

NICHOLAS O. PAGAN

## THING THEORY AND THE APPEAL OF LITERATURE

Those who have tried to explain the evolutionary origins of human engagement with the storytelling that is found in literature often foreground the appeal of the traditional devices – character and plot. In *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, for instance, Brian Boyd presents convincing evidence to support the view that authors are frequently engaged in the task of “shaping audiences’ attention by appealing to their evolved cognitive predisposition to foreground and respond to – automatically, amid all the possible patterns in a story – the patterns of character and plot”<sup>1</sup>. Using Homer’s the *Odyssey* as his prime example, Boyd insists that these key patterns explain to a large extent how throughout human history authors of literary narratives have been able to trigger and retain readers’ interest and give them enduring pleasure. Here I highlight another pattern as I propose that readers are attracted to literary narratives not just because these narratives are character- or plot-driven but also because they are thing-driven. Thus, I argue that one reason why literary narratives appeal to so many people can be explained through “thing theory”<sup>2</sup>.

The term “thing theory” was coined in 2001 by the American Bill Brown who was trying to speak out in favor of things as a possible alternative to the endless abstraction associated with “theory”. Brown’s bold initiative may be regarded as prefiguring such events as the British Museum’s recent exhibition “A History of the World in 100 Objects” and the current tendency among literary biographers like Paula Byrne to write books around objects<sup>3</sup>. These events, however, cast a glance far further back than Brown’s work to, for example, the writings of Martin Heidegger who may be regarded as the grandfather of “thing theory”. Brown refers to Heidegger, but here I discuss Heidegger’s work on “things” in more detail, and I begin by detecting a lineage in the theory of the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> Thing theory is closely allied to “Object-Oriented Ontology” (OOO) – a term coined by Bruno Latour. See, for example, Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Chicago, Open Court, 2002, Rebecca-Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010 and Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, MPublishing – University of Michigan Library, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> For Brown’s essay see the special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, 28, 2001, Autumn, pp. 1-16.

In “Art as Technique” (1917) after noting that so many aspects of our lives are habitual and unconscious, Shklovsky champions art as that which can save us from this somnambulism. Thus in a memorable passage he proclaims that “...art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony* [...] The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’ [...] to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged”<sup>4</sup>.

Shklovsky quickly goes on to give examples from Tolstoy’s work where the author “describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an *event* as if it were happening for the first time” (Emphasis added)<sup>5</sup>. Thus, it would be misleading to take away from Shklovsky’s essay the idea that human beings have been given art to help them to see objects as they have never seen them before. Shklovsky is saying that, but he is also insisting that art – especially as after the introduction by “art” he means literary narratives – also presents events as never seen before – for example in Tolstoy, the flogging of a horse from a horse’s perspective<sup>6</sup>.

Whether we think of “things” in terms of objects or events, Shklovsky’s concept of *ostranenie* – in English “making strange”, estrangement or “defamiliarization” prefigures Heidegger’s work on “things” as the German philosopher also locates “strangeness” in our encounter with the work of art<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, the contention in Shklovsky’s memorable terminology that literature makes the stone stoney prefigures Heidegger’s view that literature can help protect us from the loss of “thingness” (*Dingheit*). Thus, Heidegger implicitly builds on Shklovsky’s metaphor when he (Heidegger) maintains that works of art, especially literary texts, are the best means that we have at our disposal for potentially getting “the thingness of the thing” to come out of hiding and reveal itself<sup>8</sup>.

Heidegger puts forward at least three tenets that may be regarded as lying close to the heart of what would later be called “thing theory”:

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<sup>4</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique”, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reiss, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1965, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Although not discussing Shklovsky’s work Brown notes Heidegger’s observation that like the Roman word *res* the English word “thing” does not merely denote an object but also “a case, an affair, an event” (Martin Heidegger, “The Thing” in *Poetry Language Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter, New York, Harper & Row, 1971, p. 175).

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger may be considered as taking a step beyond Shklovsky when he claims that this “strangeness” does not merely prolong our encounter with the work of art but can also overwhelm us. See David Nowell Smith, *Sounding/ Silence: Martin Heidegger at the Limit of Poetics*, New York, Fordham, 2013, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Inwood claims that for Heidegger, all art involves “invention” or “projection” (*Dichtung*) and among the arts, poetry (*Poesie*, another meaning of *Dichtung*) is preeminent. (Michael Inwood, *Heidegger*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 110-111).

1. *There is a distinction between a “thing” and an “object.”*

In *What is a Thing?* Heidegger admits that it is extremely hard to define what a thing is, but he also insists that the word “thing” is richer and more meaningful than the word “object”. The distinction remains crucially important today when, for example, Bill Brown states that “...We look through objects [...] but we only catch a glimpse of things”<sup>9</sup>. I suggest that objects are closer to things than events are, so whatever the characters in a literary narrative may be doing, the objects in that narrative will always to some extent speak for themselves.

2. *Grasping an object’s “thingness” is beyond the province of science.*

When Heidegger in *What is a Thing?* writes that “the sciences... with their thrust toward facts, apparently come closest to things”<sup>10</sup>, his use of the word “apparently” may imply that though this is a commonly held view, it should not be taken for granted. Indeed, Heidegger believes that although science may tell us plenty about the physical properties of things, it can tell us nothing at all about “the thing as thing”<sup>11</sup>. According to Heidegger, then, if you work like a scientist and try to situate things in relation to “universal, basic theoretical postulates [...] axioms, premises, principles...” you will never be able to capture the essence of things<sup>12</sup>.

This view of the way in which scientists study an object is analogous to the way in which theorists approach a literary text when they insist on studying it through their pet theory. The American neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty aptly labels the reading of literature the goal of which is simply to apply a theory “methodical reading”<sup>13</sup>. He criticizes the reader/ theorist who knows in advance what he or she is looking for; and he implies that that which is most important in a literary text is that which cannot be predicted and that this only has a chance to reveal itself when the text is approached through “unmethodical reading.” Similarly Rorty writes,

You certainly can’t avoid approaching it [a literary text] without a certain set of expectations. But a lot of the time, what you are hoping for, if only subconsciously, is to have those expectations upset. You would like to be swept off your feet. [...] I would

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<sup>9</sup> Bill Brown, “Thing Theory”, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*. Translated by W.B. Barton, Jr. and Vera Deutsch, Washington, D.C., Henry Regnery, 1967, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> See E. T. Gendlin, “An Analysis of *What is a Thing?*” in Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*, p. 256.

<sup>13</sup> Qtd. in Keith Tester, *The Inhuman Condition*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 22.

prefer to say that although any reader comes to a text out of a background, good readers are those who try to let the text dominate the background rather than vice versa<sup>14</sup>.

There is a thread running through Shklovsky on readers being made to feel uncomfortable and Heidegger on their being overwhelmed to Rorty's having their expectations upset. All give priority not so much to what you bring to the literary text, but rather to what the text does to you. This can take us to a third feature of thing theory.

*3. Things can only take on the nature of "thingness" as a result of human interaction with them.*

Referring to the example of a teacher holding up some chalk while lecturing, Heidegger claims that even if we think of a piece of chalk as "objective", we have to bear in mind that the original word "*objectum*" means "something thrown against you"<sup>15</sup>. Thus Heidegger gestures toward a "realm of how things meet us"<sup>16</sup>. While not denying that we act on things, he invites us to imagine situations where things act on us. If this is to happen during our encounter with a literary text, we have to resist the lure of interpretation.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, still one of the best readers of Heidegger, explains:

The work of art is also a thing, and only by way of its Being as a thing does it have the capacity to refer to something else, for instance, to function symbolically [...] But this is to describe the mode of Being of the work of art from the point of view of an ontological model that assumes the systematic *priority of scientific cognition*<sup>17</sup>.

This takes us back to the problem in (2) above. Through scientific, analytical, calculative thinking a reader is not going to be granted access to "thingness". In *The Origin of the Work of Art* Heidegger approves of resistance to the inclination to interpret because "when we refuse to interpret, we allow the thing to rest in its own self [...] in its thing-being". He concedes, however, that this may be "the most difficult of tasks"<sup>18</sup>. Indeed this is paradoxical. How can we pursue thingness in literary texts while resisting the urge to interpret?

In *The Origin of the Work of Art* Heidegger himself fails to resist the inclination to interpret when he goes on to discuss Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes. "There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes in or to which they

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<sup>14</sup> See Rorty and E. P. Ragg, "Worlds or Words Apart?: The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies. An Interview with Richard Rorty", *Philosophy and Literature*, 26, 2002, 2, pp. 362-396.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*, p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Heidegger's Ways*. Translated by John W. Stanley, Albany, SUNY Press, 1994, p. 102.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry Language Thought*, p. 31.

might belong”, he says, “– only an undefined space...” The shoes in the painting are “A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more”<sup>19</sup>. “And yet –” he says, “From the dark opening of the inside of the shoes the toilsome thread of the worker stands forth”<sup>20</sup>. Thus, whether Heidegger wants them to or not, the shoes in Van Gogh’s painting open up “a world”<sup>21</sup>.

Let us take (1) above and the idea that what Heidegger calls “thingness” is more likely to emerge if objects are left to speak for themselves. It is possible to examine works of literature to register the varying degrees to which they do this. I will do so by considering three texts (chosen quite arbitrarily): Gustave Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* (published in French in 1869), Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* (published in French in 1957), and José Saramago’s short story “The Thing” (published in Portuguese in 1978 in the collection *Objecto Quase*).

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In *Sentimental Education* Flaubert uses free indirect discourse but invariably focalizes the narrative through the protagonist, Frédéric Moreau. One way in which the narrator expresses Frédéric’s feelings toward two of the main women in his life – Madame Arnoux and Madame Dambreuse – is by situating them in relation to objects.

Frédéric thinks of Madame Dambreuse quite explicitly as an object. “...he desired her as an exotic, refractory *object*, because she was noble, because she was rich...”<sup>22</sup> (emphasis added). After her husband passes away, Madame Dambreuse resorts to the familiar strategy of employing objects in an attempt to lodge herself in her lover’s affections. “She sent him flowers; she made him a tapestry chair; she gave him a cigar-case, an inkstand, countless little objects of everyday utility, so that he could not perform a single action without evoking her memory”<sup>23</sup>. These memories, however, are fleeting, and Madame Dambreuse’s gift-giving quickly taken for granted.

For Frédéric, Madame Arnoux is an object of a very different kind. Although by no means immune to her physical charms, Frédéric frequently regards her with “religious awe”<sup>24</sup>, finding even in her name “clouds of incense and trails of roses”<sup>25</sup>. The subtle interplay between objects and beloved reaches its zenith in the auction scene. The debts in the Arnoux household have become so extensive that their belongings have to be auctioned off. At the auction attended by Frédéric and

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*. Translated by Anthony Goldsmith, London, Penguin, 1970, pp. 360-361.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 368.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 202.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 271.

Madame Dambreuse, Frédéric finds that the objects that attract his attention all gesture toward the woman (Madame Arnoux) for whom he has genuine affection. Thus he finds Madame Arnoux's dresses, hats, firs, shoes and so on "vaguely recalling the shape of her limbs", and he feels that he is "watching crows tearing her corpse to pieces"<sup>26</sup>. Each item of bedroom furniture evokes a memory – for example, "the big blue carpet with its pattern of camellias which her dainty feet used to touch lightly as she came towards him..." Frédéric feels "as if a part of his heart was disappearing with each article"<sup>27</sup>. Surely, the most significant object is yet to appear.

This is a "little silver casket" which is linked to Frédéric's "dearest memories". As Frédéric tries to discourage Madame Dambreuse from buying it by asking what it could be used for, she proclaims ironically, "Perhaps for keeping love letters?"<sup>28</sup>. Frédéric had of course earlier admitted to Madame Dambreuse the powerful emotions that Madame Arnoux had aroused in him<sup>29</sup>. After Madame Dambreuse buys the casket, and it is handed over to her, "Frédéric felt his heart turn cold"<sup>30</sup>. Minutes later, he breaks off his engagement with her. Thus, the casket plays a key role in enabling nobility of spirit to manifest itself as shown by Frédéric's decision to not marry this exceedingly wealthy woman, and perhaps it allows a few rays of light to appear in the work of a writer notorious for his pessimism.

The above might misleadingly suggest a link between the casket and a pure love (between Frédéric and Madame Arnoux). Long before the auction scene, however, the casket had been associated with adultery. One evening Madame Arnoux had confronted her husband after finding a bill in the casket strongly suggesting that he had bought a cashmere shawl for one of his mistresses<sup>31</sup>. The casket is thus tarnished by and can never completely disassociate itself from these old associations. Indeed the relationship between Frédéric and Madame Arnoux becomes to some extent mired in its own impurity as the two of them became involved in forms of lying as they struggled to conceal their love from the world. They felt guilty: "...the sound of footsteps or the creaking of a panel caused them as much terror as if they had done wrong" (*Ibidem*, p. 272). Thus, the associations of the casket involve a complex mixture of impurity and purity.

Writing in the wake of Romanticism (there are many allusions in *Sentimental Education* to Romantic heroes or anti-heroes), Flaubert has the novel's central object convey mixed feelings although eventually perhaps the purer feelings trump

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 406.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 407.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 408.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 361.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 408.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 171-172.

the impure ones as at the end of the narrative the love that Frédéric and Madame Arnoux feel for each other remains unconsummated. I would suggest that the more the feelings evoked by an object become palpable, the less chance there is for “the thingness of the thing” to shine forth. The links at various stages in the novel between the casket and purity or impurity seem deliberate enough to suggest that Flaubert is far from the kind of writer who is prepared to allow objects or things to speak for themselves. We may surely be more likely to gain access to “thingness” if we turn to the work of a writer whose style is often considered “objective”.

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The labelling of Alain Robbe-Grillet’s writing as “objective” was fostered by Roland Barthes who in his essay “Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet” claimed that Robbe-Grillet’s writing “...has no resonance, no depth” and that it is constantly “keeping to the surface of things”<sup>32</sup> (Barthes, “Objective Literature”, p. 12). Barthes seemed to think that Robbe-Grillet was merely exploiting objects, especially their surfaces, for a while and then tossing them aside. Barthes goes on,

A slice of tomato in an automat sandwich, described according to this method, constitutes an object without heredity, without associations, and without references, an object rigorously confined to the order of its components, and refusing with all the stubbornness of its thereness to involve the reader in an elsewhere, whether functional or substantial<sup>33</sup>.

In a similar vein, Bernard-Henry Lévy writes: “Ah, to free oneself of the inner life! That was Sartre’s great desire. To free oneself of that French malady that is the cult of the inner life, that was Robbe-Grillet’s. It was Robbe-Grillet in the end who realized Sartre’s project”<sup>34</sup>.

I do not agree with Barthes or Lévy. Despite the widespread insistence that Robbe-Grillet’s writing is thoroughly immersed in objectivity, in an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 1986 Robbe-Grillet claimed: “I have been protesting against the idea of ‘objectivity’ for thirty years”. Even the title of the novel *La Jalousie* suggests that Robbe-Grillet is interested in describing objects as well as conveying feelings because it neatly combines a physical object (the French word “*jalousie*” may be translated as “blind” as in window shade – either with horizontal slats [Venetian] or vertical slats) with an emotion (jealousy). Throughout the novel, the reader may or may not sense that every description (particularly those involving two figures – a woman “A” and a man, a neighbor, Franck) is laced with the obsessive feeling of jealousy experienced by an unseen,

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<sup>32</sup> Roland Barthes, “Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet”, in *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet: Jealousy and The Labyrinth*. Translated by Richard Howard, New York, Grove, 1965, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Qtd. in Rachel Donadio, “He Was Nouveau When It Was New”, *The New York Times*, 2008, Feb. 24.

unnamed observer/ narrator peering in a bizarre fashion sometimes inside, sometimes outside through the slats.

Whereas the narrator of *Sentimental Education* is seemingly completely in tune with the feelings of Frédéric, the protagonist, *Jealousy*'s narrator, seems only able to guess what the feelings of his protagonists may be. He leaves it to readers of the novel to read meaning, for instance, into A and Franck's frequent glances at each other, their whispers and their smiles. In *Jealousy* there are two objects which are mentioned over and over – a mark on the wall and the remains of a centipede on the floor. After Franck kills the centipede by swatting it with a napkin and squashing it on the tiled floor with his shoe, the mark left on the wall consists of “a tiny arc twisted into a question mark”<sup>35</sup>. Later this mark is described as “curved into a question mark that becomes increasingly vague toward the tip, and soon disappears completely”<sup>36</sup>. Not a perfect question mark, the mark nevertheless is quite literally a question mark, crying out to be interpreted.

As for the creature on the floor, the narrator surmises that in its death throes “... the characteristic buzzing can be heard, probably made by the buccal appendages”<sup>37</sup>. The narrator continues, “its mandibles rapidly open and close in a reflex quiver”, and he adds, “... it is possible for an ear close enough to hear the faint crackling they produce”<sup>38</sup>. A parallel is implied between the imagined sound made by the centipede's mandibles and the sound of the comb passing again and again through the woman A's long hair. The very same word is used – “crackle” – and woman and centipede also share red coloring: the crushed creature was “nothing more than a reddish pulp”<sup>39</sup>; the woman's hair consists of “a thick black mass with reddish highlights”<sup>40</sup>. On the following page the narrator brings the two different sources of crackling sound together in the same sentence: “Listening to it more carefully, this sound [made by the centipede] is more like a breath than a crackling: the brush is now moving down the loosened hair”<sup>41</sup>.

Although readers may be drawn in to thinking that the narrator describes the appearance and noises made by the centipede as objectively, as dispassionately and in as much “scientific” detail as he can, as the subtle parallels between centipede and woman begin to mount up, they become more and more difficult to ignore<sup>42</sup>. Franck's crushing without compunction of the centipede may then be

<sup>35</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet: Jealousy and The Labyrinth*. Translated by Richard Howard, New York, Grove, 1965, p. 65.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 97.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 96.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 114.

<sup>42</sup> For scientific descriptions see, for example: “Several pieces of the body or its appendages are outlined without any blurring, and remain reproduced with the fidelity of an anatomical drawing: one



construed as analogous to the narrator's (husband's?) projected exacting of revenge on A. Revenge for what? Could it be that "A" stands for "adulteress" (*adultère*)?

Such possible parallels are given further credence by consideration of the part played by the African novel, A and Franck's discussion of which often precedes descriptions of the crushed insect. Franck comments on the husband's behavior in the novel is followed by a knowing smile from A as she glances at the blackish spot on the wall<sup>43</sup>. Even more apropos perhaps is the declaration by Franck concerning the husband character in the African novel who A and Franck agree is "guilty of negligence"<sup>44</sup>. When Franck says "But that's it, he was just unlucky enough to have come home earlier that day, and no one could have guessed he would"<sup>45</sup> is it not implied that the male character finds the female with her lover *in flagrante delicto*? And does not the husband's failure to attend to his wife in this inner narrative (in the African novel) imply a similar neglect by A's presumed husband in the outer narrative?

As we move from Flaubert's text to Robbe-Grillet's there is of course, and this is one of the hallmarks of the Nouveau Roman, a dramatic increase in the quantity of descriptions of objects and also the level of detail in many of those descriptions. While in *Sentimental Education* the key object, the silver casket, was not mentioned often and we know little more than that its design includes "silver medallions, corners, and clasps"<sup>46</sup>, the key objects – the mark on the wall and the remains of the centipede on the floor – in *Jealousy* are described over and over again, often in significantly greater detail. Although this may imply that in Robbe-Grillet's writing there is a greater chance for the thingness of the thing to emerge, there are still very plausible links between objects, characters, and plot. These links have simply become more tenuous. The playful way in which both narratives considered so far combine the three elements – object, character, and plot – exerts a powerful, though not necessarily conscious grip, on the imagination of the reader.

Although we may be getting closer to "the thingness of the thing" as we move from Flaubert to Robbe-Grillet, we can hardly be satisfied. I will now try to follow another path established in line with what above I have called Heidegger's third tenet — the contention that "thingness" depends on human interaction with things, especially objects; and I will add to this Brown's

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of the antennae, two curved mandibles, the head and the first joint, half of the second, three large legs" (*Ibidem*, p. 62). Later the narrator describes it as "a common *Scutigera* of average size" (*Ibidem*, p. 64); and he speculates about whether it is a "spider-centipede" or "minute centipede" (*Ibidem*, p. 96).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 126.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>46</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*, p. 407.

(Heidegger-influenced) suggestion that “we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working”<sup>47</sup>. In film we could turn to Charlie Chaplin’s iconic *Modern Times* (1936). In literature, we will consider José Saramago’s short story “Things”, published in English in the appropriately named collection, *The Lives of Things* (2012).

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Throughout “Things” the protagonist is called simply “the civil servant”. In Flaubert characters are of course given names. In Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* one character was referred to as the letter “A”. Now Saramago goes a step further and uses only the character’s occupation: civil servant. Could this be part of the process of dehumanizing the subject? Could this indicate a subject whose dying coincides with the coming to life of an object – a thing, one of the things of the title?

In the first sentence of “Things” the civil servant’s hand is being scratched by a door<sup>48</sup>, and after he proceeds to the First Aid Room (FAR) he is informed about a sofa awaiting treatment because its “temperature is too high”<sup>49</sup>. When a few hours later he returns to the main door and this time is able to pass through it unscathed the civil servant hears “a muffled noise that sounded like a sigh”<sup>50</sup>. It is as if the door wants to assert its own authority as “an integral part of the building, if not the most important part”<sup>51</sup>. Later another door, the main door of the apartment building where the civil servant lives, is described as “surrender[ing] and allow[ing] itself to be opened”<sup>52</sup>.

In “Things” the government labels things “OUMIs” (objects, utensils, machines, installations)<sup>53</sup>. There have been times, we are told, when the government saw it as being in its own interest for OUMIs to be faulty. Saramago’s writing is well known for its subversive political undercurrents, but here the implicit political commentary may be regarded as secondary to philosophical questions. Thus, when an announcer on the television goes beyond stating that the government is aware that things have been malfunctioning to its recognition that they have also been disappearing<sup>54</sup> the question might be: if it is impossible for anyone to see “thingness” emerging, can people nevertheless see it disappearing?

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<sup>47</sup> Bill Brown, “Thing Theory”, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> José Saramago, *The Lives of Things: Short Stories*. Translated by Giovanni Pontiero, London, Verso, 2013, p. 65.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 80.

The first object the disappearance of which the civil servant is aware of is a pillar-box, an object that is humanized as it possesses “a mouth forever gaping and silent and giving access to its belly”<sup>55</sup>. The civil servant himself is unable to see the pillar box disappear as a passing lorry obscures his view. A policeman says bizarrely “Had you been watching, the pillar-box would probably still be here”<sup>56</sup>. Is he implying the superiority of mind over matter? This is an odd idea precisely because objects have started to act independently of human volition<sup>57</sup>.

Nevertheless, as more and more things start to disappear – including a jug in the cupboard in the civil servant’s kitchen, some steps in his apartment building, cars, and building facades, then entire buildings – the civil servant is granted a view of a whole building disappearing as it “suddenly shrink[s]... like a ragged sheet of dark paper which some invisible fire from the sky was scorching and destroying”<sup>58</sup>.

Unlike in the novels by Flaubert and Robbe-Grillet where one or two objects stand out and seem to varying degrees attached to particular characters’ distinctive emotions, in Saramago’s “The Thing” a plethora of objects jostle for the main character’s attention and trigger a wide variety of emotions. The civil servant moves through “a vague sense of uneasiness, nervousness” vis-à-vis the disappearance of the letter-box<sup>59</sup>, paranoia (“I must have done something wrong”<sup>60</sup>, panic which turns to vertigo<sup>61</sup>, fear and hatred turning to “wrath”<sup>62</sup>, followed by enjoyment at the prospect of “revenge”<sup>63</sup>.

Revenge against what? Against OUMIs – against things? The civil servant is delighted when he hears that the government has organized an aerial bombardment of a considerable part of the city and he leaves the city and climbs a hill in order to get a better view of this destruction. He gloats at the prospect that OUMIs are to be destroyed. “Heaven help any OUMIs that turned up on this side [as he stands on the other side of a row of canons directed toward the city] [...] they were about to

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>57</sup> As things begin to assert themselves more and more, a train will even succeed in electrocuting all of its passengers. (*Ibidem*, p. 94).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 109.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 99, 102.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 109.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 110.

get their just deserts”<sup>64</sup>. He looks forward to the city’s “punishment”<sup>65</sup> and thinks of the military operation as “reprisal”<sup>66</sup>.

As the designated hour for the bombardment passes, however, the planes turn around without dropping a single bomb, and the cannons and other weapons on the ground remain silent and even disappear<sup>67</sup>. This happens after the civil servant is killed in the hills by a naked man and woman. These people may be described as non-conformists because unlike the rest of the population described thus far they do not have letters imprinted in their right hands. “And before he even had time to look, he already knew that the hands about to strangle him did not bear any letter”<sup>68</sup>.

At the end of the narrative, after the murder of the civil servant the entire city disappears. “In its place [...] naked men and women emerged from what had once been the city”<sup>69</sup>. These people’s nakedness parallels that of the civil servant’s assailants and the men and women who surround his corpse<sup>70</sup>. Could it be that all of these naked people do not have letters in their palms and represent a new population that will not bow down to the yoke of oppression, blindly following orders handed down by the top echelons of society. The civil servant’s mistake was to allow himself to be treated like a thing – blindly following the promptings of those in authority. He (and his kind?) have been vanquished in order for the society to be reborn. As a woman proclaims at the very end, “Never again will men [of course she means “men and women”] be treated as things”<sup>71</sup>. Throughout the narrative objects may be thought of as having spoken – saying “You, human beings, cannot control me. If I wish I can inflict pain on you. If I want to I can wreak havoc simply by disappearing”. OUMIs/ things are beyond human control. Nevertheless, Saramago leaves the last word to a human being.

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In *Fatal Strategies* Jean Baudrillard endeavored to speak up for objects, complaining “We have always lived off the splendor of the subject and the poverty of the object”<sup>72</sup>. In *Sentimental Education* one object played a key role in affecting the heart of the central character and influencing his decision making in his choice

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 111.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>68</sup> Letters in the hand denote status in the society. The civil servant was an “H” who aspired to be a “C”. People had earlier been encouraged/ ordered to show their palms to each other. (*Ibidem*, p. 93) Even children have letters in their palms – the same letter as their parents (*Ibidem*, p. 95).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 114.

<sup>72</sup> Qtd. in Bill Brown, “Thing Theory”, p. 8.

of a “romantic” partner. In *Jealousy* two objects had a decisive role in determining the possible interaction of narrator and the two main characters and in particular perhaps the fate of one of the characters, A. In “Things” the significance and power of objects extend far beyond such sentimentality and passion. Things have the power to wipe out an entire city and bring about a society’s rebirth.

Surely one reason why certain people are attracted to read and engage seriously with literature is not just because of the traditional elements character and plot (to some extent interfused) but also because of literature’s subtle relationship with objects and things. To some degree all literature breathes life into things – allows things to speak. Although we do not usually of course consciously recognize it, part of the appeal of literary narratives has to do with a dialectic between subject/ human being and object/ “thing”. We, human beings, are of course the creators of these narratives. We are the real story tellers and the real subjects. Although things may come to play a more and more substantial role in literature, we, human beings, have to be able to outthink them and make sure that history is written by us and not by them.

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### THING THEORY AND THE APPEAL OF LITERATURE (Abstract)

The term "thing theory" was coined in 2001 by the American Bill Brown who was trying to speak out in favor of things as a possible alternative to endless abstraction. This essay claims that thing theory not only opens up the possibility of a fresh approach to literature but also to some extent accounts for why literature is attractive. After briefly exploring the roots of thing theory in the work of Viktor Shklovsky and Martin Heidegger, I propose that readers are drawn to literature not just because literary texts are character- or plot-driven but also because they are thing-driven. I claim that Shklovsky's long-standing emphasis on plot (inextricably intertwined with character) is at odds with the Russian Formalist's own famous statement about art allowing us to feel the stoniness of the stone, and I suggest a parallel between Shklovsky's contention that literature makes the stone stoney and Heidegger's celebration of literature as guarding against the loss of "thingness." The contention that works of literature provide a platform on which things may be allowed to speak their own "being" is then traced through three works of fiction by Gustave Flaubert, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and José Saramago.

*Keywords:* thingness, defamiliarization, Heidegger, Flaubert, Robbe-Grillet, Saramago.

### „TEORIA-LUCRU” ȘI CHEMAREA LITERATURII (Rezumat)

Termenul de „teorie-lucru” a fost inventat în 2001 de către americanul Bill Brown, care încerca să pledeze în favoarea lucrurilor ca posibilă alternativă a abstractizării nesfârșite. Eseul de față susține că „teoria lucru” nu doar deschide posibilitatea unei noi abordări a literaturii, ci și, într-o anumită măsură, arată de ce anume ne place literatura. După o scurtă examinare a originilor „teoriei-lucru” în

operele lui Viktor Șklovski și Martin Heidegger, propun ideea că cititorii sunt atrași de literatură nu numai datorită personajelor și intrigii textului literar, ci și datorită lucrurilor. Susțin că accentul pus de Șklovski pe intrigă (inextricabil legată de personaj) este în contradicție cu celebra afirmație a formalistului rus, potrivit căreia arta ne permite să simțim „calitatea pietrei de a fi piatră”, și sugerez o paralelă între teza lui Șklovski referitoare la literatura ce face „piatra să fie piatră” și elogiul heideggerian al literaturii ca pavăză împotriva pierderii reității. Afirmația că operele literare oferă o platformă prin care lucrurilor li se permite să vorbească despre propria lor „ființă” este apoi urmărită prin intermediul a trei opere de ficțiune de Gustave Flaubert, Alain Robbe-Grillet și José Saramago.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* reitate, defamiliarizare, Heidegger, Flaubert, Robbe-Grillet, Saramago.