



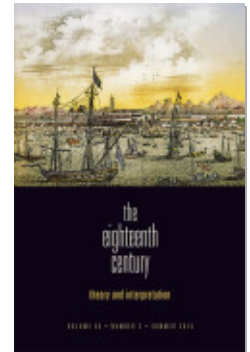
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A History of Inanimate Minds

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The age of Enlightenment gave rise to vitriolic debates about whether the materiality of the world was an objective fact or a product of human consciousness. Some eighteenth-century writers sought to triumph in the concomitant battle for a reliable theory of meaning with a performance piece which framed an abstract controversy as a theatrical spectacle. This ploy gave a voice to dumb matter so that it could write back to the Cartesian citadel, where mind ruled supreme in a separatist universe that excluded all claims of the plebeian animate and inanimate bodies. Jonathan Lamb's *The Things Things Say* (Princeton, 2011) offers a comprehensive overview of the fascinating phenomenon of the "it-narratives" which sprang up in an effort to assert the complexity of material objects, suggesting that anyone who can become a narrator of his/her/its history must also be considered as a person, that is, some kind of person whose personhood challenges any simple subdivision between persons, authors, people and things.

Lamb's ingenious study of the world of things bypasses some of the dead ends of established theories of meaning. To this end he offers a history of material culture by means of contextualizing the emergence of "it-narratives" in linguistic, legal and economic attempts to authenticate the veracity of a narrative, illustrated most famously by the statement appended to the lengthy full title of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*: "written by himself." The agents in his broadly contextualized study of eighteenth-century experience are "things," a term which Lamb strongly differentiates from "objects." He in fact insists that his readers maintain this differentiation throughout the book. To illustrate the semantic differences between the two terms: "objects" are described as indifferent components in the world of exchange until they acquire some special significance. When they attract attention to their special role, they can reach the status of "things," or authors of an "it-narrative . . . a modern fable, the autobiography of something not human, formerly inanimate but now inspired with enough passion, reason, and speech to launch upon its own story" (xxviii).

An object becomes a thing once it has acquired the ability to speak for itself. A similar differentiation applies to human beings who belong to the essentially passive rubric of the "person," unless they make the effort to speak up and by doing so affirm themselves as "authors."

The Things Things Say discusses a remarkable spectrum of examples that illustrate the curious phenomenon of things which (who?) recount their experiences and views. Theories of property and representation provide a common theme for a rich tapestry of theories and examples that illustrate the transformation of objects into something else: a different type of matter, or an intermediary between a human and a non-human being. The proliferation of "it-narratives" in the eighteenth-century testifies to a preoccupation with the role played by things in a world that came to be cluttered with an ever-increasing amount of material goods. The emergence of a new taste for stories about things, told by the things themselves, was founded on a new fascination for the minute, insignificant, and trivial. However, the stories told by the seemingly least relevant agents who recorded the seminal events of a dramatically changing society frequently tried to arrest the transfer of metaphor in an attempt to build a half-way house. Nonetheless, Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) presents itself as the disorganized rambling of a wooden brain, whose intellectual capacity enabled the tub's power of speech, which in turn enabled it to write a history of the Reformation, intermingling a history of the sentiments experienced by the competing factions with historical information, observations, and anecdotes.

Discussion of eighteenth-century still life leads Lamb to conclude that the extraordinarily visual spectacles presented by Alexander Pope refuse to remain passive objects of voyeuristic consumption. When human agents employ a superabundance of objects in order to represent themselves as important members of public life, the law of excess comes into play, the result being that objects acquire a capacity for agency: "Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots strive, / Beaux banish Beaux, and Coaches Coaches drive" (*The Rape of the Lock*, i.101-2). Although Pope's satire seems to be aimed at foppish young men who surrender their human character to heightened visual appeal and attractiveness, the world of objects in which they move as quasi-equals turns into a sinister world. The material world hence acquires ghostly shadows, consisting of memories, desires, projections, together with the residues of a religiosity that has largely been reduced to costly devotional emblems (for example, the cross which infidels could adore, *Rape of the Lock*, ii. 7-8) and empty rituals.

Lamb's discussion of the psychodynamics of inanimate matter emphasizes that the repression and displacement of a deeply felt need for devotional practices cannot simply dissolve into thin air. With reference to William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he argues that Titania's infatuation with Bottom's coarse physicality is no simple joke but should instead be understood as the antecedent to the fulfilment of her desires. Transferring the conditions necessary for the experience of sexual passion to religious raptures, Lamb ar-

gues that “the passion is proportionate to the belief that matter may be the proper dwelling place of divinity, with energy to blast the sense of things into our hearts” (90).

A special area of interest in Lamb’s book concerns the weird and wonderful relationship between property and objects of worship. Concentrating on Captain James Cook’s largely futile efforts to retain control over property that belonged to the navy, Lamb discusses the role of stories that attributed a special meaning to randomly chosen objects. It is well known that eighteenth-century expeditions were hopelessly struggling with the problems caused by the tendency of indigenous people to pilfer just about any object that belonged to the explorers. But Lamb outlines a new approach to the understanding of indigenous tribes who did not share the European obsession with individual property. By describing Cook as a control freak who made every effort to retain control over the meanings possessed by cloth dolls or effigies of indigenous godheads, Lamb sheds new light on the puzzling fact of Cook’s ready acceptance of indigenous worship of him as the Hawaiian god Lono. Lamb concludes that Cook’s failure to grasp the fluid boundary between “objects” and “things”—or simple objects and effigies endowed with the spirit of an absent person or deity—precipitated his disastrous end. His frantic struggle to retain control over people and meanings is presented as a factor that contributed to the misunderstandings that were to culminate in his unheroic death at the hand of Hawaiian warriors in 1779.

The Things Things Say offers an engaging and deeply human perspective on the beliefs and philosophical arguments of the age of Enlightenment. Its extraordinary wealth of material creates a maze of ideas that challenge us to explore untrodden paths in the pursuit of a necessarily elusive account of the relationship between the subjects and objects of representation. The emphasis on detail—of object and narrative—also suggests that the most important questions of philosophy relate to how people and things affect each other. In this process, we gain a unique glimpse of the feelings elicited by an encounter between eighteenth-century characters and the material culture which was not only made by them but which also formed their sense of being.