Object Relations in an Expanded Field

It seems to me that, in our culture, a conscious ignoring of the psychological importance of the nonhuman environment exists simultaneously with a (largely unconscious) overdependence upon the environment.
—Searles

Under the spell of shape-changing, anything can become anything at any moment, and the world around us may contain the ghosts of the stories that we no longer know. The relation between person and things grows more uncanny.
—Johnson

Novel Objects

When he invented the kaleidoscope (originally designed to produce theatrical phantasmata) in 1816, David Brewster could hardly have predicted the impact. Two years later, though, reporting on the “universal mania for the instrument,” Peter Mark Roget, the physician and lexicographer, remarked that “no invention, and no work, whether addressed to the imagination or to the understanding, ever produced such an effect” (qtd. in Baker). Brewster had in fact hoped that his invention, producing a “magical union of parts” (3), as he put it, would offer more than a means of enjoying “rational amusement” (7) or of assisting in the “ornamental arts” (6). He hoped it would become a “philosophical instrument” (6).

It became such an instrument in the hands of Charles Baudelaire, one means of getting at the psychology of modern life. Baudelaire likens the “perfect flâneur,” who takes joy in the urban masses, to a “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness,” responding to each movement “by reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering graces of all the elements of life.” The kaleidoscope figures the way a certain cosmopolitan “I” absorbs and refracts the “non-I.” “C’est un moi insatiable du non-moi”
Bergson used the kaleidoscope to figure the point of perception—the body—in the midst of a system of images that shifts utterly with the slightest change in that point (25). And for Proust, “the shifting kaleidoscope of the darkness” forms part of Marcel’s sleeping/waking/dreaming state (4). In short, the kaleidoscope can thus be understood as an invention that helped to metaphorize the experience of modernity.

For Claude Lévi-Strauss, though, it was not modern life but la pensée sauvage, not flanerie but bricolage, that could be best understood with the kaleidoscope’s help. Recharacterizing “the thought we call primitive” as a “thirst for objective knowledge” (10) that orders the world systematically, and eager to imagine this “science of the concrete” (3) as concretely as possible—to emphasize how, as he goes on to write, “savage thought” is characterized both “by a consuming symbolic ambition [. . .] and by scrupulous attention directed entirely toward the concrete” (220)—he epigrammatically maintains that the bricoleur “speaks not only with things [. . .] but also through the medium of things” (21). He soon gets his hands on a thing to speak with and through. The kaleidoscope, an “instrument” that “contains bits and pieces by means of which structured patterns are realized” (36), is an apparatus, a medium, that figures not only mythical thinking but Lévi-Strauss’s own thinking about the mythical, his own fragmentation and reorganization of mythemes into a recognizable system.

Yet, even as the kaleidoscope provides a concrete illustration of mythical and magical and anthropological thinking, it nonetheless might be said to illustrate a dematerializing operation: it shows how “concrete logic” can dissolve material properties. The fragments, which “can no longer be considered entities in their own right,” form a “new type of entity” where “signs assume the status of things signified” (36). In other words, the pattern, the design, the specular form—this has become the content; the simulacrum has become the object. That particular shard of glass—cobalt blue—is, in itself, beside the point.

Regardless of how well the kaleidoscope explains la pensée sauvage, the figure of the kaleidoscope illustrates why structuralism has been repeatedly charged with effecting a transition in French thought, circa 1960, away from an engagement with material culture. Kristin Ross’s account of this transition in the work of Roland Barthes (marked by the difference between Mythologies [1957] and Le système de la mode [1967]) is, in a word, kaleidoscopic: “Structural man takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it in view of creating the general intelligibility underlying
the object; he creates the object’s simulacrum” (161). The operation of the kaleidoscope helps to dramatize the urgency with which more recent anthropology has worked so hard to prevent us from “overlook[ing] the material properties of things” and to recognize how those properties complicate or compromise “semiotic deployment” (Meyers 22). The “very materiality of objects,” Webb Keane came to argue in 2001, “means that they are not merely arbitrary signs” (71). You might simply consider the argument as the persistence of some postructuralist attention to the materiality of the signifier, but the novelty lies, of course, in the fact that such attention is no longer restricted to the word; this is no longer, to borrow a phrase from one of Derrida’s descriptions of de Man, “materialism without matter” (550).

This “new materialism,” if I may call it that, has taken hold not just in anthropology but also in the history of science, art history, and the fields of literary criticism and literary history. But rather than charting these recent trajectories, I would like to hold onto the kaleidoscope, which reappears as a different kind of philosophical instrument in a recent novel by Myla Goldberg, *Bee Season*. When a little girl named Miriam peers into her new kaleidoscope, she suddenly “forgets to breathe.” She is “prepared to spend the rest of her life holding the cylinder to her face”; she “wishes she could squeeze through the eyehole and into the tube, joining the flawless symmetry.” Her seventh birthday ends, then, as an overwhelming success. “By the time Miriam goes to bed, the kaleidoscope clutched to her chest, she has decided that where there is a window there has to be a door” (64). Through such a window, she can perceive a world of exquisite arrangement, the world where any fragment achieves its self-transcendence. This is no mirror stage, wherein a toddler, identifying with the image, mistakes its coherence for his own fragmented self. Instead, Goldberg dramatizes some kind of kaleidoscope stage, where a child discovers just how perfect the object world can be. But when the window becomes a door, she enters no kaleidoscopic world. Rather, she begins to inhabit a kaleidoscopic world view: a view of the world as ill arranged, awaiting its recomposition, awaiting its perfection.

I would like to read this novel—or rather, this subplot from the novel—as a way of engaging another field that, like anthropology, seems to embrace objects only to let them go. Within that field—psychoanalysis—there is one figure, Harold Searles, who devoted one book to *The Nonhuman Environment* (1960), to “the significance of the nonhuman environment in man’s psychological life,” a significance generally ignored.
on behalf of the inter- and intrapersonal (5). I am wondering, as my title suggests, what a theory of object relations could accomplish if, as in some recent anthropological work, it turned its attention to things. Thus, after addressing the elision of artifactual objects from object relations, I would like to pursue their recuperation in Searles’s aberrant line of thinking and to preserve the aberrance of that thinking when it comes to understanding why Miriam, the child thrilled by a kaleidoscope, grows up to live a secret life of longing, a life of longing for things and for a perfection achieved through things, a life that her family cannot comprehend.

Object Relations

Of course, the novel as a genre, the novel as such, has been perennially understood as a written relation to the nonhuman environment. John Richetti reasserts a familiar point, a point of Allen Tate’s and Ian Watt’s, in his introduction to a recent edition of Robinson Crusoe, arguing that “[r]ealism derives much from the Latin word res (thing, object, matter), and Robinson Crusoe is a pioneering work of modern novelistic realism because Defoe renders for much of the narrative the force and feel of Crusoe’s material and phenomenal world with an unprecedented density and fine-grained immediacy and intricacy” (xvii). One of the great mysteries of literary history (literary history tout court) is why, almost three hundred years later, most novels still assume this burden of rendering the force and feel of the material and phenomenal world.

Even a novelist responsible for redirecting the genre away from realistic poetics, “away from the observed object toward the observing subject, away from exterior description toward inner apprehension,” to borrow Alex Woloch’s formula for what happens in the modernist novel (28), even Virginia Woolf famously found herself mesmerized by Defoe’s reality effects. Writing about Crusoe in the 1920s, and clearly bored by sociological accounts of the rise of the novel, she admitted that we could say that prose “accommodated itself to the demands,” in the eighteenth century, of a new middle class “able to read and anxious to read” (51). But our responsibility as readers, in her view, is to “gaze through [the individual novelist’s] eyes until we, too, understand in what order he ranges the large common objects upon which novelists are fated to gaze” (52). Her particularizing point about Crusoe, then, is that instead of poetic “sunsets,” we find, “on the contrary, staring us full in the face nothing but a large earthenware pot [. . .]. Reality, fact, substance is going to dominate all that
follows [. . .]. Nothing exists except an earthenware pot” (54–55). Defoe’s “genius for fact” also dignifies the common: “To dig, to bake, to plant, to build—how serious these simple occupations are; hatchets, scissors, logs, axes—how beautiful these simple objects become” (57).

Dignifying both the act and the product of his labor, Crusoe reports extensively on the difficulty he had making pots: two months, it took him, to produce “two large earthen ugly things” with which he was overjoyed (Defoe 96). But Woolf is far less concerned with these pots than she is with the figure of the pot, the way the pot figures Defoe’s whole materializing enterprise, his science of the concrete: “By believing fixedly in the solidity of the pot and its earthiness, he has subdued every other element to his design; he has roped the whole universe into harmony” (58). The realist commitment, the belief in things, grants him his organizational authority, the power of the novelistic art.

Though it may be difficult to read Woolf’s rumination on the pot without being reminded of Heidegger’s rumination on the jug (Krug), let me turn to a more contemporaneous rumination on the pitcher (Krug) with which Ernst Bloch begins his Sprit of Utopia (written in 1915 and 1916, published in 1918, revised in 1923). Bloch writes: “I could probably be formed like the pitcher,” and

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\textit{see myself as something brown, something peculiarly organic, some Nordic amphora, and not just mimetically or simply empathetically, but so that I thus become for my part richer, more present, cultivated further toward myself by this artifact that participates in me. (9)}
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If Defoe, by Woolf’s light, organizes the universe through his commitment to common objects, then Bloch, committing himself to one object, means to reorganize himself. Within an isolated and meditative register, Bloch enacts an anthropological and psychological fact: the constitution of the human subject through the nonhuman object, indeed, their mutual constitution, their mutual animation.

Together, Woolf and Bloch help to mark a proliferation of the discourse on objects in the 1920s, a new effort to think about things, to think with them, to think through them. That discourse includes a great range of well-known work: Malinowski’s study of the Kula in the archipelagoes of Eastern New Guinea; Mauss’s account of the life of objects outside Western modernity; Piaget’s first attempt to write about the child’s relation to objects; Heidegger’s initial efforts, within Being and Time, to think through “tool-being”; Breton’s flea-market flanerie; and Benjamin’s
materialist phenomenology that includes his redescription of the surrealist project, in 1929, as an archeological and anthropological—and not a psychoanalytic—endeavor. This attention to the nonhuman environment took place just when Karl Abraham and Melanie Klein were developing a theory of object relations and when (in the wake of Freud's analysis of the *fort/da* in 1920) Klein developed her play technique for children, making use of toys to facilitate the work of analysis.

Of course, within psychoanalysis, “object relation” denotes only an intersubjective relationship, not the human relation to the inanimate object world. The synthetic, textbook account of *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* makes it clear that this effort to interpret psychodynamic content is the exclusive effort to map the internalization of interpersonal relations (Greenberg and Mitchell). In other words, the words of Laplanche and Pontalis, “‘Object,’ within ‘object relations,’ is to be taken [. . .] in the special sense which it has for psychoanalysis in such expressions as ‘object-choice’ and ‘object-love’ [. . .]. [A] person is described as an object in so far as the [drives] are directed toward him” (278). The object, be it constituted through projection or introjection, is never not another human subject. In Klein’s work, external objects (the mother, the father) or part objects (the breast, the penis) are ambivalently internalized and split (the good breast and the bad breast), just as feelings are externalized through acts of projection (onto the mother or father). The child’s interaction with the inanimate object world becomes a symbolic drama, staging fantasy relations to those other (proper) objects (see “The Role”).

Thus, in the analytical play technique, about which she began to generalize in 1926, Klein understands the child’s interaction with toys according to the logics of fantasy, projection, and displacement; she does so because in children the conscious and unconscious operate “side by side,” enabling the analyst to “reach the deepest repressed experience and fixations” (“Psychological” 155, 158). Although champions of Klein, such as Julia Kristeva, insist that it’s unfair to accuse her of mere sexual symbolism, that accusation has often been made—by Anna Freud, among others: the toy train is always “Daddy’s genital,” the toy oven is always “Mummy’s genital”; the story is always, as Deleuze and Guattari liked to say of psychoanalysis, the story called “daddy-mommy-[and]-me” (25).

This is why, among the proliferating discourse on things, Benjamin’s *One-Way Street*, written between 1923 and 1926, provides such an arresting contrast, addressing the play of children as an object lesson for some new mode of inhabiting the nonhuman environment. Children, he writes,
are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. (449–50)⁶

Unrestricted by a mode of analysis that is determined to script the waking dream work as a family romance, Benjamin goes in search of some model for reconstructing the waste of the world—modernity’s detritus—but of reconstructing it as something other than it was. Bloch had lamented that “we have unlearned how to play,” and thus that we must “kill the cold machinery” to “see what still remains to be generously warmed up again” (10). Benjamin sought in play a human mode for reenergizing the nonhuman environment. “Warmth is ebbing from things,” he goes on to write: “We must compensate for their coldness with our warmth if they are not to freeze us to death” (453–54). Seized by the “menace” of a “refractory material world,” he sensed the urgency of positing our relation to things as a primary relation to think and work through, the dynamics of which are no less subject to unconscious fantasy, individual and collective (454).

And yet, just as Klein’s work was clarifying for Lacan (he found the question of the Thing where Klein places the mother); just as her work has been crucial to feminism because it highlights originary psychodynamics that structure the child’s relation to its mother; so, too, by shifting attention away from the father’s penis and to the mother’s breast, and by describing the ambivalent fragmentation (good and bad) of the internalized object, her work allows us to perceive modes of separation from, attachment to, and aggression toward objects, which are part objects (and not really subject or object), and need not be derived from some original whole. What if, then, as Deleuze and Guattari insist, “the unconscious is an orphan, and produces itself within the identity of nature and man” (49)?

Words and Things

“The relation to the nonhuman environment” is “also a function of object relations, since in psychoanalytic terminology ‘object’ refers to the ‘object of the drives,’ regardless of whether human or nonhuman.” And yet, Searles goes on to lament, “in actual practice [. . .] ‘human’
has almost become equated with ‘object’” (54). Psychoanalysis assumes that the significance of nonhuman objects amounts to a displacement of cathexis (65).

_Bee Season_ outlines a “concrete logic” that preserves the specificity of things and provides a case study explicable according to object-relations-as-usual but rendered more powerful in engagement with Searles. This drama takes place as a tangent to the central plot of the novel, in which Miriam appears as the mother of an eleven-year-old girl, Eliza Naumann, who has always been a mediocre student, has always suffered the humiliation of being in the slow class, but suddenly discovers, during the first fifth-grade spelling bee, that she’s a whiz of a speller. She wins the class bee, the school bee, and the divisional bee with a mystical capacity to see and to feel words. “She hears the word and suddenly it is inside her head, translated from sound into physical form [. . .]. She knows when a word has reached its perfect form, _scallion_ and _butane_ and _orangutan_ blazing pure and incontrovertible in her mind” (40). This success occurs outside the familiar order of the sign: rather than words murdering things (as the familiar formula goes), they become things, their signifying function being beside the point. Eliza has no trouble spelling words she’s never heard and does not know: “Ay-reer” (a unit of Icelandic currency): “E-Y-R-I-R” (62).

Eliza’s father, Saul, the temple cantor and a self-absorbed, passionate scholar, has never had much time for his daughter. He has paid attention to his son, Eliza’s older brother Aaron, a good student who has aspirations of becoming a rabbi. But Eliza’s spelling success captivates her father; he begins to study with her, to coach her, to travel with her, recognizing that her untraditional, intuitive, mystical capacities might enable her to achieve the kind of success he himself has never enjoyed. “Both spelling bees and Torah scribes,” he explains to her, “share the idea that a word should be constructed perfectly or not at all” (81). He directs her to begin studying the Kabbalists, to follow the ladder prescribed by Abulafia, who believed (as he recorded in the late thirteenth century) that by focusing on letters and permuting words, “the mind could loose itself from its shackles to commune with a presence greater than itself,” to achieve _shefa_, the influx of the divine (172). Abulafia prescribed a technique of meditation wherein the mystic could transcend the sensuous world by focusing on an “absolute object”—“something not merely abstract but also not determinable as an object in the strict sense,” as Gershom Scholem put it (152). The regimen, as Saul explains to his daughter, is a mode of overcoming the
barrier between the self and “the larger stream of life, the Divine Intellect” (172). But the revelation that Eliza does achieve enables her only to recognize that she must lose her next contest, must wrest herself away from her father’s grip, must assert herself (rather than losing herself) by putting an end to the bee season that has utterly disrupted the domestic existence of this family of four. The novel ends with her triumphant failure: She spells “o-r-i-g-a-m-i” with a final “Y.”

Goldberg devotes much of the novel to recounting Eliza’s extraordinary relation to words, which the girl herself originally experiences in intensely physical terms. Not only does she picture “words lining her stomach, expanding with each stretch of her lungs”; she also experiences the letters as “magnets, her brain a refrigerator door” (44). This imbrication of word and thing (outside the semiotic relation) unfolds between two antithetical subplots—one adamantly antimaterialist and one hypermaterialist—that fill out the story of the Naumann family. Abandoning his faith and his family by joining a Krishhna temple, Aaron announces his newly found truth to his father: “[T]he material body is a heap of ignorance and the senses are a network of paths to death,” he insists; “[T]he body is part of the material world, which is an illusion” (249). Saul, as though neglecting the correspondences between Eastern mysticism and Prophetic Kabbalism, and as though forgetting the rebellion of his own sixties youth (his discovery of LSD and Jewish mysticism), can make no sense of his own son’s rebellion.

Over the course of the bee season, Eliza’s mother, Miriam, the woman transformed as a girl by the kaleidoscope gift, begins to indulge her passion for the material world, for the objects of that world. Her kleptomania becomes irrepressible. A lawyer with more than enough money to afford retail-therapy-as-usual, instead she inhabits department stores propelled by an overwhelming drive, but unaware of what object, or which kind of object, might appease her longing.

Miriam sometimes spends hours combing through floor after floor, intent as a pig sniffing truffle. She’s seeking what she is meant to find, the singular item waiting for her swift hand. She and this object are intimately joined, its discovery a matter of attuning herself to her body, sensing the size and shape of the internal gap meant to be filled. Miriam treasures this inevitable moment of communion. Nothing is as certain as the instant the object reveals itself. She can practically feel the click as the
internal dislocation is corrected [...]. She is no petty thief. She is compelled by a force superior to material gain. (77)

Although Miriam might be said to inhabit the traditional role of the bourgeois female kleptomaniac, and although her acts of theft could be explained by the “female castration complex” described by Abraham in 1920 (see Pinch), the “moment of communion” described here, the intense intimacy of human subject and inanimate object, evokes the kind of “subjective oneness” described by Searles. And if consumer culture has made her access to objects convenient, so, too, as Searles would have it, has that culture made her antimaterialist materialism more intense.

The Nonhuman Environment

Overlooked in the subsequent history of psychoanalytic thinking, Searles’s book on the nonhuman environment provides an extensive resource for imagining how relations to the inanimate object world contribute to the psychic self. By now, he is known—if known at all—for his elaborations of countertransference. But his work with schizophrenics (at Chestnut Lodge, in Maryland) alerted him to “the multitude of inanimate objects lying, so to speak, in our unconscious” and thus to the profound need for developing some account of how the nonhuman impresses itself on the human psyche, how phantasms of it linger within the unconscious. He understood Freud’s case of Dr. Schreber (1911) and the essay “On Narcissism” (1914) to have initiated a theory of object relations that object relations per se (Klein and Fairbairn) compromised by positing a structure (subject/object, internal/external) for the infant libido. Searles’s unremembered Nonhuman Environment from 1960 might help us to fill the gap (however anachronistically) between, on the one hand, the object relations theory of the 1920s and, on the other, that decade’s proliferating discourse on things.

Both Searles’s personal and clinical experience demonstrated that relations to the nonhuman are characterized by a “dual level”: occasioned, on the one hand, by the transference of interpersonal attitudes or the projection of unconscious feelings but, on the other, elicited by the nonhuman itself, by “the tree as being a tree” (19). In what could be understood as an expansion of Klein’s notion of the primary attachment to the breast, he posits a primary attachment to the nonhuman environment, an attachment that in fact erases the human/nonhuman distinction: an
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originary infant-being, before any ego formation, that does not and cannot differentiate itself from its environment, that is in some fundamental way at one with its environment, that *is* its environment. This unity of world and ego—wherein there is neither world nor ego—he describes as a state of undifferentiation or of syncretism, the evidence for which he finds in stages of childhood development described by Werner, Inhelder, and Piaget; in non-Western philosophy and Western mythology; in the hallucinogenic experience triggered by LSD; and in schizophrenic patients—from the woman who dreams of being a “bombed-out building” (51) to the man who treats a telephone as “a piece of his former life” (147) to those more simply unable “to distinguish clear boundaries between the self and the nonhuman environment” (165). In other words, instead of developing the psychodynamics described by Klein, he compiles an archive that shows how “subjective oneness with the environment” persists unconsciously “long after differentiation on a purely perceptual and conscious level has been effected” (57). He is willing to concur with the idea that “it is [the] separation in the primitive ego, the formation of the external world, which, properly speaking, is the primitive castration” (145). This primitive castration is the “event” that goes unacknowledged, disavowed through, say, the fetishization of the human.

However intriguing and complicating his case histories are, the understanding of “subjective oneness with the environment” enables us to describe Bloch’s effort to contemplate a syncretic imbrication with the pitcher as the effort to recuperate from that originary rupture by which the human and its environment become distinct—a rupture reenacted and intensified by modernity. More obviously, Searles’s convictions read like an emergent impulse that characterizes the postmodernism we call the sixties. Accompanying his effort to show the nonpathological productivity of ego loss, the access it grants to “all mankind,” to “primal man,” and to the “beings of animals, vegetables, and minerals” (126), R. D. Laing imagined a future that would realize how “what we call ‘schizophrenia’ was one of the forms in which [...] the light began to break through the cracks in our all-too-closed minds” (129). Intensifying that light in the form of skizoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (decidedly deferential to Laing) transformed psychiatric description into methodological prescription and a call to recognize “the real inorganization of desire” (328) and the “order of dispersion,” over and against the structuring work of the phallus (325).
Searles himself eschews any romanticization of psychosis, although he uses the schizophrenic to point out what we overlook in our own neurotic lives. And like the Bloch he unevenly recalls and the Laing he anticipates, Searles comes to frame his argument with an account of Western culture in a state of degradation: the “psychological estrangement from the nonhuman environment” has been effected by the advance of technology, the abstraction of the material world into exchange values, and a culture of overabundance and disposability (316). Indeed, were you to historicize this work (and its elision) in the American postwar era, you might understand *The Nonhuman Environment* as some kind of response to—a justification of, a compensation for, or a critique of—the unprecedented proliferation of objects (the toasters, the refrigerators, the kitchen gadgets that Nixon celebrated to Kruschev).

*The Kaleidoscope*

The objects that Miriam serendipitously collects on her surreptitious adventures have something of the character of the transitional object as Winnicott describes it. That is, they are characterized by the same paradox he underscores: “[T]he baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created, to become a cathected object” (89). For Miriam, however, no object actually effects a transition enabling her to recognize the object’s—and the object world’s—autonomy. Quite the reverse: every discovery seems to augment her desire and her failure to distinguish herself from the objects she seeks. In her next stage of obsession, Miriam finds herself abandoning stores and breaking into houses to find the unforeseen objects she overwhelmingly desires.

*Miriam knows, technically, that she doesn’t belong here, but neither does the object she has come to rescue. As long as it stays in this house, the world will remain slightly misaligned. By reclaiming it and becoming more whole she is working toward the correction of a larger imbalance. She knows the instant she sees it that she is here for the blue ceramic dish holding spare change beside the kitchen telephone.* (111)

In this case, as in others, the object she steals is ludicrously worthless, genuinely valuable by no criterion but her own. As she understands this preoccupation, performed secretly yet certainly, Miriam is carrying out Tikkun Olam (110), the reordering of the world. Saul explained to her, one
night in bed before they were married, that the mystics believed that God’s Divine Light, enclosed in sacred vessels, had shattered them into countless pieces, leaving us with the job of fixing the world. Saul’s explanation enables Miriam to sacralize her kaleidoscopic worldview; she comes to personalize the narrative, thinking of herself as “a broken vessel, pieces of her scattered everywhere. She has been finding these pieces, in their many forms, and bringing them together so that she can be whole again” (87). The world’s unrealized wholeness and her unrealized wholeness—these are one in the same.

The extent of Miriam’s ambition becomes clear when Saul learns what his wife has been up to, when the police phone to say that his wife has been arrested, when an officer takes him to the lot of a “U-Store-It,” a group of “squat, windowless buildings with sliding metal doors,” and when that officer opens one unit, “a storage room the size of a small gym” and flicks on the bright white lights to reveal Miriam’s collection. As it turns out, she has been stealing objects for eighteen years; she has left her law firm; she has devoted her days to finding objects, to being found by part objects, by finding things. She has committed herself to the creation of some new total work of art, “meticulous constructions” that add up to “a landscape of unending shape and pattern” (223).

*A spiral of shoes of decreasing heel heights cycles from brown to orange as it winds its way to a center of earrings whose shapes and colors form a pattern of stripes and circles in sparkling metal and rhinestone. The shoes are framed by pens and pencils stacked at careful angles to form a free-standing fence of contrasting colors and shapes, the curve of a pen’s tip set off by the blunt end of an unused pencil. An arrangement of pink erasers becomes the flesh of a creature governed by the laws of geometry.*

A novel that has eschewed superfluous description suddenly becomes as detailed as anything from Dickens or Balzac.

*The transition from shoe to wineglass is barely perceptible, the shoes as they stretch toward the glasses actually assuming shapes that reflect or contain a wineglass within them. The perimeter is composed of glasses lying lengthwise on the floor, but with the aid of marbles, beads, and shot glasses, the line arches upward in a graceful curve to join a column of stacked*
wineglasses, brandy snifters, and champagne flutes reaching higher than Saul's head. (225)

Miriam's concrete logic (where one recognizes, say, the shoe-ness of the wineglass and vice versa) has abandoned consistent taxonomy; its order is sensuous, not conceptual; the magical union of parts is neither complete nor incomplete. Her collage is the culmination of no bricolage, both because of the specifying energy of her cathexis and because, however magically the shape of one object assumes the shape of another, her work depends on accumulation rather than abstraction, on accretion rather than refraction.

Objects are not shattered into a multiplicity that is whole, though each becomes something other than it was.

All around him, each object presents itself redefined, this its true function, this the reason for its creation. Looking back the way he came, Saul sees a swath of motion carved by his path, innumerable objects twisting and twirling in response to his passage through the room. This space is not a passive object to be observed and left behind. It is interactive. Every person who steps inside becomes an object in its perfect order, associating with it in infinite, beautifully balanced ways [. . .]. When Saul starts to cry, it is out of this sense of supersaturation as well as having arrived at a new level of understanding. (225)

The description begins by drawing attention to the inadequacy of the exchange/use binary, captioning the “true function” of these objects as their aesthetic function. But the affective climax appears in the universalizing claim that “every person,” within this collection of objects, becomes an integral component of the aesthetic achievement, enters the object-space as a thing among things that have been granted their places in the perfect order they themselves produce.

I hasten to add that there are many reasons why Miriam’s behavior has become so “pathological”: her parents died in a car accident when she was in college; she and her husband no longer have sex; she derives little satisfaction from her children in a household where her husband has assumed the stereotypical maternal functions: buying and cooking food, organizing the life of the family. Yet the novel specifies that the primal scene in Miriam’s psychic life was her chance to witness the “magical union of parts” disclosed by the kaleidoscope. On the one hand,
when Searles draws evidence from experiments with LSD, he describes the subjects as “overwhelmed by a kaleidoscope of fantastic images,” a kaleidoscope exposing “something of the multitude of inanimate objects lying, so to speak, in our unconscious” (49). On the other, in Goldberg’s novel, the kaleidoscope has finally been dislodged from the tropological register: it does not metaphorize the psyche; it might be said to shape the psyche, which then externalizes itself. The police tell Saul that “your wife [. . .] called this place her kaleidoscope” (226). Miriam’s passion crystallizes (and her stealing begins) when she receives the kaleidoscope gift, which serves as some kind of antitransitional object, mediating the refusal to recognize objects as “not-me,” the refusal to adopt a path toward decathexis, the refusal to accept what we call “reality,” to accept the world as it is.

It is important to say that the novel, which clearly denigrates all the excesses prompted by mystical aspiration (even as it highlights the ironic convergence of antipathetic aspirations), pathologizes Miriam, and it abandons her. As the novel closes, we know only that she remains in hospital, unwilling to have visitors, unwilling to see her family. From a Kleinian perspective, it is obvious what has gone wrong: in the rivalry between mother and daughter for the father, the daughter has captivated her father’s attention, she has idealized the second object, the father, while abandoning the breast. One might say that Miriam’s collecting obsession is both an effort to restore her own mother to her and an effort to compensate for her daughter’s rejection of her—of her part object. Here, too, the kaleidoscope (as object rather than metaphor) mediates the final mother/daughter rupture when Eliza can make no sense of the gift that Miriam offers in celebration of her child’s spelling triumph, the gift she has decided to pass on. When Eliza “uncovers the old kaleidoscope, she mistakes it for one of those fancy tubes that tights are sometimes sold in, maybe ones that aren’t so scratchy,” and Miriam immediately recognizes her humiliating failure. “It doesn’t come apart,” she explains, “It’s a kaleidoscope. It was mine when I was a girl.” Despite Eliza’s efforts to appear interested and grateful, “Miriam already envisions its internment on a dusty shelf in Eliza’s room, never to be used again” (67). You could say that such rejection gradually provokes a psychotic break; it triggers something like a latent schizophrenia. But as Deleuze and Guattari put it, “a schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on a couch” (2).

A model of what? In Miriam’s collecting habit, and in her sequestered collection, Goldberg seems to disclose an allegory of the work of narrative prose fiction itself, from, say, 1719—the effort, as Woolf would
put it, to “rope the whole universe into harmony.” Moreover, her elaborate collage of *objets trouvés* evokes the poetics of accumulation that have been so important in contemporary art, from James Hampton’s *Throne of the Third Heaven of Nations Millenium General Assembly*, the reassembled, foil-covered collection of junk discovered in the garage where Hampton secretly worked on the throne for the final fourteen years of his life (the throne now housed in the Smithsonian) to Sarah Ze’s recent accretions of everyday objects into miniature urban ecoscapes.

Above all, Miriam’s story, within the story of *Bee Season*, would seem to challenge the psychology of collecting. What if the collector’s ambitions were in fact driven by some effort not to represent the self or to collect the self, but to dissolve the self into its nonhuman environment, to become an object, a thing among things, in the collection’s perfect order? What if that object you long for were simply the object-cause of a more profound desire to achieve some Thing that amounts to subjective oneness with your nonhuman environment? And what if that object were—at the same time—precisely an impediment to that desire, perpetuating the desire simply by being apperceived as nonhuman? Goldberg’s novel, which patently criticizes mystical fanaticism, shows a host of oppositions—between word and thing, subject and object, the spiritual and the material, the animate and the inanimate—in various states of creative collapse. As Benjamin parenthetically mentions in his essay on the magic of language, “there is also a magic of matter” (“On Language” 67). However devoted to the mysterious work of words, the words of *Bee Season* speak no less profoundly of how mystical materialism might be.

How can a gift transform a child’s life? If the first steps in answering such a question amount to expanding the field of object relations, I recognize that the case I have presented here—the case of a novel refracted through the lens of Searles’s *Nonhuman Environment*, itself adjusted between the work of Klein and Benjamin—intimates an expansive field indeed, the boundaries of which, from the department store to the mysterious and mystical collection, from consumer-desire-as-usual to a deontologizing longing, have been too readily traversed. It is within that field, though, that we might formulate answers to familiar questions about our everyday lives, and where we may find questions that we haven’t been willing to ask.
For their objections, suggestions, and enthusiasms, I owe a considerable debt to Deborah Nelson, Bradin Cormack, Frances Ferguson, James Chandler, and Miriam Hansen, as well as to audiences at Penn, Vanderbilt, Princeton, Stanford, the University of Illinois (Urbana/Champaign), and Columbia.

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Notes

1 See P. M. Roget, Blackwoods, June 1818. For an account of the “mania,” see Baker 14.


3 On Barthes’s abandonment of the object world, see also 180–84. Ross’s more particular concern is the way that structuralist thought, denying historical change and the extradiscursive, occluded the politics of the present. Her book brings both those politics and the contemporary object world into full view.

4 In contrast to Keane, Lévi-Strauss had insisted that no “empirical properties of beings or things” could interrupt the system of knowing (217).

5 For an effort to historicize this concern in relation to World War I, see Brown.

6 For an account of the work of the play concept throughout Benjamin’s work and its relation to the function of Spiel within Western aesthetics, see Hansen.

7 See, for instance, Searles, Countertransference and Related Topics.

8 In formulating his cultural argument, Searles makes considerable use of Erich Fromm, Paul Tillich, and Gregory Bateson, among others.

9 See also 71. Winnicott carefully distinguishes his concept of the transitional object from the Kleinian internal object: “The transitional object is not an internal object (which is a mental concept)—it is a possession. Yet it is not (for the infant) an external object either” (9).

Works Cited


_________. “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” Selected Writings, 62–74.


The edge relations are inferred automatically, given the relative position of the objects. This eliminates the need for mostly unnecessary user intervention. Rendering is done in real time, supporting the creation of novel scenes in an interactive way, see Fig. 1. The neural network that we employ has multiple sub-parts, as can be seen in Fig. 2: (i) A graph convolutional network that converts the input scene graph to a per-object embedding to their location. (ii) A CNN that converts the location embedding of each object to an object’s mask. (iii) A parallel network that converts the location