Other Things by Bill Brown (review)

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Book Reviews

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Bill Brown has had things on his mind for quite some time. In *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane and the Economics of Play* (1997), he used Crane's fiction to explore the disquietingly everyday objects which populate their imagined worlds, not just as descriptive details of the modern, but as strange historical presences telling stories about technology, race, and the lived experience of capitalism that few had found there before. Then, in 2001, Brown edited a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*—later expanded into a 2004 book—entitled *Things*, which introduced what he called "thing theory." In the meantime, his 2003 book *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* put this theory into practice, with searching readings of Mark Twain, Henry James, Sarah Orne Jewett, and more that sought to reorient our views of realism and naturalism at the turn of the twentieth century around the accumulated coins, vases, carpets, chairs, and other material artifacts that situate these texts within the circuits of commodity exchange even as they turn on forms of value that the market rarely assigns, and only intermittently makes visible. *Other Things* is, at one level, a continuation of this inquiry into the period of modernism. It lets us see how Brown's work has developed alongside such books as Douglas Mao's *Solid Objects* (1999) or Daniel Tiffany's *Toy Medium* (2000), and has helped inspire newer work on modernism's object culture, like Aaron Jaffe's *The Way Things Go* (2014). Jaffe even cracks a second-order joke that captures the pervasiveness of objects in the criticism and theory that Brown has long championed and produced. "The recent interest in thing theory," Jaffe writes, "is really little more than a thing preoccupation: a thing thing."[1]

What makes the joke is what, at another level, threatens to unmake the theory. When some "thing" now becomes "a thing"—like an internet boyfriend (Gosling begat Cumberbatch begat Oscar Isaacs) or Kanye going Molly Bloom on *Ellen* (google it)—we usually don't need a theory to explain it, and can't be sure it will last long enough to warrant one. These memes are not exactly the kind of thing that *Other Things* is after;

though Brown is aware, I think, that many of the physical objects to which he is most attracted are almost as resistant when it comes to saying why we give them our attention. And this is so, at least in part, because our attention to them can become quite frustrating—because it seems distracting, non-productive, obdurate, obsessive, repetitious—when we're made conscious of it. Drawing on, but even more importantly, scalding down from Heidegger's "overwhelming singular Thing (*das Ding*)," Brown asks that we attend instead to "a more quotidian and rambunctious (less august and thus more significant) thing. There's some *thing* about this place that gets you (that you find enchanting) and some *thing* that drives you nuts." Brown is fascinated by things with a "vitality" that eludes the "scene of cultural coherence" we might erect around them, that "quickly disturb" the network of historical, ideological, or psychological rationales that might otherwise resolve their fascination into a structure that would be less "significant" precisely because it underwrites a theory of the self or of the market or of late capitalism (39). This is to say that "things" disclose their actual significance for Brown less in the language we can use to talk about them, and more in how we catch ourselves attending to them—bodily, intuitively, performatively—before we know that they are there, or pause to justify their hold on us. Brown begins a chapter on Virginia Woolf's "Solid Objects" with a suitably concrete set of second-person instructions: "You should be reading this with something in your hands besides this book. And something, really, besides a pencil or pen. Something like an empty glass, a rubber band, a paper clip that you can rub between your fingers, that you can twist and bend back and forth" (49). It would be better, of course, if such a thing were already in our hand since what matters most to Brown—and motivates the length and detail of the conceit—is not the conscious action, but the phenomenon of discovering ourselves unconsciously (and already for how long?) charmed or passively enraptured by the humble objects with which we live as matter in a world of other matter, both like and not like us.

Across the individually compelling essays in *Other Things*—many of which revisit and expand on work that Brown has published in preceding years—Brown pursues a logic that often starts from a moment of sheer preoccupation with the material world, an apprehension of perceptual or tactile perturbation at its most "obtuse," as Roland Barthes would describe it. Brown himself associates the allure of "thingness" with the *punctum* of the photograph that Barthes so famously explores in *Camera Lucida,* where it provides a term for constellating "minor" or "inadvertent" details that come to transfix and overwhelm our systematic reading of a larger whole (22-23). But I also found myself thinking back to Barthes's earlier essay on "The Third Meaning" as well, and recognizing a deep affinity in Brown for the particular effects of conceptual hesitation or resistance that Barthes too was willing to accept with all the "pejorative connotation" of the obtuse: "the obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has something derisory about it . . . it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason."[2] Brown's book accordingly gravitates toward the concrete and site-specific, to things that push at the limits, both upper and lower, of the theories that surround them.

As a series of essays reflecting Brown's own shifting intellectual commitments and the various objects that have patterned them, *Other Things* is structurally predisposed toward cases and examples. Every chapter in the book save one is parenthetically named for a writer or artist (from Woolf and Man Ray to Shawn Wong and Spike Lee) whose works occasion Brown's more sweeping meditations on materiality and more. Yet Brown's investment in the singular example is no mere consequence of how this book is engineered. He has a very sharp eye for things that can appear wonderfully "obtuse," and Brown is especially insightful on the lump of glass at the center of Woolf's "Solid Objects" or Man Ray's creepy, all-observing metronome "Object to be Destroyed" (decorated with a photographic eye). Brown does brilliant labor excavating the historical situation of the English glass industry after World War One to give a rationale for Woolf's material motivations, and engages Michael Fried to argue that a difference between "art" and "objecthood" is seriously hard to maintain both within a surrealist tradition, and within a

broadly poststructuralist discourse where theorists such as Gaston Bachelard and Jacques Lacan imagine subjectivity itself as a function of how we understand ourselves as seen by other objects. Still, it is less the contextual schemes or arguments that win the day and more that Brown can effectively—or better, affectively—insinuate and share the uncanny powers of his chosen things with readers. Which means that questionable choices of curation can disrupt the spell of his collection in *Other Things*. Myla Goldberg's *Bee Season* (2000), for example, gives Brown the opportunity to think through the psychology of objects in Melanie Klein and Harold Searles, an American psychoanalyst who remains relatively obscure to literary critics. But the psychology of the characters in Goldberg's novel feels too prosaic to sustain the ways in which Brown wants profoundly to reframe both kleptomania and collecting as activities that contemplate, in physical practice, that "originary rupture by which the human and its environment become distinct" (189). Nor does it feel entirely sufficient for Brown's expansive reading of the black memorabilia in *Bamboozled*—for all the command and capaciousness of his chapter on Spike Lee—to circle back to the "thingness of objects" as another variation on the "past's hyperactive presence" in regard to race in the United States. Brown's point is unimpeachable, yet circling back to Bataille's account of human reification in *The Accursed Share* (1949)—or, for that matter, to Ralph Ellison's archaeology of race's object-world in *Invisible Man* (1952)—makes the methodology appear more retrospective than Brown intends, since there is, as other moments in the chapter do concede, much about the prevalence of racial violence in contemporary America that goes beyond "witnessing the repetition of history" (269).

Since *Other Things* proceeds by way of chapters that are primarily self-contained—yet span the twentieth century and range from North America to Europe—it is not surprising that there are opportunities to disagree with some of Brown's conclusions on a particular constellation of works and forces, or to wish at times for more elaboration of the sensibility behind a set of given readings since the next set will almost certainly shift the ground again. "The whole point of thinking about things," Brown writes near the end of the book, "is a matter of posing and responding to questions that a given master narrative cannot pose in an empirically or conceptually satisfying way." "Thing theory," in other words, is finally going to be a "thing" and not a "theory" if it somehow can't be both. That said, there is less modesty in Brown's position here than we might think, and to the degree that he backs away from the post-critique empiricisms of Bruno Latour or object-oriented ontology or speculative realism—and too, from the conceptual matrixes of psychoanalysis or Marxism—it is because he believes his willfully impure mix of theories and methods is better, both in philosophy and substance. In the end, for Brown, there is precious little difference. The presiding figure of *Other Things* is Heidegger after all, and Brown wants works of art to help us fathom "the thingness of things" (272). Brown writes of Heidegger with beauty and considerable infectiousness, giving newfound vitality to gnostic formulations that can seem all too readily available—"ready-to-hand," as it were—when critics simply try to strip mine his tautologies. Brown, by contrast, risks indulging them completely because he is comfortable embracing their inscrutability (their obtuseness?) along with their power. "Standing alone and standing forth," Brown writes, less in paraphrase than homage, "the thing things" (39). This kind of thing might not be everybody's thing. Marxist critics might especially make a thing of Brown's insistence on the limits of the commodity as an analytic form, while others might ask where, exactly, does this thing called desire that Brown keeps talking about actually come from. But the test of Brown's book—which it surpasses and sustains—is that, like the paper clip or rubber band you almost certainly aren't holding as you read this, *Other Things* will stick in your mind anyway.

Notes

1. Aaron Jaffe, *The Way Things Go: An Essay on the Matter of Second Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 80.

2. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 55.