

BABETTE BÄRBEL TISCHLEDER, *The Literary Life of Things. Case Studies in American Fiction* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014), 292 pp.

Of the current scholarship driving the material turn in literary studies, Babette Tischleder's *The Literary Life of Things* is a major contribution to critical efforts intent on disentangling the complicated relationship between American fiction and material culture. Using a dual narrative trajectory, the study not only expands current theories informing thing studies and material culture but demonstrates the pervasiveness with which object-oriented ontologies informed American fiction from the mid-nineteenth- to the twenty-first century.

In the first trajectory, the introduction offers a précis of current criticism discussing what is at stake when we as humans claim that the very things that are not human impact our lives but also have a life of their own. In a refreshing move that foregrounds the semantics of "life" over that of "things," Tischleder calls attention to the psychological implications that inform the fictional representation of subject/object relationships as they unfold in both space and time. Positioned this way, the study takes measure of the mostly Marxist driven field of thing theories and their various object-centered arguments. Moving deftly from Arjan Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff's take on commodification and the social life of things to Marcel Mauss and John Frow's competing notions of gift economies, the author's argument for the importance of matter's agency is motivated by two thinkers in particular.

On the one hand, *The Literary Life of Things* gains much of its momentum from Bruno Latour's almost giddy praise of literary studies in *Reassembling the Social* (2005), where he argues that unlike empirical data, literature provides a "freer" environment for exploring material life. On the other hand, Tischleder also takes a page from Hannah Arendt's classic *The Human Condition* (1958) and its postulation that the tangibility of experience is a key feature of world-making just as the material process of reification is crucial for turning actions into the stuff of future memories. Calling on an array of theorists, ranging from D. W. Winnicott to Gaston Bachelard to Pierre Bourdieu, the book asks readers not only to find new ways that include nonhuman objects into our interpretive calculus of knowledge production but to consider

the question of how fiction enables objects to come alive *in* rather than *around* us.

The study's second trajectory consists of five case studies in which the author puts her working questions into action by tracking the nexus between the human and the material in select works of American fiction. The application of contextual sources and interdisciplinary methodologies cannot hide the influence of Bill Brown's seminal study of late nineteenth- and early twentieth century fiction. Similar to his *The Sense of Things* (2000), Tischleder also provides an interpretive tool kit that ranges widely from historical phenomenology and post-structural semiology to post-capitalist sociology and traditional cultural history. However, when it comes to actual fiction, *The Literary Life of Things* takes a more sweeping view, examining narrative articulations of the human-thing nexus during the periods *preceding* and *following* the era of high industrialism and intense commodification. By exploring the literary consciousness of material life from post-Civil War to post-modern fiction, Tischleder productively puts scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s into dialogue with current debates about New Materialism. In so doing, the book is able to make a compelling case for its perhaps most important but easily overlooked argument: American fiction is not only permeated with staged objects that have a life of their own, it has quite self-consciously been so long before the emergence of an interpretive language for addressing this phenomenon.

Using fiction by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the first chapter charts the strategic deployment of decommodified objects during the era of conspicuous consumption. Setting aside the much-debated object narrative of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Tischleder concentrates on stories and essays collected in Stowe's *House and Home Papers* (1864). In particular, the story "The Ravages of a Carpet" provides the anchor for revisiting older arguments about the dangerous allure of commodity culture in which the sin of material consumption tends to be pitted against the guiltless pleasure of owning well-used goods. The author sides with the assessment that Stowe eschews a critique of capitalism in favor of the pre-Civil War ideology of sentimental domesticity. But whereas earlier criticism demonstrated how material culture caused the commercialization of both family life and inner selfhood, Tischleder affords material possessions a more therapeutic func-

tion. Stowe's writings envision domestic environments in which people and things not only cohabit, but where objects help produce an ecological balance between the demands for domestic order and the characters' emotional state. Tischleder attributes much of this balance to the way in which the objects' "patina" mediates different life experiences. The simultaneous accretion of personal and material experience transforms objects into affective sources shaping a social order centered on the family unit rather than the mechanics of the marketplace.

According to the second and third chapters, however, the mid-century faith in de-commodified objects was called into question by short stories such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and novels like Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). Intent on exposing the limits of Stowe's domestic animism, Gilman's characterization of wallpaper renders objects as things among things. What in Stowe were once therapeutic artifacts providing intimacy and social harmony become in Gilman tyrannical things that, through their simple unmotivated existence inside domestic settings, split the subject from the object. Experiencing the home as a form of total objecthood, Gilman's character has no choice but to resign herself to becoming one more thing inside the home's material continuum of things.

Similarly, Wharton's novel explores realist and naturalist fiction depicting the psychological predicament of an object-oriented subjectivity set adrift by the surplus experience of objects. By concentrating on the use of sensory perception, in particular "scent," Tischleder posits Wharton's characters as composite selves, mutually constituted as subject and object, whose sense of selfhood is ultimately predicated on aesthetic experiences. Drawing on Bourdieu's discussion of "taste," the chapter shows how the habits of "aesthetic competence" come to dominate the physical experience of the material world. In contrast to the traditional rules of "good taste" according to which objects became subordinated to the subjectivity of the beholder, Tischleder's astute assessment reveals the rise of a parallel material universe governed by the rules of distaste. By examining the olfactory experience of "scent" as the last vestige of material memory, she shows how in Wharton's fiction objects operate in diverging patterns, providing, on the one hand, a key to self-reflection

and conduit for intimacy, while, on the other, stimulating the senses to the point where characters lose the capacity to feel.

Chapters four and five—my favorite chapters—take the book's inquiry into subject-object relationships into the fiction of Vladimir Nabokov and Jonathan Franzen. In a narrative leap that jumps historical scales of production and consumption, not to mention a multitude of global crises spanning two world wars and the acceleration of environmental degradation, the book turns to questions of how we imagine our relationship to objects that refuse to cooperate or, through no fault of their own, have become useless. Turning to Nabokov's novel *Pnin* (1957), Tischleder examines the "recalcitrance" of things by interrogating traditional literary assumptions about human relationships that privilege the bond between people rather than those we maintain with inanimate objects. Through the figure of Pnin (and via a detour into Buster Keaton's silent movies), readers discover an artifactual America in which unruly objects, like cars, gadgets, and appliances, not only have agency but can easily turn into malicious matter. For the Russian immigrant, Pnin, who already experiences himself as a foreign body, the unpredictable agency of things simultaneously disciplines human relationships and has the capacity for serving as the touchstone of self-definition.

By contrast, Tischleder argues that through representations of "obsolescence," Franzen's novel *The Corrections* (2001) deconstructs the notion that objects ought to operate along the lines of serviceability. Portraying a subject afflicted with Parkinson's disease, the novel's objects become the source of familiarity and comfort at the same time as the protagonist's human relationships begin to disintegrate. As the literary life of things fails to intersect with the literary life of the subject, the critical awareness of material obsolescence changes the biography of things into a mere paratext. Tischleder shows how through the literary use of "rhypography" (the art of still life painting) Franzen is able to critique the realist tradition and its faith in the documentary function of objects. While the characters' dependency on the material world make them face their own objecthood, postmodern fiction also recognizes that even in the age of obsolescence both our psychological life and social identity are bound up with physical matter.

*The Literary Life of Things* is an intense and rewarding read, even if at times its desire for complexity interferes with its many wonderful insights. Its explanations of how fiction makes things come alive might cause some specialists to quibble with particular close-readings, and the omission of addressing the actual materiality of things from Stowe's Brussel carpet to Franzen's upholstered armchair will strike students of ma-

terial culture as a missed opportunity. That said, the book on the whole offers new perspectives for reexamining key paradigms of thing theory and object-oriented ontology. By dint of its critical acumen and comprehensive range, this book will be at the center of future discussions addressing things in American literature.

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