Jesse Bordwin

Against Reference: On Reading Objects in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Bray House*

Ireland as we know it—as it could be known in the way we know things—is gone. In the near future depicted in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's novel *The Bray House* (1990), it has been decimated by ecological catastrophe and unchecked British nuclear ambitions. The narrator, Dr. Robin Lagerlof, is an archaeologist with an authoritarian streak who mounts an expedition to Ireland from Sweden, leading a small team that includes Karen, also a researcher, and two young volunteers, the couple Karl and Jenny. They land near Dublin, and after exploring Bray's desolate landscape of ash, discover and excavate the titular house. Robin's report, which occupies the entire midsection of the book, details what she discovers in the home, which was inhabited by a family named MacHugh at the end of the twentieth century. As the novel progresses, flaws in Robin's narration raise questions not only about her personal trustworthiness, but also about the validity of her methodology, through which she claims the ability to assemble a true and full account of the MacHughs from their possessions. The MacHughs' things, as rendered by Ní Dhuibhne, resist Lagerlof's stern management, and in doing so counter the novel's penchant for the ethnographic. Objects in *The Bray House* become increasingly ambivalent, raising questions about the limits of mimesis, as well as the ability of object-oriented criticism to account for the status of objects in the novel. As the gap widens between Robin's report and the world represented by the text, the reader is drawn to ask: How faithfully do objects, including novels, refer back to the world?

Robin sees objects as unequivocally referential. Her report, she insists, "illumines the lives of millions. It documents a really important, lost culture. A great civilization."¹ Jenny, disillusioned with Robin's methods by the end of the novel, sardonically raises the possibility of a living MacHugh coming along and repudiating the findings in the report, to which Robin responds:

1. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, *The Bray House* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1990), 203; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (BH 203).

my story is true. It doesn't need a MacHugh to prove it. It's true because my methodology is foolproof: positivistic and holistic. It has to work. Solid empirical research, rigid logical analysis, coupled with a vast knowledge of all circumstantial data. The story I'll write is the true story of the MacHughs. Even if a MacHugh came along and suggested otherwise, I would believe that. The MacHugh would be wrong. (BH 248)

For Robin, objects are repositories of social history with referential capabilities that exceed those of people. But in *The Bray House*, objects do not always tell the truth. They slip away and recede; now they seem one thing, now something else entirely.

In a broad sense, the instability of meaning surrounding objects forestalls interpretive practices like Robin's, which see literary objects simply as information-rich artifacts; if no one can agree on what objects mean, clearly they do not refer directly or unambiguously to any one thing or participate in simply one narrative. In *The Bray House*, the uncertainty of objects mirrors anxieties about the preservation and transmission of Irish identity just as the nation belatedly entered the age of late capitalism, emerging from the Troubles and on the verge of the Celtic Tiger. Insofar as objects refer back to this moment—a time when questions about what objects can or cannot represent were especially fraught—it is often not as reliable informants, but as markers of the ambivalence of representation, history, and memory. In other words, historical crisis gets taken up in the very structure of objects, which recede from interpretation and become sites of narratological and epistemological contestation.

By turning her present into the novel's past and her nation into a site of archaeological inquiry, Ní Dhuibhne foregrounds the ignored detritus of everyday life. Objects that might seem mundane to the author become of scholarly value to the narrator, denaturalizing assumptions about historical and geographical frames. Such narrative displacement binds the contested status of objects in the novel to the historical moment at which *The Bray House* appeared. In 1990, the Irish public had recently voted on a referendum to amend their constitution in order to sign, in 1987, the Single European Act, a milestone in the history of Ireland's increased involvement with Europe. But with the rapid development sparked by Europeanization came the threat of eroded military neutrality and the loss of economic and political autonomy.² The same influx of European and American investment that had created more wealth for the Irish than ever before now threatened Ireland's ability to control its own affairs. Fintan O'Toole

2. See, for example, William J. Crotty, "Introduction: The Irish Way in World Affairs," in *Ireland on the World Stage*, ed. William J. Crotty and David E. Schmitt (Harlow: Longman, 2002), 1–23, and Ben Tonra, *Global Citizen and European Republic: Irish Foreign Policy in Transition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

summarized it neatly when he wrote, "This is the paradox of the Republic in the aftermath of the British Empire: its national independence is underwritten by transnational corporations and by a supra-national European Union. Its sovereignty is a power that can be exercised mostly by giving it up."³

This self-sabotaging national autonomy left Irish social and cultural identity—always to some extent fictive, muddled, and tenuous anyway—equally vulnerable. If joining the European Community accelerated the rate of positive social change in the face of external pressure (for example, by catapulting ahead the rights of women and minorities) what looked like progress to some was perceived as a loss by others. Many shared a sense that rapid economic growth made Irish society "more selfish, less open and less sensitive to the plight of those marginalised at home and abroad."⁴ Vincent Browne would write in the *Irish Times* that the Irish citizenry had become "individuated subscribers to the anonymous society, acquisitive, rootless, unbonded."⁵ The exportation of Irish culture across the world was accompanied by the fear that it would become, as the journalist Liam Fay put it, "slurry soft," making it easier "to channel into the ongoing campaign to sell Ireland abroad and to ourselves as a bucolic idyll peopled with happy-clappy bodhran rapping riverdancing rustics."⁶ If cultural artifacts no longer protect and reflect national identity, and if Irish sovereignty is severely compromised by globalization—even as it is enabled by it—then what will remain of Irishness, and where will it reside?

National and cultural anxieties are always close at hand in *The Bray House*. When Robin and her team first explore the house, they find newspaper articles detailing the events that led to Ireland's destruction. Foreshadowing the explosions that devastate Western Europe, one reads: "The Republic's minister for energy has speculated on the possibility of legal proceedings against Northern Ireland" (BH 156) over their nuclear program's violation of Irish sovereignty. Another reports: "Britain yesterday ordered the Northern Irish port of Larne to accept the *Katherine A*, a container ship carrying toxic waste which has plied the seas from Nigeria to Britain in search of a taker for its noxious cargo" (BH 151). Many of the events Ní Dhuibhne includes mirror those taking place in her own time: the irradiated ocean in the novel recalls the outrage in Ireland over Britain's Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant, which dumped radioactive waste into the Irish Sea.⁷ Another article—"IRISH IMMIGRANTS RECRUITED TO IRANIAN

3. Fintan O'Toole, *The Ex-Isle of Erin: Images of a Global Ireland* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1997), 20–21.

4. Tonra, 24

5. Vincent Browne, "Fathers' Faith Living in Canada," *Irish Times*, 24 September 2003, 14.

6. Quoted in Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 743.

7. Ferriter, 731–32.

ARMY”—seems to play on Irish preoccupation with the Iranian-backed kidnapping of Brian Keenan, who was released the year of *The Bray House*'s publication. It ends with an endorsement of the recruitment plan by the taoiseach, who “said that he wished the drive every success. ‘Ireland has had a long and happy relationship with Iran,’ he went on ‘and, and we have been exporting beef to its markets for many years’” (BH 150). There is something haunting about that doubled “and, and,” both prevarication and insistence on the likeness of Ireland's exported beef and able bodies.

Ireland's too-permeable borders and too-easily confused citizens and objects point insistently to the nation's colonial past. The interchangeability of Irish subjects and objects within the British imagination adds a material dimension to the multiple levels of alienation (including economic and linguistic) that define the colonial experience. As such, objects become vital, if still ambivalent, sites in Irish literature for understanding locality and identity in the face of global concerns. *The Bray House* was published in the same year as Eavan Boland's collection *Outside History*, in which the poet grapples with the rival representational commitments demanded by objects. In her poem “Object Lessons”—whose title is a provocation in its own right—a coffee mug mediates a narrator's personal experience of loss while connecting intimate emotion to the menacing hunting scene it depicts, “revising the fixities into which local history has become frozen.”⁸ Boland's “The Shadow Doll” filters a woman's sadness through the titular object, a wedding ornament that “survives its occasion,” in which “she could see herself / inside it all.” But private melancholy is offset by the ethnographic note that frames the poem, explaining the meaning of the title: “(This was sent to the bride-to-be in Victorian times, by her dressmaker. It consisted in a porcelain doll, under a glass dome, modelling the proposed wedding dress).”⁹ From poem to poem, Boland's objects are sites of exchange between the personal and political, where subjective experience is shadowed by the troubled historical conditions that force subject and object into negotiation.

This proximity is not always violent or disabling. At times, the particular conditions of Irish history suggest that objects, even (or perhaps especially) when they participate in the colonial enterprise, are uniquely positioned to narrate Irish experience. Rather than posing representational problems, the object, given its closeness to the subject in the eyes of the empire, has a privileged role as testimony. Robin's attempt to locate something authentically Irish amidst the rubble of global late capitalism relies on the ability of objects to preserve

8. Steven Matthews, “The Object Lessons of Heaney, Carson, Muldoon, and Boland,” *Critical Survey* 15, 1 (2003), 32.

9. Eavan Boland, *Outside History* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), 17.

national identity after nation, an ideal that persists throughout critical writing about the material world. Writing of kitsch, for instance, David Lloyd observes that it “preserves, in its congealed and privatized, mostly portable forms, the memories of a community that cannot quite be a people.”¹⁰ “What passes for kitsch in the light of aesthetic judgment,” he writes, “is recovered as the emblem of cultures that have been cast from futurity by the state, as commodities are thrown out of circulation, only to discover in their wasted particulars the elements of another living.”¹¹ Lloyd’s kitsch echoes Svetlana Boym’s descriptions of the knickknacks diasporic people bring with them to their new homes, “transitional objects that reflect multiple belonging.”¹² In this recurring narrative, precarity necessitates a closeness between humans and objects, so that, as David Parkin noted, “people in flight store, so to speak, their precluded social personhood within mementoes of mind and matter, including cherished small objects . . . which can, under favourable circumstances, be re-articulated (even re-created) as the bases of social activity.”¹³ Objects bear witness and tell the stories of people who are unable to tell their own.

This vision of a responsive and restorative material world fits with recent trends in Irish Studies, which has shifted toward “local, recuperative projects,” and “has been more in the direction of local, national projects based in new archival research rather than finding new models of Irish comparison.”¹⁴ In 1989, around the time of *The Bray House*’s publication, Margaret MacCurtain and Mary Cullen established the Irish Association for Research in Women’s History—now the Women’s History Association of Ireland—as both “a political gesture and a call for women ‘to search their houses, open the tea chests, scour the attic to find the letters, diaries, and committee books of their grandmothers and mothers,’ in the hope that they might use these objects to reconstruct a history that was long obscured.”¹⁵ In *A History of Ireland in 100 Objects* (2013), Fintan O’Toole writes, “What makes [the object] pulse with life is the idea of the people who touched and were touched by it. It is the hands that made it, the eyes that feasted on or feared it, the terror, wonder or delight it evoked. It is the simple, awe-inspiring thought—this thing connects me to my ancestors.” In this narrative, objects are miniature safety deposit boxes which “contain secrets that can be unlocked with ever newer techniques,” now

10. David Lloyd, *Ireland After History* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 94.

11. Lloyd, 100.

12. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 200), 336.

13. David Parkin, “Mementoes as Transitional Objects in Human Displacement,” *Journal of Material Culture* 4, 3 (1999), 315.

14. Michael Malouf, “Problems with Paradigms: Irish Comparativism and Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters*,” *New Hibernia Review* 17, 1 (Spring, 2013), 55.

15. Ferriter, 750–51.

concealing and now divulging the parts of ourselves that we hold secret, never disclosed for safekeeping.¹⁶

Robin subscribes to a framework in which objects seem conduits to a particular time and place, connections through which she might recover something lost to the homogeneity of the global; objects are solid and safe, the fragments we shore against what has been called the “dematerialization” of late capitalism.¹⁷ Yet Robin’s certainty overlooks the potential for confusion and misunderstanding, as if she were the only actor involved in interpretation—and as if that interpretation could occur without loss. Though her report on the Bray House is ostensibly meant to preserve Irishness, it “tells readers more about the narrator’s assumptions about Irish culture” than it does the actual MacHugh family.¹⁸ Concluding the report, Robin writes of the MacHughs: “it is alas true to say that . . . [they] were on the whole part of the global society. Their lifestyles, their ideas, their customs, were not essentially different from those of anyone in Sweden, France, Germany or any other developed European country” (*BH* 165). Robin, in dismissing the family whose belongings she so carefully documented, re-inscribes the same loss of identity and culture she proposed to amend; in doing so, she reproduces the colonial dynamics that led to the island’s decimation. She is, in the end, “yet another invader of Ireland.”¹⁹ The reassuring solidity of objects seems to allow Robin to cut through the knot of Irish history, but she only finds herself irredeemably tangled. This is the trick objects play: “They seem precise and fixed, literally tangible. When so much about the past—especially the Irish past—is contested, physical things seem to provide secure anchors in history. They ought to make things simpler. Yet, when you actually examine any object, this apparent simplicity quickly falls away.”²⁰

The Bray House suggests that objects resist simplification. An object cannot be used for reductive political or cultural ends, in part because it “continually [slips] out of any order that claims to explain it—economic, symbolic, psychoanalytic.”²¹ This instability of signification is a useful lesson for Irish Studies—objects in mirror are more complicated than they seem!—but it is also a corrective for object-oriented criticism in English departments, which

16. Fintan O’Toole, *A History of Ireland in 100 Objects* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2013), x.

17. Colin Renfrew, *Figuring It Out: What Are We? Where Do We Come From? The Parallel Vision of Artists and Archaeologists* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 188.

18. Beth Wightman, “Lost in Space: Geography, Architecture and Culture in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s *The Bray House*,” *Space and Culture* 13, 2 (April, 2010), 173.

19. Carol Morris, “*The Bray House*: An Irish Critical Utopia. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne,” *Études Irlandaises* 21, 1 (Spring, 1996), 138.

20. O’Toole, *100 Objects*, xi.

21. Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 79.

has come to be deployed most often under the heading of “thing theory.” Thing theory is a critical approach that relies on a Heideggerian distinction between object (*gegenstand*) and thing (*ding*) to excavate the social and literary importance of things. Unlike objects, which “we look *through*,” things appear when objects stop working, naming “less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”²² A practice around things, then, should generate “new thoughts about how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects.”²³

Thing theory does not always deliver on this promise, however, which is in large part a product of how it imagines the relation between literary object and the world outside the text. Indeed, Bill Brown describes sharing the new historicist desire to “make contact with the ‘real,’”²⁴ and suggests that things “[prompt] questions that are inseparable from questions about the modern fate of the object in America, by which I mean both the history of production, distribution, and consumption, *and* the complex roles that objects have played in American lives.”²⁵ Things in thing theory have a referential quality, so that they often point to an originary object in the real world, at times rendering the material world of the novel as a repository of social history. In an analysis that evinces some of these limitations, Elaine Freedgood writes of domestic objects in *Jane Eyre*:

Each of these objects, if we investigate them in their “objectness,” was highly consequential in the world in which the text was produced. Accordingly, the knowledge that is stockpiled in these things bears on the grisly specifics of conflicts and conquests that a culture can neither regularly acknowledge nor permanently destroy if it is going to be able to count on its own history to know itself and realize a future.²⁶

The subject of study is culture or history, not literature, objects, or, critically, objects in literature. Thing theorists don referential lenses that inevitably color how they understand the material worlds of novels; here, Freedgood’s language of “stockpiled” knowledge assumes strictly defined relationships between human and object, text and world. Though most literary objects can be pressed into telling secret histories, readers should ask first: “is [this] the most interesting

22. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4.

23. Brown, 7.

24. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

25. Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 12.

26. Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2.

thing about them?"²⁷ If the answer is no, the next question should be, Then what is?

In *The Bray House*, the failure of objects to convey information turns the focus from what objects report to the very possibility of reference. By adopting the ambivalence of its context into its objects, the novel produces moments of narrative breakdown and hermeneutic failure in which the object draws attention to its own referential or representational capacity, as well as to the scenes and seasons that orient us toward objects. The object is less a fixed point than a site that lays bare the set of relations—between humans and objects, language and matter, reader and book—that structure our encounters with objects. Such is the case in this famous example from Proust, just moments before the narrator's auspicious encounter with a madeleine:

I find the Celtic belief very reasonable, that the souls of those we have lost are held captive in some inferior creature, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate thing, effectively lost to us until the day, which for many never comes, when we happen to pass close to the tree, come into possession of the object that is their prison. Then they quiver, they call out to us, and as soon as we have recognized them, the spell is broken. Delivered by us, they have overcome death and they return to live with us.²⁸

Proust gives little attention to objects themselves, but lights upon "some inanimate thing" or "the object that is their prison," or a cookie tasted in childhood, or something else altogether, to reveal a moment of experience and exchange. This description turns the reader not toward a quality of the object, but to the act of object orientation enabled by storytelling—a reframing that intimates that the popular narrative of recovery is not something that objects do, but one thing that readers do with suggestive objects. The importance of objects rests not on their verisimilitude, but in how they take part in plot, the production of narrative, the structure of the novel, and the orientation of the reader.

From early in *The Bray House*, the dissonance between Robin's measured and rational voice and the perceptibly biased narration exposes the interpretive mechanisms through which objects become translated into knowledge. Robin is no avatar for an actual social scientist—she is too blinded by personal trauma and private agendas—but rather, the extradisciplinary scientist of the object whose methods are so rigid that they reveal the limits of the discourses she caricatures. Robin touts her methodology, a hodgepodge of archaeology, anthropology,

27. Elizabeth Alice Honig, "Making Sense of Things: On the Motives of Dutch Still Life," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 34 (Autumn, 1998), 172.

28. Marcel Proust, *The Way By Swann's*, transl. Ian Patterson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 47.

and ethnography, as “one of the most revolutionary aspects of our excavation” (BH 117), but seems herself a victim of its strictures, a scholar trapped by “the imprisoning definitional terms of male (scientific) discourse.”²⁹ Compiling and compounding the weight of various methodological approaches, Robin’s claim to interdisciplinarity is a bid for authority. Her failure, when the objects of study do not match the prerogatives of her narrow interpretive lens, produces a vacancy of meaning.

This absence leaves the work of reclamation to the reader, who, skirting the narration, gleans knowledge from the objects that Robin dismisses. In a letter that Fiona, the MacHugh daughter, sends her father from a trip to her grandmother, she writes,

I’ve collected some harebells for drying—I haven’t got any, they don’t seem to grow anywhere else that I’ve seen. There are a few other interesting flowers: some thrift left, and yesterday I saw an ox-eye daisy. But no fuchsia at all any more. Even I remember when it was all over the place. Isn’t it astonishing? And not a single dogrose, and they used to be growing like grass here. (BH 134)

Robin understands the letter to mean that Fiona is lazy for going on so many vacations, and that “Although we have no concrete evidence of it, we can be sure that she drank cider on the beach at Bray on weekends, probably experimented with drugs, and most likely have died of AIDS or some similar malady had the Incident not occurred” (BH 165). The juxtaposition of “no concrete evidence” and “we can be sure” is comical and points to the fallacy of a reader who approaches the text laden with *a priori* convictions rather than interpretive openness. Objects cannot be informative, if for no other reason than that “Robin, like many colonizers before her, expects certain answers.”³⁰ Robin remains convinced that the story she builds about the MacHughs from their possessions corresponds perfectly with their lives, yet these attempts to collapse the space between the report and the world simply draw our attention to it.

Robin’s unreliability as a narrator has piqued the interest of many commentators on the novel. But it is not enough simply to critique Robin or to accept the faulty subject as the text’s necessary focus. The inadequacy of her account is an invitation to linger on the Bray House’s objects and construct a more responsible and persuasive narrative. The reader adds Fiona’s letter to a constellation of other objects that Robin neglects as she catalogs the contents of the house, which might include the floral watercolors Fiona painted that hang in her room, the flower pots in the kitchen, the flower-print curtains in

29. Ralph Pordzik, “A Postcolonial View of Ireland and the Irish Conflict in Anglo-Irish Utopian Literature Since the Nineteenth Century,” *Irish Studies Review* 9, 3 (December, 2001), 343.

30. Jacqueline Fulmer, *Folk Women and Indirection in Morrison, Ní Dhuibhne, Hurston, and Lavin* (Ashgate, 2007), 92.

the drawing room, Fiona's mother's watercolors of natural landscapes, Fiona's detailed dried flower collection (which identifies each specimen in Irish, English, and Latin, notes its location, and keeps track of declining ecological diversity) and, hanging on the wall of the kitchen, "a calendar, Premier Dairies, portraying flimsily dressed women of exceptional beauty drinking pints of milk in scenic surroundings" (BH 124), an image, with its amalgam of women, dairy farming, nature, and nation, that evokes an Irish pastoral worthy of de Valera's "comely maidens" speech. To read *The Bray House* is to become gatherer or curator, bringing objects together in various temporary assemblages that suggest different meanings. The above set of objects indicates a family absorbed by their locale, its ecological health, and the threats posed to it by shifting global conditions. A different collection of objects selected from the dozens Robin lists might produce a different story. As the number of possible narratives proliferates, Robin's understanding of objects as unambiguously referential collapses. The novel becomes a space of excess—of objects and meanings—which curtails autocratic narrative control.

Readerly self-consciousness about these processes connects objects within the novel to the material representation of words on a page. Elinor MacHugh, Fiona's mother, maintained her own "Flora Collector's Checker," in which she documented the varieties of flowers she found around Kerry. A first list, dated from "the summer of 199-," catalogues twenty-eight types of flowers; a second, from the year "202-," lists only five. The importance of this object derives not from its ability to convey empirical data but in how it facilitates an experience of loss for the reader. The lists force the reader to digest the decline of twenty-eight to five, first typographically and then, as he considers it further, ecologically. Their verticality breaks the left-to-right motion of the text, a change in reading that attunes the reader to the interruptive presence of literary objects. By reproducing the object on the page rather than filtering it through Robin's narration, the novel allows—and sometimes forces—the reader to pause on certain objects and process their significance as textual artifacts that have a particular existence on the page. In such moments, "the fictive life of objects resonates with the texts' own thingness" illustrating how objects make themselves matter in and as text.³¹

Robin's narration homogenizes objects by stripping them of distinction and detail, which severely limits what objects can do or say within fiction. Her indifference to the local, specific, and lively relationships between humans and objects aggravates her colonial presence in Ireland, contributing to the "image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter [that] feeds human hubris and

31. Babette Bärbel Tischleder, *The Literary Life of Things: Case Studies in American Fiction* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014), 44.

our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.”³² Her failure of deduction suggests that the reader, to avoid replicating these mistakes, must adopt inductive close reading practices in order to attend to the particularities of objects in *The Bray House*. At first this seems a difficult proposition: in a novel full of objects, there are noticeably few moments when Robin lingers on the material world. Descriptions in the report and outside of it are clipped and utilitarian; her tone remains “peculiarly cold and disaffected.”³³ By the end of her time in Ireland, Robin “had come to appreciate this barren place. To tell the truth, I had come to love it. . . . Unfussed by the work of human hands, which always tend to overdo things, to leave the parts of the world they touch as gaudy and messy as a Victorian drawing room” (*BH* 215). This is a distinctly antagonistic outlook for the archaeologist excavating the “fussy and Victorian” (*BH* 121) Bray House, and seems to account for her spare descriptive style. Though Robin attempts to efface the objects she describes, there is a significant exception, where the material world refuses the order imposed by Robin’s narration: in her dreams, two of which bookend the novel.

Robin’s first dream occurs as the archaeological team sets out from Sweden: “And before my half-opened eyes the knobs and buttons and levers and lamps of the control room dissolved, and transformed slowly and inexorably into quite other objects of the most brilliant colours: purple, yellow, pink, blue, every hue the very essence of itself” (*BH* 17). The fluidity of a utilitarian object scene morphing into a less rigid one is replicated in the evocatively dreamy sentence shift, as the mechanical and precise polysyndeton of the instruments (“knobs and buttons and levers and lamps”) melts into a flowing asyndeton of colors (“purple, yellow, pink, blue”). For the first time in the novel, Robin’s certitude cedes to unknowing—these new shapes are “quite other objects”—and each object refers not elsewhere but is “the very essence of itself.” “Quite other objects” is striking because it sits somewhere between the literary and material; the phrase is imprecise and gestural even as it continues to denote actual things before Robin, so that Robin’s unknowing is built into the objects themselves. The dream offers a peek behind the curtain, exposing the cagey play between language and matter that produces literary objects.

The second dream takes place at the end of the novel, as the team leaves Ireland. In it, Robin sees her mentor, Per Bishop:

He was sitting at a table, a breakfast table, holding in his two hands a quite ordinary mug, white with some blue harebells on it, the type of mug one will buy

32. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), ix.

33. Christina Hunt Mahony, *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 259.

very cheaply in a supermarket, or receive as a free gift with a purchase of petrol. Someone at the table—some old friend, perhaps Selma, a girl I had shared a room with in Uppsala—said: “What a wonderful mug that is!” I felt surprised, because it was so terribly ordinary and unimpressive. And then I noticed that Per was moulding the mug. Or rather that it changed shape in his hands, as he held it: it grew long and round, it sprung a spout, it was a coffeepot, it became slender like a vase for tulips, it widened into a fat flowerpot, it became tiny as a delicate china cup. (BH 204–05)

In this dream, as in the other, Robin is at first unable to understand the significance of the object before her. As in the other, the object's shape-shifting produces an alteration in the language. The anaphoric series “it grew,” “it sprung,” “it was,” “it became,” “it widened,” and “it became” reflects the object's improbable and unaccountable multiplicity, but it also foregrounds the agency of the thing itself. After Robin notes that “Per was moulding the mug,” she corrects herself: “Or rather that it changed shape in his hands.” The mug adopts a vague agency, while at the same time the repetition of the pronoun “it” and the mug's changing shape defer attempts to pin down its exact identity or meaning, much like those “quite other objects.” In both dreams, objects tend to be active in grammar and manner, and when considered in detail, they disclose initially unrealized and complicating attributes, revealing less about the objects than the novel's representation of perception and experience.

Waking from this second dream, Robin quickly asserts, “it is my experience that my dreams often tell me facts which are perfectly well known to my conscious mind already. The dreams simply confirm that knowledge, often using another set of images. Per Bishop had moulded me. I was the mug. The vase. The china cup. And that was not news to me” (BH 205). Robin employs paratactic declarations to recover from her loss of certainty, separating and restricting the dream terms that had blended together so riotously (“The vase. The china cup.”). She rejects the possibility that objects conduct lives outside of the human; by saying “I was the mug,” Robin collapses an independent object world back into herself. But the novel denies the psychoanalytic interpretation of dream objects as expressions of ourselves rather than as objects, in part by couching them in their own narrative register. These withdrawn, resistant objects stand in for less charismatic objects throughout the novel, which can be described and arranged but rarely point with certainty to any one thing.

The dreams, then, depict objects that have little to say about Irish history or the MacHughs, but which participate in debates over narrative meaning itself; that is, they resist interpretation while they comment on the ability to interpret. The importance of these objects is marked by the dreams' unique style, which offsets the mug or console from the rest of the text. This register, a narrative voice provoked by objects and characterized by sequences of excited asyndetic

clauses, does not occur elsewhere in the novel—it does look similar to another descriptive mode that a reader of *The Bray House* would recognize, given its ubiquity in the report: the list. Robin catalogues the MacHughs' objects for dozens of pages on end, and while these lists and the dreams appear similarly enumerative, they are in important ways distinct: Robin's catalogues list many objects one way, while the dream series list one object many ways. The former attempts to secure things in place, the latter upends imposed order. Read aloud, Robin's descriptions halt the reader, separating and distinguishing the objects; the dream descriptions accelerate the reader, blending and merging terms. One's objects are inert; the others' pulse with life. The dream voice emerges as an alternative narrative presence to Robin's report, the anarchic twin to the order and control of the list. It suggests that objects in dreams repurpose the very descriptive mode Robin uses to define them throughout the novel, attuning the reader to the ways objects take part in shaping the language through which they are mediated.

The object-oriented narrative voice of the dreams challenges the authority of Robin's narration, but also the bounds of the text itself. Walter Benjamin ends his essay "Unpacking My Library" by returning to the title's task:

Now I am on the last half-emptied case and it is way past midnight. Other thoughts fill me than the ones I am talking about—not thoughts but images, memories. Memories of the cities in which I found so many things: Riga, Naples, Munich, Danzig, Moscow, Florence, Basel, Paris; memories of Rosenthal's sumptuous rooms in Munich, of the Danzig Stockturm where the late Hans Rhaue was domiciled, of Süssengut's musty book cellar in North Berlin; memories of the room where these books had been housed, of my student's den in Munich, of my room in Bern, of the solitude of Iseltwald on the Lake of Brienz, and finally of my boyhood room, the former location of only four or five of the several thousand volumes that are piled up around me.³⁴

Benjamin's prose exhibits the same breathless and expansive energy that characterizes *The Bray House's* descriptions of dream objects, as do David Parkin and Marcel Proust's representations of object encounter. Here is the elevated language that swells and unspools, where objects lead not to one end or meaning but trigger a flood of association, experience, and memory, often in the language of revelation. Objects do not necessarily speak in these instances—though there are plenty of texts in which they do—but they illuminate a recurring configuration of humans and objects in which the latter act on and alter how they are represented by the former, as if the person meditating on the object cannot remain distinct from it. If there is something hubristic in imagining

34. Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 67.

that objects preserve and transmit human meaning, it is perhaps tempered by the hidden ways objects order human thought and expression.

Object orientation is a participatory process; the reader has a distinct role in making sense of the fictive material world. Readers become nodes in a network of objects that extends beyond the bounds of *The Bray House*. Discussing Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), Babette Tischleder shows how by "revealing the uncanny within the ordinary world of things, thereby relying on the reader's own experience with clutter and decay, the novel purposely defies a strategy of containing its object matter in a realist mode," which "conjures up a sense of material reality that goes far beyond the novel's scope."³⁵ Tischleder's observation speaks to the transgressive nature of literary objects, which form shifting configurations of author, reader, text, and world. Once imbricated in the material reality of the novel, the reader makes connections between different texts and their object topographies. This is an intertextuality that is also an intermateriality, extending the lives of objects outside the text without terminating in the real world or erasing the material presence of the novel itself.

It is the reader of *The Bray House* who situates the novel in an ecosystem of other texts, some of which are explicitly suggested by Ní Dhuibhne but others that are not. The barrenness of post-Incident Ireland, for instance, strongly evokes the landscapes of Beckett. As in plays like *Waiting for Godot* or *Happy Days*, it is the sparseness of the world, its impoverishment of things, that highlights the objects that do exist. Teapots and calendars in *The Bray House* glow with the same aura as Estragon's bowler or Winnie's hairbrush. Their radiance comes not from the fetish of commodity, but from the phantasmal imprints of utility and routine that these objects carry into a world in which they no longer belong or operate as intended. In these texts the conditions of collapse foreground the relationships between humans and things, making visible objects which might otherwise, in a different context, disappear into the scenery. Elinor MacHugh's hairbrush is not literally the same as Winnie's—what a plot twist that would be—but their commonalities suggest a transitive quality about literary objects; similarities in properties, functions, the places they hold, what they do, or how they are described allow objects to cluster in the imagination of the reader. One hairbrush calls out to the other across the space between texts.

This constellation of intertexts and the objects that move through them is a way of understanding the lives of objects outside a given text without transporting the reader away from the aesthetic world. Rather than refer to an originary real-world object, at which point object-oriented literary criticism reaches its

35. Tischleder, 256.

terminus, literary objects reflect and refract one another, reverberating back and forth across texts. Relation disrupts the teleology of mimesis, so where Robin imagines that objects correspond to the world, the reader understands objects to be in distributed and ongoing conversation. To quote *Ulysses*, another of *The Bray House*'s interlocutors, the literary object that seems to signify its referent perfectly instead, like foil flowers at a gravesite, "expresses nothing."³⁶ Both *Ulysses* and *The Bray House* stage mimetic failure in the face of anthropological imperatives, documenting Irish life at a precarious historical moment while acutely aware of that project's limitations. The text can never be the world, despite our keenest desires. The ambivalence of the Irish context bleeds into Hugh Kenner's analysis of *Ulysses* when he writes that "objects are even more enigmatic than stories."³⁷ For then he proceeds to suggest, as if channeling the Robin-like nineteenth-century archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, a practice of reading novels for those "who read kitchen middens as Sherlock Holmes or Flaubert could read a room and as Joyce's readers are expected to read his book."³⁸ Of course, Schliemann was wrong—and wrong in the way that only someone who was that slap-happy with dynamite around archaeological sites can be—and his failures illustrate how literary objects sometimes obstruct mimesis rather than ensure it. Resistant objects reveal more in conversation with each other than they do when measured against the real world.

For any given text, a reader's internal network of associations will help make sense out of that text's material world. But Ní Dhuibhne complicates this intermateriality by introducing intertextual sources as objects within *The Bray House*. One such text is *Robinson Crusoe*, which shares with *The Bray House* a narrative of sea voyage and island isolation, first-person narrators who, in industriously explicatory voices, view the material world through similarly narrow lenses of need and prescribed meaning, and sudden shifts in formal register midway through their narratives that consolidate authorial power. Certain episodes from *Robinson Crusoe* appear wholesale in *The Bray House*—like the shock of the footprint on the abandoned beach—and thematically the two novels' takes on colonial ambition form an interpretive loop, so that "*The Bray House* is a novel about examining what remains of Ireland, the well-mapped, well-known island nation colonized by the budding empire that Crusoe's island invokes."³⁹ If nothing else, most readers should draw a connection from the over-determined likeness of the protagonists' names.

What makes Defoe's presence so unusual is that Robin has been reading

36. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 113.

37. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 25.

38. Kenner, 50.

39. Wightman, 165.

Robinson Crusoe during the length of the expedition. The text that haunts *The Bray House* is also a book on the narrator's bedside table. And this keeps happening. At one point Robin mentions her fondness for *Brideshead Revisited*, immediately following which she and Karl reenact Waugh's cruise-ship scene, in which two characters' romance blossoms when their respective partners are bedbound with seasickness. Before picking up *Robinson Crusoe*, Robin tries to read *The Magic Mountain*, which she describes as "the adventures—though that is hardly the *mot propre*—of a diseased man, which was supposed to be an allegory for a diseased, twentieth century society. I found the German hard and the pace slow" (BH 17). Robin recognizes the allegorical function of Mann's novel without noting the similarities to her own situation. That this knowledge evades Robin, even though she has the guides right in front of her, does not simply confirm that she is a bad reader; it shows how literary objects, exemplified in the book-as-object, so precede and exceed the reader's experience of them that it makes it difficult to know them in some absolute way. The novel and the world, even when they seem to correspond, are still separated by the confounding material artifact of the book and the distorting brackets of fictionality.

Books become exemplary objects, insofar as they evince a materiality that extends beyond the narratives they contain—whether you have read them or not, books still move through the world in meaningful ways. At the beginning of the novel, Robin confesses that: "I do not, I must admit, like novels, or any kind of literature" (BH 16). Robin seems to have inherited her affection for English literature from her mother's love of literary film adaptations: "she was forever borrowing videos of *Little Dorrit*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Brideshead Revisited*, and possessed a fairly vast video library of films based on literary works of one kind and another" (BH 41). "The books," Robin complains, "always seem so stodgy and dull, I really don't know why people bother to do them any more, unless they are, like me, scholars" (BH 42). Erasing print culture seems to confirm Robin's antagonism toward objects; yet despite her antipathy, Robin owns a large collection of novels, which, she stresses, "are always printed on special long-life acid-free paper, as is only proper, and will be almost immortal, if it is not, of course, destroyed by some environmental disaster before their own span has been exhausted" (BH 42). Robin's attachment to her books is distinct from their contents or a sense of aesthetic appreciation for them, yet it is a powerful force in its own right; it is what pulled Robin to London in the first place, what enabled her to meet her Irish husband, and what compelled her to return to Bray.

The meanings of books, for Robin, are multiple and contingent, and seem detached from their narratives—an ironic divergence from her deterministic approach to the MacHughs' possessions. Robin's attachment to her books is based on a cocktail of childhood nostalgia, spousal regret, and a doomsday-prepper's

enthusiasm for the non-perishable, and yet this connection preserves these objects and a link to their country of origin, which no longer exists. As if in an unknowing symbiotic relationship, the collector appreciates qualities of an object that are not related to its primary or original use, but through which that object ensures its continued importance and future transmission. By enacting this version of its objecthood, the novel makes a case for its own materiality, challenging the assumption that “a novel’s success no doubt depends on eliding itself as the object in hand—paperback or leather-bound—on behalf of providing access to its represented world, the world residing somehow within, somewhere beyond, the printed page.”⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin provides another counter-argument in his previously referenced essay, in which he writes that “for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object.” What matters is not only everything “remembered and thought” by the collector but also “the period, the region, the craftsmanship, [and] the former ownership” of the books, which is to say their material existences.⁴¹

This resistance of elision in *The Bray House* has politically generative implications. Rey Chow, expanding on a Benjaminian model of assemblage, writes of how the act of collecting produces “identificatory anarchy,” disrupting the ways national ideology orders attachment.⁴² In the short story “Lian” (“Attachment”) by Lao She, Chow argues, the problem for the collector Zhuang Yiya is that “he is faithfully attached to *something other than the national community itself*.”⁴³ Approaching the politics of collecting from a different direction, Wai Chee Dimock describes the Soviet poet Osip Mandelstam’s habit of carrying around a pocket-sized edition of the *Divine Comedy*. “Its very existence gave Mandelstam a different reference point, dimensions of space and time not reducible to the arm of the Soviet government.” It is not just the contents of the book that are important, but “the physical presence of the poetry inside his pocket.”⁴⁴ That the stories told about people and their books also crop up within novels themselves reveals something about the genre’s history: Cynthia Wall ties forms of collecting and object-attachment to the moment of the rise of the novel, excavating “the intensely personal and private possibilities for self-description and self-creation in the choice and care and arrangement of things—a Lockean

40. Bill Brown, “The Matter of Materialism: Literary Mediations,” in *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn*, ed. Patrick Joyce and Tony Bennett (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), 60.

41. Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” 60.

42. Rey Chow, “Fateful Attachments: On Collecting, Fidelity, and Lao She” in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 376.

43. Chow, 375.

44. Wai Chee Dimock, “Literature for the Planet,” *PMLA* 116, 1 (January, 2001), 174.

sense of possession and identification that derives from labors of intimacy, from knowledge of detail, or even from a precapitalist conflation of subject with object.”⁴⁵ The novel has built into it from the beginning a defense for its own matter's meaningfulness. Broadly speaking, representations of books and book collecting in novels serve to highlight how the novel's own materiality resists effacement in light of the discursive.

The distinction between the novel (narrative) and book (object) means that no analysis of an object can result in a single, settled conclusion. *The Bray House* leaves the reader with a final instance of this ambivalence. The last page of the novel is a one-page epilogue, an obituary for Robin, who kills herself upon returning to Sweden, in which its author notes that “An exhibition on the Ireland excavations will open early next year at the Archaeology Archive in Uppsala, and Dr Lagerlof's book on the expedition, which was completed before her death, will be published posthumously on the same occasion” (BH 255). The suggestion is that “Dr Lagerlof's book” is *The Bray House* itself, in which case the object succeeds but also precedes its human narrator, creating her as much as she creates it. The book has its beginning in its end, forming a recuperative loop that tells Robin's story again and again. But this preservation is deeply ironic. Just as Robin's report said more about the archaeologist than her subjects, *The Bray House* is foremost a story about Robin, not a lost Ireland. The same irony is reproduced in Robin's library: the books she saves—which, in addition to *Robinson Crusoe* and *Brideshead Revisited* include *Little Dorrit* and *Pride and Prejudice*—are emblematically English novels, enshrining Robin's colonial presence on the island in the records she leaves behind. Refusing to elide the novel's thingness, Ní Dhuibhne emphasizes its materiality by performing its circulation beyond the life of the narrator and narrative, where it will move and move us in unpredictable ways. The author leaves her readers with no way to read objects in the novel—or the object of the novel—as unambiguous or legible records. Objects, like books, continue to tell stories, but it remains unclear how trustworthy they are, given the vexed status of objects in the postcolony.

The interpolation of anxieties from Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's Ireland into literary objects, the illegibility and intermateriality of such objects, and the exchange between fictional objects and the book object demand that readers reconsider the status of objects in the novel. As sites of narrative ambivalence and unsettled meaning, *The Bray House*'s objects tax the limits of Robin's anthropological practice and thing theory's presumption that establishes a false dichotomy between mimetic and non-mimetic objects, mistaking rhetorical sleight for ontic voodoo. *The Bray House* makes clear that objects in dreams can have as much

45. Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Descriptions in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 4–5.

consequence as those in archaeological reports; they, too, clamor to be understood—and they too, in turn, question the limits of understanding. To account for such objects, Irish Studies and object-oriented literary criticism should balance their new-historicist leanings with an increased attention to the particular affordances and capacities of literature and literary form. Materialist scholars in literature departments ought not sell the literary object as what one critic terms the “reassuringly safe ground upon which to acquire a more or less unmediated access to the real.”⁴⁶ To do so is to make the same mistake as Schliemann and forfeit that which distinguishes them from new materialists in other disciplines: the imaginative, even utopian possibilities of the fictional. Object-oriented literary criticism must describe not only how the world is, but how the novel imagines it could be.

☞ UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA
jessebordwin@virginia.edu

46. Jonathan Gil Harris, “The New New Historicism’s *Wunderkammer* of Objects,” *European Journal of English Studies* 4, 2 (2000), 114.