

Thinking Things

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Is a “thought” the same as an absence of a thing? If there is no “thing”, is “no thing” a thought and is it by virtue of the fact that there is “no thing” that one recognizes that “it” must be thought? (Bion 1962, 34).

Taking Sides

Here is a thought to hold on to during the twists and turns that follow. Thinking, which is properly nothing and nowhere, can only lay hold of itself in the form of a thing. When we think about thinking, we must think about it as though it were some kind of thing. But not just any thing will do, for it seems that it needs to be a special kind of thing, a thing apt to embody thought - a thinking thing. When we think about things, we may perhaps also always be thinking about the kinds of thinking that things are and allow.

Recent years have seen in philosophy and cultural studies something like a thingly turn, a *neue Sachlichkeit*, a *nouveau choseisme*. For at least two decades, there has been a slow, incremental, but by now immense stirring of things.

As Bill Brown observes, one characteristic of thing theory is precisely that it focuses on things rather than objects. For Brown, objects are what we know, objects are things that know their place, and whose place we know. Things arise when objects down tools and refuse to cooperate with us, break down, or have their functions mysteriously interrupted. ‘We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily’ (Brown 2001, 4). Things come into visibility when the thought of them ruptures or ebbs. I should make it clear at this point that, though I will refer at intervals to this distinction between objects and things, I have no intention of observing the distinction myself and will mix my

usages promiscuously, as the demands of my argument, or of alliteration, dictate.

There are two strings to thing theory. The aim of the first may be summarised conveniently by the title of Francis Ponge's 1942 collection, *Le Parti pris des choses*, as the effort or at least the instinct, to secede from the party of the first person and cross over to the side of things. Something odd tends to happen during the course of this secession. Whenever human beings attempt to drain themselves out of the pictures they form of things, in the service of a direct and nondistorted apprehension of the things themselves, they usually turn out to have secretly left a cherished part of themselves in the object. The thing is acknowledged or embraced as entirely, enigmatically other – in other words, just like me in my otherness. This is a cryptic or paradoxical kind of animism, in which the object resembles the subject not in sharing its particular powers or capacities, but in exhibiting the power of resistance or reserve, the power to withdraw or withhold itself from being known, that the subject secretly, stubbornly, assumes as its own alone. This solidarity in alterity is there, for example, in Lacan's story of the glittering sardine-can, seen from a fishing-boat in Brittany, of which Petit-Jean, the fisherman whom the young Lacan is accompanying, says: 'You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!' (Lacan 1986, 95). Lacan broods, with amusing solemnity, on why he finds this story less amusing than Petit-Jean. For Petit-Jean's mot reveals that there is something ungraspable about all perception: though '[t]he picture, certainly, is in my eye...I am not in the picture' (Lacan 1986, 96). Why can the can not see the tyro Lacan? One is tempted to reply to this question with a version of the answer that Mr Snagsby gives to Chadband's windy rhetoric in *Bleak House*: '“Can we fly, my friends? We cannot. Why can we not fly, my friends?” Mr. Snagsby... ventures to observe, in a cheerful and rather knowing tone, “No wings.”' (Dickens 1972). But this wouldn't quite get at it. The sardonic sardine-can does not not see Lacan merely because it is unequipped with optical apparatus, since, even if this deficiency were made good, it would continue not to see Lacan (as opposed to not seeing him), for the same reason that my guitar does not in fact gently weep and my iPod is ineligible to vote in general elections, namely, that a sardine-can just doesn't do seeing. Lacan will not have it this way, though, averring, to the contrary, that 'if what Petit-Jean said to me, namely that the can did not see me, had any meaning, it was because in a sense, it was looking at me, all the same' (Lacan 1986, 95). Not-seeing is here being seen as overlooking, and not being looked at turned into looking 'like nothing on earth' (Lacan 1986, 96). 'I am not', Lacan affirms, emphatically, but incomprehensibly, 'speaking metaphorically' (Lacan 1986, 95). The antihumanism which this story subserves is therefore sleekly anthropomorphic,

since in it Lacan's not-mattering remains a matter essentially for him, ensuring that human being stays bang in the bullseye of its own decentring. As Derrida remarks, of another text by Lacan entirely, though still à propos here, 'quelque-chose manque à sa place, mais le manque n'y manque jamais' – 'something is missing from its place, but the lack is never missing from it' (Derrida 1987, 441).

This covert anthropomorphism takes a rather more florid form in Jane Bennett's recent call for us to attend to what she calls 'thing-power'. At the centre of her argument is the affirmation that 'so-called inanimate things have a life of their own, that deep within them is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and to other things. A kind of thing-power' (Bennett 2004, 358). We are, accordingly, to have 'a respect for the cunning thing-power of things' (Bennett 2004, 359), and to emphasise 'their powers of life, resistance, and even a kind of will... powers that, in a tightly-knit world, we ignore at our own peril' (Bennett 2004, 360). Bennett proposes that we read the vivacious recalcitrance of things in terms of Adorno's principle of the non-identical, of that which resists recruitment to concepts. But she removes from it the very principle of transcendence which ensures the distance or desisting of the nonidentical: 'To us, resistances and swerves are less gestures of transcendence than manifestations of the vitality of immanent forces that flow through us as well as course over and under us' (Bennett 2004, 364). The appropriative sentimentality of this is barely concealed. Rather than marking a limit or failure, rather than being the enigmatic 'entifiable that is unspecifiable' (Brown 2001, 5), or even, perhaps, in the very figuring of that inaccessibility to us, things have been smuggled over the border into the land of the living, where we, of course, take ourselves to reside, and rule the roost. Why, one must wonder, should we put our relation to things in this way, if not as an expression of the automatistic *idée fixe* that we are on the side of life, indeed, are its privileged beneficiaries and exponents, and as such can be expected to take a filial or nondominative interest only in those entities that have somehow managed to get the word 'organic' stamped in their passports?

As with any other announcement of a new direction in literary and cultural theory, the thingly turn has taken forms that, proclaiming themselves as new, in fact serve very nicely to ginger up well-established and therefore somewhat fatigued lines or idioms of enquiry. Thus, we can confidently expect to see a flood of essays and books exploring the significance of commodities in literary texts (for what novel, play or even poem is unfurnished with an abundance of these kinds of things?) under the name of thing theory, to follow the works of Bärbel Tischleder on feminine domestic objects, or Barbara Benedict's on eighteenth-century thing-poems. We can also confidently expect such studies to

assume and confirm the consumptionist hypothesis, that is already in so many quarters held to be a truth self-evident, that modernity is to be understood as the emergence of an historically unprecedented relation to things as commodities. The very formalisation of things as commodities will continue to ensure, first of all, that things themselves are bound to keep escaping the net of concepts and, secondly, that this can be made the occasion of exquisite scruple and factitious heartache, as things are comprehensively represented as the unrepresentable. When something is known, and also known to be unknowable, then the work of theory, which is to say, the opening up of limitless opportunities to carry on doing work that there is no longer any need for, will be complete; that is, at once all over, and all still deliciously to do.

I come here not at all to do for thing theory, but to make out some things to do with it. But I want to do so by means of a sidestep or swerve. For I aim neither to get on the side of things, nor to celebrate the crossing of the line whereby things come over to our side. I am less interested in how life and thought get into things than in how things get into life and thought, and, I suppose, into the thought of life. For this reason, I propose to start, not from the side of the object at all, but from that of the subject. This is not to move from ontology to the apparently safer ground, or at least more reliably shifting sands, of epistemology, for surely we have all had an ample sufficiency of that in the literary and cultural theory of the last four decades, and anyway I am with Bruno Latour who declares that '[e]pistemology is a professional hazard of first class air-conditioned train travel' (Latour 1997, 187) that is, of the manufactured amnesia of things. Instead, my purpose in this is to interest you in the ways in which subjects may be said to be the outcome or achievement of objects. How does one become a subject? By means of the objects one takes oneself for. This has two consequences. First of all, I will want it to appear that thinking about thinking can only ever be done through the things that draw, drain and detain our thinking, and that make thinking accessible as a kind of thing. Secondly, I hope to make the thought irresistible that thinking about things is unavoidably a kind of thinking about the kind of thing that thinking is.

Travelling Companions

To use terms like *neue Sachlichkeit*, or *nouveau chosisme*, as I did in my opening, and to recall with them earlier artistic aspirations towards objectivity, in the first case in German art and architecture of the 1920s and 1930s, and in the second in the French *nouveau roman* of the 1950s, is actually to point to a difference of emphasis in this new thingliness. The objectivity of both *Sachlichkeit* and *chosisme*

was framed as an attempt to focus on things apart from human agency or intent, an attempt to clear from art the muddle and desire of the human investments in objects, But many forms of the new thingly disposition see things not as a refuge or remission of the human at all, but rather as intimately involved with and expressive of it.

The most important of the influences here has undoubtedly been the actor-network theory that was developed from the 1980s onwards in the work of Michel Callon and John Law and has been most vividly laid out and robustly defended in the work of Bruno Latour. Actor-network theory has gained a reputation among historians of science and social theorists as a form of social constructionism. But, if this is the theory that scientists work to construct objects, in order to draw the line between the knowing subject and that of which it knows, then actor-network theory follows up the hunch that objects and subjects may in fact be reciprocally constitutive, that the things we think we do to things may turn out to be things that things do with us. The motto of actor-network theory is therefore, not the Husserlian 'zu den Sachen selbst', 'back to the things themselves', but rather 'watch what the things themselves get up to', meaning, track the movements of things in and out of their thinghood.

Actor-network theory, and Bruno Latour's work in particular, has drawn very considerable impetus in this from Michel Serres's notion of the 'quasi-object', developed, like all of Serres's concepts, across a number of publications, but most explicitly in his *The Parasite*. The most important thing about quasi-objects is that they travel. In this sense, the objects and commodities that give voice in what have come to be known as the 'it-narratives' of the eighteenth century – coins, watches, clocks, dolls, books, lapdogs, waistcoats, walking-sticks, pins, pens, rings, loaves of bread, and even an atom (Smollett 1769), nearly all of which undergo circulation from owner to owner (Bellamy 2007) – all qualify as quasi-objects. Quasi-objects are like objects in the sense that they stabilise or instantiate social forms and processes that, without them, would be too fleeting to endure. But they are unlike objects, or what we think we know about them, in that they move and mediate between subjects. In *The Parasite*, Michel Serres compares a quasi-object to the different forms of accessory that are necessary in the playing of certain games or sports, for example the 'furet' used in a French version of 'hunt-the-slipper'. Possession of such an object is not exactly in itself the objective of the game, rather it is a necessary accessory for the subjects of the game to employ in achieving the object – you don't win at football simply by getting hold of the ball, indeed, you can only win by getting rid of it in a certain specified way, but you cannot score unless you have it.

The quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject. He who is not discovered with the furet in his hand is anonymous, part of a monotonous chain where he remains indistinguished. He is not an individual; he is not recognized, discovered, cut; he is of the chain and in the chain. He runs, like the furet, in the collective. The thread in his hands is our simple relation, the absence of the furet; its path makes out indivision. Who are we? Those who pass the furet; those who don't have it. The quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual. If he is discovered, he is "it" [mort]. Who is the subject, who is an "I," or who am I? The moving furet weaves the "we," the collective; if it stops, it marks the "I." (Serres 1982: 225)

The quasi-object thus gives rise to quasi-subjects, with which it almost coincides:

This quasi-object that is a marker of the subject is an astonishing constructor of intersubjectivity. We know, through it, how and when we are subjects and when and how we are no longer subjects. "We": what does that mean? We are precisely the fluctuating moving back and forth of "I." The "I" in the game is a token exchanged. And this passing, this network of passes, these vicariances of subjects, weave the collection... The "we" is made by the bursts and occultations of the "I." The "we" is made by the passing of the "I." By exchanging the "I." And by substitution and vicariance of the "I." (Serres 1982: 227)

Many proponents of thing theory assume a fundamental difference between things and persons, or, as we might perhaps prefer to say, beings, even when they are arguing for a blurring of that difference. I do not find much to object to in this, or, if I do, my objections do not bear very heavily on my purposes here. But this assumption of an ontological sundering between things and beings often leads to the further assumption that there is therefore also a fundamental antagonism between them. But it is precisely because of the ontological divide between things and beings that that the former are so indispensable to the latter, and perhaps even vice versa. We become subjects only in our dealings with objects; we need objects precisely because they are not beings. Things are not our antagonists, but nor are they our secret sharers,

or co-conspirators; rather, they are what I just now called our necessary accessories.

Writers on things often assume that things in commodity culture have begun to jostle for space with thinking subjects. But this palms the assumption that, before this challenge, there might, even must, have been a time when things merely dozed docilely, inertly en-soi, and persons were fully self-possessed, alertly apprised of their own natures. But thinking beings can only ever accede to themselves, which is to say become able to think about their own thinking, via the accessory of things. The eighteenth century, Barbara Benedict tells us, saw a blurring of the distinctions between ‘thought and thing, self and stuff’ (Benedict 2007, 194). But when, we should feel entitled to wonder, were they ever immiscible? Part of my intent is to persuade you that self and stuff cannot at a given moment get to be mixed together any less or any more than they ever have been, but can only ever be mixed together in different ways. Carbon dioxide is neither more or less compounded than carbon monoxide, it’s just a different kind of compound.

Thinking of thinking is a kind of ‘taking-for’, as in the expression ‘what do you take me for?’. I want to follow Marina Warner, in her investigation of different phantasmata, the substances and apparatuses by which the soul represents itself to itself – wax, clouds, light, shadows, mirrors, ectoplasm, ether, film (Warner 2006), in wondering, what sorts of ‘thinking things’ are there, meaning what kind of things do we take thinking for? And then, what kinds of thing does the taking of thought for various kinds of thing do – what profits does it offer, what liabilities may it entail?

Dejection

Again, Michel Serres can help us tune this enquiry. We nowadays assume that subjects arise very largely as the effect of language, and that it is the possession of language that makes it possible for human beings to be subjects in the way in which animals cannot. In his *Les cinq sens* of 1985, Serres argues, by contrast, that language can automatise, addict and anaesthetise us, turning us into autistically unresponsive statues. But, two years later, in the book he named *Statues* (1987), we can find Serres affirming that before language there is something else, more mysterious, but also more generative:

From the beginning, we exist as humans by means of something other than the word, indeed by the thing, irreducible to the word.

The subject is born of the object. The hominid appears in front of that which is there, given. An animal has no object any more than it has death, even though, sometimes, it makes use of language; language issues from the throat and prolongs it, while the thing, strangely, proposes itself apart from the body, aside from its propriety. (Serres 1987, 208)

On this account, human beings come into their specific kind of being not in the ways in which, through language, they draw objects into webs of value and significance, not, in short, in the work of the concept, for this is actually what we share with animals, who in this sense can be thought to have dealings, in Bill Brown's sense, only with objects, by which he means things that are for things, things that are there to do things with, rather than things in themselves. But it is pretty safe to say that what other animals do not have is access to the inaccessibility of things, in the idea of the object in itself, what Serres calls 'the transcendental objective, the constitutive condition of the subject by the appearance of the object as the object-in-general' (Serres 1987, 209). This access is precisely and uniquely what makes it possible for there to be, for us to be, the kinds of objects we know as subjects:

Human being appears in front of the object that has been abstracted or separated from these relations, that is free, come from elsewhere like a stone fallen from the sky. We invent it, we receive it, what matter, we were only there to decide upon it, we were born, in the beginning, from its epiphany. Man comes from things, he knows it yet. (Serres 1987, 208)

The subject and the object do not give rise to each other once and for all and then, the vorpal blade gone snicker-snack, go ever after their separate ways. Rather, they enter into each other's composition, such that the reciprocal constitution of subject and object is both inaugural and ongoing:

I imagine, at the origin, a rapid vortex in which the transcendental constitution of the object by the subject grows just like, in the other direction, the symmetrical constitution of the subject by the object, in dizzying semi-cycles endlessly renewed, leading all the way back to the beginning. (Serres 1987, 209)

How is it that the subject comes into being before or in front of the object that is, if we are to take the etymology of the word object seriously, thrown before it? For Serres, it is via a humility. In contrast to the work of appropriation

undertaken by a humanity which makes nature its own by smearing and blurring it in its secretions and excrements – a theme to which Serres has returned in his recent book *Le Mal Propre* (2008) – the human subject comes into being, as its name might suggest, in being cast down. *Statues* is a book that circles round death, stone and petrification, and Serres plays throughout it on the French phrase, *ci-gît*, here lies, from the verb *gésir*, which is only ever used in the third person, and of the dead, the destroyed, or the dying. Serres establishes a link between humanity, humility and humus, and what lies in the ground. The subject is

[t]hat which lies under that which lies before it, holds itself back: attentive, concentrated, humble, silent. Subject. This word retains the trace of an act of humility. The subject subjects itself to the dominion of that which forms and loses it. Yes, kills it. Only the object exists and I am nothing: it lies before me and I disappear beneath it. (Serres 1987, 211)

This abasement or willing dejection of the subject has a name: it is thought. So, for Serres, thought is not that which forms and underpins the being of the subject; it is that which allows the subject to be born, or reborn, in and out of its very disappearance: ‘[t]he subject will appear if and only if it disappears, rendered nothing by the object before which it appears’ (Serres 1987, 211). This triggers a series of variations on Descartes’s famous slogan: ‘I think therefore I consent to die of the object, to lie under the stone, interred. I think therefore I vanish’ (Serres 1987, 212). Or, in this further variation, from Serres’s *Variations sur le corps*, more than a decade later, ‘The more I think, the less I am; the more I am I, the less I think and act’ (Serres 1999, 12).

Lacan has appropriated from Freud a distinction between *die Sache* and *das Ding* in order to articulate the idea that subjects contain and organise themselves around some unnameable notion of a primary lost object, which stands almost for the inaccessibility of things in general. Peter Schwenger (2006) has used this notion to account for the melancholy that seems to attach to all our relations to things, which, insofar as they are things rather than objects (in German, a matter of *das Ding* rather than *die Sache*), seem always to escape us. So Lacan’s myth gives us a self that is formed around the loss of a primary object. *Das Ding* is a kind of black hole, around which the subject rotates and clingingly accretes. Serres’s alternative myth gives us a self that comes to itself through its own loss in the face of a primary object – even if that object is its own invention, whether in its original sense of a discovery or its modern sense of an origination. I think there is one crucial difference between Lacan and Serres,

though I admit that making it out may require a lively appreciation of shades of grey. For Lacan, *das Ding* is a nothing, tenanted in the self, holding it together by interior suction like von Guericke's sphere, the absence that is always present and correct. For Serres, the thing is what nothings or nihilates the self from the outside, from a non-appropriated elsewhere.

The term 'nihilates' may seem serve to summon to the scene Jean-Paul Sartre, who advances an even more extensive set of arguments for viewing the subject as a nothing. For Sartre, let us recall, 'Man presents himself...as a being who causes Nothingness to arise in the world, inasmuch as he himself is affected with non-being to this end' (Sartre 1984, 24). In one obvious sense, this is the stark opposite of what Serres argues; for Serres, Man invents, or perhaps discovers, objects, things rather than nothings. In another sense, Sartre and Serres may hold converse: because, for both, the subject is a nothingness, a vacuity, even if, for Sartre, this vacuity heroically or painfully thrusts the subject out of 'the world' into his indetermination, whereas, for Serres, at least the Serres of Statues, the subject comes into being in being drawn into the world, which it reciprocally draws out of itself, giving to the world and, now I come to think of it, to itself too I suppose, an exteriority where there has never yet been innerness.

If there is a kind of resiling of the mind from the thought that its thinking may be sedimented in things, there is also a magical compensation for this, that is instanced in the many efforts to claim that thoughts have the power to materialise or manifest themselves. In the nineteenth century, it was photography, and X-ray photography in particular, that was the carrier both of many new possibilities of thinking things and of attempts to subdue these things to the unilateral power of mind. The growth in spirit photography (Jolly 1996) testifies to the twin desire, not just to capture the spirit as though it were a thing, but also, and more particularly, to show that spirit can spontaneously impress itself in material forms. A more refined form of what one contemporary commentator called 'the exteriorisation of sensibility' (Rochas 1895) was developed in the work of Hippolyte Baraduc and Louis Darget, who, following the discovery and sensational publicity attached to X-rays, claimed to have developed ways in which the thoughts of the living might be projected directly on to photographic plates. X-rays probably also encouraged the development by the theosophist Annie Besant of the theory of 'thought-forms', which was set out in her book *Thought Forms* in 1905, and summarised in a chapter entitled 'Thoughts Are Things' that concluded a pamphlet by C.W. Leadbeater in 1912 (Leadbeater 1912, 53-8). This theory depends upon the idea of a mind entirely determining itself and its body, even if that body is formed

of astral matter: 'Such a thought-form if directed to affect any object or person on the astral world, will take to itself a covering of astral materials, of fineness correlated to its own, from the elemental essence of the astral world' (Leadbeater 1912, 55). This is the fantasy of the thing the thingness of which has been entirely purged, its place taken up completely by the thought that doubles and determines it: 'According to the nature of the thought', Besant asserts, 'will be the form it generates' (Leadbeater 1912, 56).

A rather cruder version of this fantasy is found in W.W. Atkinson's *Thoughts Are Things* (1912), which argues that it is the nature of thought to impress itself outwards on matter, in four forms of manifestation: 'Manifestation in the direction of creating character and personality' (Atkinson 1912, 17), 'Manifestation in the direction of the materialization of our ideals, good or bad, into objective and concrete existence' (Atkinson 1912, 17) 'Manifestation in the direction of drawing to ourselves the persons, things, and environments in harmony with, and conducive to, the character of our desires, mental images, feelings, and ideals' (Atkinson 1912, 18) and 'Manifestation in the direction of vibratory waves radiating in all directions, influencing those in harmony therewith' (Atkinson 1912, 19). The proposition 'Thoughts are Things' means that they are 'real, actual forms of energy and power, and not the airy, unreal, appearances that we had thought them' (Atkinson 1912, 20). In fact, this set of wish-fulfilling fantasies about 'thought-atmospheres', 'thought-magnets' and the power of positive thinking is a kind of magical bad faith, or reification of thought that, by asserting the absolute and determinate thingliness of thought, strives to secure its self-identity, and thereby to deny both its no-thingness and its ambivalent entanglement with things.

The project of possessing oneself in thought via an evacuation of all matter from mind, which readily flips over into the constitution of mind as a pure and self-sufficient object for itself, runs through twentieth-century mysticism and psychism. It sometimes takes the form of a pseudo-materialism, which pretends to affirm mind as an evolution of putative energies in matter in order once again to move beyond matter, and to purge thought of the admixture of things. It is there in the call for 'mentality-engineering' to bring about 'the idea of moving from a physical to a psychic environment' in a book like Merl Ruskin Wolfard's *Thinking About Thinking* (Wolfard 1955, 233), and the many forms of internet-mysticism suggested by the work of Teilhard de Chardin. The deterrence of the thought that things might be endemic to thinking is alive and well today in popular mysticism like Gary Lachman's *A Secret History of Consciousness* (2003). Though Lachman argues that consciousness can never round fully upon itself, or assimilate the 'black hole' at its centre, this very

insufficiency then becomes the guarantee that consciousness must in fact be able to grasp the 'absolute universe' that lies beyond it (Lachman 2003, 189), as though the mere fact of knowing that the lighthouse is five miles offshore were enough to ensure that you could hit it with a stone, or, in a more familiar kind of popular magic, as though knowing exactly how much you owe the bank were enough to get you out of hock. As nearly always, magical thinking is a thought about the omnipotence of thought itself, here in the service of the claim that the cosmos is in fact the projection or production of man's consciousness, which, by that same token, is able to possess itself as an absolute object. Again, thought here constitutes itself as a thing precisely in order to expunge thingliness, to constitute itself as the fantasy of purely determining, entirely undetermined thought. The subject inundates the object in its project.

There is another way of understanding the relation of the subject to the object. This is that the subject is, as it were, constitutively *dingarm*, poor in thinghood, in something of the way that Heidegger suggests animals are 'poor in world' (*weltarm*). A subject is the name of that which requires the accessory of things to accede to itself, the nothing that craves its catachrestic self-construing as thing. Peter Galison has discussed the development of a particular kind of analytic object that seemed to exploit this principle. The Rorschach psychological evaluation test, developed by the Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach in 1921 and extensively refined and modified thereafter, took from the history of augury and divination the idea that haphazard or seemingly random arrangements of objects – the flight of birds, the strewing of entrails or tea-leaves – could help the mind to focus its otherwise inaccessible powers to foretell the future. Leonardo's famous recommendations of a similar technique for stimulating the artistic imagination and 'arousing the mind to various inventions' has acted as an inspiration for occult and artistic practice in modernist artists as various as Yeats, Woolf and Dali:

when you look at a wall spotted with stains, or with a mixture of stones, if you have a chance to devise some scene, you may discover a resemblance to various landscapes, beautified with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and hills in varied arrangement; or again you may see battles and figures in action; or strange faces and costumes, and an endless variety of objects, which you could reduce to complete and well-drawn forms. And these appear on such walls confusedly, like the sound of bells in whose jangle you may find any name or word you choose to imagine (Da Vinci 1970, I.254)

As Peter Galison has shown so well, the Rorshach test was believed to work precisely because every trace of subjective intention had been emptied from it, leaving only an aching vacancy into which the mind of the subject would not be able to help projecting itself: 'If the blots suggested even a shard of human design, certain patients would seize on that fragment, losing their own ability to speak from within...In order for the subject to speak, the card, and the card's author, had to find a perfect silence' (Galison 2004, 271). Whereas scryers in the past has used the polished stone or cryptic giblets as an aide-voyance, the Rorshach blot subjects the subject to its own impulse to projection; the cards force thought to play its self-objectifying hand. Here it is precisely the failure of the illegible thing to succumb compliantly to the projective powers that stimulates the projection of an object that, without the subject realising it, is in fact a thought-form, or snapshot of itself. Galison concludes that

The Rorshach system functions as this intersection of self and world, subjectivity and objectivity. These ten cardboard plates remain a remarkable technology, reaching as they do into the domain of the objective by their unformed, chance images and at the same time into the very core of private desires. At every moment, these plates take what we say about them and speak back to us about our innermost selves, through specific results and through the saturating metaphor of a self that projects, distorts, transmits. (Galison 2004, 293-4)

Oddly, or at least unacknowledgedly, Galison's essay employs and approves in its method of analysis the technique whose genealogy it unfolds, for it elicits from the history of the Rorshach test the very symptomatic self-disclosures that the Rorshach test itself claims to elicit, only it is not patients, but diagnostic doctors who are here the subjects of the object, unwittingly projecting their desire (their desire for there to be projective and therefore symptomatic objects) on to the symptomatic object. In this, the Rorshach test exhibits an important characteristic of what I am calling the 'thinking thing', in its capacity not only to objectify thought, but also to signify that objectification, and thus be taken in by itself.

Given this talk of objects and projections, it is high time that I called to my aid the psychoanalytic theory that has made most of the dependence of the mind upon its objects, as well as extensive use of the metaphor of 'projection' that is so important in the history of the Rorshach test, namely object-relations theory. Within that tradition, it is the work of W.R. Bion and, following him, Didier Anzieu, that has given most attention to the act of thinking, a topic that,

though hidden, like the purloined letter of Poe's story, in plain view, seems to have escaped the attention of most other psychoanalysts and indeed philosophers of mind, who have needed to break down the act of thinking into more convenient and digestible chunks of cognitive action – feeling, representing, remembering, deducing, desiring, mourning and so on. The emphasis within Bion's work on the act of thinking, and especially his view of the analytic process as a work of shared cogitation, along with a powerful streak of rationalism, expressed in his fondness for mathematical models and analogies, may account for its continuing eccentricity to formal psychoanalysis, even in its more homely Anglo-Saxon attitudes. Perhaps it is not too prejudiced of me to say that many psychoanalysts are liable to be perplexed and put out by the thought that the aim of psychoanalysis may be to get the patient to think for themselves, or indeed that having a self might be fundamentally less a matter of striking deals with the id, or effecting other, equally delicate, cognitive and affective adjustments, than of simply being or becoming able to think. As a result, psychoanalysis keeps itself unable to account for the thinking operations, on the sides of the patient and the analyst, of which it consists, which thereby becomes or remains, purely magical, and without visible means of support.

Bion sets out precisely to materialise, even to physiologise, the process of thinking. Most accounts of the development of thought assume that thoughts are in some sense the necessary outcome of the capacity for thought. But, for Bion, thoughts come into being first, in the form of what he would eventually designate as 'beta-elements', which are unformed sensations and impulses. What is important about these proto-thoughts is precisely that they are not thoughts, because there is not yet in existence an apparatus of thought to think them: ' "thoughts" are regarded as epistemologically prior to thinking and... thinking has to be developed as a method or apparatus for dealing with "thoughts" ' writes Bion (Bion 1962, 82). They are in a sense, thoughts without a thinker – recalling the terms in which Hume objected to Descartes's *cogito*, by arguing that the mind must be thought of simply as its thoughts, rather than as a capacity for thinking in general:

Des Cartes maintained that thought was the essence of the mind; not this thought or that thought, but thought in general. This seems to be absolutely unintelligible, since every thing that exists is particular: and therefore it must be our several particular perceptions, that compose the mind. I say compose the mind, not belong to it. The mind is not a substance, in which the perceptions inhere. (Hume 2000, 414)

Before the achievement of the state of *cogito ergo sum*, there is a stage in which it would be possible to say, *cogitationes sunt, ergo non sum*: there are thoughts, therefore I am not. According to Bion, the work of analysis is intended to produce, not so much understanding of the nature of the neurosis, not even the putting of I (ego) into the place where it (id) had previously been in charge. Rather, it is intended to develop an apparatus of thinking that is capable of accommodating these thoughts without a thinker. It is in this sense that, for Bion, psychoanalysis teaches people how to think.

Bion follows Melanie Klein's theory of projective identification, the 'omnipotent phantasy that it is possible to split off temporarily undesired, though sometimes valued, parts of the personality and put them into an object' (Bion 1962, 30). Indeed, he suggests that '[t]he activity we know as "thinking" was in origin a procedure for unburdening the psyche of accretions of stimuli' (Bion 1962, 30). These accretions of stimuli are produced by bad objects, of which the prototype is the bad, because unpossessable breast:

As a "model" of thought I take a sensation of hunger that is associated with a visual image of a breast that does not satisfy but is of a kind that is needed. This needed object is a bad object. All objects that are needed are bad objects because they tantalize. They are needed because they are not possessed in fact; if they were possessed there would be no lack. As they don't exist they are peculiar objects different from objects that exist. Thoughts then, or these primitive elements that are proto-thoughts, are bad, needed objects and to be got rid of because they are bad. (Bion 1962, 82-3)

The child, and then later the patient recapitulating this process, has the choice either of evacuating these objects without ado, or of attempting to retain them but in a modified form (alpha elements). It is this latter process that both requires an apparatus for thinking and, seemingly spontaneously, but not infallibly, gives rise to it.

Negativity is therefore at the heart of Bion's thinking about thinking. The intolerable thing about a bad object is precisely that it is both a thing and not a thing – it is the object form of a privation. It is thus the cousin of the uncapturable thing-in-itself, the thing that refuses to buckle under to names and concepts. Indeed, Bion explicitly equates the evacuated object with Kant's *Ding-an-sich*: 'If evasion dominates, the name denotes a beta-element, that is a thing-in-itself and not the name that represents it. The thing in itself is non-

existent and therefore tantalizing. It is dealt with by divestment (evacuation)' (Bion 1962, 83). The ejected or split-off thing is ejected precisely by being made a thing (though it might be possible to put this the other way round, to say that it is made a thing precisely by being put at a distance), all connection with the self severed, in an attempt to alleviate the frustrated need that it otherwise embodies. Prior to its ejection, the thought is painfully plumbed with negativity; as the sign of something not being there, it is itself also both there and not there: 'Is a "thought" the same as an absence of a thing? If there is no "thing", is "no thing" a thought and is it by virtue of the fact that there is "no thing" that one recognizes that "it" must be thought?' (Bion 1962, 34) The apparatus of thinking arranges (then is) a space in which this 'thing' and 'no thing' can be allowed, even encouraged, to coexist. Indeed, perhaps thought is nothing more than this parenthesis of toleration or deferral, the broaching of an interior rather than an exterior breach.

Something like this process is acted out in a Keats poem that I have always until now found puzzlingly disappointing. In the first twelve lines of the sonnet 'When I have fears', Keats traces out the rising curve of a mild panic attack, piling up thoughts of all the thoughts that he might never have time to pile up in books before he is personally extinguished, and then all the experiences of love he may not live to have.

When I have fears that I may cease to be
 Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
 Before high piled Books, in charactery,
 Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain –
 When I behold upon the night's starr'd face,
 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
 And feel that I may never live to trace
 Their shadows with the magic hand of Chance;
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
 That I shall never look upon thee more
 Never have relish in the faery power
 Of unreflecting Love: then (Keats 2001, 168-9)

And then, at last, and yet also oddly in a kind of hurry, Keats offers us the answer to these crowding doubts in the dim and rather dreary consolation served up by the final couplet and a bit:

on the Shore
 Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
 Till Love and Fame to Nothingness do sink. (Keats 2001, 169)

Why, I have always wondered, is this supposed to be any use? Note that Keats does not say that love and fame sink into nothingness as a result of his thinking that love and fame are in the end vain and soapy things. We have no warrant for assuming that Keats thinks anything of the sort, for he declines to tell us exactly what he thinks. What he does, or tells us he does, is think until. Thinking here is not any kind of specific answer or antidote to this spasm of timor mortis, it is simply a delaying mechanism, a playing for time, or sort of deep breathing exercise. Keats has no intention of abandoning love and fame. Instead, he tells us, he just thinks, which is exactly what is needed to make his ambitions possible of realisation, precisely by making a space in which his thoughts can be thought. It is this act of moving from thoughts without a thinker – or the panicky thought that the thinker might have vanished before he has had time to think his thoughts through into the condition of things – to the act of thinking, that allows the renegade thoughts to become the objects of that thinking. For, hey presto, in the very act of not turning away the assailing thoughts, or turning them into anything else, the poem effects its occupatio, allowing us the sudden illumination, in flat contradiction of the corny ending, that Keats has actually succeeded, before his very eyes in this poem, in something like the downloading of thought that he feared he would never have time for.

We can think of Keats's predicament here as somewhat analogous to that of the tennis player who thinks to himself during the change-over, 'Yikes, I'm in trouble here. I'm a set and 5-4 down, with a break against me and my serve to come. If anything goes wrong with my serve on the first two points, that'll make it 0-30, so I will absolutely have to win the next point I serve, otherwise my opponent will have three match points in a row.' Tennis coaches will remind players that they need to find a way to win to a much simpler place, of physics and physiology, rather than probability and portent, in which what matters is to hit the fuzzy round yellow thing as sweetly as they can, taking into consideration the facts of its direction, speed and spin. This is sometimes represented as living in the moment, but it should be remembered that it involves not so much a concentration as a relaxed dilation of attention: the moment must be inclusively wide rather than narrowly decisive, in order to allow that willingness to deal on equal terms, with every contingency, with the equal mind signified in the precious word 'equanimity'.

Or we might recall Brutus in his tent before the battle of Philippi in 42 BC. Plutarch tells us that, as Brutus pored over his troop dispositions and battle plans, a hideous monster suddenly rose up before him. The monster, who seems to embody all Brutus's fear and guilt for the murder of Julius Caesar, leeringly threatens, in Xylander's Latin translation of Plutarch's *Life of Caesar*, 'Sum tuus, Brute, malus genius; apud Philippos me videbis' – I am your evil demon, Brutus; you will see me tomorrow at Philippi' (Plutarch n.d., lxix). To which Brutus replies, superbly, imperturbably, 'Videbo', and turns back to his papers. (Shakespeare's rendering of this scene in Act 4 scene 3 of *Julius Caesar* shadows Xylander's version but lacks its coiled terseness.) Brutus wisely does not square up to his fears, or turn the monster into a bad object to be expelled from consciousness, but constructs a subjunctive space in which it can be held in protective custody until it is time for it to make its appearance. In one sense, this turns the monster into a thing of thought, who, instead of choosing his time to jump out gibbering, must hang around awaiting Brutus's convenience. In another sense, it turns him into a no-thing, or a thing that hovers between the condition of a thing and a no-thing, precisely through being denied presence and being spread out in time between now and then. I recalled this story when I first heard of a therapy developed by Dutch psychiatrist Marius Romme, who discovered that there are large numbers of people who regularly hear voices, unaccompanied by any other symptoms (Romme and Escher 1993). Such people sensibly tend not to tell anyone about their voices, since hearing voices is still taken in many psychiatric quarters as a sure and sufficient indication of psychosis. It turns out that a good way of coping with a voice that breaks in, as such voices tend to, at a crucial moment, before a sales meeting, say, or during a plenary lecture, is not to try to disavow or suppress it, which only tends to increase its irritable virulence, but to say to it: 'I can't really give you my full attention right now – could you call back in about an hour?'

Bion's emphasis on toleration and containment suggests that thought must provide for itself a way of holding on to the 'no thing', rather than simply expelling it. Both involve processes of objectification, we may assume, since expulsion also requires to be put into an object. Perhaps the development of thinking requires us to resist the denial of the negativity, or its splitting from positive forms: the non-breast is no longer a certain kind of breast, a bad breast, it is now a certain aspect or possibility of the breast, which can be accepted as an ambivalent or intermittent – now-you-see-it now-you-don't – object. Thought allows the object to oscillate between being and non-being, fort and da.

The move from beta-elements to alpha-elements is a move from an indigestible thing-in-itself to a thing-(maybe)-for-me – and therefore from amputation to imputation, from a thing to an object, to evoke again that distinction of Bill Brown's to which I have been so annoyingly indifferent. Proto-thoughts are corporeal – often imagined in the form of lumps, clots and contusions, of sputum, excrement or urine – while thinking is abstract. Yet Bion also saw this very process of abstraction as in origin corporeal, following his apprehension that the forms of thinking must always have their origin in, or at least be referred to bodily process, and especially processes that have to do with the alimentary cycle whereby things are taken into and ejected from the body. For Bion, André Green has said, '[t]hinking is a digestion of the mind' (Green 2000, 112).

In Bion's later thinking, digestion is itself taken up into – one might say, is itself digested in – a larger metaphor. Thinking, Bion will come to assume, is a process of forming some kind of envelope or container for the otherwise ill-assorted, angular, bumpy, thing-like beta-elements. This transforms them into contents. The container is a spatial conception, but it might just as well be thought of as a delaying or dilation, a holding-together that is a holding-off. Thinking preserves no-things from being precipitately spat out as bad things, allowing them to persist uninjuriously as ambivalences, as either-ors, without the demand that they be resolved into positives. Thinking keeps the lid on the box containing Schrödinger's cat, which may not thereby have much of a life, but is at least afforded an indefinite stay of execution. Beta-thinking, which is not really thinking at all, says things like Got it! or That's it then or You're either with me or against me; alpha-elements say, hold on a minute, let's think. André Green records Bion's pleasure when Green quoted to him Maurice Blanchot's judgement that 'La réponse est la malheur de la question' – 'the answer is the misfortune of the question' (Green 2000, 122).

So thinking stays or delays the evacuation of no-things into things. Conceived as a container of thoughts, it acts as their outside or limit. So what kind of thing is thinking? In order to answer this, we might distinguish two aspects of thinghood. One is the quality of apartness, or inaccessibility to me. The other is its quality of singularity or internal coherence with itself. The containing function which is furnished by thinking has more of the second aspect of thinghood than the first: it is more important that the things it contains should have a relation to each other than that it itself should have apartness. Bion tried to prevent the idea of the container from ossifying into rigid formula, from becoming a kind of thing rather than a function or process. Nevertheless, it is not possible to conceive the container except as an object, which is to say some

kind of content, which is itself in need of a good home, or some conceptual or other container. Thought must be able to move outside itself; indeed, perhaps it is nothing more than this capacity of oscillation between absorption in itself and its objects and reflection on itself in its relation to its objects. This capacity of oscillation can then form a larger container, can become a horizon that one can see round.

There is another reason for suggesting that the container of thought must always have something thing-like about it. Seeing the container of thought as a space of suspension, or waiting-room, may suggest that it must always have come first, must always be there to receive the thoughts that it is to accommodate. Bion himself suggests that nobody is able to generate the capacity to think endogenously for themselves. In fact, he thinks that thinking is first borrowed from the form of the breast, or rather the form that that form itself adumbrates or en-things, namely the containing screen constituted by the relaxed, attentive receptiveness of the mother, later recapitulated by the analyst. This Bion calls the reverie, defined as 'that state of mind which is open to the reception of any "objects" from the loved object and is therefore capable of reception of the infant's projective identifications whether they are felt by the infant to be good or bad' (Bion 1962, 35).

Congenial though the idea is that thoughts cannot be thought until there is a thinking and perhaps ergo a thinker to think them, there is also something quite conventional about it. Bion's formulation might be made both subtler and more dynamic if it could accommodate the reverse process, in which the containing function of thought might in some sense itself wait upon or be generated by the incorporation of as-yet indigestible objects. It is this that I think Michel Serres's conception of the subject formed by the alternating current of the subject and the object helps to provide. As Serres suggests, the apparently commonsense principle that you cannot learn something you do not understand, is in fact a snare and a delusion. We are wrong to assume, as we so often do, that in order to know something, we must also and as it were in advance know what it is we are to know (Serres 1999, 102). Ordinary experience, whether of practising irregular verbs, arpeggios, or aerial backhands, ought to teach us time and again that the order of learning in fact runs *prendre, apprendre, comprendre*, for which it is possible to provide only an approximate rendering in English, as taking in, learning, understanding (Serres 1999, 104). Practising is pragmatic, a matter of *pragmata*, or things. We learn things in order to understand what they mean, trusting rightly that things will scoop a space to be thought in. What is more, a thinking that is insufficiently provided for by the internal irritation of things may itself harden into a mere

routine, thereby dwindling down into a mere content. I think of the courses in advanced literary theory that so many of us impose upon incoming students who have rarely or never experienced the exhilarating indigestibility of a sermon, sonnet, or epic simile, who have too few contents with which to hold the circus tent of theory up and prevent it collapsing inwards into an inglorious tangle of tarpaulin. This provides a confirmation of what may be called the Rumsfeld Omission. When in a press briefing of February 12, 2002, U.S. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld distinguished things we know that we know, things we know that we don't know and things we don't know that we don't know, he forgot, or perhaps never knew, that there are also things we don't know we know, which we might conjugate for present purposes as things we don't think we think.

The irreducible implication of thingliness in thinking makes it appropriate to think of thinking as a kind of atmosphere, something that seems all-containing, yet is itself containable as a concept. As a thinking thing, the atmosphere is both there and not-there. As soon as you see it or, in Peter Sloterdijk's term, explicitate it (Sloterdijk 2004, 76), it is no longer an atmosphere in the hitherto-obtaining sense, because it has lost its implicitness, its quality, as a given, of just being there. In other words, it is 'no-thing', the thing that can entertain thought, because only thought can entertain such a thing. The alternation of thing and no-thing can be thought of in terms of the alternations of space and time. As Sloterdijk has himself suggested, the architecture or spatial forms of the institutions of collective deliberation – parliaments, or speaking-places – can be thought of as ways of parking arguments, allowing discourse to be ventilated by thought, and time to be taken before giving a reply or coming to judgement. The ultimate thinking thing – a question to which Bion devoted much of his later thinking, which seemed to take him well beyond the practice or even theory of psychoanalysis – would be that form of container that was large, inclusive and myriad-minded enough to encompass the near-infinite multiplicity of things and ways of being, without either constricting them in a formula, or dissolving dizzily back into the blizzard of pure multiplicity.

So what kind of things are apt to form the thinking thing? Didier Anzieu has suggested a more literal corporeal form as a support for the idea of thinking than Bion, while preserving and developing many of Bion's central notions. Following the appearance of *Le Moi-Peau* in 1985, in which Anzieu set out his theory that the ego takes its form by reference to the experience of the skin, Anzieu both abstracted and in a sense consolidated the association between subjecthood and skin in his 1994 book *Le Penser*, as suggested by the book's subtitle: *Du Moi-peau au Moi-pensant – From the Skin Ego to the Thinking Ego*. For

Anzieu, the thinking thing, the thing good to think with, is a body, and, more particularly, a body such as the one that primates like us have, namely one provided with a largely hairless, highly sensitive epidermis. Anzieu takes the eight functions that, in *Le Moi-peau*, he had attributed to the skin in forming and supporting the ego and translates them into an account of the process of thinking, as follows: maintenance; containment; constancy; inscription; correspondence; individuation; energisation and libidinisation (Anzieu 1994, 104). Following Bion closely, Anzieu distinguishes between thoughts and thinking, and suggests a link between the containing function of thought (and for him too the breast is thought's matrix or ur-integument) and the 'deferral of the answers to questions, to allow time to elaborate them' (Anzieu 1994, 6), which Anzieu relates to Derrida's *différance*.

Anzieu explains that, for this reason, he preferred not to call his book *La Pensée*, which would be the usual French term to designate 'thought', but rather *Le Penser*, a neologistic noun-infinitive in French for which the natural English translation would probably be 'Thinking' (Anzieu 1994, 8). 'Thinking' is a gerund, which means that it has both a verbal and a nominal function. In the sentence 'thinking of examples is easy', for example, it acts as a verb in the non-finite clause 'thinking of examples', but as a noun governing the verb in the predication 'thinking is easy'. So, like thinking itself, the gerund thinking is both active and substantive, both process and object and, again like thinking itself, seems to hold open a space in which these two different things can alternate. In fact, it is just this swivel or shimmer that I hoped to set off in the term 'thinking things', thinking as an adjectival participle and thinking as the name of an action – thus 'things that are thinking' and 'thinking about things'. Thinking, I'm wanting to get you to think is the very interval where these two things can take turns at being each other, the background against which this flickering can figure, which then itself can start to participate in the flicker. So thinking things constitute a surrogate way of thinking about the things that thinking takes to itself in order to think about the way it thinks about things... and so, exquisitely, illimitably, on, or for as long as anyone can bear it. And, in fact, the very word gerund derives from *gerere*, meaning to bear, wear, manage, maintain, negotiate; it even has a bearing on the word *digest*, from *digerere*, as well as the words *jest* and *suggestion*.

Where *Le Moi-peau* was an attempt at thinking the skin, *Le Penser* is an attempt to think with it, to make the skin a thinking thing. Where Bion moves progressively away from the body into more and more abstract logical functions, Anzieu goes forwards and backwards simultaneously, such that the more the body is immaterialised in thought, the more thinking is revealed, not

as a transformation of the body into something else, but as a transformed body. To say that thinking is built on the corporeal schema of the skin is not to say that the mind simply deposits itself in or delegates itself to its other, the body. For the body already contains the duality, one side of which alone it is supposed to constitute; its form, Anzieu will repeatedly suggest, is therefore that of the Möbius strip, a surface that both exceeds and includes itself. It is both a thing and the no-thing that is a potential action, and itself the register in which such an ambivalence can be embodied. The body, my body, is an object that is not limited to its bodily form. I am, as Hopkins describes himself in ‘The Wreck of the “Deutschland” ’

soft sift

In an hourglass – at the wall

Fast, but mined with a motion, a drift,

And it crowds and it combs to the fall (Hopkins 1970, 52)

The body capable of movement is always beside or beyond itself. So it is the same kind of unfigurable, impalpable thing as thought. If this is the case, perhaps we may surmise that all thinking things are kinds of bodies.

Mind-Stuff

Bion’s idea of proto-thoughts, or thoughts without a thinker, has interesting resemblances to a theory that had its brief heyday in the later nineteenth century, a theory centring on what came to be called the existence of mind-stuff. In an essay of 1878, W.K. Clifford reflected on the implications of carrying through an extreme materialism. If it is accepted that mental operations are the result of the complex organisation of material forms, and never involve the appearance or emergence on the scene of any new kind of substance – if mind is the modification of the conditions of matter rather than, as is suggested by most traditional dualisms, the entry into matter or splitting apart from it of some ontologically other principle – then we will never with any conviction be able to determine the point at which matter becomes mind. ‘There is no evidence which amounts to a *primâ facie* case against the dynamical uniformity of Nature: and I make no exception in favour of that slykick force which fills existing lunatic asylums and makes private houses into new ones’, Clifford concludes (Clifford 1878, 61). But it follows from this that we will also never be able to identify a state of matter in which the elements of mind are wholly lacking. This in turn leads Clifford to something like Bion’s notion of thoughts without a thinker: ‘A feeling can exist by itself, without forming part

of a consciousness. It does not depend for its existence on the consciousness of which it may form a part...Sentitur is all that can be said' (Clifford 1878, 65). Clifford's anti-dualist conviction that mind can only ever be a complication, not a transformation of or addition to matter, leads him to conceive the universal existence of what he calls 'mind-stuff':

The element of which...even the simplest feeling is a complex, I shall call Mind-stuff. A moving molecule of inorganic matter does not possess mind, or consciousness; but it possesses a small piece of mind-stuff. When molecules are so combined as to form the film on the under side of a jelly-fish, the elements of mind-stuff which go along with them are so combined as to form the faint beginnings of Sentience. (Clifford 1878, 65)

This leads Clifford the materialist to a remarkable series of conclusions:

The reality external to our minds which is represented in our minds, is in itself mind-stuff.

The universe, then, consists entirely of mind-stuff. Some of this is woven into the complex form of human minds, containing imperfect representations of the mind-stuff outside them, and of themselves also, as a mirror reflects its own image in another mirror ad infinitum. Such an imperfect representation is called a material universe. It is a picture in a man's mind of the real universe of mind-stuff. (Clifford 1878, 66)

In his critical review of these arguments in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) William James pushed the argument back even further than the jelly-fish's film, for why come to rest there in the quest for the most elementary matter of the mind? The ultimate thinking thing, James reasons, must in fact be identical with the most elementary state of matter:

If evolution is to work smoothly, consciousness in some shape must have been present at the very origin of things. Accordingly we find that the more clear-sighted evolutionary philosophers are beginning to posit it there. Each atom of the nebula, they suppose, must have had an aboriginal atom of consciousness linked with it; and, just as the material atoms have formed bodies and brains by massing themselves together, so the mental atoms, by an analogous process of aggregation, have fused into those larger

consciousnesses which we know in ourselves and suppose to exist in our fellow-animals. (James 1890, I.149)

The odd thing about the doctrine of mind-stuff is that a materialist theory that denies that thought or consciousness could represent any radically new principle of emergence in nature should turn out, in the form of the doctrine known as panpsychism, to affirm the universality of mind, and therefore to give comfort and succour to just those proponents of the 'slykick' forces in the universe at whom Clifford so elegantly jeers. As David Skrbina shows in his useful review of the history of the doctrine, *Panpsychism in the West* (2005), it soon found other adherents, such as Morton Prince (1885), C.A. Strong (1903, 1918) and Durant Drake (1925). Even Arthur Eddington declared in his *The Nature of the Physical World*, 'the stuff of the world is mind-stuff' (Eddington 1928, 276). It has been revived in more recent years by Thomas Nagel (1979) and Galen Strawson (2006). My interest here is not in the plausibility or not of what James calls this doctrine of 'atomistic hylozoism' (James 1890, I.149). Rather, it is in the throwing up of a particular kind of ultimate object, that of the atom, for the thinking of thought. This tradition has its origins in the thinking of Democritus, the first atomist, who, according to Aristotle, in *de Anima*, believed that there were certain kinds of atoms which were possessed of soul, because they were spherical and thus able to permeate everywhere (Aristotle 404a5). The atom as thinking thing, along with the identification of thinking with a kind of composite matter, as an aggregate of atoms, will prove to be one of the most important and telling objectifications of thought.

Riddling

Thought, then, has an intrinsic indebtedness, a liability to objects, which both exceed it, and yet which must always form part of its own substance, insofar as thinking always has an object, is always, as Brentano insisted in reviving the medieval doctrine of intentionalism, a thinking of (Brentano 1995, 88-9). There is an analogy between thought's relation to its objects (objects of thought) and the relation of the act of thinking to the thinking things (objects for thought, objectifications of the action of thinking) that stand for it – an analogy that is also an interference.

This seems to make of thinking itself a lost object, even as, and exactly because, it must lose itself in objects, be unthinkable except through substitution, surrogacy and standing-in. Just as one can be, as the English phrase has it, lost

in thought, so it is the nature of thought veritably and inevitably to be lost to itself even and exactly when it is lost in itself. This might recall Lacan's concept of *das Ding* though it is really its obverse. For the object that is lost to thought, the lack that is never lacking from its place, is not a dark wedge of otherness, excavating, yet coring the work of thought. The lost object is thinking itself. Thought must always think improperly of itself.

This is perhaps why it is the role of certain thinking things to embody, not thinking itself, but thinking's exceeding of every thing, including the things it takes for itself, takes itself for. Certain objects, by failing to capture thought, seem apt to capture its uncapturability. Hence the importance of certain kinds of ambivalent matter and bodiless substance – in particular, air, gas, vapour and their allotropes, snow, fog, rain, wind, storm, blizzard, the various climates of the soul to which Daniel Tiffany has drawn attention in his investigations of what he calls 'lyric substance' in poetry. Enquiring into the improbable question of what lyric poetry takes itself to be made of, and assuming that it is neither sugar and spice and all things nice nor slugs and snails and puppy-dogs' tails, Tiffany enjoins 'close attention to the kind of body produced by lyric; to the nature of its material substance, whether continuous or discontinuous, palpable or impalpable; to its modes of appearance and disappearance; to its limits, its temporal nature, and its modes of relation' (Tiffany 2000, 15). I am interested in particular in Tiffany's scintillating extension of the arguments of *Toy Medium* to riddle poems in his essay of 2001. Riddles are helpful in thinking about thinking's relation to itself because there are riddles of reflexivity involved in all thinking things, in all the ways in which thought brings itself to mind. Thinking is like, or likes to take itself to be, a highly reactive gas, and perhaps most like the most ravenously and in the end ruinously reactive gas, the one that both keeps us going and will do for us all, oxygen, in that it binds vigorously to most of the other elements with which it comes into contact, deforming them and itself in the process. Cogitation lets copulation thrive.

Air figures forth the mind and spirit, and, concomitantly the act of thought, so regularly in so many times and places, not just because the air is light, quick, changeable and edgelessly expansive, but also because, as Hopkins puts it, it is a compounded and compounding substance, that

goes home betwixt
The fleeciest, frailest-fixed
Snowflake; that's fairly mixed
With, riddles, and is rife
In every least thing's life (Hopkins 1970, 93)

Air gets everywhere, just as thought can put no term to what it thinks of, or the objects with which it can intermingle, veining them with its volatile insinuations. So these vaporous compounds and allotropes of air are rendered riddles – enigmas, teasers, puzzles – because they are literally riddled, ragged, tattered, lacerated, nooked, pricked, minced, sieved, shot full of holes, so that they are almost, or as near as makes almost no difference, no longer themselves at all. As Tiffany himself notes, riddling is etymologically related to reading, but, at a more primary stage, is kin to words signifying counselling, advising, deliberating or guessing – the actions of thinking (Tiffany 2001, 78 n.11). So there is a literality to riddling, which helps us to understand why riddled, sieved and ragged things, things that are built around interior vacancy and declivity, are so ripe for thinking about thinking with.

Tiffany explains that riddle-objects, the objects that the speaking creatures that both conceal and enunciate themselves in riddles are, are not only things without names ('what am I?'), but also names without things, for the answer to the riddle is often an object that is in itself 'inherently puzzling or mysterious' – so that '[t]he thing is therefore a riddle even before it starts talking in riddles' (Tiffany 2001, 80-1). More precisely, it is the form of the riddle that makes its answer always a kind of makeshift or place-holder. Whenever one seems to have hit on the answer to a riddle – as it may be, 'a cup', or 'gold', or 'snow' – this is to betray into nameability and visibility an object whose nature it is to defect from them (the most important attribute of gold is given in the formula 'I must hide from men', Tiffany 2001, 80). The answer to the riddle is, as we say, a solution, that dissolves the temporary knot of resemblances formed in mid-air by the verbal process of the riddle. So there is really only one correct answer to the question 'what am I?' that conventionally concludes so many riddles, and always one and the same answer: 'you are a riddle'. We might say the same of any thinking thing, or object for thought; it may seem or mean to body forth thinking, but can in fact do so only if it is sufficiently perforated by obscurity, doubt and defect to embody the unbodied nature of thought.

Bion and Anzieu saw in such thinking objects the signs of the psychotic, the one who had lost or never had a way of thinking their thoughts, no longer had a thought that could entertain their own thinking. Anzieu repeatedly evokes the ego skin that is experienced as a colander, the leaky vessel that cannot adequately cinch together its thoughts and impulses, a container that cannot perform its function of containment. Bion and Anzieu are surely right to point to the agonies and anxieties embodied in the image of the riddled, shot-up self. But we would be wrong to assume that thought must therefore find images that hold or grasp itself entirely. For this too is a source of anxiety, a clausturation

rather than an agoraphobia of the mind. It is imperative for thought also to exceed or escape itself in its objects. It is this, perhaps, which impels Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to return so often to the experience of the mined or holey skin, in which the self finds its most satisfying object in a mixed integument, one held together by its loopholes and airpockets, as in Dr. Johnson's definition of a net as 'anything made with interstitial vacuities' (Johnson 1785, n. p.)

Bubbles

Didier Anzieu gives a brief case history of a patient he calls Eurydice, who alternates between the experience of a carapace-like thought that crushes and asphyxiates her with its rigidity and repetitiveness and her fears that she will dissolve or float away. There is either a gasping paucity of air, or an inability to distinguish oneself from it. Skin and air here enter into composition with each other, for skin is what encloses air, just as air is what animates or energises skin. There is a large class of thinking things that compound interiority and exteriority, volume and volatility, in this way. This may be in small part verified by the attention paid to the curiously voluble alternations of fullness and emptiness in the Renaissance gloves analysed by Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones (Stallybrass and Jones 2001, 123), or the description by Lesley Stern of cinematic objects as inflated or deflated (Stern 2001, 325-7). But the most conspicuous of these tenuous mixed bodies of skin and air is the bubble, probably because of the thought bubble, or thought balloon, with which comic strips have made us so familiar.

The thought balloon developed from the speech balloon, which was itself a development from the graphic representation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of speech in the form of a scroll, unrolling from the mouth of a speaker. During the eighteenth century, speech started to be represented graphically in ways that were more suggestive of breathy emanation than print, and so began to be represented as rising up from or hovering above the speaker rather than falling from the lips, sometimes with just a thin thread, like the tail of a kite, to connect it to their mouths, but without any form of enclosing line. However, the first balloon-like forms had begun to appear the middle of the eighteenth century. Some caricatures of this period, like George Townshend's *The Recruiting Sarjeant* (1757) or the anonymous *Will[ia]m Hoggarth Drawn From the Life* (1763) have a transitional form, a squarish balloon with a tail, that still looks like a flag or label (Donald, 1996, 25). Earlier forms of speech bubbles seem to have a tendency to sag, or fall from the lips, which can

make them look more like socks than balloons. But full-blown speech bubbles with tapering spouts or mouthpieces are visible coming from the mouths of nine speakers in the anonymous *The State Ballance, or Political See-Saw* (1762) (Donald 1996, 51). Later in the nineteenth century, the tail would develop wiggles, suggesting the curling of smoke – for example in J.L. Marks's *Much Wanted: A Reform Among Females* (1819) (Donald 1996, 194). It took some time for cartoons and popular comic strips in the nineteenth century to rediscover this eighteenth-century convention. It was not until Rudolph Dirks's *Katzenjammer Kids* strip in the *American Humorist* from 1897 onwards that speech balloons began to feature regularly again (Waugh 1947, 11). It took even longer in France: when Hergé's *Tintin au pays des soviets*, which used speech balloons extensively, was republished in France, captions were added below the images, presumably to assist the reader to make sense of the convention (Khorduc 2001, 158).

It was also in the 1920s, it seems, that 'thinks' bubbles, or thought balloons, developed as a modification of speech balloons. The most interesting thing about thought bubbles is that they lack the spout which links the utterance to its utterer, by identifying the specific aperture from which it has been emitted. Speech, which is no longer wholly the possession of the speaker, since it has become a thing in the world, is shown nevertheless as clearly continuous with the speaker. The thought bubble, which one might naturally think of as more internal, and less to be sequestered from the speaker than his or her spoken words, is nevertheless represented as more detached and even sealed off from the thinker who is their subject. What is more, where the speech bubble seems to be fixed in its own air-space, and kept by its attachment to the speaker at a constant distance, the thought bubble is classically represented as in the process of escaping from the thinker, usually represented as rising up, as Aristotle and other classical writers thought that *pneuma* or spirit had a tendency to do, into the ether. Instead of the lead or mouthpiece, the thought bubble is traditionally indicated by a trail of preliminary puffs or bubblets, which might be thought of as picturings of proto-thoughts, shapings to thought, or thinkings before thought – for these bubblets are always empty of content. In this sense bubbles are the possibility of thoughts without a thinker. These cognitive quasi-objects are sometimes themselves occupied, not by words, but by objects – such as simple marks of punctuation, like the exclamation mark or question mark. In comic strips, certain mental states that come short of the condition of thought can be represented by objects that are not enclosed in balloons – the rotating stars or tweety-birds of the recently stunned, for example. That the materiality of thinking has its own kind of historicity is brilliantly suggested in Albert Uderzo's *Asterix* illustrations, in which, when Asterix has a bright idea, it is

signified by a thought bubble containing, not the conventional light-bulb coming on, but an oil-lamp.

Daniel Dennett sees the thought balloon as a perfect embodiment of the Cartesian view of consciousness, and, as such ‘a deep and seductive mistake’, especially in the fact that it involves the idea that there is ‘a special medium, not of ectoplasm or other dualistic mystery-stuff but of brain-stuff, entry into which marks off conscious events from unconscious ones’ (Dennett 1995; Lloyd 2000). Here, though, Dennett is stalking different prey than I am, for his concern is with establishing the truth, the object as in itself it really is, of consciousness. My concern is with figuring out the phenomenological truth of the object as in itself it seems to itself to be, the inside story of the way in which thought imagines getting beside itself.

The bubble is an appropriate quasi-object for thought because bubbles have all the qualities of air – lightness, mutability, ungovernability, levity – while no longer being quite, or only air. A bubble is air arrested: air limned, embodied, given a shape, given surface tension, an epidermis, which is to say internal relation. It is the uncontained container chambered, the great outdoors interned, the flux of phenomena held up, held back from itself. The etymology of bubble offered by the OED can go no further back than the imitative action of making a bubble with the lips; bubbling seems therefore to be the counterpart of babbling, and first cousin to other labio-plosive entertainments, such as prattling, blithering, blathering and the sadly-obsolete blattering. All these come together in the fool’s bladder or bubble-like bauble, which has traditionally emblematised the lightminded thought of the tale told by an idiot; I have unfolded these connections at merciless length in my ‘Windbags and Skinsongs’ (Connor 2003). Babies, whose names echo the action of babbling, will often develop virtuoso skills of raspberry-blowing and spit-lathering as part of the joyous prelude to speech proper, and the bubbles thus produced may be regarded as continuous with the babbling songs that D.W. Winnicott included alongside rag-dolls and comfort blankets in the category of transitional objects.

Bubbles are vain, impermanent, deceitful. But they are also the extravasating abundance of invention, and thus participate in the great duality relating to the foamy which, as Peter Sloterdijk has shown, runs through many civilisations (Sloterdijk 2004, 27-42). Foam, froth, sperm, suds, bubbles, are both airy and treacherous nothings – Yeats’s ‘spume that plays/Upon a ghostly paradigm of things’ (Yeats 1979, 244) – and yet also in many cosmogonies are also the origin of everything, in various kinds of churning, ferment or effervescence. These two usages came together in the South Sea Bubble, in which the

treacherous nothingness of a fraudulent scheme that did not exist nevertheless became a thing of enormous moment, marking the definitive entry of nothingness, in the form of fictional capital, into the seemingly too too solid world of commodities and purchasable objects.

I hope that we can enlarge Tiffany's arguments about what he calls the 'subtle body of lyric' (Tiffany 2000, 29) to encompass the traditions of rendering thought, mind, soul in certain kinds of riddling or oracular thinking thing (indeed the term 'subtle body' has been precipitated from a tradition in which its signification is much broader and more diffuse than the particular uses to which Tiffany puts it in *Toy Medium*).

Lighter Than the Mind

As Peter Schwenger notes, words, though traditionally thought of as effecting the murder of the thing, also offer a kind of redemption in that words are also things, or can be induced to display a thing-like aspect themselves (Schwenger 2001, 106-7). Perhaps the most important thing about words, and especially words worked up into the specially inscrutable kinds of thing we call works of art, is not their capacity to impersonate objecthood or cloak themselves in inscrutability, but rather, as John Frow notes, their duality, or equivocality, the fact that 'works of art both are themselves things and may at the same time represent things' (Frow 2001, 281). He might very well have put in, even and especially in representing themselves as things. We might say the same however of thinking things, which, as should by now be abundantly clear, I think are always to be seen as metaphorical embodiments of their own power of embodiment, ways of thinking about what thinking does and how it does. This turns thinking into a thing that shows the kind of thing that thinking does. It is a thing with an inside, or a thing that can treat or touch on itself, and therefore a reflexive thing, a thing that can give thought.

This is particularly the case with linguistic artefacts, but not, I think, because of the quality of the well-wrought urn that poetic or literary language can on occasion aspire or pretend to. Rather it is for just the opposite reason, namely that speech, and more particularly writing, while depending on and coinciding with its material embodiment, can never be identical with it. That is, it is necessary for any text to appear in a particular form, in a particular font, page lay-out, binding, and so on – but it is never necessary for it to be set out in any one font, page lay-out and binding in particular. These material features are, as Sartre observes of the body, the contingent form which is assumed by the

necessity of its contingency (Sartre 1984, 309). It must be something, but there is no necessity for it to be a specific thing. This makes language isomorphic with thought itself, which is always simultaneously short of and in excess of thinghood. Thought and writing constitutively call for and call on things, precisely because they are themselves always something more or less than a thing. Writing and thought are bound together, not just for the powerful though ultimately banal reason that words are the medium of thought, but because writing is the same kind of substantial no-thing as a thinking thing.

We can conclude that a thinking thing must at once be a thing and a no-thing. It must offer a picturing of the unpictureable, in a form with limit, definition and internal continuity. It must make present the impresent or unrepresentable. But it must do so in such a way as always to suggest its own insufficiency. The thinking thing must be a thing, but it must appear to be able to think, which is to be nothing and nowhere and nohow. This is perhaps to suggest that, if it is true that the things which are of most interest to us are those that exceed or fall beneath our power of thinking them, this may be because they are all incipient figurings of thought's desire to encounter in things the objects of its own thinking.

I owe you by now a developed example of such a thing. In Francis Quarles's emblem-poem 'My Soul, What's Lighter Than a Feather', we have a poem that conjoins many of the elements of my argument. The poem is a playful pondering on the weight and substance of things, and especially the things of thought – a pondering, precisely, since this word reminds us of the operations of weighing and balancing that often hang on the thought of thinking (French *penser* and *peser* are related). Quarles finds in the idea of gravity and levity, whether material or metaphorical or metaphysical, a kind of universal scale or register which will allow everything to be assigned its place in relation to everything else. Thinking is a matter not just of degrees of weight, but also of a sequence of encapsulations, in which containers are thought of as denser than what they enclose (thus a thought is lighter than the mind that contains it, but 'the world' is lighter than both because it can be contained in the thought of it). The poem effects a riddling inversion of large and small, mental and material, in which the ultimate content is also the most attenuated container:

My soul, what's lighter then a feather? wind.
 Then wind? The fire. And what then fire? The mind.
 What's lighter then the mind? A thought. Then thought?
 This bubble-world. What then this bubble? Nought. (Quarles
 1643, 19)

The poem is a something turning on a nothing, or a sequence of near-nothings, that nevertheless comes up exquisitely, inexplicably short of being nothing at all. It offers itself as a shape, a series of enclosures, an intricate house of hypothecations, of feints and counter-feints, lessenings and leastenings. It has no substance, but only relations, of less and more, inner and outer, lighter and heavier. The shape it draws out in air, out of air, is the profile of the thinking it does, and the body, not quite there, of the thinking thing it is.

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