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Shifting things: Objects as contradictory partners in life writing

Abstract:

Evocative objects, suggests Sherry Turkle (2007), demonstrate the inseparability of thought and emotion in our relationships to certain objects. This is even more the case with objects that have become things, untethered from and exceeding their everyday use. There is a comforting solidity about things that offers a contrast to the shifting consciousness of the writer. But then things, too, begin to morph and shift: childhood objects opening an infinity of stories, the cracked teacup conjuring another time and place, people now dead. Life writing from and through things both dramatises and contests dualities such as self and other, order and chaos, exposure and concealment. This essay follows things and draws on thing theory and contemporary material culture studies to explore the way evocative objects become contradictory partners in life writing.

Biographical note:

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Key words:

Life writing, thing theory, objects

Mice scurry

A small cone of dark brown wood (stained teak I think), ending in a nose tip, where two black beads form the eyes. Ears and tail are soft pale brown leather. This mouse is only three centimetres long and half that wide and is clumsily glued to a pin, making it a brooch for a child. It cost me $5.00 from a junk store. It is not in very good condition but it is so like one I had as a child that I had to buy it, to return it to its rightful place on my bedside table. I like to stroke his ears and run my fingers, very gently, down his tail. (Why do I say 'he'? I'm not sure, but this miniature mouse is a male it seems.) Immediately I saw him in the shop; I recognised an old friend, a friend from at least 45 years ago, even though I had not remembered him until now. I do not remember how I acquired him as young child in England, nor how I lost him, but I know that he (or rather his twin) was once mine.

It can be strange meeting objects from your early days. You can feel pleased to see them even if your childhood was not particularly happy. I can't say that mouse triggers memories of happy moments. In fact, he triggers only the memory of himself; no other visual cues appear. But the feeling triggered is specific and deep – a feeling I can't quite name but which moves me. I want to stare at the mouse, stroke him, hold him in my hand. This is not nostalgia; this is a return into the child, a kind of re-embodiment. A momentary feeling of discomfort warded off is the closest I can get to describing the feeling. And once described, that feeling changes, and now I feel sadness *for* (instead of *as*) that child.

I had another small mouse as a child: this one also with a body made of wood (a pale colour like pine) with pink fluffy fur and tail. Pink Mouse was the size of a child's hand, and always stayed near, or in, my bed. She is famous in family folklore due to the adventure she had when we travelled across America by car. I was four years old and took her with me. One evening we couldn't find Pink Mouse when I was ready for bed and after some discussion and not a few tears, my mother decided that I had probably left her behind in the hotel we had slept in the previous night. Of course, we couldn't go back – two days of travel wasted – but my mother did ring the hotel and ask them to check for Pink Mouse. She gave them the postal address of our end destination in case they found her. I don't think any of us expected to see Pink Mouse again, but there she was, wrapped in brown paper and string, awaiting us on the east coast. This became one of my parents' favourite stories once we were back home in England. My father particularly liked to talk about the politeness and generosity that everyday Americans demonstrated: as well as the story of Pink Mouse, he liked to retell stories of super-large food portions and 'never-ending' coffee. I was pleased to have Pink Mouse back, of course, but there was ever-after a sense of shame which soiled both her and me because I was so negligent as to lose her in the first place. When her pink fur paled over time, I didn't mind, for the faded fur matched our faded self-image.

I thought of Pink Mouse when I first read *The World Doesn't End* by Charles Simic: 'On her feet she wears soft, thickly padded slippers around which mice scurry' (1989, p. 6). Holding again the mouse brooch, I remember another line from the same book: ''These are dark and evil days,' the mouse told me as he nibbled my ear' (1989, p. 8). I think the mouse brooch

whispered things to me as a child, whereas Pink Mouse didn't seem to speak, she was just held and loved. Loved, even when, like me, she was known to be stupid.

Self and other

I started to write these paragraphs, using the mouse brooch as a prompt, not knowing where it would take me. I did not expect to be writing about myself at four, identifying as 'stupid' and holding a sense of shame as well as anxiety. But as soon as I wrote it, I knew it was truthful. Sherry Turkle's notion of 'evocative objects' applies here, referencing, as it does, 'the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things' (2007, p. 5). She describes some objects as 'naturally evocative because they remind us of the blurry childhood line between self and other' (2007, p. 8) and it seems to me that my mice fall into this category. The brooch mouse was other – a wise and reassuring other perhaps – but the pink mouse was self – foolish and soiled like me but still, somehow, able to be loved.

It seems to me that this duality of self and other is evident in life writing from and about objects. It is one of a number of dualities that this essay explores, digressively, by way of object-inspired life writing snippets and related theory. I hope to show in what follows some of the ways in which objects are contradictory partners in life writing, as they both dramatise and challenge such dualities.

Recent life writing scholarship has embraced the material turn, extending the analysis of autobiographical work beyond textual examples to explore visual and material forms, digital media and other autobiographical acts (see, for example, Harley, 2017; Matthews & Simon, 2020; Poletti, 2020; Poletti & Rak, 2014; Rak, 2015; Whitlock, 2013). Influenced by affect theory, posthumanism and material culture studies, life writing scholars are exploring what Anna Poletti, in the subtitle of her book *Stories of the Self* (2020), calls 'life writing after the book'. Poletti challenges us to 'think differently about how autobiographers are engaged by and engage with the materiality of their lives' (2020, p. 21), and to recognise that autobiography occurs 'within an assemblage made up of a located, material intersection of discourse and human and nonhuman actors' (2020, p. 24).

Even within analyses of the more traditional textual life narratives, there is now an increasing recognition of the important role that material objects play (see, for example, Hirsch & Spitzer, 2006; Rueggemeier, 2016). Drawing on Bill Brown's thing theory, Alice Blackhurst (2015) suggests there is a growing interest (among French writers at least) in shifting from 'the paradigm of life writing towards ... thing writing, and from an *écriture de soi* to an *écriture des objets*' (p. 426-7). Using François Bon's *Autobiographie des Objets* as an example, Blackhurst's analysis indicates the difficulty of achieving genuine 'thing writing', that is, autobiographical writing that reconfigures the subject-object relation. Because life writing is 'tethered … to the dimensions of a particular writing channelled through the body and a uniquely situated subjectivity', Blackhurst argues that it may remain 'haunted by the spectre of the self which the inert object cannot overshadow' (2015, p. 435).

My own attempts at 'thing writing' have floundered in the same way: I find myself unable to avoid returning to a focus on human subjectivity (Robertson, 2020a; Robertson, 2020b). What I have found, however, is that attending to objects has enabled me to explore issues around the relationship between the individual and the quotidian, and the individual and the social, and that this has partly occurred because of the way objects may remain resistant to autobiographical manipulation. The agency of objects is in no way fully obscured by the subject. The objects work in tandem with and in opposition to subjectivity, acting as contradictory partners in my writing, as I suggest here through five different examples.

Elephants parade

At some point in my childhood, it became known within my family that I collected miniature elephant ornaments. From that time onwards, I was often given elephants as presents. I don't remember deciding to collect them; I just remember having some. Early amongst my collection was a small grey and white glass elephant with a collection of tiny infant elephants alongside her. I spent long hours arranging the babies in different configurations: sometimes in a spiral around the mother, sometimes in a long line behind her, sometimes in small groups with their trunks meeting.

Gradually, my elephant collection grew, so that I filled two shelves with elephants made of glass, porcelain, metal, cloth or bone, and ranging in colours from grey to purple, and gold to blue, green and silver. I only remember choosing one of these elephants myself, the rest were presents. Eventually, in my early twenties, I told people I was no longer collecting elephants and I was given very few after that. I don't dislike any of my elephants, but the only ones I'm drawn to are the early grey and white glass family grouping.

Order and chaos

I see now that the ordering and re-ordering of my collection was important for me – it staved off anxiety, relieved the panic I used to experience, and quelled that sense of being overwhelmed by life. 'Collecting, whether by individuals or museums, is essentially a modernist project of assembling, organising, and controlling a portion of the world,' says Russell Belk (2006, p. 541). William Davies King (2008) describes this as a more personal drive:

> The widely shared impulse to collect comes partly from a wound we feel deep inside this richest, most materialistic of all societies, and partly from a wound that many of us feel in our personal histories. Collecting may not be the most direct means of healing those wounds, but it serves well enough. It finds order in things, virtue in preservation, knowledge in obscurity, and above all it discovers and even creates value. (p. 7)

‘Order in things’: this is what my infant elephants offered me. I see the child, arranging them around the mother elephant with trunks just touching, making things right, finding order in a seemingly chaotic world.

It is not surprising that a collection of miniatures expresses the duality of order and chaos, for miniatures give us access to a sense of control not offered by larger objects. Claude Levi-Strauss notes how the miniature reverses how we comprehend an object: instead of seeing it piecemeal via ‘sensible dimensions’, we see it whole through ‘intelligible dimensions’ (1966, p. 24). Representational objects that are reduced in size, like miniature elephants, dolls houses and toy cars, offer us very specific corporeal ‘choreographies’ (as Cochrane, 2016, p. 351 says) because of their scale in relation to our own body. We can hold an elephant, turn it upside down, feel the contours of its feet, brush our fingers against its tusks. Miniatures somehow allow us to feel that we control the boundaries of time and space, as we move our objects in ways we could never manipulate full-scale objects.

Susan Stewart argues, ‘The reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld, and as an object consumed, the miniature finds its ‘use value’ transformed into the infinite time of reverie’ (1993, p. 65). Miniatures, like reveries, reveal to us an inner world. This may be the world of the life writer as she seeks to find the story within the story. She wants to turn the story upside down (as the child does her glass elephant), feel its contours and understand it whole, not piecemeal.

Cups crack

After the death of my mother, I took some of her possessions into my own home. Some were decorative and some useful, but mainly I kept them because she valued them or because I couldn’t bear to throw or give them away. The Shelley tea set is both decorative and useful, so long as I have only two people visiting me. My grandparents gave my mother this fine bone china tea set to take up to Cambridge with her in 1945. East End Jews, they would have been thrilled that their daughter was going to read mathematics with the smartest young people in the country, all the establishment sons and daughters (or at least, those who had survived the war years). They would have imagined her hosting tea parties for the other women at Girton College.

The tea set is still eye-catching, even though there are now only three cups (one cracked) alongside the six saucers and side plates, and a milk jug (no sugar bowl or tea pot) and a single platter (for scones I suppose). The shape is Queen Anne – eight alternating long and short edges, and sharp-tipped handles. We knew the design as ‘sunset’, but in fact it is called ‘sunrise and tall trees’. The error may be evidence of my mother’s romantic nature as a young woman. The art deco pattern uses only black, grey, orange and yellow on white. Two stylised trees stand either side of a path with a fence and, above that, the sun; around them is the soft grey and black foliage of trees and bushes. Each cup and plate is bordered in bright orange, and this paint has hardly faded during all these years.

Did my mother host tea parties in her rooms in college? I don't know for she never mentioned this. But I know she cherished this tea set and used it after she married. Apart from one life-long female friend, most of my mother's Cambridge friends were men. Hardly surprising as she was one of the very few women in a large cohort of men reading maths. Although she went out with several young men, my father was my mother's longest-running boyfriend. He was doing a PhD at the time she did her undergraduate degree and he was also a member of the same orchestra (my mother on clarinet and my father on piano and organ). The orchestra seemed to be the trigger, for my father, shy as he was, began to wait outside my mother's rooms to walk her to rehearsal twice a week. As well as their similar interests, I realise now they were both outsiders, my mother as a Jew and a woman reading maths, my father because of his working-class Glaswegian background. Her father was a textile merchant; his a station master on the railways. Both had a passion for music and maths, and both – I suspect – were socially ill at ease, more interested in ideas and problem solving than people or small talk.

The big difference between my parents – the stumbling point – was religion. My mother was expected, and expected herself, to marry a Jew. He wouldn't have to be devout or especially religious; a secular Jew would have been acceptable. I think my mother was by then a non-believer herself. But an atheist born into the Church of Scotland was not acceptable. So, at the end of her second year, my mother told my father that she would not be seeing him after the summer break; their relationship was over. My father never spoke to us of this so we have only my mother's story. She told us that come orchestra night at the start of the Michaelmas term, there was my father, waiting for her, as cheerful as ever, taking her arm and walking with her to rehearsal. They became engaged, and then married in 1951.

Hearing this story as young girls, my sister and I were impressed with Dad's determination to win the woman he loved. We saw this as the height of romance. My mother, however, used the story to point out how my father 'never listened' to her or took her seriously. This seemed quite wrong to us: he clearly did listen to her and respect her views and she was the dominant decision-maker about most things in our family. She didn't have to marry him; she obviously loved him and made the choice to marry a gentile, and weather her family's anger and sense of betrayal. We'd seen photos of both my parents around the time of their courtship and marriage and there is no doubt that my mother's image shows her strong will. No one was going to push her around. And yet, the way my mother in mid-life told this story about her failed rejection of my father is interesting to me now. It suggests the complexities of her life and decisions as a woman who wanted a satisfying academic career *and* love and family, who wanted to please others but also go her own way. It's like my mother insisting her tea set is sunset not sunrise, as if she knew her parents' gift of it symbolised an ending as well as a new beginning.

Exposure and concealment

The sunrise teacup always makes me think of W.H. Auden's lines, 'And the crack in the tea-cup opens/A lane to the land of the dead' from his poem about mortality, 'As I Walked Out

One Evening' (1976/2007, p. 11). When I sip my tea from one of the (uncracked) cups, I try to imagine my mother at twenty years old, serving tea to my father, already conflicted, perhaps, by her feelings for him and for her family, the limited choices available to a Jewish woman born in 1920s London. I think about the many contradictions of this story and, indeed, many of my mother's other stories about herself. How each revelation could also be a camouflage for something else, how exposure and concealment are twin apparitions in all life narratives. My experiences writing from objects are well described by Auden's lines: an everyday object suddenly takes me to another time and place, usually the 'land of the dead'. If, as Avery Gordon (1997, p. 7) says, 'haunting is a constituent element of modern social life', then it is no surprise that objects may create a 'seething presence', demanding that we examine them more deeply and open ourselves to what they convey or, perhaps, obscure.

Wood connects

In a basket on my desk is my mother's sock darning mushroom. The wood grain shows porous rings as well as flecks, which makes me think it is made of oak. It has been much used; there are several pin holes in the top and some chips to the side of the mushroom cap. The top of the handle is slightly darker where the left index finger and thumb hold it while the right hand wields the needle. It is comfortable and textured, warm to the touch.

I never darn socks. I keep this mushroom because it is beautifully aged and deeply intimate. And perhaps I hold on to it because I feel that touching 'possesses a sort of transitivity' (Korsmeyer, 2012, p. 372), so that I am linked in a chain of touch to other women, including my mother, who have used this object or one very similar.

Continuity and discontinuity

This everyday object of decades past has no value. You can buy one online for under $20 and in any case, not many people in Australia darn woollen socks anymore. By now, the darning mushroom may be what Bill Brown calls a thing, rather than an object, a dead commodity that shows us 'how inanimate objects organise the temporality of the animate world' (2001, p. 15-16). Brown suggests that when objects assert themselves – through obsolescence or breakdown or a change in use for example – what we are really seeing is a change in a particular subject-object relationship. This is when the object becomes the uncanny other, the moment W.J.T. Mitchell memorably describes as 'when the sardine can looks back' (2004, p. 156).

The wooden sock darning mushroom looks back at me, both ordinary and uncanny, symbolising continuity – 300 years of women using wooden darning eggs or mushrooms – but also discontinuity – the break in that chain triggered by the development of synthetic fabrics and machine-made clothing and, more recently, the ready availability in developed countries of cheap goods made offshore by low-paid or slave labour. That this wooden, quite basic thing

can represent a long tradition to me is perhaps only possible because I am aware of the break in this tradition. Like all memorialisation (of a person, a tradition or a culture), it relies on both continuity and discontinuity at the same time.

Vases wait

A pale green glass stem vase, suitable for a rose, the rounded base containing what is known as controlled bubbles. The flute is slightly stained after years of use, as if every flower has left a tiny trace behind. The colour and shape invoke mid-century design with its clean lines and organic curves. When filled with water and a single flower, its simplicity triumphs.

This, too, was once my mother's, so familiar I hardly noticed it while she lived. With her death, the vase became another vacant object, suddenly empty of flowers but full of a strange power, the value that the death of a loved one imparts. Once I brought the vase home, I used it regularly, choosing a single flower or frond of greenery from my small garden to fill it. And then one day at a second-hand store I saw a similar vase in red and bought it. And not long afterwards, I found a few more, very cheap, at the vintage markets and bought them too. I can't say why I did this. It was silly – I have plenty of vases, none of these other ones belonged to my mother, I'm not usually acquisitive for more household goods, and no one, least of all me, can really use nine stem bubble vases. What was I doing?

Aggravation and alleviation

In her article 'Melancholy Objects', Margaret Gibson talks about objects of the dead, what she describes as 'those spectral, melancholy objects mediating, and signifying, an absence' (2004, p. 285). She goes on to say: 'As part of mourning and memory, objects function as metaphorical and metonymic traces of corporeal absence' (2004, p. 285). The green vase was such an object. On the shelf in my living room, it represented my mother's absence, reminding me daily of this loss. But when I found a suitable flower and placed it in the vase, having it there soothed and comforted me. It became an external referent for me, the way some people keep photographs of dead loved ones on their walls. Objects such as the vase become technologies for managing loss, a way to navigate through grief.

Gibson notes, 'In the most simple, fleeting and poignant moments, people grieve with and through objects. While objects assist in grieving…they may be experienced as impoverished, never substituting for the person themselves' (2004, p. 296). Reading this, I realise that my impulse to purchase more bubble vases was a response to this experience of impoverishment, as if I could alleviate that feeling by having replicates of the vase. This impulse didn't last long; part of me knew that more of anything doesn't help. Gibson describes how 'keeping objects is a way of reclaiming and rehousing (making homely) the remains of a life now gone' (2004, p.

297), and this is how the vase now operates for me. I have incorporated the vase into my life and home and it now triggers the memory of grief, rather than grief itself.

Objects associated with loss both help us deal with grief and at the same time highlight our loss; they aggravate and alleviate. Yet again, objects enact a contradictory operation in our lives and in our life stories.

Objects and subjects

I started writing from and with objects when I provided a home for some of the things left after the death of both parents. Those that interested me were everyday objects: a vase, a darning mushroom, a tea set. This made me pay more attention to other objects in my life – to ornaments, toys, and things that had lived with me for decades. I was writing what might be termed 'object autobiography', where the objects are in service of the writer.

Exploring thing theory, material culture studies, and post-humanism encouraged me to view objects as equal others with agency, as assemblages within a wider network of the human and non-human. I wanted then to write something closer to thing writing than life writing. This eluded me; I struggled to leave behind the central autobiographical self. But I have moved on from object autobiography; objects are no longer completely in my service. Instead, they have a level of agency and remain resistant to certain forms of authorial manipulation. They remain resolutely difficult, always exceeding words and ideas, providing a limit to theory. 'The object is always more important, more interesting, more capable (full of rights)', says Francis Ponge, 'it has no duty whatsoever toward me, it is I who am obliged to it' (1948/2008, p. 4).

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Research Statement for 'Shifting Things: Objects as Contradictory Partners in Life Writing'

Research Background

'Shifting Things' is a critical-creative essay exploring how life writing from and about objects can create new ways of conceptualising subjectivity and the subject-object relation in autobiographical writing. It is part of a series of works drawing on insights from thing theory, material culture studies, affect theory and post-humanism, whilst also telling personal narratives using memory, imagination and literary devices. Demonstrating Sherry Turkle's (2007) claim about the inseparability of thought and emotion in our relationships to certain objects, the essay takes five different examples of autobiographical writing from an object to unpack how the objects work in tandem with and in opposition to subjectivity, acting as contradictory partners in the work of life writing.

Research Contribution

This essay responds to the material turn in life writing scholarship (see, for example, Harley, 2017; Matthews & Simon, 2020; Poletti, 2020) by attempting to enact theoretical insights within an autobiographical literary work. It is an experiment or trial in the tradition of the literary essay, making a contribution to the field through the application of scholarly ideas about life writing into a life writing example.

Research Significance

The significance of this work is indicated by its acceptance by *TEXT* journal, the key journal for creative writing in Australia, and inclusion in a special issue of *TEXT* on writing and things. Two other recent works exploring similar topics have been published in *Life Writing* and in the *European Journal of Life Writing*, both prestigious international life writing journals.

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