



Thing Theory

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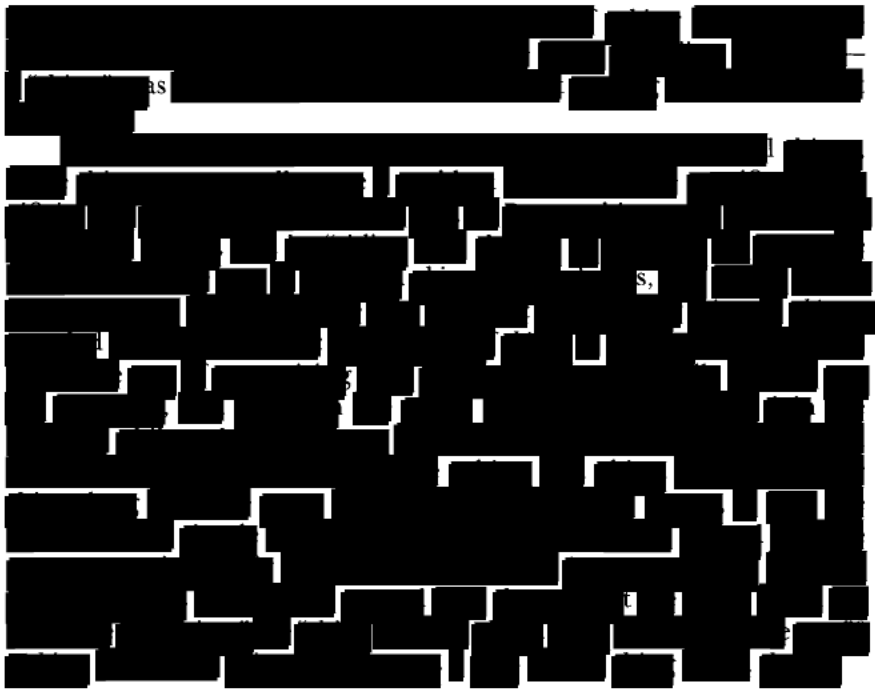
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"Things are what we encounter, ideas are what we project." That's how Leo Stein schematically put it.⁶ Although the experience of an encounter depends, of course, on the projection of an idea (the idea of encounter), Stein's scheme helps to explain the suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power: you cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy, you get bopped on the head by a

6. His "delight" in these objects was prompted not by any familiarity, but by the suddenly recognized peculiarity of the everyday, the fact that water "lies flat on its stomach" in a "hysterical urge to submit to gravity," for instance, sacrificing "all sense of decency to this *idée fixe*, this pathological scruple" ("ce scrupule maladif") (Ponge, "Of Water," trans. C. K. Williams, *Selected Poems*, trans. Williams, John Montague, and Margaret Guiton, ed. Guiton [Winston-Salem, N.C., 1994], pp. 57, 58; *Le Parti pris des choses* is the title of the volume of poetry in which "Of Water" first appeared).

7. Michael Riffaterre, "Ponge tautologique, ou le fonctionnement du texte," *Ponge inventeur et classique*, ed. Philippe Bonnefis and Pierre Oster (Paris, 1977), p. 66. See also Riffaterre, "The Primacy of Words: Francis Ponge's Reification," *Figuring Things: Char, Ponge, and Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Charles D. Minahan (Lexington, Ky., 1994), pp. 27-38.

8. Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York, 1984), pp. 126, 14.

9. Leo Stein, *The A-B-C of Aesthetics* (New York, 1927), p. 44.

falling nut. These are occasions outside the scene of phenomenological attention that nonetheless teach you that you're "caught up in things" and that the "body is a thing among things."¹⁰ They are occasions of contingency—the chance interruption—that disclose a physicality of things. In Byatt's novel, the interruption of the habit of looking *through* windows as transparencies enables the protagonist to look *at* a window itself in its opacity. 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.¹¹ We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.

And, yet, the word *things* holds within it a more audacious ambiguity. It denotes a massive generality as well as particularities, even your particularly prized possessions: "'Things' were of course the sum of the world; only, for Mrs. Gereth, the sum of the world was rare French furniture and oriental china."¹² The word designates the concrete yet ambiguous within the everyday: "Put it by that green thing in the hall." It functions to overcome the loss of other words or as a place holder for some future specifying operation: "I need that thing you use to get at things between your teeth." It designates an amorphous characteristic or a frankly irresolvable enigma: "There's a thing about that poem that I'll never get." For Byatt's protagonist, the quest for things may be a quest for a kind of certainty, but *things* is a word that tends, especially at its most banal, to

10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, trans. James M. Edie et al., ed. Edie (Evanston, Ill., 1964), p. 163.

11. The window scene in Byatt's novel should be read in relation to Nabokov's point about how things become multiply transparent and read in the context of a dialectic of *looking through* and *looking at*: "When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object" (Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things* [New York, 1972], p. 1). We don't apprehend things except partially or obliquely (as what's beyond our apprehension). In fact, by looking *at* things we render them objects.

12. Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896; New York, 1987), p. 49. In his preface for the New York edition of the novel (reprinted in this Penguin edition, pp. 23–33), James plays with a full range of the word's denotations (for example: "The thing is to lodge somewhere, at the heart of one's complexity an irrepressible *appreciation*" [p. 31]).

index a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable: Dr. Seuss's Thing One and Thing Two.¹³

On the one hand, then, the thing baldly encountered. On the other, some thing not quite apprehended. Could you clarify this matter of things by starting again and imagining them, first, as the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject, the anterior physicality of the physical world emerging, perhaps, as an after-effect of the mutual constitution of subject and object, a retroprojection? You could imagine things, second, as what 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, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). But this temporality obscures the all-at-onceness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic and the fact that, all at once, *the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names some thing else*.

If thing theory sounds like an oxymoron, then, it may not be because things reside in some balmy elsewhere beyond theory but because they lie both at hand and somewhere outside the theoretical field, beyond a certain limit, as a recognizable yet illegible remainder or as the entifiable that is unspecifiable. Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects. If this is why things appear in the name of relief from ideas (what's encountered as opposed to what's thought), it is also why the Thing becomes the most compelling name for that enigma that can only be encircled and which the object (by its presence) necessarily negates.¹⁴ In Lacan, the Thing is and it isn't. It exists, but in no phenomenal form.

13. By hastily tracking some of the ways we use *things* to both mark and manage uncertainty, I am specifically not deploying an etymological inquiry to delimit and vivify the meaning of things. But see, most famously, Marcel Mauss, who finds in the "best" etymology of *res* a means of claiming that *res* "need not have been the crude, merely tangible thing, the simple, passive object of transaction that it has become" (Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls [1950; New York, 1990], p. 50); and Martin Heidegger, who finds in the Old German *dinc* the denotation of a gathering of people that enables him to concentrate on how "thinging" gathers; see Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), pp. 174–82. I should add that Heidegger believes that it is the English word *thing* that has preserved the "semantic power" of the original Roman word *res*, which is to say its capacity to designate a case, an affair, an event (p. 175). In turn, Michel Serres complains that such etymology—wherein objects exist "only according to assembly debates"—shows how "language wishes the whole world to derive from language" (Michel Serres, *Statues: Le Second Livre des fondations* [Paris, 1987], p. 111).

14. See Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, volume 7 of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, 1992), p. 139. The