologists have conceptualized the exchange of gifts in non-Western or "archaic" societies as an alternative economy that facilitates social cohesion.

The classic text dedicated to this "other" mode of exchange is Marcel Mauss's essay *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925). Drawing his insights from the potlatch culture of the Haida in Pacific North America and Malinowski's study of the Kula ring—the ritual exchange of shell necklaces and armbands—in the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea, Mauss demonstrates how the relations between social groups are perpetuated through ceremonial gifts. For Mauss, it is crucial that the gift generates social obligations and ties of reciprocity: what appears to be a voluntary act of giving—"free and disinterested"—is in fact "constrained and self-interested." Mauss calls the apparent generosity of the giver "a polite fiction" that obscures the expected restitution that comes with the gift.[11] Unlike the circulation of commodities, which is constituted by one-time transactions regulated by the market, the exchange of gifts entails a perpetual cycle of exchange, whereby objects function as social media between persons. The reciprocity between the giver and the recipient is the vital principle of the gift economy, in which things figure as connectors, actualizing the rela-

10 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63. Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *Social Life of Things*, 64–91.

11 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Function of Exchange in Archaic Society*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1990), 3.