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Daniel Nisa Cáceres
Universidad de Sevilla

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Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006. 196 pp. ISBN 0226261553.

Reviewed by Daniel Nisa Cáceres, Universidad de Sevilla

In *The Ideas in Things*, Elaine Freedgood proposes a stimulating way of reading "things"; that is, of apprehending elusive, absent or overlooked meanings and ideas long stored in objects. This substantial study is situated within the growing interdisciplinary field of object studies, known as "thing theory," but aims to open new horizons. Thing theory, broadly speaking, develops approaches to fill the notionally perceived breach between things and human beings. In *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003) Bill Brown, for instance, seeks to explore objects and their relationship to ideas in late nineteenth-century U.S. fiction by utilizing the marginal logic of subjectivity—the uniqueness of personal experience, the attachments and emotions that mark the bonds between people and things. Whereas Brown departs somewhat from the perspective afforded by a focus on commodity culture in order to foreground the subjective dimension of those bonds, Freedgood's frame of reference in *The Ideas in Things* is still very much that of New Historicism. Yet instead of reading texts by treating them merely as encoded receptacles of cultural materialism and capitalism, she traces the social histories that lie within seemingly unimportant objects of consumption as evoked and represented in three mid-Victorian novels: *Jane Eyre*, *Mary Barton* and *Great Expectations*.

Through this exploration of the ideas in things, Freedgood makes an enlightening contribution to the practical applicability of thing theory by advancing an innovative reading method. In the first three chapters, she retrieves the cultural, historical, social and material qualities of some manufactured goods. Following Brown in *The Material Unconscious* (1996), she carries out a "strong metonymic" reading (142) by taking a literary thing literally and relying on "mediations"—"those of historians of textiles and tobacco, of forestry and furniture" (5)—that can illuminate its past. Thus she avoids "the routinized literary figuration that precludes the interpretation of most things of realism" (5)—such as pieces of furniture, drapery or tobacco, which are not "indentured to a metaphorical relation in which they must give up most of their qualities in the service of a symbolic relation" (10). This is what Freedgood labels conventional or "weak" metonymic reading, in which objects only "suggest, or reinforce, something we already know about the subjects who use them" (2). Instead, her methodological approach is built on Walter Benjamin's description of the "protocols of the collector" (2) and seeks to delay the construction of metaphors and allegories until the vision and knowledge of the collector have been acquired (4). In the monographic volume of *Critical Inquiry* (28.1) given over to thing theory, Bill Brown states that "we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about *us*)," but hardly see the things themselves (4). Freedgood sets out to justify an alternative or solution in the form of a necessary material investigation "beyond the immediate context in which they [things] appear"; then the things are returned "to their novelistic homes" with a fresh and legitimate "resonance of meaning" (5-6).

The introductory chapter, "Reading Things," aptly summarizes the contents and establishes the theoretical ground for Freedgood's text. Roland Barthes's definition of the "reality effect" produced by "many objects in the realist novel" (9) is crucial for Freedgood's use of metonymy

and narrative theory. For her, this neglected trope might solve a common conflict in literary criticism; namely, the fact that the "object as reality effect loses its potential as a material thing outside the conventions of representation," and "as metaphor loses most of its qualities in its symbolic servitude" (11). Bill Brown's strong metonymic reading in *The Material Unconscious* starts from Barthes's ideas, but allows for "causal, material, and conceptual connections beyond the covers of the text, or outside the frame of the narrative" (11). In the second section, Freedgood examines the conventional and contingent aspects of metonymy and demonstrates how her strong, literalizing approach can transcend these limitations (12-17). Next, Freedgood takes into account the fact that readers have to face the circumstantial evidence provided by the novels—i.e. what can be interpreted and assumed as such by them; yet, given the "extent to which history and convention govern that category" (21), she proposes that novelistic objects should first be taken "literally" in order to "understand them as interpretable" (20). In the following section, she examines the possibilities for making legitimate interpretations out of the "vagrant processes of what might be called the metonymic imagination," which is described—with reference to Barthes and Derrida—as the "cognitive motor of the reading process" (21). In light of Giambattista Vico's ideas on the material foundation of language, Freedgood argues that cultural knowledge is stored in a "variety of institutional forms," but more relevantly "at the level of the word" (23). Finally, the interpretive legitimacy of words leads to the nature of hieroglyphics and Marx's theory of exchange, in which "the commodity fetish is a social hieroglyphic" (26). For Freedgood, the "commodity is both a material object and a trope" (27); therefore, "[h]ieroglyphics, commodities, [and] fictional objects" have to be taken both literally and figurally" (28) to achieve a well-balanced interpretation.

Each of the following three chapters centers on a canonical Victorian novel and a particular object virtually unexplored by scholarship, despite the object's distinct evocation of industrial and imperial overtones. These "things of realism," according to Freedgood, amount to "a nearly infinite catalogue of compressed references to social facts that have, in the history of novel reading, remained largely unread" (84). Her choice of "unread" things is "influenced by structures of thought and thinking which derive from a line of thinking that could be traced from" Marxist criticism, the work of Edward Said and postcolonial studies, and the writings of Freud, Foucault, and Judith Butler (5). From their angle of vision, things are not quite relevant to the structural logic of the text, but rather point to the context where they were manufactured; special emphasis is thus placed on the social histories surrounding the object. However, for an object to be either metaphorical or a part of the "referential illusion" of realism, it must lose most of its specific qualities as such, its own historical links included; metonymy—for Freedgood—reconciles both processes with its essence (10): an object can be itself, as well as a metaphor and a fraction of what signifies the real in the text.

In the first chapter, "Souvenirs of Sadism," Freedgood analyzes how the histories of slavery, deforestation and enclosure internalized by pieces of old mahogany furniture in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* are disavowed, which explains to a great extent why they have passed unnoticed. She argues that the politically incorrect meaning of *Jane Eyre*'s refurbishment of Moor House and Ferndean, in terms of the topical moral response to the social relations of consumption and production inherent in the furniture, is secreted and repressed. This is the case of "the deforestation, colonization, and implementation of plantation slavery in the two critical sources of wealth in the novel, Madeira and the Caribbean," islands from which a large amount

of this wood and the furniture made of it was imported between 1720 and 1760, known as the "age of mahogany" (32). Freedgood comments on how the novel stresses both the destruction of the furniture in Thornfield Hall and the "uninhabited and unfurnished" state of Ferndean, which "invites the exercise of habitation as a demonstration of power" (33). Freedgood suggests that for Jane the "symbolic compression of violence" in this type of furniture is a source "from which to draw consolation and a sense of power" (35), rather than anxiety. Imperialism provides the novel with a sadistic narrative of selfhood in which "subjection, first of the self and then of others, makes for subjecthood" (44-45). Close attention is also paid to the politics of power as held by Jane—who "decorates, but [. . .] refuses to be decorated" by disavowing and maintaining "mastery behind a screen of cunningly convincing abjection" (48); to the metonymy of mastery expressed by the profits made by the importation of Madeira wine (49-50); and to the return to a pastoral, domestic condition both of Ferndean and the Caribbean islands, which are ultimately transformed by the tourist industry from mid-nineteenth century onward (52-53). In short, as Freedgood points out, "*Jane Eyre* has been widely discussed as a text of empire," but not from the perspective offered by "interior decoration" (31).

In Chapter Two, "Coziness and Its Vicissitudes," the focus is on the checked English calico curtains which Elizabeth Gaskell puts up in Mary Barton's house. Stepping over the threshold of their traditionally metonymic and ideologically comforting function—i.e. to convey order and coziness—Freedgood gradually extracts the evasive social, national and cultural significance of calico as a recipient of troubling histories of the cotton industry and the social relations of production, as well as a "definite boundary between the domestic and the foreign" (57) in the narrative. In order to suggest how ideas are present in things, Freedgood first examines the etymologically related meaning of "fustian" and "bombast": they refer simultaneously to a kind of "overblown language" and cotton (more concretely a manufactured textile and raw cotton, respectively) (55). Once the object has been literalized, she investigates the social history of calico—fustian "made from cotton exclusively" (55), how from "a luxury import, [it] becomes in its British incarnation a low-price and utilitarian textile" (57). Given that blue and white Mancunian calico curtains can be seen as things and commodities at once, those in Gaskell's *Mary Barton* become "available for multiple translations and interpretations" (75), indicating not only domesticity, but also "the history of the deindustrialization of the Indian textile manufacture, and the rise to dominance of British cotton production" (57) at the expense of slaves and laborers alike. Through these curtains and other things—"a pile of goods [that] seems to gather in the margins of the text" (72)—Freedgood tries to recuperate meanings that, despite having been rendered unavailable for present-day readers through what she terms "the social destruction of meaning" and "interpretability" (68), nevertheless survive "in textual form" and even in the "incidental memory" of those still related to them by virtue of some sort of personal experience or cultural heritage (69).

Chapter Three, "Realism, Fetishism, and Genocide," revolves around Negro Head tobacco in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. In comparison with what George Orwell condescendingly termed a characteristic profusion of "unnecessary detail," Dickens's novels, for Freedgood, are indeed old curiosity shops full of forgotten, dusty objects, ephemera, and itemizations of necessary detail waiting for readers to establish and pursue metonymic connections. Freedgood argues at length that this variety of tobacco, a "highly desirable object" (91) in the metropolis, is connected, among other encrypted social associations that include slavery-related cultivation in

the United States, with black "Australian Aborigines" (83) and with how they were massacred by white British settlers; therefore the horror of "Aboriginal genocide" in Victorian Australia "cannot be named but only be encoded fetishistically in the most apparently negligible of details" (82). Freedgood investigates the history of tobacco "both as currency and commodity" (92), especially through its advertisements in the form of tobacco cards—she includes four photographs (94-95) and the Indian motif that presides over the volume on its flyleaf. In *Great Expectations*, slavery is "neither distant nor exotic; it is used as a metaphor for thoroughly British relations, and is very nearly interchangeable with imprisonment and transportation" (97). Negro Head tobacco serves, she maintains throughout, as a sort of ever-present, albeit self-effacing, memorial, oscillating between the readers' historical consciousness or unconsciousness of the fact and its repression, or rather combining them all symbolically. Freedgood concludes this chapter by clarifying the "metonymic sublime of the Dickens novel" that is created by his disproportionate inventories and descriptions. This marks a transition in her argument, inasmuch as Dickens's excess somehow parodies the "ambitions and limitations of realism as a hopeless project" of representation (105).

Chapter Four, "Toward a History of Literary Underdetermination," a study of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, is not an isolated object; rather, Freedgood approaches *Middlemarch* on the basis that it reveals conscious authorial attempts at setting, restricting, and stabilizing meaning against the symbolic, metonymic, or figural interpretive openness of preceding Victorian novels. Eliot makes things take on metaphoric meaning through long "hermeneutic displays" (6) which "restrict and assign meaning to fictional objects"; the narrator "actively dissuades readers from making meanings on their own" (6). Freedgood holds Eliot's pedantic—in its etymological sense—procedure responsible for blocking the strong metonymic—literal and historical—reading of things Freedgood proposes in the preceding chapters. In her discussion of the novel, she suggests that amid mounting awareness of uncertainty and an abundance of "undiscriminating readers" and "undiscriminating writers" (114), Eliot invents a self-contained literary novel that, in consequence, paves the way for Modernism. Freedgood revisits the sense of "poor dress," emeralds and Roman objects; in short, she points out that Eliot translates moral and social ideas into things (118) in a way that avows and disavows them simultaneously. In this process of "standardization of literary meaning," "[a]llusion becomes metonymy and then metaphor and then fetish"; in other words, "the narrator works the allusion through to its rightful reduction" to "an assigned quality" and the suppression of the rest (123). Freedgood carefully analyzes how Eliot imposes her interpretations upon readers, and she concludes the chapter by suggesting that a novel like *Middlemarch* can "produce literariness and historicity together," and "make its meanings limited, legible, and reproducible," thus marking "a signal moment in the history of fugitive meaning" (138).

Freedgood surveys the concept of Victorian thing culture in the final section or "Coda." She sets it against the background of early twenty-first century reading habits, and especially as a contrast to the fetishism inherent in "commodity culture" (142) and industrialism, somewhat taken for granted, as is often the case, by Marxist interpretations. In accordance with her perspective, Freedgood means to "defetishize" commodities, as the stresses and strains of this subsequent socio-cultural tendency preclude further readings of the archive-like character of mid-Victorian novels. Thing culture, she implies, also seems to survive into the detective novel, as shown in Sherlock Holmes's fluent reading of individual things as such, not as merely illegible material

commodities exposed to the danger of becoming metaphors (150-53). Incipient underdetermination or stabilization of meaning can nevertheless be found in the last third of the nineteenth century in the literary fiction of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, somehow blocking the previous right of recourse to strong metonymic or literal reading (155), as is previously argued.

Elaine Freedgood examines objects meticulously by subjecting them to a gradual process in which she moves from their unattended and apparently meaningless literalness to their meaningful, overall metonymic relation to the text and their extra-textual connections with subjects and histories outside the narrative. This extremely instructive and readable contribution to our understanding of things and the ideas they occlude should be most appreciated insofar as it provokes fresh contemporary readings of the Victorian novel. It only remains to observe the fruitful productivity of this method in future interpretations of the "unread" things and details of this and other nineteenth-century paradigms of realism, no doubt abundantly laden as well with elusive meaning.

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