universität wien

MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

„Things to Consider in Post-Millennial Novels: Material Culture in Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man* and Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*"

verfasst von / submitted by

Jeannie Mae Emathinger

angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2018 / Vienna 2018

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt / degree programme code as it appears on the student record sheet:	A 066 844
Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt / degree programme as it appears on the student record sheet:	Anglophone Literatures and Cultures
Betreut von / Supervisor:	Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Alexandra Ganser-Blumenau
Mitbetreut von / Co-Supervisor:	

Abstract

In the twenty-first century, we live our lives surrounded and impacted by things—things we consume, things we cherish, and more often than not, things we forget. The number of things we own and touch each day, from gadgets, to clothes, to plastic wastes has risen so dramatically over the past century that the effects of modern consumption can be considered a critical variable of contemporary life. Scholars in cultural and economic fields, such as Jean Baudrillard and Arjun Appadurai, have contemplated the role of objects in our social and personal lives. However, it wasn't until Bill Brown's seminal essay, "Thing Theory" (2001), and his book *Sense of Things* (2003), that material culture was examined within literature. In this thesis, Brown's *thing theory* and contemporary discourse surrounding object-culture studies is utilized to inform a philosophical discussion of material things within two contemporary novels: Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man* (2002) and Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* (2013). Situating the novels into today's age of global production, mass consumption, and the culture of 'material abstraction,' this study investigates how objects collect and clutter in the stories and how things influence and enhance the characters' lives and identities. Through a close textual analysis, the characters' habits of collecting are interpreted to signify on the one hand, the anxious affiliation we have towards culturally symbolic objects, and on the other, our personal and complex relationship to things. Additionally, the narrative trope of the written word as a complex thing illuminates how these novels portray literature as a fluid entity, at once a physical object, at another moment a product, and at the same time a metaphysical construct of image and signs. Although the scope of this study is limited to a philosophical contemplation of the material world within novels of fiction, its political capacity encourages a fresh consideration of the material world which, in turn, could inspire a consciousness for ecological ways of life.

Zusammenfassung

Im 21. Jahrhundert leben wir unser Leben umgeben und beeinflußt von Dingen: Dinge die wir kaufen, Dinge die wir lieben, und viel öfter, Dinge die wir vergessen. Die Zahl der Dinge die wir besitzen und jeden Tag benötigen, von Gadgets über Kleidung bis zu Plastikmüll, ist über die letzen Jahrzehnte dramatisch gestiegen. Der moderne Konsum hat in unserem gegenwertigem Leben einen kritischen Punkt erreicht. Die Gelehrten in Kultur und Wissenschaft, wie etwa Jean Baudrillard und Arjun Appadurai, haben über die Rolle von Objekten und Dingen in unserem täglichem sozialen und privaten Leben lange und breit diskutiert. Jedoch bis Bill Browns ‚Thing Theory' (2001) und sein Buch, *Sense of Things* (2003) erschienen sind, wurde die Sachkultur in der Literatur kaum berücksichtigt. Diese Arbeit wird von Browns *thing theory* belegt und eine phisolophische Diskussion von materielen Dingen in zwei gegenwärtigen Romanen, Zadie Smiths *The Autograph Man* und Donna Tartts *The Goldfinch,* betrachtet. Diese Studie gibt einen Einblick in die globale Massenproduktion, und den dazugehörigen Konsum und in die kulture Geisteshaltung von *materieller Abstraktion.* Diese Studie untersucht was das sammeln von Objekten für unser soziales Leben und unsere individuelle Identität beduetet und wie Dinge in Literatur beschrieben und bezeichnet werden.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

We live our lives encumbered by things: things we buy, things we collect, things we love, and more often than not, things we forget. While "a typical German owns 10,000 objects," and a garage in Los Angeles "often no longer houses a car but boxes of stuff," the excessive consumption and accumulation of things (in largely Western societies but increasingly in other parts of the world as well) is a critical aspect of our contemporary life (Trentmann 1). Over recent decades, as objects have cluttered in closets, filled-up storage units, and flooded landfills, object culture has come to the fore in mainstream media and scholarly studies.

A plethora of research and writing on material culture and material vitality, on 'object culture' and objecthood, and on the agency of things and *thingness* has percolated up into the academic world. Works such as Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1968) studies the psychological relationship between humans and their objects. Arjun Appadurai's books *The Social Life of Things* (1986) and *Modernity at Large* (1996) consider the socio-political value of things within modern capitalist society. In *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (1990) Susan Pearce et al. analyze our relationship to the accumulation of objects in public and private spaces, and Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2009) aims to destabilize the binary between living and nonliving things. However, Bill Brown's essay "Thing Theory" (2001) instigated the investigation of the meaning of things within literature. Thing theory has proven particularly fruitful for literary analysis, as scholarly reading has long deliberated the relationship between the figuratively material and the immateriality of the real. Since Brown's seminal work, things as represented in literature and art are no longer considered merely inert objects, commodities of consumption, or passive pieces of a collection. Rather, they signify the complex relationship humans share with the material world.

In this master's thesis, I contemplate how two twenty-first-century novels, Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* (2013) and Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man* (2002), incorporate things into their stories. Moreover, how do material objects influence the portrayal of modern life, the construction of identity, and the development of the literary form? These two novels have yet to be scrutinized under the lens of thing theory; therefore, this study adds a page to the collective interpretation of Tartt's and Smith's literary oeuvre. Although the two novels reflect vastly different styles, it is evident that physical objects play prominent roles within both stories. Each narrative presents protagonists and other characters who collect, chase after, and fetishize objects. In this way, these texts ask what the relationship is between humans and their possessions. Moreover, the narrative modes convey a tendency to distract the reader from the flow of plot and pivot the view towards physical matter and the details of the material world.

Bridging ideas from cultural and literary studies, this paper contributes to a growing interest in materialism and the representation of things within the literary medium. The sections of this thesis meander through various aspects of thing theory which are crucial to a discussion of the positions things hold in personal and cultural life. I begin my study by briefly introducing the novels and by providing a condensed character-analysis of the protagonists. Representing antiheroes of the bildungsroman, both main characters act instead as protectors of material culture. In the next section, I offer a deeper explanation of thing theory, and following Brown's methodology in his book *Sense of Things,* I attempt to describe the "object culture" within a twenty-first-century context. In view of two critical contemporary attitudes towards things, namely anti-materialism and dematerialization, I ask how Smith's and Tartt's novels reflect or retaliate against the current material culture. Chapter One, "Object Fetish and Nostalgia for Materiality," discusses the novels' positions within their temporal settings and reveals that each story portrays a certain longing for or anxiety towards the material world. In Chapter Two, I take a more personal look at the way in which humans become emotionally attached to objects. As both protagonists experience profound trauma, I pull from psychoanalytical approaches to illuminate the meanings of their habits and the significance of their relationships to material things. Finally, in Chapter Three, I undertake a philosophical consideration of the ontological ambiguities surrounding things. Leaning on Brown's and Jane Bennet's deliberations on the metaphysical quality of things and the agency of inert entities, I find instances within the novels that seem to advocate the vibrant nature of objects and question the dichotomy between animate and inanimate objects.

Concerning methodology, this project is a multifaceted study. Conducting a close reading of the texts through the approach of thing theory, I also consider aspects of narratology, utilize psychoanalytical methods and draw from commodity culture studies. Although the scope of my research is limited to a mostly philosophical contemplation of objecthood and close literary analysis, its political capacity is to urge a renewed consciousness of the inanimate world, which, in turn, could encourage a mindfulness of consuming and living in more ecological ways. A close textual analysis of things, 'thing power' and the narrative modes that mediate the relationship between human characters and their material world will illuminate the ways in which literature negotiates the significance of objects into the narrative form.

Two Novels: Two Protagonists Preoccupied by Things

In this study, I examine two postmillennial novels: Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man* and Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*. These novels are written in vastly different styles: Smith experiments with form in a postmodern production of prose whereas Tartt mimics a grandiose Dickensian tale. Nevertheless, they cross thematic paths in the way they represent our relationship to material things in contemporary western culture. Additionally, both stories are set in metropolitan hubs, in London and New York respectively, and both follow single main characters who lead independent and somewhat lonely lives. In fact, each protagonist has been similarly criticized as antiheroes of the contemporary bildungsroman. In various reviews, Smith's main character, a half-Chinese, half-Jewish man approaching thirty named Alex-Li Tandem, is bashed as "a dreary blank, an empty centre entirely filled by his pop-culture devotions" (Wood, "Fundamentally Goyish"). In another critique, he is labeled as a "perpetual adolescent" who "lives in a limbo of self-absorption" (Kakutani, "Books of the Times"). Similarly, Tartt's antihero, Theo Decker, a quasi-orphan whose father abandons him, and mother dies when he is thirteen, is knocked down as "a young New Yorker similarly drawn to emotional extremes and hedonism" (Stokes).

Though harsh, these critiques are not untrue. In fact, one could argue that the characters represent antiheroes of contemporary hegemonic and capitalistic society. Failing to participate in anticipated social codes of conduct, neither engages in traditional romantic relationships and both are dishonest to their friends. Although the protagonists are surrounded by people who care about them, they tend to withdraw from typical social responsibilities and remain introverted with their troubles. Since losing his mother in a terrorist attack, Theo, in *The Goldfinch,* has a hard time trusting and connecting with those around him. In *The Autograph Man,* Alex (as he is referred to throughout most of the novel) is stuck in a state of arrested development after his father's sudden death and struggles to relate to his childhood friends. Clearly, both characters suffer from extended symptoms of trauma (a topic I discuss in detail in a subsequent chapter) and they engage in harmful practices with drugs and alcohol. Along with playing the part of the loner, both protagonists fail to perform their roles as cogs within the contemporary economy of hyper-consumerism. Though Alex and Theo are businessmen, they trade in hand-crafted antiques or eclectic collectables instead of mass-manufactured products or commodified social services. Despite being relatively successful in their trade, they fail to represent positions in an ever-modernizing economy.

Aside from this, at various moments in the plot, their moral standings are called into question and they often portray a lack of ethical consideration. In *The Autograph Man,* Alex repeatedly cheats on his girlfriend, fails to attend her risky heart surgery, and financially profits

from the misconstrued death of another character. Theo, in *The Goldfinch*, slips into a seedy business of selling faked furniture pieces to unknowing customers, gets caught up in the black market of stolen art, and even commits murder to retrieve a stolen masterpiece painting. Yet, to their credit, Tartt's and Smith's characters are aware and reflective of their flaws. Inquiring of his social and moral role in the world, Theo begs the questions:

> What if one happens to be possessed of a heart that can't be trusted—? What if that heart, for all its own unfathomable reasons, leads one willfully and in a cloud of unspeakable radiance away from health, domesticity, civic responsibility and strong social connections and all the blandly-held common virtues and instead straight towards a beautiful flair of ruin, self-immolation, disaster? (853)

Writing through Theo's autodiegetic mode, Tartt empathizes with a universal uncertainty of how to live one's life, whether to follow social expectations or pursue individual desires. Smith's character is similarly unsure of his position in society, indicated by his question:

> Who would ever choose this life? Alex stepped out into the centre of town. In the curved black glass of a superior clothes store he dropped his shoulders, placed his hands by his sides, itemized himself. No love, no transportation, no ambitions, no faith, no community, no expectation of forgiveness or reward, one bag, one thermos, one acid hangover, one alcohol hangover, one Kitty alexander autograph, in pristine condition, written in dark ink, centrally placed on a postcard. Look at this. If this is a man. Look at him. […] *I have nothing and at the same time everything. And if I am out of my mind, thought Alex-Li Tandem, it's all right by me.* (119, original emphasis)

Notice the contrasting nature of the things Alex does not have: immaterial concepts such as ambition and faith, and the things he does have: corporeal, tangible things such as a hangover and a celebrity autograph. Through her protagonist, Smith presents an alternative way to value oneself. Satisfied by what is physical and present instead of what is abstract and absent, Alex identifies himself through the physical items he has instead of the socially-prescribed things he lacks.

Yet, as both main characters convey distressed relationships to people and pursue unconventional activities and professions, they also portray intense attachments to and peculiar affairs with things. When Theo's mother dies in an art museum, it indirectly leads him to stealing the famous painting by Carel Fabritius titled "The Goldfinch". Over the course of the novel, Theo smuggles the painting wherever he goes and the longer he has it, the stronger the painting's mystical vivacity affects him. By the end of the story, Theo finds solace and purpose in his role as the protector of a masterpiece painting. Similarly, Alex's complex relationship with things is exemplified by his intimate attachment to his autographs which he collects and trades. When Alex obtains a signed photo from his favorite Hollywood actress, its aura of fame moves him, literally, to venturing for the first time outside of his city and away from his comfort zone. The novel concludes with Alex finally becoming a successful autograph man, however the greatest thing he gains is a moment of reprieve when he lets go of his most precious object, his father's signed pound note.

Despite their flaws, an understanding of the character's behaviors through their relationship to objects and materiality helps to perceive their roles as advocates of a revived connection to the material world. For although Alex and Theo fail to perform as social and economic agents in a hegemonic capitalist society, they succeed in their roles as collectors of things. Turning now to a discussion of the current object culture, I aim to show how the characters thwart the status quo of contemporary materialism, and how, as Smith's narrator suggests, "the collector is the saviour of objects that might otherwise be lost" (222).

Theoretical and Cultural Contexts

Recently, an increased interest in material culture in connection to literature and art has produced a fresh discussion of and captivation with things. Thing theory begins by contemplating the "complex role" that objects play in everyday life. For instance, Brown asks why "do you find yourself talking to things—your car, your computer, your refrigerator?" and more poignantly, "how do we ask objects to represent us, to comfort us, to change us?" (*Sense of Things* 12). Jane Bennett, another pivotal scholar and a vital-materialist, suggests that there exists a "material agency or effectivity of non-human or not-quite-human things" which elucidates, as Brown articulates, "how inanimate objects transform us, in art and life" (Bennett ix, Brown "The Nature of Things"). Another aspect of thing theory examines how humans identify themselves through objects. The modern quip "are you an Apple or PC person?" or the way clothes, gadgets, and home furnishings are used to express identity reveal how people define themselves through their possessions. Baudrillard boldly claims that, "it is invariably oneself that one collects" and Brown asserts that at times there is a "slippage between having (possessing a particular object) and being (the identification of one's self with that object)" (12, *Sense of Things* 13). The roles that things play in our lives, the ways they are used to make meaning in our culture, and the emotional and psychological positions they hold in the constitution of our selves will motivate the following chapters of this thesis.

Figure 1: "The Plenty" by Barbara Kruger, 2010

Following Brown's methodology of examining literary texts through the lens of thing theory, I move on to ponder the "object culture" within which Smith and Tartt's novels were written and how their stories reflect or react to said culture. "A given object culture," explains Brown, "entails the practical and symbolic use of objects, and thus both the ways that inanimate objects mediate human relations and the ways that humans mediate object relations" (*Other Things* 201). To describe a distinct object culture is to contemplate how nonhuman things "mediate individual and group identity" and to consider "the systems (material, economic, symbolic) through which objects become meaningful" (Brown, *Other Things* 134, 201). For instance, in *Sense of Things,* Brown reads late nineteenth-century American texts as a reaction to a bombardment of products which flooded society via the invention of stream-line manufacturing and the enactment of mass-distribution. Accounting for an object culture that overwhelmed yet mesmerized the collective consciousness of consumers and artists alike, Brown questions "what desires did objects organize?" and "what fantasies did they provoke?" (*Sense of Things* 12). In addition to these questions, I ask what place do objects have in contemporary life? How do certain objects reveal current sentiments about our place in the world today? Essentially, by ascertaining the social and cultural status of material culture in a given society, and by considering the "history of production, distribution, and consumption," thing theory asks how objects are integrated and adjudicated into our lives.

In an effort to guide this query through the scope of Smith's and Tartt's novels, I will briefly situate the stories into the social and cultural context and ask how they react to or reflect

the object culture of today. In his study of modernist literature and art, Brown points out that "it is hardly possible to think seriously about objects in the closing decades of the nineteenth century without beginning to think about the department store," which drastically changed the structure of consumerism. Similarly, it would be facetious to ignore the recent developments of production and consumer practices, along with technological and communication developments, which influence and regulate the relationship between people and objects today. Following his sense of a "modernist fascination with things," Brown postulates that the mantra of modernist writing and art is found in a line of one of William Carlos Williams' poems that reads "no ideas but in things" (*Sense of things* 1, 14). Could, then, the idiom of our postmodern era come from Barbara Kruger's 2010 multimedia installation: "YOU WANT IT / YOU NEED IT / YOU BUY IT / YOU FORGET IT" ("The Plenty")? Put another way, in a time in which we accumulate things as quickly as we forget them, or as Brown describes, in the "midst of abstraction [that] increasingly determines our lives," how attentive are contemporary novels to inanimate objects and what impact do nonliving things have on the stories they tell (*Sense of Things* 19)?

Kruger's confrontational message aptly comprises two strains of sentiment within twenty-first century object culture: that of *anti-materiality* and *dematerialization*. On a connotative level, Kruger's slogan, "YOU WANT IT / YOU NEED IT / YOU BUY IT / YOU FORGET IT", conveys the anti-materialistic structure of modern consumer culture as it entails a certain amount of indifference and a carelessness for the material things we buy. Despite wanting something—that *want* transformed into a desperate *desire* masked through contemporary marketing as *need*—as soon as we satisfy our want, the actual thing proves to be irrelevant. In other words, the desire to consume is derived not from the material object, but rather from consumption itself—"it". Semantically, the word "it" signifies the consequences of *dematerialization* through the effects of commodity fetishism by linguistically misplacing the object/product/thing for a trivial pronoun, just as the structure of the commodity successfully abstracts the value and sense of materiality from physical products. Indeed, Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, most notable for the notion that the value of labor is abstracted from an object's exchange-value, also posits that the commodity-form *dematerializes* the physical thing, in that it has "absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material *[dinglich]* relations arising out of this" (qt. in Brown, *Sense of Things* 28). Referring to Georg Lukács, Brown supports this sentiment by stating that the modern "culture of rationalization and calculability, effected by the commodity form's abstraction of the object, conceals 'above all the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things'" (*Other Things* 10).

Arjun Appadurai seconds this notion by observing that in the current western consumer-market culture, material *abstraction* has replaced a sensibility towards things as the value of objects

rests primarily on their position as commodities or "material repositories of monetary or exchange value" ("The Thing Itself" 18). Through the phenomenon of abstraction, "no object or thing in American society is fully enjoyed for its sheer materiality" and "no object is truly priceless" ("The Thing Itself" 19). Accordingly, Bennet entails that "American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever shorter cycles is antimateriality" (5). Moreover, the "sheer volume of commodities, and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter," along with the wide-reaching impact that objects have on our lives (Bennet 5). The egregious effects of today's anti-materialistic consumerism are becoming increasingly apparent when one considers the ecological and social crises arising from the swelling amounts of trash, plastics, and pollution inhabiting different regions of the planet.

Along with the "abstraction of the material world into exchange values," Brown interprets Harold Searles's concern that the "'psychological estrangement from the nonhuman environment' has been effected by […] a culture of overabundance and disposability" (*OT* 190). Thus, anti-materialism can also evoke an aversion to things in response to the exponentially rising volume of objects available for purchase and predetermined for disposal—at once muddling our sense of value and at the same time overwhelming our abilities to regulate and restrain the influx of things in our lives. While massive accumulation can provoke awe as in Christian Boltanski's installation "No Man's Land" which stages a pile of thirty tons of discarded clothing, it can also induce repulsion and regulation. In 2009, the television series *Hoarders* debuted on A&E and shocked its viewers with a narrative of individual material deviance meant to be rectified by social services. The show gained international attention and aired until 2013. That same year, hoarding was admitted as a mental disorder in the American Psychiatry Association's fifth edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DMS-5) (Herring 1). The incongruous and inconsistent attitudes and behaviors towards the mass of objects and flotsam which now inhabits the world begs various questions, such as what instigates our passion to collect or our neurotic urges to declutter? Who is allowed to engage in collecting and where are collections accepted and displayed? "Do we collect things in order to keep the past proximate," Brown leads on, "to incorporate the past into our daily lives, or in order to make the past distant, to objectify it […] in the effort to arrest its spectral power" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 12)?

Figure 2: "No Man's Land" by Christian Boltanski

While various social institutions grapple with collecting, saving, or disposing objects, sectors of economic production have been quietly relinquishing themselves from material things. Pointing to the rise of global corporations and the popularity of brand marketing, Naomi Klein senses an antagonism towards things over the past few decades within the western business world.

> And for the longest time, the making of things remained, at least in principle, the heart of all industrialized economies. But by the eighties, pushed along by that decade's recession, some of the most powerful manufacturers in the world had begun to falter. A consensus emerged that corporations were bloated, oversized; they owned too much, employed too many people, and were wired down with *too many things*. The very process of producing running one's own factories, being responsible for tens of thousands of full-time, permanent employees —began to look less like the route to success and more like a clunky liability. (*No Logo* 4)

With the advent of mass-global manufacturing, western economies transformed from producing to primarily consuming societies and commodity fetishism which masks the labor invested in the object progressed into what Appadurai labels *production fetishism:* "an illusion created by contemporary transnational production that masks translocal capital, transnational earning flows, global management, and often faraway workers" (*Modernity at Large* 42). Along with globalized production practices, robotic manufacturing and the recent emergence of online shopping have "liberated" corporations "from the real world burdens of stores and product" (Klein 4). Subsequently, the physical disconnect between humans and things (the diminishing number of women and men making and building things or handling the machines that assembled products) widened in the

decades leading up to the millennium resulting in a lost sense of self as *homo faber*, the subject that creates (see Brown *Other Things* 173).

Along with anti-materialistic production practices, another aspect of the dematerialization of modern culture can be found within the digitization of communication. Developments in technology and virtual networks have produced "the current separation 'between communication and substance'" (Brown, *Other Things* 12). Referring to Colin Renfrew who apprehends that, "the electronic impulse is replacing whatever remained of the material element in the images [and messages] to which we became accustomed," Brown senses a postmodern concern for the loss of material connection between human correspondences (*Other Things* 12). Though communication has become practically instant and seamless, there is also growing disconnect between materiality and speech.

The virtual void within modern communication produces various attitudes and effects. For instance, soon after Donald Trump was inaugurated into office in 2016, a man built a robot which prints out the president's tweets onto small slips of paper and then sets them on fire, disposing the remains into a glass ashtray (Cresci, "Trump Gets Flamed"). The homemade robot, with its crude cables and rotating mechanical limb, counteracts the invisible and immaterial nature of today's virtual transactions. It also begs the question, as images and text are increasingly mediated through virtual mediums, or as communication is decreasingly tangible, do we feel less able to handle, grasp, or control the messages transmitted? Additionally, how does the digitization of the object world, effectively replacing or succeeding material things (think of our parents' photo albums superseded by iCloud, or our DVDs players collecting dust), creates anxieties over object obsolescence? With these inquiries in mind, Brown finds it "perfectly reasonable to account for the recent scholarly attention to objects (not to say things) as a reaction against […] the further disappearance of the object within an increasingly mediated (indeed digitally mediated) universe" (*Other Things* 57).

However, while the receding decades of the twentieth century saw emails replacing letters and virtual realms gaining immense popularity, the postmodern episteme within academic discourse has also swayed towards dematerialized interpretations of the world. Incidentally, the way in which Klein describes the process of market branding in the 1990s, in which "'Polaroid is not a camera—it's a social lubricant.' IBM isn't selling computers, its selling business 'solutions.' Swatch is not about watches, it is about the idea of time," is quizzically analogous to the postmodern turn towards structuralist and post-structuralist thought—in which a thing is not a thing, but merely a sign for another thing (*No Logo* 23). Observing how "certain intellectual currents of the 1960s seemed to wash things away," Brown stipulates that objects had got "caught up, analytically, in economic systems or sign systems that prevent us from attending to their material speci-

ficity and that specificity's semantic ramifications" (*Other Things* 135, 202). Seconding this notion, Mary K. Holland explains: "specifically in the context of the shift in language that has occurred, culturally, critically, and literarily: 'the world of things has become a world of signs'" (139). Within the structuralist world of signs, Renfrew maintains that "engagement with the material world where the material object was the repository of meaning is being threatened" (qt in. Brown, *Other Things* 12). Subsequently, the postmodern worldview reflects conflicting attitudes towards the objects and the real material world, at once detached from and at the same time apprehensive about the status of things.

Chapter 1

Object Fetish and Nostalgia For Materiality

In his latest book, *Other Things* (2015), Brown remarks that after "having been marginalized or elided for so long by, say structuralism and deconstruction, various theories of the subject, and the emphasis on discursive or social construction," "the phenomenological object world (or indeed the material world, the real world, and things themselves) [has] return[ed] with a kind of vengeance" (12). Furthermore, despite the anti-materialist or dematerializing aspects of contemporary culture, Brown establishes that within the medium of "art and literature," "the character of things has been preserved" (*Other Things* 11). Therefore, turning to Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* and Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man,* I set up the following chapter by asking: how do these postmillennial novels reflect or react to contemporary sentiments towards objects, the real world, and things? More elaborately, considering how the object culture leading up to the twenty-first century informs our relationships, behaviors and sentiments towards things, how do the aspects of anti-materiality and dematerialization inform Tartt's and Smith's novels on narrative and structural levels?

To answer these broad enquiries, I first discern which behaviors and attitudes towards objects are most prevalent in the stories and describe how things are negotiated into the narrative structures. Crucially, both novels focus on objects characterized and threatened by obsolescence. Where Tartt fills her novel with broken pieces of antique furniture and seventeenth-century paintings, Smith's story centers around twentieth-century memorabilia and celebrity autographs. Consequently, the plots follow characters who collect and care for these pragmatically useless things, and the stories present protagonists who obsess and fetishize over particularly prized possessions. On the one hand, each novel projects a "kind of fascination, indeed a kind of fetishism" for "valueless material object[s]," which Brown regards as, "an alternative mode of inhabiting modern culture [that] confounds political economy's account of value" (*Other Things* 57). But on the other, the way in which the texts' present, but also commit, object fetish points to a postmodern collective anxiety against the loss of materiality within twenty-first-century culture. Thus, where Tartt's focus on hand-crafted antiques and art reveals a nostalgia for a pre-industrial lifestyle, Smith's concern with material referents of the age of TV along with the objectification of celebrities conveys a postmodern impulse to return to the real, or to the world of things. Concurrently, although fetish works to imbue objects with nostalgic significance beyond their material use-value, the narrative discourse deliberately reminds the reader of the value of their palpable and tangible nature.

In this way, the two narratives fit into what Holland describes in her book, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*, as "a proliferation of novels [post 2000]," which have redirected their "foci toward the real, the thing, and presence, and away from the sign, word, and absence upon which earlier postmodern fiction fixated" (7). Reminding us that "the text itself is a thing in the world, not simply a delivery system for content," Holland proposes that, "we must encounter art as things" (144). Therefore, if I sporadically refer to the authors' own affinity for or trepidation towards things, I do so in order to treat the novels as cultural objects themselves, created and crafted through human hands and from a human consciousness contextualized within the object culture of the turn of the twenty-first century. Turning first to Tartt's novel, which evokes a nostalgia for the preindustrial world, and then to Smith's story, which examines fetishes for twenty-century collectables, I aim to reveal certain facets of our contemporary conscious through literary representations of our relationship to things.

The Goldfinch

Within her fiction, Donna Tartt is undeniably attentive to the material object world. "When I'm writing," she explains in an interview, "I am concentrating almost wholly on concrete detail […] the color a room is painted, the way a drop of water rolls off a wet leaf after a rain" (Woodward). Underscoring this rhetorical technique, the first page of *The Goldfinch* opens within a focalized description of the protagonist's immediate surroundings: the sound of "church clocks tolling," the warmth of his "camel's-hair coat," a view of "lights twinkling" and "canal bridges," and a fixated study of "a tiny pair of gilt-framed oils hanging over the bureau" (5-6). Contemporary reviewers and critics have been eager to scorn Tartt's Dickensian descriptions as outdated and clichéd (see Wood). Yet, such vigilant receptivity towards things appropriately sets the stage for a narrative that follows the protagonist chasing after a thing. Appropriately, the narrative mode reflects the desire to look at, possess, and hold onto things. Additionally, Tartt's tendency to preoccupy her plot with poetic digressions of the material world functions to pay tribute to that world, ever threatened by twenty-first century trends of digitization, virtualization, and a consumeristic insensibility towards material things.

Ultimately, in reflection of and in reaction to the contemporary object culture within which streams of anti-materialism and dematerialization flux and flow, *The Goldfinch's* preoccupation with things, depicted through various forms of object fetishisms, reveals an overarching sense of nostalgia. And nostalgia for things—certain types of objects, but also social positions—threatened by obsolescence reflects an anxiety towards loss, past or impending. Consequently, Tartt alludes to and engages in different modes of object fetish: through the creation of charac-

ters who maintain intimate relationships with antiques, through an abundance of animistic and anthropomorphic object-imagery, and through an aesthetic fixation with craftmanship. These object fetishisms, along with the narrative's digressions towards material things, or to use Appadurai's term, the text's *methodological fetishism*, act as Tartt's techniques for "returning our attention to the things themselves" (*The Social Life of Things* 5).

Contradicting a world of material indifference and careless consumption, Tartt develops characters who portray an acute affinity for objects—particularly items threatened by obsolescence. A red string can be pulled through Theo and his mother, Hobie and Welty, and even Mrs. Barbour tying them together in their intense fondness for antiques, classical art, and tailored clothing. At the beginning of the novel, Theo's mother tells of how she had become "completely fascinated" with "The Goldfinch" painting and would "stare at it for hours" to the point of falling in love with it, "the way you'd love a pet" (29). Theo adopts his mother's fetishistic admiration for the famous painting (the psychological and emotional implications between Theo, the painting, and his mother will be discussed in the subsequent chapter) and working in Hobie's restoration shop he comes to realize his intrinsic attraction to other "old things" for their "different personalities" (184). Welty, too, who dies early in the story but often returns through rumination and memory, is characterized as someone who gets "attached to objects" (845). Hobie works to restore antiques and is highlighted for his ability to see the "creaturely quality of good furniture" (188). Even Mrs. Barbour, whose emotional reserve at the beginning of the novel is juxtaposed by her sentimentality in the second half of the story, tells Theo: "Oh, delicious. Antiques!' She sighed. 'Well—you know how I love old things'" (473).

'Old things' are privileged both within and without Tartt's narrative fiction. In an interview, Caroline Baum reports that "she is not an Ikea customer" as she appreciates "the creaturely animal qualities of really good pieces." "They look alive" Tartt tells Baum, "fakes look inanimate." What lies behind this desire for inanimate things to look alive? Does Hobie's interaction with furniture "like pets," the way he refers to pieces as "'he' and 'she,' […] and in the affectionate way he [runs] his hand along the dark glowing flanks of his sideboards and lowboys," hint at an "erotic fascination with the material object world" or is there something more to Tartt's unabashed use of animism (Brown, *Sense of Things* 31, Tartt 188)? Additionally, to what end does Tartt's object fetishism and preference for "dignified old highboys and secretaries [who have] lives longer and gentler than human life" work to challenge western logic that inanimate things cannot have lives of their own (188)?

The thematic fixation with *old things*, such as seventeenth-century art and antique furniture, evokes a nostalgic longing for the pre-modern and a sentimental favoritism for handcrafted artifacts over manufactured products. Baudrillard explains that our reverence for antiques is de-

rived from the fantasy that they comprise a "mythical quality, by their coefficient of authenticity" (80). In *The Goldfinch*, this fantasy is expressed through the juxtaposition between antiques as quasi-living things and modern products as "cold, bright, newly-minted stuff" (567). In one scene, a chair that Hobie works on is imagined as "less like a piece of furniture than a creature under enchantment, like it might up-end itself and hop down from his work bench and trot away down the street" (188). Contrastingly, furnishings from a department store are deemed as "new, charmless, dead-in-hand" (567). Brown expounds that "the animation of material objects makes it seem as though there is something hidden within them," something that Marx could not quite explain when he admitted that the "commodity is […] a mysterious thing" (*Sense of Things* 117, *Capital* 47). Hidden within the antique furnishings and art pieces in *The Goldfinch* is "the magic that came from centuries of being touched and used and passed through human hands" (188). Within this sentiment a prominent theme within the novel is revealed: the way in which objects comprise a sense, at once supersensible but *also* material, of social interaction and human connection. For instance, when Hobie repairs a modern joint "bonded too hard with the wood and cracked it and didn't let it breath," he reminds us that "the person we're really working for is the person who's restoring the piece a hundred years from now" (469). Thus, interacting with material objects in the present translates to a physical and metaphysical connection to humanity—in the past and the future.

Additionally, while the narrative positively projects the fantasy of antiques as objects of authenticity, such as the furnishings that "looked as if they'd had pure, golden Time poured over them," it exposes modernized marketing as the source of fallacy. At a department store, Theo observes that "there was something unspeakably sad about the pristine, gleaming displays, with their tacit assurance that a shiny new tableware promised an equally shiny and tragedy-free future" (567). Theo's personal history of trauma and loss, disproves the myth that happiness and security can be bought. Therefore, Theo links new products with the vulnerability of the future and perceives antiques as survivors of the past. This, along with the pessimistic attitude towards contemporary consumption—"crowded stores," "flowing with shoals of tourists," "holiday shoppers" and the "bridal consultant who was working so hard to provide 'Flawless Service'"—conveys how Theo's narration is mediated by a nostalgic longing for a quainter world (567). All told, the negative disposition towards the contemporary along with Tartt's tendency to fetishize 'old things' as vivacious entities with social histories indicates a "fetishism-that-is-not-commodity-fetishism" and signals a challenge to "hegemonic systems of value" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 117). While this is not to suggest that *The Goldfinch* projects a calculated critique of American capitalism, nevertheless, Tartt's story effectively "depicts an alternative value system," which

esteems the old and vulnerable over the new and efficient, and reminisces a "nonindustrial economy" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 117).

Highlighting this nostalgia for a world which values handcrafted goods and personal interaction mediating exchange, is Welty's wistful characterization. Through figural recollections, Welty is described as a "very smart businessman," but more emphatically, as having "an innocent about him, you know? Like scholar. Or priest. He was grandfather to everyone" (474). Additionally, although Welty "loved the marketplace. The to and the fro of it. Deals, goods, conversation, exchange," it is because he "was an agora*maniac*. Loved people" (445). Such romanticized characterization functions to appeal to the reader's sensibility towards a fading social position, the shop keeper:

> It was that teeny bit of Cairo from his boyhood, I always said he would have been perfectly happy padding around in slippers and showing carpets in the souk. He had the antiquaire's gift, you know—he knew what belonged with whom. Someone would come in the shop never intending to buy a thing, ducking in out of the rain maybe, and he'd offer them a cup of tea and they'd end up having a dining room table shipped to Des Moines. Or a student would wander in to admire, and he'd bring out just the little inexpensive print. Everyone was happy, do you know. He knew everybody wasn't in the position to come in and buy some big important piece—it was all about matchmaking, finding the right home. (445-6)

This scene explicitly contradicts the modern consumerist model which, "by establishing fixed prices […] eliminated the human interaction of bargaining and restricted the act of consumption to a relation between the consumer and the merchandise" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 31). Today, the social aspect of buying and selling things is being further eradicated by online shopping and self-check-out payment systems, producing a consumerist culture in which the human touch between product and purchaser is fully dissolved, or, at best, completely disguised. Understood within this contemporary context, Tartt's novel harkens back to an era in which the market was facilitated face-to-face. Likewise, Welty's character reappears throughout the narrative like a ghost of a foregone era, as a nostalgic reminder of the missing middleman between buyers and things.

Hobie is similarly constructed through a highly sentimental frame, as "the great conservator, the great caretaker," as "artist—not businessman" (848, 473). If Hobie "ever actually sold a piece, I never saw him do it" Theo explains (444). "His bailiwick (as he called it) was the workshop, or the 'hospital' rather, where the crippled chairs and tables stood stacked and awaiting his care" (444). However, the intensity of Hobie's care for material things, contrasted with his practical indifference for his material welfare indicates another aspect of Tartt's alternative value system. Although Hobie "sorrow[s] over these elegant old remnants as if they were unfed children or mistreated cats" and despite the fact that he feels it his "point of duty to rescue what he could," his financial negligence brings the shop to the verge of bankruptcy leading Theo, then a teenager, to sell fake pieces to pay the bills. Therefore, while the highly anthropomorphic meta-

phor of Hobie as a doctor for suffering patients functions to romanticize a character who works to save objects, it also provokes ethical and moral questions about our concern (or lack thereof) for inanimate things—a dilemma of social responsibility which all artists face. Contemplating his social position, Hobie acknowledges: "I suppose it's ignoble to spend your life caring for objects," and admits that, "mending old things, preserving them, looking after them—on some level there's no rational grounds for it" (848-9).

However, in the face of an anti-materialistic culture and the trends of dematerialization, Tartt's novel combats the notion that inanimate things do not deserve our attention and care, for the characters are bonded together through a common appreciation for objects. Within the narrative world which values old things, "whose uselessness," Holland suggests "brings [them] closer to being art," Tartt proposes that "the whole point of things—beautiful things—[is] that they connect you to some larger beauty" (143, Tartt *GF* 849). Consequently, the characters in the story are connected most poignantly through their common recognition of and appreciation for material beauty. Moreover, Brown articulates that it is the "emotional intensity of the shared aesthetic experience [which] establishes the way that 'things,' mediate social relations in the novel—the way people circulate around them—and […] establishes a politics of taste wherein 'cultural capital' […] is utterly irreducible to class" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 145).

Put another way, objects have for Tartt a "semiotic and social, but not a sociological, function: [they are] an index of character not class" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 152). Thus, in addition to the characters with privileged Upper-East-Side backgrounds, Boris and his gangster comrades also recognize the beauty of things. For instance, although Boris is unconvinced by Theo's story about stealing a masterpiece painting, when he sees it he concedes "but—it was real. Anyone could see" (624). And despite the fact that "possessions meant so little to him," when Boris apologizes to Theo for having lost the painting, he expresses more than guilt but individual remorse as if he'd lost a personal treasure: "I know how much you loved it. I got to where I loved it myself, actually" (335, 618). Boris's Russian bodyguard Gyuri is similarly sensitive to the object's visual appeal as he exclaims: "Ah, beautiful […] So pure!" (754) In an effort to express his aesthetic experience he adds, "like a daisy, plain flower, alone in a field? It's just—' he gestured, *here it is! amazing!*" (754) Another character, Horst, a black-market art dealer and "a bad junkie," refers to the painting as "the most remarkable work […] a miracle in such a bijou space" (642, 649). Despite his antagonistic role, Horst strikes "an emotional chord" when he mentions the "weight" of the painting, "oddly important" to Theo, resulting in a moment of shared appreciation for the object's "heft"—"Quite," Theo agrees, "just the word" (650). These moments, in which an object's palpable and physical traits are fetishized as embodying the sublime, such as the painting's brushstrokes described as the "place where reality strikes the ideal," that the bond

between human beings is emphasized, regardless of socio-economic background (849). In other words, the more the characters are pivoted towards the beauty of objects and the more their attention concentrates on the materiality of things, whether it's the texture of old wood, the thickness of paint, or the heft of an item, the more the connection to one another is felt. Returning our attention to things and materiality in the fictional world, Tartt constructs objects as catalysts of social interaction and humanist connection.

Alternatively, Tartt's narrative creates intrigue around things by referencing objects that exist outside the realm of the story. In contrast to her efforts to write an "alternate history," by constructing a vague temporal setting, Tartt consciously constructs a material setting which references real things that can be found in the real world (Miller). Thus, despite the fact that "literature, a thing itself made entirely of words/signs, always and already/only existing in the real of representation, can only invoke the thing via, and as, representation," things function in Tartt's story to return the reader to the real world (Holland 144). With the many allusions to Hepplewhite and Chippendale furniture labels, along with the historically accurate information about "The Goldfinch" painting, things act as tangible and solid links between the imaginary and extradiegetic realms. In this way, the reader's concern for things inside the story is bridged to the actual referents outside the novel. *The Goldfinch*, as with much of "twenty-first-century literature," maintains Holland, "places things […] center stage to contemplate a world in which we might experience their primacy" (144).

Micheal Klipfel also notices the many references to real pieces in the story such as Hobie's "John Lobb shoes" or Theo's "Turnbull & Asser" suits and inquires: "What is it about Hobie's handcrafted English shoes, ones that run upwards of $1000, that merits Tartt calling them to our attention?" ("Donna Tartt and Dandyism"). Rather than reflecting "her characters' superficiality," Klipfel deduces that the references to luxury brands denote their "depth." He elaborates that:

> Hobie's thousand-dollar soles are relevant because they're made with attention to craft and detail and a deep sense of artistic pride. And unlike Brooks Brothers, whose stock suits are offered off the rack, Turnbull & Asser only make their suits custom to each person, and unlike Brooks, the details of their ties are still sewn by hand. […] Hobie buys his shoes from John Lobb instead of Brooks Brothers because the ones made by John Lobb are a work of art and the ones manufactured by Target or Payless are not. Hobie's shoes instantiate a way of being, his understanding that in life, well-made art is what really matters. ("Donna Tartt and Dandyism")

While his argument balances precariously on a high-versus-low-art line of judgement and overlooks blatant economic reasons for buying cheaper mass-manufactured products, Klipfel appropriately assesses Tartt's predilection for handmade things and craftmanship. In fact, considering the longwinded and meticulously detailed descriptions of Hobie restoring furniture which exaggerate and amplify the mode of methodological fetishism by pivoting the narrative discourse to-

wards the construction and material make-up of things, Tartt's novel can be read as an instance of postmodern "craft fetishism".

In the article, "Craft Fetishism: from Objects to Things" (2012) Justin McGuirk deliberates that, in the context of the west, where "we no longer manufacture many of our own goods, even by machine, let alone by hand, the handmade acquires genuine cachet." Tracing current fashion fads ("graphic designers dressed as artisans of old"), marketing schemes ("Levi's campaign called 'Made and Crafted'"), and contemporary design trends ("the local is replacing the global"), McGurik speculates that contemporary western culture is nostalgic—not "for a historical period as such but for a quality – the quality of long-lost craftsmanship". *The Goldfinch* contributes to this nostalgic sentiment for the quality and the act of making things by hand. Fetishizing the pieces "enlivened by [Hobie's] touch" as animate, Tartt also fixates on the acts of constructing, creating and restoring throughout her narrative discourse. Dedicating lengthy and extravagant passages to depict Hobie's work, Tartt portrays craftsmanship as an artform through a literary medium.

> While he carved splats and turned new chair legs to match old, melted beeswax and resin on the hot plate for furniture polish: 16 parts beeswax, 4 parts resin, 1 part Venice turpentine, a fragrant butterscotch gloss that was thick like candy and satisfying to stir in the pan. Soon he was teaching me how to lay down the red on white ground for gilding: always a little of the gold rubbed down at the point where the hand would naturally touch, then a little dark wash with lampblack rubbed in interstices and backing. ('Patination is always one of the biggest problems in a piece. With new wood, if you're going for an effect of age, a gilded patina is always easiest to fudge.') And if, post-lampblack, the gilt was still too bright and raw-looking, he taught me how to scar it with a pinpoint—light, irregular scratches of different depth—and then to ding it over lightly with a run of old keys before reversing the vacuum cleaner over it to dull it down. 'Heavily restored pieces—where there are no worn bits or honorable scars, you have to hand out a few ancients and honorables yourself. The trick of it,' he explained, wiping his forehead with the back of his wrist, 'is never to be too nice about it.' By *nice* he meant 'regular.' Anything too evenly worn was a dead giveaway; real age, as I came to see from the genuine pieces that passed through my hands, was variable, crooked, capricious, singing here and sullen there, warm and asymmetrical streaks on a rosewood cabinet from where a slant of sun had struck it while the other side was a dark as the day it was cut. (467)

Passages like these function on the one hand, to fetishize the hand-made thing as poetic: the materials used are depicted through metaphor ("butterscotch gloss […] thick like candy"), and "genuine pieces" showing "real age" are phonologically underscored by alliteration ("crooked, capricious, singing here and sullen there"). On the other, Tartt's use of specialized terminology ("Venice turpentine," "lampblack," and "gilded patina") conveys a calculated effort to impart an authentic representation of the materials and labor required for restoring antiques. In this way, Tartt's literary production of craft fetishism, which McGuirk's admits is "merely an easy bastardisation of Marx's notion of commodity fetishism," reveals an effort to reinvest the labor into the commodity intended for exchange. Accordingly, the consistent focus on "where the hand would

naturally touch," the "irregular scratches," the "honorable scars," and on the acts of rubbing, dinging, and wiping, evokes a longing to reconnect our lost physical contact with the work which produces things.

Moreover, craftsmanship in Tartt's novel is "not merely a quality, it is a way of being, and a noble one" (McGuirk). Hobie's honest character is directly linked to his profession, as craftsmanship is viewed through a twenty-first century lens as an honorable trade. Expressed in semantic harmony, "his tired smile, his elegant big-man's slouch, his rolled sleeves, his easy, joking manner, his workman's habit of rubbing his forehead with the inside of his wrist, his patient good humor and his steady good sense," Hobie's noble character is attached to his noble craft in syntactical symmetry (188). Furthermore, in a scene in which Theo confesses to having sold multiple faked antiques, Hobie's fair and reasonable personality is signaled not only in his verbal responses but in his craft interwoven in the dialogue:

> "Hobie," [Theo] said, "I'm in a jam."
> He glanced up from the Jappened chest he was retouching: roosters and cranes, golden pagodas on black. "Can I help?" He was outlining the crane's wing with water-based acrylic—very different from the shellac original, but the first rule of restorations, as he'd taught me early on, was that you never did what you couldn't reverse.
> "Actually, the thing is. I've sort of gotten you in a jam. Inadvertently."
> "Well—" the line of his brush did not waver […] "What's going on then?" he said reasonably, reaching for one of the saucers he mixed paint in. […]
> Once I got started it was like I couldn't stop […] He was so quiet for so long, that I started getting nervous. But he only sighed and rubbed his eyes and then turned partly away, leaning back to his work. […] His hand was steady; the line of his brush was sure. […]
> "Look, I want to make it plain—" his calmness harrowed me—"the responsibility is mine. If it comes down to that." (550-58)

As much as one can gather Hobie's sentiment towards the damaging situation of fraud and towards Theo's culpability through his verbal replies, one also gains a sense or a feeling for his character through his physical actions—the movement of his steady, skillful hands. Promoting the idea that physical actions speak louder, or at least as potently as words, Hobie's careful, deft craftsmanship affirms his benevolent persona. On another note, the scene draws the reader's attention to the words which delineate things other than words. Despite the medium of written literature, which transmits its messages through language, Tartt challenges her reader to notice the actions and imagine the materials beyond the words and signs as projecting real and tangible meaning.

Returning the reader's attention towards real objects and the labor of making material things, Tartt's novel projects a nostalgia for our lost contact with the physicality of the world and a longing to see, watch, and possess something made by human hands. Therefore art, specifically old paintings, is particularly esteemed in the novel, as it also represents a handmade thing. Inserting detailed depictions of the tactile features of "The Goldfinch" painting, Tartt emphasizes Fab-

ritius's craftsmanship. "He takes the image apart very deliberately to show us how he painted it. Daubs and patches, very shaped and hand-worked, the neckline especially, a solid piece of paint, very abstract" (649). Eventually, the physical facets of the painting become more important to Theo than the "historical significance [which] deadens it" (859). When "running [his] fingertip incredulously around the edges of the board," Theo notes,

> it was harder to deceive the sense of touch than sight, and even after so many years my hands remembered the painting so well that my fingers went to the nail marks immediately, at the bottom of the panel, the tiny holes where (once upon a time, or so it was said) the painting was nailed up as a tavern sign, part of a painted cabinet, no one knew. (754)

Although we look at a painting for the images and its symbols it projects, Tartt reminds us that it is also a concrete artifact and that its material qualities connotate the history of human connection. Additionally, the physical imprints from human handling, or as Appadurai describes, "the tear in the canvas, the crack in the glass, the chip in the wood, the flaw in the steel," project "not just signs of *homo faber*, but of the activity that art both conceals and celebrates" ("The Thing Itself" 16).

However, the closer one gets to the actual thing, and one acknowledges art's physical nature, the more its vulnerability as a destructible object becomes apparent. To borrow Appadurai words, "despite their aspiration to the illusion of permanence, [pieces of art] are only momentary aggregations of material, such as paint, bricks, glass, acrylic, cloth, steel, or canvas" ("The Thing Itself" 15). Thus, as much as "The Goldfinch's" features are revered as signs of antiquity and therein authenticity, Tartt's attention to the painting's tangible features work to reveal its material fragility. For instance, when Theo observes the verso of the painting, he reports "the back was as distinctive as a fingerprint: rich drips of sealing wax, […] The crumbling yellow and browns were layered with an almost organic richness, like dead leaves" (624). The painting's material attributes, depicted as crumbling dead leaves, signifies its susceptibility to physical ruin. Such imagery indicates that, "what is at risk is not just aura or authenticity but the fragility of objecthood itself" (Appadurai, "The Thing Itself" 15).

With regards to the fragility of materiality, Tartt's mode of methodological fetishism, or returning the reader's attention to the materiality of things, evokes an anxiety towards the destructible nature of culturally symbolic objects. The first scene of the novel proper, beginning with a deadly explosion at the MET museum, emphasizes the sense that the objects of our past are vulnerable and endangered. Theo's mother pinpoints the sentimentality towards stating, "people die, sure […] But it's so heartbreaking and unnecessary how we lose *things*" (31, original emphasis). Brown would interpret the novel's angst for things as a continuation of "the fascination with memory that took particular hold in the 1990s (generally understood as a response to the world-transforming events of 1989, but clearly in accord with the architectural and literary-

critical historicisms that thrived in the 1980s)" (*Other Things* 284). And while Tartt's inclusion of a terrorist attack seems to allude to 9/11, she explains in an interview that "I started writing *The Goldfinch* before 9/11 happened […] the first idea came to me from the blowing up of the Buddhas at Bamiyan. I was haunted and sickened by the destruction of something that had been at the heart of the world for centuries" (Baum). Reflecting her apprehension towards the destruction of cultural artifacts, Tartt's novel signals a fear for the dematerialization of history and therein a lost connection with the past.

Tartt's attentiveness to the material object world reveals an overarching sense of nostalgia and at times anxiety for the loss of things. Through the representation of various forms of object fetish, such as Theo's obsession with "The Goldfinch" painting and Hobie's lifestyle indebted to old furniture, Tartt presents characters who are sympathetic to the vulnerability of physical objects. Written within an object culture at once overwhelmed by the abundance of manufactured products, and at the same time disengaged with the manual labor needed to produce our things, Tartt's novel harkens for a pre-industrial era and fetishizes the handmade. Finally, the novel seems to suggest that to hold on to our past, we must hold on to the things that reify its significance.

The Autograph Man

While *The Goldfinch* evokes an unabashed tone of nostalgia for craftsmanship and fetishizes antiquities of long ago, Smith's story focuses on material obsessions of the late twentieth century and reasserts the prevalence of the real within the postmodern world. Instead of pining for "some godforsaken era," the nostalgic undertones within *The Autograph Man* signal a turn-of-the-century impulse to hold onto or reconnect with the remnants of the material world (Smith, *Autograph Man* 2). Yet, similar to *The Goldfinch*, Smith's text also presents a mode of methodological fetishism, wherein diegetic digressions function to reestablish the import of objects and materiality within the postmodern novel. All told, the novel's thematic focus on the items within object fetishisms and the diegetic techniques which highlight physical matter reveal a postmodern nostalgia for the real—material—world.

Considering the postmodern framework which supports *The Autograph Man's* narrative structure and principal themes is crucial to understanding how things and objects fit into the story, and how the story fits into its contextual object culture. Written and positioned within the television age and in the midst of the internet boom, *The Autograph Man* portrays a contemporary consciousness. Smith describes this mentality in an essay as the growing sense that "the larger part of our lives [is spent] in the consideration and curation of digital simulacra" ("The Tattered Ruins" 205). Appropriately, *The Autograph Man's* protagonist represents the prototypical film-buff

and stands in for his generation that "deals in a shorthand of experience," or, "the TV version" (2). Within this postmodern episteme, which increasingly perceives the world through technological screens and two-dimensional images, Smith senses that the "the material world becomes peripheral" ("The Tattered Ruins" 205). Yet despite the dematerialization of the postmodern perspective, Smith notes that the real world of objects and things "continues to exist" and can be felt "dragging itself slowly behind us like uncoiled viscera, often unpleasant and inconvenient yet apparently still necessary" ("The Tattered Ruins" 205).

In *The Autograph Man,* certain objects perform such roles of interrupting the plot and disrupting the characters' actions with their obstinate materiality. Such as Alex's glasses, with which he struggles, "remoulding the mad wire arms until they behaved themselves," or his crashed car, "Greta", whose "front bumper had been brutally torn from her body and now hung from an iron thread" (54, 58). These things remind the characters (and the reader) of the persistent presence of the material world. That as much as we are consumed by television entertainment and image culture, our lives are still tangibly impacted by object matter.

However, along with the items that bother the characters with their troublesome physicality, other types of objects exist in the story as more than mere material disturbances of real life. Certain things, specifically celebrity autographs and twentieth-century memorabilia, are coveted, chased after, compiled into collections, and fetishized as comprising the touch of fame or the quality of historicity. What is it about *these things*, overtly imbued with artificial value, such as "Dorthy's ruby slippers (rhinestones, but as expensive as rubies now)", that garner so much of Smith's attention (245)? I propose, that Smith's thematic fixation with fetish for such prized but useless objects illustrates that the material world not only still exists, but is actively sought-after, assembled, and treasured for its ontological, albeit nostalgic, connection to the real. In other words, through object fetishism, Smith draws the reader's attention to how objects and materiality serve as links to the real world. In the story, things act as the bridge beyond the structuralist/poststructuralist shift and behind the virtual images projected through screens.

One way Smith's novel confronts the antimaterial aspects of postmodern culture, which Jack Solomon deems as "devoted to the transformation of products into images," is through the thematic fixation with characters who engage in collecting and fetishizing objects (49). Looking past the pictures projected through screens, the novel focuses instead on the material referents of the television age. The compulsion to collect old things from films and televised history represents an attempt to grasp at the materiality of media and entertainment culture—an endeavor to reconcile the images shown with the real things used in the production of virtual story-telling.

The most sought after items, collected by most of the characters in the novel, are celebrity autographs. Smith is aware that these objects are essentially worthless, it's "just ink," as one

character remarks, "just letters" on paper (174). However, by the time the novel was published, collecting autographs and other celebrity memorabilia had become a multimillion dollar industry (see Gleadell). Within this context, the characters fit into a generation obsessed with collecting memorabilia and infatuated with celebrities. Alex starts collecting signatures as a child and eventually turns his hobby into a business. Along with his business comrades, Jason Lovelear, Ian Dove, and Brian Duchamp, his childhood friends also engage in buying autographs. Joseph initiates the passion for philography when he and Alex were children, saying "I collect things, […] Things, stuff, autographs […] I collect things from things that I like and then I keep them. In albums. I file them. I find it extremely worth while" (27). Although "for children," as Baudrillard points out, "collecting is a rudimentary way of mastering the outside world," Smith's characters continue this habit of collecting late into their adult lives (87). Rubinfine, a Rabbi who repeatedly lectures Alex on his poor-life choices, is a "[Harrison] Ford man" (73). When he finds a signed photo in Alex's bag, "he [feels] like taking this autograph and showing it to every one of those teachers and therapists and rabbis who had told him he no to interpersonal skills" (203). Even Adam, Alex's spiritual friend who occasionally enhances his search for enlightenment through experimental drugs, "sheepishly requests [an autograph] every now and then" for his collection which he has Blu-tacked to his wall (126).

Based on the diversity of characters who collect celebrity memorabilia, Smith conveys that the desire to accumulate trinkets of pop-culture is widespread phenomenon. Not only autograph men pay up for names scribbled on paper. Even the famous, such as Honey Smith, Alex's friend and an adult-video star, engages in collecting famous signatures. While psychological theories surrounding the behavior of collecting could be used to analyze each individual case, from a materialistic angle, the impulse to obtain pieces touched and signed by television icons signals a common obsession with the reification of celebrity culture. In other words, the novel nods to a desire to grasp at the physical pieces of a culture that is founded on the immaterial and transmitted through the medium of virtual entertainment. Thus, if "an Autograph Man's life is spent in the pursuit of fame, or its aura, and all value comes from the degree of closeness to it one can achieve," Smith's depictions of characters collecting, touching, and arranging celebrity autographs, reflects an attempt to physically arrest the power of fame in object form.

More to this point, Smith's narrator notes that "names on paper are the very least of what is traded and shifted round the world. Autographs are a small blip in the desire network, historical flotsam" (114). Other "stuff," "big stuff" like "cold fireplaces ripped from great houses" and "a moose […] stuffed, standing," are accrued by material-enthusiasts and exchanged at auctions (115). In one scene, Alex views the accumulation of what the narrator surmises as "the twentieth century in miniature":

> Castro's signature, Oswald's shirt, Connery's cheque stubs, Streisand's concert programme, the AT-AT (still in its original box), Ali's gloves, an envelope Joyce forgot to post, a photo of Darth signed by both the voice and the body […] Kennedy's Christmas card, Himmler's exercise book— (245)

Representing the material remnants of modern history and entertainment, these items exemplify the way in which culture is conserved through objects and converted into commodities. On the one hand, Alex's desire for such items is explained by a contemporary drive to consume: "there were things in here he wanted. Things which worked on him at a subterranean level" (245). But at the same time, he is overwhelmed by the way these objects, ultimately useless, are obsessively fetishized as treasures and ardently preserved. "And they just kept on collecting! As if the world could be saved this way!" (247). Alex's exclamation reflects that in addition to contemporary consumerism, the market of memorabilia is driven by nostalgia, which Solomon describes as "an empty desire" for a pre-modern mentality that "has been forever left behind" (46).

From one angle, the compulsion to collect the physical remnants of twentieth-century culture reflects a collective endeavor to physically hold on to the past in material form. For, as Smith reveals through a narratorial comment, "the collector is the saviour of objects that might otherwise be lost" (222). However, the attention given to items that act as physical debris of *television culture*—props from films, celebrity autographs, tokens touched by fame—tells us something else. Accounting for the effects of the postmodern consciousness increasingly mediated through digitalized simulacra, the impulse to collect the material objects projected as two-dimensional pictures suggests a longing to reach out and through the screens, behind the images, and physically connect to the real world. In other words, the fact that physical objects are fetishized (and not just the films or celebrities themselves), reveals a nostalgic sentiment for the material world behind virtual entertainment and representations of reality.

Another way in which Smith combats the dematerialization of our postmodern mentality is by subverting the effects of celebrity fetish. Clearly, the most overt instance of object fetish in *The Autograph Man* can be understood as what Solomon refers to as "the cult of the celebrity," or the "human equivalent of commodity fetishism" (47). Presenting a protagonist who idolizes a fictive mid-twentieth-century actress, Kitty Alexander, the novel centers around the effects and consequences of idolizing celebrity. Over thirteen years, Alex writes "hundreds and hundreds" of unanswered letters to Kitty requesting her personal autograph. When he finally receives a signed photo, he remarks "[i]t is exquisite. It is real. Or he is not Alex-Li Tandem" (66). For Baudrillard, fetishized objects are "by no means mere accessories, nor are they merely cultural signs among others" (79). Instead, "they symbolize an inward transcendence, that phantasy [sic] of a centre-point in reality [that] comes to stand for the ego" (Baudrillard 79). Seen in this light,

Alex's mode of fetish describes how, as Brown articulates, the "accumulation and display" of objects "generates the feeling of success and identity" (*Sense of Things* 33).

On a different note, Smith explicitly compares autograph-collecting with "woman-chasing," and in doing so, she translates "our complex relation about objects […] into the more familiar script of erotic desire" (65, Brown, *Other Things* 121). Additionally, she likens the act of revering the celebrity to "God fearing," which harkens back to the etymological meaning of fetish, the perception of objects as symbols of a deity or supernatural force (65). "A woman who gives up her treasure with too much frequency is not coveted by men," explains the narrator, "likewise, a god who makes himself manifest and his laws obvious-such a god is not popular" (65). Therefore, "a Ginger Rogers is not worth as much as one might imagine. This is because she signed everything she could get her hands on. She was easy. She was whorish" (65). Metonymically referring to the object as a person's name, and then reversing the effect by referring to the person through the nature of the object, Smith conveys how fetish transforms humans into mere constructs of desire. In a Lacanian sense, Kitty stands in as Alex's *object petit a*, the unattainable object of desire.

Yet, considering as Brown does, that "in Lacan, the Thing is and it isn't. It exists, but in no phenomenal form," then Kitty as the *object petit a* merely describes a mental fantasy ("Thing Theory" 5). Therefore, although the psychological interpretations for fetish contribute to understanding our desire for things, they also tend to, as Brown puts it, "[leave] things behind", by overlooking the phenomenological nature of material interactions (*Sense of Things* 4). Smith, too, argues in her essay "Meet Justin Bieber," that although the celebrity as the "love object" is a psychological construct, they rely on an actual human referent within the "realm of things" or the material world (381). A leitmotif within *The Autograph Man* is found within Smith's essay in which she urges us to allow others "to truly exist […] independent of [our] own fantasies, desires and feelings about them" ("Meet Justin Bieber" 391). Indeed, discerning the ways in which Smith's novel focuses on undermining celebrity fetish by highlighting the corporality of the person behind the superstar-image, and noticing the narrative emphasis on the tangibility of items that embody Kitty's aura, signals an effort to subvert the structuralist sense that an object is merely a psychological construct or an abstruse source of signification. More concisely, Smith's reiteration of the physical substance within celebrity-object fetishism indicates a broader fixation with materiality and the material world.

One way in which Smith's narratorial discourse brings forth the real thing—or in this case the real person—within object fetishism is by exposing the way in which contemporary culture converts humans into commodities. "Just as advertising managers transform products into desirable images," explains Solomon, "celebrity image managers transform human beings into icons of

desire" (47). Moreover, "whatever humanity lurks behind the image, whatever doesn't show up on camera, is irrelevant" (Solomon 48). In other words, where commodity fetishism conceals the human labor invested in the object, celebrity fetishism effectively obscures the real person behind their image. Therefore, by interjecting extraneous behind-the-scenes (or behind-the-icon) facts about Kitty into the story, such as how her real name, "Katya Alessandro," was changed as it sounded, "too Russian" and "also too damn Eye-talian," Smith reestablishes the significance of her real personhood (272). Further undoing the dehumanizing effects of celebrity fetishism, she exposes the very real, bodily consequences of manipulating a person's appearance into the celebrity image. Detailing how Kitty's eyes were "sellotaped into an […] epicanthic fold" for a film in which she plays a Chinese character, and referring to the "infamous ACT diet: apples, coffee and tobacco," which she was put on to lose weight, stresses the process of physically altering a human body to produce a fetishized image (63, 272). Subverting celebrity fetish in such ways reflects Smith's efforts to combat the "postmodern […] impression that there *is* nothing [or no one] behind the image" (Solomon 48).

Additionally, the novel highlights the role of material things that reify the object of fetish. For her biggest fan, Max Krauser, "president of the KAAA (Kitty Alexander Association of America)," Kitty's image is embodied as "posters, movie stills, framed news clippings, magazine covers [and] one kitsch masterpiece: Kitty painted in thick sentimental oils on a stretched piece of black velvet, gilt framed," all of which fills up his apartment—the "Kitty cave" (151, 262). For Alex, Kitty is materialized in the form of signed photos and the video tape which he repeatedly rents because, "if I owned it,' he admits, 'I think I would literally not do anything else but watch it" (135). However, her hand-written signature represents the most potent piece of her celebrity aura, which causes Alex to "[feel] a genuine rush of blood to the head as if he were a Catholic touching a reliquary" (81). "[Trying] to regulate his breathing" he reflects, "there she [is], there she [is]" (81). While Kitty stands in as "the cause or subject of a passion," she also exemplifies the way in which modern celebrity culture spells "the objectification of people as possessions" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 156). Moreover, the material quality of these possessions plays an important role by enhancing the subject's tangible connection to the abstract object of desire.

Baudrillard mediates that "objects of passion [are] no longer simply material bodies offering a certain resistance, they become mental precincts" (85). However, when Alex explains his infatuation for Kitty, saying "she is the most beautiful thing," Smith sets up a play on the word *thing,* which contradicts the notion that fetish is derived more from abstract subjectivity than the physical object (137). Although the word *thing* alludes to the image of Kitty's beauty as a sexual fantasy, it also signals her beauty objectified into a *physical thing.* Therefore, when Alex interacts with a video tape showing a film in which Kitty stars, he gains pleasure from the beauty of the

image but also from his ability to interact with the physical object. In other words, a significant part of object fetish lies in the satisfaction of encountering a two-dimensional image incurring desire as a three-dimensional object that can be physically touched. Describing this aspect of fetish, the narrator dictates as Alex:

> knelt down before the television. Retrieved *The Girl from Peking* from the video recorder. He put it into its case and felt a soothing pulse of happiness. Prompted by beauty. On the cover were the two beautiful faces of his favourite actress, the musical star Kitty Alexander. […] There was a split in the protective plastic. Alex slipped his finger in and felt around, touching first one Kitty and then the other. […] Carefully, he squeezed her into a fold in his bag. (63)

Hinting at "the 'sex appeal of the inorganic,'" Smith draws the reader's attention to the materiality of the plastic case and allows her character to physically penetrate his *objet petit a* (Brown, *Sense of Things* 31). In this way, Smith confirms that beauty is "pleasure objectified" or "reified" and emphasizes "less the quality of the feeling, more the quality (the thingness) of its apparent source" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 26). In other words, Alex's appreciation for Kitty's beauty is not merely based on a sexual fetish, but rather on his experience with her beauty as a thing.

Kitty's most coveted item, her handwritten name, is also emphasized as a palpable thing. More than just a scribble on paper worth a small fortune, Alex appreciates the distinct materiality of Kitty's autograph. Studying the autograph and noting how "Kitty famously, dotted her only *i* with a little lopsided heart," Alex is moved (emotionally and physically) by the thing: "[he] touched it now loved her for it" (81). Moreover, the detail about "the ink […] raised off the coarse paper, like a scab," highlights the tangible texture of the autograph. More than a symbol of fetish, her handwritten name exists as a real thing.

Moreover, Smith's repetitive focus on handwriting, such as Kitty's "exquisite *tt*, achieved with just one lunge of the pen, curling in on itself, carrying on," can be understood as a reaction to contemporary culture in which reading and writing has turned increasingly digital (83). Recording a time in which calling an email a "telegram," is deemed by Alex "technologically illiterate," the narrative discourse, which fixates on the sensuous substance of autographs, reveals an undercurrent of nostalgia for the materiality of the written text (156). For, the more we move towards e-books, online story-telling, and other virtual renditions and reproductions of literature, the more we lose the intimacy that comes from a physical interaction to that which shares stories of human experience and connection. As Smith's novel repeatedly stresses, part of our living experience is our interaction with the material world. We feel comfort, pain, and pleasure through touching and sensing texture. But as things move into virtual forms, we risk losing our grip on the material substance of our reality.

Following Smith's focus on the physical quality of writing, her novel also seems to project a post-structural awareness "about the arbitrariness and problems of language" with regards to

experiencing the material world (Holland 17). "[T]he world is made out of letters, words," proposes the omniscient narrator in *The Autograph Man* (384). Yet, in what Holland would identify as a "direct opposition to the 'dematerialization' that became typical of postmodernism" through the "logic followed from Heidegger through Lacan and Derrida," words, ideas and names in *The Autograph Man* depend "upon the existence of the thing" (134, 131). Different from *The Goldfinch,* the names of people and things do not always refer to the extradiegetic world, however they exist as tangible matter within the realm of the story. Even abstract ideas can take on a substantial form in Smith's novel. Like pleasure, "real pleasure," which "aint a thing," can still be "had" and let go of (268). Because, as Honey Smith explains to Alex, "gather[ing] a spoonful of the highest level of fluff […] bringing the steel to his lips," although pleasure is a "no-thing," it's still something (267-8). And something that "tastes good" (Honey's whipped-cream) or 'feels good' (Alex's definition of relief) is, in essence, an experience between the physical body and the material world (267, 401). Moments like these, which reinstate the prevalence of physicality, signify a challenge to the dematerialized structures of the postmodern consciousness. As Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga identifies, *The Autograph Man* "work[s] against Baudrillardian 'resurrection of the figurative,' against the celebration of language in which 'the object and substance have disappeared'" (307).

And just as words and ideas rest on the existence of material things, names (even names on paper) also rely on actual referents within the story. In addition to Honey Smith, whose "name gave up its secret," "people Alex had only met virtually appeared before him now," at the auction in New York, "in hideous material form" (248, 250). Yet, Smith's pivotal object-lesson hinges on Kitty's name which appears in the story as more than a signifier of fame, but as an actual thing. Kitty's autograph (appreciated for its cultural and monetary value, but also for its physical properties) leads Alex directly to the real object of his fetish. Following the return address on Kitty's signed postcard and knocking on her physical door, Alex finally lets go of his fetishized image, "as perfect and particular as a childhood memory," and meets Kitty's real self (271). The real Kitty has "no hotel robe, no black silk Parisian slippers," instead, she is "small, smaller than one would imagine," and seventy-seven with "thin, but still bobbed, grey hair" (273). The narration hones in on the reality of Kitty's bodily presence when at one point, Alex "sees more than he should: a piece of her thigh, the skin candle-white and glutinous, without muscle, falling off the bone. Purple veins, thick as pencils" (308). However, as Smith proposes in her essay "Meet Justin Bieber," "recognizing the reality of other people—and having them recognize the reality of you—is at the heart of the matter" (391). Thus, as Alex finally perceives the real Kitty, "the viewing was not one way. She could see him too" (274). In this way, when Alex

meets the real Kitty, he "goes beyond the cinematic, televisual experience of the world and recovers the sense" of the real (Terentowicz-Fotyga 311).

Following the fetishisms for things within *The Autograph Man,* and noticing Smith's emphasis on the materiality of real life reveals an "object lesson in the desertification of the real" (Smith, "The Tattered Ruins" 206). Deploying "the mechanics of narrative prose fiction" Smith aims to, as Brown articulates, "convince readers of the materiality of the represented object world, to infuse that world with significance, and to exhibit how objects organize our desires, knowledges, and fantasies" (*Other Things* 11). Centering her plot on characters who fetishize objects for their aura of fame, Smith presents a conundrum of contemporary object culture in which certain things are collected and cherished while others act as obstacles in the flow of our postmodern consciousness. Additionally, the novel works to disrupt the effects of celebrity fetish by reinstating the real person behind the image, because experiencing "other people (or fictional simulacra of people)" as "fantastical projections" is, Smith explains in an essay, "an annoyingly persistent habit of actual humans" (*Feel Free* 191). Finally, noticing the way in which words and language are given the status of material things, *The Autograph Man* seems to work against the marginalization of the real within the postmodern episteme.

Chapter 2

Psychological Connections: Objects of Trauma

Another way to comprehend the significance of things in the novels, is to consider their relationship to the dynamically subjective experience of trauma. As both novels convey profound loss through the sudden and unexpected death of a parent, I ask, what is function of things in stories of traumatized protagonists? For, if trauma represents what Michelle Balaev describes as "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society," how do inanimate objects pertain to such a dynamically human-experience (150)? To answer this question, is to reiterate Brown's enquiries of why and how do we "use objects to make meaning, to make or remake ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies" (*Sense of Things* 4)? These questions will act as branches on which to venture out and through Tartt's and Smith's novels.

In substantial ways, the texts convey how the story of trauma is hinged on the story of our relationship to things, which is to say, they examine how "human subjects and inanimate objects may be said to constitute one another" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 25). A poignant effect of trauma (especially in the case of a child losing a parent) is the necessity to reconfigure one's identity against a new and unstable reality. Thus, the emphasis placed on the critical role objects play in providing relief to the main characters sheds light onto "the relational dynamic between the self and non-self, as well as between the human and non-human" (Balaev 160). On the one hand, things act as emotional crutches for the characters, providing comfort and security, on the other, they reveal an emotional and cultural dependency on the material world. Along with the symbolic implications of things in stories of trauma, things contribute to the structure and discourse of the traumatic experience. In a significant way, solid objects act as the red string pulled through the nonlinear structure, blips in memory, and narrative silences. Where there are gaps in graphic detail or omissions of explicit mourning, things crowd the narrative discourse to resemble psychological dissociation and reflect the overwhelming experience of emotional stress on the mind.

Finally, in relation to the traumatic experience, Tartt and Smith illustrate and reiterate the ambiguous nature of a thing. For, if "the 'omnipotence of fiction' resides in the way reading overcomes the 'incompatibility' between 'consciousness and its objects,'" then the powerful nature of things resides in the way their ontological complexity helps to shape that which has no shape: trauma (Brown, *Sense of things* 11). Conducting a close reading of the novels through an intersection of thing theory, literary trauma theory, and psychoanalytical methods, reveals how

the Theo in The Goldfinch and Alex in The Autograph Man negotiate grief through objects, and how Tartt and Smith construct narratives of trauma through things.

The Goldfinch

In the first critical event of *The Goldfinch*, Theo's mother fatefully laments moments before her death: "people die, sure […] But it's so heartbreaking and unnecessary how we lose *things*" (31, original emphasis). Acting as an allegory to the novel, Mrs. Decker's sentiment foreshadows the relationship between the protagonist's experience of trauma and his attachment to things. While literary representations of trauma cannot be taken as essentialist—as traumatic experience is diverse and produces vastly varied responses—nevertheless, the traumatized protagonist can function as a "representative cultural figure" and the individual experience depicted in fiction can be associated with "larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies" (Balaev 155-56). Therefore, how Tartt emphasizes trauma through loss—both human and, more deliberately, nonhuman—is crucial.

Through drawn-out descriptions of material loss, her novel illustrates an "individual that suffers," but in such a way as to "suggest that this protagonist is an 'everyday' figure" (Balaev 155). The scene in which Theo's apartment is cleaned out depicts an acutely familiar pain of losing personal possessions:

> My bed—a brass camp bed from the fleamarket, soldierly and reassuring—had always seemed like the safest place in the world to hide something. But now, looking around (beat-up desk, Japanese Godzilla poster, the penguin mug from the zoo that I used as a pencil cup), I felt the impermanence of it all strike me hard; and it made me dizzy to think of all our things flying out of the apartment, furniture and silver and all my mother's clothes: sample-sale dresses with the tags still on them, all those colored ballet slippers and tailored shirts with her initials on the cuffs. Chairs and Chinese lamps, old jazz records on vinyl that she'd bought down in the Village, jars of marmalade and olives and sharp German mustard in the refrigerator. In the bathroom, a bewilderment of perfumed oils and moisturizer, colored bubble bath, half empty bottles of overpriced shampoo crowded on the side of the tub… How could the apartment have seemed so permanent and solid-looking when it was only a stage set, waiting to be struck and carried away by movers in uniform? (213-14)

With the reader's attention shifted towards the ubiquitous world of objects, Tartt shows how traumatic events have more than emotional but also physical and material consequences. Employing the experience of losing one's home as an archetype for trauma, Tartt constructs a universally relatable story. Theo compares himself to a "bee watching its hive being destroyed" as he watches "the apartment vanish piece by piece" (225). Each piece, it should be noted, is a diegetic tool, deliberately detailed with a personal history—the bed from the fleamarket, the mug used as a pencil cup, the records from the Village—to convey how our social lives are intertwined with physical things. While Tartt's protagonist grieves a lost parent and survives an explosive

terrorist-attack, he represents a more universal and inherent fear of losing that which makes up our sense of reality and sense of selves. For it is "the loss of things [that] spells not a physical but an existential crisis" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 65).

To exemplify this existential crisis, Tartt compares traumatic experience to the sense of being displaced. Theo is repeatedly forced into estranged and disorienting environments and, while the juxtaposition of place is symbolically critical, the sense of place often relies on objects. His apartment in New York, where "closets were packed to overflowing, where every bed had boxes underneath it and pots and pans were hung from the ceiling," is sharply contrasted against the new house in Las Vegas, "the emptiness of the place stunned me" (250). In addition to repeatedly stressing how the traumatic sensation of displacement is hinged on the absence or loss of things, Tartt's juxtaposition reveals an underlining partiality towards clutter and an abundance of things. Illustrating how traumatic experience disrupts the protagonist's "framework of reality," the absence of things indicates that the Theo must "reorganize the self in relation to this new view of reality" (Balaev 162).

As traumatic experience "causes a reformulation of perception of self and world," Theo depends on objects to stabilize his disoriented reality (Balaev 159). "Objects allow us to apply the work of mourning to ourselves […] allow[ing] us to live," Baudrillard maintains; "to live regressively, no doubt, but at least to live" (97). Theo's regression into the object world is explicitly described through the reprieve and pleasure he derives from Hobie's workshop—"so rich and magical: a treasure cave" (183). Working as Hobie's assistant, Theo is fully immersed into an intense interaction with the materiality of things: "labeling jars, mixing rabbit-skin glue, sorting through boxes of drawer fittings ('the fiddly bits')" (187). This world of physicality and palpability affords the traumatized protagonist a distraction from the emotional chaos of his disoriented reality. Regressing into a world of objects rewards him the feeling of sinking "into a calm like a stone in deep water" (188).

Furthermore, when Theo is unable to physically enter this material world, he copes with emotional stress through "means of a virtual association with objects instead" (Stockard 30). Avoiding distressing memories or flashbacks, he fills his "mind with visions of material perfection" and imagines a life that unfolds within furnishings (Stockard 30):

> [I]n the night when I woke up jarred and panicked, the explosion plunging through me all over again, sometimes I could lull myself back to sleep by thinking of his house, where without even realizing it you slipped away sometimes into 1850, a world of ticking clocks and creaking floorboards, copper pots and baskets of turnips and onions in the kitchen, candle flames leaning all the left in the draft of an opened door and tall parlor windows billowing and swagged like ball gowns, cool quiet rooms where old things slept. (190)

Theo's "dream-like reveries" or "fantasy worlds," can be understood as expressions of "ideal materialism" (Stockard 30). Through purely mental conjectures, Theo regresses into the comfort

of this idealistic world of materiality where the familiarity of antiquity shields the pandemonium of the present.

The way in which Theo copes with his trauma through mental configurations of Hobie's house, represents how place can assume the role of a "special kind of object […] an object in which one can dwell" (Yi-fu Tuan qt. in Balaev 160). Acting as an object of comfort—"it was just the kind of shop my mother would have liked—tightly packed, a bit dilapidated, with stacks of old books on the floor"—Theo metaphysically "possesses" and "puts" the item "to use," illustrating how place can perform the primary functions of an object (Tartt 132, Baudrillard 90). Much like a security blanket, Theo carries with him a palpable sense of place (through a potent sense of things) with which he mentally covers himself from the external world. Meditating on thoughts of "rugs worn to thread, painted Japanese fans and antique valentines flickering in candlelight," he escapes the external world and retreats to "some environment *or configuration* where my chest wasn't tight with anxiety" (165, emphasis added). Tartt's mediation, filled images of "ideal materialism," constructs place through things and as a thing.

Considering the longwinded passages of imagery and detailed lists of innumerable things within the traumatized protagonist's auto-diegetic retrospective narration, signals a rhetorical strategy to express the perception of traumatic experience. Through Theo's gaps in memory, or more pointedly, through the blockage of things that convolute his narration, Tartt demonstrates how "traumatic experience restructures perceptions" (Balaev 161). To reflect an "intrinsic epistemological fissure between traumatic experience," Theo's narration becomes linguistically artificial, when, for example, figurative language takes over direct discourse (Balaev 151). As Theo returns from the scene of the attack to his apartment—"normally so airy and open, buoyant with my mother's presence"—his narration is overwhelmed with images of "fragile fabrics, scratchy sisal rug" and furniture that "seemed spindly, poised at tiptoe nervousness" (77). Substituting his internal processes for descriptions of external surroundings, Theo's mediation conveys a common response to trauma known as pathological dissociation, the effect of traumatic experiences becoming "encoded in an abnormal type of memory" (Bouson as qt. in Balaev 154). The longer Theo dwells in his memories of traumatic experience, the more 'abnormal' and animated the material world becomes: "Objects in the apartment wobbled with my fatigue: halos shimmered around the table lamp; the stripe of the wallpaper seemed to vibrate" (78).

Because the experience of trauma is "repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable," this formal strategy to fill narrative gaps persists between the protagonist's direct speech (Balaev 151). Attempting to describe the bomb attack to Hobie, the conversation is repeatedly disrupted by focalized descriptions of his material environment: "my shoes. It was interesting how I'd never really looked at my shoes. The toe scuffs. The frayed laces" (141). Realizing the potential for objects to

harbor distress, Tartt's prose clutters with things the more her protagonist is pressed to relive his trauma. Unable to speak about the "ugly repetitive flashes" of the "splattered insides" of the museum, Theo's mediation pivots to "murky portraits, china spaniels on the mantelpiece, golden pendulum swinging, tockety-tock, tockety-tock" (141). Even between and around his utterances, "swallowing hard, I nodded. Dark mahogany; potted palms," things stand in to buffer his recollections from becoming too intense (141). From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, Theo's disrupted narration is another symptom of pathological regression. Pivoting to the object world is Theo's way to escape a painful memory, because unlike Hobie, whose "eyes were still one me," "you can look at an object without it looking back at you" (142, Baudrillard 90).

Of course, the most glaring examples of objects that Theo with comfort and validation are Welty's ring and the painting. Both items are obtained at the museum, the epicenter of his trauma, and can be understood as having the symbolic import of transitional objects, or crutches for the self in crisis. According to D. W. Winnicott, attachment to objects resulting from crisis is a common experience. During the transitional phase of infancy, in which we are increasingly separated from the physical closeness of our parents, a tendency to cling to a first "not-me" possessions, such as a blanket or teddy bear, develops (Winnicott 2). Although this habit typically dissipates as we grow older, a "need for a specific object or behavior pattern […] may reappear at a later age" when faced with psychological or emotional deprivation (Winnicott 6). Clinging to the Welty's ring and his mother's favorite painting after the attack, Theo's anxiety and sense of isolation is quelled by the physical presence of these objects. Additionally, these objects spell diegetic digressions from narrative mode to figurative language in which metaphors demonstrate the fluidity and vitality of things. Representing active forces in the stories, these objects exert a power which influences the traumatized protagonist's sense of self.

Transitional objects provide comfort and a sense of security to traumatized protagonist. Theo describes the painting as "an article of protection […] like a holy icon carried by a crusader into battle" (400). Likewise, the ring, which Theo neurotically toys with in his pocket, slips on his finger, and wears almost everywhere provides physical relief for his emotional instability. Tartt draws particular attention to the ring's materiality, conveying how "emotions, no less than impressions of sense, can be objectified; they can be experienced as objects" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 27).

> When I hefted it in my palm, it was very heavy; if I closed my fingers around it, the gold got warm from the heat of my hand but the carved stone stayed cool. Its weighty, antiquated quality, its mixture of sobriety and brightness, were strangely comforting; if I fixed my attention on it intensely enough, it had a strange power to anchor me in my drifting state and shut out the world around me… (106)

Tracking the kinesthetic sensations derived from the material substance of the ring, this passage illustrates how an object's external form can internalize feelings. The brightness of the golden

band uplifts Theo from his surroundings in the Barbour's "practically lightless" apartment (90). The warmth transmitted through the metal contrasts against the Barbour family's unsympathetic mannerisms, enunciated by Mrs. Barbour whose "reserve (or coldness depending on how you saw it) sometimes made me uncomfortable" (88). Despite the ring's connection to past trauma, its physical presence is a comfort to Theo's traumatized state. More to this point, when following the hierarchy of senses affected by the ring—from tactile, to visual, to metaphysical—Theo, along with the reader, is pulled into the aura of the thing. This "phantasmatic aura", its influence on the senses, depends on a thing's "abstractability," its "fungibility" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 27). For even the shape of the ring corresponds to the shape of trauma: where a ring wraps around a finger, trauma wraps around Theo. However, when he allows himself to regress into the object and revel in its "strange power," or as Brown would call, its *thingness*, trauma's ring-like shape which surrounds Theo, is unable to breach his materialized sense of self.

The ring's "strange power" echoes Bennet's idea of 'thing power', a concept which is also present in Winnicott's description of the transitional object. He maintains that "it must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own" (7). In other words, we create intimate attachments to "non-human or not-quite human things" because of their effectivity, their "material agency" (a topic I will divulge in more detail in the next section) (Bennet ix). Along with the painting's symbolic position, "the magic and aliveness" of the painting garners Theo's attachment and adoration (432).

Through and through, Tartt novel follows a protagonist leaning on the physical comfort of things. After Theo returns the ring to Hobie, the painting provides a sense of security: "even when I couldn't see it I liked knowing it was there for the depth and solidity it gave things" (340). Yet, while the painting maintains a therapeutic role for Theo, for Tartt it acts as wedge between descriptive mode and metaphor. The paintings comforting presence is construed as, "the reinforcement to infrastructure, and invisible bedrock rightness that reassured me just as it was reassuring to know that far away, whales swam untroubled in Baltic waters and monks in arcane time zones chanted ceaselessly for the salvation of the world" (340). On the one hand, the shift in narrative mode recalls Tartt's the strategy to represent the dissociative perception of trauma, but on the other hand, the figurative language semantically shows the ontological abstractness of a thing (see Brown, "Thing Theory"). Considered in this way, the metaphor between the painting and the essence of its effects function twofold: as what Theo intends, as illustrating the bolstering presence of his possession, but also as a subliminal comment towards the complex ontology of a thing. More than describing the feeling Theo obtains from the painting, the images "solidity," "infrastructure," and "bedrock" can be read as representing the absolute nature of an object,

which is thought to be solid, inanimate, soulless. However, the images "whales swam in […] waters" and "monks […] chanted ceaselessly" contradict this static notion and instead illustrate the metaphysical fluidity of a thing. This metaphor, when understood as portraying the vibrant nature of a thing, presents Theo perception of the painting as "an elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness" (Bennet 3).

Within the scope of a narrative of trauma, the use of metaphor to bridge the abstract nature of trauma to tangible inanimate objects represents the protagonist testing "the boundaries of the self against an external medium in order to experience what is self and non-self, and to differentiate between contemporary reality and traumatic past" (Balaev 161). While the bomb attack leaves Theo in a shattered world, he holds onto the ring and the painting as the things which indicate his new reality. Considering the ring a physical symbol of the—"consanguinity: joined in blood"—link between himself and Welty, Theo believes that since the traumatic event, he is living with "Welty's energy, or force field" that "he's present, his personality is with me" (123, 694). Moreover, Theo's post-traumatic perception of the world is informed by Welty's: "His world. His things. Everything up there—it drew me like a flame. Not that I was even looking for it—more that it was looking for me" (694). In this world, things appear as active agents or forces, and can be conceived as actors or characters in the novel. Perceiving objects as Welty did, as having "personalities and souls," ultimately shapes the concept of the traumatized protagonist's identity as "relational or as a non-binary organizing principle of the self and consciousness" (Balaev 160). Reflecting this fluid sense of identity, Theo narrates: "if secrets define us, as opposed to the face we show the world, then the painting was the secret that raised me above the surface of life and enabled me to know who I am" (857).

Reflecting the experience of profound loss through a loss of things, Tartt's trauma narrative also conveys the process of reconfiguring the self and world through object matter. To sustain a sense of self, the protagonist relies heavily on things and is perceptibly sensitive to their abstract and vibrant nature.

The Autograph Man

Similar to *The Goldfinch*, an undercurrent of trauma flows within The Autograph Man that is best traced through Alex's interactions with material things. Smith sets up her novel with a prologue, in which Lin-Jin takes his 13-year old son Alex and his friends to a wrestling match: Big Daddy versus Giant Haystacks. In between the lines of cheeky teenager-banter, the reader learns that Lin-Jin has a terminal brain tumor: "a Chinese doctor in Soho diagnosed it as the influence of Alex-Li's obstructing his father's qi [and that he] loved his son too much" (12). Lin-Jin rejects

this conclusion, but when he dies, and the tight father-son bond is abruptly broken, Alex is traumatized. Much like Theo in *The Goldfinch*, who is with his mother at the museum but apart from her when she dies, Alex is also present at the time and place of his father's death but does not directly witness the event. Instead, he is off with his friends obtaining his first famous autograph from the champion wrestler. The connection between his father's death and his obsession with collecting signatures will be discussed further on. The reader, however, is focalized into Lin-Jin's gaze desperately searching for his son in the crowd when his brain aneurism implodes. The distance, both spatially and on the level of discourse, between Alex and his father's death corresponds to the way he copes with his emotional trauma (through detachment and denial) as an adult. Conversely, Alex's attachment to material possessions reveals how he (like Tartt's protagonist Theo) stores his trauma in things.

Cutting to fifteen years later, Smith continues her story with her protagonist still living in the fictional London suburb of Mountjoy with and still having the same childhood friends. However, Alex is distinctly wary of intimate relationships. "Alex […] wanted and expected *deflation in people above things*. Without it, as with Adam or Esther, your attachment grew too strong. The possibility of future pain only multiplied" (405, emphasis added). Alex's lingering trauma explains his evasive behavior towards his best friends who have planned a memorial for his father's yahrzeit and, why, when confronted with the event of his girlfriend's heart surgery, he places an ocean between himself and the risk of witnessing loss. Thus, where human relationships are "home of uniqueness and conflict" and a "continual source of anxiety," Baudrillard deliberates that "the sphere of objects, consisting of successive and homologous terms, reassures" (88). To protect himself from the pain of loss or disappointment, Alex derails his closest relationships and dodges potentially emotional situations, however the things he keeps closest are, in fact, just that: things.

While a person can pass away or go amiss, break up or cut ties, a thing is seemingly static—an object a sure thing. Alex relies on the physiological stability of the material world, trusting it enough to 'expect deflation in people above things' (405). But Alex's habitual interactions with his possessions, his neurotic compulsions to touch things, collect things, and make lists of things, have the "effect of animating an otherwise inanimate world of objects" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 63). Before leaving his bedroom, for instance, Alex touches "*in order* […] a small chipped Buddha on his desk, a signed Muhammad Ali poster and the old pound note, Blu-Tacked to the top of the door-frame" (Smith's 62, original emphasis). On the symbolic level, these three objects represent pieces of Alex's identity in material form. The chipped Buddha nods to the fragmented connection to his father's Chinese origins, but also to his skepticism towards his generation's hype for all that is Zen: "no—' he insists to his friend Adam, 'this isn't a Zen issue. […]

This is a private-property issue." (123). The Muhammad Ali poster denotes his profession as an 'autograph man' and perhaps even to his conflicted Jewish identity; according to an extra-diegetic reference, "Ali was Jewish" (57). The third thing he touches, a pound-note, is the last gift he received from his father before he died. From a psychoanalytical perspective, Alex's compulsive habit of physically touching things that mirror his identity is a way of reassuring his sense of self. Moreover, Baudrillard would assess Alex's compulsion towards items that connect him to his father as, an "outlet for all kinds of tensions and for energies that are in mourning" (90).

And yet, Alex feels as though he lacks sufficient outlets. His life is compared to a stress ball, "made out of elastic bands and each day you add another elastic band? Tighter. Bigger. More involved. That's how it was for him" (62). Depicting anxiety through distinctly palpable imagery, Smith's narrator suggests that Alex orders his life through a material conception of the external world. Therefore, "by doing the same thing with the same things," Alex creates "the illusion of sameness and continuity over and against the facts of disorder and change" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 64). When, for example, Alex travels abroad for the first time to New York City (or, seen through a symptomatic perspective, when he flees the emotional stress of Esther's heart surgery) he brings with him, "receipts, bills, unread books with snapped spines, push-pins, Post-its, the famous pound note (this he Blu-Tacked above the door), a very old hairclip of Esther's, an age-ing muffin, half a joint" (230). Spreading these things around his hotel room, he succeeds in "traveling without moving" (230). Compulsively surrounding oneself with familiarity in material form reveals "a symptomatic effort to stabilize and possess the physical world" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 67).

But Smith's character engages in another curious habit of ordering and organizing things that have no physical form. At all times, Alex keeps with him a notebook in which he jots down lists of things he finds either "goyish" or "Jewish," terms contrasted together as a binary and made famous by the comedian Lenny Bruce (an excerpt of his sketch is inserted as an epigraph at the beginning of the novel). It originally started as an almost-academic project, with an introduction and essays but, "now he was left with the beautiful core of the thing itself: three hundred pages and counting of what amounted to a two-sided list" (89). A girlfriend describes it as "that funny little book" in which Alex "split[s] things into Jewishy type things and the other type things" (186). Boot's banter seems equivocal, yet her description is apt when one considers the semantic fluidity of a thing. A thing "denotes a massive generality as well as particularities, even your particularly prized possessions," and in turn, the word epitomizes the variable content of Alex's lists (Brown, "Thing Theory" 4). Catalogued and categorized are things such as "…other things. A movement of an arm. A type of shoe. A yawn. A dress. A whistled tune" (88). But also,

> Jewish books (often not written by Jews), Goyish books (often not written by Goys), Jewish office items (the stapler, the pen holder), Goyish office items (the paper-clip, the mouse-mat), Jewish trees (sycamore, poplar, beech), Goy trees (oak, sitka, horse chestnut), Jewish smells of the seventeenth century (rose oil, sesame, orange zest) Goy smells of the seventeenth century (sandalwood, walnuts, wet forest floor). (Smith 90)

Alex's project is an attempt to demarcate "Goyishness" and "Jewishness" as distinct things. In fact, the massive generalizations (movement of an arm) coupled with eccentric exactitudes (wet forest floor) demonstrate that the word things already perfectly encapsulates his motifs. "Things is a word that tends, especially at its most banal, to index a certain limit or liminality," explains Brown. Similar to the word things, the content of Alex's lists hovers "over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable" (Brown, "Thing Theory" 5). In order to cope with that which has no shape—trauma—Alex endeavors to give shape to the world around him.

Brown suggests that "the quest for things may be a quest for a kind of certainty" ("Thing Theory" 4). For although Alex supposes that "everything's a symbol of everything else,' he inquires relentlessly, "Which helps me how?" (177) On the one hand, Smith's narrator deters any further interpretation of Alex's habit, warning the reader that "all possible psychological, physiological and neurological hypotheses" make Alex "want to staple his eyeballs to the wall" (88). But, on the other, Smith's "representation of habit" mirrors her own "habits of representation," when one considers the substantial physiology of the novel with its multiple diagrams and illustrations, quotations as epigraphs, and the repetitive word-lists at the beginning of each chapter (Brown, *Sense of Things* 73). At a glance, words grouped into lists have the appearance of objects—little conglomerated inkblots positioned and pigeonholed—and in a way, "language becomes opaque, and thus an object itself rather than a transparency disclosing other objects" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 73). The semiotic function of Smith's lists set in the spaces between discourse, is to give her imaginary character's habit corporal form. Thus, within the story world, Alex's list-writing, his act of putting pen to paper, is also an act of turning the immaterial into a thing—a thing with which he (and the reader) carries, touches, and interacts. Despite the heterodiegetic narration, the physical reproduction of the narrative evokes Alex's subjectivity.

Alex's perpetual state of coping with trauma can also be described in the way that Smith assesses a story in her essay, "Two Directions for the Novel," as a "form of dialectical materialism – it's a book about a man who builds in order to feel" (86). Correspondingly, Alex creates to feel. Writing his book about the undefinable notions of "goyishness" and Jewishness is one way he organizes the external into an accessible and tangible format. Additionally, his job of verifying autographs, or his role in creating their value, is described as "a skill and an art. It is a skill knowing the difference between the notorious Sydney Greenstreet secretarial (expertly forged by his

assistant, Betty) and the curves and loops of the real thing" (59). Pinpointing Alex's mode of dialectical materialism, Joseph explains

> It's wonder. You don't see it. You have the power with things. I document the acts of God. I give out the insurance when things mess up. But you're in the world, with things. You sell them, you exchange them, you deal with them, you identify them, name, them, categorize them […] you write a bloody book about them. I'm sort of horrified by it, actually – you're so determined to shape what to me is fundamentally without any shape – and the joke is, you don't even realize it. (335, original emphasis)

Joseph seems to envy Alex's intimate interaction with the material world, dealing with physical matter instead of abstract institutions such as insurance. However, his impulse to create may be due to the fact that, as Kitty identifies, "there is a lack somewhere" (287).

At the crux of Alex's proclivity to shape what is fundamentally without shape, is his practice of writing "God's unsayable name" on every page of his book, "over and over. It was a thing of beauty" (90). According to the narrator, a "spasm of superstition" started the habit, "as if the invocation of the holy name would protect his heresy" (89). Despite the irony of this habit resting on the fact that frivolously writing god's name is also unorthodox, Alex means to be neither flippant nor facetious. For, in the Jewish tradition a name conveys the nature and essence of the thing named, thus, god's name is held highly sacred precisely because it is unutterable and ineffable. Attempting to physically grasp the essence of god, Alex creates hard-copies—material creations—of יהוה, the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, over and over again in his notebook, which Smith sporadically reproduces in physical-ink-in-physical-novel form. On the one hand, Alex's material creation of god's name symbolizes his endeavor to feel god's presence, for unlike "lucky Adam" whose world of spirituality is "wonderous," Alex feels "no magic" and doesn't "understand the idea of unity of nothingness" (96). On the other hand, god's name as an unutterable and ineffable thing alludes to the unspeakable and intangible form of trauma. Due to his past trauma, the thing that Alex struggles the most to materialize and therein understand, is his grief for his father.

Alex doesn't "believe in therapy," and spiritual rituals are too ethereal to bring him solace (99). "He was barely capable of faith. Confronted with spiritualism, he found only humour" (326). Accordingly, he cannot "figure out how to mourn a father dead for fifteen years in a dead language. 'YITGADAL VE'YITKADASH!'" (315). Still, human relationships remain too risky for emotional support. Insecure about his friendships, Alex repeatedly voices his concern that Esther will leave him. But in New York, Alex meets the physical form of his celebrity fetish, Kitty Alexander, who, coincidentally, has also lost her father and has spent the past few years paying people to "shuttle around Europe retrieving the objects of her childhood" (314). For the first time, Alex can relate to and sympathize with a method for grieving: "this detail about the saucers, spoken with such horror, made Alex inadvertently smile" (314). Kitty's story about retrieving and saving her father's things—"most of them I don't even like. But in its way it is a ges-

ture, I think. You never know, until it happens, what you will owe the dead"—leaves an impression on Alex (314). An impression made deep enough within her protagonist's emotional self that Smith repeats and reproduces it as physical impressions on physical paper:

What you owe the dead.

What you owe the dead.

What you owe the dead. (315)

The "impression that things leave on people," writes Brown, is "really to say the impressions that constitute character" (*Sense of Things* 155).

While Kitty collects as many of her father's things as she can obtain, Alex holds on to one particularly poignant object. The day of the wrestling match, Lin Jin gives Alex and his friends one-pound notes and after the event turns tragic, the objects become sacred. "His father's notes were to be invoked only with great caution. You had to earn your right to speak of them" (61). For Alex, the pound note symbolizes a transitional object. It remains Blu-tacked above his bedroom door until he brings it on his first trip to New York, where he puts it up above the door in his hotel room. This image of the note adorning the thresholds between the outer world and Alex's inner sanctuary is reminiscent of the Jewish tradition of hanging a Mezuzah on the door to remind one of god's (or the father's) presence. Additionally, the transitional object posted on the symbol of transitional space signifies the state of 'in-between' in which Alex dwells with his grief. Because infants cannot perceive the transitional object as a "fully external reality," Laura Praglin suggests in her article on Winnicott's theory, these items are "symbolic of a third reality, a resting place that exists 'in between' subject and object" (3). It is in this 'in-between' transitional space that Alex seeks refuge from trauma. Turning away from unstable human relationships and social intimacy, he leans on the supportive vitality of the material world. Nevertheless, although this world may be the "most real and authentic part of our existence," Praglin notes that we cannot stay "in this realm of creative possibility and transformation forever" (4). Eventually letting go of the transitional object alludes to Smith's protagonists taking a metaphorical step towards emotional healing.

Moreover, Alex's process of grief is most explicitly exposed through his interaction with the note. It is only within the last few pages of the novel, on the morning of his father's fifteenth yahrzeit that Alex—"touching the note"— finally breaks down and admits: "I miss him. I still miss him. All the time. I miss him so much. I don't feel better" (411). Unlike Adam, who gains his happiness and fulfillment from spirituality, Alex maintains, "there's no other good than feeling good […] It's not a symbol." For Alex, materiality is crucial, "good has to be felt" (411). Still, by the end of the story there are no epiphanies or explicit moments of emotional relief and it is unclear whether Alex feels good.

Consequently, as Alex never fully realizes his quest to materialize his grief and cope with his trauma, the novel fails to properly conclude for the reader. The epilogue, structured in free verse and voiced through the same distanced extradiegetic narrator, dictates Alex reciting the Kaddish interrupted by abstruse reports of people swinging their feet, sniffing and yawning. "Such an almost-circular, or defiantly uncircular, narrative structure, notably common in contemporary fiction," explains Holland, "speaks to a trend in literature to resist the novel's traditional implication that everything ends neatly, bows-tied, lessons fully learned" (154). Instead, the fragmented structure function to remind the reader of the "work involved in making it all make sense, and that that work never ends—whether we are reading a novel or living our lives" (154). However, a few pages earlier, in the final scene with the pound note, a moment of reprieve can be found. Giving up his father's note by placing it with the other autographs that are Blu-tacked onto Adam's wall, Alex let's go of his transitional object and acts as his personal gesture of finally letting go.

Chapter 3

Object Agency and Ontological Ambiguities of Things

The final chapter of this study addresses another crucial aspect of thing theory which aims at describing the complex and slippery nature of things. Brown postulates that things are ontologically dualistic and enigmatic (see "Thing Theory"). In everyday life, things comprise a paradoxical position of effectual passivity. Despite being lifeless, things tangibly impact the living—a blanket provides warmth, a table leg stubs a toe; despite being inanimate, things arouse vital emotions, harbor memories, and inspire worship. On the one hand, Brown posits that "the power of the physical object" comes from "its authority, its physicality"; on the other, he advocates the "metaphysics of the object," which alludes to the fluidity of its density and its ontological ineffability (*Sense of Things* 42). Even the word itself evokes the "audacious ambiguity" of a thing (Brown, "Thing Theory" 5). Brown's semantic examination of the word thing shows how it, "denotes a massive generality,' *what was the other thing I wanted to say?*, 'as well as particularities, even your particularly prized possessions," can be reducibly referred to as things ("Thing Theory" 5).

This dualism pervades literature as well. The construction of "object matter" within literature (and the construction of literature through "object matter") is especially revealing of the phenomenological fluidity of things. The most elaborate descriptions of object imagery may be linguistic moments of eloquence, but at the same time, they are just inkblots on a page. Furthermore, there is the physical paper, the book, or the laptop, etc. that the reader grasps, puts down, and picks up again. Yet, literature—as thing, as art—maintains a special ability in rendering the ontological ambiguities between objects and things, signs and things, living and nonliving matter, the real and illusory nature of things. Tracing literature's ability to grasp and its tendency to convey the ineffable nature of things, Brown seconds Bruno Latour's position that "literature may indeed be the place where […] 'the freedom of agency'—that is, the distribution of agency beyond the human—'can be regained'" (*Other Things* 7).

Returning to the idea of the metaphysical qualities of material things, Brown and Bennett maintain that things can actually achieve a sense of transcendence, in which their objectified status shifts to subjective. This transcendence can occur in a moment as simple as when an object stops working, claims Brown, and its thingness is noticed, or more controversially, when the thing has asserted itself as a subjective force ("Things" 4). On a related note, Brown speculates that, as "enmeshed as we are in the object world" and as things "(however actively or passively) have somehow come to resemble us," at times differentiating ourselves from things proves difficult (Other Things 9). In Bennett's words, "there is a moment of independence" in which ob-

jects obtain thing-power, wherein the object undergoes an ontological shift and becomes "vibrant matter" (3). Bennet recognizes a vibrancy in all things, from biological organisms to spinning atoms in a heap of trash. Brown would identify Bennet's materialist standpoint as a "new political ecology" or a "postsociological effort to distribute agency beyond the human" (*Other Things* 135). Bennet describes herself a "vital materialist" and reasons that "at a time when the interactions between human, viral, animal, and technological bodies are becoming more and more intense," it is inadequate to "assume a world of active subjects and passive objects" (14, 108).

Contemplating the complexity of things leads Brown to ask, "how do objects mediate relations between subjects, and how do subjects mediate the relation between objects?" (*Sense of Things* 18). Thus, the next branch of this study begins with an examination of how non-human things are represented as ontologically intricate in Tartt's and Smith's novels. One way in which the authors reveal the ontological complexities between living and nonliving things is through the depiction of the agency of objects and their impact on our social, psychological, and phenomenological lives. Additionally, both texts portray and "imaginative possession of things" in which objects are invested "with a metaphysical dimension" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 4).

In *The Goldfinch*, Tartt stresses the ethereal connection between humans and things by emphasizing the effervescent quality of objects, specifically the painting. At various moments, the masterpiece artwork captivates the protagonist with its "mesmeric power of aesthetic value," a force strong enough to persuade the characters and plot into action (Brown, *Sense of Things* 33). Smith, on the other hand, refers to the powerful force of things in contemporary life through the ever-encroaching presence of technological objects. Pondering the status of technology in our increasingly digital age, Smith examines object agency through their physical, material, and virtual energies. Attending to the "strange ability of […] items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness," Smith and Tartt convey the complex nature of things and their roles as dynamic agents in their stories (Bennet xvi). Consequently, the way in which nonhuman things are invested with vital energy spells "a subjectification of objects that in turn results in a kind of objectification of subjects," and in moments of ontological ambiguity, "things seem slightly human and humans seems slightly thing-like" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 17, 13).

The Goldfinch

In the opening pages of *The Goldfinch*, Mrs. Decker pronounces how heartbreaking it is to lose things, foretelling the plotline of Theo's attachment to objects. However, exposing the catch to this sentiment, Hobie states: "if you care for a thing enough, it takes on a life of its own, doesn't it?" (849). While Tartt utilizes things to convey tragedy and trauma, she also infuses objects with a lively force and the power to influence the characters' actions and persuade the plot.

What begins as a story of Theo's survival and endurance in the face of trauma, twists into a tale of his relationship to a vibrant thing, "The Goldfinch" painting.

Yet, before divulging into the subplot of Theo's obsession with and submission to his prized possession, it should be explained how the painting represents more than a masterpiece artwork, more than an emotional attachment, and more than a physical object, but rather an encounter with a Thing. For thing theorists like Brown and Bennet, a crucial difference exists between objects and things. Brown notes that "as they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture-above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things" ("Thing Theory" 4). For Brown, we notice the *thingness* of an object when they stop working for us or when they assert themselves into the story of our lives as independent forces ("Thing Theory" 4). On a similar plane, Bennet refers to W.J.T. Mitchell, who claims that "objects are the way things appear to a subject… Things, on the other hand, [signal] the moment when the object becomes the Other" (2). In other words, perceiving objects as Things names a moment of acknowledgement—a recognition of Things as vibrant forces and as existing independently from human subjectivity.

In Tartt's novel, the painting describes something other than an appraised object, but rather an encounter between human life and the vibrant impression of a Thing. However, while the literary treatment of objects is, "of course, quite unabashed in its celebration of their uncanny personhood," I realize, along with W.J.T. Mitchell, that analyzing inert items for traces of aliveness involves a "dubious personification of inanimate objects" and "flirts with a regressive, superstitious attitude" towards nonliving things (71-2). Scrutinizing Tartt's literary image of a famous painting for instances of vitality risks reducing a scholarly study to the practices of "totemism, fetishism, idolatry, and animism," practices viewed through modernity's lens as primitive and pathological (Mitchell 71). But like W.J.T. Mitchell, I believe that "the subjectivized object in some form or other is an incurable symptom" of the human experience and "our task is not to overcome these attitudes but to understand them" (72).

Thus, if the painting signifies a vibrant Thing, then Tartt's protagonist represents a character who distinguishes the thingness of objects, who recognizes the metaphysical potential of nonhuman things. Describing how "taking [the painting] out, handling it, looking at it was nothing to be done lightly," Theo explains that "even in the act of reaching for it there was a sense of expansion, a waft and a lifting" (340). These animated sensations of expanding, wafting, and lifting denote the transcendent state from object to thing and indicate the subject's experience of thingness—that which "is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence" (Brown, "Thing Theory" 5). Throughout the novel, the painting's metaphysical force

(for Bennet, "thing power") translates to its agency and ability to influence the characters, prompt plot-twists, and affect the narrative format. And if, as Brown stipulates, "the story of objects asserting themselves as things […] is the story of a changed relation to the human subject," then Tartt's novel represents "the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" ("Thing Theory" 4).

Closely examining the subject-object relation between Theo and "The Goldfinch" painting reveals that the painting's connection to his mother and its role as an emotional crutch quickly shifts to that of a coveted possession. Not long after taking it from the museum, Theo admits, "already I'd begun to think of it as mine; […] as if I'd owned it all my life" (196, original emphasis). Therefore, despite feelings of guilt for stealing the painting, and aside from fears of punishment should he turn it (and therein himself) in to the authorities, Theo's decision to keep the painting stems from an intensifying attachment to it. In Las Vegas, he keeps the piece hidden, "quite cleverly as I thought, in a clean cotton pillowcase duct-taped to the back of my headboard," but at times "the desire to look at it was irresistible" (340, 252). Succumbing to the object's allure, Theo "carefully, carefully" unwraps it, and describes how "the painting slid out more easily than expected, and I found myself biting back a gasp of pleasure" (252).

However, Theo's sense of gratification neither derives from the object's aesthetic properties nor its cultural significance. The portrait's size, "only slightly larger than an A-4 sheet of paper," and "all that dates-and dimensions stuff, the dead textbook info was irrelevant" (432). Even the subject of the masterpiece, the little yellow bird "with shiny changeless eyes," is largely overlooked until the concluding chapter (432). Instead, the painting's "metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems," scintillates Theo's senses and induces his obsession (Brown, "Thing Theory" 5). In one scene, the painting's "thing power" is explicitly described when its presence proves, once again, to be:

> Too much—too tempting—to have my hands on it and not look at it. Quickly I slid it out, and almost immediately its glow enveloped me, something almost musical, an internal sweetness that was inexplicable beyond a deep, blood-rocking harmony of rightness, the way your heart beat slow and sure when you were with a person you felt safe and loved. A power, a shine, came off it, a freshness like the morning light in my old bedroom in New York which was serene yet exhilarating, a light that rendered everything sharpedged and yet more tender and lovely than it actually was… (355, emphasis added)

On the one hand, this passage reveals the intensity of the painting's effects on its subject, and on the other it exposes the painting's propensity to pull the narrative towards itself. Theo's description of the painting as glowing, shining, and light, contradicts the lackluster matte of lifeless matter and expresses the luminous vibrancy of the thing.

Further scrutinizing Tartt's rhetorical moves, "the magic and aliveness" of the painting, which arrests Theo's attention, also functions as digressions from the narrative mode (432).

Through symbolic imagery and metaphor, Theo describes his experience with the painting: "like that odd airy moment of the snow falling, greenish light and flakes whirling in the cameras, […] that speechless windswept moment" (432). Here, as in other instances, Tartt substitutes the authenticity of Theo's story-telling for passages of figurative language riddled with linguistic artificiality. Permeating the plot with reoccurring images of light and references of airiness to depict the painting's incandescent aura, Tartt establishes a semantic correspondence between a thing and its lucent, lively nature. In this way, Tartt's novel plays on a dualistic dynamic between fiction and things; while the power of things lies in their ability to instruct the text, it is the text which animates the object. For instance, when Theo encounters the painting for the first time "in the light of day," his narration deviates again from the plot and expands into amplification of how the "muted colors bloomed with life; and even though the surface of the painting was ghosted ever so slightly with dust, the atmosphere it breathed was like the light-rinsed airiness of a wall opposite an open window" (252). Deliberately intercepting the plotline in such a way illustrates Tartt's motive to convey the lively qualities of things. Thus, along with the painting's roles as an object of emotional attachment and a masterpiece of art, it is also a thing of light, a thing that breathes—a not-quite-nonliving thing.

A story which draws attention to the vibrant form of inanimate things, will also, maintains Bennet, "highlight the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other" (4). In *The Goldfinch*, the subject experiences moments of ontological equivocation with the object when Theo conveys an "inability to distinguish between the animate and the inanimate" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 137). "At some strange point," recounts Theo, "when I'd looked at it long enough […] all space appeared to vanish between me and it so that when I looked up it was the painting and not me that was real" (340). As Theo's perception and experience of thingness as a powerful force intensifies, he begins to grasp a sense of his self as merely a body of matter, as an entity of energy—as a thing. When Theo considers the life of the painting, "as the light flickered over it" in his hands, he describes having "the queasy sense of my own life in comparison, as a patternless and transient burst of energy, a fizz of biological static just as random as the street lamps flashing past" (754). The idea of oneself as 'a fizz of biological static' recalls Bennet's notion that "human power is itself a kind of thing-power," since "humans are composed of various material parts (the minerality of our bones, or the metal of our blood, or the electricity of our neurons)" (9, 10). Therefore, if "one moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman," then Tartt, like Bennet, is aiming to show "that things too, are vital players in the world" (Bennet 4).

Promoting the agency of things, Tartt's novel follows the painting's effects on the protagonist and plot and reveals how things present "not a solution to a problem, but a problem in

their own right" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 18). Although, at times, the painting's presence brings Theo a feeling of security and stability, it also spells anxiety and responsibility. Often, he fixates on his role as curator of antiques. Providing details of his precautionary care, he notes, "I never touched it with my bare hands, only the edges," and informs his reader of how he wrapped the painting "in several layers of taped drawing paper—good paper, archival paper, that I'd taken from the art room at school—with an inner, double layer of clean white cotton dishcloth to protect the surface from the acids in the paper (not that there were any)" (340, 355). And yet, the painting persists as a source of vulnerability, and the risks of discovery or destruction finally persuade Theo to figuratively bury his treasure, wounding it "around and around with tape until not a shred of newspaper was visible and the entire X-tra large roll of tape was gone" (356).

Nevertheless, after returning to New York to live with Hobie, the liability and culpability of caring for the stolen artifact overwhelms the protagonist. The possibility of his secret being discovered and the thought of Hobie being punished as an accomplice to his theft consumes him with "terror and anxiety" (459). "I'd almost fainted from the cardiac plunge of coming in my room to find [Hobie] kneeling on the rug near my bed" where the painting was hidden (471). Theo resolves to move the painting into a high-security storage unit, however, hiding it remotely fails to alleviate his qualms. "To think of it as wrapped and sealed uptown made me feel self-erased, blanked-out, as if burying it away had only increased its power and given it a more vital and terrible form" (550). Because Theo conceptualizes his sense of self in relation to the thing, locking the item up in a distant place essentially separates himself from a piece of his identity. Additionally, while the painting's physical absence exacerbates his possessive desire for it, he is also filled with guilt for keeping a thing which has a life of its own. "[T]o keep it shut in the dark—a thing made of light, that only lived light—was wrong in more ways than I knew how to explain. More than wrong: it was crazy" (561).

The longer Theo endeavors to hide the painting, the more it is vividly theriomorphized and seems "less like an inanimate object than some poor creature bough and helpless in the dark, unable to cry out and dreaming of rescue" (532). Knowing that the painting "would still be shut away in the dark and waiting for me forever as long as I left it there, like the body of a person I'd murdered and stuck in a cellar somewhere," torments him (536). Through personifying the painting first, as a creature, and later as a body "locked away in its steel coffin" which waits and dreams of rescue, can be understood merely as a symptom of anthropomorphic fetishization, these images can also be interpreted as Tartt's strategy to construct the thing as having a "conative nature" (Tartt 535, Bennet 2). "Conatus names a power present in every body" and argues that every thing has an innate will to exist and enhance itself (Bennet 2). Tartt's repetitive application of prosopopoeia, or the way in which the painting is personified as having humanistic feel-

ings, "affirms that so-called inanimate things have a life of their own," and that objects can comprise a vibrancy and effectivity outside of human subjectivity (Bennet 18). For, as Brown suggests, long after the object has been let go of, "things may still lurk in the shadows" as "an experience of an encounter" ("Thing Theory" 4).

Another way in which Tartt demonstrates the intensely emotive relation between the subject and object is through the pathological effects of addiction. While in Las Vegas, Theo experiments with various recreational drugs, but when he returns to New York he develops an addiction to pain killers and opiates. The relation between the protagonist and the painting illuminates Theo's unstable mental state and the unreliability of his narration. For example, returning to the storage facility to lock away his remaining pills, he is reunited with the "mummified bundle" and is overcome with

> an urge amounting almost to delirium: for to have it only a handbreath away again, after so long, was to find myself suddenly on some kind of dangerous, yearning edge I hadn't even known was there […] for a moment it was all I could do from snatching it up and tucking it under my arm and walking out with it. But I could hear the security cameras hissing at my back […] Just the sight of the painting, lonely and pathetic, had scrambled me top to bottom, as if a satellite signal from the past had burst in and jammed all other transmissions. (532, 533)

Theo's uncontrollable desire, paranoia, and mental instability symbolizes how objects fulfil pathological habits, therefore the painting acts as Theo's new drug. When the stolen painting is threatened to exposure by another character, Lucius Reeve, Theo admits: "perversely, this only made me long even more to have the painting close to hand, to look to whenever I wanted" (582). "Fear, idolatry, hoarding," come to define the Theo's relation to the painting, along with "the delight and terror of the fetishist" (582).

Just as Theo's relationship to the painting reaches a crux balanced between fetishization and susceptibility, Tartt supplies an unexpected turn of events, conveying how "things thus compose the axle around which the plot turns" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 147). When Theo reads a news article stating that the painting had been employed as collateral and in a trafficking scandal, he assumes the gangsters had dealt with a replicate, for the real thing was in his possession. Yet, Tartt intermediates that, "somehow, even shrouded and entombed in the storage locker it had worked itself free and into some fraudulent public narrative, a radiance that glowed in the mind of the world," articulating the active agency of the object and its ability to assume an existence of its own (550). Fulfilling this message, Tartt supplies an ironic and surprising twist, in which Theo finds out that what he had been hoarding over all those years was not the masterpiece artwork, but his high school civics book, switched out by Boris, his best and only friend at the time. Instead of relief "to have the painting off [his] hands," Theo feels "scorched with despair, self-hatred, shame" and embarks on a wild chase to retrieve his precious object (627).

The events that track Theo's pursuit for the thing itself lead to a realization that some things are bigger in life than life itself. Following Boris to Amsterdam in a dodgy attempt to recover the painting, Theo survives a deadly shoot-out, hides in a hotel room for several days, momentarily contemplates suicide, and ultimately returns home empty-handed. One might suggest that Theo's endeavor to recover the painting in Amsterdam is unsuccessful, as the painting is found by the authorities and returned to the world of art museums. But ultimately, Theo is relieved of his responsibility for the painting's security and finally acknowledges that the painting, a thing with a life of its own, does not belong to him. He surmises that:

> Whatever teaches us to talk to ourselves is important: whatever teaches us to sing ourselves out of despair. But the painting has also taught me that we can speak to each other across time. […] And in the midst of our dying, as we rise from the organic and sink back ignominiously into the organic, it is a glory and a privilege to love what Death doesn't touch. For if disaster and oblivion have followed this painting down through time—so too has love. Insofar as it is immortal (and it is) I have a small, bright, immutable part in that immortality. It exists; and it keeps on existing. And I add my own love to the history of people who have loved beautiful things, and looked out for them, and pulled them from the fire, and sought them when they were lost, and tried to preserve them and save them while passing them along literally from hand to hand, singing out brilliantly from the wreck of time to the next generation of lovers, and the next. (864)

Acting as the final passage of her novel, Tartt's lasting message conveys that along with their metaphysical qualities and powerful force on our lives, Things represent immortality materialized into a tangible substance. The agency and the value of objects like paintings and art itself lies in a thing's ability to maintain an existence which spans over lifetimes and connects humanity throughout the eras.

By noticing the fluid quality of objects within Tartt's novel along with the effects certain items have on human behavior, reveals the intimate relationship people have with things. Although we designate objects as inert and inactive, in literature and art, nonliving things are brought into life revealing their indeterminate nature, or at least, our ambiguous understanding of their nature. Especially as our lives become more and more entangled with objects, and as objects begin (however actively or passively) to reflect human physiology and psychology, texts which question the static nature of things are crucial to moving forward in the twenty-first century. Where Tartt's novel pays tribute to the vital nature of material art pieces and their role in connecting human lives over geographical and temporal distances, Smith's novel notices the overwhelming presence of technology in modern life.

The Autograph Man

While the preceding chapters of this study have investigated material objects within *The Autograph Man* which pertain to trauma and to postmodern celebrity culture, this final section will

consider the items which confound our understanding of the phenomenological nature of things. In various ways, the ontological bounds around humanhood and thinghood are stretched and teased within Smith's postmodern novel. Firstly, pondering the presence of technology in our ever-digitalizing age, Smith illustrates how both technological objects and the abstract object of technology act as powerful *actants* in modern life. Secondly, she demonstrates how the ontological gap between humans and machines is already narrowing, echoing the prediction that "[m]an is on the threshold of breaking past the discontinuity between himself and machines" (Bruce Mazlish qt. in Porush 92). Finally, she fixates on the thing-like materiality of the human body by capturing the "alien quality of our own flesh" (Bennet 112). Written at the brink of the twenty-first century, and as technologies increasingly integrated into everyday life, Smith's novel can be read as questioning the assumption that the world is composed of active subjects and passive objects as well as pondering our place in the complicated network of bodies and things.

Peppered throughout Smith's narrative are instances of technological objects asserting their active presence in the plot and reflecting their dynamic status in modern life. In various scenes, for instance, televisions are personified as a lively, as "talking piece[s] of furniture" (350). In numerous moments, TVs intercede conversations: "'I thought I told you,' said the television," and later, "'Why bother with painful exercise routines?' asked the television" (252-3). Although a television produces sound, the object is only a medium for human speech. Choosing to identify the TV as speaking instead of a human, Smith seems determined to personify the object as having animate qualities. One explicit example is when the TV is described as having, "trembled into life, almost cautious to intrude" (350). Indeed, a television's ability to "fill the sound gaps" with speech is descried as "one of its most useful functions" (350). In Smith's narrative realm, the TV represents something more than a material medium for transmitting images out into the world and more than an electrical box with a screen. Giving the TV speech and personality, Smith allows for the object to participate in the story as an active player, revealing the ontologically ambiguous role televisions have gained in modern life.

Showing up as one of the various sketches throughout the novel, the TV plays another significant role in Smith's exploration of the "slippage or fluctuation between the physical and metaphysical referent" of a thing within the literary medium (Brown, *Sense of Things* 141). Holland notes that the use of "visual elements alongside linguistic ones, incorporating photographs, drawings, and sketches" contributes a contemporary literary trend in which a novel endeavors to merge "language and the material world [through] the recognition and use of the materiality of language" (Holland 130, 131). In the scene in which the TV falsely reports that Kitty Alexander "died peacefully in New York last night," three identical drawings of the television are produced between three narrative captions of various pictures being shown on the screen (352-3). Ironical-

ly, the images are produced only as text—"here a picture of the actress when young […] here is one of the men she loved […] here is the most famous moment of her most famous film"—whereas the screens of the sketched TVs remain blank. By configuring the TVs into visual shape, designating a whole page to a figurative object, Smith's attempts to "solve the problem of representation" within the "novel, made of language" and "reverse the loss of the thing" (Holland 137). However, in the presence of the object, Smith reasserts the power of linguistic representation, leaving the images within the TVs to be imagined by the reader. In other words, although the object is made vividly present, the meaning of the image it projects depends on words. Such a paradoxical representation of objects and images points to the "slippery *relationship* between sign and thing" (Holland 139).

Yet, in other moments in the novel, Smith reiterates the idea that the "very materiality of objects [...] means that they are not merely arbitrary signs" (Webb Keane qt. in Brown, *Other Things* 202). Although in the previous chapter, I discussed how Alex tends to organize the external world through his habits with things, at times, certain objects interrupt his routines and force him to acknowledge the "unruliness of the thing itself" (Appadurai, "The Thing Itself" 21). In one scene, "Alex, who always felt subtly attacked by the phone if he could not see it, hurried to find his glasses and put them on, remoulding the mad wire rams until they behaved themselves and hooked behind his ears" (58). Although nervousness towards a ringing phone may allude to a social anxiety, Smith extends the feeling of social pressures to another object: Alex's glasses. Instead of signifying internal unease, his glasses are described as obstinate and uncontrollable due to their material nature. Thus, highlighting the "dynamic of materialist affectivity," or the ways in which Alex resists being subjected to material things, Smith blurs the subject-object dialectic of who, or what, subjugates who (Brown, *Sense of Things* 140).

Moreover, the "touch[es] of anthropomorphism" attached to various items "catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations" of power (Bennet 99). In another encounter with a ringing phone the narrator depicts how, "Alex picked it up and walked to and fro with it in the hallway for a while, like a new father with a distressed baby, hoping the thing might either make a noise or fall silent. It did not" (65). Moments like these contradict the idea that "nonhuman materiality is essentially passive stuff, on one side of an ontological divide between life and matter" (Bennet 51). However, in contrast to *The Goldfinch,* in which Theo's interaction with the vibrant nature of the painting inspires and deepens his admiration for the thing, *The Autograph Man* conveys, through Alex's encounters with the active force of technological objects, that the "experience of ontological ambiguity can provoke, or be provoked by, anxiety or fear, not love and affection" (Brown, *Other Things* 7). In other words, "the experi-

ence of object agency," Brown articulates, "can't be ascribed to any one disposition" (*Other Things* 7).

In Smith's story, the technological device plays the role of the "restless 'quasi-object'" which often "suddenly seems to have a will of its own" (Brown, *Other Things* 7). Computers maintain a particularly tyrannical presence in the novel—even the one merely referenced to on Rubinfine's "salmon-colored jumper that had written across it TO ERR IS HUMAN, TO REALLY *??!@# UP TAKES A COMPUTER" (192). Instead of focusing on the physical attributes of technological objects, Smith accounts for their "metaphysical potency" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 155). Alex's behavior with his computer reflects, for instance, the way in which human behavior reacts to the seemingly-sentient presence of technology:

> Slowly Alex's window jerks into life. It has been designed, he knows, with the intention of ordering his thoughts and conserving his space. Thinking of this, Alex touches his fingertips to the plasma (concentric rainbows!) and takes some pride in how successfully he has thwarted these intentions. Icon overlaps icon crowding out the wallpaper (the popular singer Madonna, naked, thumbing for a ride), pressing at the edges of the screen. All files incompetently named: ThisOne, ThisOne2, Alex1, AlexLi2, AlTandem4, Alexi3, Tandemimportant. He has a file called RUBINFINEPHNENMBER which contains Rubinfine's phone number and nothing else. Important he feels, not to let these interfaces have the power, not *all* the power. (149-50, original emphasis)

While the depiction of Alex's efforts to control the computer's authority, or "thing power," is comical, it also alludes to a universal tendency in which human beings "achieve an intimate relation with their possessions" (Brown, *Sense of Things* 64). Considering how Alex exerts his control by physically subverting the appearance of the object's virtually organized space, relates to how, "within the dynamics of projection and cathexis," we turn objects "into personalities that must be subsequently managed, satisfying not last our will-to-management" (*Sense of Things* 64). Additionally, Alex's relationship to his computer signifies apprehension and suspicion towards the prodigious presence of technology.

David Porush notes in his essay, "Technology and Postmodernism: Cybernetic Fiction," "the anxiety that technology poses a specific threat to or competes with something human has been articulated by artists and critics again and again since the Industrial Revolution" (92). Smith's novel, written in the midst of the late-90s tech boom, reflects a continuation of this apprehensive attitude towards hi-tech gadgets and 'technology' as a complex and ontologically ambiguous thing. Incidentally, in the recent decades before Smith would set to write her second novel, "computerphobia" plagued many first time PC owners who described various apprehensions towards the new machine such as, "fear of losing power, fear of looking stupid, and fear of lacking control" (LaFrance). Computerphobia would soon be replaced by trepidations towards the internet and cyberspace, and today, computers seem practically docile compared to the addictive qualities of our smartphones. However, the fundamental anxieties towards technology re-

main attached to the idea of human obsolescence in the face of objects whose active abilities have been engineered to mimic and even replace our own.

Another encounter with a computer in the novel reflects what Leo Marx calls "technological pessimism," which refers to "that sense of disappointment, anxiety, even menace that the idea of 'technology' arouses in many people these days" (238). This time the computer is referred to only through its familiar visual and auditory characteristics: "this world-famous interface, this window, with its tinkly opening music" (149). By "replacing things with character, or, rather, displacing the physicality of objects with their effects," Smith enunciates the agency of technological objects (Brown, *Sense of Things* 154). The visual and audible signifiers of the technological thing cause a dramatic effect: "For a moment everyone […] was reminded, *compelled* to remember, the work undone. Documents unfinished. Letters half written. That game of suspended solitaire which sits at home waiting for Alex-Li and his entire generation to return and finish it (and lose)" (149, original emphasis). The presence of the physical object reveals technology's ability to impress psychological stress.

However, there are times in the story when technology is cause for fascination and awe. Although Smith points to the tyrannical presence of technological devices that overcome the protagonist in their virtual grip, Alex's computer is still commended as representing a connection to "the world. The world!" (153). Despite the object "want[ing], *demand[ing],* that Alex answer these flashing messages," he realizes that his device is an "incredible resource" (155). In another instance, Alex marvels at the awesome abilities of technology in the underground while talking on his cellphone: "Why was he still getting reception? How big were these satellites anyway? Big as planets? Were they carcinogenic?" (83) In this way, *The Autograph Man* demonstrates how "postmodernist fiction occupies a […] paradoxical point between fascination and revulsion," as authors like Smith "betray a perverse fascination for and celebration of machines at the same time that they warn against its assaults on expression and freedom" (Porush 93).

How is it that technological objects, essentially lifeless things, can imbue such fear, antagonism, and awe in their living human counterparts? Bennet would suggest that negative interpretations about objects partly derives from the "feature of our world that we can and do distinguish things […] from persons" (Bennet 10). In other worlds, perceiving the world through such a strict living/nonliving binary eventually gives way to phenomenological and symbolic incongruities, such as when high-tech devices seem to have personalities or project subjective authority, and provokes unease and uncertainty about the ontology of things. Yet, fears towards modern machines and high-tech devices may be quelled if, maintains Bennet, we read the differences between animate and inanimate things "horizontally as a juxtaposition rather than a vertical hierarchy of being" (Bennet 9).

Smith's novel further teases the ontological ambiguities between persons and things by showing how human life increasingly depends on objects and technology. While the protagonist leans emotionally on cherished possessions, his girlfriend, Esther, literally depends on an object to live. Esther's pacemaker is symbolic on multiple levels. From one angle, Smith plays with the idea of a human mortality attached to a nonliving thing. In fact, Esther refers to the thing attached to heart as a common commodity, "the ticker […] past its sell-by date," and to her emergency surgery as: "not a big deal. Routine. They cut me open, they take it out. Replace with new state-of-the-art-number" (160). Esther's casual references to the thing as an easily replaceable part of her anatomy produces a sense that the "gap between what is perceived as human and what is perceived as mechanical in the self […] is about to be effaced or bridged" (Porush 92).

Yet despite Esther's attitude towards the pacemaker as just a thing to be replaced, for Alex, "her pacemaker – hard and square, across which her skin was tightly pulled," brings him face to face with the reality of the body's material form. Describing Alex's various feelings for the device: "fear, awe, affection, sexualization," the narration also zooms in on Alex's interaction with its corporeal connection to Esther's body. Alex is allowed to "clutch it, to dig behind it and make his thumb touch his fingers through her skin on its other side" (99). When thinking about the operation, he imagines, "lifting that little box out of its home. Opening up that scar. Making another one. And black skin scars badly. What's left stays pink and angry, always" (161). The realization that the object is not only a part of Esther's body, but will induce the mutilation of that body, brings Alex in contact with reality of human mortality attached to things.

Another confrontation with a human's life dependent on and entangled with machines is depicted as Alex meets his friend, Brian Duchamp on his deathbed in the hospital. Focalized into Alex's mortified perspective, the narration details how "he was unmanned by tubes. Going in, going out. And beeping machines. And that pool of dried blood trapped under colourless tape that say in a hollow of Brian's pulsing neck" (366). Smith novel seems to fixate on the intimate relationship between the living and nonliving machines, even asking what counts as life, when the narrator remarks that "a full-time dialysis patient" is "only half a life, a life half lived by machine" (368). But, there are other instances which invoke cases of what Brown calls, the "ontological democratization of person and thing—their equalization" (*Sense of Things* 139). For instance, Alex supposes that there exists "that God chip in the brain, something created to process and trigger wonderment. But it's not so well designed. It's a chip that has its problems" (119). Utilizing technological metaphors, Smith reveals how we already conceptualize our self as semi-mechanical beings.

Additionally, Smith shines light our own "indeterminate ontology," by filling the scene at Duchamp's deathbed with images of seemingly foreign qualities of human materiality (Brown,

Sense of Things 137). Alex is "horrified" when confronted with a body which resembles something other than a person. He observes "a roaming bruise, purple hearted, yellow-edged," "a raised fistula that lay under the skin," and "something yellow [which] came from Duchamp's mouth and had body enough to wriggle wormishly down his chin" (368-9). These images call to mind Bennet's "oxymoronic truism that the human is not exclusively human" (113). They remind us of "very radical character of the (fractious) kinship between the human and the nonhuman" components of our material flesh" (112). Elaborating on this notion, Bennet explains:

> My 'own' body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. 'The bacteria in the human microbiome collectively possess at least 100 times as many genes as the mere 20,000 or so in the human genome.' […] The *its* outnumber the *mes*. In a world of vibrant matter, it is thus not enough to say that we are 'embodied.' We are, rather, *an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes. (112, original emphasis)

Thus, Smith's exploration of the ontological complexity of things ultimately extends to us. Although we designate ourselves as human, living, breathing things, our physical biology reflects the ambiguous nature of our material selves.

The ontological divide between humans and objects, animate and inanimate things is questioned in various ways in Smith's novel which leads to a consideration of the self. Through the depiction of technological objects, from phones to computers, Smith portrays the powerful role technology plays in our lives. Additionally, she conveys that the mental and physical gaps between humans and technological devices is closing. Finally, by revealing the object matter of the human body, Smith confirms the complex of the nature of our self as things of the material world.

Conclusion

As I hope to have shown throughout this multifaceted study, Donna Tartt's and Zadie Smith's postmillennial novels contribute to a discussion of the status of objects in our postmodern culture and a literary expression of the nature of things. Considering the attitudes towards objects within the current cultural context of anti-materialism and dematerialization, I have discovered in both novels a fear of losing artifacts and objects which are vulnerable to destruction. Moreover, the texts present an anxiety towards losing the physical connection and touch with the material world. In the face of loss and trauma, both novels present protagonists who attempt to cope with their emotions through the stability of the physical world and with the comfort of transitional objects. The attachment to things in times of emotional instability reflects the intimate relationship humans have with our inanimate counterparts. Finally, in accord with literature's long tradition of expressing the complexity of objecthood and the vibrant agency of things, the novels participate in figuratively constructing things with a vivacity that reflects both their palpable and their metaphysical presence in our lives.

Throughout my research for this thesis, it has become increasingly clear that these novels fit into a movement of artistic expression which is fascinated with objects and motivated to tell their stories. A multitude of installations exhibiting the everyday objects of our lives through the various mediums have sprung onto the art scene. Take Alejandro Duran's photography, for instance, displaying memorizing images of plastic waste arranged in colorful formations within natural environments, the pieces of trash extending past the photo and onto the gallery floor. Or, Paula Zuccotti's project, now a book titled *Every Thing We Touch*, which chronologically arranges images of the random articles and items that she interacts with each day. Thus, though *The Autograph Man* and *The Goldfinch* follow single protagonists on their personal journeys, through their experiences of trauma and their efforts to maintain social relationships, the diegetic and thematic attention posited towards objects and materiality situates the texts within a contemporary culture fixated on things.

Ultimately, one can take from this project an acknowledgement of our intimate relationship with things. By recognizing the ways in which humans depend on certain items to describe their identities and to express their passions or pain, we may begin to see the distinction between living and nonliving counterparts on a more parallel plane. Although we inhabit a culture overwhelmed by a mass of goods and products for sale and then thrown away, a renewed consciousness for the material world may inspire a more mindful interaction with that world.

Word Count: 27,289

Works Cited

Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in A Cultural Perspective.* Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Balaev, Michelle. "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature,* Jun. 2008, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 149-165.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects.* Translated by James Benedict, Verso, 1996.

Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry,* 2001, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 1-22.

Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

"The Nature of Things." *Bigthink,* 29 Mar. 2010, https://bigthink.com/videos/the-nature-of-things.

Other Things. University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Boltanski, Christian. "No Man's Land." 2010. Park Avenue Armory, New York. *The Guardian.* www.theguardian.com/fashion/2018/jun/22/mps-to-examine-environmental-footprint-of-uk-fashion-industry. Accessed 3 Sep. 2017.

Cope, Rebecca. "Donna Tartt interview." *Harper's Bazaar.* 10 April 2014. www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/culture/staying-in/news/a30126/donna-tartt-interview/. Accessed 4 Mar. 2018.

Cresci, Elena. "Trump Gets Flamed: Robot Prints and Burns President's Tweets." *The Guardian*, 30 Mar. 2017. www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/mar/30/trump-gets-flamed-robot-prints-and-burns-presidents-tweets2017.

Duran, Alejandro. *Washed Up: Transforming a Trashed Landscape.* www.alejandroduran.com/. Accessed 3 June 2018.

Gleadell, Colin. "Art Sales: the market for celebrity memorabilia." *The Telegraph*, 9 Mar. 2010, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/artsales/7406136/Art-Sales-the-market-for-celebrity-memorabilia.html. Accessed 5 May 2018.

Herring, Scott. *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture.* University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Kakutani, Michiko. "Books of the Times; an Elusive, Whimsical Autograph." Review of *The Autograph Man. The New York Times.* 25 Sept. 2002.

Klipfel, Kevin Michael. "Donna Tartt and Dandyism: Lessons from *The Goldfinch* on the Art of Personal Style." *Ethos: A Digital Review of Arts, Humanities, and Public Ethics,* 6. Oct. 2015. http://www.ethosreview.org/intellectual-spaces/dandyism. Accessed 2 Feb. 2018.

LaFrance, Adrienne. "When People Feared Computers." *The Atlantic,* 30 Mar. 2015, www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/03/when-people-feared-computers/388919/. Accessed 4 May 2018.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy.* Translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, Progress Publishers, 1887.

Marx, Leo. "The Idea of "Technology" and Postmodern Pessimism." *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism,* edited by Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, The MIT Press, 1994, pp. 237-257.

Mitchell, W. J. T. "What Do Pictures 'Really' Want?" *October*, vol. 77, 1996, pp. 71–82. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/778960.

Porush, David. "Technology and Postmodernism: Cybernetic Fiction." *SubStance*, 1980, vol. 9, no. 2, issue 27, pp. 92-100.

Praglin, Laura. "The Nature of the 'In-Between' in D.W. Winnicott's Concept of Transitional Space and in Martin Buber's das Zwischenmenschliche." *Universitas,* vol. 2, no. 2, 2006, pp. 1-9.

Smith, Zadie. *The Autograph Man.* Penguin, 2003.

"The Tattered Ruins of the Map: on Sarah's Sze's Centrifuge." *Feel Free,* Penguin, 2018, pp. 200-211.

"Meet Justin Bieber." *Feel Free*. Penguin, 2018, pp. 381-393.
"Two Directions for the Novel." *Changing My Mind*. Penguin, 2009.
Solomon, Jack. "Our Decentered Culture." *The Postmodern Presence: Readings on Postmodernism in American Culture and Society*. Ed. Berger, Arthur A. AltaMira Press, 1998.
Stockard, Emily. "The Journals of Denton Welch: Material Culture and Trauma." *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 1, Mar. 2017, pp. 21-38.
Stokes, Emily. Review of *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt. *Financial Times,* 18. Oct. 2013. www.ft.com/content/23e5cbb4-34c1-11e3-8148-00144feab7de. Accessed 5 May 2018.
Tartt, Donna. *The Goldfinch*. Little Brown, 2013.
"This Much I Know." Interview by Dee O'Connell. *The Guardian*. 16 Nov. 2003.
"Interview: Donna Tartt." Interview by Caroline Baum. *The Sydnew Morning Herald*. 19 Oct. 2013.
Terentowicz-Fotyga, Urszula. "Unreal City to City of Referents: Urban Space in Contemporary London Novels." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 39 no. 3, 2009, pp. 305-329.
Tew, Philip. "Celebrity, Suburban Identity, and Transatlantic Epiphanies: Reconsidering Zadie Smith's *The Autorgraph Man*." *Reading Zadie Smith: The First Decade and Beyond*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
Trenntmann, Frank. *The Empire of Things: How we Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First*. Penguin, 2016.
Winnicott, D.W. "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena—A Study of the First Not-Me Possession." *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis,* vol. 34, 1953, pp. 89-97.
Wood, James. "Fundamentally Goyish." Review of *The Autograph Man*. *London Review of Books*. vol. 24, no. 19, 3 Oct. 2002, pp 17-18.
"The New Curiosity Shop: Donna Tartt's The Goldfinch." *The New Yorker*. 21 Oct. 2013.
Woodward, Daisy. "Your guide to mysterious literary genius Donna Tartt." *Dazed Magazine*. 14 Nov. 2017. www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/38063/1/your-guide-to-mysterious-literary-genius-donna-tartt. Accessed 5 May 2018.
Zuccotti, Paula. *Every Thing We Touch*. Viking, 2015.

Index