

Marie-Laure Ryan  
Introduction: Objects and Narrative

“If there is something that distinguishes our species of *Homo Sapiens* and its predecessor, *Homo Habilis*, it is the ability to manufacture objects that facilitate life-sustaining activities. And if there another thing that distinguishes *homo sapiens* from all other *homo* species, it is the development of language and its use to narrate experience. Hence, objects and narrative have an evolutionary affinity. And yet objects, until recently, have been barely noticed by narratologists. Seymour Chatman, for instance, divides story into event and existents, and existents into characters and setting, either ignoring objects, subordinating them to setting, or recognizing them only when they function as characters. This invisibility, this taken for granted of objects is in a sense understandable: narrative is about human or human-like experience, not about inanimate things (poetry is more likely to feature them prominently), and even though characters need objects to perform most actions, objects remain hidden from the reader’s consciousness when they perform their function normally. Who would notice the jar from which Emma Bovary took poison? It would of course be an entirely different matter if Emma dropped the jar, its content spilled, and the incident prevented Emma from committing suicide. As Heidegger observed, it takes a broken hammer for the mind to focus on the hammer in and for itself, rather than taking it as an extension of the body or as a mere piece of equipment.

In the past few decades, the theoretical silence that has long surrounded objects has been broken by sociology, through material studies concerned with the role of objects in everyday life, and by philosophy, through a loose movement that covers labels such as New Materialism, Object-Oriented Ontology, Speculative Realism, and Thing Theory and to which one can globally refer as the “material turn.”<sup>1</sup> Worth noting however is that while the sociological approach focusses on manufactured material objects and stresses their relations to humans, the philosophical approaches tend to expand the concept of object to include natural ones and even abstractions: for Graham Harman, everything that can be an object of thought is an object in a philosophical (if not material) sense, and the aim of object-oriented ontology is therefore to produce a “theory of everything.” Typical of the material turn is a conception of objects as defined not by their practical (i.e. human-ascribed) function, but rather by their role in a network that includes both humans and non-humans and that attributes the same ontological status to all of its elements, in what is called a “flat ontology,” so that material objects are not subordinated to human concerns. Moreover, all these theories deny the conventional belief that humans are active and objects passive by stressing the agency of objects. These ideas are increasingly influencing approaches to narrative, as the contributions by Caracciolo and Tang demonstrate. I leave it to their articles to provide more information about the material turn.

It would be wrong to say that before the material turn, literary criticism (which I take to be distinct from narratology) has been blind to objects. Prominent objects, functioning as symbols, have received their share of attention: for instance the handkerchief in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, the Holy Grail in medieval romances, or Achilles’ shield in the *Iliad*. Moreover, extensive scrutiny has been devoted to description—the attribution of features to objects, as Mieke Bal defined it (130)—and to whether it is a distinct text type or an indispensable feature of narrative. The 2014 *Style* issue on the description of interiors before 1850, which asks the question of the presence of internal focalization in this period, is a landmark in a narratological treatment of objects. So is the 2016 special issue of the same journal on lists, a major way of introducing objects in narrative. Yet objects have not received a widely recognized theoretical

status and a systematic coverage of their contribution to narrative meaning: one would look in vain for an object entry in either the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative* or the the *Handbook of Narratology*. Tang and I attempted to fill this void in our book *Object Oriented Narratology* by distinguishing four narratological functions of objects: mimetic, structural, strategic and thematic. The first one relates to the discourse component of narrative, while the other three have to do with the form, logical motivation, and content of the story. The distinction of these functions for a given textual object is not always easy, because objects can fulfill several of them, and fulfill them to variable degrees.

The mimetic function involves two components. (1) The study of the devices through which objects are represented in narrative; this includes a theory of description but it is not limited to it, for objects can be evoked through far more economical devices than extended description, such as lists or simple mentions. (2) The use of objects as descriptors, rather than as focus of description, as when a larger entity such as an interior or a landscape is evoked by means of the things that fill it, or when characters are psychologically described by means of the objects they keep, select, use, or that they let passively define their life. The study of the mimetic function is a well-represented area, especially component (1), as the theoretical approaches to description mentioned above suggest, though more work remains to be done on component (2).

In the structural function, objects are used as connectors between distinct narrative episodes or segments. A prime example of objects fulfilling a structural function is a genre that flourished in eighteenth century England, and that has been occasionally revived in contemporary fiction: the genre variably known as it-narrative, object narrative, or novel of circulation. A spin-off of the picaresque novel, which was particularly popular at that time, the novel of circulation replaces the traveling hero with a traveling object, or with an object that witnesses the coming and going of many characters. Each of the travels of the object, or each visit by different characters in the case of a sedentary object, leads to a different narrative episode. Another type of structural function is when objects are used as themes for chapters, as in Marina Warner's *Esmond and Ilia*, a biography of her parents: each chapter is titled after an object ("Two Diamond Rings," "The Box Brownie," "A Hat Box," etc.) , and many are illustrated by a picture of this object. Objects can also mediate between an embedding and an embedded narrative, according to the pattern "a character unexpectedly finds an object in a hidden place; this object awakens memories that form the topic of the story." But while the vast majority of narratives involve objects in some role, these objects rarely fulfill a distinct structural function, and the types of structures are limited. This explains why the structural function has been generally ignored.

In the strategic function, objects play a decisive role in the logical motivation of the plot. Insofar as plots represent possible course of events, the strategic function reflects how objects can determine imaginary or real lives, and it is epitomized by this saying: "For want of a nail the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe the horse was lost. For want of a horse the rider was lost. For want of a rider the message was lost. For want of a message the battle was lost. For want of a battle the kingdom was lost. And all for the want of a horseshoe nail." Widely found in narrative, the strategic function is represented by cases such as: an intensely desired object forming the goal of a quest; an object that miraculously saves the hero in a life-threatening situation; an object that malfunctions at a critical time, causing the doom of the hero; an object that functions as sign, solving a mystery, such as revealing the identity of a character; a found object or a lost object that affects a character's ability to perform actions, leading to success or failure; a fake object that passes as genuine, until its falsity is revealed; an object that transmits vital

information, or that fails to do so, as in the case of a lost letter; an inanimate object that magically comes to life to help a character; an invention supposed to better the fate of mankind but brings catastrophes instead; an object that gives great powers to its owner and creates a fight for its possession. The strategic potential of objects derives most often from their instrumental role, and it is when this role is blocked, or when characters find a way to use objects in a way that differs from their standard use, that the story stages the unexpected and achieves tellability. But objects can also affect plots through their memorial function, i.e. their ability to evoke past events, as does the madeleine in Proust's *A La recherche du temps perdu*. The strategic function of objects remains relatively unexplored, because the research of the post-classical era, in contrast to classical narratology, has generally been more interested in discourse phenomena than in the logical motivation of plot.

The thematic function resides in the symbolic value of objects and in their contribution to the global meaning of the text. An object is thematically significant when it means something else, and this something is not entirely predictable by the nature of the object. For instance, identifying an object as "a handkerchief" will not tell what it stands for in *Othello*: namely, as a symbol of love and marital fidelity. The refusal to let things stand for something else, which distracts from their being-in-themselves, can even become a theme, or metatheme, in its own right, as in a text by Annie Ernaux titled "On Cancer and Desire: Images from a Complicated Year." In this text, the narration of a cancer treatment and of a simultaneous love affair is interspersed with descriptions of photos (also included) taken of rooms after sexual encounters: the photos and the descriptions show a variety of random objects strewn on the floor, but the meaning of the individual objects is nothing more than their brute existence. Or if they have something to say, it consists of testifying that the narrator had sex with her lover on a given day. Barthes would call this the reality effect.

While the mimetic, strategic, structural and thematic functions are strictly narratological -they describe the role of objects in narrative *texts*, not in everyday *life*—the narrative study of objects cannot be divorced from considerations of the roles that objects fulfill in practical life, this is to say, of how they affect human experience; for if fictional lives differ from real lives, they are nevertheless imaginable lives, and much of what is true in reality will therefore also be true of fictional world, unless explicitly contradicted by the text.<sup>2</sup> The narratological functions need therefore to be complemented with a set of practical functions, though these functions are not necessarily practical in the narrow sense of the term. In real life, we not only make and keep objects because they are useful; in addition to their standard instrumental function, which is self-explanatory, objects can fulfill several others: for instance, ludic, aesthetic, and memorial. Ludic objects are either explicitly created for the non-practical activity of play (such as dolls or balls), or they are used in ways that subverts their practical function, as in pretending that an object is something else. Aesthetic objects are either objects with no other function than the pleasure taken in their contemplation, or they combine instrumentality with aesthetics when useful things are decorated. The function of memorial objects, such as relics or souvenirs, is to evoke the past and in so doing to trigger emotions, for remembering is a strongly emotional activity. Whereas souvenirs, the quintessential memorial objects, are deprived of any instrumental function, originally useful objects can also be valued for the memories they conjure, as when the everyday things of a loved one are revered as relics after their death. The common feature of these functions is that they are interchangeable, so that an aesthetic object can become memorial, an instrumental object ludic, or an instrumental object aesthetic.

Donna Tartt's novel *The Goldfinch* offers a prime example of how objects can simultaneously fulfill multiple narratological and practical functions. The novel weaves a fictional story around a real-life painting, "The Goldfinch" by Carel Fabritius, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch painter who died in an explosion that destroyed most of his work but preserved "The Goldfinch." In the novel, the hero and narrator, Theo, together with his mother, visits the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where the painting is temporarily displayed. In the rubble created by a terrorist attack that kills his mother, Theo finds the goldfinch painting and takes it with him. He then moves to Las Vegas to live with his father. There he befriends Boris, a street-wise Ukrainian kid. Boris steals the painting from Theo and replaces it in its package with a high school textbook, but since Theo never opens the package, he does not notice the theft. Several years later, after returning to New York, Theo is afraid of being prosecuted for stealing the painting, which he believes he still has, while Boris has become rich through drug deals, in which he used the painting as a collateral. But he finally manages to recover the painting from the traffickers and to clear Theo's name, and the painting is returned to the museum.

Objects play an important role in this novel, from the gold ring that a dying man gives Theo in the museum, to be returned to his partner, an antique dealer, to the antiques themselves, with which Theo falls in love, and which become his trade as a seller (he sells copies as originals, getting in trouble with the law). But the goldfinch painting stands out as the principal bearer of the strategic function: the acquisition, hiding, theft, and recovery of the painting determines the global trajectory of the plot.

The mimetic function of objects is richly represented through numerous interior descriptions, especially ones that involve antiques. But as far as the painting goes, description is very sparse: "It was a small picture, the smallest in the exhibition, and the simplest: a yellow finch against a plain, pale ground, chained to a perch by its twig of an ankle" (26). "I stepped back, to get a better look. It was a direct and matter-of-fact little creature, with nothing sentimental, about it; and something about the neat, compact way it tucked inside itself—its brightness, its alert watchful expression—made me think of pictures I'd seen of my mother when she was small: a dark-capped finch with steady eyes." (27).

The painting has important thematic implications, which involve several different practical functions. One of them, unexpectedly, is the instrumental function. As aesthetic objects, paintings are not supposed to play a useful role in life, yet their economic value allows them to participate in profitable deals. Boris activates the instrumental function when he uses the painting as collateral in a drug deal.

The aesthetic dimension of "The Goldfinch" resides in great part in the emotions it arouses in spectators through its subject matter. Here is a little girl's reaction in the museum: "Very softly---so softly I could barely hear her—I heard the girl whisper: 'It had to live its whole life like that?'" (28). While the little girl feels sorry for the bird, Theo's mother interprets the painting as an affirmation of life: "Such a mysterious picture, so simple. Really tender—invites you to stand close. All those dead pheasants back there [in conventional still lives] and then this little living creature" (28). Another aspect of the aesthetic function concerns the particular pictorial techniques. The painting is generally regarded as a *trompe-l'oeil* because the flat image gives a strong impression of three-dimensionality, but according to an art-dealer character, Fabritius made a joke of the *trompe-l'oeil* tradition by making the brushstrokes visible: "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...there's a doubleness. You see the mark, you see the paint for the paint, and also the living bird" (579). But

not at the same time: seeing both the bird and the paint takes a game of in-and-out that is also fundamental to the aesthetic appreciation of fictional worlds.

The reason for Theo's attachment to the painting lies in its memorial function. "The Goldfinch" is part of Theo's last memory of his mother: shortly after they view it, Theo's mother leaves him to buy a present in the gift store; then the explosion happens, she is killed but he survives. For Theo, as a passage quoted above suggests (it "made me think of pictures I'd seen of my mother when she was small"), the goldfinch stands for his mother, and as long as he holds onto the painting, he holds onto her presence. For other characters, the painting's memorial function resides in its story, in Carel Fabritius's tragic death and in its miraculous survival after the explosion in Delft that destroyed most of the painter's works.

But the emotional impact of "The Goldfinch" on Theo goes beyond mere remembrance. The possession of the painting, though illegal, gives him an empowering sense of holding a secret that gives meaning to his life. This is why he is devastated when Boris tells him that the package he so carefully held onto and hid contains nothing more than a common textbook: "The painting had me feel less mortal, less ordinary. It was support and vindication; it was sustenance and sum. It was the keystone that had held the whole cathedral up. And it was awful to learn, by having it so suddenly vanish from under me, that all my adult life I'd been privately sustained by that great, hidden, savage joy: the conviction that my whole life was balanced atop a secret that might at any moment blow apart." (559)

Why do we love objects? asks the novel. This love can lead to greed and materialism, as when Theo sells modern copies of antiques for originals, or when Boris uses "The Goldfinch" in a drug deal. But objects can also provide morally pure joy: as witnesses of history, as ways to overcome trauma, and above all, as manifestations of "some larger beauty" (757).

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In this issue, the question "why we love objects" is asked of narrative in general. The texts gathered here explore narrativity in areas wider than modern, Western, adult, and language-based narrative fiction, the traditional territory of narratological research: computer games for Caracciolo, children's stories for Ciccoricco, pre-Modern narratives for von Contzen, non-Western poetry for Fu and Zhong. Only Tang's chapter and Ryan's review stick to the standard narratological hunting ground. Moreover, the contributions highlight different narratological object functions: von Contzen starts from the mimetic, but connects it to the thematic and strategic, Ciccoricco reveals an original kind of structural function, and Caracciolo focuses on the strategic role of object in games. Tang's and Fu and Zhong's contributions cannot however be easily classified according to the narratological functions proposed here, because these functions represent the narrative role of concrete, material, physically bound objects, while for Tang the notion of object stands for reality in all its mysteries, and for Fu and Zhong, it encompasses all that exists. But the notion of thematic function may be broad enough to cover any kind of interpretation.

Von Contzen's contribution bridges the gap between materiality studies and object-oriented narratology. All man-made objects are made of some kind of matter, whether natural, like wood, stone and gold, or itself man-made, like glass or plastic, but the success of their design depends on whether or not they respect the inherent properties, or affordances, of their material. Von Contzen invokes the medieval concept of *virtus*, inspired by scholastic philosophy, to designate the affordances of glass, and she connects this *virtus* (etymology of the French term of *vitre* for window pane) to the narrative potential of glass-made objects. By demonstrating the

symbolic and metaphorical importance for medieval narratives of some of the properties of these objects, such as hardness and endurance on one hand, brittleness, translucidity, and reflectivity on the other, von Contzen initiates a comparative approach that does to kinds of matter what Gaston Bachelard did for natural elements with his studies of earth, air, fire and water in the poetic imagination.

Children have different, less utilitarian relations to objects than adults. For the very young, objects are primarily material things that they can explore from all sides by holding them in their hands or bringing them to their mouth, ignorant of what they are really for. For slightly older children, objects can be turned into “props in games of make-believe” (Walton) by making them stand for something other than they are (stumps are to be taken as bears), or by using them in ways different than what they were designed for (bedsheets turn children into ghosts). More generally, young children easily attribute sentience to things, and therefore do not subscribe to a rigid distinction between animated humans and inanimate, lifeless things. The vast domain of children’s literature begs to be explored for its conceptions of objects and for their narrative role. David Ciccoricco takes up this task by revealing a narrative structure that reflects the mode of thinking typical of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder): rather than following a single existent, the text jump from object to object according to “free,” yet not random associations whose nature deserves close scrutiny. Does this type of narrative promote self-acceptance in ADHD children or should they be exposed to more traditional, focusses narratives ? Whatever the answer, Ciccoricco’s suggests the value of narratological inquiry for empirical studies of neurodivergent minds.

Adherents to new object philosophies may argue that the practical categories of instrumental, ludic, aesthetic and memorial objects proposed above place too much emphasis on the needs of human subjects and not enough on the autonomous being of objects. A strong current in the material turn seeks to free objects from their subordination to humans by insisting on their agency. Marco Caracciolo’s article associates this agency with the hidden, uncertain characters of algorithms in computer games. Uncertainty does not mean here that the behavior of the code that underlies objects in games is unknowable: code is fully deterministic (to the point that it cannot generate truly random numbers) and its strategic effect is generally well known to the game designers, except in the case of inadvertent coding mistakes. But because code is hidden to the players, they cannot safely predict how objects will behave and whether they will fulfill an instrumental function. Some objects will even be totally deprived of agency because they have no code associated with them, though their difference from code-activated objects cannot be established by visual examination. Caracciolo gives two examples of computer game objects that exhibit unpredictable behavior, subverting the common view of things as docile equipment. In *The Secret of Monkey Island*, players must discover a non-standard affordance of things, i.e. using a saucepan as a helmet in order to be allowed to be shot out of a cannon. In *Immortality*, players believe that they are helping to unlock a movie clip by clicking on objects, but when the clip appears, their activity turns out to have been inconsequential: why the algorithm reveals the hidden film clip at a certain point in the game and after which player moves remains a secret.

The material turn is popular in Chinese narratology, and a trademark of this work lies in its close application to narrative of the models and concepts proposed by philosophers. A case in point is Tangs contribution. In a previous article (2019), Tang describes the contribution of the material turn to narratology as providing three novel perspectives on objects: a cultural approach, focused on how desire for certain commodities (spices, silk, China, opium, gold) shapes history,

society and narrative plots; a “vibrant things” approach that demonstrates the agency of things through their strategic role in narrative; and an ontological approach that attempts to show how art and language provide glimpses into what Graham Harman calls the “withdrawn” reality of things. In his contribution to this volume, Tang borrows from Harman a broad concept of object that includes not only “material thing that can be seen and touched,” as the OED defines object, but also abstract and mental phenomena, as well as fictional entities, as this list of examples by Harman suggests: “Sherlock Holmes, real humans and animals, chemicals, hallucinations” (2018, 55), as well as “the electron, the molecule, the Dutch East India Company and the galaxy” (2018, 40). Tang relies on Harman’s model of objects in *The Quadruple Object* to demonstrate how short stories manage to reveal “the mystery or reality of life,” an effect of the genre that has been noted by many critics. In the examples discussed by Tang, this mystery is represented in many ways: by a concrete object or person whose true nature remains unknown (Beckett’s *Godot*, a giant’s body washed ashore in a J.C. Ballard short story); by concrete objects whose mysterious reality is alluded to (Rick Bass’s natural things such as animals or forests); by an abstract idea whose nature is revealed, such as love in a Raymond Williams short story; or by an abstract idea whose perceived nature is shown to rely on false beliefs (civilization in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*). Not only does Tang follow Harman in exploding the notion of object beyond the material and human-scale, he also applies the model proposed by Harman in *The Quadruple Object* in a literal fashion, developing a four-fold, symmetrical analysis of the various ways in which not only short stories, but also selected novels and play deal with the mystery of life.

The ontological approach mentioned above finds its purest manifestation in Fu and Zhong’s contribution, “Listening for Thingness: Representing Sound in Chinese Literary Tradition.” The reality of things, if it is to be glimpsed by humans, will not be apprehended by vision exclusively, the sense we most often rely on for information, but by the totality of our sensorium, as well as by our embodied mind. The term “listen” in Chinese refers not so much to audition as to the holistic experience of the interrelation of all things. As a form of attention to the surrounding world, “listening” requires neither sound (“listening to nothingness”) nor listener (“listening without us”) nor consciousness (“listening without hearing”). Through their study of listening, which makes bound objects dissolve into the unity of all that exists, Fu and Zhong’s article captures beautifully the serenity and sense of presence of the world that emanate from Chinese poetry.

The final article, a review by Marie-Laure Ryan of Marta Caraion’s *Comment la littérature pense les objets*, introduces *Style*’s readers to the work of an important francophone scholar, and through its survey of the treatment of objects in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, advocates a diachronic approach to narrative objects.

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<sup>1</sup> The sociological approach is represented by Daniel Miller, and the philosophical approach by Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Steven Shaviro, Ray Brassier, Levy Bryant, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett and others. The main proponent of “Thing Theory” is Bill Brown.

<sup>2</sup> I have called this idea the principle of minimal departure. See Ryan 1991.

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