

Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

Volume 5
Number 1 *Spring 2005*

Article 1

Spring 2005

Review of Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*.

Gustavus T. Stadler
Haverford College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl>

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Stadler, Gustavus T. (2005). Review of "Review of Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 5 : No. 1
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol5/iss1/1>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
<https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol5/iss1/1>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Bill Brown, A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 254 pp. (+xii) ISBN 226076288.tadler on Brown

Reviewed by Gustavus T. Stadler
Haverford College

Arriving in the wake of a series of articles published in *Critical Inquiry* and elsewhere, Bill Brown's *A Sense of Things* was one of the most eagerly awaited books in recent American literary studies. Brown is a nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Americanist who not long ago published a very compelling study of Stephen Crane and the culture of mass amusements, but he has more recently emerged as a central figure in a body of critical writing that has come to be called "thing theory." Those associated with this category (Peter Stallybrass, Miguel Tamen, Arjun Appadurai, and Daniel Miller are some names that come to mind) do diverse work in a number of disciplines, sharing interests in the history, politics, and epistemology of the conceptual split between the world of people and the world of things -- a seemingly common-sensical dichotomy that anthropologist Bruno Latour portrays as one of the weak, strained foundational structures of the Western notion of modernity in his treatise *We Have Never Been Modern*. If Latour is the extravagant polemicist of "thing theory," Brown is its soft-spoken genius of literary reading. Yet *A Sense of Things* is a book that will speak powerfully to scholars who work in a number of fields, literary and otherwise, as it considers a series of fictional texts that "dramatize the role of objects in American lives, and how such texts dramatize the role of humans in the life of American objects" (14).

The question of the relationship between things and ideas is the book's main concern, and for Brown, the knowability of this relationship is itself a fundamental question, as his work explores lives that objects live independently of, or adjacent to, their referentiality to ideas such as the commodity form. His readings of US fiction of the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s (major texts include Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, Frank Norris's *Vandover and the Brute* and *McTeague*, Sarah Orne Jewett's *Deephaven* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, and Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton* and *The Golden Bowl*) thus confront a powerful critical mandate developed with utmost theoretical mastery in new historicism, to treat the literary texts of this period as complicated but ultimately legible encodings of mass-market capitalism's engulfment of culture and everyday life -- a reading especially overdetermined in famous department store novels like *The Ladies' Paradise* and *Sister Carrie*. Instead, Brown develops a loosely Benjaminian notion of the object that uses the category of "everyday aesthetic value" to describe the practices and

attachments, erotic and otherwise, that arise between people and things. He describes exemplary works of American realism, naturalism, regionalism, and early modernism as "texts that . . . ask why and how we use objects to make meaning, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies" (4). His fundamental point is that not everything things did, and do, is legible through categories such as "commodification"; as he puts it, "my gambit is simply to sacrifice the clarity of thinking about things as objects of consumption, on the one hand, in order to see how, on the other, our relation to things cannot be explained by the cultural logic of capitalism" (6).

Each chapter focuses on one or two pieces of fiction while ranging widely, and brilliantly, into an array of other kinds of writing and media: prominent among these are pragmatism, *trompe l'oeil* painting, and the "life-displays" of native American life in early anthropological museums. The first chapter introduces the book's interest in the "trivial thing" by staging a fascinating encounter between *The Prince and the Pauper*, the furniture in Twain's Hartford home, and the acrobatic table Marx describes in the first chapter of *Capital*. Subsequently, the book presents a remarkable reading of Norris's work as concerned mainly with *habit*, which Brown describes as the practice by which "human beings achieve an intimate relationship with their possessions . . . Our habitual interactions with objects both bring them to life and impose order on that life; our habits both mark time and allow us to escape from time, as we perform the present in concert with the future and the past" (64). Thus Norris's naturalism becomes not the dull reiteration of Darwinism that critics have generally described, but a forerunner of object-catheted modernists such as Marcel Duchamp. The third chapter's reading of Sara Orne Jewett's portrayals of rural Maine life is in many ways the most stunning example of Brown's ability to evoke the texture of a literary *object*, lushly describing the deeply sensual nature of her sketches and the "overwhelming intimacy" with which the "culture of nature . . . comes to saturate bodily life" in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (90). The chapter on Jewett eventually shifts to a detailed history of museum displays of native Americans working and living among their things, tableaux in which, Brown argues, curators did not so much oversee the supplanting of the extraordinary by the mundane as "try to transform the mundane into the extraordinary." In Chapter Four, Brown explores the ambivalence of Henry James's "compulsive effort to represent things" in his later novels. He portrays James's focus on domestic objects as a preoccupation that supplants any tidy way of distinguishing "modernism" from "realism" in his work. This chapter offers a brilliant reading of how writing on domesticity shaped the turn that came to be known as modernism. As the Jewett and James arguments accrue, Brown's book depicts a new way of understanding modernism as fully imbricated in the everyday vicissitudes of gender, a framework that refreshingly complicates the more typical account of a more or less

successful "repression of the feminine" by panicked masculine moderns. The book returns to James in the epilogue, portraying the late travel narrative *The American Scene* as a text that, much like cinema, all but undoes the person/thing dichotomy, an uncannily forward-looking retrospective that "knows we have never been modern, that we have not and cannot sustain that ontological divide" (187).

In recent years, scholarship historicizing the "culture concept" has been an especially vibrant area of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literary studies, and a small bevy of books and articles have opened up generative discussions of the roughly contemporaneous emergence of this category across literary criticism and early anthropology. While Brown's book certainly contributes to this project, it is also *not* a book written in the vein of Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*; it is very much a book of literary criticism. Indeed, Brown's book is so effective because its own reading practice is so deeply shaped, inspired, and haunted by the representations of objects it discusses. Indeed, in an odd way, it is more anthropological because it is so sensitive to the literary. Brown is more fully attentive than perhaps any other critic working today to the many registers in which the thing we call literature lives -- the textures of texts, the way they signify not only in what they "say" but through gesture, rhythm, and hesitance. I can think of no book that so fully and successfully refuses to dichotomize the Arnoldian and anthropological senses of "culture"; indeed, it *performs* this refusal that so much criticism merely *states*. What I have described as the book's intervention in critical debates unique to American literary studies is something Brown himself demurs from taking up explicitly, and consequently the work is especially effective and wide-ranging because it refrains from proscriptive or jeremiad-like rhetoric. In this way it exemplifies the rare strengths of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms "reparative reading." (See the chapter "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*.) It's likely that you'll emerge from this book wanting not to trash your books by the guiding intellectual lights of new historicism, Marx and Foucault, but to re-read them. It's also this quality that makes the book a promising read for comparatists, particularly those interested in nineteenth-century European realist fiction. (The James chapter, not surprisingly, contains some particularly rich material on Balzac.)

I did feel, however, that Brown's decision not to address race in any topical sense was a mistake. It seems likely that this choice resulted from his commitment to not subordinating things to "ideas." (Brown begins with, and repeatedly explores different dimensions of, William Carlos Williams's famous modernist dictum "No ideas but in things.") But his silence here becomes somewhat too loud when his analysis of the ontological "crisis" of the "human" in the Jewett chapter seems to submerge the ambiguous status

of racialized native Americans as people and things -- as well as to gloss over the relationship between their racialization and the rustic whiteness of Jewett's Maine denizens. Still, the book has opened a wide, compelling analytical path for future work taking up such concerns, particularly in this same chapter's historical-theoretical analysis of the fetish concept. As critics begin to synthesize Brown's theoretical and readerly acuity with our increasingly rich understanding of this historical thing called "culture," the reflexive dissociation of ideas and things, of the cultural and material, will come to seem a quaint superstition.