

## The Insistence of the Object - and its Sublimations

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Theories of sublimation and symbolization, concepts which lie at the meeting point of psychoanalysis and culture, have traditionally followed Freud then Lacan in focusing on language as the vehicle of representation. This essay examines what could be called the Kleinian foundation of Lacan's theory of sublimation, arguing that both before language and throughout life, material objects may function in more primitive ways as mediators of loss. In its emphasis on the "vitality" of objects (psychic and material), much post-Kleinian theory has demonstrated the way material objects may offer a third space, *between* subject and object, allowing us to negotiate the dialectic between reality and hallucination, the confrontation with the Lacanian Real. Texts examined include Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Angela Carter's *Wise Children*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Melanie Klein's essay on the creative impulse, and Lacan's seventh seminar.

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*la mère . . . de la position dépressive, . . . introduit un élément nouveau de totalité, qui s'oppose au chaos d'objets morcelés qui caractériserait l'étape précédente. Eh bien, cet élément nouveau, c'est bien davantage la présence-absence.*

Jacques Lacan<sup>1</sup>

**A**t the beginning of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the protagonist Saleem Sinai describes the task of narrating his life as one of ingesting and digesting a huge mass of material. He has, he says, "so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable

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1. "Théorie du manque d'objet," *Séminaire IV* 67.

and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well" (9). This dense commingling, that has to be digested if Saleem is to hold it down, teems with an insistent urgency that constantly threatens to get the better of him (and the reader). What saves him, however, is one particular material object: "Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me; and guided only by the memory of a large white bedsheet with a roughly circular hole some seven inches in diameter cut into the centre, clutching at the dream of that holey, mutilated square of linen, which is my talisman, my open-sesame, I must commence the business of remaking my life" (9-10). In his drive towards the complete picture ("swallow[ing] the lot"), Saleem only gets fragments, glimpses through the hole in the sheet, which was how his grandfather first saw his future wife's body, according to the traditions of modesty imposed by her Kashmiri father. But the hole provides protection against what teems beyond it ("the [whole] lot"). What the grandfather saw through the hole, we are told, "had filled up the hole inside him" (27), although it opens up again immediately the sheet is removed. Saleem, like his grandfather, only ever has too little or too much material.

The "open-sesame" of Rushdie's magic realist text has as much to do with what is hidden and intractable as it does with revelations. For Saleem finds that what he has as a guide is, as he puts it in the above passage, only "the memory" or "a dream" of the large white perforated sheet, not the sheet itself. "Remaking" his life turns out to be a process of negotiating the chasm that separates the subject from the objects around it. Objects, for all their allure and vitality, persist in eluding him, abandoning him to the mirages of his own mental projections. In their potential to provoke memory and desire, things resonate with meaning as much as they (maddeningly) insist on remaining inert.

It could perhaps be argued that it is out of the tension between these two impulses - the drive towards symbolization, and its frustration - that the novel as a genre has taken shape, with Robinson Crusoe's obsessive salvaging and storing of things an early prototype. Objects that can't be co-opted in the service of memory or desire, or that are deprived of the comforting illusions of their exchange value, threaten the human subject with death, warning of the imminent return of all matter to waste. One of the many objects that propels Crusoe towards death is shoes. The "sign" (Defoe 66) first comes in the form of the two shoes washed up as the only remaining trace of his ship-wrecked companions. At this point, Crusoe simply mentions

that these two shoes were “not fellows” (66), drawing attention both to their failure to offer him the fellowship their owners might have given him in his isolation, and to the fact they’re not a pair, and therefore of no use. Years later, another wreck brings more things which, however, only serve to remind him still further of the gap between what he wants and what he’s got:

I got very little by this voyage [to the wreck] that was of any use to me; for as to the money, I had no manner of occasion for it: ’twas to me as the dirt under my feet; and I would have given it all for three or four pair of English shoes and stockings, which were things I greatly wanted, but had not had on my feet now for many years: I had indeed gotten two pair of shoes now, which I took off of the feet of the two drowned men who I saw in the wreck; and I found two pair more in one of the chests, which were very welcome to me; but they were not like our English shoes, either for ease or service; being rather what we call pumps than shoes. (197)

This collecting of useless shoes highlights the transformation of objects into commodities within a capitalist economy, where objects are accumulated for the sheer sake of it, even when (as on the island) they have no exchange value. The frantic quality of Crusoe’s collecting, however, has a particular point, for by this time trauma has struck him in his long isolation in the form of a much more tenuously material sign than shoes. A footprint on the sand, which for a long time gives no indication of meaning, makes Crusoe flee like one pursued by the devil, “terrify’d to the last degree” (162) - a terror, he confesses, which seemed quite “inconsistent with the thing it self” (163). Worn shoes with no feet in them may be a potent symbol of death and violence, of which the heaps of shoes in Nazi concentration camps are an appalling reminder. The footprint, however, presents Crusoe with a double threat. First, the link between signifier and signified is deliberately cut: what does the footprint represent? Symptomatically, this uncertainty provokes a flurry of defensive attempts to give symbolic meaning to every random object he meets. Every bush, tree and stump becomes a sign of something: “nor is it possible to describe how many various shapes affrighted imagination represented things to me in” (162). It is at this point, under the shadow of the object, we could say, that this prototypically realist text becomes a Gothic novel. Secondly, and worst of all, however, the symbol threatens to disappear altogether, as “the first surge of the sea upon a high wind would . . . defac[e] [it] entirely” (163). Surely, Crusoe pleads, “the devil might have found out abundance of other ways to have terrify’d

me than this of the single print of a foot" (163)? The devil, it seems, knew what he was about, as the footprint represents the possibility of the loss of the symbol itself, and thus a direct and traumatic encounter with the Real of loss.

As a self-consciously postmodern subject, Saleem Sinai is brave about his own materiality. Accepting that he will "eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust" (Rushdie 37), he sets about making full use of the matter around him to preserve his life, as he preserves pickles in the jars whose contents permeate the senses at every turn. Gritting his teeth against the rumbling in the gut, he holds firmly to his objects - the perforated sheet, the chutneys and kasaundies, the frost-hardened tussock of earth that his grandfather hit his nose on - in order to be able to hold it all down, to create a symbolic narrative.

### **Nameless Things and Thingless Names**

This new self-conscious ability to digest (symbolize) the material world contrasts sharply with an early postmodern queasiness. Beckett, the master of the unnamable, placed *homo symbolicus* in unanchored relation to things in a bare and melancholy topos, where objects such as boots, hats and trees only serve to remind us of our impotence, of their status as floating signifiers. The iconic depiction of the resistance of things to signifying categories comes in Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), when Antoine Roquentin confronts the root of a chestnut tree that plunges into the ground under the park bench he's sitting on:

all of a sudden, there it was, as clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost its harmless appearance as an abstract category: it was the very stuff of things, that root was steeped in existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass on the lawn, all that had vanished; the diversity of things, their individuality, was only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, in disorder - naked, with a frightening, obscene nakedness. (*Nausea* 183)

Diversity, whereby signifiers take on meaning through their difference from other signifiers (roots, grass, gates, benches), has vanished to reveal "the very stuff of things," immanent with a seething, shifting life of their own: vomit-like "soft, monstrous masses" ("des masses monstrueuses et molles"

[Sartre, *La nausée* 180]). Unlike Saleem Sinai, Roquentin is overwhelmed, ready to throw it all up. This process whereby symbolic diversity gives way to monstrous undifferentiated multiformity is one which lurks at the core of all human terror, as the fictions of H.P. Lovecraft and Stephen King have shown.

As Simon Critchley argues in his analysis of the poetry of Fernando Pessoa and Wallace Stevens in this volume, to cease to be lured by the obsessive drive towards the attribution of meaning is to be freed to perceive the world as it is. Such insights have emerged for Critchley (and others) within the context of phenomenological philosophy, from which objects have been released from their servitude to human signifying practices and invested with active agency, in the process relieving us from the burden of their ordering. In this way, *they* may be the ones to provide order, standing out calm and alluring, like Stevens's jar placed upon a hill in Tennessee, which "made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill" (Stevens 446). For Heidegger - pondering the question of "what is a thing?" - the jug's "thingness" has precisely to do with its standing-forthness, its self-supporting independence of the human representational acts that encounter it. We, not things, are the ones that are "conditioned": "We have left behind us the presumption of all unconditionedness" (181). We can't "step back" from our thinking, because "all attitudes, including the ways in which they shift, remain committed to the precincts of representational thinking" (181). Only when, suddenly, "world worlds as a world" (earth, sky, divinities, mortals), does the thing "shine forth," "thinging" itself in its own unpretentious way (182). Only then can it be called a thing.

Because of this standing-forthness, the thing is able to take on its function in the process of intersubjectivity. Objects, as Husserl argued (and as Peter Costello illustrates in this volume), bring about links between subjects through our shared interpretations of them. Thus instead of the rigid dualism of Cartesian metaphysics, we have what Donald Davidson has described as a triangulation of the subjective, intersubjective and objective. Objectivity, he argues, is possible because of the intersection of points of view: "Intersubjectivity is the root of objectivity, not because what people agree on is necessarily true, but because intersubjectivity depends on interaction with the world" (91). Beckett's hats, passed from one to the other in endless rituals of seeming futility, may, if seen in this light, become agents of interaction; the poignant mutuality of Vladimir and Estragon comes about not so much (though also) through the attaching of words to things as through the attaching of people by means of words and things. As Elaine

Scarry has put it, following Marx, what distinguishes humans from other creatures is neither the acuity of our senses nor the endurance of our bodies, but rather the fact that our sentience “is, to a vastly greater degree than that of any other animal, objectified in language and material objects and is thus fundamentally transformed to be communicable and endlessly sharable” (255).<sup>2</sup>

### Projections and their Vicissitudes

Davidson’s (and phenomenology’s) triangulations seem to have been born from the head of psychoanalysis. One of the crucial points of intersection between philosophy and psychoanalysis in the twentieth century is in their common concern with the process of projection, described by Freud in his radical reformulation of the human personality as structured upon Oedipal projections. Simon Critchley is right to insist (with Pessoa) that the untying of things from their symbolic attributions requires a long “apprenticeship in unlearning,” as the establishment of psychic projections (identification, symbolization, sublimation) is a process initiated from the first moments of life, if not *in utero*. Focusing on infant-mother projections, Melanie Klein extended Freud’s paradigm into the complexities of introjection and projective identification, the phantasmatic instalment back in the ego of what’s “found” in the other/object, and the aggressive re-insertion of parts of the ego back into the object so that it may be controlled. The model of monadic subjectivity has become impossible in a post-Kleinian context. The subject, objectified through relatedness, then sets about subjecting the object to its needs, compelling the other/analyst to experience what s/he is experiencing intrapsychically. At the same time, object relations have always had as much to do with processes of substitution as they have with those of identification. It is a short step, if it is a step at all, from Hegel’s definition of the word as the murderer of the thing to Freud’s wooden reel, hurled away with vengeful glee and a shout of “*fort-da*” by the toddler attempting to come to terms with its mother’s absence. Free-standing objects, whether they be others, hand-made products, or more collective products like mon-

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2. Scarry adds the following footnote here: “The stipulation that this is a difference in degree is important, for animals have not only *verbal* or vocalized forms of communication but also the rudimentary equivalents of *materialized* objectification, artifacts or tools. Engels, for example, mentions . . . the spider’s weaving of a web, as does Marx as well [in *Capital I*]. The web is a tool that not only assists the catching of prey but does so by extending the range of the creature’s sentience” (364n75).

ey or ideological structures, must be recognized as “successive circles of self-extension” - or, to put it differently, as “external materialization[s] of our interior capacity for *self-replication* and *self-modification*” (Scarry 284). The subject’s constitution, as Kristeva puts it, “is nothing other than a slow, laborious production of object relation” (*Powers of Horror* 47-48), with the terms of her description (labour, production) echoing Marx’s famous dictum that “[t]he person is objectified in production; the material thing is subjectified in the person” (Marx 350).

The important point to note here is that whereas things always become objects, objects can never be things. We may call things objects; indeed, it is characteristic of our symbolizing compulsion that we will. But the thing as that which escapes psychic investments is and must by definition always be beyond them. Psychology, like phenomenology, has taught us that all perception is apperception. Within contemporary psychoanalysis, as within postmodern culture, there is a feeling that it’s time to give both things and objects their due, that humanism has been too voracious in its projections. In an interview in a collection of essays on his work entitled *The Vitality of Objects*, the British object-relations analyst Christopher Bollas complains that psychoanalysis has tended to focus too much on the projective uses of objects at the expense of their “integrity,” on what we strive omnipotently to put into them, their function “as sorts of neutral or empty spaces to receive our contents” (“Christopher Bollas Interviewed” 216). We need, he argues, to look at this the other way round, to focus on how objects have an “evocative integrity” which has the ability to “structure us differently” (185).

The emphasis on the resistance of objects to subjective appropriations has given to some recent psychoanalytic writing, including that of Bollas, an almost mystical reverence for the object’s activity. As Bollas explains it, until the “grasp” of language, the infant’s meaning resides primarily within the mother’s psyche-soma in the form of a “being-with” prior to symbolic knowledge (*The Shadow of the Object* 35, 32). The power of this memory, which he calls the “unthought known” (4), exerts throughout life a hold such that all objects (others, artifacts, natural forms, experiences) perpetually lure us back to this being-with before thought. Aesthetic experiences have an important function in this respect. In the aesthetic moment, which may be a spot of time in a natural setting,<sup>3</sup> a flash of religious insight, or the awe on

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3. Wordsworth’s description of the effects of spots of time has a strikingly Kleinian-Bollasean ring to it:





procedure. They are always, as Saleem Sinai complains, being “bull[ied] . . . back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next” (Rushdie 38). Past, present and future are less easily crystallized into the poetic spot of time, a flash of unification, restrained and intensified by metre. But in dragging out time’s linearity over years (or the length of a day), fictional texts open gaps for ghostly presences - spaces, however, that always have to do with the temporal. The object is never in (the) place; it only ever haunts it, through memory and desire.

Saleem Sinai understands the weight of time. He is, he says, “hand-cuffed to history” (9), his own as well as that of his nation. The legacy of his grandfather, the perforated sheet, has left a lack in the Lacanian sense of “*béance*” meaning a hole or gap between things - not nothing, but a gaping, beseeching something that won’t let him rest.

Saleem’s ghost doesn’t make its appearance until well into his narrative. Throughout Book One (the first 120 pages), we follow the story of his family history - only to be told, belatedly, that he’s actually the son of someone else, having been swapped for another mother’s baby in the nursing home on the night of his birth (which is also the night of the birth of India’s independence, in August 1947). His (as it turns out, surrogate) mother has been given a prophecy, that she’ll give birth to “a child with two heads” (100) - which in a sense she has, being fated to rear the other and always lack the (“real”) one. The one and its double dog each other’s steps from this point on, with much comedy deriving from the confusions. Grandfather Aadam Aziz’s big nose turns up two generations later on the wrong boy, the one with no genetic relation to him. What you see is *not* what you get. The only authentically-transmitted characteristic is the father’s knobby knees. To the end, Saleem is pursued by his double, “the terrifying figure of a war-hero with lethal knees, who has found out how I cheated him of his birth-right” (462).

Sibling rivalry, Lacan notes in his essay on “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis,” is the trope, *par excellence*, of our otherness to ourselves. Much contemporary fiction is preoccupied with murderous twinning, brothers and sisters whose stories, when not being bullied back into the world of linear narrative, open cracks to reveal death-driven antagonisms. Angela Carter’s late novel *Wise Children* (1991), like Rushdie’s novel, presents a world of proliferating duplicities, in which every one has her double. The narrator Dora’s identity is such that she and her identical twin Nora speak of themselves in the collective singular: “We were a pretty girl” (110). These two get along happily enough, but both the other two sets of (this time non-

identical) twins seethe with enmity to the last. And each of these two sets of twins harbours grudges against the other set. The “magic” here, as well, comes (as Carter’s title suggests) in the fictions of paternity whereby, as many fairy tales attest, childhood fantasy is dominated by family romances promising escape from sibling rivalries or inadequate parenting. Perhaps, after all, our real parents might be someone else. In both *Midnight’s Children* and *Wise Children* there are foundlings, born on the wrong side of the tracks, and those who have wrongfully inherited the earth. Carter’s is a theatrical world with two sides to the mask, the tragic and the comic. While Dora and Nora’s famous father Sir Melchior Hazard struts it out as Lear or Othello in the West End, they tread the boards at the “fag end of vaudeville” (59), getting up a good enough showing as long as the favours last. But in comedy, the aggressions of otherness, of mistaken identities and divided twins, are finally resolved, as they are in Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors* or *Twelfth Night*.

In other novels of sibling rivalry, such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* (2000), the murderous effects of duplicity are more tragic.<sup>4</sup> According to Lacan, aggression in human behaviour is *not* due to the failure to resolve the Oedipal conflict; this is more meaningfully explained in terms of narcissism. Rather, it must be understood as something prior to the Oedipal. Lacan described primary identification with our own reflection as setting up a “bipolar structure” of subjectivity (“Aggressivity” 10), whereby the subject becomes “a rival with himself” (22) long before the experience of empathy. Heraclitus (along with Melanie Klein) was right, Lacan contends: Discord is prior to harmony (21). “Objectifying identifications” put in place a perpetual discordance or splitting (“*déchirement*,” tearing), “by which it might be said that at every moment he [‘man’] constitutes his world by his suicide” (28). All sustained doubling, as Gothic fiction knew long before Otto Rank or Freud, must end fatally. The specifically Lacanian inflection of doubling is the constitutive role of vision in the relation to the object.<sup>5</sup> The encounter with the object, for Lacan, is always about “seeing things” in the always already metaphorical sense of perception as deception.

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4. For a detailed reading of this novel in this context, see my essay entitled “‘What Isn’t There’ in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*: The Psychoanalysis of Duplicity.”

5. Long before Lacan, however, the concept of the *imago*, usually attributed to Jung (Laplanche and Pontalis 211), posited the object as a surface onto which infant desires are projected, like light onto a screen.

### The Thing that Subsists in a Match Box

Lacan's seminars and writings are full of out-standing, sharply-visualized, material objects, from the inverted bouquet of his musings on optics in *Seminar I* (1954), to the sardine can in the seminars on the gaze a decade later, to the evocative rings of string in the last seminars in the 1970s. In the seminars on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-60), he presents a "little fable" of the match box collection belonging to his friend the writer Jacques Prévert. This is how he describes it:

les boîtes d'allumettes se présentaient ainsi - elles étaient toutes les mêmes, et disposées d'une façon extrêmement agréable, qui consistait en ce que, chacune étant rapprochée de l'autre par un léger déplacement du tiroir intérieur, elles s'enfilaient les unes les autres, formant comme une bande cohérente, laquelle courait sur le rebord de la cheminée, montait sur la muraille, affrontait les cimaises, et redescendait le long d'une porte. Je ne dis pas que cela allait ainsi à l'infini, mais c'était excessivement satisfaisant du point de vue ornemental. (*Séminaire VII* 136)

the match boxes appeared as follows: they were all the same and were laid out in an extremely agreeable way that involved each one being so close to the one next to it that the little drawer was slightly displaced. As a result, they were all threaded together so as to form a continuous ribbon that ran along the mantelpiece, climbed the wall, extended to the molding, and climbed down again next to a door. I don't say that it went on to infinity, but it was extremely satisfying from an ornamental point of view. (*Seminar VII* 114)

Objects in a collection are not the same as objects in the psychoanalytic relation, he stresses, the latter being imaginary objects, points of imaginary fixation. "Collectionism" is nonetheless an important psychological phenomenon. "I am something of a collector myself," he adds with characteristic complacency, "[a]nd if some of you like to think that it is in imitation of Freud, so be it" (113). Collecting, he continues, is less about diversity than about sameness, sameness in multiplicity or repetition. Like the proliferating, undifferentiated "masses" of Sartre's *Nausea*, we might say, the boxes take on a life of their own, running along the mantelpiece, climbing the wall, and climbing down again ("comme une bande cohérente, laquelle courait sur le rebord de la cheminée, montait sur la muraille, affrontait les cimaises, et redescendait le long d'une porte"). And like Ro-

quentin, Lacan finds this multiplicity of sameness disturbing - both “vraiment imposante” and “excessivement satisfaisant” (*Séminaire VII* 136), with emphasis on the concept of excess (less marked in Dennis Porter’s translation, “extremely satisfying”).

In this description of repeated sameness, which he is *not* saying went on to infinity (suggesting the positive through negation), there is more than a passing nod at the eighteenth-century aesthetic of the sublime. Edmund Burke, for example, had analyzed the way representations of seeming infinity provide a source of sublime pleasure. One of the ways to achieve this “deception,” Burke argued, was through forms of “succession and uniformity,” as with rows of pillars in the aisles of cathedrals (67-69). The Kantian sublime, which was particularly compatible with Lacan’s position, added to Burke the notion of the impossibility of infinity, its impossibility for the human mind which would grasp it. The sublime, for Kant, “is an object (of nature) *the presentation of which determines the mind to think of nature’s inability to attain to an exhibition of ideas*” (127).

Another unnamed interlocutor here is surely Salvador Dali. At the end of his little fable, Lacan refers to the fact that the slightly-open match box appears to be a “mutant form” of another object, a drawer, and as such, presents itself with a “copulatory force” evident to anyone viewing Prévert’s collection (*Seminar VII* 114). It would have been particularly evident to those like Lacan who had been exposed to the sculpture and paintings of Dali, many of them depicting drawers protruding slightly out of human bodies - for example *City of Drawers* or the famous *Venus with Drawers*, both of 1936, several years after Lacan and Dali first met. Surrealist objects as defined by Dali are “mutant” in the same way Lacan was later to formulate - that is, double images (*both* Narcissus *and* a stone hand holding an egg), objects of a “paranoiac” perception, duplicitously destabilized.

The “essential point” about the match boxes, Lacan explains, is that the aesthetic experience has to do with being presented with “an *Erscheinung*” (114), earlier defined as appearance as apparition (60) - “ce que l’on pourrait appeler la substance de l’apparence, le matériel d’un leurre vital, une apparition” (*Séminaire VII* 75). Here we recall Robinson Crusoe, who on encountering the footprint, “very plain to be seen in the sand . . . stood like one thunder-struck, or as if I had seen an apparition” (Defoe 162), whose obsessive collecting, in other words, has to do with the mirror play of appearance and apparition. It also has everything to do with that other psycho-visual phenomenon, fetishism. Like the collector’s item, the fetishized object is not idealized (identified with). Rather, it is that to which excessive object in-

vestments adhere, a process underlying all perversion. This is the element omitted in Kantian ethics but understood by Sade - the human propensity towards transgression beyond the limits, towards “excessive object sublimation” (Lacan, *Seminar VII* 109).

It is important to stress that what is at issue here is the concept of sublimation, the conversion of the mundane and trivial into a “collection,” something that society can “esteem, valorize, and approve” (113). But in being used to anchor desire in what can be approved, such cultural objects only draw attention to their status as sublime objects, which Lacan describes as follows:

Le caractère complètement gratuit, proliférant et superfétatoire, quasi absurde, de cette collection visait en fait sa choseité de boîte d'allumettes. Le collectionneur trouvait ainsi sa raison dans ce mode d'*appréhension* portant moins sur la boîte d'allumettes que sur cette Chose qui subsiste dans une boîte d'allumettes. (*Séminaire VII* 136, emphasis added)

The wholly gratuitous, proliferating, superfluous, and quasi absurd character of this collection pointed to its thingness as match box. Thus the collector found his motive in this form of *appréhension* that concerns less the match box than the Thing that subsists in a match box. (*Seminar VII* 114, emphasis added)

Through collecting we can understand what it means for “a thing” to become “the Thing.” A thing has to do with the object of imaginary identifications, or the material objects that lure us into imaginary investments (Freud's *die Sache*, “a product of industry and of human action as governed by language” [*Seminar VII* 45]). The Thing (*das Ding*) is something quite different, being that which eludes the aim of satisfaction. The obsessive proliferation of the match boxes draws attention to the fundamental Freudian point about the impossibility of coincidence between aim and object. Through its visual exposure, the object, like the object of courtly love, is suddenly “rais[ed] . . . to a dignity of the Thing” (112).

The collector's motive, therefore (as we have seen with Crusoe), has to do with “appréhension” in the double sense used by Lacan in the above quote - that is, both that which is laid out to be “appréhended” (seen, captured) and that which at the same time invokes apprehension, dread. The sublime, in a post-Kantian context<sup>6</sup> is on the side of the death drive, that

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6. Postmodernity has followed Kant in stressing the resistance of the object world to its

which lures, captures and terrifies through its excess. It is not irrelevant, and indeed Lacan makes much of this, that Jacques Prévert's little collection was made during "that great period of penitence" and "belt-tightening" that France went through under Pétain and German occupation, with a demonstrative curbing of excess in the name of "Work, Family, Homeland" (113). Excess, that which exceeds in grandeur or sheer proliferating multiplicity, runs counter to the symbolic order. The sublime, and here is the Lacanian paradox, is precisely that which eludes sublimation. It is in this sense that for Lacan, objects can never be symbolic, only ever imaginary or "real."

As "the beyond-of-the-signified" (54), Lacan's *das Ding* is Kant's thing-in-itself as described by Heidegger, meaning "an object that is no object for us, because it is supposed to stand, stay put, without a possible before: for the human representational act that encounters it" (Heidegger 177). It is also Heidegger's, to the extent that Heidegger's jug, like Lacan's vase,<sup>7</sup> embodies a state of emptiness, a void. For Heidegger, the jug's void is "that which holds" (172), the holding of air, which is displaced when wine is poured in. For Lacan, the emphasis is slightly different, in that the vase "creates the void and thereby introduces the possibility of filling it" (*Seminar VII* 120). Indeed, it could be said that it is on the basis of the pot/vase/jug, a primeval object which has "always been there" in human civilization (120), that concepts of emptiness and filling have entered the world - and along with them, concepts of creation:

if you consider the vase . . . as an object made to represent the existence of the emptiness at the center of the real that is called the Thing, this emptiness as represented in the representation presents itself as a *nihil*, as nothing. And that is why the potter . . . creates the vase with his hand around this emptiness, creates it, just like the mythical creator, *ex nihilo*, starting with a hole. (121)

All forms of creation, as products of human action and industry, are sublimations, representations of the void "presenting" itself. As we have argued in the Introduction to this volume, the laboriously-produced little *ur-play* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* focuses on a chink in the wall which sustains

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discursive equivalent. In his reading of Kant's third *Critique*, Lyotard argues that the sublime, the most authentic form of the aesthetic, is "a thought that is felt on the occasion of an absence of the object's form" (231).

7. Peter Schwenger comments on Lacan's misreading of Heidegger's jug as a vase, which "skews his reading away from the jug's function of pouring out, of which Heidegger makes so much" (111).

the desire of Pyramus and Thisby; its removal means death. And yet (like Saleem's narrative, the product of the perforated sheet), the play, however "palpable-gross," "well beguile[s] / The heavy gait of night" for the company (Shakespeare 122), warding off terror through representation.

### Reparations

At several points in the seminar on ethics, Lacan plays cat and mouse with Melanie Klein's object, which he is anxious to insist he does *not* accept,<sup>8</sup> to the extent that he finds it reductive and "puerile" (*Seminar VII* 107). The ambivalence of this refusal, as Mary Jacobus has argued in relation to Lacan's reading of Klein's case of Little Dick in *Seminar I*, may be described as a form of projective identification: a radical rejection of an opponent's ideas out of fear of discovering them in oneself (Jacobus 139). Throughout his discussions of sublimation in the seminar on ethics, Lacan repeatedly expels then incorporates the Kleinian object, denying then accepting it as the basis of his theory of the Thing. Kleinian thought, as summarized by Lacan, depends on the centrality of the "mythic" body of the mother, towards which "the aggressive, transgressive, and most primordial of instincts" are directed (*Seminar VII* 106). This primordial, most archaic of objects is that for which "my field of *das Ding* . . . establishes the framework" (106). Having brought Klein into his own "field" by converting the puerile into the archaic, Lacan then goes on to summarize, immediately after the little fable of the match boxes, an example of artistic creation as sublimation in Klein's essay of 1929 entitled "Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse." Here a patient complaining of an empty space in-

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8. Lacan's references to Klein's views are hedged about with negative phrases such as "not that all of this is fully satisfying for us, of course" (116), or "the reduction of the notion of sublimation to a restitutive effort of the subject relative to the injured body of the mother is certainly not the best solution to the problem of sublimation" (106). Lacanian scholars tend to repeat this emphasis. Bruce Fink, for instance, writes curtly that according to Lacan, Klein's object relations theory was "barking up the wrong tree" (190n18). Feminist Lacanians, however, have been more inclined to give Klein's theories a hearing within the context of Lacan's work. In her recent study of Klein, Kristeva discusses Lacan's uneasy indebtedness to Klein's work and his insistence on "new directions" of his own. She continues: "That did not keep him from occasionally referring to Klein's work, usually with a respectful tone, as if he had gotten over envy without quite reaching gratitude, suggesting that he sensed deep affinities with Klein's work, particularly with her conception of a primal paranoia and of an early fantasy that structures the ego" (*Melanie Klein* 228).

side her, as reported in a case by the analyst Karin Mikailis, fills an empty space on a wall in her house where a painting used to be with a painting of her own (116-17).

The difference between the Kleinian and the Lacanian theorization of this incident is less significant than Lacan would have us believe. Lacan makes much of his rejection of Klein's description of the reparative effect of such attempts, the attempt to repair the damage done by phantasized aggression towards the mother's body. For him, the important point is that the Freudian drive (*Trieb*) is that which relates to *das Ding*, the aim in excess of the object (111). But like Klein (as well as Dali), Lacan had long been interested in paranoia as a mode of misperception, with aggression the structuring principle of the relation to the (m)other-mirror ("Aggressivity" 15, 20). It was this aggressivity, he acknowledges in an essay of 1955, which motivates the depressive reaction.<sup>9</sup> And in the fourth seminar on object relations (*La relation d'objet*, 1956-57), he had acknowledged Klein's claim to the theory of the depressive position (*Séminaire IV* 64, 67). In the seminar on ethics a few years later, however, he is calling it his own. The enthusiasm for her art of the woman painter in Klein's essay, he says, "to me seems characteristic of the beginning of a phase tending toward depression" (116-17).

Klein's theory of the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions had been articulated a good twenty-five years before the seminar on ethics. More interesting than the question of priority in theories of sublimation, however, is the question of whether the "prior" nature of aggressive disorganization, recognized by both theorists, takes "priority" in relation to both the structure of human subjectivity and the function of creative endeavour. The drive towards symbolic repair, however differently stated, is fundamental for both in their theories of sublimation. Klein may have failed to theorize the gap or hole, the missed nature of the encounter with (re-

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9. See "Variantes de la cure-type," where he writes:

La notion de l'agressivité répond . . . au déchirement du sujet contre lui-même, déchirement dont il a connu le moment primordial à voir l'image de l'autre, appréhendée en la totalité de sa Gestalt, anticiper sur le sentiment de sa discordance motrice, qu'elle structure rétroactivement en images de morcellement. Cet expérience motive aussi bien la réaction dépressive reconstruite par Mme Mélanie Klein aux origines du Moi. (344-45)

10. Klein emphasizes Mikailis's point that the removal of the painting "left an empty space on the wall, which in some inexplicable way seemed to coincide with the empty space within her." The empty space, Mikailis writes, "grinned hideously down at her" (Klein 91).



creations of) the mother's body, but it is her powerful descriptions of it that stimulate Lacan to do so.<sup>10</sup> It could be argued, in counterpoint with this, that in his theory of the symbolic, clearly subsuming Klein's theory of the depressive position, it was Lacan this time who was deficient in theorization.

Earlier in the essay on "Infantile Anxiety," Klein cites at length from a summary of the libretto by Colette for a Ravel opera, which presents a striking example of the vitality of objects. (Lacan refers to this analysis as an "agreeable" account of creative sublimation, though "not . . . fully satisfying for us, of course" [*Seminar VII* 115-16].) A six-year-old boy, punished by his mother for not doing his homework, flies into a rage and viciously attacks the objects in the room - the teapot and cup, kettle, fire tongs, wallpaper, grandfather clock, even the cat and a pet squirrel. Suddenly, the things he has maltreated come to life. The furniture lifts up in the air and cries "Away with the dirty little creature!" The clock strikes the hours like mad. The teapot leans over and starts a conversation in Chinese with the cup. "Everything undergoes a terrifying change" (Klein 85). The child falls back in fear and desolation. Seeking refuge in the park outside, he again is met by "hosts" of persecuting creatures, including frogs "lamenting in muted thirds" and a wounded tree trunk "which oozes resin in long drawn-out bass notes" (86). Like the ancient mariner after his act of aggression, it is only when the boy makes a gesture of restitution towards the damaged creatures, binding the squirrel's wounded paw, that his terror abates. The dragon-flies, owls and cats cease their hostilities and fall back quietly. The child whispers one word, "Mama!"

The "profound psychological insight" of Colette's libretto, Klein writes, lies in the perception that reparation occurs when empathy produces the symbol, the "redeeming word" (89) which gave the opera its title, *Das Zauberwort* (The Magic Word) (*L'enfant et les sortilèges* in French). As she has discovered in the analysis of every child, Klein writes, "things represent human beings, and therefore are things of anxiety" (89). All going well, however, the intolerable literalness of things, Surrealism's images of concrete irrationality, may be humanized through the insistence of the signifier, running concurrently with the sadistic (death) drive. The child, in other words, learns the difference between things and objects.

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Within contemporary philosophy, much debate has revolved around the possibility and impossibility of representation. My mention, earlier, of the piles of shoes in Nazi concentration camps may have reminded some readers of Adorno's questions about the possibility of representation after Auschwitz

and his rejection of art's compensatory stylizations. Adorno's words offer a powerful warning against the positing of some simplified version of sublimation as a band aid to heal the wounds of violence and loss.

Against this truth, art and literature continue to furnish us with objects, whether these be boots, trees, jugs or wooden reels, or the words that rush to accompany or replace them (the "letter" in the Lacanian sense of the material, non-signifying aspect of the signifier). Objects continue to insist. In the final analysis, perhaps, all objects are transitional in the sense used by Winnicott, as that which hovers between reality and hallucination, appearance and apparition, in a dialectic of irresolution. Transitional objects represent the space between the subject and the object, and in play, the child uses this "third" space to guide it through its first experiences of separation. Culture (art, religion, scientific insight) is a direct continuation of transitional phenomena. Through culture, we negotiate the space between hallucination and reality, between "*the subjective object and the object objectively perceived*" (Winnicott 100). Sublimation, within this context, must be viewed not so much in the early Freudian sense of the "pacification of the drive" (Adams xiv), but rather as a struggle with impossibility. In the battle between the too little and the too much, as Saleem Sinai finds, something presents itself.

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