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Source: *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 107, No. 2 (April 2012), pp. 364-378

Published by: [Modern Humanities Research Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/modelangrevi.107.2.0364>

Accessed: 19/02/2014 07:15

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‘A THINGY WORLD’: IRIS MURDOCH’S STUFF

the eagerness of objects to
be what we are afraid to do
cannot help but move us [. . .]¹

Art, said Victor Shklovsky, exists ‘to make the stone *stony*’.² This is a view of the function of art to which Iris Murdoch’s fiction assents: the stone’s essential stoniness must be recognized, and respected; objects must be allowed, as she said, to have ‘all a life and being of their own, and friendliness and rights’.³ In 1953, and influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre’s distinction between *être-en-soi* and *être-pour-soi*,⁴ she wrote: ‘Man lives amongst a world of things, alien [and] senselessly contingent’.⁵ However, in the course of her career this sense of alienation from the material world dissipated, and she increasingly came to associate the world of objects with the positive aspects of the contingent: the messy, the ‘hole and corner’,⁶ the marginal, the indeterminate, and the free—those aspects of life which were so important to her literary and philosophical outlook.⁷ As she said late on in her life, to Harry Weinberger: ‘how nice objects are—I’m glad we live in a thingy world’.⁸ Murdoch’s novels are full of things: sometimes things that make things happen, such as Julian’s new boots in *The Black Prince* that catalyse an erotic crisis; sometimes things that sustain an illusion of a coherent self, such as Priscilla’s precious objects, whose absence suddenly and catastrophically renders her paralysed and des-

¹ Frank O’Hara, ‘Interior (with Jane?)’, in *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen (New York: Knopf, 1972), p. 55.

² Victor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’, in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 3–25 (p. 12).

³ Iris Murdoch, *The Philosopher’s Pupil* (London: Viking, 1983), p. 55.

⁴ In *Being and Nothingness* (1943) Sartre distinguishes *être-en-soi* (being in itself) from *être-pour-soi* (being-for-itself) as two different conditions of existence, and of human subjectivity, which can be understood as the distinction between the being-of-things and the being-of-persons.

⁵ Iris Murdoch, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* (1953) (New York: Viking, 1987), p. 10.

⁶ Iris Murdoch, *An Accidental Man* (1971) (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 137.

⁷ For Murdoch, objects’ particularity, rather than their unspecificity, was key. Acknowledging the particularity of things is how one respects their contingency. Elaine Freedgood has recently given us the idea of the metonymic reading as a way to uncover the supposedly marginal object in the novel: metonymy can, she suggests, act as a Trojan Horse for contingency. See her introduction to *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006). David Trotter has also identified objects as having an affinity and complicity with contingency, as he writes about ‘a mutually defining collision between a person and an object’, an encounter which necessarily figures the ‘suspension of the mind’s search for significance’ (David Trotter, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 14).

⁸ Quoted in Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 588.

titute. In Murdoch's novels, there are those who get along with objects, and those who don't: those who like the stone for its stoniness, and those who try to appropriate it, to read it; those who co-opt its stoniness and try to make it signify. In this way, she suggests we all mistreat things (as Baudrillard writes, we have always lived off the 'splendor of the subject' and the 'poverty of the object', which is 'shamed, obscene, passive').⁹

Murdoch's work explores and ceaselessly interrogates this attitude, and its ethical and ontological legitimacy, by contesting conventional hierarchies of subjects and objects. As she wrote in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 'Art invigorates us by a juxtaposition [. . .] of pointlessness and value'.¹⁰ Her novels consistently emphasize these contraries in order to highlight their ethical precariousness. To appreciate the discarded details of life is to be capable of looking at the apparently meaningless without trying to make it mean something, an attitude distinguished by a sort of cheerful, sympathetic lack of interest towards the stuff of the world, an attitude that enables an observer to consider objects benignly with what Steven Connor has described as 'a genial, slightly stoned amazement'.¹¹ This sort of epistemological contentment is problematized by, among other things, the mutual transformative powers of looking and being looked at. As M. F. Simone Roberts argues in her recent essay on Murdoch and Luce Irigaray, 'perception [is] a cultivated activity, consciously developed for the sake of the other: it is an intention'.¹² This enveloping of the material world into one's subjective perceptual range, the attempt to put our surroundings to use, for Murdoch is dangerous, because it threatens to collapse the whole world into a projection of ego. Her exemplary characters instead exercise a recognition and appreciation of the alterity of things, of their ontological integrity and separateness. Murdoch's objects are therefore an ethical fact that her characters must conjure with: an awareness of alterity comes to constitute a way of being in the world, an ethical mode that willingly accommodates difference, and is capable of surprise at the very 'thinginess' of things. Bill Brown's description of the function of objects in fiction—as a lesson in how we 'use[] objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies'—will therefore be worth keeping in mind, but so will the converse: how Murdoch, through her characters, would have us

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (London: Pluto, 1999), p. 111.

¹⁰ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 85.

¹¹ 'What is So Bad about Phenomenology?' <<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/skc/cp/sobad.htm>> [accessed 6 November 2011].

¹² 'Messy is Flourishing is Sublime', in *Iris Murdoch and the Moral Imagination* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), pp. 107–27 (p. 114). For an exploration of how the act of looking at an object is inextricable from acting upon it in some way see James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Simon & Schuster: 1996), p. 22.

not use them.¹³ This essay, then, will look at two of Murdoch's novels, *The Black Prince* (1973) and *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), and argue that, in each, the objects in the text offer us a new perspective on some of her most significant ideas. It will examine how the relationship between the subject and the object in her fiction is negotiated, arguing that through the attention paid to the material world, these novels formulate a theory of forgiveness, or an examination of 'the light by which human things can be mended'.¹⁴ Non-human things emerge as her exemplar of how to suspend destructive, and all too human, emotion, and provoke the desire articulated by Steven Connor as 'the instinct [. . .] to secede from the party of the first person and cross over to the side of things'.¹⁵

In *The Black Prince* Priscilla, the sister of the 'patently misguided' narrator Bradley Pearson, is defined by her pathetic attachment to objects, an attachment that is elided with her own objectification.¹⁶ Priscilla has been separated from her 'precious things', things 'to which she seemed to attach an almost magical significance' (p. 100), and whose loss has caused her much agony ('I do want them so, they're the only things I've got, I haven't got anything else, I haven't anything else in the world, I feel they're calling out to me', pp. 87–88). Her missing of them, we intuit, is excessive—a sign of her instability and radical aloneness. In Freudian terms, this excessive attachment is libidinal: Priscilla's objects have become metonymic for her sexual being. Her fate is prefigured by this transgressive attachment to things (as David Trotter comments, 'libidinal transcendence of an object's commodity-status rarely proves anything other than a delusion')¹⁷ Priscilla's specific delusion is connected to her sexual gratuitousness: suddenly untethered by both possessions (and as a separated wife, her ownership of these things is consistently disputed legally) and desire, she is wanted by no one, and she becomes an object of repulsion for Bradley. In this untethering she is suddenly prone to a sort of shifting subjectivity, whereby she becomes profoundly transferable: shunted from person to person in a literal sense, she is also vulnerable to others' perception. It is in the light of Bradley's reductive pity, annoyance, guilt, and disgust that he presents her, as he says, as 'crippled and diminished by my perception itself'

¹³ Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), p. 4.

¹⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 416.

¹⁵ Steven Connor, 'Thinking Things' <<http://www.stevenconnor.com/thinkingthings>> [accessed 6 November 2011], an extended version of a plenary lecture given at the 9th annual conference of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE), Aarhus, Denmark, 25 August 2008, and as the Textual Practice lecture, University of Sussex, 14 October 2009.

¹⁶ Gillian Dooley, 'Iris Murdoch's Use of First-Person Narrative in *The Black Prince*', *English Studies*, 85 (2004), 134–46 (p. 134).

¹⁷ David Trotter, 'Household Clearances in Victorian Fiction', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 6 (2008): *Victorian Fiction in the Material Imagination* <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/view/472>> [accessed 6 November 2011].

(p. 56). She has stopped functioning as a signifying, conscious subject, and been reduced to a gentle, suffering, thing.

This instability of objectified subjects is replicated and reversed in *The Sea, the Sea*, where subjectivity can be located within objects. Animals are figured as occupying a liminal space somewhere between subjects and objects: a repository for the same innocence and lack of agency as friendly objects, they maintain an ability to engage with the world, albeit in an entirely opaque way. Charles is always fascinated by, and kind to, animals. He 'was utterly horrified' to mistake what turns out to be a 'most engaging toad' for some sort of large, fleshy spider. After rescuing the toad, Charles reflects: 'How can such gentle defenceless animals survive?' (p. 24). Animals inspire the same pathos as do objects, but also a kind of unknowing wonder: they possess the same fealty to being; they are not self-reflexive, but instead deeply ontologically content, and therefore profoundly gentle; they do not seek to control the world in the way that humans, with their all-conquering egos, do. In figuring objects as animals, Murdoch shows us that this gentle faithfulness to being, the repleteness of animals, is also present and loveable in objects: 'my lovely big ugly vase [. . .] had fallen on the floor and was broken into a great many pieces. [. . .] I liked the poor ugly thing, it was like an old dog' (p. 39). And Titus, who 'returned like a dog to prove where its home was' (p. 355) after his death, leaves his 'little plastic bag with his treasures, his tie and the cuff-links and the love poems of Dante' which 'was still lying in the corner of the bookroom like an abandoned dog' (p. 413).

Dog-like fealty is embarrassing in its transparency; dogs do not dissemble or conceal: Lizzie 'looked at [Charles] so attentively, so humbly, like a dog reading its master's tiniest movements' (p. 359). Hartley is always figured 'like an animal' (p. 263) or 'like an obedient dog' (p. 327), and when she cries we are constantly made aware of her otherness by Charles's description of her inhuman, animalistic wails. Murdoch uses animal metaphors as a staging-post for the 'thingification' of certain characters, notably Priscilla and Hartley, who then become transferable as part of an economy where subjects and objects are constantly displacing each other: Priscilla's consistent identification, for instance, with the ornamental water buffalo, which starts as a 'precious object', but whose use and worth become degraded by its constant transference between various characters, so that it finally breaks and becomes a useless 'thing'. Equally, Hartley's depiction as animalistic slowly gives way to her status in the text as inanimate token; she is 'a wreck, a poor broken twig' (p. 302). Titus, her son, recognizes this, and resists it, as he says: 'I'm not going to return her, as you put it. She's not a bottle' (p. 333), and 'Mary [Hartley] was being treated like a bit of property or a child' (p. 376). Charles's continual objectification of Hartley is disguised by his explicit romantic task,

which is to refind the subject in the object, or save her from that very process of thingification: 'What I had seen was a shell, a husk, a dead woman, a dead thing. Yet this was just the thing I wanted so clearly to reanimate, to cherish' (p. 461). Hartley's inanimacy is identical with her unknowability, like 'a thing senselessly alien', or as Gillian Dooley puts it, Hartley's characterization is an expression of Murdoch's belief in 'uncertainty about other people's feelings and beliefs' and the 'opacity and independence of other minds' (p. 140). The reader is never sure to what extent she feels or knows anything, and it is this epistemological ambiguity, on both the readers' and character's part, that makes Hartley more authentically real to us even as she becomes less accessible—as, Murdoch implies, everyone is to everyone else. As she says to Charles: "As if you could know anything" (p. 305). Authenticity, for Murdoch, is equivalent to opacity, and opacity is a quality consistently represented in both of these novels by things. Identity therefore accrues by a subject's very objectness, but this is a model made possible by Murdoch's understanding of objects as potentially suffused with subjectivity.

Priscilla, who is also figured as possessing the infinitely transferable properties of the object, had grown up with her father disapproving of her 'worldliness'. Worldliness here, we understand, is an almost obscene version of the ability to extend oneself into an affinity with objects, where possession becomes a means of submitting oneself to the crassly material world, and one which has a coarsening effect on that world itself. And yet, when describing Priscilla's kitchen, with its 'horrible modern cutlery', and the 'imitation "bar" in the corner of the drawing room', Bradley acknowledges objects' potential consolatory power: 'even the stupider vanities of the modern world can have a kind of innocence, a sort of anchoring steadying quality'. 'Perhaps', he even concedes, 'some light may fall upon them' (p. 57). This version of possession as ontological safety-net, or as existential reinforcement—without which one might, like Priscilla, stop signifying, and become subject to others' shifting perceptions, passed around like a token—appears as a largely female affliction; Rachel in *The Black Prince* complains of her husband, Arnold: 'His stuff crawls over everything, he takes away all my things and turns them into his things' (p. 40). Rachel wants 'a little privacy, a little secrecy, a few things of my own which aren't absolutely dyed and saturated with Arnold', and 'I haven't any private things. He owns the world. It's all his, his, his' (p. 179). Murdoch consistently bemoans on her married women's behalf the lack of this 'thing' of their own, and in doing so articulates the possibility of a relationship with objects characterized by purity and integrity and which, rather than being conducted in privacy, comes to constitute that privacy.

Hartley tries to characterize her husband in the same terms: 'Ben hasn't anyone in the world but me. He hasn't any thing in the world' (p. 301). But this

sense of possession as ballast, where our objects can bolster us up, and tether us down, is read differently by Ben. He instead rages at the disloyalty of his possessions, which conspire to tell a different story about his life from the one he recognizes: 'All this bloody house we took so much trouble with, the bloody furniture, the garden, these fucking roses, pretence, pretence, pretence, I'd like to smash it all to pieces' (p. 199). Ben's view of his and Hartley's life as at a disjunction with the objects that constitute it is reinforced by Charles: 'Nibblets, its roses, its horrible new carpets, the brass ornaments, the lurid curtains, the bell, impressed me not at all, these were gauzy, visionary' (pp. 200–01). The 'stuff' of their life together is socially constituted, but also, crucially, in a less authentic and less solidly material way than his. This is a Charlesean snobbery at work, of course—their stuff is faking it in the social sense—but the objects are also faking it physically: they are 'gauzy, visionary', simulacra of objects. By casting into speculation their ontological integrity, Charles renders the objects uncanny. The listing of domestic ephemera dissects the essential optimism of the things, and proleptically assesses the misprision of this optimism: like Julian's dustpan and brush in *The Black Prince*, they are objects bought to construct a future, to simultaneously embody the hopes that they have for their lives and performatively to constitute those hopes.

Murdoch's frequent use of the listing of objects marks her interest in the superfluous, redundant details of life, and simultaneously subverts the notion of that redundancy. When Bradley in *The Black Prince* first sees Julian's balloon, which has been cut loose from its string, he says: 'I watched it coming toward me like an errant moon, mysterious, invisible to all but myself, the bearer of some potent as yet unfathomed destiny. I wanted it' (p. 123). This liberating gratuitousness of objects, whose flirtatiousness provokes our possessive desire—'I watched it coming toward me [. . .] I wanted it'—is contrasted with the real ballast of people's lives (other people) and their weighty, oppressive determinism: as Rachel laments in the same novel, 'my life is all compulsory. My child, my husband, compulsory' (p. 176).

As well as being the materials through which these versions of our lives are constructed literally, objects also construct a version of our lives by being passive witnesses to it. This sense of being accompanied through life by our possessions converts them into a type of externalized memory bank: for many of us, our things are the only witnesses to vast swathes of our lives; they become, in Peter Schwenger's phrase, custodians of memory. He writes:

For many, the familiar presence of things is a comfort. Things are valued not only because of their rarity or cost of their historical aura, but because they seem to partake of our lives; they are domesticated, part of our routine and so of us. Their long associ-

ation with us seems to make them custodians of our memories; so that sometimes, as in Proust, things reveal us to ourselves in profound and unexpected ways.¹⁸

Without your objects, you, and what has happened to you, and even what is going to happen to you, might cease to have any reality—as in Priscilla's crisis of subjectivity precipitated by her lost objects. Charles's relationship with his house also mines this nostalgic seam:

I felt by now that I was getting to know its oddities and I was more friendly towards it. It was not exactly a sinister or menacing effect, but as if the house was a sensitized plate which intermittently registered things which had happened in the past. (p. 210)

This sense of a house as an authority on one's life appeals to the same instinct: as Ben, and Charles, intuit, our possessions are necessarily truth-tellers: as Frank O'Hara pointed out in the poem quoted at the head of this essay, their ability to exist fearlessly has an ontological integrity that we cannot help but feel judges us, and any of our attempts to be what we are not. This can feel like a threat to the ability to act as an agent in one's own life, and in this sense objects collude with stasis: as Charles suddenly realizes, to act in the way that he wants to, 'there must be no more witnesses' (p. 373), where witnesses include one's possessions both sinister and friendly.

Bradley in *The Black Prince* is from the start established as someone whose life is defined by possession. He is an archetypal Murdochian male wielder of power, fastidious and self-regarding. His disdain for things that are not 'his' is instantly established as metonymic for his disdain for people: 'Trains induce such terrible anxiety. They image the possibility of total and irrevocable failure. They are also dirty, rackety, packed with strangers, an object lesson in the foul contingency of life' (p. 66). Trains are obvious models for promiscuous human engagement, for intimacy and similitude with arbitrarily selected members of society. Bradley retreats into a world of objects-as-possession to inoculate himself against people (in this, as in other things, he contrasts with Arnold, who tells us 'Disapproving of things is alright. But you mustn't disapprove of people', p. 48). Bradley tells us that he 'amass[es] rather than collect[s]' (p. 2) bric-a-brac and ornaments, and prides himself on his taste in his selection of them. To 'amass' is to engage in a modest form of object possession, one which implies a cheerful anti-fastidiousness, without the hint of repulsion that collection must entail; collecting means picking things carefully, the exercising of taste: this we do want, this we do not. However, it becomes clear that Bradley, like Charles in *The Sea, the Sea*, is not adequate to the ethical integrity of the amasser. Charles describes his cousin James's terrifying inability to exercise discrimination, an inability which marks him

¹⁸ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 3.

out as an authentic amasser: 'He seems to have no conception of how to sort or arrange his possessions, they are dumped and piled rather than arranged, and elegant *objets d'art* are juxtaposed with the merest oddments of the bazaar' (p. 172). James is in fact, if not an exemplary Murdochian saint, one who is closest to 'good' of anyone in the novel, and his powers are centred on his control of the inanimate: 'he had', Charles tells us, 'a sort of uncanny instinct about things' (p. 63); 'When the ball got lost it was James who found it; and he once instantly recovered an old toy aeroplane of mine simply on the basis of my having told him I had lost it' (p. 175). Such an affinity with objects transgresses the strict object/subject hierarchy of the collector—'His presence in the house would change everything, even the kettle' (p. 321)—and replaces it with the subordination of oneself to the material stuff of the world of the happy amasser, an object-subject among subject-objects.

Peter Schwenger describes collection as exemplary of possession (which is itself exemplary object-interaction according to Walter Benjamin, who says, ownership is 'the most intimate relationship that one can have to things' and suggests that collections allow objects to talk to each other—associations sparked or differences highlighted by proximity).¹⁹ For Bradley, his possessions are identical with his self, and his collecting has a sort of fastidious and yet extravagant gratuitousness that is, like himself, primarily narcissistic and melancholic. Collectors, and collections, are always melancholy, because of their pathetic longing towards completion, a completion which would negate their purpose and thus, perhaps, their existence. Symbolically, completing a collection is tantamount to death. As Jean Baudrillard notes, 'the acquisition of the final item would in effect denote the death of the subject'.²⁰ If finishing a collection is equivalent to death, and because melancholy, by Freudian definition, prolongs itself interminably to avoid the acceptance of death, collecting is melancholic in its refusal to live a normal, temporal pattern—in its refusal to stop—and subversive in its implicit rejection of death.²¹ Collecting, and its representative textual activity, listing, are both about a simultaneous capaciousness and stinginess; listing performs presence, but with a subtextual acknowledgement of what is missing, and a proleptic desire for what is not yet included. Both are constantly preoccupied with both pleasure and its deferral; if the ideal collection is one that is never finished, we might read it as

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library' (1931), in *Selected Writings*, II.2: 1931–1934, ed. by Michael W. Jennings and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 486–92 (p. 492).

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion, 1994), pp. 7–24 (p. 13).

²¹ See Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey and others, XIV: *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 237–58.

infinite postponement of the climax—a luxuriation in languor, or a continual concession to frustration.

The distinction articulated in both novels between those who collect and those who amass is in a sense a metaphor for Murdoch's own narrative neuroses, as she customarily vacillated between the need for untruthful, selective form, and the mess of (or amassed) reality that she wanted faithfully to gesture towards. These two differing narratological approaches could be summed up rather broadly as description versus narration. The sudden damming of the narrative and diversion into the descriptive, with its customary recourse to the object-list, has the effect of constructing a literary still life. Rosemary Lloyd has described how intricate descriptions of objects can create a linguistic still life that stands alone, independent of the plot, 'but that also reflects back on the novel itself by focusing on the power of observation and on how complex, indeed sometimes impossible, it is to note perfectly everything that surrounds us'.²² Lloyd assents to the basic contrast that it emphasizes, and suggests that 'the still life inserted into a novel or short story tends to be overlooked, swept aside in modes of reading that differentiate prose from poetry, privileging plot over detail' (pp. 14–15).

Both novels under discussion here abound with these sorts of narrative gaps. In *The Sea, the Sea*, when Charles enters James's flat for the first time, he says that 'the scene must be listed rather than described', and the ensuing object-list goes on for nearly two pages. In *The Black Prince*, when Bradley visits Arnold and Rachel in the throes of the initial crisis of the novel, he 'noticed broken glass, broken china, a stain on the carpet'. Nothing is fulfilling its remit as an object; everything is broken or ruined. This inadequacy of objects is everywhere: tapestries are 'pseudo', modern lithographs are 'bad' (p. 42)—nothing just is, it exists in a state of perpetual failure. Bradley's need to impose his taste on the objects that come into his perceptual field infects the early descriptive passages of the novel, and what first appears like an unsentimental, descriptively objective laying-bare of a home is in fact a facet of his inability to see with sympathy, where disgust is inspired not by the failure of the objects but by no less than his dissatisfaction with the life that is lived among these objects. That everything that Bradley sees is broken or failing is indicative of the perceptual 'falling-short' that Schwenger describes; Bradley does not understand the existence of these things, because he has no sympathy with the life that has occasioned them; the objects have become things in their uselessness.

The list, or description, effects the disappearance of event from narrative: nothing happens in these still lifes. When narration gives way to description,

²² Rosemary Lloyd, *Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 3.

things are therefore excavated of use, rendered gratuitous and textually static. This is key to the distinction between an object and a thing as elaborated by theorists of object studies: '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' (Brown, p. 4). An object is useful to us, it slots in to our perceptual field, but when something breaks, or ceases to make sense, it becomes a thing: slightly alien, slightly uncanny: 'What is this thing?' we ask, in incomprehension. Bradley's encounters with objects that have been excavated of utility and meaning are defined by this incomprehension: when he puts his hand in his pocket, 'my hand encountered [. . .] an object which my fingers were unable to "read"'. It is Hartley's hair-slide: 'I stared at the almost senseless little thing and tried to grasp it as an omen, but it just looked pathetic and filled me with sadness and I put it away in a drawer' (p. 437). The 'senselessness' of the object renders it a 'thing'. Similarly, the letter and the stone Hartley leaves behind her when she disappears for the final time provoke uncertainty: 'Why did she keep the letter, even though she did not read it? Why did she put the stone into the garden where I'd be sure to see it?' (p. 461). These objects' failure is one of signification; language cannot quite grasp them in their obduracy: they are a letter and a stone, but they are also more stubborn than that, representing both a surfeit and an inadequacy to what their linguistic 'roles' imply. This sudden gratuitousness, or objects' ability to change into extraneous things from the useful and comprehensible objects they have been previously, adds to the sense of a sudden pictorial representation of the inanimate intruding on the narrative. Literary still lifes present a narrative aporia, and a sudden absence. What has been progressing temporally, and has been understood causally, suddenly stops and scans itself spatially: against explanation, these descriptive passages represent what this space looks like at this exact moment in narrative time. As such they disrupt the teleology of the narrative, and distance us from the logic of the movement of the plot: for a moment, nothing happens, it just is.

When Bradley enters Rachel and Arnold's bedroom, the narrative performs a similar skip:

The room had the rather sinister tedium which some bedrooms have, a sort of weary banality which is a reminder of death. A dressing-table can be a terrible thing. [. . .] The plate glass 'table' surface was dusty and covered with cosmetic tubes and bottles and balls of hair. The chest of drawers had all its drawers gaping, spewing pink underwear and shoulder straps. The bed was chaotic, violent, the green artificial silk coverlet swooping down on one side and the sheets and blankets creased up into a messy mass, like an old face. There was a warm intimate embarrassing smell of sweat and

face powder. The whole room breathed the flat horror of genuine mortality, dull and spiritless and final. (p. 38)

This is not the desire-inducing vacancy of Shakespeare's Cleopatra—an absent presence at the heart of Enobarbus's encomium—but the disgusted anatomism of Swift's Celia, whose cosmetic clutter evokes only to revoke a purely artificial beauty. Rachel, the occupant of the bed, is notably absent from this passage, though everywhere her human detritus, 'creased up into a messy mass', delineates her presence. The cruelty inherent in this passage is striking, lacking any human, sympathetic generosity or objectivity: the bed, and by metonymic extension its occupant, is 'chaotic, violent' because it, and she, occasion disgust in the observer. Georg Lukács argues that description 'debases character to the level of inanimate objects'.²³ Here, the excess of metonymy is offered to the reader as a sort of obscene titillation. As Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire point out, metonymy is a marker of desire since, they argue, its 'inexhaustible power of displacement [. . .] is made precisely to mark the gap through which desire originates and into which it perpetually plunges'.²⁴ Sexual disgust is driven in the same way that sexual desire is: by absence; and that gap, of displacement, is here revealed by the almost pornographic metonymy that is listed and catalogued for our appraisal: 'gaping, spewing pink'.

Metonymy functions as the means by which things are rendered alien, by their sudden proximation to a subject, but also, as noted, to import desire. Julian, the focus of Bradley's love and lust in *The Black Prince*, is often surrounded by metonymic constructions and other associations with objects. Her entrance into Bradley's consciousness as anything other than a child of his friends is occasioned by a transgression of the conventional understanding of the relation between people and objects, when she asks to buy the small water buffalo that he treasures, to which Bradley replies blankly 'what?' She answers him, 'this little thing. I wonder if I could buy it? Would you sell it to me?' At this point her mother interjects 'Julian, you can't ask people to sell you their belongings!' (p. 79). Female body parts are often characterized as disembodied 'things' by the narrator, and Julian in particular is represented synecdochally by various legs, shoes, boots, and feet. At the moment of Bradley's revelation of love, Julian tucks her feet up under her, encased by tights; he buys her knee-length boots, which act as his first (still unconscious) arousal ('The black-clad girl began to ease the purple boot on over Julian's foot and my grey nylon sock. The high boot enveloped her leg and the zip fastener moved slowly

²³ Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe' (1936), in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. by Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), pp. 110–48 (p. 133).

²⁴ Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire, *The Unconscious and the Id: A Volume of Laplanche's 'Problématiques'*, trans. by Luke Thurston with Lindsay Watson (London: Rebus Press, 1999) p. 250.

upward', p. 163); and he urgently repeats the injunction to 'describe your costume' (p. 201), so as to elicit a description of the shiny buckled shoes which, as Prince Hal, she dons, and which lead to Bradley's unsettlingly rapacious sexual epiphany. In the theatre, Bradley describes their first physical contact: 'I cautiously advanced my left shoe up against her right shoe in such a way that the shoes were contiguous. [. . .] As if one had secretly sent one's servant to suborn the servant of the beloved' (p. 257). As he reminisces, 'Perhaps it was when she said "Black tights and silvery buckles". Or perhaps it was when she took her boots off. [. . .] And when I had that mystical experience, looking at her legs in the shoe-shop' (p. 205).

The transference of sexual desire from subjects to objects (and to disarticulated body parts) and back again marks dysfunction, impotence, and Bradley's increasing awareness of his mortality. This mingling of desire and mortality is palpable throughout *The Black Prince*. Rachel's material traces define her metonymically, but they are also 'traces' because the subtext of the scene is one of 'genuine mortality'—'Are her traces all that is left?', we must ask. The scene is autopsic in its cataloguing of intimate human dirt laid bare. Mikhail Bakhtin wrote about the sudden shift that renders the stuff of the world alien to us, and warns of its power to reach back and alter the observing subject:

That which in life, in cognition, in deed we call a specific object acquires its specificity, its profile only in our relationship to it: our relationship defines the object and its structure, but not the reverse; only where the relationship becomes random from our side, as it were capricious, only when we retreat from our authentic relationship to things and to the world, does the specificity of the object confront us as something alien and independent; it begins to decompose, and we ourselves succumb to the power of the random, we lose ourselves, and we lose as well the stable definitiveness of the world.²⁵

Our sudden alienation from things is what brings about their decomposition, and our instability as a subject. Rosemary Lloyd has argued that still lifes have decay and decomposition as an essential part: a still-life painting, just like a literary work, both immortalizes the piece of fruit or the leaf and draws attention to even the inanimate's mortality and profound susceptibility to change through time, like the stone that gathers moss, or the cliff that erodes—or indeed, the sheet which, through its textual dissection, is shown to have accretions of sweat-stains, creases, and pathos in equal measure.²⁶

This pathos is felt at the moment of metonymy's sleight-of-hand displacement. Peter Schwenger argues that 'there is a melancholy associated with physical objects':

²⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xliii.

²⁶ See 'Time and Space', in Lloyd, *Shimmering in a Transformed Light*, pp. 133–51.

The melancholy I am speaking of [. . .] is generated by the act of perception, perception of the object by the subject. This perception, always falling short of full possession, gives rise to a melancholy that is felt by the subject and that is ultimately for the subject. (Schwenger, pp. 1–2)

Schwenger identifies things' ultimate indifference to the self as lying at the heart of their consolatory power, and connects our desire for the inanimate with the desire to return to the inanimate to the inanimate which Freud described as the death-drive; the self may lie under our performative selves, in darkness: 'What is lost is not the object but our own prior state of objecthood' (p. 5). This sense of loss is echoed by the melancholy induced by the 'falling-short' of our possession of them, a melancholy that is for the self and its limitations. Objects show us the edges of our field of influence on the world. There is always a surplus that eludes us, which Schwenger describes: the 'sense-organs betray a shortfall, a falling short of full comprehension. Sight, touch, hearing, smell, taste—none of these is comprehensive in itself; each uses its own language of sense to speak of the object' (p. 5). All descriptions and paintings of objects are in a sense a product of this perceptual inadequacy; we want to understand these alien things, and our incapacity is a source of loss. This melancholy may also be entwined with envy, of course: as in O'Hara's poem, the fealty to being itself, at which objects are naturally skilled (and at which we are not, with our burden of self-consciousness), is both reassuring or disturbing, admirable and pathos-inducing; we may envy objects or pity them.

And yet Murdoch's insistence on the ethical dimension of our apprehension of the material world is key, as it is formative in the way that people can come to accommodate the opacity of the world and the crucial alterity of both things and people that Murdoch's fiction and philosophy both so consistently emphasize. This pity is not necessarily an appropriation or hermeneutic perversion of the object, but a version of sympathy, one present in Murdoch's more generous narrators. An ability to render things kindly in their dignity and integrity is the lesson that both Charles and Bradley, to differing degrees, learn throughout the course of these two novels. Charles's 'pity for her need not be a device or an impertinence, it can survive as a blank ignorant quiet unpossessive souvenir' (p. 500). This pity is itself figured as a 'thing', with a thing's ability to be blank and unpossessive. Charles figures his emotions as a friendly object: a 'souvenir'. A souvenir is, as Susan Stewart has commented, 'an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia'.²⁷ Souvenirs are objects imbued with memory and significance, objects whose status as custodians of memory has been brought to our attention;

²⁷ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 135.

they are metonymic of experience, or as Stewart says, we 'desire souvenirs of [. . .] events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby only exist through the invention of narrative' (p. 135). But if Hartley's memory is figured as a souvenir, it is because she herself has escaped narrative, and possession. The souvenir may promise to speak to us of meaning, but at the last, it resists.

Charles's pity for objects in *The Sea, the Sea* remains essentially interventionist, even at the end: 'It does matter, every little tiny thing matters and must be found again and must be picked up and must be redeemed' (p. 215). Charles resists the text's version of enlightenment (unlike Bradley: as Elizabeth Dipple writes, 'in no other book has [Murdoch] taken a character so far, from irritating inadequacy to the absolute of art and thence to death', and other critics, including Gillian Dooley, have assented to this view of Bradley).²⁸ Things can be redeemed, but not through our control, our 'picking up' of them, but through our cessation of control. This cessation of control, or the love that Murdoch believes we must have for other people, is articulated through our respect for their alterity, which is equivalent to moral goodness. Murdoch criticism has generally agreed on the complex intertwining of these categories in her work, and I would add that objects, both *The Sea, the Sea* and *The Black Prince* imply, are, and should be, our dominant model of how to love, and of how to be; objects are Murdoch's governing metaphor and her exemplary ontological figure. Peter Schwenger writes that: 'Objects have a [. . .] vivid and indifferent presence that sets off by contrast the perceiver's amorphous being, along with the very opposite of indifference: a kind of longing towards something that continuously recedes into dimensions of loss' (p. 6). This longing towards us from objects also, in these two novels, is replicated in the opposite direction: it is the longing to attain the condition of objecthood—we are, says James in *The Sea, the Sea*, ultimately no more than 'fake objects' (p. 175).

That something skipped over, glanced at, or discarded can be retrieved, accommodated, recuperated; that space can be made, and will eventually be made, for all the things of our lives: this fantasy is identical with the meditation on the degree to which we are forgivable that is at the heart of both of these novels. Objects forgive us by their ultimate indifference to us, their inoculation against the perils of ego, and of emotion. The 'love' that Murdoch identifies as a moral good is not necessarily human love: rather, it is the love that objects show us is possible; love with the messy human emotion extracted—or love-in-itself and for-itself, as Sartre might have said. As Bradley Pearson concludes: 'Forgiveness is often thought of as an emotion. It is not that. It is rather a certain kind of cessation of emotion' (p. 383). In this

²⁸ Elizabeth Dipple, *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 131.

sense our objects are doing their metonymic duty and are again standing in loyalty for our selves. As Loxias writes in the closing lines of *The Black Prince*, art is 'the light by which human things can be mended' (p. 416). 'Human things' is of course paradoxical: if they are human, they are also very much things; our messes, our materiality, or our attachments, as James from *The Sea, the Sea* would call them. Murdoch's ethical prescription is expressed by, and formulated in, her theory of how we use, and don't use, objects; how we mend, and don't mend, these 'things'. They are redeemable, can be made meaningful, without imposing on them, or changing them into something else: they can become part of our lives, the melancholy averted, the thing made useful—through pity, generosity, and love, like the 'sea, [that] undoes all knots' (p. 477).

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